

Personhood, Blessing and Divine Recompense
in Soninke Culture
(Gidimaxa, Mali)

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General Introduction

The Soninke are a large Muslim people group whose homeland occupies northwestern Mali, southern Mauritania and eastern Senegal. There are small populations as well in Guinea Bissau, and Gambia. Numbering close to 2,000,000, they are traditionally sedentary farmers in their home zone.

A large number of working age men have adopted a pattern of semi-permanent migration¹ to other countries, either as laborers or merchants, where they earn cash that is sent home to supplement what is produced through farming. From the Region of Kayes about 20% of Soninke men from the ages of 15 to 60 spend much of their adult working lives residing and working in France (Daum 1998: 87)² where their goals are quite pragmatic. They generally are not interested in integrating into these new societies. Their principal interests are meeting the economic needs of their families and villages in their home countries while cultivating status and influence for themselves in their home context (Konate 1997: 8-9, 164, Timera 1996: 36³).⁴

¹ Moussa Konate (1997) refers to this type of migration phenomena as "transnationalism", a theory of migration developed by Linda Basch, N. Glick-Schiller and C. Blanc-Szanton (1994), as the process "...by which migrants through their daily life activities and social, political and economic relations create social fields that cross national boundaries (1994:27, cited in Konate 1997:118)." The idea of social fields refers to the movement of people, ideas, money and goods between the sending and receiving countries while transnationalism "... refers to sustained sociocultural relations that immigrants use to connect the immigration and the emigration societies (Basch et. Al. 1994:7 cited by Konate 1997:119)." For Konate, French-based Soninkes represent a transnational community involved in sociocultural processes spanning the two countries. The movement of people, goods and cash creates a transnational space or circuit. Migrants are equally affected by circumstances in both countries (1997:120).

²In addition to the figures for France, other destinations include the USA, Congo and Gabon.

³ According to Timera (1996:36, translation mine), "... from the point of view of the migrant and of Soninke society, immigration and the entry into a salaried job respond to the need to take partial responsibility for the extended family in the village. Grafted to this need are strategies for personal social advancement which are becoming more and more apparent."

⁴ According to François Manchuelle, migration enables men to participate in the "patriarchal ideal". Manchuelle proposes the following explanation:

The basis of power in... [precolonial Soninke] society was wealth, which gave rise to a system of clientage. Competition among aristocrats was fierce and often violent...In pursuit of wealth and power, the ability to control labor was important. Soninke families were economic production units resting on the labor of the younger males, slaves and (to a much lesser degree) women. Soninke slavery was aimed at producing wealth through increasing the size of the family group: slaves increased the number of farm hands, hence the family's

The known history of the Soninke dates back to the Empire of Ghana (700-1250 AD) or *Wagadu* as it is referred to by the Soninke. Among the Soninke, their history is conserved in the rich oral tradition of the bard/praise singer castes (*jaaru* and *geseru*). The demise of *Wagadu*, for example, is attributed to the death of the *bida*, a magical python genie usually described as having seven heads. This genie made a pact with the founder of *Wagadu* in which he promised to make it rain gold in exchange for one virgin every year. The identity of the founder depends on the version, though it is usually Diŋa⁵, his son Jaabi Sise (Soumaré 1987) or the people of Xayamanga (Sunbunu 2004). One year the virgin girl chosen, Siyan Yatabere, was the fiancée of the young warrior Mamedi (Soumaré 1987; Sunbunu 2004) or Amedie (n.a. 1987) depending on the version. Mamedi rescued his fiancé and cut off the *bida*'s seven heads. The result was seven years of drought and poverty (no more gold falling from the sky), the fall of Kumbi, the capital city of *Wagadu*, and finally the dispersion of the people of *Wagadu* to other areas. Even today people use the saying "*Kunbi kari*" or "Kumbi fell" to refer to the historical event that is indicative of the end of their prosperity and the power of their empire.

For non-Soninke historians, however, little is known about the early part of the Ghanaian Empire. According to Davidson (1977), until the eighth century AD, Soninke society was stateless. In 733 AD, the population decided to elect a king whose main task was to manage positive diplomatic

wealth...the acquisition of slaves clearly appears to have been for the [precolonial] migrants the first step in a long-term strategy to acquire power and influence in the Soninke homeland. Soninke laptots [soldier/sailors] amassed wealth and invested it in slaves to provide steady revenue from cultivation in the Soninke homeland. This revenue in turn would be used to make generous gifts to powerful elders, to build an entourage of clients by generous gifts and displays of wealth--without forgetting gifts to griots, the praise-singers, who were the advertising agencies of the patriarchal age--and thus compete for political power....

Thus, while migration encouraged the emancipation of junior dependents in extended families, the migrants' ambition was not to destroy the Soninke traditional family but to settle down after polygamous marriages as wealthy patriarchs surrounded by their slaves and dependents, ready to participate in the local political game....

... [today] the surgas [paid laborers] play the same role of support in commercial agriculture as the slaves did before emancipation in the Soninke homeland. This is not the only familiarity between the two forms of labor. The surgas in fact play a role similar to slaves in the "life cycle" of the Soninke migrants. Today, as in previous ages, a Soninke migrant leaves home to make a seasonal fortune abroad. When he comes back, he settles in his middle old age, he lives on his farm, surrounded by his migrant workers, wives and younger dependents. From now on, he will devote his life equally to farming, farm management, and village affairs. The similarity with the 'patriarchal' household of old is striking (1989:108-112).

⁵ The Soninke of Xuusaane see Diŋa as the founder of the Cissé clan from which come the Saranbunu, the *mangu* of Xuusaane, a noble clan who assist the clan of the village chief, the Jabbira, in the administration of village affairs. See page 71 for a brief explication of the role of the Saranbunu clan in the installation of a new village chief.

relations with the Berbers of North Africa in order to facilitate and maintain trade in gold. The king was seen as the earthly representative of the founding Soninke ancestor and as such acted as the group's religious leader. According to Imperato, the first Soninke king was Kaya Mangam Cissé whose name means literally "king of gold". The Soninke kingdom prospered until 1076 when the Almoravides under Abu Bakr invaded, destroyed Kumbi, and installed a converted Muslim as King (1986: 82-3, 152). Froelich (1962) indicates that the Soninke nobles and military chiefs submitted themselves to the rule of the Almoravides in order to conserve the peace, to keep their privileges, and also because of 'snobbism'. They converted to gain power though conversion among the general populace was quite nominal. According to Froelich, when the Almoravide leader Abu Bekr died in 1087, the Soninke regained Wagadu though it never regained its former power and influence. Though the new king outlawed Islam, the Soninke became more and more attached to their new faith and eventually, became the most convinced converts in French Sudan.

The Soninke of today have a strong and extremely positive self-image. Their ethnic and religious identities are much more important to them than their nationality, for example⁶. They have a strong sense of who they are and have adapted their traditional patterns of labor migration to the modern world⁷ in order to maintain their cultural identity, cultural goals and way of life (Manchuelle 1997).

⁶ See the "La dynamique des langues africaines dans la communauté de Paris" by Gérard Galtier (1995) in which he had Soninke and Bambara interviewees in Paris rank in importance three components of their identity (being Muslim, Soninke or Bambara, and Malian). His results showed that for Soninkes, their identity as Muslims came first followed by their ethnic identity as Soninkes. Nationality was ranked last in importance. They had little trouble understanding and answering the interview questions. However, the Bambara interviewees had more trouble understanding the interview questions and finally ranked their nationality as Malians first then, then ethnicity as Bambaras and finally being Muslim (1995:8, 16).

⁷ In his book, *Willing Migrants: Soninke Labor Diasporas: 1848-1960*, François Manchuelle effectively argues that the Soninke have had a tradition of what he refers to as "periodic return migration" which was being practiced long before the French colonial period (1997:14).

The precolonial economic system of the Soninke was remarkable in that it resulted, through the practice of trade migration, in a form of productive investment, slaves--an investment that...was...morally acceptable then, and also extremely profitable. The Soninke were not, as was asserted by a number of colonial writers, a "people of traders" in the sense of a people specializing in trade as a permanent activity, but rather agriculturalists producing for a market, who migrated periodically to sell these products in exchange for their commercial agricultural production and who used the product of these transactions to reinvest in their production system in the form of slaves (ibid. 37-38).

He notes that there were several reasons behind the practice: 1) a way to maximize on periods of agricultural inactivity in the home zone (the dry season when no farming is done), 2) the opportunity to trade with other West African peoples (principally forest peoples) and Europeans and 3) the decentralized and fragmented condition of the state which allowed free movement of the local population. "There is also a great amount of pressure to accumulate wealth and, through wealth, to accumulate clients and, therefore power (the other side of the coin being if one does not accumulate enough wealth, one will lose independence and, therefore, lose

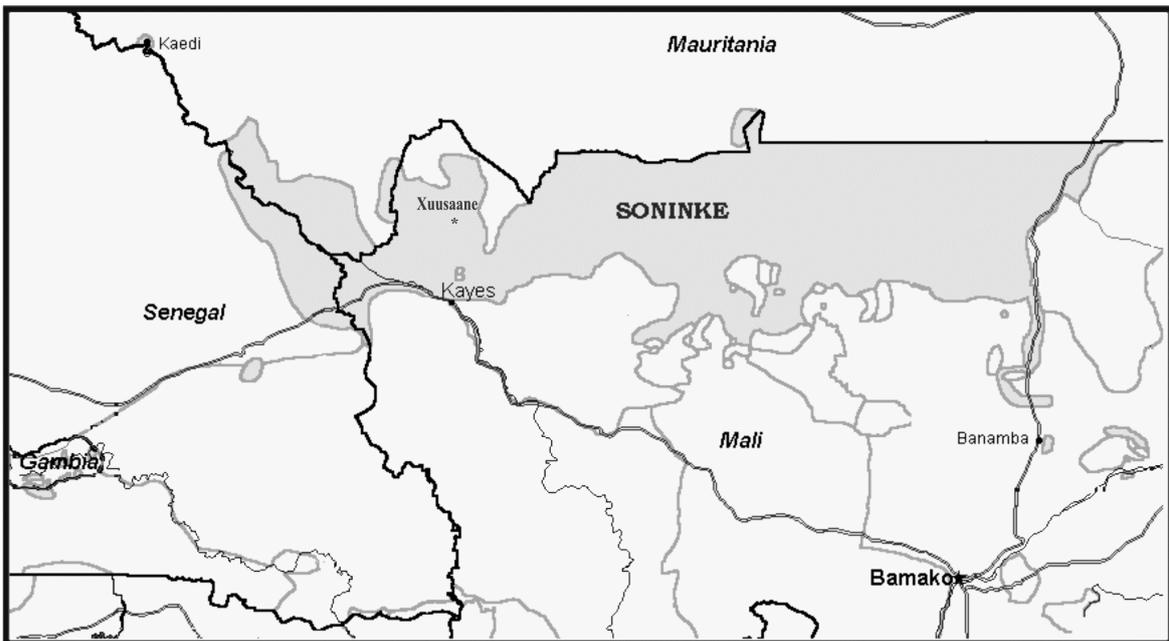


Figure 1: The Soninke Homeland

Through the course of several years of fieldwork⁸, comprised of language study, participant observation and informal conversations in the village of Xusaane⁹ in northwestern Mali (see

honor). In premodern times, trade migration was one of the ways in decentralized societies to attain wealth and power (ibid. 39)".

...the Soninke homeland in precolonial times was at the same time a comparatively wealthy region of commercial agriculture and a region of "exporting" temporary migrants. There is no contradiction between the two activities. In fact, the more the Soninkes participated in commercial agriculture and the more they were involved in temporary migration, the wealthier they became. This observation clashes with the dominant view of African modern migrations as the result of deprivation and colonial violence. That the Soninke were heavily involved in temporary migration in the precolonial period suggests it is continuity, not disruption, that lies at the center of explanations for their modern migration (ibid. 39-40).

⁸ I began learning about Soninke language and culture in Mali starting in July 1993. From that time to the present (Feb. 2004) I have spent approximately 7.5 years in the Soninke context, the majority in Xusaane. I returned to the Soninke home area in September of 2003, having been absent from Mali from October 1998 through June 2003.

⁹ The village of Xusaane is an *arrondissement* in the Region of Kayes. It is located 65 kilometers directly north of Kayes in the traditional Soninke territory of *Gidimaxa* (See Figure 1). The town has a population of about 6,000 people. The village was founded about 100 years ago when settled by two *hooro* (nobles) families, from the much older village of *Gakura*, along the Senegal River, west of Kayes. The oldest member of the *Jabbira* clan has the hereditary role of village chief or *debegunme* while members of the clan of the *Saranbunu* function as their *mangu* or counselors and supporters.

Figure 1). I have remarked that for the people of this village communal integrity (groupness), interdependence, and cultural solidarity are highly valued ideals. This paper explores how these values are promoted and maintained through adherence to various key concepts, which themselves serve to motivate behavior to meet these ends.

Thesis

Soninke people conform to their cultural norms and even strive toward the ideal because they are motivated by a combination of three basic beliefs/values. The first is the desire to be thought well of by others, to be perceived as a person of good character and honor, to be perceived literally as exhibiting "personhood" or *seraaxu*. The second is the need to amass *baraji* or "divine recompense", whose benefits are for the afterlife, specifically judgment day. And the third is the need to acquire *baraka* or "blessing", whose benefit is in this life. In this paper, I plan to address the notion of *seraaxu* along with various related notions (honor/shame, responsibility/endurance, work ethic and generosity/reciprocity). Following this, I will present the concepts of *baraji* and *baraka*, including a discussion of the notion of *sadaxa* (offerings and alms), which is important to the Soninke notion of divine recompense. I will attempt to describe why one needs to accumulate divine recompense and blessing and how one goes about doing it. I will conclude with a discussion of how these three values help the society function in accordance with the Soninke ideals of communal integrity, interdependence and cultural solidarity.

Theoretical Background: Grid-Group Analysis

I have found grid-group analysis (Douglas 1973, 1982a, 1982b) to be a useful model for making sense out of Soninke culture. Grid-group analysis also referred to as grid group culture theory posits a typology of four sorts of social contexts, which "...generate distinctive cosmologies (1982a: 191-192)". The two major criteria used to determine these 4 types are termed grid and group.

The Grid Dimension

According to Mary Douglas, the notion of grid can be defined as

...the crosshatch of rules to which individuals are subject in the course of their interaction. As a dimension it shows a progressive change in the mode of control. At the strong end, there are visible rules about space and time related to social roles; at the other end, ... the formal classifications fade and finally vanish.

At the strong end of grid, individuals do not, as such, freely transact with one another. An explicit set of institutionalized classifications keeps them apart and regulates their interaction restricting their options. At this point for grid, males do not compete in female spheres, sons do not define their relations with fathers. The grid is visible in the segregated places and times and physical signs of discriminated rank ... (1982a: 192).

The strength of grid in a particular culture is determined "... according to how much it classifies the individual person, leaving minimum scope for personal choice, providing instead a set of railway lines with the remote-control of points of interaction (ibid.: 202)

High grid cultures tend toward a communally "shared system of classification" which puts much value on conformity to that system. Where a culture has a strong shared public system of classification, Douglas proposes that there will be "...piety, sacralized institutions, strong boundaries between purity and impurity...where all moral failings are at once sins against religion and the community (1973: 91). Low grid cultures, on the other hand, tend towards innovation rather than conformity as, at the extreme, the system of classification is private and personal rather than public and shared (ibid.: 84-85).

Strong group tends to a pragmatic worldview, sin is less understood than shame for loss of personal honor, face or solvency...strong grid focuses on the honor of the individual, the number of supporters he can summon up, the control he has over his women folk (ibid.: 91).

The Group Dimension

Douglas defines group "...in terms of the claims [the group] makes over its constituent members, the boundary it draws around them, the rights it confers on them to its name and other protections, the levies and constraints it applies (1982a: 191). The size of a group can be so large people don't know each other, yet "... there would have to be in all parts of it a pressure from face-to-face situations to draw the same boundaries and accept the alignment of insiders and outsiders (ibid. 201)".

The scale for group starts from an environment in which the person finds himself in the center of a network of his own making which has no recognizable boundaries...The strongest effects of group are to be found where it incorporates a person with the rest by implicating them together in a common residence, shared resources and recreation, and by exerting control over marriage and kinship (ibid. 201-202).

When the criterion of group is weak, Douglas sees the tendency to be that individuals exert pressure to control others while in strongly group-oriented cultures individuals are controlled by the pressure of others (1973: 84-85).

The Model

In Figure 2, the four possible social contexts mentioned at the beginning of this section are represented by two axes forming a table with four cells. The vertical axis of the table represents the grid dimension. The horizontal axis refers to the group dimension representing the degree of group orientation versus individualism. Each cell represents an organizational type as noted in Figure 2 (the various type names in the diagram come from Mamadouh 1999).

Applying the Model to the Soninke

The Grid Dimension

Soninke society, according to grid group culture theory appears to fall into the strong grid category as I will demonstrate below. In the realm of hierarchy, Soninke society is strongly ranked; gender, relative age and social class/caste hierarchies are considered in all social interaction. In the domain of gender, women from birth to death are under the tutelage of either father, husband, son or another male relative. They have very little autonomy and are not involved in local leadership or politics. Soninke culture is also gerontocratic so that social status increases with age for both genders. Superior age grants a certain amount of status to an individual requiring deference from those younger than him or her. A person of superior age (even among children) has the right to command to some extent those younger than him or her (to what extent depends on the individuals in question and the type of dyad they form).

Concerning social stratification, the table below presents the three main social classes and their subclasses (Pollet and Winter 1971: 237ff). The three main social classes are endogamous.

free		non-free
<i>Hooro</i> (nobles)	<i>Naxamala</i> (artisans-clients of the nobles)	<i>Komo</i> ¹⁰
<i>Tunkalenmu</i> (royals) <i>mangu</i> (aristocrats) <i>moodinu</i> (religious leaders)	<i>Jaaru et geseru</i> (praise singers) <i>garanku</i> (leatherworkers) <i>tago</i> (blacksmiths) <i>sakku</i> (woodcarvers)	Descendants of captives from war or descendants of trade slaves

Figure 3: Soninke social classes

The Group Dimension

According to the grid-group theory, Soninke society appears to fall into the strong group category as well. Collectivism or group orientation is strongly valued and reinforced in both positive and negative ways at the level of the extended family, lineage, village, region, across international borders in continental Africa and even overseas (France, USA, etc.). Individualism is not highly valued and in the majority of cases is considered threatening to the entire social system. Soninke society is honor-based. Ruth Lienhard describes this type of orientation as follows.

¹⁰ Pollet and Winter (1971:237-261) describe in great detail the various types of slaves/captives found in Jafunu. For the sake of brevity, I have lumped them all together as *komo*. The entire chapter 5 (*Organization Sociale*) of their excellent work presents the basic scheme shown in Figure 3 but particularly for the Jafunu region.

In some cultures, honor has a wider function than that of personal appreciation... In fact, it could be called a basic constituent. In cultures where the group is important, honor demonstrates the unity of the group and holds it together. Shame destroys this unity. Therefore, whatever the individual does that furthers the honor of the group as a whole is good, but whatever brings shame (dishonor) to the group is bad.

