When is an object finished? The creation of the invisible among the Bamana of Mali

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Figure 1. Ci Warra headdress, purchased in San. Private collection.
When is an object finished?

The creation of the invisible among the Bamana of Mali

SARAH C. BRETT-SMITH

For Basi Fane, in memoriam

My aim is to investigate the way in which two interrelated African societies, the Bamana and Malinke of Mali, West Africa, viewed the production of art. It will explore Bamana and Malinke ideas about when an art object is ‘finished’ and why the ending of an object’s ‘life’ is so fraught with danger for its user. This will lead us to realize that, from the Bamana or Malinke viewpoint, the most difficult part of artistic creation is the bringing into being, and eventually the dissipation, of a non-visible component of uncanny power (nyama) associated with any ritual object. It is the process of creating nyama that protracts the ‘making’ phase of artistic creation, and it is the presence of nyama that makes ending the ‘life’ of an object so difficult.

In discussing Bamana and Malinke artistic production it is important to avoid economic models derived from modern experience that postulate a definite finishing point for the making of any art object and a clear distinction between production and use. Although any practical discussion of a Western art object, such as a seventeenth-century Dutch painting, encompasses its many years of ‘use’ and the often major changes to the perception of its ‘final’ image that these years have wrought, we still tend to focus on reconstructing the ‘pristine’ image via an examination of preparatory sketches, under-drawings, and the use of diagnostic tools, such as X-rays. Our expectations focus, it seems, on a critical point in the object’s ‘life’ where the original artist or artists considered that the work in question had attained its ideal form, that it was, in colloquial terms, ‘finished.’ The years of change that follow the artist’s transfer of the painting or sculpture to its user are not, theoretically at least, regarded as part of the creative process, even though they may be crucial for the object’s final appearance. While the actual history of some Western objects belies this artificial paradigm, the Bamana case calls the paradigm itself into question. For, both the Bamana and Malinke consider that the period of an object’s use is merely an additional stage in its creation; a sculpture or textile is always ‘in production,’ since it continues to be made, to grow, and to become something ever more valuable until the day when it is totally destroyed. Furthermore, if one asks a sculptor to consider the possibility of leaving an object alone, once it arrives at what a Western researcher might consider a ‘finished’ state, he will respond that such a carving would be an “empty” thing, deserving little, if any, consideration.

This paper will focus more on the Bamana than the Malinke, but the ideas explored here are common to both societies, and, as Jean Bazin has demonstrated (Bazin 1985), the two groups are so intertwined by history, intermarriage, and common behaviors that it makes no sense to treat them as separate and discrete entities. Thus, while the paper often refers to ‘the Bamana’ in recognition of the fact that most of my fieldwork has been carried out in the Beledugu, a quintessentially ‘Bamana’ region, much of my most

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1. The Bamana are often known as ‘Bambara,’ an incorrect term used by early French explorers and administrators that has passed into general use. I base my attribution of an interconnected set of beliefs to both the ‘Bamana’ and ‘Malinke’ on my own field experience and Jean Bazin’s seminal article of 1985, “A Chacun son Bambara.” From 1983 on, when I began to expand the range of my inquiries to the Kita area and to interview men and women who identified themselves as Malinke, it became clear that a unified belief system underlay the creation and use of sculpture and the ritual employment of textiles in both ‘Bamana’ and ‘Malinke’ societies. While mud cloths, such as the ritually significant Basiae and N’Gale, are not found among the ‘Malinke,’ actions, such as the interpretation of the way in which excision undergarments burn as indicating a woman’s future fertility, are common to both groups. Similarly, while the Kita Ci Waraw headdress (Brett-Smith 1994:fig. 10) looks nothing like the antelope heads typically characterized as ‘Bamana’ Ci Waraw, it serves exactly the same function and is called by the same name. Where important structural differences in ritual practice between the Malinke and Bamana do occur, as with the Beledugu fura ci excision and marriage rituals, I will indicate this in a note.

2. Throughout this paper I have used double quotation marks (") to indicate when I am using a word that is a direct translation of an original Malinke or Bamana term, and single quotation marks (’) to denote a word that forms part of my own interpretation. My use of single quotation marks is also intended to highlight terms that have been subject to controversy, such as ‘caste,’ or ‘taboo.’ In these cases the quotation marks should alert the reader to the fact that I am skeptical of the term used, but that it seemed the best choice from among a group of unsatisfactory alternatives.
interesting information comes from Malinke speakers native to the Kangaba and Kita areas—regions usually considered ‘Malinke.’ In all cases, I identify my sources by their ‘ethnic’ affiliation, but I regard the set of ideas presented here as common to both the ‘Bamana’ and ‘Malinke’ from the Kangaba/Kita zone through the Beledugu and Segu areas up to the region of San, where the somewhat different belief system of the Minianka begins to dominate.3

The Bamana are among the best known of West African peoples, if only for their Ci Wara headdresses that combine the features of antelope, lion, anteater, and pangolin into a striking ensemble (fig. 1). This headdress, which is worn by the Bamana (and by many ‘Malinke’) to celebrate excellence in farming, signals the Bamana identity as cultivators who wrested a difficult living from the sahel that covers much of central Mali. The northern Bamana areas, such as the Beledugu, have always been subject to periodic drought, and famines are cyclical and expected events in a life of ongoing hardship.4

3. The extent to which, even after colonization and the historic ‘definition’ of the ‘Bambara’ and other ‘tribes’ by Maurice Delafosse in his famous Haut-Sénégal-Niger of 1912 (Bazin 1985:113–121), ethnic identities remain fluid and overlap throughout Mali is enormous. It is not always clear whether a speaker is saying that he is ‘Bamana’ because he participates in non-Muslim traditions like the Ci Wara and refuses to pray to Allah, or whether he is referring to an identity based on the colonial definition of ethnic groups and reflected to this day in the identity cards possessed by most Malians. One can still be both ‘Malinke’ and ‘Bamana’ at the same time—‘Malinke’ in terms of geographic origin and colonially set boundaries and ‘Bamana’ in terms of one’s resistance to Islam and adherence to traditional ritual practices (Bazin 1985:109, 112–113, 121–122). Furthermore, Bazin aptly describes how in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the term ‘Bamana’ could signify that a man cultivated the land as opposed to engaging in commerce, fishing, praisesinging, or blacksmithing (1985:120–121). This is actually the sense in which many of my Beledugu sources identified themselves to me as “Bamana.”

The reader should be aware that my Minianka sources (whose information is not cited in this paper) identified themselves as “the true Bamana,” regarding the term ‘Minianka’ as a colonially instituted misnomer. Bazin (1985:101) also describes this mislabeling. I use the name ‘Minianka’ merely because it is now the standard ethnic designation for the people in the San/Koutiala area who speak the Minianka language (called Mabara or Mabala by the Minianka themselves, Jonkers 1987:6).

4. Conditions of scarcity and harshness have been the rule, not the exception for the Bamana, and they live with a variety of incapacitating diseases; polio, tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria, and now AIDS, are all common killers. Life expectancy is still short, approximately 45 years for men and 47 for women in 1987 (Kurian 1992:1242). A more recent publication, the Enquête Démographique et de Santé, Mali 1995–1996, still gives a general life expectancy of 47 years.

Written and oral traditions date the emergence of the Bamana as an autonomous ethnic group to about A.D. 1600, while Malinke identity was established with the foundation of the famous kingdom of Mali in the thirteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Bamana in the regions of Segu and Kaarta began a process of state formation that was dependent on slave raiding and slavery for its economic base.5 This emerging system of sanctioned force and centralized power marked the Bamana farmer deeply, while leaving his more inaccessible Malinke neighbors relatively untouched; even today, in the midst of rapid Islamization and change, the northern Bamana are viewed as dour cultivators who cling tenaciously to traditions and beliefs that have almost vanished elsewhere. Society was and is both patriarchal and authoritarian. Power is concentrated in the hands of the oldest living male within the lineage, and in the past stringent rules regulated almost every aspect of social and sexual behavior as well as artistic production for the members of both societies.6

5. For an exhaustive description of how the economy of the slave trade facilitated the development of the Segu kingdom, see Roberts 1987. The reader should also consult Bazin 1975.

6. I collected a great deal of evidence suggesting that there has been a massive change in Malian, particularly Bamana, sexual mores since independence in 1960. Elderly and middle-aged Bamana of both sexes agreed that after independence young men and women broke free of traditional sexual rules that forbade sex before marriage (Brett-Smith 1994:43). When I have mentioned this at conferences in the West, individual Malians studying or teaching in the United States have confirmed this assertion.

When I use the word ‘traditional’ I am intending to suggest that the practice or object I am referring to formed (and may still form) an integral part of a worldview dominated by non-Islamic, non-Christian Bamana and Malinke rites and thought patterns. The use of this word view probably goes back to about 1890, although certain portions of it may be much older. It is impossible to provide any more detailed time frame for most of the issues under discussion, since my sources tend to be uniformly vague about time, merely saying that a certain belief or object forms part of their inherited bamanaya or “Bamana-ness.”

Some men and women can date changes in behavior to “the time of Modibo Keita,” (the first president of Mali) or “the time of Moussa” (Moussa Traore, the leader of the military junta that ruled Mali prior to the current democracy), but most cannot. Furthermore, change in mores is never uniform. In 1983 I witnessed a Malinke woman in a very old fashioned village tenaciously adhering to the rule that until a mother weans her child (at about two or two and a half years) she must not have sex with her husband. When we asked her if this was not difficult, she said that it was very difficult, but that if she gave in to her own desires, other women would make fun of her. At the same date in Bamako, other young mothers seemed to be waiting only forty
In this unyielding environment survival and death are still believed to depend on hidden spiritual forces—spirits, “things of the head,” or as they are now called, djinn, sorcery, ritual power, and the human manipulation of sacred sculpture and ritual textiles. It is in the creation and destruction of these objects, the things that we label as “medicines,” that we can discern a distinctive view of the artistic process. When a Bamana or Malinke client commissions a mask or a textile, there is, of course, a moment when the maker has completed the object and hands it over to its tigi or “owner.” However, it would be wrong to interpret this event as the moment when the object achieves its ideal form, when it is, so-to-say, ‘finished,’ except on the most superficial level. For, in Bamana eyes, the artist’s labor, whether it is the carving of wood or the dyeing of cloth, is only a beginning, a preparation for the more significant process of producing the ritual power that gives life to a successful “medicine.”

This is best illustrated by examining the language the Bamana and Malinke employ when talking about sculpture or textiles. In the past, neither sculptor nor cloth dyer would have ever referred to a mask or mud cloth (bògòlanfini) as being “finished,” (A bana). Rather, an expert textile artist like Salimata Kone would say, A nyana, “It has succeeded” or “It is good,” A da falen don, “It is full,” A sera, “It has arrived [at maturity],” or A ce kayni, “It is beautiful.” My research associate, Mr. Adama Mara, who worked with me and Salimata Kone, from 1978 until the dyer’s death in 1990, told me that he had never heard this elder comment that a cloth was “finished.”

Mr. Mara then explained that in traditional Bamana and Malinke speech “It is finished,” or A lana, was a profoundly sad statement; it was only used to refer to the death of a living being, never to the completion of an activity. Furthermore, A bana was a more serious declaration than the more common A sara, “he or she has died,” for A bana, “it is finished,” implied a death without descendants. Sabani Cissoko, a self-confident woman of thirty-three, whose ritual and medical expertise has already brought her a large clientele of women with gynecological problems, explains this distinction as follows:

Sabani: The person is not “finished,” because she (or he) leaves children behind. Therefore, she (or he) is not “finished.” Her name will live on until the end of the world. For example, people will say about my children: “These are Sabani’s children.” That is the meaning of this. Someone who has never ever had a child; at her death, she is “finished.”

In a culture where neither men nor women are considered to be complete human beings unless they have had children, A bana refers not just to death but to the total annihilation that occurs if one dies childless.

As Mr. Mara’s and Sabani’s explanations imply, the terms that are traditionally employed in speech about human beings apply as well to the “medicines” (or art objects) that so often function as living creatures. When a carver looks at the mask he has made and comments, A falen don, “It is full,” or A sera, “It has arrived,” he borrows the phrases used to describe a young man or woman who has blossomed into full physical maturity. Similarly, a phrase used to describe both the ripeness of a tempting mango and human maturity can also be employed to describe artistic fruition. A mud cloth dyer

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10. All the names of Bamana and Malinke informants cited in this article are pseudonyms. Since much of the information cited pertains either to traditional ritual or sexual practices, it is important to maintain the anonymity of my sources. An extended discussion of my field work methods can be found in the Introduction to Brett-Smith 1994. The Introduction also includes a description of Salimata Kone’s personality and expertise (pp. 5–6).

11. Sabani told us her age in an interview on 5/25/98 in Bamako. French translation of tape (98-3), pp. 1–2. Sabani, who also performed divination using cowry shells, had acquired her extensive knowledge of traditional medicine and ritual from her oldest brother who had been trained by their father in Narena.

Figure 2. “Ripe” or “full” cloth, Basiae. In the past, free Bamana women wore the Basiae after excision. They continued to wear it during their seven-week retreat period. When this ended, an excised girl gave it to her mother or another trusted female relative from her father’s or mother’s family. This elderly woman preserved the cloth and wore it until it fell into shreds. At this point, the female elder carefully buried it or wrapped it around a stone and threw it into a pond. The geometric pattern on the cloth has stayed almost the same from 1910 to the present; its motifs refer obliquely to success in childbearing and the protection of the bride’s future children. Commissioned June 4, 1998, unused. Collection of S. Brett-Smith.

who, on seeing a beautifully made excision cloth from a neighboring village, exclaims, A mona, or “It is ripe,” borrows the words used to describe a pot of rice whose grains are full and ready to be eaten, whereas the disappointed A banal describes the empty pot whose contents have been totally consumed.12

Why are “ripe” or “full” cloths and sculptures (fig. 2) not “finished”? Such objects are not “finished” because, like physically mature human beings, the completion of their carving or dyeing is only the beginning of a long process through which the “empty” mask or textile acquires the spiritual charge or nyamà that will allow these objects to intervene in human affairs.13 For the

12. Interview with Sabani Cissoko, 7/24/98, Bamako, French translation, pp. 41–42.

13. The Bamana think that human beings, as well as objects, accumulate nyamà as they age. They believe that anyone who lives
Bamana or Malinke viewer this non-visible component is by far the most critical aspect of any sculpture or textile, always taking precedence over its aesthetic power. In the Mande world, the *nyáma* of an object is the real measure of its importance, and when a dyer or carver begins the practical process of carving, or even dyeing, he or she must perform both ritual and technical actions that will impart an appropriate quotient of this elusive force to the product.

