The mouth of the Komo

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The mouth of the Komo

SARAH BRETT-SMITH

The elders say that seeing a naked woman is seeing the Komo.

_Nyamaton Diarra, Interview of April 18, 1984_

My purpose is to reexamine the significance of the Bamana and Malinke Komo mask in the light of new data collected in the Kita and Beledugu regions of Mali, West Africa (fig. 1). This information suggests that the headdress incorporates several levels of meaning and that an intense concern with the control of masculine sexuality and the mastery of human reproduction informs one of the less easily accessible, but crucially important, metaphors that lie concealed within the mask. The data also suggests that a deep-seated fear of the female sex is an important motivation for the creation of secret male associations and the artworks used in them.

Let us begin by seeing how the Komo functions in daily life. The Komo is still the most widespread of the six ‘secret’ associations (jow) that formerly structured the

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1. The Bamana text is as follows:

_Cëkôrôbaw ko, musu lankolón ye, Kómò ye don._

_Second interview with Nyamaton Diarra, 4/18/84, Book 19, pp. 19-20 of transcribed tapes_

Unfortunately, there is no single standard written form for Bamana and Malinke. The interviews used as data for this article were transcribed by M. Seku Ba Camara using the orthography preferred by the Direction Nationale de l’Alphabétisation Fonctionnelle et de la Linguistique Appliquée (DNAFLA), Mali. However, there may be times when the Bamana or Malinke text presented here differs from what might be an official DNAFLA transcription. I have judged it wiser to publish M. Camara’s transcriptions word for word, since the spoken Malinke or Bamana of many of my interviews departs considerably from urban Bamana speech. It is hoped that the meticulous transcription of the oral text will give the Bamana- or Malinke-speaking reader the flavor of the original text.

The reader should also be aware that Bamana texts published in Mali do not use either capital letters or punctuation. I have inserted both in order to make the Bamana transcriptions and their translations more accessible. The plural form of nouns is indicated by adding a w to the end of the word.

When translating and interpreting Bamana or Malinke terms, I have used double quotation marks (") to indicate when I am employing a word that is a direct translation of the original Malinke or Bamana and single quotation marks (‘) to denote a word that forms part of my own interpretation.

My use of single quotation marks is also designed to highlight terms that have been subject to question and controversy, such as ‘caste,’ and terms that are derived from Western art history and whose use may be somewhat inappropriate in the Bamana context, such as ‘realistic.’ In these cases the single quotation marks should alert the reader to the fact that I am somewhat skeptical of the term used, but that it seemed the best choice from among a group of unsatisfactory alternatives.

2. The research and writing of this article were supported by a number of grants and fellowships. I would like to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Fulbright-Hays program for funding field research in 1984–1985 and 1984 respectively.

When I returned to the United States, the translation and cross-referencing of the data used in this article were funded by a series of grants from Rutgers University: in 1988–1989 and in 1989–1990, two

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I would also like to express my gratitude to David Robinson, who negotiated my award of an NEH grant for the translation, “Bamana Origins and the History of the Komo Society,” through the “Translations of African Historical Sources” project administered via Michigan State University. This funding was instrumental in allowing me to translate the interviews with Nyamaton Diarra that make a critical contribution to “The Theft of the Komo.”

I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for the award of a Fellowship for University Teachers (1990–1991) and the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton for a Herodotus Fellowship (1990–1991). These fellowships allowed me to begin this article.

Finally, I am grateful to the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, for the award of a Visiting Research Fellowship (autumn 1995), a grant that enabled me to complete this paper.

It may seem improbable for a woman to discuss the Komo, but the reader should remember that a foreign female researcher is often regarded as having a male persona and is therefore permitted access to information that might not be available to Bamana women. This switch in gender identification occurred in my own case and is described in Brett-Smith (1994:4–5).

Another factor was the collaborative research method that evolved from long-term fieldwork with my colleague, Mr. Adama Mara. For a description of this method, see the introduction to Brett-Smith (1994), especially pp. 1–2.

According to McNaughton, the Malinke and the Wasulu Bamana call the Komo, Koma (1979:17). I have used the term Komo simply because that was the name used the most consistently by my informants, whether Malinke or Bamana. It may be that Koma is the earlier term and that it has given way to Komo because radio broadcasts are almost invariably in Bamana not Malinke.

McNaughton’s 1979 account s the best monograph in English on the Komo and its art. In French, the most detailed account is that of Dieterlen and Cissé (1972).
Figure 1. Map of Mali showing Bamana area and also Kita and Beledugu areas.

lives of Bamana and Malinke men. In most farming villages, it continues to enroll young men in its ranks, its dignitaries and elders are still consulted about difficult family problems, and it remains the most feared of all the male associations. The fear surrounding the Komo

3. McNaughton (1979:2–9) provides a comprehensive overview of the secret associations and succinctly summarizes how different scholars have classified them over time. Most researchers have noted the existence of at least six male associations (N’tomo, Tyi Warra, Komo, Nama, Kanon, and Kore) and two female ones (the Guan and the Nyakuruni), but the number varies from region to region. The Kore seems to be limited to the eastern Bamana and Minianka area; my Beledugu informants knew nothing about it. In the central Bamana area, most villages possess only one of the adult male power associations, the Komo, Nama, or Kanon, although individuals may travel to another village in order to enroll in a second or third jo. Finally, in the Ganadugu region around Buguni, there seems to be only one male association, the Jo (this is distinct from the term jo, which means any secret society).