Because group cohesion is so central in such cultures, it is essential that the group as a whole be honored. Its members will avoid anything that could bring shame... Individuals will always weigh the pros and cons of a course of action in terms of how much shame it might bring (2001:23).

In Soninke society the acceptable norms of behavior are quite codified and reinforced through the threat of shame and dishonor to the offender and to his entire family. This takes place in the public arena before one's neighbors, the local community and often in the regional and the transnational Soninke community as well. Social pressure to conform is extremely strong and the threat of dishonor appears to be quite an effective form of social control¹¹. This social control also results in a strong value on individual self-control: control of the physical body, of speech, of expressing personal information¹², etc.

The Soninke group identity is closely tied to Islam so that religious ideology also plays an important role in social control. Given that the process of Islamization began among the Soninke in the 11th century, it is not surprising that in almost 10 centuries many values and allegiances relating to this religious ideology form an important component of Soninke identity. The Islam practiced today is much concerned with orthopraxis though traditional beliefs and cosmology have meshed together to create a brand of folk¹³ Islam that is distinctly Soninke. This ideology regulates a great many

¹¹ In exploring notions of sin and culture type, Douglas says

The relation of self to society varies with the constraints of grid and group: the stronger these are, the more developed the idea of formal transgression and its dangerous consequences, and the less regard is felt for the right of the inner self to be freely expressed. The more the social relations are differentiated by grid and group, the more the private individual is exhorted to pour his passions into prescribed channels or to control them alltogether (1973:135).

¹² Dave Marantz in his book, **African Friends and Money Matters**, contrasts how Africans in the area of privacy are the exact opposite of Westerners. He says "Africans readily share space and things but are possessive of knowledge (2001:30). He adds that "Africans have categories of information and knowledge that are very private...when it comes to what they know, there are many facts that are closely guarded, and will be revealed in only very measured ways (ibid. 31).

¹³ Here I am referring to the distinction made by various writers to distinguish between doctrinal religious practice and belief and the belief and practice of the everyday person, variously referred to as high versus low

aspects of everyday life, providing a set of ideals by which individual behavior is monitored. It also provides an explication for all that happens in life. The bottom line is that the will of Allah and the mechanistic world that he has set into motion are the reasons for all that happens in life, good or bad¹⁴.

In summary, using the approach of grid-group analysis, the Soninke would fall into the hierarchy/collectivism type which is strong grid/hierarchy, strong group (see Figure 2).

Introduction to Seraaxu (Personhood / Good Personness)

Seraaxu Defined

Sere is the word for “person” or “human being”. It is used, however, in two quite different ways. The first is generic; it is the word that classifies a living being as a human being separate from other animals and other categories of living things. A *sere* can be anyone and everyone who is human.

The second way *sere* is used is much more restrictive and designates someone who is a “real person” or a “good person”. It is used to refer to someone who exhibits culturally valued behaviors and qualities, and many times is used in contrast to someone lacking these qualities. People use the expression “He¹⁵ is a [real] person” (*Seren ya ni*) when they want to point out someone’s goodness. *Seraaxu* is the abstract nominalization of *sere*, in the second more restrictive sense, so it literally means “personness” or “personhood”. The notion is “appropriate personhood” or “good personness”, that which makes one a real human being who relates to self and others as he ought to. A child, for example, is not considered a *sere* in this sense because he is not yet been thoroughly socialized and grounded in the desired values. In other words, a child hasn’t yet acquired good character (*jikku sire*), which should produce in her the quality of *seraaxu* when she reaches the age of accountability. Children and people who are not considered *soro* (*sere* in the plural) are simply referred to as *hadamarenmu*, literally “children of Adam”. They have the quality of

religion, official versus folk religion (Yoder 1985-66), great tradition versus little tradition (Redfield 1956), classic or learned versus common or popular, etc.

¹⁴ Douglas proposes that each culture type has a distinctive cosmology. For strong grid strong group cultures like the Soninke,

... the universe is just. Pain and suffering are either the proper punishments of individual misdeeds or are accounted for by transcendental bookkeeping so that the effects of one man’s virtue are chalked up to the common good and his faults are likewise charged to the community (1973:169).

¹⁵ In cases where gender is neutral referring to men and women equally, I will alternate the usage of male and females pronouns.

humanness, which simply means having the same form as the first human being, Adam: two arms, two legs, a nose, etc. (BJS 2003¹⁶).

Seraaxu is closely associated with the concepts of respect (*dorontaaxu*), unity (*baanaaxu*), and good character (*jikku sire*) (Saranbunu 2002¹⁷), which are important to the strongly group-oriented nature of Soninke society and its strict social hierarchy. A person who has *seraaxu* values groupness, unity, harmony and respect more than individual wants and desires (ibid. CL# 385ff¹⁸). To have *seraaxu* implies that an individual is working towards unity (*baanaaxu*) in the group (ibid. CL# 461). Doing things in accordance with proper Soninke tradition (*danbe*¹⁹) is believed to produce individuals with appropriate *seraaxu*, who will in turn raise children who have this same quality (ibid. CL# 343).

Promoting Seraaxu in one's family

The concern for good character (*jikku sire*) in one's descendants, an essential element in *seraaxu*, begins with the choice of a marriage partner, especially the wife and eventual mother of offspring. A mother is thought to give her children their character through her breast milk. An indicator of a potential wife's *jikku sire*, and thus that of her eventual children is not only her own behavior, but also the reputation and behavior of the members of her family and clan since these qualities will be passed on to her (MDS 2000, 2003).

In choosing spouses for their children, families first look at the quality of *seraaxu* of the prospective spouse, and his or her family and lineage (Saranbunu 2002: CL#164-7). Marriage is believed to foster appropriate personhood (*seraaxu*) if it is based on proper respect (*dorontaaxu*) (Ibid. CL# 84-6). Proper respect, in turn, maintains the personhood of others. *Seraaxu* results in peace (*jamu*), prosperity (*xeer*), proper relations with one's paternal and maternal relatives (*sunpu do xaati*), mutual compassion (*me hinneye*), mutual aid (*me deemande*) and doing good to one another (*me*

¹⁶ For the sake of confidentiality, I will refer to my informants simply with their initials and the year that I recorded the data.

¹⁷ The generalizations stated here come from an article written in Soninke by Baba Jara Saranbunu of Xuusaane who won first place in the Madi Kama Musundo writer's contest of 2001. The theme of the contest was "marriage among the Soninke". Participants in the contest responded in writing to a series of questions concerning the topic of marriage. It is not surprising that such an essay would touch on issues pertaining directly to values central to Soninke culture.

¹⁸ In the case of Saranbunu's document, the numbers preceded by CL# following the year the document was written refer to the clause where the information was found. I have numbered the clauses of the entire document to facilitate translation. The collection in which this article appears is yet unpublished.

¹⁹ One informant described *danbe*, which can be translated as tradition or culture as an appropriate sense of honor (*yaaguransiraaxu*), generosity (*gaccentangande*), hardworking endurance (*buuturanlinaaxu*), trustworthiness (*saayiye*), reciprocity (*meyidande*), and good oversight/government (*mereye moxo sire*) (MDS 1994).

siroye). The communal ideal is that prosperity or poverty, peace or suffering experienced by one member of the group is shared by the whole group (Ibid. CL# 72-73.).

Concerning the socialization of young children, in the early years of life, the mother (along with her female housemates) has the major responsibility for beginning the process of molding a tiny *hadamarenme* (lit. "child of Adam") into a *sere* (real person). At about age 5, male children begin to spend the majority of their time during the day away from their mothers. They may be at play running around in a group of siblings and friends or with their father and male relatives when there is work to be done. Sometime after age 5, they may no longer sleep in their mother's rooms but elsewhere in a communal bedroom for brothers, cousins and age mates of their age or older. The task of molding their character (*jikku*) begins to move more and more into the domain of male relatives as male children spend less and less time in contexts dominated by women. Girls, on the other hand, spend their days with their mothers or other female relatives and sleep in their mother's rooms until they finally marry. Their mothers have the primary responsibility for the molding of their *jikku*.

Qualities that contribute to seraaxu

Some basic qualities that Soninke people appear to highly value in an individual of appropriate personhood are honor/appropriate shame (*yaagu*), generosity and participation in reciprocity (*gacce*), and self-denial, endurance, responsibility (*butte*)²⁰. I will present these in the following sections.

Yaagu

Yaagu often translated, as shame appears to include the following semantic components: shame, guilt, shyness, humiliation, embarrassment, and dishonor. In other contexts, it also refers to honor and modesty in the positive sense. A person sensitive to *yaagu* is concerned about what people think of him or her. To "have" *yaagu* as a personal quality is a good thing, it refers to honor or appropriate shame. A person with "proper" *yaagu* has integrity, a suitable sense of modesty/humility, a code of right and wrong that she seeks to follow and personal dignity. She behaves in the approved manner, respects others²¹ and meets her responsibilities. To "feel" *yaagu*, on the other hand, is to feel shame, which is quite negative and usually avoided at all costs.

²⁰ See S. Smeltzer, 1997, "Soninke Values: Responsibility, Work, Respect and Shame" in which I previously wrote about these themes. I am adding to and updating my data and conclusions in this paper.

²¹ Each relationship between ego and another has a *dango* or *danka*, which informants described as a boundary, which should not be crossed. For example, in the father-child dyad, for the child (even if he or she is 50 years old), the boundary of respect is very strict. Contrastively, the relationship between cross cousins is extremely relaxed. It is in fact a joking relationship where very little is sacred. Each pair of relationships has its *dango*; husband-wife, noble-casted person, grandmother-grandchild, etc. Recognizing and practicing the proper boundaries in all these relationships are essential to an individual of proper *yaagu*.

Because of the group orientation of Soninke society, the opinion others hold about an individual are of highest concern and feelings of *yaagu* are the signal the one needs to modify one's behavior.

In the following section, I will briefly present some common ways the word *yaagu* is used in the Soninke language both as a noun and a verb.

Some common uses of yaagu and their meanings:

As a noun:

1.

yaagu- dun- roxe

shame/honor- self- small

individual of little shame

Yaagudunroxe is a compound noun referring to a person who does not have *yaagu* in the positive sense (honor and an appropriate sense of shame/modesty). Since the comportment of such a person is not bounded by the need to protect himself from shame/dishonor (*yaagu* in the negative sense), he is a potential threat to the honor of immediate family members, the extended family and even the individual's lineage and clan. Mothers often scold their children by calling them *yaagudunroxe* to shame them into behaving appropriately. Among people who share a joking relationship (usually between cross-cousins and between various pairs of patronymics), one hears this used in friendly insults²². However, to use this term in a serious fashion to label an adult expresses an extremely strong judgment of that individual's character.

2.

yaagu- ran- sire

shame/honor- place- good

individual of good shame/honor

Yaaguransire is a compound noun referring to a person who has honor, the positive sense of *yaagu*. Such an individual is sensitive to the need to protect himself from dishonor and shame (*yaagu* in the negative sense).

A *yaaguransire* shows respect appropriately for those of higher age or gender status. It is considered a positive characteristic when a small child is shy before other adults, for example. He should be, it is a sign of appropriate *yaagu*. Similarly, women in a formal context among men,

²² In joking relationships among the Soninke, the friendly play almost always boils down to a comment about the joking partner's inability to abstain from sexual relations and thus his lack of shame concerning this area of life. There are also jokes about spouse sharing. What is normally a fairly taboo subject in polite conversation becomes acceptable in the mutual teasing and insults between people with this special relationship. People love to listen and laugh at such interchanges.

normally appear to keep quiet unless asked to speak. In October of 1995, I attended a village-level association meeting concerning women's development issues, with both men and women attending. Though the meeting was for the benefit of the women, they did not feel comfortable expressing themselves in this gender-mixed context. The men did most of the talking and only two women spoke and then very briefly, both were embarrassed. A male informant later told me that the women couldn't bring themselves to speak because of their *yaagu*; especially as there were older men present (YJS 1995). Women rarely if ever attend village meetings so this was a new and uncomfortable experience for them. Though at the time it was a bit frustrating for those trying to run the meeting, in general, such reticence is considered appropriate. Similarly, in a meeting of Soninkes from Xuusaane in Paris (July 15, 2000), one of the *xirise* (elder man) encouraged the young men not to *yaagu* but go ahead and ask questions about the topic in question as they needed to understand it. His assumption was that the *yaaguransiru* (those of good *yaagu*) would not speak in such a meeting; it would be too disrespectful for them to act as if they were on an equal status with the elders (*xirisu*) present there. During the time I was in the meeting, only one young man, in fact, dared ask a question.

3.

Yaagu-ran- sir- aaxu

Shame-place-good-abstract NOMINALIZER

Yaaguransiraaxu is a compound noun referring to the abstract notion of an appropriate sense of *yaagu*. This is the term used to talk about the ideal of honor and appropriate shame. It is an extremely important element to the Soninke ideal of good personness (*seraaxu*) and good character (*jikku sire*).

4.

Yaagu nta a yi.

shame/honor is not him to

He has no shame.

Yaagu nta a yi is a statement referring to a person who has no sensitivity to *yaagu*, who doesn't "feel" *yaagu*. Such a person is perceived to be capable of most any 'bad' behavior as he doesn't care what people think about him.

5.

Yaagu da a raga.

shame PAST him grab

Shame grabbed him.

Yaagu da a raga is a statement referring to an individual feeling embarrassed or shy [children], ashamed, humiliated, guilty or dishonored.

6a.

I da yaagu wara a yi.

They PAST shame put him on

They put shame on him

I da yaagu wara a yi is a statement in which someone has caused another to feel shamed or dishonored (*yaagu* in the negative sense).

6b.

I da a yaagu-ndi.

They PAST him shame-cause

They made him ashamed, feel dishonor.

The meaning and usage of this is the same as 6a.

As a verb:

7.

A nta yaagunu.

he not feel-shame

He doesn't feel shame.

A nta yaagunu is a statement used when talking about an individual who doesn't have a proper sense of honor and who doesn't feel *yaagu* when she should. Such a person, due to their insensitivity to *yaagu*, is not constrained by the norms of the society, which, of course, is considered very bad.

8.

A yaagu.

he PAST feel shame

He is ashamed.

A yaagu is a statement used to describe someone who is feeling shy, embarrassed (children), humiliated, ashamed, and guilty or dishonored. When said about small children, it is not negative.

Here are some other characteristics of *yaagu* that I would like to point out.

- People want to avoid "feeling" *yaagu*. Whether one does or not depends on what people think of you. If an individual does something he shouldn't but no one knows about it, he may feel little or no *yaagu* concerning it. However, if other people find out about it, he will experience feelings of *yaagu*. There is a common blessing, which says, "When all the slaves (of God) meet God on judgment day, may God not cause us to feel shame [before

each other]" (*Komo gan na meji, Alla nta o yaagundi*). Keeping one's self from feelings of *yaagu* is a bit like walking a social tightrope. *Yaagu* appears to be the mechanism that keeps people acting like they should lest they risk social sanctions, which usually start with gossip and can go as far as ostracism and perhaps even capital punishment. One can feel *yaagu* as well before Allah (God), though this seems rather rare as God is perceived as too distant and of a mechanistic nature. The real concern is for the perception of others, as the proverb shows.

- Another characteristic of *yaagu* is its ability to stigmatize its bearer, this, of course, being determined by how the larger group perceives the offender. There is permanence about an attribution of *yaagu* when the infraction is perceived as serious. It appears there is no getting rid of the stigma entirely once you have it. People don't quickly forget (especially concerning lying, cheating, stealing and not living up to family and/or group obligations). There are apparently exceptions where the offender is forgiven, but the *yaagu* is rarely if ever truly forgotten. Feelings of *yaagu* can taint an entire family based on the actions of only one member. Hence the proverb "Death is better than shame" (*Kallen yan fasa yaagu*). Suicide is not an unknown response to acute feelings of *yaagu*.
- Causing another person humiliation or embarrassment can result in estrangement between the two parties for life. The asking of forgiveness and the granting of it is possible but is apparently quite rare.

Following I will present some examples in which *yaagu* plays a significant role in order to illustrate its role in the lives of individuals as well as in the larger group.

Honor, Social Class/Caste and Dependency

Differences in behavior regarding standards of *yaagu* contribute strongly to the interdependent relationship between the three classes of people in Soninke society. The *hooro*, as the royals and leading social class are the patrons in the patron-client relationships that exist between them and the other two classes²³. It must be noted that many of these patron-client relationships have existed for many generations.

The sensitivity to *yaagu* of an individual appears to be most important in relation to his social equals and those of lesser social status. Nobles, for example, because of their "nobility" (the fact that they are at the top of the social hierarchy and have traditionally occupied the patron role) appear to have an extremely high standard of *yaagu* (honor). This high standard puts them in difficult positions sometimes when relating to members of the casted (*naxamala*) and the captive (*komo*) classes. Nobles are under great pressure to maintain their honor especially in the area of

²³ Casted families (*naxamala*) may also have patron relationships with captive/slave (*kome*) families in the same way nobles do. These relationships have similar roots as those of nobles and have spanned many generations. I first encountered this at a *hoore* (noble) wedding in which the *kome* (captives/slaves) of the *sakke* (woodworkers) associated with the bride's family had certain roles.

generosity. When requests are made by people who are traditionally considered clients, it is very difficult for nobles to refuse without experiencing *yaagu* (in the sense of shame). While begging from nobles (*naagaye*) is acceptable behavior for members of the artisan castes, this same behavior on the part of the *horo* would be terribly shameful.

Because of honor, nobles will also avoid putting themselves in situations where they could be classified as clients themselves. Conversely, some *naxamala* (though not all), who have traditionally been the clients of the nobles are less concerned with their *yaagu* before the nobles, but the question of honor remains important with their social peers. The same orientation holds for the *komo* who were, in pre-emancipation days, wholly dependent upon their noble masters for everything²⁴.

²⁴ François Manchuelle (1997), in presenting the history of the Soninke, clarifies some of the historical reasons for the way the different social classes relate to each other and how "honor" seems to be perceived. What Manchuelle refers to as "honor" in the following texts concerning the Soninke, I believe to be *yaagu* :

All societies in which clientage plays an important role have a strict conception of honor...In societies where the concept of honor is important... honor appears primarily tied to the realities of influence and wealth. Honor in these societies either results from a connection with the powerful (which brings prestige) or more simply from the ability to provide for one's family (which guarantees one's independence). In such societies, the "people without honor" are the poor, who have no connection with power and who also must beg from or work for others in order to survive. Because they depend on others for a living, the poor are incapable of preserving the integrity of their kind...Thus defined, clientship contains a contradiction: on the one hand, it is prestigious to be a client of the powerful, in a sense, to be dependent; on the other hand, it is dishonorable to be too dependent on others.