Furthermore, creation, as the Bamana and Malinke understand it, does not stop when the “full” object is transferred from maker to user, because successful sculptures and cloths stockpile *nyáma* continuously from the time when the tree is cut or the cloth is dipped in its first dye bath, to the moment when the mask is left to disintegrate on a termite mound, or the worn rag is tied around a stone and carefully thrown into a deep pond. It is this continuous intensification of *nyáma* that unites what we might wish to call ‘making’ and ‘using’ into one continuous process of production for the Bamana.

What is this invisible force that constitutes the most important part of any art object? Charles Bird, a linguist with years of experience among the Bamana, calls *nyáma* “the energy of action,” (1974:vii-ix; Bird and Kendall 1980:16–17, notes 4–6), that is, the energy or force released by any act. However, this enigmatic power, which lurks in every animate and inanimate object, usually has more negative than positive effects. For, while contact with a portable *Komo* altar, or *Komo boli,* can sometimes enable a sterile woman to become pregnant, it is far more common for the ritual object’s intense *nyáma* to inflict sterility as a punishment for transgressing *tanaw* or interdictions. Similarly, menstrual blood, one of the select female substances whose *nyáma* surpasses that of a *Komo boli,* certainly has a benign aspect, because both men and women acknowledge that women cannot bear children without the “flowering” (*fyere*) of menstruation, and in the intimacy of an individual interview, women will explain that the careful preservation of a woman’s first menstrual cloth enhances her fertility.

Nevertheless, it is far more common to overhear a man recounting how the *nyáma* released by accidentally touching a carelessly hidden

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into his seventies or eighties must have access to mysterious sources of power, otherwise he could not have withstood the frequent assaults of sorcerers and lived this long. Survival itself is taken as proof of otherworldly powers.

14. Some authors, such as Bazin (1986:268–269) have viewed *nyáma* as being an entirely negative force, but this is not my understanding. The problem of dealing with *nyáma* is generally that one needs a very high level of expertise to channel its power in a ‘positive’ rather than a ‘negative’ direction: i.e., as a generative rather than destructive force.

15. Throughout this paper I use the term ‘ritual object’ to refer both to what we consider to be ‘art’ and objects that are sacred for the Bamana and Malinke, but that we would not recognize as artistic creations. In practice, I am often referring to the costumes, masks, headdresses, *boliw* (see below), metalwork, such as the flutes used by the *Komo* association, textiles, and amulets that we do recognize as artful, but my use of the phrase, ritual objects, also includes things such as menstrual cloths.

The word *boli* can be used as a general term that includes any sacred object used for ritual purposes. However, it also has a much more specific meaning, and it it is this sense that I employ the term here. *Boliw* are sculptural objects composed from a wide variety of heterogeneous substances; animal or human placentas, birds’ beaks, white cloth, claws from various animals, wood, ritually significant plants, bark, venom, and animal excretions. Their exterior surface is covered with what looks like a deep, black putty and what is really a thick coating of dried sacrificial blood, millet porridge, and beer. The *boliw* best known in the West are those that have been collected as art objects and placed in museums. These are often shaped in the form of cows, humans, or spherical balls. However, the Bamana and Minianka manufacture *boliw* in numerous other non-specific shapes, and some of these *boliw* are without any noticeable sculptural presence. *Boliw* may be as large as a human being or small enough to put in one's pocket. In order to maintain its *nyáma,* a *boli* must be continually “renewed” or “refreshed” with sacrificial blood, and Dieterlen and Cissé note that certain *boliw* may be immersed in a sacred pond in order to keep them soaked and therefore “alive” (Dieterlen and Cissé 1972:254). Although we see the *boliw* in museums as dry objects, the Bamana conceive of them as basically wet; the multiple sacrifices made over them simply return them to their original or wet state. *Boliw* exist at many levels; the best known are those belonging to male secret associations, such as the *Komo.* These are public *boliw.* However, there are also family-owned *boliw* and personal *boliw,* each of these is made following a distinctive recipe and each acts in a particular way and solves particular problems. Recent French researchers have defined the term *boli* as “altar.” This is a useful term and perhaps the best English or French equivalent possible, but, as Jean Bazin points out (1986:254–255) it does imply that they are altars to something. In fact, they do not serve as points of contact with some exterior deity, but are nodes of spiritual force in and of themselves (ibid., pp. 257–259, 264–266). If one wishes to use Western rather than Bamana terms, they do not represent a deity, they in themselves are deities. Both my 1983 article on *boliw* and my previous book assume this ontological starting point as a given without explicitly discussing it. However, Jean Bazin elaborates this idea and takes apart the definition of a *boli* as an altar in his wonderful article. With a few minor exceptions, I agree with Bazin’s elucidation of the *boli’s* identity.

16. Babilen Coulibaly of Martà characterized menstruation as the “flowers” of a woman, interview with Babilen Coulibaly of Mantà at Kolokani, 5/31/98, French translation, pp. 11–12.
menstrual cloth has noticeably reduced the mental acuity of an acquaintance or diminished his success in the hunt. While it is all too easy to unleash an object's nyáma with devastating consequences, it is far more difficult to channel the intensely powerful energy contained within ritual objects for positive purposes. To achieve a satisfactory outcome for the situation the artifact is intended to remedy, both the makers and users of objects, such as a Komo boli or an excision cloth, must follow elaborate precautions and procedures. These are often so abstruse and so difficult to execute that it is only too easy to explain ex post facto why the “medicine” has not worked. Thus, while it is easy for the Bamana to explain the negative effects of nyáma, it is difficult to obtain either the most banal description of the procedures that intensify nyáma, or any deeper understanding of why such procedures are believed to achieve positive results.

Common linguistic usage reveals the ease with which nyáma can be released to negative effect, as well as the difficulty of controlling this unnerving force for positive purposes. When a man confides to his best friend that he has ceased to have erections since he accidentally touched his wife's menstrual cloth, he may comment, “A nyáma bórål,” or literally translated, “The nyáma has come out!” And indeed, every action, no matter how inadvertent, is said to “let loose” or “release” nyáma (ka nyáma bó). Significantly, there is no comparable verb with which one can describe the gradual increase of the creative nyáma attached to a Komo boli or an excision cloth, once they are in use.

The absence of any widely used and understood verb to describe the intensification of nyáma is important, for it reflects the fact that the actions that condense free-floating energy and localize it in ritual sculpture and textiles are not only secret but, in the words of the expert sculptor Kojugu Cissoko, “difficult.” When an experienced sculptor like Kojugu, who has made seven Komo masks, comments that carving a human figure is “hard” he is referring not just to aesthetic problems, but to the level of nyáma involved, to the rule that he must remain sexually abstinent while carving and that he must, above all, refrain from working on the project when his wife is menstruating. Furthermore, the ritual “difficulties” that worry him can occur both before and after an object has been transferred to its user, and this transfer is only a minor break in the continuous trajectory of the object's nyáma.

Yet, for the Bamana and Malinke, it is these unseen ritual steps, these undeclared but essential events, that are the most critical aspect of the creative process. In reality, the sculptor or dyer who seemingly ‘makes’ an object has simply laid the groundwork for the ongoing process of investing the sculpture or textile with power. Although this groundwork is essential, the object does not truly come to maturity—it cannot really function as an active force in the universe of competing spiritual powers—until its user has continued the sculptor's or dyer's work of endowing it with nyáma. It is the continuous trajectory of ritual “work” (baara) that constitutes the essence of making among the Bamana.

If, according to artists like Kojugu, the technical problems of carving a mask are not “difficult,” what do the Bamana and Malinke consider to be the more serious challenges that face the artist and the user of ritual “medicines”? In fact, artists and ritual experts face two intractable problems: how to imbue an object with nyáma without harming themselves in the process, and how, when the sacred object's nyáma reaches an unbearably high level, to destroy it without incurring terrible retribution. In a sense, the first problem is less difficult than the second, for when endowing a mask or excision cloth one at least begins with an “empty” object, but deliberately destroying an aged mask imbued with generations of sacrificial blood and power is a dangerous enterprise, since there is no guarantee as to what disaster may not strike the ritual expert who ventures to dislodge the object from its accustomed habitat.

Although the rules that must be observed to endow an object with power have obvious practical difficulties—few artists look forward to the months of sexual abstinence demanded by some commissions—any artistic endeavor also exacts a far more devastating price, a price that is all the more painful for being impossible to predict and yet expected. For there

17. French translation of interview with Sabani Cissoko, (98–3), 6/27/98, p. 17. Sabani says that contact with a menstrual cloth will “trouble a man’s thoughts,” and that it can reduce a man’s life span or make him impotent.


actually exists an economy of nyámá, an economy which is always a tragic game with a zero sum as the result. Nyámá is gained when other things are lost, sacrificed, or destroyed. A sculptor famous for the life-like quality of his hyena masks and their power to inspire possession trances will have lost his two most intelligent sons to tuberculosis and leprosy. A master mud cloth dyer like Nya Coulibaly, known far and wide for her renditions of the Turusina pattern, is semi-paralyzed from birth and childless, a catastrophe for a Bamana woman.20 Great artistry in every culture has often been associated with human loss, but among the Bamana and Malinke, the zero-sum equation holds good for the clients who commission objects as well as for the artists who are their more ostensible creators. The elderly man who decides to start a local branch of the Komo association knows, before he begins negotiations with a sculptor, that he will die shortly after acquiring the rituals, masks, and other objects necessary for this cult. In fact, if he does not die, thereby reducing the equation of nyámá to zero, the Komo association he has founded will probably falter, since it has not received the necessary influx of power from the death of its purchaser. Like the man who acquires the Komo, sculptors too know the price they have paid for their skill and renown and often hesitate to take on commissions for fear of further exactions. However, this foreknowledge is frequently vague enough that it leaves the artist prey to constant anxiety, for the carver who finally consents to make a coveted object is never entirely sure whether the nyámá of the project will attack his favorite wife, son, or nephew. That someone will die, he knows, but who and how remains to be seen. In fact, this zero-sum game is weighted in favor of the spirit world, for some objects become so intensely destructive with time that they lose any positive powers they once possessed and turn on their users. It is then that one must embark on the dangerous enterprise of bringing their 'lives' to a close.

Let us first examine how nyámá is accumulated. For the Bamana nyámá is primarily a naturally occurring force. The universe is filled with a variety of invisible powers: spirits or djinns, dwarves, ghosts, ancestors, and nyámá. Unlike some of these other entities, nyámá is all-pervasive, although most objects and situations generate only a negligible quotient of this force. However, significant quantities of nyámá occur spontaneously in natural substances, animals, and events whose anomalous nature seems to challenge man’s control of his environment. A kola nut made up of one red half and one white half (naminoro), a lizard who loses his tail and continues to live, menstrual blood, and the body of a woman who has died in childbirth are all nyámáman or “filled with nyámá” in varying degrees. In all these cases, nature seems to transgress the expected boundaries of life, creating anomalies of growth, death, and transformation.

It is easy to understand how startling, natural anomalies can be perceived as charged with invisible power, but why do the abstruse rules followed by the men and women who create ritual sculpture or powerful textiles create analogous sources of invisible force? I suggest that the actions and situations of use which build up nyámá throughout the life of an object are seen as encompassing an anomalous and threatening break in accepted boundaries. In a charged action or event two substances, persons, or objects come into transgressive contact, producing nyámá. By intentionally breaking normal rules and limits, ritual experts attempt to wrest control of ever-lurking nyámá away from the environment; their unusual actions are designed to place this intangible force in their own hands and transfer it to objects they can direct.

This process seems to occur in two stages. First, through a series of preliminary events, which often consist of refraining from 'normal' behavior (abstinence from sex is one of the most common practices to fall under this rubric), the ritual expert increases the amount of nyámá under his or her control. Second, he takes an action that breaks a boundary, and, through the unexpected and sometimes shocking physical contact of two normally separate entities, transfers a certain quotient of nyámá to a ritual object. Frequently, this transfer involves a dangerous and anomalous contact with the human body, which acts rather like a lightning rod, receiving power and transferring it to the object it touches.

Elsewhere, I have proposed that the ideal body for the Bamana is one that is totally shut and walled off.21 Any bodily opening, whether mouth, anus, or sex, is a

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20. Nya was Salimata's aunt. Although she was married as a young girl, her disability prevented her from having children. However, her extraordinary renditions of the Turusina mud cloth pattern were widely admired.

suspect, and at best, ambivalently regarded point of contact with the outside world. While the Bamana admit that bodily openings, including the skin and its pores, can open the self to the positive effects of medicinal herbs, delicious food, and the benefits of human companionship, they also live with a pervasive fear of contamination via these same channels. No one can live in a traditional village for very long without being struck by the surreptitiously mentioned but constant fears of poisoning, sorcery, and destruction through sexual contact or feces.\textsuperscript{22}

With this intensely ambivalent view of the human body in mind, we can now look at some examples of the ritual procedures that imbue art objects with nyàmà. Let us begin with sculpture, since it provides us with the least confusing set of ritual actions. This is partially explained by the fact that carving is universally recognized as a particularly nyàmà-filled activity, and by the fact that sculptors obey rules that are set apart from the rest of Bamana culture. Only those born into the ‘caste’ of sculptor/blacksmiths have access to the knowledge necessary for creating sculpture, and, by virtue of this restriction and the importance of carving, the rules that control the creation of ritual sculpture have, at least to some extent, become codified.\textsuperscript{23}

Let us now look at more ambiguous and yet more revealing examples of nyàmà-imbued objects. The analysis of textiles is a thornier problem than that of ritual sculpture, because, at first glance, it is not at all cannot be overestimated. It is blacksmith women who perform excisions and make pottery. For an extensive discussion of the blacksmith's role in Bamana culture, see Brett-Smith 1994:34–43 and McNaughton 1988. For the most comprehensive treatment of the history and social roles of the various ‘castes’ see Conrac and Frank 1995.