In addition to the problems posed by geographic complexity, researchers disagree about the exact status of the N’tomo, Tyi Warra, Kore, and Nya (a male association more commonly found among the Minianka than the Bamana, although some scholars occasionally add it to the list of Bamana associations). My own impression is that the Tyi Warra is an “eating society,” or ton (see next part of this note), not a jo, and that the Kore and Nya are Minianka, rather than Bamana, associations. The N’tomo appears to be a jo, but a less secret one than the others, since it is made up of uncircumcised boys, and women view its performances.

McNaughton (1979:9–17) categorizes four of the adult male jow as “power associations” (Komo, Kanon, Nama, Nya), grouping these societies together because they seem to wield political and mystical power at a higher level than the other associations. In the past, all these jow had a significant ability to enforce their rules through the use of violence, and all possessed a similar ability to harness or unleash intensely destructive spiritual powers.

For the special status of the Komo within the group of “power associations,” see Brett-Smith (1994:262, n. 6).

There is considerable debate as to whether the male associations can be labeled ‘secret.’ Z. S. Strother (Noote 1993:161, 178, n. 5) prefers the term ‘fraternity’ suggested by Kassim Kone. However, my informants made a clear distinction between the tonw, or fraternal societies, and the jow, or ‘secret’ associations (Brett-Smith 1994:285, n. 21). Whereas tonw were based on village-wide work groups formed for farming and carrying out other tasks of community importance, such as road maintenance (Hopkins 1971:104–106), jow were associations specifically concerned with the teaching and use of ‘secrets.’ A ton, such as the Tyi Warra, could include both male and female branches, but jow were either male or female exclusively. Tonw entrance was usually automatic (Hopkins 1971:105), whereas admission to any jow demanded a sacrifice, a formal initiation, and the swearing of a loyalty oath to the society in question. These oaths always involved the commitment not to divulge the society’s ‘secrets.’

However, the word ton has also acquired the more general sense of “association,” and informants sometimes spoke of the Komo ton or “Komo association” as a shorthand way of referring to the Komo jo. However, they were always careful to give the specific name of the society in question—the Nama ton, the Komo ton, etc.—in order to
women, and uninitiated men. With the introduction of a Western-based legal system, its overt power has diminished, and the elderly Komo leaders who discussed the society with me complained bitterly about

make clear that they were actually talking about a 'secret' association, not an eating society. When asked specifically about the meanings of the two words, my informants backtracked and cited the differences outlined in the preceding paragraph.

This paper is based on the premise that the Bamana consciously define jow in terms of 'secret' knowledge, and that they distinguish between 'secret' and non-'secret' associations. It also adopts the view that the information encapsulated in 'secrets' is both more important to society and more emotionally charged than that which remains open to all. In this sense, both my data and my point of view as author follow a more standard analytical paradigm than that proposed by Poppi (Nooteboom 1993:197--203). Poppi suggests that the content of an association's 'secrets' may be less important than the fact that it possesses and manipulates information that is ostensibly off limits to those outside the association's boundaries. For him, the significance of the 'secret' is its framing, not its actual 'meaning.' In fact, he suggests that the actual content of an association's 'secrets' is often banal and already familiar to the initiates. For Poppi, interpretations and objects are 'secret' not because they or their 'meanings' are either esoteric or unknown, but because a specific group within society (e.g., elderly men, women) declares them to be outside normal discourse.

My own point of view is closer to that of D'Azevedo (in Blakely, Van Beek, and Thomson 1994:342--362) who, although he notes that the Western idea of a 'secret' society is at least in part a colonial creation, describes one specific 'secret' manipulated by the Gola women's association, Sande, and attempts to identify its possible meanings. While issuing caveats about the use of the term 'secret society,' D'Azevedo actually proceeds on the basis that the Gola themselves recognize some knowledge as 'secret' and that these 'secrets' have important meanings.

Both its content and the reluctance with which my informants divulged the data presented here indicate that the Bamana and Malinke considered this information 'secret.' I would also suggest that the relative value of a 'secret' depends on the cultural frame of the viewer. To dismiss the content of non-Western 'secrets' as trivial because it often involves the revelation of basic information about the female reproductive system, is to impose a Western point of view on the Bamana or Gola definition of 'secrets.' Modern Western society is unusual in its demystification of sexual behavior and biological processes, and this demystification clearly depends on our access to and belief in scientific explanations. In fact, although we no longer consider human reproduction sacred, sexual behavior and even information are still emotionally charged subjects in our own society. We need to remember that sex remains a sacred 'secret' for those living in traditional societies and that, even among the educated elite, there may be very little access to information about female bodily processes. As D'Azevedo points out (1994:353--354), even Western-educated Gola men have surprisingly little access to information about the female body or how it functions reproductively; his statement that most Gola men have never seen even their wives' vaginas (1994:354) might also be made for the Bamana. As will be discussed later in this article, the sexual symbolism and the beliefs about female sexuality encapsulated in the Komo mask are far from trivial to those who use it.