Such a contradiction is apparent in the Soninke concept of honor. Tradition maintains, for example, that some royal slaves were originally free men who had been driven by circumstances to throw themselves on the generosity of the royal clan, thus becoming the "things" of the royals. The story may or may not be true, but it expresses the social disapproval of too complete a dependence on patrons, even prestigious patrons. It is significant that marabouts and caste artisans, who were the most visible clients of noble families, were to varying degrees considered as not entirely honorable, even though they were free; marabouts were considered "women" who could not fight, and caste artisans married only their own kind and were subject to rules of physical avoidance. Thus families struggled to increase their wealth and gain followers, but also in a negative sense not to "fall behind" and become too dependent--a kind of social "fear of falling".

In order to be considered wealthy, and thus "honorable", one had to own slaves, cattle, one or two horses, filled granaries, and secondarily, jewelry and money. All stages in life, moreover, were occasions for necessary ostentation of wealth. Marriage was probably the most expensive stage in the life of a Soninke man

Conversely, poverty was castigated ... The idea of poverty and that of slavery (understood as a metaphor for abject dependence) were associated in the minds of the Soninke. Slaves were recognized by their "shabby appearance"; they sat in the "poor man's sitting position" *misikina*

Since nobles are the community leaders and, from the Soninke point of view, have the highest prestige, their dignity and honor set them apart from the other social classes of the society. In one case I observed in Xuusaane, for example, there had been an ongoing argument among the women of two neighboring households for more than six months. Their courtyards face each other across a street. One family is *hoore* from the chiefly clan and the other is from the captive class (*komo*). One informant (a *hoore* herself) commenting on the argument stated that a *hoore* must not even deign to fight with a *kome* as "nobles are better than slaves" (*hoore ya nan fasa kome*) (MSJ 2003). In other words, it is beneath their dignity. It lowers their honor. They should feel *yaagu* about such un-*hoore*-like behavior. This situation was finally resolved when go-betweens came and exhorted the *kome* women to ask forgiveness of the nobles (*na tuubi i hooron danja*), which they did. The response of the noble women was to give the *kome* women a small gift of money (BMT 2004). The same informant (MSJ 2004) who the year before commented that nobles shouldn't even deign to argue with slaves, felt that, in this particular conflict, the nobles were wrong and the slaves were right. To resolve the conflict, however, a noble could never ask forgiveness of a captive (nor a casted person). Their status and honor as nobles excludes this as an option for conflict resolution. The appropriate solution was for the go-betweens to exhort the slaves to ask forgiveness of the nobles even though they were not at fault. According to my informant, because they are *kome*, the slaves can ask forgiveness in this situation without loss of honor, where a noble cannot. She said that the overall good of the neighborhood is at risk when people don't resolve their differences. This *genmeye* (resolution of conflict) was necessary for the greater good of the whole neighborhood (MSJ 2004). It was interesting that the relationship was finally restored when the nobles gave a token gift to the slaves, emphasizing both their patron role and the client position of the captive family.

In doing research on famine survival strategies among the Soninke in the Bakel area of Senegal in the 1970's, Monique Chastanet discovered that her informants found it difficult to bring themselves to talk about the gathering of what they considered "famine foods" because of the stigma of poverty (and thus *yaagu*) attached to such activities. She states that "The free, in particular, were much more reserved on this subject than the captive class" (1991: 266). She goes on to explain,

In the Soninke context, these [subsistence strategies] are organized around the scarcity of funds, the resources of each family and certain behavioral norms. The gathering of famine foods is usually done by women while the men go on trips looking for millet to purchase, *jiggiye*. When an individual or a family must move to

taxe, (with legs tucked under the body as a sign of humility), and slave women "had songs expressing the poverty of slaves and the gratitude they were supposed to feel towards their masters." Slaves and freedmen were not expected to have any dignity: they begged, they had uncouth manners, men and women slaves performed obscene dances. In precolonial times, therefore, poverty and slavery provided a negative image of honor. In Soninke society, it was (and remains) very important to hold one's rank, and rank and honor understood (not only but primarily) in terms of wealth (1997:20-21).

an area less touched by famine, they avoid going to a region where they might find members of their own clan, *janmu*, or their in-laws. In disassociating the place of the crisis from social life, they are looking for a way to be able to return to normality once the crisis is over. **To conserve one's identity, to act according to one's social position, to not have to depend upon an 'equal', *xawansa*, are constant preoccupations** for those who have the wherewithal. After a certain degree of poverty, however, the need to survive wins out. Once the crisis has been met, it is very difficult to talk about the transgressions one had to commit as if there is always a latent risk of failure in spite of the fact that one has returned to his place in the society (p. 276, translation and emphasis mine).

Though Chastanet doesn't mention *yaagu* as such, I believe *yaagu* is the major force behind this reaction to a crisis where poverty or dependence could result. Her data²⁵ seems to fit very well with

²⁵ In her paper "Survival strategies of a Sahelian Society: The Case of the Soninke in Senegal from the middle of the Nineteenth Century to the Present", Chastanet (1992) presents the evolution of the various survival strategies implemented when there were shortages of food and how Soninke culture and their survival strategies have evolved with the advent of colonization and then independence. I include her observations here as I find the looking at past helps make sense of the present.

In pre-colonial Soninke culture in the Gajaaga region of the Soninke homeland, there were very rigid standards concerning the types of activities nobles could be involved in. For an aristocrat, "Being able to live without working on the land was a sign of wealth and represented one of the values of the aristocracy (131)."

Up to the second half of the nineteenth century, socioeconomic and political activities were strongly linked with social status. For instance, the warriors could not carry on trade without departing from their status. They participated in the slave trade in other ways as *laptots* (seamen), brokers and interpreters (130).

Chastanet points out that in the latter half of the 19th century the

...different [survival] strategies were implemented according to the intensity of the [food] crisis but also according to social requirements. They were hierarchically ranked according to the level of shortage they revealed: to go and prospect for millet was more honorable than gathering food, because it showed that a family still had some goods to exchange. However, both were less degrading than working for other people. Besides, the reversal of gender-defined roles was a sign of difficulty and a reason for shame. If a man gathered food, that is to say, did a woman's job, it showed the reduced circumstances of his family which, being shorthanded could not comply with the usual division of labor. If a woman went and prospected for millet, it also meant serious difficulties, for it was the man's responsibility to go out of the village in order to fetch food... (140)"

When all other options were exhausted, the Soninke

... resorted to migration. The poorest sold their labor in regions less affected by the crisis. They performed...agricultural or domestic tasks in return for their food. They generally went to Bunu or Fuuta Tooro...regions populated by the Haapulaaren...The Soninke and more particularly the free men tried to separate the ...crisis space from the space of normal life, in order to assure a return to a certain normality. The fact of working for other people amounted

Manschuelle's comments concerning Soninke perceptions of dependency and poverty in the times past.

It appears to be these preoccupations among others that push a large number of Soninke men to go off and work in Paris, Congo, Gabon, the US, etc. This provides them with financial security for their families and a measure of prestige and eventually at least some political influence. For the *naxamala* and the *kome*, it is the route to independence and access to possibilities closed to them back home where the principal options are farming and commerce (Weigel 1980)²⁶.

Honor and Types of work

Soninke men, especially those of the noble class (*hooro*) participating in transmigration in Paris and other first-world countries rarely disclose exactly what they do to earn money there, with the exception of commerce, because of the *yaagu* they may feel about the menial level of some of the work they may be doing (street sweeping, etc.). They do work elsewhere that they would never do at home²⁷. It's a topic that is rarely talked about. The monetary fruit of their work appears to be acceptable to the people at home with 'no questions asked' about how it is acquired.

Young nobles often migrate to other regions and work for others as farmers. Farming is honorable work for a noble. Other types of work, however, are not traditionally acceptable for one of the noble class. I recently met a noble man who has worked in France for about 20 years in a welding shop. Such work is traditionally blacksmith (*tage*) work and in his own context in Mali a noble would never have anything to do with the work of a caste person - it would cause them *yaagu*. My husband met noble Soninkes in Ivory Coast who were making shoes, the traditional work of the *garanko* leatherworkers, work they would never do in their home village. What would cause extreme *yaagu* for an individual in one's home context appears to be acceptable somewhere else. It is perhaps for this reason among others that the Soninke employ the euphemism, "he went to the bush" (*a daga gunne*), to refer to someone who has gone to foreign parts to work. The thinking behind it is that as one suffers hunger and thirst in the bush, one suffers also indignities (*yaagu*), hardships and homesickness in the foreign country (*tuna*).

Certain types of work are shameful for everyone, social class aside. For example, walking in the village at night I have many times remarked men working on their cesspools (gray water that comes out of the bathing enclosure). Apparently any work related to cleaning or enlarging a sewer

to being dependant on them, as in the case of the clients, or worse, of the enslaved people.

Therefore, famine migrations were bound to lead to a loss of social status, but it was less likely to occur if it took place among other ethnic groups (139).

²⁶ According to Weigel (1980), the *nijegunmu* (masters of the land) are certain noble families in each village of the Gajaga region who control the use of all the land, its distribution and rents. *Naxamala* and *komo* as well as strangers gain access to cultivable land only through them thus access to land requires dependence on nobles.

²⁷ See footnote 24.

system which is in current use is always done in the dark. Accompanying friends' comments always underline the *yaagu* of such work, which is why it is done at night.

Another example in the same vein came from a group of informants who recounted the following hypothetical situation in an effort to give an example of *yaagu* (in the sense of shame/dishonor) related to status and types of work: Moors²⁸ sometime steal children they find out in the bush and turn them into slaves to herd animals or even to sell. The children themselves are aware of who they are and where they come from but even as adults would never return to their families. The reason is *yaagu*. The individual would feel *yaagu* to come home because of having been a slave. On the other end, his homecoming would cause the family as well as the whole village to feel *yaagu* because they failed to find the child when he or she was first lost. There would be so much *yaagu* felt by both sides at the person's eventual return that the person would never go home again even if he could (BSD et. al. 2000).

Honor and Theft

It seems that being caught in theft causes an individual to have strong feeling of *yaagu*. This extends to the culprit's whole family. A thief (an adult) who is caught may end up having to leave his home village forever because he will probably be excluded from group life and cannot live with his *yaagu* before others.

In Xuusaane, the village charges a fine of 50,000 CFA for all cases of theft. This is paid to the village elders (*xisiru*) and goes into the village cash box. Informants said that the fine is always paid most usually by the family of the thief as the perpetrator's *yaagu* taints everyone in the family. Paying the fine lightens the feelings of *yaagu* for the family but not the thief. The person who was stolen from also decides what he /she wants as recompense, the price usually having little to do with the value of the item stolen. Whatever the case, for the thief, the *yaagu* is great and the person will have great difficulty in getting a spouse from anyone who is aware of his thievery. The village may not chase this person away but they won't include them in group life either. Such strong feelings of *yaagu* may drive the person to go live where he's not known (BDS et. al. 2000).

Honor and Lying

Lying in the Soninke context is defined fairly broadly as saying something that is not true or may not be true in the future. If a person says he or she is going to definitely do something, and then doesn't do it, this causes the person to feel *yaagu* as he has told a lie thus showing himself as lacking in integrity before others.

In planning a visit to his in-laws in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, I was present when a Soninke man called them on the telephone from Bouaké (about 6 hours by road from Abidjan) 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

²⁸ A nomadic people from Mauritania who speak Hasaniya Arabic.

he would be coming without it ever being explicitly said. He explained 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 (MDS 1996). This would have caused him extreme feelings of *yaagu* for it would call into question his integrity and his honor, especially so, as it has to do with his in-laws to whom he must show great respect and to whom he wants to present himself in the best light possible.

The Soninke language has multiple ways to mitigate language so that the speaker's desire is expressed without any commitment thus protecting him/her from expressing something that could be construed later as an untruth.²⁹

This preoccupation about speaking only the truth is well illustrated by the stories about one of the local historical figures, Mamedi Kanute or more familiarly Madi Kama³⁰. Madi Kama, born in the 1820's, was a slave (Traoré 1998:9). He is renowned today among the Soninke of Gidimaxa for his honesty and wisdom. One of the stories recounts that certain people kept trying to catch Madi Kama in a lie. One day, he was sent as a messenger to invite guests to a wedding. He was told to tell the prospective guests that they had already slaughtered the sheep for the feast. As he was leaving to deliver the message, he saw the butcher with a knife at the throat of the animal. After arriving at his destination and delivering the invitation, the invitees asked him if the sheep for the feast had been slaughtered yet. He responded that he could only say that there was a knife at its throat when he had left to bring them the message.

As this story illustrates, the definition of a lie in the Soninke context is quite broad. A person of proper *yaagu* is prudent in his speech. An individual who is close-mouthed (*sittinte*) is admired as he keeps his business to himself and is very careful about what he says. On the other hand, someone who talks all the time, can't keep a secret, is indiscreet in his speech, talks before he thinks, etc. (a *laxaminte*) is neither admired nor respected.

Honor and Requests

The whole area of asking and granting or refusing requests is fraught with potential for *yaagu* on both the side of the requester and the requestee. It is also closely related to the notion of *gacce*, a type of shame concerning failure to engage in the economic system of balanced reciprocity, which I will present in the next section of this paper. The following proverbs (in bold type) and their explanations illustrate the complexity of this issue (the following translations are mine).

²⁹ For example, a man is going to buy a horse. He has the horse picked out and has even discussed the price, yet he won't say "I am buying a horse". He might say any of the following (the mitigating constructions are underlined) *N lefi sinyugo xobono*. (I am hoping to buy a stallion). *N wa a mulla na sinyugo xobo*. I want to buy a stallion. *Alla ga na durje, n na sin yugo xobo*. If God wills it, I will buy a stallion.

³⁰ Madi Kama is the mascot of a grass roots organization, Madi Kama Musundo (Prix Madi Kama). This organization has a weekly radio show and a yearly writer's contest out of Kayes in the Gidimaxa. Their major objective is to celebrate Soninke language and culture.

If an old pair of pants permits you to stand, you also should permit them to sit.

If someone who has always been good to you makes a request of you, your refusal to grant his demand will come between the two of you, you will cause your friend to experience *yaagu*. Even if you wouldn't do it for anybody else, you would grant the request of your friend (Tunkara³¹, 1999:36).

If you make a request of someone three times and he refuses you, *don't* take on the burden of his *yaagu*.

For the first request, if you say to someone: "I want to marry your daughter" and he refuses because he says she's already spoken for, don't take on this *yaagu*. Let the situation go because sooner or later when he does give his daughter to someone, in the end the man won't marry her.

For the second request, when someone is washing clothes and you say to her, "Hey, friend, give me your dirty water." If she refuses, don't take on her *yaagu*. Sit down and you'll see that she won't drink the water in question nor put it in her water pot; she'll just throw it out.

For the third request, if you say to a rich man, "Give me something so that I can feed my family today" and he refuses, don't let this *yaagu* cause you pain because one day he'll be left with no money or his money will be left behind but he'll be dead (Ibid.: 45-46).

A person doesn't swallow poison on top of *yaagu*.

Yaagu shouldn't push a person to grant a request which is in the end detrimental to him (Ibid. 26).

There seem to be several factors that an individual must take into account when dealing with a request. There is always a certain amount of *yaagu* caused to the person asking if his request is refused. There is also *yaagu* experienced by the refuser. Many things are weighed in each exchange: the social status of the asker in relation to the person asked, the closeness of the relationship between the two participants, the age of the two parties, the perceived ability of the one asked to grant the request, the reasonableness of the request, the consequences of refusing the request, any personal obligation one may already have to the requester, to name some of the more obvious considerations.

In general if a person makes a request of someone which is reasonably in their power to grant and is not to the his or her detriment (a favor, a loan, a gift, etc.), the requester expects that the requestee shares in a code of mutual respect which will avoid causing anyone unnecessary *yaagu*. In other words, they are not expecting a refusal, at least not a direct one that appears from their

³¹ Buubu Yamadu Tunkara is a resident of Xuusaane.

perspective to purposely cause them to feel *yaagu*. This is very painful and shows that the refuser is a mean person who doesn't care for the dignity of others. People look for ways to mitigate refusal without ever baldly saying "no" and even then, there is still *yaagu* felt on both sides.

For example, if someone asks for a loan, and the person he asks can't meet the request, he might explain concerning his own financial straits and his other responsibilities. He might give the person a small bit of cash to show his desire to help if he has it to spare. Whatever he says, he will communicate his inability in a somewhat indirect way so to cause the person the least amount of *yaagu* possible³².

Honor and Estrangements

While living with a Soninke family I witnessed an incident, which shows the power of *yaagu* to cause permanent estrangement between two people. In this polygamous household, there had been long standing tension between the first and second wife. The second wife (we'll call her Fatumata) cooked lunch one day and when she called the women to eat, Taco, the oldest daughter of the first wife did not hear her. Taco believed that the Fatumata purposely did not call her and this caused her to feel *yaagu*. Fatumata says she did call her but made no effort to mitigate the situation in anyway and thereafter quit calling her to meals. Fatumata was also responding from feelings of *yaagu* because of Tako's accusation. In spite of several tries on the part of family members to help the two resolve their differences, they were still not speaking to each other months later. Taco has since married and moved to her husband's house so they see less of each other thus the tension between them is significantly reduced. According to those who tried to help them reconcile their differences, both parties refused to acknowledge any fault (which would lead to greater feelings of *yaagu*) and thus refused to forgive each other. This created even more tension between the two co-wives because a perceived insult to a daughter includes her mother also (BK 1998).

Dishonor Leading to Extreme Behaviors

Trying to avoid shame and dishonor can push people to extreme behaviors. The power of *yaagu* is such that sometimes people will literally commit suicide to escape living with its consequences. Informants told me of a noble woman who had been made crazy by spirits for about a year. She

³²Dave Marantz (2000), quoting an African colleague, presents the African point of view concerning requests which one cannot grant:

A categorical refusal is understood as a lack of tact and diplomacy. To answer a request in a negative and direct way is an offense, and shows an absence of respect vis-à-vis the other.... It doesn't mean that Africans make promises that they won't keep. Not at all. As people do all over the world, they put off those that come to ask them for a service they cannot perform. However, there is a way to do it without offending the other and without adversely affecting future relations between them (p. 4).

Although shame is not explicitly mentioned here, I believe this is in fact a large part of the concern from the African point of view, trying to protect both parties involved from losing face resulting in shame.

yelled at people and just generally acted crazy. After being cured by a *marabout*³³, she had such strong feelings of *yaagu* concerning her previous behavior when she was under the control of spirits that she went home and hung herself. My informant said that "it was shame that killed her" (*Yaagu yan da a kari*) (BDS et. al. 1998)³⁴.

There was an incident in which a woman became pregnant while her husband was in France. He had been gone more than two years so everyone knew that the child was not his. When her labor got to the point that she knew she would have the child, she went in her outhouse, had the child, strangled it and threw it in the toilet pit. This was her solution to the *yaagu* resulting from the common knowledge that her husband had not sired the child. The infant would have been a living reminder to everyone of what she had done. My informants said she did it because of *yaagu*. Although they all agreed that her behavior was bad, they also understood what motivated it. Eventually, the woman went to jail for what she did (BK 1994, MSJ 1999). Her husband, however, came from back from France and was able to get her out of jail after several months. He took her to France with him where she still is at the writing of this paper. My informant said that this woman could never return to Xuusaane (MSJ 2004).

Case Study

Over the course of about 5 years, I was able to observe the following incident which shows how the larger group reacts to one individual's seeming insensitivity to *yaagu*.