For a detailed description and analysis of the rules that control the making of ritual sculpture see Brett-Smith 1994.

22. In this context it is interesting to note that Gosselin (2000:210) reports that women with fistulas are almost universally rejected by their husbands and families. A fistula is an opening between the vagina and rectum or the vagina and urethra that causes an uncontrollable leakage of either feces or urine (Gosselin 2000:214). Presumably, women with this condition are rejected because of a deep fear of contact with the feces of another person. The same condition is also grounds for the rejection of women in other African cultures, and has been well documented in the Zaria state of Nigeria (Mandara 2000:103, 107).

23. The Bamana and Malinke traditionally divided themselves into a variety of inherited social categories, which they called siyaw or ‘races.’ Freemen or “nobles” (horonw) farmed and made war, “slaves” or joww were usually freemen captured in raids or warfare and then set to farming, blacksmiths/sculptors (numuw) carved wood, forged and repaired agricultural tools, and acted as surgeons and healers, praise singers (jeluw) memorized historical epics and conserved a variety of diverse traditions, and leatherworkers (garankew) made amulets, shoes, saddles for horses, and were often knowledgeable in Islamic lore. The Bamana still refer to all who are not freemen or slaves as nyamakalaw. These artisans are believed to arrive in the world with an inherited charge of nyàmà that enables them to undertake their various occupations with success and without incurring the dangers that would inevitably strike someone who was unprotected. Blacksmiths are acknowledged to be among the most powerful of all the nyamakalaw, and their importance, both as carvers, ritual specialists, and surgeons in the traditional world each carved object has its own sanctions, from not calling anyone by name while carving the “little dog” to remaining sexually abstinent for the months it may take to finish a human figure.\textsuperscript{24}

These rules of restraint clearly build up nyàmà, but what are the actions that transfer it to the object carved? Blacksmith/carvers report that all ritual carving and many ritual actions must be carried out with the left, not the right hand.\textsuperscript{25} In using this hand to carve, the artist breaks a fundamental rule of Bamana conduct that proscribes using the left hand for anything but sex and the cleaning of the anus and genitals. In what is for the Bamana a profound transgression of the normal, the artist or ritual expert deliberately employs the “secret” hand in order to transfer the force compressed within his body to the object he is creating. Furthermore, numerous other rules for carving ritual objects, such as not speaking, eating, drinking, urinating, or defecating during the time one is carving the N’kösôn (possibly a southern or Buguni-style Ci Wara) fit the paradigm of intensifying spiritual force within the artist’s own body and then transferring it to the artifact via an unusual and dangerous form of bodily contact.\textsuperscript{26}

24. See Brett-Smith 1994:88 for the restrictions relating to carving the “little dog,” and pp. 231–233 for human figures. It is unclear to me exactly what sculpture Kojugu refers to when he speaks of the “little dog,” although he does say that it is used by the Komo association.


26. For the English text of Kojugu’s statement about the N’kösôn see Brett-Smith 1994:227. For the Bamana text see p. 328, note 96.
clear which textiles, if any, are imbued with power, and how they come to possess it. Although there were many different textiles available in the pre-colonial Bamana world, this analysis will focus on the mud-dyed excision cloths traditionally worn throughout the Beledugu and Segu regions by farming women after excision, marriage, and childbirth. While the belief system and practices I will discuss apply unequivocally to pre-colonial, and to some extent, pre-Independence times, in the Beledugu they persist today, and it is possible to adopt imported Western cloth, dyed and worn indigo (interview with Yayiri Coulibaly, Guegouan, 6/27/98, pp. 40-41 of French translation).

Today, both young and old women have a wide variety of choice in cloth, although wealthier women living in towns and cities have access to the greatest number of possible cloths and dress styles. Since colonization, all women's dress has been profoundly influenced by Western norms and, within the last twenty years, by Islamic custom. This article will not discuss whether commercially woven and printed cotton cloth made in Africa (bagi finin), or imported Islamic items, such as the prayer shawls worn by older women, are imbued with spiritual power, although this is an interesting problem, and I suspect that a great many beliefs about traditional cloths are carried over to these textiles.

The reader should note that throughout the Kita and Kangaba regions Malinke women did not wear mud cloth wrappers after excision. However, Malinke excision rituals were very similar to Beledugu ones, and, as in the Beledugu, the wrappers and undergarments worn by newly excised women were used as divinatory tools to predict a girl’s success in childbearing. The Malinke did not practice *fura ci*, an ensemble of rituals that traditionally fused excision and marriage ceremonies in the Beledugu; rather the Malinke separated the excision retreat and its rituals from the actual marriage ceremonies or *konyo*, but their ritual use of both excision and menstrual cloths closely paralleled Beledugu practice.
reconstruct a large part of the earlier beliefs about dress from the recollections of older men and women. The first thing I should state is that in the traditional worldview not all cloths inevitably possess a high, or even a noticeable, valence of nyâmà. It is quite common for even an elderly woman to look down at the cloth she is wearing and say, “Nyâmà t'a la,” or “This has no nyâmà.” Yet, further exploration indicates that it is more accurate to interpret this statement as “This cloth has no exceptional nyâmà,” for if one were surreptitiously to clip off a small patch from the edge of the wrapper, one would risk being accused of sorcery. What an elder means when she says “Nyâmà t'a la” is that this cloth has no unusual nyâmà, apart from that which any textile absorbs by being worn.

To understand both this random, everyday accruing of nyâmà and the more explicit attribution of higher valences of power to ritual textiles, let us look at one of the two cloths currently used after excision, the Basiae (fig. 2). The Bamana believe that a used Basiae is highly charged with nyâmà, and the details of this cloth’s production and use reveal much about the ways in which ritual objects gain and lose their charge of power.

Even today excision is a normal rite of passage for a Bamana woman, and most men and women believe that the surgery and its rituals make an essential contribution of the formation of a girl’s character.28 The Bamana say that excision is “good for women,” but they also acknowledge that this critical rite of passage gives ample opportunity for “ill-intentioned people” (mogow juguwa) to harm the young girls through sorcery, perhaps by interfering with the healing process, or by inspiring unusual protests.29 In response to both the physical and spiritual dangers of the operation, a girl’s mother or her fiancé’s family will commission one of two mud cloths, either the Basiae or the N’Gale (fig. 3), for the young woman so as to protect her after the surgery. Immediately after performing the excision and applying herbal medicines, the female surgeon attaches the cloth around the young woman, both as clothing and as spiritual protection.30

28. For an extended discussion of the excision rituals and the Basiae and N’Gale cloths used in them see Brett-Smith 1982.

29. Sokona Danba, a blacksmith woman from Shuala north of Segu said the following. “A be nyâmà bô, bolokélë ka nyi, a ka nyi muso ma kojugu,” or “Excision releases the nyâmà, it is good, it is very good for a woman.” Interview with Sokona Danba, 8/28/79, p. 116 of transcribed tapes from 1979.

30. Salimata Koné and other Bamana women always referred to the N’Gale and Basiae cloths used in the fura ci, the Beledugu marriage and excision ritual, as excision rather than marriage wrappers. Salimata Koné identified a design, which does not look at all like the Basiae published here, as the “marriage Basiae” (furu siri Basiae), and said that in the past some girls wore this wrapper rather than their excision cloth when they traveled to their husband’s compound for their marriage night. I plan to publish this Basiae variant in my forthcoming book. Both Salimata and all my other female sources spoke as though an excised girl were wrapped in her excision cloth immediately after the surgery.

On 12/12/2000 Mr. Adama Mara interviewed a seventy year old blacksmith woman, Fatoumata Bagayogo, from Kolokani in the Beledugu. She reported that in the past the female blacksmith surgeon who excised a girl immediately wrapped her in either the N’Gale or Basiae cloth while saying incantations. In the past the excision surgery always took place at daybreak and the girl faced the east as she was wrapped. This was so that she might absorb the earliest rays of the rising sun, a light emblematic of creative activity. The surgeon also placed a folded plain white wrapper on the young woman’s head and tied a white cotton string with one cowrie around either the girl’s hips or neck while saying incantations. According to Fatoumata, the older custom was to tie the cotton string around the girl’s hips. In separate interviews on 12/13/2000 and 12/11/2000 three other Beledugu Bamana women confirmed that excision wrappers were attached immediately after the excision surgery. One of these women, Djuuma Koné, was the granddaughter of a female surgeon. Mr. Mara reported this data to me on 12/15/2000.

In her dissertation Julianne Short describes a different sequence of events. Short saw two girls (one about 13 or 14 years old and the other about 8 or 9 years old) excised by a traditional female surgeon in early October (Short 1996:161–162, 167–177). However, these excisions seem to have been separated from the remainder of the fura ci rituals. The copy of Short’s dissertation available on University Microfilms does not say whether the young women were wrapped in their ritual
What are the steps that imbue the Basiae with increasing nyamâ and how do they shed light on the more general problem of imbuing objects with nyamâ? Let us first look at how the dyeing process imparts what one might call a base-line level of power to any Basiae cloths immediately after the operation, or whether the women in charge of the excision waited to use the ritual cloths until the rest of the fura ci ceremonies could be performed. Short's dissertation makes it clear that in the 1990s and perhaps even earlier, a young woman's fura ci celebrations might occur months or even years after her physical excision, because many families are now so poor that they have difficulty finding the grain and animals necessary for the ritual. Short does describe a four day fura ci celebration in a small village (not in Kolokani where she witnessed the excision) during the middle of the dry season. On the first day of the fura ci Short reports how the girls had their hair braided and were then washed and wrapped in a sheet by an older woman. After this, the initiates and the older women went beyond the edge of the village a little way into the bush. There the older women formed a circle shielding each initiate as she came forward. A blacksmith woman then wrapped the naked initiate in one of the two ritual mud cloths or in a plain indigo cloth. She held the ritual cloth up to the initiate four times and took it back four times before tying it around the girl's waist and did the same with a white wrapper used as a headscarf. When their cloths were tied, the young girls walked back to the village having been transformed into adult women. Short reports that this portion of the fura ci is the most sacred and secret, that important incantations (klissiw) are said at this time, and that it is called fini ta or "taking the cloth." Short's description of this ritual is extremely valuable, and I would agree that the wrapping ceremony is deeply significant, but my understanding of the phrase fini ta is that it is used as a general term to designate the entire process of the fura ci. Saying, A ye fini ta, or "she took the cloth" is a more polite way of saying, A bolokara, "she was excised." By using this circumlocution one identifies oneself as having good manners. The fini ta was never identified as a specific episode of the fura ci ceremonies either by Salimata or my other female sources or by Mr. Mara's sources. On a more general level, it seems as though Short's sources placed much greater emphasis on the significance of the fura ci as a marriage ritual than Salimata Kone did in 1978, when I observed two young women under her care in the post-excursion surgery retreat. This change in emphasis may result from increasing Islamization and the influence of a largely Islamic marriage ritual called konyo or the "wedding" which has gained prominence in the Beledugu within the last twenty years (the konyo ceremonies were not traditionally practiced in this region). The ritual of konyo secludes the bride and groom together for one week and focuses on their union, whereas the traditional fura ci highlighted the individuality, physical courage, and reproductive potential of the recently excised girl.

In 1910, Abbé Henry, a Catholic father working in the Segu region, noted a sequence of events just before and after the excision surgery very similar to that which has been reported to me and Mr. Mara (Henry 1910:175–198). Henry says that on the night before an excision the girls wear wrappers, which are the gifts of their fiancés and that "on reconnaît grâce à lui la race de chacune et sa caste aussi, car les couleurs différent, il a son importance, on le voit!" In a note he adds that these cloths are black and yellow with designs of circles and lines (probably the excision Basiae and the N’Gale although he does not name them). Abbé Henry reports that each girl runs naked towards the blacksmith woman to be excised. After the operation is finished, the girl's 'mother' envelops her in a large white sheet, places the young woman piggyback on her own back, and then carries her daughter to the hut where all the excised girls will sleep. Henry does not mention whether the white sheet the mother uses to wrap her daughter is replaced by the Basiae or N’Gale, but his photographs of "excisées" show two young girls wearing these cloths, suggesting that in his time they were used after as well as before the operation. In addition the young women wear white headscarves and carry the poles Short describes as being used after the fini ta ceremony. According to Henry's description, the girls go directly from the excision surgery into the retreat period. Although I have worked on excision and the cloths associated with it for many years, I have not been able to see the surgery performed or to follow all the steps of the fura ci ceremonies that follow it. 31 A detailed discussion of the dyeing and painting process will be given in Chapters Two and Three of my forthcoming book, Bamana Mud Cloths: A Female Language of Power. For further information on the plant identifications given here and a discussion of the nyamâ implicit in the mud dye see Chapter Two of this book. Bailleul, the Catholic father and linguist who has produced the most recent complete Bamana-French dictionary (1996:453), identifies the cangère bilen or "red cangère" as Combretum glutinosum (comb) or kinkeliba coriace and the cangère je as C. Collinum geitonophyllum (comb) plus C. Collinum lamprocarpum (comb). Thoyer-Rozat (1986:111–112, 114, 130, 180, 182) identifies the Cangura as Combretum glutinosum. Bailleul (1996:463) identifies the Wolo as Terminalia sp. (comb). Thoyer-Rozat (1986:113, 180) identifies the wolo as Terminalia macropera.

Bailleul (1996:459) identifies the Nkalama as Anogeissus leiocarpus. Thoyer-Rozat (1986:72–74, 178, 181) identifies the Galaman as Anogeissus leiocarpus and gives varying medical uses for it. 32 This tool can also be called tamani, biyên tamani, fini ci kala, or fini nyègên biyên. Written notes on interviews with Salimata Kone, Kolokani, 2/9/77 and 9/22/79 and interview with Tenen Traore, Kolokani, 5/3/77.
Figure 3. N’Gale excision cloth, also called Suru suruni. The N’Gale design of horizontal lines is probably the oldest mud-cloth pattern still in existence. It is unclear why the cloth is called N’Gale, but the name Suru suruni refers to the advice that is often given to a young bride that she “become close to her husband,” “e ka surun e cè ma.” The advice suggests that it is by being close to one’s husband that one will obtain influence and success in life. The straight lines that follow each other so closely across the cloth are implicitly compared to the closeness that is desired in marriage. Commissioned on June 4, 1998, unused. Collection of S. Brett-Smith.