4. Each local association has its own Komotigi, or "owner of the Komo," who is the executive decision-maker for the society. He is usually, but not always, a member of the blacksmith 'caste' (numu). He must be an expert in ritual practice, divination, and poisons and their antidotes. He may or may not wear the society's mask during the Komo's celebrations; often the performer is a much younger man who has the endurance to sustain the prolonged dancing and acrobatic feats expected of the masquerader.

The data presented in this paper is largely that collected from two such Komotigi, Kojugu Cissoko and Nyamaton Diarra. It is unusual for Komotigi to agree to talk frankly about the association.

5. The most feared Komo are usually those in either remote and/or fervently traditional villages.

For an eyewitness account of secret association violence, see Brett-Smith (1994:319, n. 15). In this case, the informant was Minianka, and his mother was killed by a man who came up behind her and cracked her skull in two with a club. It is unclear whether his mother was deliberately forced to view a Komo mask or whether the object shown to her belonged to another secret association, but was also off limits to women. The Minianka possess the Komo, but it is a relatively recent introduction and is often imported from Bamana villages.

6. Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 6/14/84, Cissoko6-14, Book 7, p. 74 of transcribed tapes.

Kojugu was also a gifted sculptor, who had carved seven Komo masks, and an inspired diviner. For a description of Kojugu's personality and the circumstances that allowed the author to work with him, see Brett-Smith (1994:3--4). This book presents the greater part of the data collected from Kojugu.
Komo mask of its power is menstrual blood.7 On the surface, at least, the Komo is the most explicitly masculine of all the Bamana and Malinke ‘secret’ associations, and in the past young men could not marry or have intercourse until they had first been circumcised and then inducted into the society.8 In fact, one could say that among the Bamana, to be a man was to be a member of the local Komo.

The Komo’s ubiquitous, if unseen and often subtle, presence continues to dominate village life and structure the passage of time for both men and women.9 The

7. Dieterlen (1951:150). Dieterlen notes that in order to prevent any mishap, society members whose wives are menstruating are forbidden to attend Komo festivities.

While both male and female informants agreed that menstrual blood could remove the power of any male ritual object, including the Komo, Kojugu Cissoko made specific observations about the rules that protect a sculptor from this substance.

Kojugu said that the sculptor must protect the jagi, a curved chisel for scraping out mortars, from contact with women. The reason for this precaution is that if a woman has just had sex and has not washed or if she is menstruating, she will contaminate the instrument, causing it to wound the artist the next time he uses it. Furthermore, this wound will be resistant to healing. (See Brett-Smith 1994:151, 306, n. 143; Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, Outil-1, Book 12, p. 64 of transcribed tapes.)

He also observed that sculptors never cross the boundaries of the kitchen for fear of stepping in the footsteps of a woman who may be menstruating (a menstruating woman may sit in the kitchen area to cook her own meal, or simply to talk with the other women; see Brett-Smith 1994:158, 307–308, nn. 10–11; Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 8/9/84, Questions-1, Book 13, pp. 74–75 of transcribed tapes). If he were to have such contact, whatever object the artist carved would not only be devoid of spiritual power, but it would also lack any ability to act in the world.

Finally, Kojugu reports that artists try to avoid carving figures of women when their wives are menstruating. If an artist were to carve such an image at this time, his wife’s menstrual blood would act at a distance to render the figure useless, even if the sculptor himself avoided any direct contact with her (Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 8/9/84, Questions-3, Book 15, p. 91 of transcribed tapes). However, in theory at least, the sculptor can make other ritual objects, such as masks, at this time, provided he avoids his wife.

In a continuation of the passage just cited, Kojugu gives an additional explanation of the reasons why it is not good to carve any human figure, male or female, while one’s wife is menstruating. He says that sculptors avoid carving human figures at this time, because if they were to break the interdictions that forbid sex with a menstruating woman, either the child produced by this union would die (allowing the wooden figure to function), or the figure would be useless (allowing the child to live). Kojugu’s discussion of this entire issue is far from clear, but what he does communicate is that both sexual relations and contact with a woman’s menstrual flow are inimical to the creation of ritual objects that will function correctly. For the passage in question and a more detailed analysis of its meaning, see Brett-Smith (1994:232, 330, n. 113; Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 8/9/84, Questions-3, Book 15, pp. 92–93 of transcribed tapes).


Both Bamana and Malinke male and female informants asserted that indiscriminate sexual activity and the breaking of the ritual interdictions (tanaw) that traditionally controlled sexual behavior were unknown at the village level prior to Malian independence in 1960 (for date, see Murray 1981:152). Up to this time, grandparents arranged the marriages of their grandchildren, and no one, male or female, ‘experimented’ with sex before marriage.