A young married man from the family and clan of the chief began having an affair with the wife of his spouse's uncle. When the woman became pregnant, he wanted to marry her. She had a letter of divorce obtained from the *chef d'arrondissement* (the administrative head of the county). Her grounds for divorce were that her husband who was in Congo had not returned to see her for more than three years. Many doubted the legitimacy of her divorce.

The entire village disapproved of the young man's behavior with this woman and tried to get him to give her up. Among other things, it was argued that the woman was too closely related to the man's first wife to be part of a polygamous marriage with her. The two women had grown up together in the same compound and so were like sisters. Even if the new woman had never been married, she could never be considered a possible wife for him because of her close relationship to his first wife. To add insult to injury the two women share an "in-law" relationship as the new woman was married

³³ A *marabout* is a Muslim healer.

³⁴ Douglas proposes that "The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived (1973:93). Among several rules she puts forward pertaining to the relationship between these "two bodies", she says "...the scope of the body acting as a medium is restricted by the demands of the social system to be expressed" and "...strong social control demands strong bodily control (ibid. 100)". Within a strong grid strong group culture like the Soninke, where, on the one hand, you have a strongly codified and controlling social system of grid, and on the other hand, a strong value concerning the avoidance of shame before one's group, this woman's suicide as a reaction to being out of control her body is unsurprising.

to the other's uncle. Many people still considered her married to him at the time of this incident. The divorced husband is a member of the clan of the *mangu*, counselors for the clan of the chief.

The young man's age mates and his in-laws tried repeatedly to talk sense into him, outside mediators came several times to try to resolve the situation³⁵, all to no avail. The young man spent a couple of months in jail awaiting judgment after the "wronged" husband came back from Congo and pressed charges of adultery against him. In spite of all these efforts, the young man still refused to give the woman up.

In the meantime, the young man's first wife divorced him and all of his of his age-mates quit associating with him. My husband and I were even scolded for welcoming him into our home when he came to visit. The whole village perceived him as a *yaaxadunloxe* (see example 1). Finally, he went with the woman and their new baby to stay in another village near the Mauritanian border. The elders of that village forced him to come home to Xuusaane and resolve the situation because his behavior was affecting the succession of the chieftainship in Xuusaane.

During the period of these events, the village chief had passed away (January 1999) and the *mangu* refused to give the chieftainship to the young man's uncle, the next in succession, because of the shameful situation in his household with this young man. The *mangu* are a clan of nobles who assist the chiefly clan in village affairs, it is their responsibility to guard the chieftainship at the death of a chief and hold it until the succession is decided and then formally pass it on to the next designated chief. They reasoned that a man who could not keep his own household in line should not hold the village chieftainship so they refused to pass on the chieftainship to the young man's uncle until his situation was resolved in an acceptable fashion. When the young man under duress finally renounced his decision to marry the girl for the moment, the chieftainship was finally passed on to his uncle (sometime in March/April 2000).

Some people believed that this young man was under the control of a spirit (*jina* or *sitan*) or had been bewitched³⁶. When we left the village in 1999, his best friends (his age mates with whom he has grown up) avoided him. His own grandmother shook her head in despair when his name would come up in the conversation. Not only did his family feel the *yaagu* of his behavior, the shame of it extended to the whole village and its sister/mother villages as well. It is the young man's *yaagu* both perceived and, in a sense, shared by the whole group that appears to have caused the estrangement between him and his community.

³⁵ The Association Madi Kama sent people to Xuusaane from Kayes to try to help resolve the situation. After that the mother village of Gakura, sent elders two different times for the same reason.

³⁶ This situation started soon after the deaths of both the young man's parents. His mother died in January 1998 and his father in April of the same year. As he is a member of the chiefly family, some people propose that he could be the victim of sorcery done at the grave of his father, the objective of which was to cause problems in the succession of the village chieftainship. Yet others propose that, lacking the strong guidance of his parents who would never had let this situation get to such a state, the young man, on his own, has gone so far now that he can't face the *yaagu* of admitting he was wrong.

After an absence of three years from Xuusaane, I returned in October of 2003 to find, that the young man had indeed married the woman in question and now has three children from her. His social situation appears to be somewhat questionable. I asked several people how he is perceived and the response was "We have let him go" (*O da a wara*). In other words, he is physically a part of the community but socially non-existent in most situations. He has no relationships with his age mates, they greet him and are polite but that is all. In a way, it is like he is dead to them. One of the young man's age mates, former close friend and also nephew of the wronged husband in the Congo, said he felt sad about the young man's situation but he has to side with his uncle and, in any case, could not go against the village's decision to ostracize the young man (MDS 2003).

A recent development was the unexpected death of his new wife (November 2003). She had been out in the fields working, came home that evening feeling ill and died in the middle of the night. Several informants have posited a connection between the death of the wife and the fact that the couple should have never married in the first place pointing towards a type of divine retribution or punishment.

The young man now finds himself in a difficult situation as he has 6 children to care for and no wife to do so. By custom as well as Malian civil law, children belong to the father, and he has the right to take them from the mother once they are weaned. His first wife bore him three children who now live with him plus the three children by his deceased wife, the youngest only 5 months old at the time of her death. He is currently in correspondence with family members working in France trying to find a woman to marry who can care for these 6 children. One informant has expressed doubt that he will find anyone in Xuusaane willing to give him their daughter because of his past behavior. The outcome remains to be seen.

Summary

Avoiding shame, dishonor and loss of dignity as well as maintaining one's honor are powerful motivators for behavior in Soninke society. Once an individual has been dishonored or shamed, the stigma of *yaagu* is felt, not just by the individual involved, but also his family, clan, village and even the transnational community of which he or family members are a part depending on the severity of the infraction. The potential for dishonor and shame is a constant in daily life affecting the choices one makes in every relationship, in every action and in every word spoken. Conformity, following accepted tradition (*danbe*) and cultural laws (*laada*) and a constant preoccupation concerning the opinion of the other members of one's group helps people to monitor their behavior and maintain their honor. It is impossible to be a true *sere* (person), that is, someone perceived by others as having the quality of *seraaxu* unless the individual also is perceived as a person of honor (*yaaguransire*, example 2). This is why people often quote the proverb "death is preferable to dishonor" (*Kalle yan fasa yaagu*). *Yaagu* can, in a sense, socially "kill" and if, in extreme cases, an individual experiences strong enough feelings of *yaagu*, he or she may chose something as radical as suicide to escape them.

Gacce

The next component of *seraaxu* that I will explore is *gacce*. *Gacce* appears to a sub-category in the larger notion of shame/honor (*yaagu*). It could be loosely translated as the shame/dishonor/guilty conscience associated with failing some way in participating in the Soninke system of mutual interdependence and reciprocity.

One informant described *gacce* in the following way:

Gacce is, for example, to not do something which you aren't forced to do, but it's a good thing to do. Why? If you do it, it's good and if you don't do it, it's not evil. For example, I come in from the bush with some baobab fruit. I bring the fruit home and sit down and eat it all myself. I don't give any to my family and close friends. This is *gacce*, which had found me. If I come from a trip with something and I don't give some to my neighbors, I don't make them happy [by sharing], this is *gacce* (MDS 1994, recorded text, translation mine).

Gacce, however, concerns more than just reciprocity with material goods, it also encompasses "social" or non-material reciprocity. *Gacce* is tied to the whole notion of generosity in its broadest sense including material goods, one's time, and the maintenance of proper social relations with other members of one's social group. This will be illustrated in the following section on the uses and meanings of the noun *gacce*.

Uses and Meanings of Gacce

28.

Gacce-n wa sere-n ŋa.

Gacce-DEF is person-DEF with

The person has *gacce*. (Literally, 'Gacce is with the person.')

"To have *gacce*" means a person has made a conscious decision not to do something that would benefit or please someone else, especially when the effort would not itself cause the person any harm. Not doing these kinds of things is perceived as a lack of concern for others, and as threatening to group solidarity since one is really saying she doesn't need other people (MDS 2000).

One informant gave the following three examples of what constitutes having *gacce* and how people react to cases of perceived *gacce*:

You have something or get something but you don't share it with the rest of your family or clan. You and some neighbors have a neighborly reciprocal relationship, yet you bring something in from the harvest, or you get something and don't share any with them. People greet you or come and give you blessings but you don't reciprocate.

People will either tell you that *gacce* had gotten you or they might look at you in a particular way and you know they think that you have *gacce*. A person's reaction if they believe that someone thinks they have *gacce* is to *yaagu* [to feel ashamed]. They will try to repair the problem appropriately. To be considered *gaccenroxé* ["having small *gacce*", example 30] is bad. *Gacce* destroys good personness (*seraaxu*)³⁷ (BJS 2003)³⁸.

Another group of informants gave these examples of *gacce*:

We asked you for some condiments for sauce yesterday and you brought us squash and spices. Today you come to our house, ask for something but we say we don't have it and you leave. Maybe later you come back and we are in the middle of eating the thing you asked for. This is *gacce* and it causes us *yaagu*.³⁹

If we are eating in the morning and we run out of couscous, we ask a neighbor for some. If they have it, they give some. This is the keeping of *gacce* (*gaccitangaye*). If they have it and refuse, this is *gacce* and they should feel *yaagu* about it.

If you are sick and I come and greet you and give blessings for better health and then when I get sick and if you could come and do the same for me but refuse to do so, you have *gacce*⁴⁰ (Salla et al. 2000).

Many informants felt that once an individual has *gacce*, it is difficult to get rid of. If one asks forgiveness and receives it the *gacce* could be taken away but this is very difficult and quite rare.

The other thing you can do is try to do lots of good to that person but they will always remember that you have *gacce* unless forgiveness happens. Lots of people react by being vengeful and thus end up having *gacce* themselves (ibid).

29.

Ke ni gacce-n ya.

That is *gacce*-DEF FOCUS

That's *gacce*.

³⁷ *Gacce wa seraaxun sangalle xosono*. Literally, "*Gacce* shatters the fence of good personness".

³⁸ In this same conversation, the informant talked about two sorts of stinginess: *kutungenaaxu* and *kitiranxotaaxu*. *Kutungenaaxu* is a miserly stinginess. "You ask for something and the person won't give it even if you beg them. *Kutungenaaxu* is part of *gacce*" Concerning the other term, *kitiranxotaaxu* "...perhaps the thing you are asking for was hard for the person to obtain. They probably won't want to give it but if you beg them they will give it, even if they don't want to. They are not quick to give, but they do (BJS 2003)".

³⁹ *An da yaagu wara o yi*. "You put *yaagu* on us."

⁴⁰ ...*gacce w'an ŋa*, "...you have *gacce*."

When an individual is caught in *gacce*, observers and the offended use this expression. In a poem about the need for people to learn to read the Soninke language, the author says the following:

... if you study, you will learn something, if you learn something, this will let you rest... To not learn is to be lost. To not learn to read is *gacce*... Come, let's study and teach each other. You will find that we will learn something and we will share it with each other⁴¹ (annon. 2000: 4, translation mine).

According to the author, it's *gacce* to refuse to learn, especially to refuse to learn to read and write to better one's self and to help and educate one's neighbor.

30.

Gacci tanga -ye

Gacce to guard NOMINALIZER

the guarding/keeping of *gacce*

To keep or guard *gacce*, means to protect one's self from having *gacce*. It is accomplished by "...doing things that are not required but are good for others. It means not refusing if you can do whatever because you have a good sense of honor (*yaagu sire*) (MDS 2000)." The proverb "God has no *gacce*" (*Gacce nta Alla yi.*) underlines that no human being is exempt from the burden of *gacce*. It is only God who has no such burden to bear as all things come from him to begin with.

In discussing the meaning of *gacce*, one informant pointed out that there were two components to protecting one's self from *gacce*.

When someone does good to you, it is like you have a debt which because you are sensitive to *yaagu* you want to pay back as soon as possible. Until the debt is paid, you have *gacce*.

When someone does something good for you, you should tell people about it, this will encourage the giver and it protects you from *gacce*.

A person who doesn't protect themselves from *gacce* is someone who is saying they don't need other people. This is a bad person. Such a person has no sensitivity to *yaagu* either (MSJ 2003).

Attributions of *gacce* appear to find their starting place in peoples' perception of how things ought to be done according local tradition (*laada*). It is common to hear people say things like "In our tradition (*o laada*) we do it this way..." When someone doesn't follow the generally agreed upon rules in whatever the situation, there is potential for *gacce* to be attributed to that individual.

⁴¹... *an ga na xara, an na tuwi. An ga na tuwi, a nan tuuma...Tuanbalaxu ni sankuyen ya yi. Xaranbalaaxun ni gaccen ya yi...Xa ri o nan xara, o na me xaranjundi. Xa ni o nan tuwi, o na me tuwindi.*

One group of informants felt that *gacce* was very important between neighbors, "...if one neighbor gives food and such to the other but the neighbor never reciprocates in any way, they have *gacce* which is very bad." They agreed that if everyone 'guarded' *gacce* like they should, neighborly relationships would be very good (JS et al.: 2003).

JS et al. described *gacce* as a type of *yaagu*.

When you keep *gacce* (*na gacce tanga*), *yaagu* doesn't get you. When you have *gacce*, you feel *yaagu* and you may not be able to look that person in the face until you can reciprocate and remove the *gacce* from yourself. For example, if a man asked to marry Fese [the teenage daughter of one of the informants], and she was given, her mother must give kola nuts to a whole group of people. Now if I show up at the wedding with 3 or 4 pieces of cloth for Fese's trousseau and I hadn't received any kola nuts, well, Fese's mother couldn't look me in the face, the *gacce* and thus the *yaagu* would be terrible (JS et al.: 2003).

The previous example also illustrates the principle of balanced reciprocity that is so much a part of the Soninke economic system. The pressure to *gacce tanga* (keep *gacce*) helps ensure that balanced reciprocity is maintained. All the major rites of passage (birth, marriage, death) as well as other types of activities (putting the roof on a house, moving into a new home, etc.) have an aspect in which the keeping of *gacce* through *dansa* is important. When *dansa* is used as transitive verb, you *dansa* someone with something (money, cloth, etc.) for the purpose of helping them. The thing you give (the noun) is also referred as *dansa*. At weddings, for example, the mother of the bride has given much time and effort, sometimes years putting together cloth, soap and kitchen utensils to make up her daughter's trousseau. However, a huge portion of what the bride takes with her to her husband's home comes from the *dansa* of female family members and friends who give cloth, soap and kitchen hardware to add to what the mother has been able to set aside for her daughter⁴².

⁴² In January 2004, I attended the *saaxakiraane* ("spending the day with the bride's mother") of a wedding for a noble girl. The bride's mother and the bride's *maani* (classificatory and fictive mothers of which I was one) put on this event that lasts two days. The main point of the *saaxakiraane* is for the bride's relatives and friends to bring their wedding gifts (*dansa*) to the mother of the bride. The *maani* receive the gifts, keep an exact count of them and who gave them, put the bride's mark on them and decide on the various gifts that are to be given to the cooks and helpers, the *xusumanta* (the *kome* woman who assists and counsels the bride), and various members of the husband's family. During the two days people came with their *dansa* and gave blessings for the good fortune of the marriage, which are received and responded to by the *maani*. The main activity apart from this is dancing and eating a mid-day meal. Several drummers (*komo*) played and the women and girls danced. The meal is provided by the *maani*.

The bride was not present at these events. During the first day of the *saaxakiraane*, she was secluded elsewhere being prepared to be taken to her husband's home that night for the consummation of the marriage.

On the third morning, after the two days of the *saaxakiraane*, the *yokkideni* (the bringing of the gifts to the bride in her new home) took place. This is not done until the *xusumanta* (counselor and helper to the bride) can assure that there has been a successful consummation of the marriage (MSS 2004).

This trousseau is like the new bride's bank account from which she can now enter into the Soninke reciprocal system of economics. A new bride with a very small trousseau cannot easily participate in this economic system. The bride's mother and her mother before her (this goes on *ad infinitum*) have all participated in *me dansande* (mutual aid of this type) by both giving and receiving *dansa* in relationships with many others, both family members, and friends. They are part of an intricate web of relationships in which balanced reciprocity and the keeping of *gacce* are important components. Failure to participate results in the feeling of *yaagu*. Successful participation is a huge component of honor and contributes to *seraaxu* (good personness).

In the following paragraphs, I will describe the "script" of a baby naming ceremony. *Me dansande* and *gaccitangaye* are both important components in this rite of passage.

Example: Baby Naming Ceremony

On the eighth day after the birth of a baby, the family⁴³ has a naming ceremony for the child. The *yinmansiye* or *siyinde* (head shaving) is held early in the morning, starting about 7AM. The male members of the newborn's family sit in the middle of a group of mats outside the rooms of the new mother's mother in law. Next to them are those responsible for receiving and redistributing the various *dansa* brought⁴⁴. The new mother, her female relatives and her in-laws as well as the various persons responsible for shaving the child's head sit in the mother-in-law's *xube* (front room

Before the gifts are taken to the bride's home, the *faabeni* (the bride's fathers, classificatory and fictive) were shown all the gifts so that they could testify as to how much was sent. The gifts were brought out, unpacked and counted publicly (in this case by two women from the *sakke* (woodworkers) caste who are clients of this noble family). The final count for this wedding was: 205 pieces of cloth, 105 food bowls (most with lids), 240 pieces of soap, 9 buckets, 5 plastic washtubs, 1 thermos, 1 mirror set in a small cupboard, 2 tables, 30 small ladles for eating porridge, 9 sauce ladles, 1 large wire basket, 4 stools, several coffee pots, 2 ablution water pots, about 20 liter sized plastic cups, 4 plastic mats, 3 big cooking pots and 3 knives.

After the counting was done, all the gifts were repacked loaded into 2 donkey carts to be taken to the bride's new home led by an entourage of the *maani* (excluding the real mother whose role in the wedding is now finished). Once there, the counting of the gifts was done again so that the in-laws could witness what was given. After this, the items chosen as special gifts for the cooks and helpers, various in-laws and the *xusumanta* were distributed in the same public way.

⁴³ Soninke society is patrilineal and patrilocal, so that the baby's family in this case is the father of the child and his network of relatives.

⁴⁴ Who these people are depends upon the social class of the father's family and their historical relationship with people from other social classes. It is most usually members of the blacksmith caste (*tage*) who perform this function but not always. For example, I know a *hoore* (noble) family who has a long-term relationship spanning many generations with a particular lineage of *sakke* (woodworkers). These two families have very specific roles in each other various rites of passage (birth, marriage, death). At a *yinmansiye* for the noble family, it would be the men and women from this family of woodworkers who would receive and redistribute the gifts brought. Men and women of the *hoore* family would do the same for the woodworkers at a head shaving for the birth of one of their children.

of her house). Outside the *xube* are women who receive the *dansa* brought by women friends and family, usually a small bowl of grain which may or may not be accompanied by a piece of soap, depending of the closeness of the relationship between the women and the depth of their *gacce* relationship. After handing over their *dansa*, each woman retrieves her bowl and enters the *xube* where she finds a place to sit on mats, which cover the entire floor of the room.