Excision cloths are differentiated from everyday or “white” mud cloths (kanjida) by the rust-red color of their designs which is achieved by adding twigs from the N’Golobe shrub in a preliminary dye bath in which a cotton wrapper is immersed. Bamana dyers have conflicting opinions about whether the N’Golobe twigs and leaves are especially charged with nyâmâ. In 1978, Thoyer-Rozat (1986:118, 122, 178, 182) identifies the N’Golobe as Combretum micranthrum.

Today many dyers add so little N’Golobe to their original leaf solutions that it is hard to detect any difference between “red” or ritual cloths and “white” cloths. However, examples of Basiae and N’Galew

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33. The entire process may be repeated two or three times to produce a cloth with a strong contrast between the light and dark areas.

34. Bailleul identifies the kòlòbe as Combretum micranthrum.

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the great mud cloth artist Salimata Kone stated that the leaf of the N’Golobe plant is a basi, meaning that the leaf itself is the medicine that charges the cloths dyed in it with power. In addition to Salimata, a male healer, Negetena Diarra, reported that the N’Golobe is nyâmâman or filled with nyâmâ, and said that it was advisable to wash in a protective solution made by boiling the leaves of the kunje plant before picking the shrub. However other Bamana with a different cast of mind report that it is the visual shock of the red color itself, not the nyâmâ of the N’Golobe plant, that strikes fear into the viewer. No matter whether they view the

commissioned from conservative, elderly dyers in remote Beledugu villages turned out to be such a dark rust that they were almost black in color, indicating that the original tint of these ritual cloths must have been much darker in the past. Dyers in larger villages explain the gradual lightening of most excision cloths by the fact that today’s young women refuse to wear the deep red/black textiles, because they regard them as both terrifyingly powerful and old fashioned. There is also some implication that the intense rust color is ugly.

My identification of the N’Golobe as the critical plant used to make “red” or ritual cloths rests on my long term work with Salimata Kone. It is very possible that other dyers have different plants that they add to their dyes in order to produce the deep rust color of ritual cloths. Written notes on interview with Salimata Kone, Duguba, 5/17/78. Today there has been so much change in even the ‘traditional’ belief system that it may be impossible to corroborate this information.

The N’Golobe is picked, dried, and sold in weekly markets as a type of all purpose restorative tea. The N’Golobe plant is well known and its tea is widely drunk by users who attribute a variety of powers to it. Probably only a few users are aware of the precautions recommended by Negetena.


37. Tenen Traore said the following.

Tenen: Nn, nn—The nyâmã has no part in it; it is the dye alone which frightens people; haven’t you seen the reddish color of the Cebilenke . . . Haven’t you seen the way in which they are red . . . Then, don’t you understand how, as soon as children see them, they are frightened?

In this passage Tenen refers to the costume of the Cebilenke masquerader, a distinctive rust-colored cotton suit that covers a man’s hands, feet, and arms and which is decorated on the face and sides with bogolanfifani patterns. The harsh, acid tone of the costume’s “red” grates on the eye, and it is this effect to which Tenen refers.

The Cebilenke costume is difficult to investigate, since the masquerader performs on behalf of a highly secret male association, the Do, which is found in some Beledugu villages. Paradoxically, women and children are permitted to watch Cebilenke dances which are the focus of great interest. Cheron (1931:283) notes they give to their leader who then distributes them. Currently, Kassim Kone is the scholar who knows the most about the Cebilenke; in his dissertation he states that the Do is more feared than the Komo (an impression that I also received) and that the Cebilenke masqueraders communicate by hting the short sticks which they always carry together. When I watched Cebilenke masqueraders perform for the Dabà, it quickly became evident that the horns the masqueraders carried in their hands were foci of intense ritual power and that their sticks were also sacred.

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38. Julianne Short (1996:193, 200–201) reports that even during modern fura ci ceremonies, which have often been separated from the excision surgery and put off for months or years, the young women are not permitted to have sexual contact with their fiancés and husbands (although the girls may have been living with their partners and may have born children by them). In fact, the men are forbidden to see their fiancées (or wives) during the first week of the girls’ retreat period. Short explains that during this period the sight of the excision cloth is dangerous to the young women’s future husbands who will become very tired if they see it. After seven days the excision cloth is washed for the first time, and ceases to be a danger to the men.

39. Many different male elders stated that prior to changes in sexual mores, a man would have feared to go near a woman wearing a Basiae.
What imbues the rust color of traditionally fabricated Basiae and N’Galew with so much power and prepares them to become objects that emanate nyâmâ? First of all, there is an obvious visual link between the dark brown/red color of old fashioned “red” cloths and the reddish brown of dried blood. Second, the name Basiae both reflects this association, and suggests a parallel train of thought that may lead to a deeper understanding of the way in which excision cloths are filled with nyâmâ. Female dyers, who generally focus on the practical tasks of painting mud cloth, not on its ‘meanings,’ do not interpret the name Basiae, simply repeating that it is a name. However, Basiae is remarkably close to basi, a word that the linguist, Father Bailleul, defines in the most recent complete Bamana dictionary as both “dirty yellow color, brown,” and “blood” (Bailleul 1996:27). In addition, Bailleul lists basi for a second time (in a new listing with the same spelling) as “fétiche, medicine, poison” (ibid.).

The name Basiae (spelled basiya or basila) appears in Bailleul as “excision cloth” (ibid., p. 28). Clearly, the visual link between the rust color of the Basiae and blood is reflected in Bamana speech. However, what unites a Basiae with a “fétiche, medicine,” or “poison,” is less obvious.

To understand the intuitive link between a painted Basiae and Bailleul’s definition of basi as “medicine” or “poison” one must realize that the Bamana and Malinke, like many other African peoples, view the female sex as a sacred object.

Unlike the altars, masks, and personally owned ritual objects (basiv) of men, which must be painstakingly created step by step, the female sex occurs naturally. Yet, so great is the power of this icon that traditional sexual rules forbid a man to look at it on pain of losing his eyesight or incurring untreated tuberculosis (Brett-Smith 1994:208–209), and too close a contact with even one woman can void the most feared Komo mask or altar of any power. For, in the Bamana world, women are viewed not just as loving sisters and mothers, but as incalculable beings who perpetually hold a devastating weapon, their sex, in temporary abeyance (Brett-Smith 1982:27). A woman’s sex is, in fact, a “fétiche,” a “medicine,” and sometimes even a “poison,” in Bailleul’s words, and it is the surgery of excision that releases enough of the nyâmâ inherent in this potent object that a man can safely have sex with an excised woman.

Whenever one asks Bamana women to discuss excision, they always explain that it “releases the nyâmâ” (ka nyâmâ bô), and it is easy to understand the

40. Bazin gave approximately the same definitions. He first defines basi as “arbrisseau donnant une teinture brune,” and then as “couleur brune.” In a separate definition he says that basi means “sang” or “remède, grisgris, remède superstitieux” (Bazin 1906:59). He defines the word Basiae as “bitterness.”

41. See Brett-Smith 1994:208–209 for a discussion of the similar ways in which the Bamana and Malinke handle the sight of male ritual objects by women and the female sex by men. In 1998, Tene Konare responded to our questions as follows. Mr. Mara: Unhun! Then the ‘Komo’ belonging to women is a person? Tene: Yes indeed! It is the nyabila (sex) of the girls who are about to be excised [i.e., the unexcised female sex]. Mr. Mara: The sex? Tene: Yes!

Interview with Tene Konare, (98–51), 7/15/98, pp. 9–10 of French translation.

42. Gosselin (2000, 199) reports that a Bamana blacksmith woman explained the need for excision by observing that without excision a woman’s sex possesses too much nyâmâ for a man to be able to have intercourse with her. Gosselin cites a myth told to her by the blacksmith woman that explains the origin of excision in these terms: “In the past there was a woman with a lot of nyâmâ. When her husband wanted to touch her, he would see light like fire coming out of his wife’s sex. So he couldn’t take her but he wanted her so badly that he lost weight.” The myth then recounts how a slave discovers that the woman’s sex is the source of the husband’s apparent illness and tells the elders. The elders return the woman to her family and instruct them to take her to the ancestor of the smiths, Duâlô. Duâlô’s wife, Mariam, cuts out the woman’s clitoris and throws it away, only to have it spontaneously catch on fire. Then the woman returns to her husband, who is able to have sex with her.

43. Tlasun Balo, a blacksmith woman, about 70 years old and married to Basi Fane, told us that, although her mother and grandmother performed excisions, she had chosen not to do them because, “she couldn’t bear seeing someone suffer.” Instead, she had made pottery. When we asked Tlasun why she didn’t suffer from the nyâmâ released by the other members of her family who did excise, she said that, indeed, she had suffered from this nyâmâ and that her eyes were affected by two illnesses, kurusa (a skin infection) and nkô bon (loss of the eye lashes, possibly trachoma). Interview with Tlasun Balo, Bamako, (98-30), 6/22/98, pp. 33–4 of French translation.

Another very aged woman in a highly traditional village, Araba Kone, told us the following regarding a blacksmith woman who excised a girl with a bad tere one of the intrinsic parts of the personality): “If you excise her [the one with the negative tere] and she doesn’t die, the consequences will be bad for you; you will die.” Interview with Araba Kone, Carouguen, (98-34), 6/27/98, pp. 27–8 of French translation. The Bamana believe that each person is born with either a good or bad tere and that the tere manifests itself in certain physical features (such as a chin set at approximately a 90 degree angle on the neck in the case of women), and by a person’s ability to communicate bad or good luck to others. A woman with a bad tere is said to cause husband after husband to die of mysterious causes.
genital surgery as a one-time act that removes, or more accurately diminishes, this powerful force along with the removal of the clitoris. But where does this released nyámà go? To some extent, the Bamana believe that it "attacks" or falls back on the female blacksmith who performs the excision, causing blindness in old age and in some cases even killing the surgeon. However, the force released by excision does not only fall on the traditional surgeon. Other older women participate in the ritual, bringing the girl to the operating area, seating her, and holding her during the surgery. Excision is an act performed by older women on younger women, and it is the grandmothers of the young who hold to it so tenaciously and mastermind its enactment. Furthermore, although the surgeon disposes of the clitorises she has removed by turning each girl’s over to her mother and thus presumably evades some of their nyámà, considerable blood may still be shed. When asked about medicines for circumcision and excision, both male and female elders immediately mentioned the importance of recipes for arresting hemorrhages, suggesting how important it is to control the flow of blood after the operation. While special medicines are necessary for unusual cases, it would seem that wrapping a girl whose surgery has proceeded normally in either a Basiae or N’Gale cloth immediately after the operation also forms part of the armory of traditional medicines that help to staunch the blood and capture the nyámà released by the operation.

It is at this moment, when the blacksmith surgeon wraps the unused Basiae or N’Gale around the newly excised girl while uttering incantations, that the most significant phase in the production of the cloth begins for the Bamana. It is the blood from the excision surgery, charged with some of the uncanny power of the removed clitorises that transfers an immense quotient of nyámà to a new excision cloth. In fact, the nyámà of a used Basiae is so powerful that a jealous woman who steals even tiny shred of the textile can use it to perform ritual “work” (baara) that will render the young girl who wore it sterile. For this reason, the used ritual cloth is always handed over to a trusted elderly woman with strong links to the girl’s natal family after the retreat period ends.

Later I will discuss how this elder guards the cloth and presides over the gradual lowering of its nyámà, but for the moment, let us look more closely at the transfer of nyámà from the young girl to the cloth. The operation of excision is intended to “remove nyámà” from the young woman, to lower her sex’s level of power enough that productive, childbearing intercourse is possible. Why do excision cloths work as tools for accomplishing

44. Salimata Kone said the following, Salimata: . . . The person who is going to perform the excision, when the moment of surgery arrives, the person who holds the girl—we say that the nyámà goes onto her. This one too [in addition to the blacksmith woman who performs the surgery] will seek medicines to wash herself with . . . . Interview with Salimata Kone, 4/20/84, Grossesse 2, Book 2, p. 22 of transcribed tapes.

The woman who accompanies a girl into the excision area and helps to hold her is called her “mother,” but is usually the girl’s mother’s co-wife. Traditionally, a Bamana mother did not raise her own children, but those of her co-wife or co-wives (Brett-Smith 1982:25). The husband assigned each child to a non-genetic ‘mother’ in order to reduce rivalry between children of different co-wives (fadenya).

Needless to say, this strategy was notable for its failures, and examples of fadenya are crucial story elements in Bamana and Mande oral history. All my female sources indicated that no ‘real’ mother could bear to watch a child she has born undergo excision. The true mother of the girl to be excised waited out of sight of the excision area to hear the results of the surgery.

45. Short (1996:169–172) has an interesting discussion of senior women’s emotional investment in the excision and fidelity of young women. Admadu (2000:300–301) also addresses the issue of older women’s involvement in the excision of their daughters and granddaughters and describes how a positive attitude towards excision can persist despite modernization.

46. In the Beledugu region a Bamana girl wears either the N’Gale or Basiae depending on which her mother wore. Among the Malinke in the Kita area, the girl was traditionally wrapped with a cloth dyed entirely black with locally grown indigo. Tlasun Balo, a Malinke blacksmith woman, told us that the medicine used for washing the wounds of excision was made with the “segen (unidentified plant, see Bazin 1906:521) that grows under millet.” This is boiled and the liquid poured over the wound when the girl washes. After this, congealed shea oil is put on carded cotton which is then placed on the wound. Interview with Tlasun Balo, (98-30) 6/22/98, p. 65 of French translation. Other women mentioned other medicines, and it is likely that each blacksmith surgeon and each elderly woman (zeman) who supervises the recovering girls has her own special medicine.

47. Similarly, Sabani told us that, among the Malinke, ritual “work” performed with the lenpen or undergarment worn beneath the excision cloth can prevent any man from asking a young woman’s hand in marriage and seal up her vagina so that she is unable to have sex. Interview with Sabani Cissoko, (98-3), 6/27/98, pp. 37–8 of French translation.