Along with some readers of this paper, I have been skeptical that such strict abstinence requirements could have been observed in reality. However, at the 1996 African Studies Association meetings in San Francisco, Kassim Kone and another Malian scholar stood up after a presentation on contemporary premarital pregnancy in Bamako to say that during their childhoods, sexual rules were strictly enforced and premarital pregnancies were almost unheard of. Both men are probably in their late thirties or early forties, which would place their childhoods in the late 1950s. One tends to dismiss elderly informants’ tales of abstinence as fabrications, but every Western-educated Malian I have consulted who was alive at this period has agreed that today’s sexual behavior was unknown in the 1950s. They have also agreed that the changes I describe here did, in fact, happen.

From the precolonial through the early postcolonial period, women had to be excised before they could marry or bear children, and men had to be circumcised. Since girls underwent clitoridectomy at about age 16 or 17, and men were circumcised at about age 25, this rule imposed a considerable period of sexual abstinence on both men and women. According to my informants, sexual rules were not only rigid but were rigidly enforced; a girl was required to be a virgin at marriage, and a child born to either an unexcised girl or an uncircumcised boy was exposed to die in the bush (Interview with a group of women elders at a Beledugu village, 5/21/78, p. 2). Because excision was the gateway to sexual experience and adult, married status, many young women actually looked forward to the successful completion of their surgery and its accompanying ‘rituals. This attitude was still evident in the pride with which both Narsun Suko and Araba Diarra spoke of their recent excisions in 1978 (Brett-Smith 1982b). While I do not possess equally detailed data on circumcision, all the male elders I interviewed agreed that it would have been just as unthinkable for an uncircumcised young man to break the sexual code as for an unexcised girl. Thus the data suggests that recently circumcised men (who had also just been initiated into the Komo) were virgins when they married their first wives.

Both circumcisions and excisions are normally performed at the height of the dry season in February or March, and both men and women would have consummated their arranged marriages during the rainy season. Since the Komo initiations take place at the society’s yearly sacrifices (in early June just prior to the first rains) men would have received their assigned brides after both circumcision and initiation into the Komo. Zahan (1963:123) notes a variant of this timetable in which men are inducted into the Komo on the sixth day after circumcision, which would then occur in late May.

See note 66 for a discussion of changes in the ages at which circumcision and excision are performed.

9. Its celebrations take priority over all other events (especially those planned by women’s associations) with the possible exception of
Komo's ritual calendar is complex, and the information collected by different researchers at different time periods suggests considerable variation from village to village and region to region. However, all the reports agree that every functioning Komo society holds annual celebrations in late May or early June just before the beginning of the rainy season, and that these festivities involve the appearance of the society's medium wearing the famous mask (figs. 2–6, 8). Dieterlen (1951:159–160) says that the Komo also celebrates the year's harvest and that it appears during the dry season when a circumcision is held. Travéle (1929:137) mentions a number of other Komo festivities, including a ritual clearing of the bush and a communal fishing effort. Both Travéle (1929:137) and Pâques (1954:85) describe yearly ceremonies where, in order to reinvigorate them, Komo objects are first immersed in the society's sacred pool and then removed from it. On a more practical level, McNaughton (1979:20–21)

Circumcisions usually occur during the hot season, which begins at the end of January and lasts until the first rains in early June. If the identifications provided by Travéle are correct, these objects are the association's wooden trumpets (1929:pl. 1). However, Dieterlen and Cissé's description of a similar ceremony (1972:252–254) involves the immersion of bòlw, or portable altars.

On the basis of the following data collected among the Minianka, Dieterlen and Cissé's description seems more probable to me. On 5/16/79, Bakari Traore, the head of his local Komo association, reported that among the Minianka, men did not save their children when a village was attacked; rather, they ran to get their bòlw so as to hide them from the enemy by throwing them into a nearby river (Interview with Bakari Traore, region of Koutiala, 5/16/79, p. 173; Brett-Smith 1983:60).

Pâques (1954:85) and Dieterlen and Cissé (1972:287–295) also discuss the rituals that are performed on the death of a society leader.
reports that throughout the dry season, fully functioning associations hold weekly performances at night, where the masked medium becomes possessed and provides inspired answers to the dilemmas that have been set before the association's leader during the preceding seven days. Whether exceptional or expected, all these events interrupt daily life and reinforce the fear that surrounds the association and its mask, for they require

Figure 3. Komo mask, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Wood, feathers, horns, and other organic substances, L: 65 cm. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, 5-12980.
the uninitiated—women, children, and strangers—to lock themselves inside their houses on pain of death until the festivities have ended.