Events outside the *xube*⁴⁵: Male friends and family members arrive, each bringing a *dansa* of little cookies, kola nuts, candies and/or coins which are handed over to the man responsible for receiving and redistributing the gifts. He opens the bags of cookies and makes various piles of these gifts for redistribution. The child's father and his relatives have provided kola nuts and cookies as well and these are part of items to be given away. The first round of redistribution is usually comprised of kola nuts given to the older men present. The next round of gifts is a handful of cookies and kola given to each man present. The men put what they receive in their pockets. The man who does the redistribution ties up the women's portion in a cloth and takes it to the women responsible for its redistribution in front of the mother-in-law's *xube*. At this point the baby is brought outside by the blacksmith woman who shaved the baby's head. She hands the child to the *moodi*⁴⁶. The *moodi* puts his hand on the child's head and murmurs prayers and blessings. Once done, he tells the woman the child's names⁴⁷ and she, in turn, announces the names to the men. She takes the baby and goes back into the mother-in-law's *xube*. The men then say the *Alfatiya* (first surat of the Koran) together and then they all pronounce blessings for the health and growth of the child. Once this is done, the men disperse.

Events inside the *xube*: Women friends and relatives come bringing their *dansa* of grain and soap, which they deposit with the women waiting to receive it outside the door of the *xube*. They all sit down inside the mother-in-law's *xube* on the mats provided. Inside, there is at least one representative of the blacksmith caste who, accompanied by an older woman (usually a relative of the new baby), shaves the baby's head.

As the hair of the child is removed during the shaving, it is put on a special *lafa* (woven bowl cover), which has been prepared as a *sadaxa* (offering) to ensure the child's future prosperity (I will describe this *sadaxa* in detail later). In some families the hair is simply buried in a place where no one will find it. In others, the hair will be spun with cotton to make a string that is placed around the baby's waist or neck and worn until it falls off by itself. The string functions as an amulet of protection that protects the child when the mother has to leave the child to go to the wells or do other work (MSJ 1998, LJS et. al. 2000).

⁴⁵ As a woman, I am always inside the *xube* so have yet to observe what the men are doing outside. The description (script) presented here was related to me by Brad Smeltzer (March 2004) based on his observations from having attended many head shavings over the last 10 years.

⁴⁶ The *moodi* are a subclass of the *hooro* (nobles) who are the religious specialists in Islam.

⁴⁷ A child is given several names, one is the *kayitintoxo* ("the paper name", the official name used on all government documents), which is chosen by the father. The second name is chosen by the mother.

Once the baby's head is shaved and the redistribution of cookies and kola have taken place among the men, the blacksmith woman who shaved the child's head takes him outside to the *moodi* to be blessed and receive his names. She returns to the doorway of the *xube* where she is met by the child's mother who kneels down inside the doorway facing outside holding her arms extended before her as if to receive the baby. The *tage* offers her the child and then pulls him back, each time the child is pulled back the mother drops her arms. On the third offer, the child is given to the mother who receives him and returns back into the *xube* to sit down. According to some informants, this rite at the doorway is considered a *duwanje* (blessing) for continued fertility. The mother receives and releases the child several times symbolizing the raising and releasing of one child to then have another (LJS et. al 2000). Another informant thought that the doorway rite was a rite of protection for the health of the child (MSJ 1998).

Once the doorway rite is finished women begin to pronounce blessings for the welfare of the child. As they finish visiting and blessing, they take their bowls outside to those responsible for redistributing the cookies and kola where they receive a portion in their bowl to take home with them.

The *dansa* of grain that was brought by the various women belongs to those who received the *dansa* and redistributed the cookies, kola nuts and candies. They usually leave a small portion of it for the new mother. Any soap that was given as *dansa* is given directly to the new mother. Any money that was given goes either directly to the mother or is kept by the head of the household to buy meat for that day's noon meal (JJS 2004).

When people fail to participate in these kinds of activities, *gacce* will likely be attributed them, thus dishonor (*yaagu*). A good person, one who exhibits *seraaxu* participates appropriately in the social and economic life of their family (i.e. large multigenerational extended families), their clients, patrons and friends.

Further illustrations of *gacce*

A male informant told the following story. He said that it is told locally to illustrate *gacce* and *gaccitangaye*.

Once there were three men out in the bush when it began to rain. They hid themselves in a cave so as not to get wet. When they wanted to get out they found that the cave door was covered by a big rock. They talked among themselves saying who here has guarded *gacce* so much that when they tell their deeds God will open the door so we can get out? So each one told how he had kept *gacce*.

The first said: "I took good care of my aged parents. I took them milk one morning and they were still asleep so I just waited until they woke up to give it to them. It was cold and it began to rain so I waited standing in the rain until they got up then I gave them their milk."

When he finished, there was a sliver of light that could be seen at the door of the cave.

The second man said that he went away to another area to work. He stayed there a long time and made some money. Then he decided to go somewhere else and he left his money with his host to keep for him. While he was gone his host used that money to get very rich by acquiring a lot of livestock. When the man came back he saw how rich his host had become. His host told him, "Everything you see here is because of your money that I used to get rich. I am giving it all to you." The man was so impressed that he gave all of the riches back to his host and as well giving him the original money that he had left with him.

When he finished speaking, there was a bit more light showing at the door of the cave but still they couldn't get out.

The last man said, "When I was young I wanted to marry a very beautiful girl but was not able to. Much later, after she was married to another man who was very poor, she came to me for help. She needed food and money. I said that if she would sleep with me, I'd help her. She refused. She came a second time and I told her the same thing and she refused. She came a third time and this time she agreed so she went into my bedroom and took off all her clothes. As we were going to start, she said, 'you know God watches everything that you do even if other people may not be aware of it'. I said, 'What you say is true. Put your clothes on.' She got dressed and I gave her the help she needed without requiring anything from her."

When he finished telling his story, the door of the cave became clear and the men were able to get out of the cave.

So who kept *gacce* the most? Many think it was the third man (MDS 2000).

"Keeping *gacce* [also] means including or honoring, in a culturally appropriately manner, those around you. It ... means maintaining the proper boundaries in one's relationships⁴⁸ (Smeltzer 1997: 5)." A divorce case that was taken to court in Kayes is a clear example of this.

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.

⁴⁸ See footnote 21.

The mother-in-law, however, refused to accept the apology (a case of once words are said they can never be taken back)⁴⁹. 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* [towards his mother] (ibid.).

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 ... [honor] everyone should possess) and the negative aspects of shame used to put pressure on offenders through public opinion (ibid.: 6).

On a trip to Abidjan in 1999, my husband went to visit the father of a good friend from Xuusaane. He had visited there one time the year before. He went simply to greet the man and his family and deliver some letters. The response to the visit was to present him with an abundant meal, to pay his taxi fare back to his lodgings and to pronounce blessings for his health, prosperity and eternal well-being. At one point, the man commented to my husband "You have put me in your debt because this is the second time you've come to visit me while I have never come to greet you where you were staying in Abidjan."⁵⁰ This man was feeling the results of not having responded to his *gacce* and its resulting *yaagu*.

Just going to greet someone at their home is part of keeping one's self from *gacce*. It causes the one visited to have *gacce* which if they are sensitive to *yaagu*, they will try to neutralize at some point in the future by returning the visit, or giving the visitor a small gift.

Sometimes all a person has to give in a situation where he feels the indebtedness of *gacce*, is the pronouncement of blessings. The Soninke believe in the power of spoken blessing and it is believed especially powerful when pronounced by an elderly person to confer *baraka* (blessing) and *baraji* (divine recompense) on the recipient of the blessing.

During the rainy season of 1996, the husband of a pregnant woman came to our home and asked us to take his wife to Kayes for a caesarean section. She had been in labor two days and the local midwife thought that the baby was already dead and that unless the woman had surgery, she would die as well. We didn't know the family as they were from a neighboring village but as there were no other vehicles in town and the situation was quite desperate, we agreed to take her as close to Kayes as we could get in our car before the road became impassable. She had to travel the last 15 kilometers in the back of a donkey cart to finally get to the hospital. We later heard

⁴⁹ This reflects the thinking behind the Soninke proverb: "The place of a wound can heal but something bad said, no." *Tugon batten wa sahana, xa digan xan bure, ayi* (Dancoxo 1988:20).

⁵⁰ Oral communication by Brad L. Smeltzer, March 2,000, Bamako, Mali.

through an announcement on the local radio that the mother and child were fine and that they named the little boy after my husband.

Two days later an elderly blind man appeared on our doorstep. He was the woman's "father"⁵¹. He had walked all the way across town to give us blessings for having taken his daughter to Kayes. He said that he was poor and that he was old, but he had come to give us blessings because it was the one thing he had to give. He came with a friend as a witness to his action. He felt the weight of *gacce* and its accompanying *yaagu* and had come to do what he could to begin to neutralize his debt.

In analyzing this situation from the Soninke perspective, the man did three important things that began the process of neutralizing the *gacce* under which he was laboring: 1) As an old blind man, he came all the way across the village on foot to visit us (Xuusaane is a big village) which can be considered an offering (*sadaxa*, see page 39), 2) He brought someone who would witness his gratitude to us, 3) He pronounced many blessings for health, prosperity and divine recompense which are thought to be especially powerful because he's an elderly pious man.

31.

Gaccin -roxé

Gacce -small

Individual of small *gacce*

To be thought of as a person of small *gacce* is a terrible commentary on an individual as it also implies that they are insensitive to *yaagu*. In other words, this person is not honorable and is refusing to participate in communal life like they ought to.

One group of informants related the following example:

When a man is a *gaccinloxé*, people don't say anything immediately; they just watch and keep track of his behavior. However, when the offender starts looking for a wife, he finds that no one will give him their daughter. At this time, someone will sit him down and scold him by saying something like the following: "You have no sensitivity to *yaagu*. You act like you don't need other people. The keeping of *gacce* (*gaccitangaye*) has no meaning for you. You don't participate in community meetings, you don't go to baby naming ceremonies, you don't go and greet and give blessings like you should and, worst of all, you don't help your own father like you should. Look at your father; he's out there hauling water. You should be ashamed. You better change your ways."

At this point the offender will probably verbally repent and promise to change his ways. However, everyone will watch him and in 3 or 4 months to a year's time, if

⁵¹ He was the head of her father's extended family.

they see that he has changed, he'll be forgiven and will probably be able to find a wife. If he doesn't start to show proper *yaagu* and begin to participate in *gaccitangaye*, he'll never get a wife from anyone in Xuusaane and probably not from any surrounding village either. He will have to go somewhere else where he not known in order find a family that will give him one of their daughters (BDS et. al. 2000)

Another informant related the following incident about a man in Xuusaane who was perceived by his neighbors and family to be *gaccinloxe*.

This man never did anything good for anyone. He wasn't involved in protecting himself from *gacce* at all. He never did anything bad to anyone but he wasn't involved in group life either.

He was building a new mud house and when he got to the stage where he was ready to put on the mud roof, he got all ready to do it and had it announced in the village so people would know. The next morning nobody came to help him put on his roof. You cannot do such a job by yourself, it takes a big group.

The man was really scared because there's no way he could do the work by himself. He went to the public square (*miside*) and announced to the elders that he was a bad man and said that Allah would pay anyone who took pity on him and helped him. A few people went and helped him but it was very hard and took a lot longer than normal because a whole crowd of people didn't come and turn it into a short easy job. The ones who did help, got very tired (MDS 2000).

32.

Gacce ma an wari

Gacce not you see

Gacce has not seen you

This expression is used to praise someone in situations where that person is recognized to be participating in *gaccitangaye*. It is an acknowledgement of the person's involvement in the balanced reciprocity of communal life. When something is given or done for someone else, the receiver will use this expression as part of their response to the generosity shown by the giver. As stated in the beginning of this section, *gaccitangaye* involves not only material goods but also "social" generosity that which is shown by participation in the various ceremonials tied to birth, marriage, death, in helping others in with projects that require a large group to complete (putting a mud or cement roof on a house, for example), and in appropriate social interaction such as greetings and the pronouncement of blessings. To say "*Gacce ma an wari*" to someone is a very good thing. It is an affirmation that one's behavior is appropriate and appreciated.

Summary

Guarding one's self from *gacce* ensures appropriate participation in communal life with its high dependence on a system of balanced reciprocity in which *me dansande* (mutual giving in times of need), *me yidande* (sharing), *me deemande* (mutual aid) and *marenmaaxau* (unity of family⁵²) are important values (KS et. al. 2000). If everyone participates in *gaccitangaye* (keeping *gacce*) like they should, the whole group prospers and traditional values and practices are preserved. This is the ideal state of things. An individual seen as a *gaccinloxe* (one of small *gacce*, see example 31) cannot also be perceived as a person of *seraaxu*. The notions are incompatible with each other. As one group of informants put it "*gaccitangaye* is *seraaxu* [good personness] (Ibid.)"

Butte

The final component of *seraaxu* that I will explore in this paper is the notion of *butte*, which literally means "liver", one of the centers of emotion in the Soninke conception of a person⁵³. It is through one's *butte* that emotions such as anger, happiness, and discouragement are expressed. It is the quality and state of one's *butte* that determines the character traits of responsibility, self-denial and endurance.

Uses and meanings of butte

As a Noun

9.

butte

liver

anger, emotion, fidelity, faithfulness, courage

When people use the term *butte*, they may be referring to the literal liver of a person or an animal; however it is also used when referring to human beings to point to anger, strong emotion, faithfulness and courage. To say *butte wa sere yi* (lit. the person has liver) could mean "the individual is faithful", "courageous", "a hard worker", "responsible", etc.

Having *butte* means working hard, meeting one's responsibilities, pulling one's weight, 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* (*butteranloxe*) means that a person...is letting his body dictate his actions rather than his will (Smeltzer 1997:4).

⁵² *Marenmaaxu* is a derived noun composed of *marenme* (relative) + *aaxu* (abstract nominalizer). Its meaning is something like "the unity that comes from being from the same family or ethnic group who share the same values".

⁵³ The intestines (*nuxunrenmu*), the heart (*sondonme*) and the mind (*haqille*) are also referred to in expressions of emotion and character.

One informant offered the following:

“If a person has *butte*, when he has responsibilities, whatever they are, he carries them (on his head) and doesn't try to pass them off to someone else. He doesn't try to find a way around his responsibilities by saying 'There is no one to help me'. This is why a person who does things this way has *butte*. If a person has *butte*, he doesn't play around. If he has *butte*, he doesn't put his burdens on others.” (MDS 1994-recorded text, translation mine)

When used to refer to anger, *butte* by itself refers to a relatively mild passing anger or irritation. It is an anger that a person gets over quickly. One informant gave the following example: “A friend passed me on the street but he didn't greet me. I can say to him later, 'We are fighting' or 'I am mad at you' and then we work out the problem” (MDS 2003). When *butte* is associated with such negative characteristics as heat, pain, or rottenness, however, the type of anger referred to is much more severe in its intensity as we will see below.

10.

buttun- buyi

liver burn

rage, bitterness, anguish

Buttunbuyi or a “burning liver” refers to the feelings people experience when someone does something bad to them or abuses them in some way. It is frequently felt by those in situations where they are victims who can do nothing to change their situation. One group of informants offered the following description: “It is like when a man habitually beats his wife for no good reason...your reaction is anger and your thoughts just go around and around. You are having very bad thoughts about the perpetrator and what happened” (JS et al. 2003). Another informant said *buttunbuyi* is like an illness that causes the person mental pain because of their helplessness to change the situation (MDS 2003). As such it appears to encompass the semantic components of bitterness, anguish, resentment and helpless rage.

11.

buttun- xaasa

liver hurt⁵⁴

rage, bitterness, anguish

Buttunxaasa refers to a “painful” or “hurting liver”. This expression is synonymous with *buttunbuyi* and is used interchangeably in the same contexts as explained above.

⁵⁴ *Xaasa* is only used in association with the liver or the heart. My informants had difficulty in explaining exactly what the verb meant, except to say that when you liver experiences *xaasa*, it hurts.

12.

buttun-sire

liver good

patience

A person with a *buttunsire* or a "good liver" is perceived as someone who is patient and avoids fights, even in the face of abuse or provocation however severe (JS et. al. 2003).

13.

buttun- bure

liver bad

bad, prone to violence/vengeance

A "bad liver", *buttunbure*, is the opposite of *buttunsire* (example 12). Informants felt that a person with a bad liver does bad things to her family members as well as to others. She is capable of any kind of normally out-of-bounds behavior and is prone to violence. Such a person is easily angered and will physically attack others with their own hands or with weapons. They gave the example of a wife who attacked her co-wife with a knife (JS et. al. 2003).

14.

butti- ran- xote

liver place hard

dependable, having endurance, hardworking, responsible, faithful.

Having *buttiranxote* or a "hard liver place" is used interchangeably with the what was explained in example 9 concerning someone having *butte* in the sense of responsibility, hard work, endurance, etc. All informants agreed that someone with a "hard liver place" finishes what they start even if it is hard and they start projects even though they know it will be difficult to see them through to the end. They don't let tiredness, sickness or difficult odds stop them from finishing what they start (BJS 2003, JS et. al 2003, MDS 2003, KS 2003). Another informant added that someone with *buttiranxote* is a person who works hard and fights hard (KS 2003). The major characteristics, then, of a person with a "hard liver place" are dependability, responsibility, faithfulness, endurance and hard work. These are highly valued as character traits among the Soninke. Recently my neighbor was telling me about his thirteen-year-old son who has had terrible trouble with a viral infection in his eyes over the last year. His comment was that, in spite of the eye problem, his son had missed only one day of work in the bush during the whole last year. Although *butte* or *buttiranxote* was not specifically mentioned in his explanation, it was implied (GS 2003). What he said, in his son's presence, was very high praise for the child's endurance, dependability and hard work in the face of a fairly debilitating physical problem.

It is not unknown in the Soninke context for someone to literally work themselves to death, in the sense that though ill or physically suffering, a man or woman continues to work until they just lay down and die. I have known several people in Xuusaane who have died this way. It is the high value placed on *buttiranxotaaxu* (abstract nominalization of *buttiranxote*) and the potential for *yaagu* in not maintaining this value that motivates people sometimes to such an extreme. I have also seen similar behavior among pregnant women who though warned that they must rest in order for their pregnancy to come to term, are driven by this value and the fear of *yaagu* to do hard work which finally contributes to a miscarriage of their pregnancy. During the Ramadan fast, although the old, sick, pregnant, elderly and people traveling are excused from fasting, they often keep the fast anyway with detrimental results for this reason among others.

15.

buttun- xoore

liver big

happy, hardworking, has endurance

Buttunxoore or having a "big liver" is very similar to example 14, *buttiranxote*. One informant added the idea of contentment or happiness as a part of having a "big liver". This enables the person to work hard because their mental state is good (KS 2003).

16.

A butte lije ni.

His liver sweet is

He has a good personality.

To have a sweet liver is a very positive trait. I recently heard this term used in praise of a woman who had died. The comment went something like, "... although she was a *sakke* [from the woodworker caste of the artisan class] she never begged [the *sakke* are renowned for begging]. She raised as her own several children of a relative as she had none herself. She never fought or argued with others. She was a good person (*sere sire*). She has a good personality and she was not stingy (*A butte lije ni*)" (MSJ 2003).