Sabani: She won’t marry. No man will ask for her in marriage. Similarly, she will not have sex with any man. Mr. Mara: Unhun! Sabani: This “work” results in the disappearance of the woman’s sex. Each time a man wants to have sex with her, such a woman’s sex disappears completely. Her vaginal opening closes up completely.
this purpose? I propose that these “red” cloths with their enigmatic designs work primarily because they both absorb and camouflage the nyámá-laden blood of excision. Significantly, finished Basiae cloths dyed the traditional deep black/red color are so impregnated with dye that the cloth can actually be stiff, almost like a pliable piece of cardboard, and it is often impossible to see the tiny holes in the traditional weave if one holds the cloth up to the light. This transformation of pliable cloth into a more rigid, protective sheet with all its ‘pores’ filled with dye creates a screen on which dried blood is hardly noticeable and enables the cloth to fulfill its camouflaging function.

What are the conceptual implications of the Basiae’s absorptive capacity? I propose that the Basiae’s ability to absorb liquid substances from the outside is critical, not only to its role as an excision cloth, but also for a deep understanding of how sacred sculpture is created, and why blacksmith/sculptors must obey so many, seemingly nonsensical, ritual rules in order to invest these products with nyámá.

The evidence for the idea that absorption is a fundamental key to understanding the artmaking process among the Bamana and Malinke comes, not only from the Basiae and N’Gale excision wrappers, but also from the plain white cloth or faded rags that are used as menstrual cloths, objects that, in a Western framework, cannot be considered ‘art.’ Yet, they are crucial, for in the Bamana world they are the only objects imbued with greater nyámá than ritual sculpture, and by looking at the use of these cloths and the beliefs associated with them, we can glimpse some of the fundamental thought processes that lie behind both the creation of the Basiae and the production of sculpture. All my Bamana sources, both male and female, agreed that menstrual cloth has enough nyámá to render the most powerful Komo mask void of power, should the two ever come into contact; such a cloth is, ritually speaking, more powerful than the mask.

Like the most powerful ‘art’ objects in many African cultures, menstrual cloths are almost never seen, but the image of the menstrual cloth nevertheless dominates much of Bamana thinking and behavior. These cloths are universal “secrets” that men are made aware of insistently, because they live with women. In fact, if they wish to have children, men must come dangerously close to women’s menses and their menstrual cloths. Every man grows up knowing that women stretch their washed menstrual cloths over their bamboo sleeping frames in order to dry these potent objects in secret. Every man likewise knows that touching a menstrual cloth, no matter how inadvertently, will bring a host of ill upon him, and yet if he wishes to have sex with his wife, he must trust that she has removed this feared tool of ritual work from the bed he shares with her. Most male rules of female avoidance, including the sexual abstinence that dominates the carving of sculpture, are, at their most basic, avoidances of even the remotest possibility of contact with menstrual blood.

Why is this cloth so powerful that women cling to it with great ferocity? Why is the mysterious disappearance of one’s menstrual cloth grounds for a traditional legal case and accusations of sorcery against one’s co-wives or in-laws? Women believe that the cloth used at their first menstruation is the guarantee of their fertility; if this cloth is carelessly thrown away its absence is believed to render its “owner” permanently sterile. Likewise, if a woman obtains a piece of this cloth, she can easily use it to destroy her rival. In the words of Sabani Cissoko:

Wyatt MacGaffey’s remark that, “Not surprisingly, some of the most respected art objects are rarely seen by anybody,” (Nooter 1993:56). She also provides a perceptive description of how secrecy affects the aesthetic of viewing ‘art’ in many African cultures, mentioning the requirement that many, particularly meaningful objects never be seen (Nooter 1993:66–67).

50. Sabani Cissoko reported that women stretch their washed menstrual cloths out under their sleeping frames so that these potent textiles dry unseen. She said that women do this in order to keep their “secret,” Interview with Sabani Cissoko, (98-3), 6/27/98, p. 16 of French translation.

51. Sabani Cissoko said that if a woman places the drying or dried menstrual cloth under the end of the bed frame where her husband places his head, he “will not have a long life.” However, if she hides it under his feet, “he will be prosperous,” either in terms of the number of children he has or monetary wealth. Interview with Sabani Cissoko, (98-3), 6/27/98, pp. 18–19 of French translation.

52. M’Fa Diarra, a Malinke friend of mine, told me that he had been called in to advise a middle-aged man concerning the loss of one of this man’s wives’ menstrual cloths. The woman was distraught because the cloth was the first one she had ever used, and it was the guarantee of her continuing fertility. M’fa was present when the man
Sabani: Stealing a menstrual cloth is more serious than anything else in the world. No matter what you do, when you look at it, you will always see traces of blood on it; the places where blood has rubbed into it will be there. But, for example, is my skin on the wrapper I am wearing right now?

Mr. Mara: No.

Sabani: Look at this one, if you cut a piece from it, you can perform ritual operations with it until you are tired and you won't harm me, but if you take my menstrual cloth, no matter whether the marabout is skilled or not, you can get to me.53

Sabani states very clearly that it is the fact that one sees the traces of its owner’s blood and “skin” on it that invests a menstrual cloth with intense power, implying that it is the cloth’s ability to absorb blood that is the critical facilitator of this process. It would seem that it is its capacity for absorption that enables a menstrual cloth to become the ultimate icon of female fertility.

Sabani’s statement also highlights what I believe to be another critical factor: the menstrual blood can be “seen” on the cloth, and no amount of washing will eradicate this sight. This brings up the issue of what menstrual cloths are actually made from, for in a culture where so much is hidden, it is surprising that women do not necessarily use a dark cloth, which conceals the blood completely. Interviews with several women revealed that there were considerable differences between regions and between individual women as to what cloths were used to absorb a woman’s menses. In the Beledugu, Salimata Kone always spoke of the undergarments worn during menstruation as being dyed completely black with mud. However, Tene Konare and Sabani Cissoko, both from Malinke areas, stated that some women use menstrual cloths made from clean scraps of used wrappers (presumably of many different colors). Tene reported that she learned to make her menstrual pads from pure white cotton cloth cut into sections and folded, and Sabani told us that in the time of her grandmother, a Malinke woman wore a pure white outer wrapper and tied a menstrual pad made from red cloth in place with a special belt that went around her hips. According to Sabani, the pad prevented any menstrual blood from appearing on the white wrapper. She added that today it is preferable to wear an indigo cloth.54

To understand why Bamana and Malinke women might even consider using a white cloth, we need to know that menstrual cloths are used in an almost divinatory fashion to obtain what we would call critical medical information regarding fertility. The practical reason for using white cloth is that Bamana women must be able to see their menstrual blood in order to determine whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad.’55 If the blood is


54. Tene Konare discussed how menstrual pads are made in the interview 98-29 carried out on 6/20/98 (pp. 23, 25, 29 of French translation). Tlasun Balo, a Malinke blacksmith woman, also reported that women do not use dyed cloth as menstrual cloths. She was quite firm that white cloth is used. Interview with Tlasun Balo, (98-30), 6/22/98, pp. 56–7 of French translation. Sabani Cissoko discussed the nature of Malinke menstrual cloth in the interview 98-3, 6/27/98, pp. 45–7 of French translation.


Several groundbreaking articles on female menstrual regulation in West Africa will shortly appear in Renne and Van de Walle 2001. Two of the papers, “The Blood that Links: Menstrual Regulation Among the Bambara of Mali,” by Sangeetha Madhavan and Aisse
dark in color and has numerous lumps, it is considered to be a sign that the woman producing it will not become pregnant.56 A woman who notices this several times will attempt to improve her menses by going to a female healer, such as Sabani Cissoko, explaining what she has seen on her menstrual cloth, and obtaining a traditional herbal medicine which will produce a flow of shiny red blood without lumps. This type of menstruation (which would appear to conform more to a young girl’s flow than to that of an older woman) is believed to be ‘good’ and the harbinger of successful pregnancy.

The white menstrual cloth’s dual ability to absorb and then display blood is, I believe, a crucial clue to the supreme power of these cloths. The white cloth absorbs and yet shows—it does not camouflage—this nyámâ-filled blood. It is the fact that menstrual cloths enable the viewer to see the unseeable with shocking clarity that renders them so potent. It is this potential for direct visual contact with the most forbidden of substances, a substance that even women do not take lightly, that makes these cloths so feared and imbues them with so much power. Furthermore one should note that a dried, unwashed menstrual cloth becomes stiff, like a Basiae wrapper when first worn, and that part of the shock the Bamana experience when seeing a Basiae or a menstrual cloth is the result of seeing a nyámâ-charged liquid transformed into an object that can now be manipulated for good or evil ends.

Conceptually, menstrual cloths are cloths whose entire function would seem to be defined by their absorptive capacity. It is the cotton’s ability to provide a material base that can first ‘drink in’ and then display the liquid produced by a woman that is critically important. These two phases of use, first absorbing and then displaying to the eye what should never be seen, correspond rather precisely to the paradigm I have suggested of first stockpiling and then releasing nyámâ. Nyámâ is built up as the cloth absorbs menstrual blood, and it is then released when the human eye comes into forbidden contact with it. Women, who produce the blood, have enough intrinsic nyámâ to deal with this sight, but men must try to evade this destructive gaze at all costs.

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If menstrual cloths are the ur-objects, the subliminal model for any sacred object, how does understanding them illuminate the creation of ritual sculpture, the ‘art’ objects with which this paper began? Menstrual cloths are potent because the thickly spun and woven traditional cotton is soaked over a considerable period of time in the most dangerous fluid possible. I believe that this idea of soaking is critical to understanding Bamana thought about the intensification of nyámâ during artistic creation. For, when one examines them closely, almost all the ritual and artistic procedures that invest sculpture as well as textiles with nyámâ are based on the premise that the raw material to be worked possesses the capacity to absorb substances from the outside. In the case of cloth, this is self-evident, but, from a Western viewpoint, it is not nearly as clear with regard to sculpture.

When we think of wood in the West we tend, without necessarily realizing it, to think of this material as hard, resistant, and impervious to the outside. What is necessary here is to abandon these assumptions and look at wood as though it were a porous sponge (which, on a microscopic level, it is). When Bamana sculptors select a tree to cut for a ritual object, they ideally

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Mr. Mara: What sort of blood is healthy blood? Sabani: Healthy blood is blood without any impurities in it. Mr. Mara: How does one know that there are no impurities in it? Sabani: Of course one can know that. Mr. Mara: How? Sabani: Well, blood which is not healthy—when you look at it, its appearance is dark, it forms lumps, it becomes grainy.
choose one growing out of a termite mound (Brett-Smith 1994:124–127). Carvers select such trees because they believe that termites (who are said to be messengers from the spirit world) only build their mounds over underground sources of water, hidden streams that invisibly connect the arid plateaux of the savannah with the life-giving Niger river. The virtue of such trees is that their roots have absorbed, and pulled up into the wood itself, the fertilizing properties of this secret water source. It is because the wood, at the most fundamental level, is a porous substance (like cotton cloth) that it can act as the medium for the transfer of the water’s life-giving power to humans. This perception of wood’s ability to absorb is also demonstrated by the report that, in the precolonial past, famous sculptors took huge chunks of wood, placed them in human-sized, pottery jars filled with oil (and probably herbal medicines) and boiled them for hours or even days. The boiling was ostensibly designed to make the wood last longer and become resistant to insects and it depended on the awareness that even the hardest woods would absorb the oil. Once saturated in potent liquids, the wood was well on the way to becoming a *basi* or “medicine” that emanated power.57

If we move to the next stages of making a ritual carving, we find that the idea of soaking both the wood to be carved and the carver in potent “medicines” dominates this process (Brett-Smith 1994:64–66). The Bamana usually refer to the actions that I conceptualize as ‘soaking’ as “washing” (ka kò). When we speak of washing in the West we generally refer to a process whereby the body or object is doused with water, scrubbed with soap, and then rinsed. However, ka kò refers to what we would regard as repeated washings, for in the Bamana world, “washing” encompasses drinking a leaf solution, using it to bathe in, and sometimes boiling the solution and inhaling its vapours before drinking and washing in it. These actions maximize the contact between the skin of the human body, both internal and external, and the leaf substance in question, in an effort to have the “medicine” penetrate the human skin in as many ways as possible. Thus, the human body, like the wood of trees, appears to be perceived as porous and able to absorb outside substances.

I have already mentioned the ambivalence and the constant fear of poisoning that this perception of the body as porous and therefore vulnerable generates, but the perception of the body as open and penetrable also allows the Bamana to “wash” the body protectively in curative substances. All ritual experts, and especially carvers, spend a great deal of time seeking out anti-poisons (*lakariw*) and “medicines” in which they can soak themselves through repeated washings. Some of these *basiw* or “medicines” will address what we consider purely physical ailments, like arthritis, but most will attempt to armor the expert’s body against the poisons of his or her rivals, and against *nyàmà*. Famous sculptors still “wash” with numerous medicines when they prepare to cut trees like the *lënkè*, which are particularly charged with *nyàmà* (Brett-Smith 1994:121–122).58 In the past, by the time a sculptor actually isolated himself in the bush, and sat down to carve, he, like the wood he carved, or indeed, like a newly dyed *Basiæ*, was ‘soaked’ in “medicines.”

The idea of ‘soaking’ allows us to understand the mechanism through which a sculptor transfers power or *nyàmà* to his carving. If the wood he works is a porous

57. I believe that, although it may be somewhat concealed, the ‘soaking’ process sketched out here forms the most significant part of the preparation of any ritually important object. Some objects, such as *bolivi*, show obvious visual signs of this process, but on many other objects, such as *Ci Wara* headdresses, the signs of ‘soaking’ may be minimal or confined to the fibers and costumes that are always used together with the wooden object. Since the Bamana and Malinke see a headdress and its fiber accoutrements as a conceptual whole, such an object is regarded as though it were soaked simply because a portion of it has received this treatment. My own conviction is that no sacred object is ever put into use without undergoing some ‘soaking’ process, but confirmation of this hypothesis requires a great deal of additional research.