In actuality, Komo celebrations usually occur without interruption, since the society’s medium usually wears the mask at night, and women receive numerous warnings letting them know when they must remain hidden. Nevertheless, both men and women refer to the Komo headdress as an object of terror. That women should be frightened of the mask is understandable, but why men? When the Komo medium performs, he not only has license to kill any woman he may encounter but also to eliminate any initiated man who is judged to have broken the rules of the association. Dieterlen (1951:163) reports that the masquerader wounds the culprit with a metal hook impregnated with poison and that the erring society member dies within the next few days. Kojugu corroborated this, and he also emphasized the rigid hierarchy that holds sway within the Komo, commenting that older members use force to make the younger initiates obey orders:

13 Dieterlen (1951:151, 163) notes that the masquerader carries a hook (koli) in each hand. Both hooks are soaked in poison, which is renewed annually. Dieterlen reports that the right-hand hook is used to kill erring Komo members, while she says that the left-hand hook is waved in front of faithful society members to defend them against the poisons that emanate from the masquerader’s right hand.

Kojugu says that it is the left hand, not the right-hand hook, that kills, and it is the right hand, not the left, that has a protective role. Clearly, Kojugu’s opinion on this matter contradicts Dieterlen’s.

Interestingly, this contradiction echoes another concerning the identification of the left and right hands as male and female respectively (see Brett-Smith 1994:127, 296–297, n. 53). Dieterlen (1951:69) and Kojugu (Interview of 6/14/84, Book 7, pp. 88–89 of transcribed tapes) both identify the right hand as male and the left as...
The whip, it is the whip which demonstrates it to you clearly, and you will do that thing.\footnote{Kojugu Cissoko provided ambiguous and confusing information when asked to identify the \textit{Komo saman} and the \textit{Komo suruku}. In an early interview (6/14/84, Cissoko 14, Book 8, pp. 11–12), Kojugu identified the \textit{Komo suruku} as a small metal flute and the \textit{Komo saman} as a larger metal flute or horn. However, in the later interview, Molède-2, he was less precise, identifying both terms simply as \textit{tuna}. See also Dieterlen (1951:149) for corroboration of this point.} In fact, Kojugu viewed both the whips and the \textit{Komo} mask as essential tools with which the leader of the association and his elderly advisers control the young. The sculptor, who had himself carved seven \textit{Komo} headdresses, indicated that the mask is deliberately designed to terrify young initiates.\footnote{See also Dieterlen (1951:149) for corroboration of this point.} He observed that older initiates are less impressed by the mask, since they know that the association’s stock of poison is kept inside one of its ritual iron flutes (\textit{Komo saman}), not on the imposing carving.\footnote{Nyamaton Diarra (Interview of 4/15/84, Book 17, pp. 31–33 of transcribed tapes) identified the pair of flutes as the \textit{Komo saman} and the association’s mask as the \textit{Komo suruku} (see note 22), and this is the identification used here.} Nevertheless, Kojugu indicated that

female, but Nyamaton (First interview, 4/15/84, Book 17, pp. 70–71 of transcribed tapes) identifies the left hand as the “man’s” and the right hand as the “woman’s.” I have been unable to unravel this confusion, except to note that all the sources (Dieterlen, Kojugu, and Nyamaton) agree that ritual and sexual acts are performed with the left hand and that the right hand is used for ordinary actions.

In the case of the \textit{Komo} masquerader striking a victim with intention to kill, it would seem to make more sense for this to be carried out with the left hand, since this is reserved for ritual “work” (killing an offender would fall within this category of actions). Kojugu says that there is no remedy for being struck with the left hand; inevitably the victim dies within the next few days.

But, if you put on the entire costume of the \textit{Komo} (the masquerader), at that moment you become the \textit{Komo}. Indeed, you are feared on your left and on your right. At that time, hitting someone with your right hand is better than hitting them with your left. If you hit someone with your left hand, in any case, that is, that person is a dead man. There is no remedy for that. There is nothing against that. There is nothing against that. That is why we fear the left side. May this be pleasing to Allah and to you.

\textit{Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 8/14/84, Bolivi-2, Book 16, p. 64 of transcribed tapes}

The Bamana text reads:

\begin{quote}
N\textsc{k}a n\textsc{\textacute{e}} \textsc{m}i \textsc{d}onna a nyëng\textsc{\i}nh\textsc{\i}n\textsc{\e}f k\textsc{\o}n\textsc{o}, \textsc{aw}a o t\textsc{\u{u}}m\textsc{\a} na i k\textsc{\u{e}}r\textsc{\a} K\textsc{\o}m\textsc{o} ye. I t\textsc{\e} k\textsc{\u{e}} m\textsc{\o}g\textsc{o} ye tug\textsc{\u{u}}n \textsc{d}e, i b\textsc{\e} k\textsc{\u{e}} K\textsc{\o}m\textsc{o} de ye. Wa i k\textsc{\i}n i n\textsc{i} n\textsc{\u{u}}m\textsc{\a}, s\textsc{i}r\textsc{\a}n b\textsc{\e} k\textsc{\u{e}} olu ny\textsc{\e}. I k\textsc{\a} m\textsc{\o}g\textsc{o} bon i k\textsc{\i}n\textsc{\i} na o wa\textsc{i}t\textsc{\a} la, o k\textsc{\a} f\textsc{i}a i k\textsc{\a} m\textsc{\o}g\textsc{o} bon i n\textsc{\u{u}}m\textsc{\a} na. N\textsc{i} ye m\textsc{\o}g\textsc{o} bon i n\textsc{\u{u}}m\textsc{\a} na, o k\textsc{\i}n\textsc{\i} ye, o k\textsc{\e}r\textsc{\a}, o k\textsc{\e}r\textsc{\a} su ye ka ban m\textsc{\e}r\textsc{\e}; l\textsc{\u{a}}n\textsc{k}\textsc{\a}r\textsc{\i} t\textsc{o} la, fo\textsc{\i}y t\textsc{o} la. Sar\textsc{\a}k\textsc{\u{a}} t\textsc{\o} la, fo\textsc{\i}y t\textsc{o} la. O k\textsc{\o}s\textsc{\o}\textsc{n}, s\textsc{i}r\textsc{\a}n b\textsc{\e} k\textsc{\u{e}} n\textsc{\u{u}}m\textsc{n\u{a}} n\textsc{\u{a}}f\textsc{\i}n\textsc{\l}\textsc{\u{e}}l\textsc{\a} n\textsc{\i} n\textsc{\u{u}}m\textsc{\u{e}} ny\textsc{\e}. Allah sako i sako.
\end{quote}

Also see Brett-Smith (1994:140, 303, n. 101).

14. B\textsc{\i}san, b\textsc{\i}s\textsc{\i}n de b\textsc{\i} o y\textsc{\i}ra kë\textsc{\i}n\textsc{\e}n\textsc{\i}k\textsc{\e}s\textsc{\i} k\textsc{\i} j\textsc{\i} k\textsc{\i}n, a\textsc{\i} w b\textsc{\i} a k\textsc{\i} k\textsc{\i}.

\textit{Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 6/14/84, Book 8, pp. 14–15 of transcribed interviews}

15. See also Dieterlen (1951:149) for corroboration of this point.

16. Nyamaton Diarra (Interview of 4/15/84, Book 17, pp. 31–33 of transcribed tapes) identified the pair of flutes as the \textit{Komo saman} and the association’s mask as the \textit{Komo suruku} (see note 22), and this is the identification used here.

\footnote{Kojugu Cissoko provided ambiguous and confusing information when asked to identify the \textit{Komo saman} and the \textit{Komo suruku}. In an early interview (6/14/84, Cissoko 14, Book 8, pp. 11–12), Kojugu identified the \textit{Komo suruku} as a small metal flute and the \textit{Komo saman} as a larger metal flute or horn. However, in the later interview, Molède-2, he was less precise, identifying both terms simply as \textit{tuna}. See also Dieterlen (1951:149) for corroboration of this point.}
features of the mask with any precision (figs. 2, 4). One has the impression of gazing at the materialization of a shadow, rather than an actual object. The Bamana and Malinke enhance this effect of imprecision and fluidity by performing with the mask at night under the diffuse light of the moon or in an open space lit by the flickering flames of a bonfire. Furthermore, as with the society’s portable altars, or boliw, the original lines of most Komo masks are highly abstract (figs. 2–7). Although, as in the mask reproduced in figure 2, these abstract forms often convey extraordinary animation and the sense of a distinct personality, no visual clues inform the viewer as to exactly what animal is being represented. While carved and adorned to give an impression of lifelike vitality and threatening aggression, the mask never reveals its features or its identity with any exactitude. Perhaps it is this imprecision that adds an uncanny dimension to the headdress, since the fluid forms allow the terrified initiate to interpret the mask according to his own fears. In the end, the “head of the Komo” seems to defeat precise identification, presenting any interpreter with a set of complex and apparently irresolvable iconographical problems.

Numerous scholars have worked on the Komo, and the death-dealing mask has often been interpreted as some type of animal head. Dieterlen (1951:149) identifies the mask generically, as simply human or animal, while specifying that individual Komo masks represent panthers, swans, eagles, elephants, and vultures. She also reports that many masks are composites created from parts of animals, such as buffalos and crocodiles, but she never discusses whether the generic Komo headdress possesses any fundamental meaning. McNaughton (1988:129) offers a more subtle interpretation when he relates a cautionary comment made by one of his informants, Sedu Traore, in September of 1973:

The kōmō mask is made to look like an animal. But it is not an animal; it is a secret.

He suggests that Komo masks may be enigmas, complex power objects that incorporate the violence and energy

17. For a comprehensive discussion of the sinister meanings attached to dégê, see Brett-Smith (1994:300–301, n. 79).

18. See McNaughton (1979:44; 1988:138) for a discussion of the spiritual message conveyed by the encrustation that covers most Komo masks.

19. I am indebted to William Tronzo for this observation.

of the animals they evoke. He stresses that the headaddresses do not actually “represent” any particular animal, interpreting the mask’s forms as a series of visual metaphors that express in a general way the Komo’s aggressive power and uncanny abilities. I shall argue that we have enough data to discern at least one basic metaphor that unites McNaughton’s interpretation of the mask as a mysterious “secret” with Dieterlen’s disparate menagerie of birds and animals.