17.

A butte ma lijo.

His liver NEG become sweet

He is worried, distracted.

When one's *butte* loses its sweetness, literally becomes not sweet, the individual involved is worried about something, easily distracted from what he is doing by this worry or preoccupied.

18.

Sere butte na jaxali

person's liver INF be happy

Person is content, happy, and joyous.

When a person's liver is happy, his or her mental state is healthy. This results in the ability to work hard, and to endure in order to meet one's responsibilities. One informant stated that that "when your liver is happy, you don't get tired" (KS 2003).

19.

butti- ran- roxe

liver place small

lazy, undependable, gives up easily, irresponsible

A person with a 'small liver place', *buttiranrox*e, is the opposite of *buttiranxote* (example 14). The main characteristics of such a person appear to be laziness and an inability to finish things they start.

One informant said the following:

Someone with a 'small liver place' can't do her own work, she doesn't maintain reciprocity (*gacce tangiye*), and she doesn't tell the truth. If she starts a job, she can't finish it. Such a person has a 'small liver place'. Having a 'small liver place' is bad. Such a person is lazy (MDS 1994).

Another group of informants agreed that such a person

... is lazy and gives up when they get tired. They will say, 'I am sick' and let someone else do their work. For example, I come home from working in the bush and it is my turn to cook dinner. I say 'I'm sick' and someone else cooks dinner in my place. But really I am just tired and I don't want to make dinner. Such a person doesn't finish what they start (JS et. al. 2003).

To be thought of as *buttiranrox*e is an extremely negative criticism of a person's behavior. The disdain and disapproval expressed by my informants for such an individual was immediate and very strong.

20.

buttun- mure

liver cool

satisfaction

To have a “cool liver”, *buttunmure*, means to be satisfied, comforted, no longer angry or upset (Smeltzer and Smeltzer 2001).

21.

butte na lampu

liver INF be weak

to be discouraged

When a person's liver becomes weak, the person is discouraged. They are depressed or pessimistic about whatever the pertinent issue may be. They may want to give up.

22.

butte nan roxe

liver INF be small

to be discouraged

When your liver becomes small, it is the same as when it becomes weak (example 21). These two terms are used interchangeably.

23.

butte nan bone

liver INF be rotten, ruined

to be angry, mad

When one's liver becomes rotten or ruined, this means that the individual in question has become angry. The quality of the anger is such that the individual keeps going over and over in his mind the cause of the problem (KS 2003), which apparently intensifies the angry feelings, hence, the “rotteness” of the liver.

24.

buttun- muure- ye

liver to hunt for NOMINALIZER

vengeance

Buttumureye is literally “liver hunting” or vengeance. The idea appears to be that until the individual has given retribution for perceived wrongs, the liver cannot cool off.

25.

A da a butte girindi

he PAST his liver to make get up

He made him mad

To make someone's liver get up/stand up is to make them angry.

26.

A *da butte ro Abdulaye yi*

he PAST liver put Abdulaye POST

He encouraged Abdoulaye

To "put liver into to someone" is to encourage them. A man recently gave his 10-year-old son a bicycle. His comment was that this will "put liver into him concerning school" as he rides his bike back and forth each day instead of having to walk (MDS 2003).

As a verb:

27.

A *butu.*

S/he become angry

S/he became angry.

The same lexical root found in *butte* exists in the verb, *butu*, "to become angry". It is the same kind of anger referred to in example 9, a passing anger or irritation.

Summary

In summary, *butte* appears to encompass a fairly wide range of emotions and characteristics important to the Soninke conception of a person, especially concerning an individual's good or bad qualities. From the examples given above, *butte* can be seen to be important in three major domains: the general domain of emotion (happiness, satisfaction, bitterness, patience, etc.), the specific domain of anger in its various degrees and intensities, and finally, the notions of responsibility, endurance, faithfulness, fidelity, dependability and hard work.

Having *butte* in all its positive senses is extremely important to the notion of *seraaxu* (good personhood) as being happy, patient, dependable, responsible, hardworking, etc. are all qualities that benefit everyone. Living out these positive characteristics help maintain mutual interdependence and group solidarity, values important to the group-oriented Soninke. Someone perceived as a *buttiranloxe* (lazy, undependable person, see example 19) is incompatible with the whole notion of *seraaxu*.

Summary: Seraaxu, yaagu, gacce and butte

Among the Soninke, serious people are looking for ways to maintain and promote *seraaxu*. It is what good people do. Proverbs like "It takes two hands to wash each other"⁵⁵ or "One hand cannot

⁵⁵ *Kittun fili, i ya na me wanxini.*

clap"⁵⁶ point out the value of groupness and mutual interdependence. In other words, people need each other and they should help, respect and honor each other. This is what *seraaxu* is all about. A true *sere* is someone who exhibits good character through their behavior, who has an appropriate sense of honor, is hardworking and responsible, and avoids *yaagu* (shame) and *gacce* (lack of beneficial behavior towards others) by participating fully in the Soninke system of balanced reciprocity and mutual dependence. When someone transgresses something related to these basic values, pressure of various sorts is put on him to motivate a change in behavior. Unwillingness to repent and conform results in many cases in social marginalization or even ostracism.

Introduction to Religious Ideology

Before presenting *baraji* and *baraka*, it is important for the reader to understand the importance of Islam as a religious ideology for the Soninke people. Being a practicing Muslim is highly valued and expected in Soninke society. In the minds of most Soninkes, to be Soninke is to be Muslim, there is no alternative belief system. Islam influences, in some way, most aspects of daily life as well as being a basic tenet of group identity. The group expects pious behavior and exerts strong pressure on its individual members to conform to these expectations.

Since Islam for the general populace (except religious experts among the *moodi* class) is concerned primarily with orthopraxis rather than theological considerations, the most obvious signs of a pious Muslim are the practice of *salli*, the prayer ritual done five times a day and the keeping of the Ramadan fast. Aside from observing family members in their practice of Islam, children get formal training in the basics of Islamic practice at an early age (from about 5 years old). In Xuusaane, for example, though most children do not attend formal schooling in the government system, a large portion of children, both girls and boys attend the *Madarasa* (Koranic schools), to learn the practical basics of Islam so that they can pray, fast and practice the other pillars of the Muslim faith in the correct manner.

The values associated with *baraji* and *baraka* are an important component of the Muslim ideology of the Soninke and influence the way they see the world and interpret the events, actions and circumstances of everyday life.

Baraji

The concept of *baraji* is central to the worldview of the Soninke and fundamental to their practice of Islam. Being a Muslim people, the acquisition of *baraji* (divine recompense or merit) is a constant preoccupation of the Soninke. The source of *baraji* is thought to be Allah and its benefits are, unlike *baraka*, exclusively for the afterlife. In tune with the standard theology of Islam, Soninkes believe that one's accumulation of divine recompense (*baraji*) is weighed against one's deeds (*junubu*) on the Day of Judgment (*kiiitin koota*). In order to reach Paradise (*Lahara* or *Arijanna*), a person needs

⁵⁶ *Kitti baane ra nta sooxono.*

enough *baraji* to outweigh their *jununbu* (sins). If one's sins outweigh one's merit, the individual is destined for destruction by fire⁵⁷ in Hell (*Jahannaba*)⁵⁸. This being the case, it is not surprising that people are highly motivated to amass as much *baraji* as possible.

In the Soninke context, *baraji* is acquired through the performance of religious acts associated with Islam as well as other actions that fit into the category of "good deeds". The rote performance of these things is not enough according to many informants as the thinking is that God looks at the heart of a person as well. If one's heart is not right, that is, if one is doing things, not out of devotion to God but to gain the approval or praise of others, God will not grant *baraji* for the act.

Etymology

The etymology of *baraji* is a bit unsure. According to Vydrine (1999: 96) *bàraji* is a borrowing of *baraka* from Arabic through the Fulbe language resulting in *baraji* meaning "divine reward" and "blessing". In the Macina variety of the Fulbe language, *baraka* falls into a particular noun class in which *baraji* is the plural form (Mary Crickmore 1998, personal communication). As the Soninke and many other Mande groups have the transhumantic Fulbe as their neighbors, this etymology is a likely possibility.

Correspondence with Islamic notions from the Classical Arabic of the Koran

The meaning of the term *baraji*, according to informants with knowledge of classical Arabic, corresponds to *ajir*⁵⁹, the principal term referring to "divine recompense" or "merit" found in the Koran (MDS 2003⁶⁰). According to Schacht (1975: 215), ADJR in classical Arabic refers to recompense, salary or rent.

In a great number of Koranic passages *ajr* refers to recompense in the future world for acts of piety. This idea seems to come from Christian sources rather than from Jewish ones and has become one of the ideas fundamental to the ethics of Islamic practice (Ibid. translation mine).

⁵⁷ It is common to hear people refer to Hell as *yinbe*, literally fire.

⁵⁸ According to one informant, at conversion, (which includes the confession of the *sahada* and a ritual bath), an individual's *jununbu* up to that point is forgiven and the individual starts out his life as a Muslim with a clean slate before God (LJS 1998 as reported by Brad Smeltzer). The amount of *baraji* at conversion appears to be sufficient to covers the sins of one's previous life.

⁵⁹ It is in the realm of possibility linguistically that *baraji* is a borrowing from the classical Arabic أَجْر [ajiri], although unlikely.

⁶⁰ This informant also indicated that, in the Koran, the noun *sabab* (reason) sometimes has the meaning of "divine recompense" or "merit" though I was unable to find any evidence of this in l'Encyclopédie de l'Islam (Bosworth et. al. 1995:686-687).

Acquisition of *Baraji*

As was mentioned above, *baraji* is the reward for performing religious acts. It is also something that one can confer upon others through the performance of certain religious acts on their behalf. Extra merit can be earned through a wide variety of ways though many of these constitute some sort of performative religious act. At the very minimum, one must faithfully adhere to the five pillars of Islam. In addition, there are what appear to be more socially oriented behaviors that are considered necessary, though they have nothing to do with the five pillars. Obedience to one's parents, doing good to others and generosity are highly valued and thought to show respect for God's laws thus resulting in much merit. The offering of various types of *sadaxa* (sacrifice/offerings) is also an important way that one can acquire *baraji*.

The Five pillars of Islam

Having begun their conversion to Islam in the 11th century, the Soninke associate their identity with being Muslim. As such the practice of the five pillars of Islam is routine for most adults.

The five pillars are religious acts which, when faithfully performed, may permit an individual to acquire enough *baraji* to outweigh his sins thus enter Paradise in the afterlife. The pillars consist of *sahada*, the confession of faith; *salle*, the prescribed five daily prayer/worship rituals; *Sunxaso sumiye*, the Ramadan fast; *hijjiye*, the pilgrimage to Mecca (if possible); and *jakka*, the annual 3% tithe of one's assets given to the poor. If an individual is somehow inhibited from practicing one or more of these pillars as prescribed, there are ways to make it up or improvise so that the person may be able to acquire the necessary *baraji*.

For example, during the month of Ramadan, women don't fast during their menses as they are considered unclean at that time. If they must skip days because of this, they should make up the days sometime before the following year's fast in order to get the *baraji* for it. Unless the fast is done in the proscribed way for the appropriate number of days, it is believed that there is no merit in it. It is the same if one cannot fast because of sickness. The missed days must be made up in order to get *baraji*.

If a person is chronically ill and can't participate in the fast, he can offer a *sadaxa* of a quart of grain to the poor each evening in place of fasting. In one particular case where a man had no grain, a *moodi* was consulted about what to do. His response was that the man should offer a nightly *sadaxa* of 50 CFA to the poor. My informant commented that this man got a lot of *baraji* from his *sadaxa* (MSJ 1998).

In 1997 traveling on the Bamako - Kayes train, I met an elderly Soninke woman who was physically unable to do the standing, kneeling and bowing of the *salle* prayer ritual. The solution to this problem was a small stone brought to her by her son which she pressed to her forehead whenever she got to the part of the prayer ritual that requires bowing. This simple innovation solved the problem so that she would be able to receive merit for her prayers.

Because of the conflict between his work schedule and the *salle* prayer times, one Soninke man working in Paris made up the prayers he missed during the day after doing his *soxufo* prayers (the prayers done before retiring for the night) in order to receive the necessary merit⁶¹.

Ways for individuals to acquire supplementary Baraji

Among the many ways to earn extra *baraji*, the main ones appear to be, *baraji sumiye* (supplementary fasting), *yirumu* (the use of prayer beads), reading the Koran, pronouncing blessings (*duwa*), doing good deeds and *sadaxa* (offerings, alms and sacrifices). People also gain merit by performing extra *salli* prayers⁶², making pilgrimages to the graves of Muslim saints and participating in prayers performed at the gravesite of deceased fellow Muslims.

Fasting

Baraji sumiye is an optional kind of fasting which people do to gain extra merit. Though one can do this kind of fast anytime, it is especially effective when done during the first week of *minxaso*, the lunar month following the month of Ramadan (*sunxaso*). It is common for those seeking extra *baraji* to do another six days of fasting just after the Ramadan celebration in order to accumulate extra *baraji*. The supplementary fast starts right after the several days of the Ramadan celebration have finished as this is the most propitious moment, modeled after what Muhammad himself is reported to have done in the *hadith* (MSS 2004). People who have missed days of the Ramadan fast usually try to make them up as well during *minxaso* (the lunar month following Ramadan), although they are free to make up missed days whenever is convenient as long as this is done before the beginning of the next Ramadan fast, eleven months later.

Prayer Beads

Another common way that people earn *baraji* is the practice of *yirumu*, the thumbing of prayer beads while reciting the 99 names of Allah. The ritual is usually terminated with a gesture in which the rosary is held between the two hands and then brought up the face in wiping gesture from forehead to mouth. This is done to receive the *baraji* acquired from the act.

Reading the Koran

Reading the Koran and writing out Koranic verses are believed to result in merit for the reader/writer. One informant said that he reads the entire Koran twice a year. Although he doesn't understand the meaning of the classical Arabic, he can read it by sounding it out. He does this to get *baraji* (MSS 2004).

⁶¹ As reported by Jerome Fisher, August 2000, Paris.

⁶² It is common to see elderly people doing the *beteye* prayer, which an optional prayer service performed about 9 AM. The five regular prayer rituals are *futuro* (dusk), *soxufo* (last prayer before retiring) *fajiri* (dawn), *sallifana* (midday) and *laxasara* (afternoon).

Blessings (*Duwanḡu*)

The pronouncement of blessings upon others (*duwanḡe*) is thought to be conferring *baraji* upon those doing the blessing as well as upon those receiving the blessing, especially when the blesser is a *seri xoore* (elderly person). This appears to be the general belief of most informants. The *baraji* acquired with the pronouncement of blessings is believed to be significantly multiplied when done on a Friday (MSJ 2004). One group of female informants made the following comments concerning the relationship of blessings (*duwanḡu*) to *baraji*:

Baraji comes from doing things according to one's religion but also from *sadaxa* and good deeds, which are done without the motive to receive something from the person. This includes acts like helping the poor or visiting the sick. *Duwanḡe* (blessing) is also a force that you can acquire. The recipient of the blessing gets *baraji* and *baraka* from it and the pronouncer of the blessings gets *baraji*. When you go to *Lahara* (Paradise), *baraka*, *baraji* and *duwanḡe* all go before you and will be weighed against your sins (MAS et. al. 1998).

For these informants one has the impression that *duwanḡe* is a separate force, neither *baraka* nor *baraji*⁶³.

Good Deeds

I have chosen to use the term "good deeds" as the catchall category for *baraji*-producing behaviors that don't fall into the other categories addressed in this section. The majority of informants felt that any good thing done for another person will result in *baraji* for the performer. People are constantly offering affirmation and pronouncing blessings which ask God to confer *baraji* or payment on those who have done something recognized as meritorious⁶⁴, even if it is as commonplace as simply

⁶³ I found this a bit surprising, however, my husband and I have noticed quite some differences in data in the domain of cosmology and religious ideology between men and women. The tendency appears to be towards a more orthodox Muslim explication from men probably because they much more informed about Muslim theology than women and feel some pressure to at least give lip service to the orthodox view. Women express the folk views which reflect the real rather than the ideal. Both genders share the same worldview, however, it seems that other pressures sometimes cause a disparity in the data that falls along lines of gender.

This whole notion of *duwanḡe*, however, needs more research.

⁶⁴The idea that one's good deeds will be rewarded may find its roots in the hadith where the giving of *sadaxa* (alms and offerings) is equated with virtually any kind of meritorious behavior. Weir in his article "*ŞADAQA*" from the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* points this out very clearly.

The importance of offering *şadaqa* in order to avoid the tribulations of this world and the fire of hell in the other is the theme of many *hadiths*. "Whoever can protect themselves from the fire of hell must give them, even if it is nothing more than half a date". An angel is believed to pray that the giver be rewarded while another prays for the destruction of the riches of those who refuse to give alms... If one has nothing else to offer, one can always offer a kind word... All meritorious behavior is, in fact, called *şadaqa* in the *hadith*. So that licit sexual relations by a

going to visit someone in their home or sweeping a friend's floor because she is sick. One informant's view was that any behavior which shows *serisiraaxu* (a person's goodness) and *nuxudunxullaaxu* (the whiteness of their intestines-goodness/generosity) will be rewarded with *baraji* (MSJ 2004)⁶⁵. People respond to such acts by saying "*An do baraji*" which literally means "you and *baraji*", or more dynamically, "May you receive *baraji* for what you have done." They also use the blessing "*Hari na an tuga.*", "May God pay you [for what you have done]. This is a more general blessing, which includes the attribution of *baraka* as well as *baraji*. These blessings are thought to confer even more *baraji* on the person.

Sadaxa

A common way to acquire supplementary *baraji* is through the practice of *sadaxa*: almsgiving, offerings and sacrifices. The word is a borrowing from classical Arabic. According to T.H. Weir in his article "ŞADAQA" in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, it refers to alms and offerings given voluntarily. The giving of *şadaqa* "...indicates the sincerity of the faith of the giver" (1995: 729).

In the Soninke context, *sadaxa* encompasses all types of alms, sacrifices, and offerings: the slaughtering of animals, the giving of alms, grain, food, clothes and even woven mats and other household items (MSS, MSJ 2004). Though generally speaking *sadaxa* involves concrete items, several informants felt that going to someone's home to give blessings (*duwa*) appropriate to the situation (sickness, funeral, birth, marriage, etc.) also constitutes a *sadaxa*. It is the "going" (*terende*) that is the offering. Once there the individual pronounces blessings, which, as well, result in *baraji* for both the performer and the recipient.

man are *şadaqa*, just as helping a beast of burden or every step taken on the way to a place of prayer. To plant something that can be eaten later by a person, a bird or any other animal counts as *şadaqa*. Whoever takes care of himself and his family is credited with the giving of *şadaqa*...even to greet someone politely is considered as *şadaqa*...in short, every good act is *şadaqa* (1995:731, translation mine)

I was very careful to check out this idea with informants; however they were adamant that except for going to give blessings (*duwa*), *sadaxa* always involves the giving of something concrete and tangible.