In the case of *Ci Wara* it is probable that the wood these headdresses are carved from was soaked or washed prior to carving. Also, one has to remember that while we see *Ci Wara* isolated under spotlights in a museum and without the fiber garments that cover the dancers, the Bamana do not view the headdresses as separate from the fibers. Many years ago James Brink told me that when he studied the *Ci Wara* dances in the Kolokani area he was informed that the most sacred and powerful part of the headdress was its fibers, because these had been soaked in special leaf solutions. In addition, the recent article on *Ci Wara* in *African Arts* by Stephen Wooten (2000: 21, 25–26, 29–30) highlights the existence of *bolivi* that are indissolubly linked to some *Ci Wara* headdresses and their successful performance. *Bolivi* are always subject to soaking and “washing,” if only in the blood of sacrifice.

58. Bailleul (1996:454) lists only a synonym for the *lënkè*, *dågan* (or *dâng/), which he identifies as *Afzelia africana*. Thoyer-Rozat (1986:26, 28, 36, 152–153, 179; 181) cites the *Linge* and identifies it as *Afzelia africana*. She mentions that it is used to treat fevers, gastritis, and wounds, and that the seeds are poisonous.
substance capable of absorption, it can, by definition, "drink in" the nyamá released from his body when he uses his left, rather than his right hand to carve. Thus, wood, like a menstrual cloth or a Basiae, can absorb and stockpile nyamá, however invisible it may be. I think that this metaphor of "drinking in" nyamá, which, when used in this context, is my own and not one used by the Bamana, allows us to understand the continuous trajectory of the artmaking process somewhat more clearly.\(^59\) If one traces the origins of the nyamá in the people and things that are intimately involved in the creation of sacred objects, one finds that the substances concerned have all, at some point, undergone a process of soaking in and absorbing a nyamá-filled liquid. In some cases this liquid is naturally produced, as in the blood of menstruation, and in some cases it is artificial, as in the "medicines" in which wood can be soaked or boiled. I suggest that even insubstantial entities, such as speech (which has its own very powerful nyamá), are actually linked, at some stage in thought, to the image of liquid substances.\(^60\) In the case of speech, much of its nyamá is said to come from the spit of the person speaking, and it is this saliva, absorbed by the knots in the tassels that adorn ritually charged men's shirts (fig. 4), that imbues such garments with power.\(^61\) The transfer of nyamá, I would argue, fundamentally depends on whether its having a liquid carrier, or a carrier, such as speech, that can be conceptualized as a kind of liquid penetrating the wood or the textile through the air.\(^62\)

If, for the Bamana, the primary function of what we call "artmaking" is to transfer and stabilize nyamá, and if increasing nyamá involves a soaking process that must take place over a certain length of time, it becomes clear why neither sculptors nor mud cloth dyers can ever "finish" their products. For, by definition, any 'soaking' process is lengthy and continues through time. To be "full" a mask must 'soak up' both the nyamá communicated by the sculptor’s left hand, and the substances its "owner" pours over it—the ritual porridge (dege), sacrificial blood, and incantations that keep the object alive, and these are processes that need never end. Human skin, wood, and cotton each have their own capacity to absorb foreign substances, and it is the power of these substances that builds up an object's nyamá. Cloth (and wood) are powerful to the extent that they have absorbed powerful fluids; their real function is to serve as a base for the stabilization of these solutions and the concentration of nyamá.

So far, I have dealt almost exclusively with the nature of nyamá itself, but I have not directly addressed the issue of whether the nyamá associated with both the fabrication and the use of a ritual object leaves identifiable visual signs that track the object's trajectory of power. If such signs exist, do they change to signal that an object's power is used up, has vanished because a ritual rule has been broken, or that its nyamá has intensified to the point that its "owner" can no longer run the risk of living with it, and must destroy it?

In trying to identify the visual signs of nyamá, we run into a preliminary stumbling block, for the Bamana experience the nyamá of a powered object in many dimensions, and their perception of an object's power can be acquired as much from an olfactory or aural experience as from a visual one. In many cases, the bystander perceives the nyamá of a person or object through its smell; nyamá-laden clothing is seldom she must throw her bath water into the stream. In this case the nyamá will leave more quickly; that is what the old men say. Mara: Indeed! Therefore, it is when one has no choice that one burns the medicine? Tene: Yes! It's when one has no choice. Truly, it is running water that is good for getting rid of nyamá.

Interview with Tene Konare, (98-44), 7/7/98, p. 10 of French translation.

The fact that washing is the most efficient way of getting rid of nyamá suggests that nyamá itself has at least some characteristics of a liquid substance, even though extended conversations on the subject with many people make it absolutely clear that this force is invisible and cannot truly be characterized as having any particular physical form.
Figure 4. Hunter’s shirt with thick tassels, a taïow dloki. Each tassel must be made under certain conditions, often from thread spun by a virgin. The ritual expert who makes the tassels and attaches them to the shirt mutters an incantation as he creates each one and spits the words into the thick cotton. It is his saliva that transmits the incantation to the cotton, which then embodies it. Thus, a hunter wearing such a shirt is bristling with embodied incantations and thereby protected from hostile spirits and people. Collection of S. Brett-Smith.

washed, and important masks usually disgorge a strange, smoky odor, or textiles the scents of mud and herbal dyes. In other cases, the verbal communication of knowledge about the medicines a person may have absorbed, or the way in which an object was created and is used, is even more important than smell, and in some situations, the fact that a person, sculpture, or textile is nyámàman (laden with nyámà) may be self-evident to a Bamana viewer merely from hearing the object’s name, or, in a manner more familiar to a Western observer, from viewing the object. A Bamana observer who hears that an innocuous looking elder has studied with a famous healer for many years and is a master of divination will immediately assume that the elder has “soaked” himself in herbal medicines and, if he is wise, will choose to eat with men other than the ritual expert, who is left to consume his meal alone. Yet, this expert may bear no sign of special status that can be identified from the outside (some elders choose to wear signs, such as special iron amulets—others do not), and the viewer’s perception of the elder’s nyámà may be totally dependent on the transmission of spoken information.

The importance of verbal communication to the perception of nyámà is enormous, for an object’s nyámà
may not only be invisible, but there is always the possibility that it has been dissipated by the breaking of ritual rules. How does the Bamana viewer know that the mask he is watching or the cloth she is wearing really is one with power to act in the world? Here, I think visible signs are not necessarily accurate predictors of an object’s power, for, focused on visual objects and tangible evidence as we are in the West, we may underestimate the power of speech, rumor, and memory. It may be sufficient that rumors start concerning a particular Komo owner’s (Komotigi’s) transgression of the rule that he not have sex prior to approaching his sacred objects, for the altars and mask in question to lose their apparent potency.

Furthermore, it is difficult to describe the absolute scarcity in which many Bamana and Malinke households live on a daily basis. I have often interviewed elderly women who alternated between only two wrappers, and, were the first to become irremediably torn, would have to make do with one.63 In these households and others like them, everyone knows exactly what dish, what broom, and what cloth belongs to whom, and someone who borrows an old, torn piece of cloth to use as a rag without asking will quickly find herself in the midst of a quarrel. In such an environment, any new or unusual object is cause for comment and investigation. Indeed, this scarcity of objects seems to endow even everyday things with almost an extraordinary sense of meaningfulness, and it is not unusual for a particularly striking object, such as an unusual looking and particularly intelligent dog, to generate an oral explication that charges it with inevitable connections have registered, a cloth or mask it was used, and any rumors about it. For a Bamana viewer, an excision Basiae was not just a ritual cloth, it was Kankou’s Basiae made by her great aunt, Guanjò, and used after the excision performed two months ago during the hottest dry season ever. Such a cloth is no longer “the same” as an unworn excision wrapper painted by the same artist. Once the viewer can detect some signs of use, no matter how insignificant, and the inevitable connections have registered, a cloth or mask is no longer “empty;” it has begun to emanate a potentially dangerous energy.

Whether verbally or visually conveyed, such information is critical for the Bamana and Malinke, and it often fuses social and economic relationships into a perception of power that lasts throughout the lifetime of an object. For, a ritual cloth or mask that is not enmeshed in a thick web of human actions and interactions is, in Bamana terms, “empty,” without nyamà, and nonfunctioning, no matter how beautiful it may be. When discussing the commission of a Komo mask, the sculptor Kojugu Cissoko explicitly states that an object that does not result from a complex set of negotiations between artist and client, but is carved simply because the sculptor feels like it, is “a round thing,” “an ornamental thing,” and above all a useless thing. It is the slow accumulation of

63. This occurs principally in the Beledugu, which is one of the poorest Bamana areas because of its proximity to the Sahara. Women who had grown up or lived in other areas often referred to large wedding trousseaus of different cloths. When I first began research in Kolokani in 1976–1979, elderly women, such as Salimata Kone, also looked back to times when women possessed larger numbers of wrappers. However, in evaluating these memories one has to be aware that a wedding ‘trousseau’ is divided up amongst all the different female members of the bride’s husband’s family, and that the bride herself may often end up with only a few cloths from the trousseau.

64. Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 6/22/84, Modeles-2, Book 13, pp. 1–2 of transcribed tapes. For this passage, see Brett-Smith 1994:86, (Bamana text, p. 283). The English translation of Kogugu’s statement follows. Kojugu: If you have carved a new one [a mask] like that in order to keep it like that [i.e., without using it immediately], and if you have carved it simply to please your hand and you have sculpted it because there is no work, then if you hear that it can’t resolve anything [i.e., any problem], that the Komo mask belonging to a certain person can’t resolve things, the reason for this can be found in the way in which this Komo mask was made. You carved it, but no one sought it from you, you simply made it like that and you put it on one side like that, saying that should a person come [in need of a Komo mask], you would give it to him. No one spoke to you about this problem [the problem of commissioning a Komo mask], but you carved it like that according to your own ideas—such a mask can not possess any strength. Only when someone gets up and comes to you to say, “I have need of a Komo mask” [does the mask have any strength]. Then you will discuss the problem and will come to an agreement. You cut it [the tree]. But to say that you will cut it according to your own whim like that, you will sculpt it and you will put it aside like that, this is like something that one sells. Such a thing resolves nothing. You can give it to whomever you wish, but he will simply have a round thing in his hands, an ornamental thing in his hands, but it will resolve nothing.
significant events, each a hard-won achievement in its own right, that creates the intangible power, the nyámà, with which a mask begins its active life as a presence within a community. Without the effort and sweat of farming the millet used to support the sculptor and his extended family while he is carving, the divination to find the right tree, the sheep and kola nuts sacrificed to the tree before it is cut, the slaves and cattle traditionally offered the artist as his final payment, and the maintenance by the sculptor of a state of purity, not only for himself, but for his tools as well—without these actions, the object has no nyámà and therefore no power. In part, at least, it is the invisible flow of economic and social relations that wrap themselves around a ritual object, and the self-sacrifice of the individuals involved, that endow a mask or human figure with the orally transmitted history that produces a perception of nyámà.

Oral history and rumor are crucial in the perception of nyámà, for the inexpert viewer must somehow become aware, if only vaguely, of the economic and ritual actions that have filled an object with power. What is critical for the young man, who for the first time views the Komo mask his elders have commissioned, is the knowledge that his own labor in the fields has contributed to the acquisition of the mask, and the belief that the elders have conducted the necessary rituals and the negotiations for the object in the right way. Whether he knows the details of the procedures the elders have carried out or not, and most of a sacred object’s audience remain unaware of this “secret” information, it is the faith that such negotiations have taken place and that the proper rules have been observed in the carving of the piece that inspires the viewer’s perception of the headdress as filled with nyámà.

The contextual history I have been describing can be the most significant factor in a viewer’s perception of an object as seething with force, but aesthetics and the visual communication of nyámà are not unimportant for the Bamana, and in most cases, the procedures that imbue a person, mask, or textile with power leave some visible traces. It is rare for the negotiations, agreements, ritual procedures, and sacrifices I have described not to leave any mark on the finished object or “medicine.” Perhaps this sign is only a slight burn on the left hand side of a famous healer’s face or the deep brown/black color of a particularly famous mask, such as the Dabà (fig. 5), and it often takes a very knowledgeable viewer to detect such signs, but these subtle visual clues are immensely powerful for the Bamana. Furthermore, such signs can often be read as a gauge of how much time has passed since the object was first commissioned.

To some degree, and Bamana experts like Kojugu Cissoko stress that this is only a partial correlation, the number and intensity of visual signs apparent on a mask or textile reflect the force of an object’s nyámà and the length of time over which this power has been built up. Just as the smooth surface of a recently carved mask may testify to its low level of nyámà, so the encrusted carapace of an old headdress thick with accumulated blood and porridge can signal its ability to kill an unwary viewer. Although such a mask is always perceived as nyámàman by the Bamana viewer no matter what its quality, such masks are often very fine aesthetically. Similarly, although a discolored menstrual cloth or a wrapper which is in shreds may inspire more fear than an unused excision cloth, no matter how well it is painted, it is often the finest excision cloths that become the most powerful once they are used. Aesthetic power is recognized and sought after, but for the Bamana, it is important not on its own account, but because it contributes to the nyámà of the object.

The visual signs of nyámà, the marks of use that simultaneously testify to an object’s age, power, and to its arrival at some vaguely conceived finishing point where the object is either so damaged as not to function

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65. McNaughton (1979:42–45) has discussed the deliberate ‘anti-aesthetic’ aesthetic of sacrificial blood, porridge, quills, strange seed pods, birds’ feathers, and even garbage that are added to create the horrific appearance required of Komo masks and many bolìw. The aesthetic of nyámà has numerous correlates in other West African and Central African cultures. One thinks particularly of the bocio sculptures found in southern Benin and Togo and their deliberate counter-aesthetic documented by MacGaffey (1993:18–103). In this vein, Ikem Okoye’s 1997 article, “History, Aesthetics and the Political in Igbo Spatial Heterotopias,” brilliantly describes how, in each village, the Igbo traditionally transformed rejected and unsightly objects into a dynamic architectural structure with its own special aesthetic.