Among all the scholars who have studied the Komo, perhaps only Zahan (1960b:80–81) begins to unify all the possible ‘meanings’ attributed to the mask when he reports that the Bamana associate the headdress’s gaping mouth with the hyena’s voracity. The hyena’s capacity to devour anything it encounters presumably represents the Komo’s power to “devour” those who break its rules. Yet it still remains unclear why other devouring animals are mixed with the hyena image and whether any more fundamental metaphor lies hidden behind the mask’s aggressively yawning mouth.

I believe that we must stop trying to understand Komo masks literally and begin to read them as complex symbolic constructions built out of layer upon layer of associations. The interpretations discussed so far—from Dieterlen’s swan to Zahan’s hyena—assume that the animals, birds, or “secrets” represented by the mask express the essence of Mande masculinity. On a surface level, this is obviously true; in the Malinke and suruku, and the sources that mention it, see Brett-Smith (1994:286, n. 27).

23. This is my interpretation based on my own field data. See note 22 for Zahan’s interpretation.

24. I use the word Mandé as an adjective to denote the cultural values common to those ethnic groups that speak a core Mande language. The Mande language family includes Bamana, Malinke, Jula, Manya, Khasonke, Wangara, Marka-Dafin, Kuranko, Vai, Susu, Mende, Kpelle, Loma, Mano, Dan, and a number of other relatively local languages (Brett-Smith 1996:19, n. 5).

The term Manden designates the geographic heartland of the thirteenth- to late-sixteenth-century empire of Mali. The Manden is centered on the upper valley of the river Niger and includes Malinke-speaking areas in both the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Guinea-Conakry.

When one talks of ‘Mande values’ or a ‘Mande ethos,’ one is usually referring to the cultural beliefs shared by the Mande-speaking ethnic groups (the Bamana, Malinke, Marka) who live within the core area of the Manden. Much of this cultural ethos is shared by other Mande-speaking groups outside the Manden geographic region. For the precise borders of the Manden, see Brett-Smith (1996:19, n. 5).

Zahan (1960b:33) says the following of the Komo society: “Son domaine est marqué par la monovalence sexuelle du mâle...”
Bamana world hunters adorn their jackets with horns and quills, and spikes and teeth are clear indicators of the animal aggression associated with powerful men. McNaughton correctly tells us that a famous Komo mask, like a renowned Komo leader, can be referred to by a phrase usually employed to designate an old and powerful male elephant or bush buffalo.25

However, the Komo headdress is multivalent, and there may be something even more terrifying for Bamana men than the accumulated powers of a male elder, particularly if we remember that the primary audience that views the mask and for which it is designed, consists of young, newly initiated men, who, in the traditional context, would still be virgins.26 Perhaps it is revealing that informants refer to the mask as a warra, or “clawed animal,” without being able to provide a more precise identification.27 In Mande legend, the most terrifying clawed animal is not the lion, the anteater, or the roan antelope, but the sorcerer who disguises herself in animal form to entrap the unwary hunter. In tale after tale, a woman assumes the shape of a mysteriously attractive clawed animal in order to defeat a hero who is the embodiment of male power. If one takes the hint offered by these tales and looks beyond the obvious ‘masculinity’ of the Komo mask, perhaps one will find that its features express male fears, not male prowess. Perhaps the bestiality of the mask conveys a more subtle meaning than at first appears, for the worst “clawed animal” of all may be woman herself.28

25. The phrase is dan kelen, which means, “isolated one.” See McNaughton (1979:30) for this information.
26. Women almost never view the mask, and if they do, they do not live to talk about it.
27. McNaughton (1979:30, n. 34). The source is the famous hunter’s bard Seydou Camara. Also see ibid., p. 35.

The Bamana and Malinke term warra denotes an animal category that does not exist in Western classification systems. Warra is a general reference word for any wild animal with claws that can scratch and wound (see Zahan [1980:35] for a slightly different definition of the term). This category includes animals as diverse as the lion (the warra par excellence), the pangolin (n’koson, Manis tricuspis), the anteater (timba, Orycteropus afer), and the roan antelope (dage, Hippotragus equinus).

For additional information on the nature of warraw and their relationship to the Tyi Warra association and masks, see Zahan (1980).
28. In this context, it is interesting to note that the modern Malinke singer, Salif Keita, praises the African woman and girlfriend as a true warra in his song Waraya, or “Wildness” (on the tape, Amen, Island Records, 1991). Here, Salif is using the term warra in order to celebrate the ferocity and physical strength valued in a traditional woman. He implicitly contrasts the strength of the African woman with the faults of Western women, who are generally viewed as too frail to withstand either a tropical climate or ‘real’ lovemaking. Traditionalists consider many aspects of what we would call romantic lovemaking (for instance, kissing) to be corruptions of the truer and stronger methods of traditional intimacy.