⁶⁵ In contrast to the majority, one informant, a man, felt that there were social activities in which one was not obliged to participate but that it was highly desirable to do so because these activities (i.e. baby naming ceremonies, marriage, etc.) promote good social relationships (*taaxalenmaaxu*) and group unity. He felt that such activities were neutral in the sense that they have little *baraka* and no *baraji* potential.

When you don't do these things it means that you don't need others which is badly viewed, but not for religious reasons. For example, if you go to a baby naming ceremony, you have promoted *seraaxu* and you have kept *gacce* though there is no *baraka* or *baraji* attached to the act itself. The blessings you pronounce give *baraji* to the pronouncer and the recipient but that can be done at home as it is between you and God. The going itself is the thing that promotes *taaxalenmaaxu* (good neighborliness). And people will in their turn come to your family's events, which reinforces group unity (MB 1998).

Again, the disparity in data here appears to run along lines of gender.

Weir's article on *sadaxa* shows many similarities to the Soninke view. For example, he states that the best *ṣadaḳa* is

...that which you give when you are robust and still in good health, fearing poverty and hoping for prosperity...The merit attached to alms giving resides in the degree of abnegation ... the best *ṣadaḳa* is that which a diminished person is able to give ...The alms given to a close neighbor are better than those given to a more distant person. Giving alms to relatives is highly meritorious because you merit at the same time the recompense for the *ṣadaḳa* and the recompense for keeping up family responsibilities. The merit for alms given on Friday is double compared to those given on any other days of the week... The reward for voluntary alms given in secret is 70 times that given in public.... Of all that can be given in alms, water is the best and the person who gives water to another thirsty Muslim will drink the wine of Paradise (1995: 730-731, translation mine).

These ideas correspond quite closely with Soninke beliefs about *sadaxa*. For example a Soninke informant recounted the following:

Sixana was a Muslim holy man who had quite a following in Nioro. Once a bunch of his followers came to give him their offerings (*sadaxa*). People gave him a lot of stuff: sheep, money and so on. One very poor woman gave him a needle as her *sadaxa*. He stood up, quieted everyone, and held up the needle for them to see. He told them that her *sadaxa* was worth more than anything anyone else had given (MDS 2003).

Sadaxa are offered for a variety of reasons, some focused on gaining merit for one's self or for the benefit of another, others in hopes that God will respond concretely in some way by granting a wish or desire (desire for healing, resolution of conflicts, getting a visa for France, etc.). There are also communal *sadaxa* in which the entire local community participates. The majority of these appear to be tied to the agricultural calendar or gaining *baraji* for the dead.

Following I will present some examples of *sadaxa* from the Soninke context.

Leya (*Tabaski*)

Leya, more commonly called *Tabaski* in West Africa, is a special Muslim holy day that commemorates God's provision to Abraham of a sacrificial ram to take the place of his son Ishmael. Every year, each family head offers a *sadaxa* of at least one sheep⁶⁶ for this celebration. It

⁶⁶ The preferred animals for the *Leya* celebration are usually neutered male sheep who have spent their lives staked in someone's concession being fattened up on leftovers, greens brought from the bush and dried peanuts stalks. If a woman is the owner, the animal follows her out to the bush (much like a dog) during the rainy season to graze. Some women have said that they prefer to sell their sheep for cash rather than have them butchered because they get attached to them.

is common, however, for large extended families to offer several animals if they have the means. An integral part of the sacrifice, however, is the redistribution of the meat to extended family members, friends and to the poor. An adequate portion is kept for the immediate family who has sacrificed the animal.

One informant, a family head, while expressing his frustration with the heavy burden of having come up with all the necessary food (sheep, special condiments, bread, etc.) for the celebrations pointed out that, ideally, the poor should receive the bulk of the meat but in reality it is redistributed primarily among one's extended family and friends (MSS 2004). This particular *sadaxa* is believed to cancel out a certain amount of *jununbu* (sin) thus conferring its equivalent in *baraji* on the families performing the offering.

***Sadaxa* as Protection during the Rainy Season**

Although the practice is slowly disappearing in Xuusaane⁶⁷, some people don't go to their fields on Mondays during the rainy season. According to informants, Monday is an especially dangerous day of the week. People are more likely to have an accident on Monday than during the other days of the week, if there happened to be a rainstorm with strong stormy winds (*dundo*), for example. People believe that by staying home on Monday, they are offering a *sadaxa* for protection against accidents and other disastrous things (like one's house falling down because of the rain, etc.). This *sadaxa* covers the person for that whole week (MSJ 1999).

The same informant reported that the heavy storms of 1998 brought so much water all at once, that there were many accidents and homes which fell down. The whole village offered the *sadaxa* of not going to the bush to work for three consecutive Fridays in order to moderate the rain and thus to protect the village from any more accidents (Ibid.).

***Sadaxa* for Rain**

Each year, at the very beginning of the rainy season (June-July), the village of Xuusaane offers several communal *sadaxa* for rain in which all village habitants are supposed to participate in order for them to be effective. At the very beginning of the rainy season (June 2) in 1995, a group of women informants told me that in their home they prepared millet couscous (*futo*) from three *muude* of millet (the equivalent of about 9 kilos), which is their normal amount to prepare for the midday meal. They prepared the millet as *soose* (a fermented porridge containing sour milk and sugar). One third of the *soose* was taken to the village square and given to the children from the

The market price for this sort of animal goes up substantially as the demand rises with the approach of the *Leya* feast. It appears to be a mark of prestige to be able to offer multiple animals over the two or three days of the celebration. Several informants have commented that a feast is good when one can eat as much meat as one wants. During the *Leya* celebration of February 1-2, 2004, we received mutton from twelve different families. Each one gave a *saada* or pile equivalent to between 500 and 750 grams of meat.

⁶⁷ One informant indicated that in the past all Soninke as well as the neighboring ethnic groups practiced this *sadaxa*. It is only recently that its practice is disappearing (MDS 2004).

Koranic school. Two thirds was kept and eaten by their family. Before it was eaten, the *soose* was put in front of the head of the household (and one his friends) who prayed over it, then it was consumed by the whole family as the midday meal⁶⁸. Another part of the same *sadaxa* was for each married woman to present her husband with three white kola nuts (HS et. al. 1995).

That same day, June 2, 1995, I noticed about ten large cooking pots bubbling away in the village square. I was told that it was for a *sadaxa* in which the village offers a cow to ensure a successful rainy season and harvest. Everyone in the village is supposed to eat a piece of the meat for the *sadaxa* to be effective. This particular *sadaxa* has been done every year in Xuusaane since the village was founded (KS et. al. 1995).

Offerings/Alms

Giving alms to the mothers of twins, *almodinu*⁶⁹ (little Fulbe boys) and *garibu* (beggars, usually children, or those physically handicapped) is quite common. In 1996, I observed a woman going from concession to concession begging. With her she had three children, two of which were twin boys. One of the twins was ill. When she got to the concession where I was staying, my hostess went into her granary and brought out millet and peanuts for her. After the woman left, my hostess said that the woman came to get *sadaxa* to heal her sick child. She said that if you have twins and one of them gets sick, you go around and beg (*naaga*) so that people will give you *sadaxa*. These *sadaxa* act as the medicine (*safare*) for the sickness (BK 1996). The givers receive *baraji* for the act of giving *sadaxa* and the child receives healing from it. The healing of the child then is dependant upon the goodwill and generosity of others.

⁶⁸ An offering of *soose* is more broadly practiced than just to ensure a good rainy season. It is a common type of *sadaxa* offered in the case of any kind of village level crisis (MDS, MAS, BDS 1995 as reported by Brad Smeltzer).

⁶⁹ *Almodinu* are young boys, usually from the Fulbe people who have been given by their parents for a period of several years to a Koranic teacher to learn about Islam. In exchange, these boys beg for grain and money, which they give to their teacher who cares for their needs from these offerings. People also give them the leftovers of meals, which are usually eaten on the spot. Many of my Soninke informants feel sorry for these boys as they tend to have an ill kept appearance and no one to really look out for them if they happen to get sick.

Sadaxa for a Baby Naming Ceremony

In all almost every *yinmansiye* (baby naming) that I have observed, there is a woven bowl cover called a *lafa*⁷⁰ (see Figure 3) sitting on the floor of the mother's chamber with certain specific items placed on it: a handful of salt, a couple of cotton or indigo balls, a piece of silver or gold jewelry, and a couple of handfuls of whatever is in the granary of the child's father depending on the gender of the baby, millet, corn and/or beans for boys and peanuts, millet and or rice for girls. According to informants, this is a *sadaxa* to ensure the hoped for prosperity of the child. The elements have a "sympathetic" component. Like salt, the wish is that the child's personality will be *liŋe* ("taste good or sweet") to others, the cotton balls represent clothing, the silver jewelry wealth and the various grains, the food that the child will eventually grow as a farmer. The idea is ensure that child will have what he or she needs throughout life in these four fundamental domains (DJS et. al 1998, JAS 2004). Except for the jewelry, which is returned to the new mother who provided it, the contents of the *lafa* are given to the blacksmith (*tage*) woman who shaved the baby's head (LJS et. al 2000).



Figure 3: *Sadaxa* for a baby naming ceremony

⁷⁰ The *lafa* appears to have a special role in *sadaxa*. According to informants, in times past, *sadaxa* were all put on *lafa* to be delivered to their recipients. Whether it was meat, grain or something else, the fact that it was on a *lafa* (*lafan kanma*) told the receiver that it was a *sadaxa* (MDS, MSS 2004).

Informants gave the following examples of the various uses of the *lafa*. In marriage, there is a *sadaxa* given to the grandmother of the bride in which couscous and meat are delivered to her on a *lafa*. At the death of a person, the *borolo*, a *sadaxa* of a set of clothing given to the person who washed the body of the deceased before burial, is also delivered on a *lafa*. When there is the risk of an epidemic, people put an old worn out *lafa* in a hole in their concession gate as a protection from disease. Just before the rainy season starts, some people take a bit of their best planting seed and feed it to their horse on a *lafa* so that the rainy season will be good. A person should never stand on a *lafa*. If a child does so, people promptly put a stop to it (Ibid.). One informant told a story about his mother who refused to let him bring a newly acquired horse into her concession until she went outside the yard and fed it millet from a *lafa* (MSS 2004). When a *lafa* is worn out, it is simply thrown away (MSS, MDS 2004).

The *lafa* is getting less use today for *sadaxa* as factory-made recipients are replacing traditional ones. *Sadaxa* are now more commonly delivered in plastic bags and factory-made bowls (Ibid.).

Conferring Baraji on the Dead

Besides gravesite prayers that are believed to confer *baraji* on the deceased, there are several types of *sadaxa*, which are routinely offered on behalf of the dead. This is not a new notion for Islam, as according to Weir,

The inherent merit of a gift of *ṣadaqa* does not disappear with the giver...its benefits are not only limited to the living because, according to the *hadith*, *ṣadaqa* can be given in the name of deceased Muslims, particularly by a child for a parent, and their recompense will be presented to them on a platter of light...the deceased is credited with the merit of the *ṣadaqa*, which does not in any way diminish that received by the giver (1995: 735, translation mine).

At the death of an adult among the Soninke, there are two different *sadaxa* that take place in the first 40 days⁷¹ in the hope of assuring that the deceased receives enough *baraji* from God to enter Paradise. The first takes place after her burial, usually on the same day, after the *laxasara* (late afternoon) or *futuro* (dusk) prayers. Messengers are sent all over the village to let people know when the *sadaxa bagande* (the giving of offerings for the deceased) is to take place. Individuals go to the home of the deceased's family taking an offering to be given to them. Women generally take a small bowl of grain or peanuts and men give 50 to 100 CFA (GGJ et al. 1998). Some of the grain is cooked put in a bowl and covered with milk. This is for the deceased and is left out the night of her burial so that she will not go hungry. This *sadaxa* has two functions according to my informant: to feed the dead and to give them *baraji* (JAS 2004). The deceased's family redistributes the remaining offerings to the poor and to the *almodinu*⁷² (GGJ et al. 1998).

Forty days after the death, the deceased's family either butchers a sheep or goat or buys several piles (*saada*) of meat from which the evening meal of millet or corn couscous (*futo*) and sauce with meat (*maxafonji*) is prepared. This meal constitutes a *sadaxa*. Messengers are sent to notify the village that there will be a *sadaxa* for the deceased. This *sadaxa* is eaten only by men who, on receiving the message, go to the appointed concession to consume the meal. At the end of the meal, those who've eaten pronounce blessings (*duwanje*) for the deceased, which are thought to confer *baraji* upon the dead individual (JAS 2004, GGJ et al. 1998).

There are other *sadaxa* for the benefit of the dead practiced in Xuusaane. If a person is still thinking about a deceased family member a year after their death, they may offer a *sadaxa* resembling the one done at 40 days after the death in order to "add [*baraji*] to their peace and well-being" (*fo kafu i neema*) (JAS 2004).

⁷¹ People believe that *yonki* (soul) of a deceased person stays around the living for the first 40 days after the individual's death. People may have dreams about the deceased or even see them during the forty days. This is considered neither dangerous nor bad (MDS 1999).

⁷² See footnote 69.

Other *sadaxa* for the dead are communal in nature and are destined for all the dead collectively. One of these is called *Xarandigolle*⁷³, which is done every year during the harvest. This offering is to remember the dead of the village so they won't be forgotten. Women make little millet cakes (*tufulle*), salted peanuts (*tiga soronte*), steamed peanuts (*tiga segente*), or couscous (*futumulle*) with milk, which are given primarily to children, although adults consume them as well. The whole village is supposed to participate. People say that "The dead live on *sadaxa*." (*Bone wa birene sadaxa ya*). If someone doesn't participate, they are thought to be disrespectful of the dead and in the process of forgetting them (MSJ 2003).

When someone has been away from the village a long time, like a man who has spent several years in France for example, he must first pay respect to those in the village who have died while he was away before he can get on to the business of visiting friends, giving gifts and settling back into his family. He does this by going to give blessings at the various homes where there have been deaths during his absence. This may take several days, especially if he has been gone for many years. Once this is done, he must go to the village square before the elders to give blessings on behalf of all those who had died since his departure. He also gives a monetary gift to the elders as a *sadaxa* for the collective dead. Once he has acknowledged the dead in the proper manner, the returnee can now enter in the normal social activities of the living (MDS 2003⁷⁴).

Summary: *Baraji* and *Seraaxu*

To ensure entry into Paradise, people need to acquire enough *baraji* (divine recompense) to outweigh their sins on the Day of Judgment. *Baraji* is acquired through various acts of piety as defined by the Koran, the principal ones being associated with the keeping of the five pillars of Islam. Supplementary *baraji* can be acquired through other actions such as reading the Koran, using prayer beads, extra fasting, extra prayers, doing good deeds, pronouncing blessings and the offering of *sadaxa*. One can also confer *baraji* on others and on the dead through *sadaxa* offered on their behalf and through the pronouncement of blessings.

It is especially in the domain of good deeds where religious ideology meets and compliments the values associated with *seraaxu*. Practically anything a person does which proves beneficial to someone else is perceived as *baraji*-producing. The act may simply be moving a stick off a path (considered a *sadaxa*-MDS 2004) or going to greet someone in his or her home. These "good deeds" not only result in *baraji* for the performer but they have positive repercussions in the social domain as well. Such behaviors promote *seraaxu* with all its associated values. Religious piety is a strong component in the ideal Soninkes have about qualities of a good and honorable person.

⁷³ This *sadaxa* is referred to by various names: *xarandigolle*, *tufulle* and *kunkutu*. These are all names of little millet cakes made from millet couscous, salt and sugar, which are the principal offering.

⁷⁴ As reported by Brad Smeltzer October 2003

***Baraka*: Blessing and Power**

Another important element that influences individual behavior in Soninke society is the quest for *baraka* whose benefit is enjoyed in the everyday life of the living. The Koranic concept of *baraka* came to the Soninke through the influence of Islam starting in the 11th century. Since that time, at least in the Jafunu and Gidimaxa regions of the Soninke homeland, the concept has been adapted to the Soninke context in such a way that the meaning has changed from the strictly Koranic understanding⁷⁵. Before presenting the Soninke view of *baraka*, I will give a brief overview both of the notion of *baraka* from the perspective of the Koran and orthodox Islam and from that of folk Islam concentrating on its meanings in sub-Saharan West Africa.

***Baraka* from the Koranic Perspective**

The noun *baraka* in Soninke is a borrowing from the classical Arabic root BRK. According to Denny, *baraka* in orthodox Islam means "blessing" or "spiritual power" (1985:396). Georling summarizes the meaning of the root *BRK* in the Koran as "benediction". He states that, in the Koran, it is almost always Allah who blesses (1995:331). G. S. Colin in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* describes *baraka* as a

... beneficial force of divine origin that produces an overabundance in the physical domain, and prosperity and happiness in the psychic. The text of the Koran is naturally laden with *baraka*. God can have at His disposition the emanation of *baraka* in the person of one of His prophets or saints: Mohammed and his descendants are especially gifted. In their turn, these holy persons can transmit to common individuals emanations of their supernatural potential while living or after their death, the modes of transmission being quite varied and sometimes bizarre.... Here and there, one finds *baraka* attributed to various things. Already in the Koran the olive tree and the night of the 27th of the month of Ramadan are *mubarak* (Colin 1975: 1063, translation mine).

Folk Islam and *Baraka* in Sub-Saharan West Africa

Musk defines *baraka* from a folk Islam perspective as "...'blessing'; often thought of in terms of some kind of positive, magic force available from holy people, places or objects" (1998:295). From the same perspective, Hiebert defines it as a "this worldly extraordinary unseen power" which is good rather than evil (1989:48, 51). Goerling further adds that "There is a shift of meaning from the primary meaning of "blessing" to mere power in our West African context" (1995:322). According to Froelich,

...the notion of *baraka* has often been distorted by the black-African mentality resulting in a real confusion with *Nyama*, the notion of life or vital force, and with magical power (1962: 146, translation mine).

⁷⁵ I suspect that it may have been influenced by some Soninke pre-Islamic animistic beliefs.

Vydrine in his *Manding – English Dictionary* describes the meaning of the noun *bāraka* in northwestern Mandé languages⁷⁶ as "...benediction, power, force, stoutness, strength, thanks" (1999: 97). The intransitive verb has the senses "... become strong, become powerful, mighty, strengthen, give force to, to install firmly" (ibid.).

The Soninke share their homeland with many other ethnic groups (the Wolof, the Fulani, the Bambara, the Khassonke, the Kagoro, the Malinke, and Hasaniya speaking Moors). Though all of these groups are "Muslim", apart from the Wolof, the Fulani and the Moors, their conversion to Islam is relatively recent. The Fulani and the Wolof, like the Soninke, have had much longer contact with Islam. These two peoples have a history of strong participation in Islamic brotherhoods (Mourides, Quadiriyya, Tijaniyya, Hamiliyya, etc.), which continues today. Many of the brotherhoods center on either a descendant of the brotherhood's founder (a grand master) or a particular marabout of the order in question. In the case of an order centered on a grand master, it is the sheik (descendant of the founder), who holds the *baraka* and this chain of *baraka* is transferred at his death to one of his descendants (Froelich, 1962: 218) or to a favored disciple (Schmitz, 2000:242)⁷⁷. Froelich adds

The sheik's *baraka* protects one against bad luck, it makes it rain, it multiplies one's livestock, makes women fertile, assures peace or victory.... in [the] ...eyes [of the majority of African Muslims].... the gift of *baraka* that these people are reputed to have is not necessarily linked to either the good or bad behavior of its holder here on this earth: The *baraka* is something which has its own value and effectiveness in itself, the sheik is only the depositary. This is enough, however, to assure him the veneration of his faithful followers (1962: 218-219, translation mine).