Throughout Africa the aesthetic of exuviae and the ‘ugly’ seems to be linked to the manipulation of secret powers, and Mary Nooter notes that the secrecy, with which many ritually important African objects are shrouded, is frequently linked to increasingly less ‘beautiful’ visual forms (Nooter 1993:59–61). Among the Bamana it is certainly true that the more bloody and ‘non-aesthetic’ an object, the more a viewer will tend to perceive it as highly secret and powerful.
Figure 5. The Daba mask. Beledugu region, nineteenth or early twentieth century. In 1979 the elders who care for the mask said that its huge mouth represented its ability to destroy whoever crossed directly in front of it. The elders attributed this power, not to the sacrifices made to the mask (it never receives a blood sacrifice), but to the speech said over it year after year. It is interesting that the name Daba, when translated literally, means “big mouth.” The mask appears for about fifteen minutes every year shortly after the completion of the Do rituals.
at all, or so powerful as to be dangerous, acquire another dimension when one learns that a strikingly similar term, nyámàn, means “garbage.” In fact, the nasalized ending of nyámàn is often lost in the quick flow of conversation, and frequently one can distinguish the two words only by their context. Furthermore, the Bamana themselves appear to associate various types of exuviae and ‘garbage’ with nyámà, endowing rejected and damaged objects, from excrement to lost coins discovered in the sand, with uncanny power. Physical garbage is actually nyámàman, or full of spiritual nyámà, perhaps because, when left to itself in a heap at the edge of town, it smells and ferments until it produces the best earth for growing plants. Paradoxically, in the creation of garbage, the natural disintegration of used objects gives rise to an intensification of hidden energies, that, when released, allow new growth. Thus, the detritus of life is both good and bad—it can, like clear, bright red menstrual blood, be the sign of a productive fertility, or, it can take on sinister and destructive abilities, like the coagulated black menstrual lumps feared by women. These analogies suggest that an inherent process of disintegration and destruction, a natural ‘death’ for every nyámà-laden thing, may also hold sway over the artificial creations of men—the sculptures and ritual objects that we, in the West, endeavor to preserve.

For the Bamana, the marks of use—the scrapes and tears that testify to the wearing of a mask or cloth—are, like the smell of putrefaction, critical markers both of the build up of nyámà and its simultaneous dissipation. Signs of wear are often read as a testimonial to an object’s ritual power and status. In fact, a straw broom, the familiar tool used to handle every kind of garbage, is actually treated as though it were a ritual object. No matter how many people inhabit a courtyard, it is customary for there to be only one broom, and this truncated remnant is often so stubby as to seem unusable. In 1998 I stayed in a courtyard where three different women used such a broom to sweep different sections of the courtyard. When I asked why each woman did not buy her own broom, which may render him impotent. Mr. Adama Mara gave both this information and the explanation of the single broom rule to me at different moments in our work together.

In their own way, the Bamana are well aware that the visual signs of wear can generate a specialized aesthetic and they often react as much to the detritus added to a carving as to the underlying form itself. On many objects, and one thinks immediately of Komo masks (fig. 6), aesthetic effect may end up being determined as much by how the blood drips over the surface of the headdress as by its original features. Because the critical index of an object’s power is its nyámà, not whether it is in pristine condition or damaged, a new or little used mask is almost never as “good” or as powerful as an old one that visibly demonstrates the marks of use. This visual nyámà—one might say the “garbage” added to the mask—the layers upon layers of blood and porridge, the addition of porcupine quills, bird feathers, and animal horns, and the damaged teeth—produces a “full” image which declares the authority of the headdress. Such a coating takes many years to build up, and the production of an object’s nyámà, and therefore the object itself, may require years of use and may extend far beyond the lifetime of a mask’s sculptor. Thus, production, as the Bamana know it, may in principle continue indefinitely, because an object, by definition, never possesses enough nyámà and is therefore never “finished.”

This aesthetic of “garbage” is usually but not always accumulative; the thick surface of a Komo mask is not only built up through many sacrifices, but its nyámà is given visible expression in the animal horns, the porcupine quills, and the black feathers attached to it. The assemblage forms a visual code that the average Komo society member can easily decipher. A particular horn comes from the mangalanir, a tiny antelope filled with nyámà whose sex becomes erect when it is killed, porcupine quills are tools favored by sorcerers, and the

66. The power of a used broom is also demonstrated by the fact that a woman should never touch a man with a broom while sweeping a courtyard. If she does so, she may be accused of intentionally harming a man’s masculinity through contact with the nyámà-filled broom, which may render him impotent. Mr. Adama Mara gave both this information and the explanation of the single broom rule to me at different moments in our work together.
black feathers come from the vulture, an awe-inspiring bird with many secret abilities. Some objects are associated with nyámà-filled words as well as sights: a hunter's shirt (fig. 4) may be marked with the attachment of thick twists of cotton whose knots each encode a different klissi or incantation. The shirt's bristling surface immediately communicates the hidden power, the nyámà, of the verses and human spit captured in each knot.

67. Basi Fane reported that the mangalanin is a “sorcerer animal” who is endowed with great nyámà and is the “diviner in sand” for all the other animals. According to Basi, this antelope has “double eyesight;” it has two pairs of eyes, one for use in the daytime and one for use at night. Basi also said that the mangalanin could shake itself and change color and that it could also shake itself and change into a white sheep, and that he himself had seen these transformations. Basi told Mr. Mara that the Khasonke believe that if a woman eats the flesh of the mangalanin, her children will be abnormal. Interview with Basi Fane, (98-50), 7/13/98, pp. 11–18 of French translation.

Figure 6. Komo mask, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Wood, metal, organic materials. L.: 85.1 cm. The Brooklyn Museum of Art, 69.39.3.

Visual nyámà can be interpreted at many more and less subtle levels. Younger men may view the horns, quills and feathers of a Komo mask as the expression of a deadly quotient of nyámà, but ritual experts and sculptors like Kojugu Cissoko report that this detritus is merely camouflage designed to frighten the average viewer. For Kojugu, these additive elements are not nearly as nyámà-laden as the liquids, the herbal medicines, poisons, blood, and human sweat absorbed by the wood base.

Kojugu: A Komo that doesn’t have many decorations—one can’t say that it is a Komo without power. The ornaments are simply like those [initiates] that one calls timidenw.

68. Neither Dieterlen (1951), Dieterlen and Cissé (1972), nor Travéle (1929) mention a group of Komo initiates called timidenw, but they appear to be relatively junior association members. Kojugu defines their role as that of clapping their hands to make the noise that intimidates the young men who are being inducted into the Komo.
Thus, they are there to frighten people so that they know that it is something one should fear.69

While Bamana viewers expect a certain category of objects, such as Komo masks, to display visible nyámà, some masks which bear no signs of blood sacrifice and no accumulative additions, such as the Dabà (fig. 5), can also emanate terrifying power. In the case of the Dabà, its awe-inspiring effect is partly caused by its huge size, its enormous jaw, the solemn music played for it, and its ponderous, animal-like movements, but even more important is the audience’s knowledge of the mask’s history. Any stranger who comes to see the mask is immediately warned not to pass in front of the Dabà’s open jaw, lest its nyámà kill him, and it is also well known that the owners of the Dabà killed its sculptor when he had finished it, thus investing the headdress with the power released by taking a human life. In addition, inhabitants of the town that owns the Dabà are aware that it can shine with mysterious light at night, heralding an ominous event, such as the death of a beloved elder. Thus, visual nyámà can certainly point to spiritual power for certain viewers, but some objects without this distinctive aesthetic are nevertheless charged with intense nyámà.

We have seen that both oral history and visual signs—the horns, quills, patina, knots on a shirt, and blood on a cloth—are accumulated by Bamana masks and textiles after the ritual object is ‘finished’ and handed over to its user. Once one accepts that a crucial stage in producing these objects actually occurs after, rather than before, this transfer, one realizes that, in the Bamana world, there must be a different definition of “finishing.” And indeed, that is so.

What happens when a ritual expert is forced to destroy a ritual object whose nyámà has increased to the point that the once useful “medicine” has turned on its owners and become an everpresent danger to those in its vicinity? Why and how do those objects which the Bamana both cosset and obey come to the end of their ‘lives’?70 When do the signs of wear cross some invisible line and lead a ritual expert to declare that an object must be ritually destroyed? Natural factors are certainly at work in the progressive disintegration of carvings and textiles among the Bamana, but in the case of most artifacts, the deliberate actions that are designed to impart nyámà also serve the purposes of destruction. And, as with the household broom, destruction is, in some sense, an implicit and even a planned goal of the artistic process.

Although this observation is particularly true for textiles, it is also relevant for much sculpture. For, in Bamana eyes, long-term conservation presents serious dangers because of the ever-increasing nyámà it creates. One of the major problems in Bamana life is what to do with highly charged ritual objects whose nyámà is so intense that they threaten anyone who handles them, including their “owners” (tigiw). While modernization has intensified this problem because few younger people are willing to observe the stringent rules that surround the handling of such objects, it is not a new dilemma.71 Thus, to protect both its owner and other potential users, ritual objects often possess built-in escape procedures that empty the physical shell of its nyámà. Yet, this ‘escape’ process is so fraught with danger that it is rare for the actual users or “owners” of the object to undertake it themselves. Let us look at this process, first with regard to the Basiae and N’Gale cloths and then with regard to sculpture.

We have seen that cloth is a useful stabilizer for nyámà because it can absorb powerful liquids such as

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blood, but a young woman about to start on married life does not want her all-too-potent excision cloth among her belongings. If stealing a shred of this cloth and performing ritual work with it can inflict a devastating long-term illness on her or make her sterile, why give her future sisters-in-law or co-wives an unnecessary opportunity for working sorcery? Thus, at the end of the retreat that follows excision, a young woman transfers her Basiae or N’Gale to a “mother,” a trusted elderly woman in her own natal family (often a young woman’s paternal or maternal aunt, grandmother, or mother’s co-wife). This elder has successfully survived childbirth and has accumulated the ritual knowledge to guard and enhance the young woman’s fertility by careful handling of the cloth. To protect the cloth and to dissipate its nyâmâ safely, the elder wears the Basiae or N’Gale daily. As the female elder wears the cloth, the signs of use, at first markers of increasing power, intensify as the cloth is repeatedly washed. Originally the black/red designs merely fade away to a yellow-toned grey, but after a year or more, repeated wearing and washing actually destroys the cotton, and it falls into shreds (fig. 7). By this point, it is hoped that the young girl who wore it after excision has become pregnant, and perhaps even given birth successfully, assuring herself and her relatives of her fertility. Nevertheless, as long as the cloth exists, it still has the potential to harm the young woman, and must therefore be destroyed.

It is difficult to obtain any clear statement from either young women or female elders about why the process of wear first endows the cloth with nyâmâ and then allows this mysterious force to ebb out of an excision cloth safely. Everyone agrees that even a Basiae in shreds still possesses potentially harmful nyâmâ, but most elderly women seem to think that the level of power carried by the richly colored textile the young girl handed over to her “mother.” Clearly the fading of the rust-colored designs represents, at least to some extent, the diminishing of the cloth’s uncanny power, and it is only at this point, long after the cloth dyer’s work has been completed, that Bamana women consider that the wrapper approaches a “finished,” or metaphorically speaking, a ‘dead’ state. However, even at this stage, the cloth is still powerful enough that it would be most unwise to keep scraps of it for use in cleaning or to cast it on the heap of communal garbage at the edge of town. Thus, its elderly guardian carefully ties the Basiae or N’Gale around a heavy stone and takes it to a deep pond where she casts it in. If there is no body of water nearby, she may also bury it in the ground far out into the bush where no one will find it. Similarly, women destroy their used menstrual cloths either by casting them into a river, burning them, or burying them far out into the bush.72

It is fairly easy to see at what point the ongoing ‘creation’ of an excision wrapper becomes interchangeable with a process of disintegration and destruction. But what about sculpture? Here, we are faced with far more secrecy than in the case of ritual cloth. However, Basi Fane, does give some insight into this problem. Basi told us about a blacksmith named Kunfiyn (he was unwilling to provide a last name) who had inherited a Komo from his father. However, the inherited Komo had “fought” with him and “fatigued” him:

Basi: . . . depriving him of everything that he would normally have. Furthermore, it [the Komo] made him blind. In this case, wouldn’t he go and get another Komo?73

Basi also explained:

Basi: . . . if it is a case of a ritual object that you yourself have created, if you get to a point where you cannot support it, you go and throw it into the water. But, with regard to every other ritual object that you have not created yourself, but which you have travelled to another village to purchase from an owner of basiw [medicines, i.e. ritual objects]; when you can’t bear living with this ritual object any longer, you must retrace your route and give the object back to the person who made it. Then he will tell you what he needs for the ritual [to be able to remove the spiritual ties binding the user to the object]. Once you have given him what he needs, then you give him the object. From that moment on you owe him nothing.

Mr Mara: But Basi, does this take place in secret or is it a celebration?

Basi: This is not the cause of a celebration. It occurs when you judge that you can no longer support the ritual object

72 Interview with Sabani Cissoko, (98-3), 6/27/98, pp. 20–21 of French translation. Sabani emphatically states that it is better to throw used menstrual cloths into the hole in the outhouse (in cities) or bury them in the bush (in villages), or cast them into a body of water, rather than burning them. In her words, “By burning them, one provokes armed fights in the region.”

73 Interview with Basi Fane, (98-49), 7/8/98, p. 16 of French translation. Later in the same interview Basi carefully noted that this event was not something he saw, nor did it occur in his lifetime. The Bamana text is as follows. Basi: K’a kor’a sôrò, fenuw mirw kuru bêe la pew! K’a tiì la, k’a nyew fêa don, a te foyi ye . . . e tina a nyini?
and there is no other alternative, and when, if you don’t get rid of it, it will harm you. Then you go and give it back to its creator saying, “So-and-so, I received this object from you, May Allah bless you, but I cannot sustain it [literally, “continue underneath it”]. If I were to return it, what would be the customary offerings?” He will tell you to rid of it, it will harm you. Then you go and give it back to its creator saying, “So-and-so, I received this object from you, May Allah bless you, but I cannot sustain it [literally, “continue underneath it”]. If I were to return it, what would be the customary offerings?”