Partly through contact with North African saint cults and because of their own participation in brotherhoods centered on charismatic individuals, there is still today a strong practice of saint veneration between the Wolof and the Fulani. They believe that *baraka* is inherent in their sheiks, marabouts and other "holy" persons, even after death. Again Froelich explains

... at the death of a saint, his *baraka* stays close to his body, and radiates around his tomb....*Baraka* is the gift of holiness acquired by contact with the supernatural, transmitted by a type of holy contagion....*Baraka* permits the saint who is vested with its power to attract favor and blessing for himself and for others and their undertakings; it grants him a supernatural power to change the natural course of

⁷⁶ *Soninkanxanne*, the Soninke language is part of the northwestern Mande language family.

⁷⁷ For a very complete history of this phenomena among the Wolof and the Fulani in the Senegal River Valley up to the 19th century, see "Le souffle de la parenté: Mariage et transmission de la *baraka* chez les clercs musulmans de la Vallée du Sénégal" by Jean Schmitz, in *L'Homme: Revue Française de l'Anthropologie*, No. 154, pp. 241-278, 2000.

things, to perform miracles and to predict the future.... (ibid. 188-189, translation mine)

Monteil (1964: Ch. 5) in discussing the importance and role of *marabouts* in West African Islam comments that as Muslims are quite preoccupied with gaining *baraka*, it is not uncommon for the saliva and water from rinsing out the mouth or from ablutions and the leftovers from a meal of such men to be gathered and utilized by others to extract the *baraka* from it. Sometimes the same man will drink his own ablution water to keep his *baraka*. In 1907, Amadou Bamba spit on the head and hands of his disciples to give them his *baraka*. *Baraka* can be transferred as well by the laying on of hands.

The Understanding of *Baraka* among the Soninke

The conception of *baraka* among the Soninke, contrary to the generalizations made by both Froelich and Goering for West Africa, appears to have the senses of both blessing and power. It must be remembered, however, that the Soninke began the Islamization process in the 11th century and have since developed a strong tradition of Koranic studies. Large portions of men are able to read the classical Arabic of the Koran with comprehension as well the commentaries and the *hadith* accounts written in that language. There are also specialists in Koranic studies, the *moodi*, who give Koranic teaching and are consulted about religious issues relating the Koran.

Baraka as Blessing⁷⁸

The ultimate source of *baraka* is God. In the sense of "blessing", it appears to mean something like "blessing for this life". Some believe that *baraka* is something that enters the body. When one has it, it enables the individual to work harder⁷⁹. When someone has *baraka*, it is believed that God will meet that person's needs through others. If an individual needs help or food, for example, he will get what is needed if he has enough *baraka*. Because of the *baraka* in an individual, he will have an adequate supply of what he needs in life. There's a proverb that says "a person with *baraka* may have to work hard but he will never be dishonored⁸⁰". In other words, life may be difficult but with *baraka* a person will make it, God will meet his needs and he will not have to face the dishonor and shame of poverty and/or dependency. A common blessing spoken for newborn children is "May God make him/her a *barakantanrenme* (lit. 'a child of *baraka*', one of great *baraka*)⁸¹. In other words

⁷⁸ Most of the research for this section of the paper (*baraka* among the Soninke) was done in Xuusaane during January 1998 by both myself and my husband, Brad L. Smeltzer, through informal interviews (MB, LJS, LS, DJ, MAS, BK, KS, MJ, JS, JAS, MDS, BT).

⁷⁹ I have heard a similar explanation in regards to the offspring of a spirit marriage (when a man or a woman enters into a marriage contract with a *jinna* (a spirit). Though invisible, the *jinanrenmu* (spirit children) are thought to be present with family members and their descendants, especially when they are involved in physical labor giving them endurance and the ability to work really hard (BMT 1995).

⁸⁰ *Barikantanlenme wa tampini nxa a nta yaagunu.*

⁸¹ *Hari na a ja barakatanrenmen ŋa.*

may the child acquire lots of *baraka* so that his needs in this life will be met. Another blessing given during the period of mourning for a baby, the loss of livestock or the failure of a business deal is "May God replace what you have lost with *baraka* (MDS 2004)⁸².

There appear to be two main ways of obtaining of *baraka* in the sense of blessing. It can be either inherited or acquired.

Inherited Baraka

A person can inherit *baraka* through his ancestry. One of the main sources is through one's mother. The amount of blessing that comes to an individual through her is based on the way she has lived her life. The more righteous her life, the more *baraka* her children will inherit. The acts of a woman that people consider important are that she leads a pious life, treats others with respect fulfilling her role as defined by the society and, most important of all, takes care of the children of others in the same way that she cares for her own.⁸³ Though one's mother is the most important source of inherited *baraka*, one can also inherit *baraka* from any or all of one's ancestors. A child can inherit *baraka* from his parents, if they respect each other and keep up the care of their elders. Inheritance of *baraka* can be cumulative through the generations of one's family as well. So if one's family line contains a lot of *barikantansoro* (people who had lots of *baraka*), one inherits blessing through them all⁸⁴. This inheritability appears to resemble a bit the chain of *baraka* notion found in both orthodox Islam concerning Mohammed and his descendants and in Islamic brotherhoods centered around a grand master or sheik.

Acquired Baraka

Acquired *baraka* is based on the principle that when a person does good works without the expectation of repayment, he will receive *baraka*. God judges the purity of an individual's heart and thus his motivation. If it is found pure, the person is accorded a certain amount of *baraka*.

Though there are several ways to acquire *baraka*, certain contexts are thought to be especially significant. The first one that everyone mentions is respecting and taking good care of one's parents and older relatives, especially one's mother⁸⁵. The thinking is that one will be blessed (i.e. taken care of) in the same manner that one takes care of one's parents. In a conversation concerning a man who recently lost his mother after a long illness, it was said that he would get lots of *baraka* because of how well he took care of her until her death and after. He took her to Kayes to be treated at the hospital, he stayed with her there the whole time, he was faithful and devoted to

⁸² *Hari na baraka saage a batten ŋa.*

⁸³ This is a common belief in West African Islam. See Marantz, 1993:131.

⁸⁴ After reading the biblical story of Ruth, a Soninke friend observed that Obed as well as his descendants Jesse and David inherited a lot of *baraka* through the good actions of Ruth and Boaz. Ruth honored and took care of Naomi while Boaz honored Elimilek by seeing that his family line continued when he married Ruth and she bore Obed (as reported by Brad L. Smeltzer from DJ 1998).

⁸⁵ Compare Goering, 1995:335-338 for an in-depth discussion concerning Jula beliefs on this topic.

her after their return to the village until her death and he continues to be faithful by mourning her in the correct manner. In another case, an elderly woman of the chiefly clan in her 90's became bedridden when she fell down and broke her hip. One of her daughters and a *komoyaxare* (woman of the captive class) took care of her until her death. They carried her in and out of the bathroom, washed her and met all her daily needs. It is believed that they will receive a lot of *baraka* given how needy the woman was and how long and how well they cared for her (MSJ 1998).

Another important avenue to *baraka* is through the marriage relationship. Marriage is seen as the hope of the future (*jikke*) for a family and this hope is realized through the acquisition of *baraka* for one's family, which is inherited by one's children. This is thought to result through marriages that are based on traditional values pertaining to the roles of the spouses in family life and work which include maintaining proper relationship with each other (*dango*), mutual respect (*me doronde*), endurance (*butte*), hard work (*golle*), guarding one's honor (*yaagu*), keeping a good conscience, maintaining one's obligations (*gacce*) and the production of children (*jiidiye*). Promoting close patrilineal (blood - *sumpu*) and matrilineal (milk - *xatti*) relationships is also highly valued and seen as *baraka* producing (Ja 2001)⁸⁶. A major source of *baraka* then is the marriage relationship, which ideally should reflect all the values mentioned above.

The acquisition of *baraka* is not restricted to Muslims, a *kafir* (unbeliever) can earn it too if they are good to their elders. For example, it is said that God warned Moses to be careful of Pharaoh because he had lots of *baraka*, due to the fact that he treated his elders well⁸⁷. People take this belief very seriously.

In a larger sense, meeting family responsibilities⁸⁸ and respecting the *dango*⁸⁹ (the rules of respect) in one's family relationships is also believed to confer *baraka* on a person. In a broader sense than the family, the serving of a *seri xoore*, an older person, also results in the acquisition of *baraka*.

Yet another way to acquire *baraka* is to be generous to those in need. Informants felt that one should help others in such a way that even one's best friends don't know anything about it. One informant gave me the following illustration:

If I want to help a family who doesn't have enough food, I would go there early in the morning or at night and just leave a sack of rice. If I were to go there in broad daylight and make a big show of giving them the rice, there is no *baraka* acquired

⁸⁶This is a distillation of ideas taken from an article written in Soninke by Jeneba Ja of Sabaku in the region of Kayes who won 5th place in the Madi Kama Musundo writer's contest of 2001. The theme of the contest was "marriage among the Soninke". Participants in the contest responded in writing to a series of questions concerning the topic of marriage. The information cited came from question 2, *Daaru yexun ji kan moxo yi?* (What were yesterday's marriages like?).

⁸⁷ See Goerling (1995:336-338) for the corresponding story concerning Pharaoh among the Jula.

⁸⁸ This is part of the notion of *gacce*.

⁸⁹ See footnote 21.

by the act because I would be looking for recognition of my generosity from the people themselves. God who knows that I was wrongly motivated won't bless me with *baraka*. Doing the giving in such a way that the giver receives no earthly praise results in a lot of *baraka* (MB 1998).

Giving to the mother of young twins, for example, is thought to result in lots of *baraka* as the mother is so encumbered by the two children that she is in a sense handicapped. Giving her alms really helps her. A common blessing spoken for the benefit of someone who has done a good deed is "May God put *baraka* in you"⁹⁰. People also felt that is especially meritorious to help strangers.

***Baraka* as Power**

The notion of *baraka* as simple power or strength in the sense that Vydrine points out in his Manding dictionary (1999: 97) exists in the Soninke language but is little used, at least in Xuusaane. For example, it is common to hear *baraka* used in this way in the blessing for healing, *Hari na baraka bogu a yi*, "May God remove the *baraka* of the disease." Generally speaking, however, other lexical items such as *senbe* (power, strength, capacity) or *fanka* (power, strength) are used in the everyday sense of "power" or "strength". The verbal forms of *senbe* and *fanka* are commonly used as well.

There is a sense of *baraka*, however, that is different from the notion of blessing described above. For want of a better term, I am calling it "spiritual power". I suspect it finds its roots in to North African Islam saint veneration and the beliefs of Sufi brotherhoods like the Hamaliyya⁹¹. Though a few Soninke participate in such brotherhoods⁹², it appears to be more the exception than the rule.

Generally speaking, *baraka* is evident in older people. A person with *baraka* speaks with authority, can settle disputes and is someone who people will listen too. Such a person is self-assured and highly respected. When such a person speaks blessings (*duwanŋe*) over another, these invocations are thought to confer *baraka* on the blessee. I was once blessed by an old Soninke woman who spit on her hands and then touched me while speaking the blessings in Arabic. I

⁹⁰ *Hari na baraka ro an ŋa*.

⁹¹ There may be some vestiges of influence from their pre-Islamic traditional beliefs. However, the Soninke of Xuusaane express a disdain for what they call the *bambara binne*, the pagan or ignorant Bambara, who, though nominally Muslim, are perceived to have mixed up their traditional belief system with their practice of Islam.

⁹² I don't know of any involvement in Xuusaane nor have I heard anything about the Gidimaxa region. However, this question needs to be researched more thoroughly. I do know of a Hamaliyya mosque in the Soninke village of Dionkoulané in the Jafunu. There is perhaps more participation in the Nioro areas where the Sufi brotherhoods centered on the descendants of Tall, Sy and Hayidara are located. This could also be the case in the Bakel region in Senegal where the Mourides among the Fulani and the Wolof have some influence

suspect that she was giving me some of her *baraka* via her saliva as well as through the actual spoken blessing⁹³.

Another source of *baraka* in the sense of power is from the graves of persons considered saints or people who were considered exceptionally pious, righteous or powerful during their life. For example, there is an especially powerful grave of a Soninke holy man (a certain Tanjigoro) near Bakel where people go on the 27th day of the month of Ramadan to make requests of God. Because of the propitiousness of the day and the *baraka* of the gravesite, it is believed that one will get whatever is asked for. The grave of a certain Jaabbira⁹⁴, a powerful *moodi* from Xuusaane is said to turn water into milk because of the *baraka* there. When a well-respected elderly woman passed away in 1998, an elderly informant said that because of the deceased's good character, piety and age, her grave would be endowed with *baraka*. She said that after a year or so, if one were to lay one's hands on the grave, water would come to the surface of the ground because of the deceased's *baraka* (BT 1998).

The Soninke do not confuse *baraka* with the concept of life force as Froelich suggests in a general way for all West Africa. They have the conception of *nama*, which is a completely different notion. It is believed that all living things have *nama*, the *nama* of certain powerful beings like the baobab, the lion, the elephant and certain human beings, is very dangerous. *Nama* appears to be an amoral and unpredictable force. Consequently, when one wants to cut down a baobab or kill a lion, for example, measures must be taken to protect one's self from the *nama* of the being in question. If not, at the being's death, the release of the *nama* might injure, kill or drive a person crazy.

Summary: *Baraka* and *Seraaxu*

The ultimate author of *baraka* is God. He is the one who decides when to confer its blessing on an individual. The notion of *baraka* appears to have two similar but distinct senses, both blessing and power.

In the sense of blessing, the main payoff of *baraka* is for this life. If a person has enough *baraka*, God will meet that person's needs during his lifetime through the actions of others or even in supernatural ways. It is a bit like the Hindu concept of *karma* in that when a person does good deeds, he will benefit from them at a later time. *Baraka* can be inherited especially through one's mother but also through one's ancestry. It can be acquired through certain meritorious acts if they are performed with a pure motivation and without expectation of recompense. When a person goes before God to have his deeds weighed, *baraka* among other things is considered, however its main advantage is for this present physical life and, of course, to benefit one's descendants after one's death.

⁹³ This took place on the train to Kayes in 1996 long before I began researching *baraka*

⁹⁴ Jabbirra is the patronymic of the chiefly clan in Xuusaane. This man is famous because he was able to build a house and consequently live and farm in particular area of Xuusaane where certain *jinna* (spirits) associated with baobab trees had chased everyone else away.

In the sense of blessing, *baraka* resembles somewhat the orthodox Islamic notion with the main differences being that one can earn *baraka* by one's acts and the possibility of its inheritability outside of the bloodline of Mohammad, expanding the chain of *baraka* concept to include anyone.

In the sense of power, it is a spiritual power. *Baraka* is inherent in certain persons and can be transferred to others by spoken invocation (blessings), saliva or touch. *Baraka* is believed to stay with such a person after their death and to be present at the place of their burial. This power can continue to benefit the living in miraculous ways through a type of transmission. However, among the Soninke, it is not to be confused with *nama*, as Froelich proposes.

The majority of acts that result in an acquisition of *baraka* are also culturally approved behaviors in Soninke society. The quest for *baraka* ensures that one's needs in this present life are met but it also encourages people to conform to the society's values as well. A person who pursues acts resulting in *baraka* is likely to be considered a true person (*sere*) by those around him. The pursuit of *baraka* coexists very well with the whole notion of *seraaxu* (good personness). The two values complement and reinforce each other.

Conclusion

As was stated in the introduction to this paper, in applying Mary Douglas' grid group model to the Soninke, their society would be classed as both strong grid and strong group. The model predicts that one ought to find the following characteristics in a strong grid, strong group culture:

- There is strong hierarchy, possibility for specialized roles and resources are unequally distributed.
- Individuals within the group find their life support from the group.
- The control of individual behavior is done in the name of the group.
- There are multiple types of solutions to internal conflicts.
- There are constraining group boundaries that protect from outsiders.
- The group can be quite large and will persist longer without fission than a strong group low grid culture.
- Because of its feasibility, the group can make levies on individual members to ensure the group's future, and because of this, the group will, in fact, persist (Douglas 1982a:206-207).

I have found all of the above to hold true for the Soninke.

Concerning grid, the social structure of Soninke society is stratified containing three endogamous classes. Every person depending upon gender, age and social class has an ascribed position in the social structure with an associated set of expectations for behavior, a set of duties and a standard of honor. The only variable which changes in this essentially ascribed system is age; status comes

with age and grants a certain level of commandment for those younger than the individual in question. Concerning group, the Soninke have a strong collective orientation in which ideally the good of the group is more important than any one individual's good. Independence and individualism are not only unimportant for the Soninke but perceived as threatening to the larger group. Conflict resolution is for the most part done within the group at some level (family, lineage, village, region, etc.) and in a variety of ways depending upon many factors (what kind of problem, who is involved, potential for dishonor etc.). Individuals desire group approval and receive it by maintaining personal, family, clan and group honor. The threat of dishonor and shame are serious deterrents to deviant behavior as they can ruin the reputation of an individual, a family or even an entire lineage thus affecting its members' marriageability and their access to group aid in times of need. There are fairly clear group boundaries concerning who are insiders and who are outsiders. These boundaries become even more pronounced in places like France where the Soninke live in enclaves.

In the Soninke context, behaviors that conform to the notion of *seraaxu* (good personness) and actions which result in the acquisition of *baraka* (blessing for this life) and *baraji* (divine recompense in the afterlife) have many areas of overlap. Many acts of *seraaxu*, for example, result not only in social approval, but also the acquisition of *baraka* and/or *baraji* for the performer. Participation in group life is a must in Soninke society. The collective nature of the society permits nothing less. The group at whatever level (family, lineage, village, region, etc.) rewards or sanctions the individual depending upon whether or not they live within the norms acceptable to the group. When group solidarity is threatened by failure to conform, the whole society is, in a sense, at risk. In these cases sanctions are immediately implemented to force the offender to conform or run the risk of dishonor and shame.

It seems that the group at whatever level (family, lineage, clan, village, region, etc.) ensures the well-being of its members through its communal orientation, its hierarchical social structure, and its values which emphasize honor, responsibility, endurance, generosity, balanced reciprocity, and piety. A "good person" ideally conforms to the culture's *laada* (cultural laws) and *danbe* (tradition). He or she respects the boundaries (*dango*) defining appropriate behavior between any two people, which are based on age, gender and class/caste hierarchies. And finally he or she lives according to values that I have attempted to articulate in this paper, thus maintaining personal and family honor before the other members of the society.

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