Basi then continues, explaining what would happen if the ritual object in question were a jaso, a “medicine” produced by the men’s Nama association and designed to kill sorcerers:

Basi: ... Let us take the case of the jaso. You know that this is made to fight sorcerers. If you did this [probably Basi refers to throwing it in the water] to the jaso, even though you are the owner, it would kill you immediately. If you are the owner of the jaso, I mustn’t reproach you in your absence. If you do something to me, while you are sitting with me as we are now, we must talk about it together like this and put an end to it like this. If not, if you curse me and insult me when I am not here, I swear that it will kill you. It is the same thing if another person or a sorcerer wishes ill to its owner, it will kill the person. That is what we call destroying someone completely (ka tomoni). Any individual who betrays or speaks ill of others should restrain himself from taking this object. In the case where you want to get rid of this object, you must bring it back to the door of the Nama where you got it. You must provide a ram, ten kola nuts, and a red cock and tell them that you took the ritual object, but that at this time, you can no longer support it. Once you have done that you are finished with it.

Interviewer: And if you go and cast it in the river?
Basi: You will suffer something harmful! It is not good to throw ritual objects away.

Basi does not tell us whether the sacrifices made actually empty the object of all power or simply break the bond between the object and its “owner.” However, additional information collected by Mr. Mara from

74. Interview with Basi Fane, (98-49), 7/8/98, pp.19–20 of French translation. Basi: N y’a don, basi korri .... n’i yéré ye basi min bò la, n’i déséra o kôrò, I b’a la fili jirò. N’i yéré tè basi wo basi bò la; f’i dun to lo k’a basitigj sëgëre a la dugu kereët; k’a taga basi , k’a taga a basi san o dugurò, n’i y’a yë ka fo, k’i tè se a kôrò, i b’i kômunun k’a taga a basi di; i la soro min fè k’a taga di o ma. A b’a la laadafew bò; k’a la basi d’a ma; o tuma, a la noton si t’i kan. Mara: Basi tè, “mais,” Basi, o tumanan, o yë këra sutarà la le wa, “ou bien” o fanan ni kë la tilon ne dij Basi: A tè këla tilon di. Fè y’èrè y’a ye, a b’i bolo, awaa .... Yelemà cogo t’a la; n’e m’a bò e bolo, a bë ñyn bila i la. S’era min fè, e y’a sòrôrë min fè, “e karisë, ne nana nin fènin ta e fë, Allah sago, e sago, “mais” ne tè së a kôrò. N’i b’a bila, e y’a laada ye fènë mn yë. A b’a la laada ye fëny’è, b’a la laada fènë d’a ma, o tuma, e tògo bòrò la pëw.

75. The Nama is a male ‘secret’ association whose main purpose is the eradication of sorcery. The Banama consider epidemics of infectious disease to be the result of sorcery, and in the past it was the responsibility of the Nama to both prevent and remedy such attacks. Since the Nama performed this task by accusing specific individuals of sorcery and unleashing popular anger against those accused, the French attempted to suppress the association. The Nama still exists, but chapters of it are rare and most villages lack it. When a Nama masquerader does perform, he now avoids naming specific people as sorcerers. Nama masks are quite similar to Komo headdress, but they usually lack teeth and the additive elements that appear on Komo masks. They often have very long ears.

76. When Basi says, “you must bring it back to the door of the Nama where you got it,” he refers to the door of the small ritual hut dedicated to the Nama in every village that possesses this association. In the past, the sacred objects of the association would be kept in this hut and sacrifices would take place in front of it. However, most ritual experts are now so afraid that their sacred objects will be stolen for sale to art dealers that they prefer to keep their basi hidden in other locations. In the present these huts were repaired yearly by the young men of the community. Now many of these young men have converted to Islam and refuse to carry out the repairs or participate in the sacred associations. Thus, a large number of these huts have disintegrated completely or are in a state of disrepair. A village might have several Komo or Nama huts, one for each branch of the association in question.

Interview with Basi Fane, (98-49), 7/8/98, pp. 20–21 of French translation. Basi: Jaso file ni ye, ni ye jaso ta, I y’a lon subaga-këlë-filalen. A tè taga .... a ye, a tigë y’èrè min ye, a b’ërèrë fàga yòrò nin kelen! Jaso. N’i jaso ye bolo. n’ë ni tyongò fë nin ye, ne tè .... e mana fëntën kë ne la, ne kanan sëkë k’ë makuma e k’ë fë. Ne kana diminman, k’a fò ko, Adama no nin kenna k’a dimì man .... A mayni. N’i ye kò min kë ne na, n’ë gannan na, n b’i wele, “Adama e nò nin kë, a ma diya ne ye.” A ma ban wa! K’a wa I kò fë, k’a taga I kò fë, kuma k’i kò fë—dajuguya kuma, walahi a t’i to yen! N’i ma fara, a b’i fàga. “Mais” n’i migli gëré fìli la, fo cogò, subaga fàra fèn fèn nyongò kan, k’a wulità i nò fë, ca bu, a b’i fàga. A ye kò lo le ma ko tomaroni. Migòg o migli bë se migli jantà la, migli o migli b’ë se, migli kò kuma la, “ou bien,” k’ë ma fënv kë, k’ana ta de! Wa n’ë y’ò ta, ni b’a bila, I y’a ta Nama-bënda mìn, b’e b’è kôn, a ni wörwò tan, a ni manan dondon, e bi taga o diolow ma. “Awa ne le jaso ta, jaso fìlë nin ye. N tè së a kôrò.” I ila la, a kun si tè së l’i. Mara: Nka, n’i tarà la fili ba rò? Basi: E ye t’a rò, n’i y’a fìli ba l’ò, I b’i galo ye. Basiiya fìli mayni,

The verb ka tomaroni comes from the Banama and Malinke term for a ruined town, tomo or tomon. Here the word is transformed into a verb to indicate that the jaso will not only destroy its owner and anyone who attacks him, but all their extended family as well. It can literally turn its owner into “ruins.”
another ritual expert, Klempe Coulibaly, a blacksmith from Dioila, suggests that such sacrifices merely break the bond linking an “owner” to his object, and that the object can go back into use under the care of another user. Coulibaly reported that if an object such as the jaso were being returned to its source, the expert in charge of the Nama cult from which it had originated would send word to the owners of all the other jasow in the region. On an appointed day all these ritual experts, each of whom possessed his own jaso, would assemble, together with their apprentices. The head of the assembly would announce that so-and-so had returned his jaso, since he found himself unable to keep it. Then the leader would ask if there was anyone present who already possessed a jaso, and who wanted the object, now that it had been formally detached from its previous owner. In most cases, another elder would ask for the object with the stated intention of bestowing it upon a specific apprentice. In a different ceremony (which also demanded appropriate sacrifices) the apprentice would be given the abandoned object and admitted into the ranks of those possessing a jaso. If, on the other hand, no one could be found to take the ritual object, a situation that has become increasingly common with the spread of Islam, the expert in charge of the Nama where it had originated would have to dispose of it.

Basi, perpetually reticent, never revealed the method of destroying a ritual object that is probably the most common among the Bamana, and Malinke, although there may well be additional procedures that I have not yet encountered. Both casual conversations with elders and information provided by Klempe Coulibaly suggest that placing a sacred object on a termite mound may be the method of choice for destroying masks and other basiw. Coulibaly, who had himself participated in this type of ritual, reported that when the owner of a powerful basi dies and no one in the village can be found who is willing or able to care for it, the village summons an expert who is a member of the same association as the dead man and requests him to return the object to its origins. If no expert can be found with a sufficiently high level of expertise to carry out this task, the object will be...
left alone in the dead man’s house until both house and bais fall into complete ruin, destroyed by years of rain.

If, however, a ritual expert is discovered who is willing to take on the burden of removing the object’s nyámǎ and assuring its safe destruction, he will do the following. In order to move the ritual object, the village must provide two goats. One is put in front of the sacred object and one behind, while the bais is carried out to a termite mound in the bush (daba so, or nton bilen). When the cortège arrives at an appropriate mound, a hole is dug into it, and the first goat is sacrificed and its blood dripped into the hole. The ritual expert places seven kola nuts on the blood and then lays the ritual object down there. The expert then addresses the bais, telling it that its owner who died has not given it away, that it must not think it has been thrown out, but merely that it is being requested to return from whence it came. The ritual expert will also make invocations to the spirits who inhabit the termite mound, because of the belief that there are powerful djinns living inside every termite mound and that the termites are their messengers. Djinns are creatures said to be constantly in touch with water; likewise ritual objects or bais are all believed to have their origins in the water. The deepest source of the power animating both djinns and bais is water, a substance which the Bamana believe to be stronger than all others; no matter how strong you are, you cannot cut it, you cannot do anything against water. After the expert has uttered his message to the spirit world, the ritual object, sitting in its hole, is covered with earth. The expert then sacrifices the other goat, carrying the carcass around the termite mound until the blood ceases to flow. Finally, the hearts of the two goats are removed, and together with the heads and the four hoofs, they are left on the mound, while the rest of the meat is cooked and eaten in the bush by the men who have accompanied the ritual expert performing the ceremony. Whatever is not eaten, is either buried in a hole or thrown into a pond.

Like Basi and Klempe, many ritual experts regard this method of destroying an object as much safer and infinitely preferable to burning it or casting it into a river, because they have no doubt that the termites will carry the nyama of the mask or boli directly back to the djinns inhabiting the mound. These insects’ extraordinary social organization and order mirrors the structure of the human world, yet, unlike humans, termites have direct contact with djinns and the other world. It makes logical sense for sculptors to believe that, just as termites brought the power of the underground streams and the spirits associated with them into the raw wood from which so many “medicines” are made, so the termites can absorb the power of the ritual object as they consume it. They can then carry this power safely back to its original source—the earth and the spirits that lurk in or around the mound. Thus, the nyámǎ, so painfully coaxed into sacred objects via an endless series of “baths” in herbal solutions, sacrificial blood, sacred incantations (klissiw), and millet porridge (dege), can be returned to the bush, that eternally present and endless repository of diffuse spiritual force. Just as ritual objects can be charged with power because they can absorb and soak up significant substances through their pores, so they can be voided of energy, perhaps even by the honeycomb tunnels the voracious insects create in the wood as they transfer the bais’s power back to its deepest source.

Termites provide a means of taking back to the other world the necessary and potentially positive nyámǎ that animates ritual objects and enables them to destroy sorcerers, punish wrongdoers, and create fertility. The Bamana view the fact that a particular object may have turned on its owner, or accumulated too much nyámǎ to continue in use, as a temporary situation which only demonstrates the frailties of the object’s owner and the limits of human power. The fact remains that the larger human community desperately needs sculptures or ritual “medicines” to work on its behalf, and that the negative actions of these objects are a price that must be lived with in order to obtain their positive benefits. However, the clitoris, the most glaringly anomalous source of female nyámǎ, is perceived as embodying almost exclusively negative power and as being inimical to successful fertility. It is interesting that Basi Fane’s first wife, Tlasun Balo, reported that after an excision, the female surgeon (always a blacksmith) carefully preserves the clitoris and the other flesh removed from each girl.

77. Mr. Mara communicated all of the preceding information, which had been given him by Klempe Coulibaly, to me in a phone call on 8/5/2000.

78. Throwing an object into a river would not remove its nyámǎ—it would merely leave a dangerous source of power floating in the water and waiting for someone to find it and possibly misuse it. Placement on a termite mound assures that the insects will devour the wood and thus destroy the object and liberate its nyámǎ permanently without harming anyone.
and gives it to the girl's mother. The young woman's mother wraps the clitoris in white, carded cotton, carries it out into the bush, and "slides it into the hole of an anthheap" (ntinkinyëso), in secret. In 1984, Salimata Kone said that when a woman gives birth to a deformed child who dies, elderly ritual experts would take the child and abandon it far out into the bush on top of an anthill (Brett-Smith 1994:130–131). Because black ants are able to carry off a farmer's entire harvest to their anthill in a single night, and because they continue their activity after dark, the Bamana believe that these destructive insects are the agents of negative forces in the spirit world.

Thus, while the masks and ritual objects that have been created by men to maintain human fertility are returned to the termites, the miraculous messengers of abundance and prosperity, the flesh and the deformed bodies that represent a vitality whose power exactly balances that of the ritual objects artificially constructed by men.

We have now followed the trajectory of an 'art' object from its manual fabrication by a carver, ritual expert, or mud cloth artist to its 'death' and burial in the earth. We have seen that the physical production of a sacred object is only the first step in a process of creation that may be drawn out over months, years, and even centuries as the "medicine" accumulates the energy, or nyámà, that enables it to act in the world. In an effort to analyze the stockpiling of nyámà we looked briefly at the rules that, in the past, governed the carving of sculpture. However, it was a detailed examination of the creation and use of mud-dyed excision cloths which suggested that soaking an object in a charged liquid might be the fundamental mechanism for endowing it with nyámà. With this in mind, we looked at menstrual cloths—objects whose entire function is defined by their absorptive capacity—and found that not only are they the only things in the Bamana and Malinke world with greater nyámà than the most powerful sculptures, but that they appear to function, at least on a subliminal level, as primal models for any ritual object. The examination of the beliefs about the source of a menstrual cloth's extraordinary power suggested that the Bamana and Malinke perceive any material object used to create "art" as intrinsically porous. Wood, and even human skin, are in some sense no different than cloth because they, too, are able to absorb key substances that will imbue them with nyámà. We then found that certain sacred objects, such as Komo masks, display the substances in which they are soaked, creating startling displays of exuviae, while others, such as the Dabà, are endowed with power by the rumors and oral traditions that surround them. Finally, we looked at the end point of what is, for the Bamana, one continuous trajectory of artistic production—the deliberate destruction of those terrifying medicines created by man.

The slow disintegration of a sacred object on a termite mound, the return of its nyámà to the depths of the earth is a profound gesture which allows us to see that, in the Bamana world "art," like human beings, ultimately finds its finishing point, its resting place in the ground. A long-used menstrual cloth, whose owner suddenly feels that the shredded rag's power is too intense to keep hiding it in her mattress, will be taken some way into the bush and buried in secret. The elderly guardian of a Komo mask who senses his death approaching and whose sons refuse to sacrifice to the headdress because they have converted to Wahabite Islam, will carry it far into the bush and leave it on a termite mound to be destroyed by nature. The termites, those enigmatic messengers whose mounds testify to the presence of spirits and underground streams, will eat the mask piece by piece, carrying its power safely back to the spirits from whence it came. Then, and only then, are the production of nyámà and the mask itself, "finished." Production, if it is to succeed, must encompass the destruction of the art object, its nyámà safely restored to the elemental matrix from which it came.


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