Let us begin our investigation of the Komo’s ‘animality’ with some new and unexpected data. In the spring of 1984, Mr. Mara and I presented Nyamaton Diarra, the former head of a Beledugu Komo society, with an open-ended question about the meaning of the Komo mask. We expected that Nyamaton might refuse to answer or, if he did, that he would simply identify the association’s mask as one of the many creatures already recorded by other scholars. Instead, the Komo leader bluntly stated the following, as if it were a well-known fact:

Old men say that to see a woman naked is to see the Komo.29

Nyamaton then elaborated on his statement as follows:

Seeing the Komo is the same kind of thing. Because, what is seeing the Komo? If you have seen a woman, if you have

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29. Cékkóònë ñò, mëso lankan יe, Kòmò yë don.
Interview with Nyamaton Diarra, 4/18/84, Book 19, pp. 19–20 of transcribed tapes.
seen her naked, and if it has excited you, if she doesn't keep her feet together [that is, prevent you], you will sleep with her. This is as though you have seen the Komo. For instance, your female relative, if you see her naked sex and if you say, 'I want you, I am going to have sex with you,' then you will obtain her and have sex with her. And if you have sought after your female relative, then you have seen the Komo.30

How can we make sense of these statements? Before we begin our exploration of their enigmatic content, it is necessary to have some idea of how the Bamana and Malinke view human sexuality. Specifically, we need to know what they think about the female genitals, since this is the key body part to which Nyamaton refers.

For traditional Malinke and Bamana, sex is an important and indeed almost sacred activity, since children are essential for individual security in old age and the survival of the group. Like a religious mystery, the sexual act is viewed as profoundly incomprehensible; no one really understands what determines either sterility or successful conception and childbirth. What is known is that the female sex is essential for these processes and that its pleasures exert a compelling power over men. Apart from that, the reproductive process remains an unknown quantity: something that women apparently control, at least in regard to menstruation, conception, and childbirth, for these are events from which Bamana and Malinke men feel they are completely excluded.31

Despite the availability of modern health clinics in large towns and cities, a generic sense of exclusion and an attitude of ritual awe still pervade male attitudes towards sexuality. A small boy who accidentally finds his mother's first menstrual cloth as he plays in her bed will never forget her expression. However, her calm explanation that it is the preservation of this cloth that guarantees her continued ability to have more children inspires her son with a profound respect, fear, and awe for the creative powers materialized in the blood-soaked rag. Such a rag is not a source of shame, guilt, or evil; rather, it is one of life's most powerful objects, and no one, least of all a man or boy, takes such an object lightly.32

This sense of ritualized respect, of almost incredulous disbelief at a woman's power to create new life, affects Bamana and Malinke sexual behavior in concrete ways. Sex is too important and too sacred to be left to the individual; in the past, grandfathers not only arranged the marriages of their grandsons but taught the basic rules of sexual conduct, many of which are still followed to this day. Almost every detail of sexual behavior was regulated by some rule, and young men learned most of these during the retreat period following their circumcision (Dieterlen and Cissé 1972:58–59).

This sexual code is pertinent to our understanding of Nyamaton's enigmatic statements regarding the Komo and the female sex. First of all, the female sex, the only observable part of the female body that is clearly necessary for conception and childbirth, is surrounded with an atmosphere of fearful reverence. Men not only think of the female genitals as erotically exciting, but as sacred and terrifying. The female sex itself is a ritual tool, and every woman carries within her own body a weapon capable of destroying the most powerful man. When a woman is angered or shamed beyond the point of no return, she has only to detach her skirt in public, place her hand on her naked genitals, and curse the offending male, for her oppressor to face universal ostracism and social run. No one will speak to, feed, or have any dealings whatsoever with a man so cursed. The fact that few women ever resort to this extreme gesture adds to its power; the gesture continues to exist as a measure of last resort, and men continue to fear it. Furthermore, the female sex has other capacities that inspire caution; in an instant, a woman's menstrual

30. Kômô ye don o coco rô. Pârce que kômô ye ye mun ye? N'î ye a ye, nî y'a lankołon ye, nî jàbabê'î la, n'â m'a senw kè nyâgon kan, i bê si fê. O bê kômi i ye kômô ye. I balembamuso, nî y'a ju lankołon ye, nî y'a fô ko 'n bôi nyini n' bê si fê, i bê se k'a sórô, k'î k'î la. N'î ye i balembamuso nyini, i ye kômô ye.

31. Biology excludes men from menstruation and childbirth in a direct physical sense. However, they are also socially excluded from these events, since they are forbidden any direct contact either with a menstruating woman and menstrual cloths or with a woman in childbirth and childbirth cloths. Men also believe that they are excluded from control of conception, since sexual activity is viewed as a basis for conception, but not necessarily the cause of conception. Everyone knows that a woman has to be having sexual relations to conceive, but just because she has these relations does not necessarily mean that she conceives. Actual conception or sterility is thought to be dependent on other factors, such as the woman's communication with the spirit world, her breaking or not breaking ritual interdictions (tanaw), and her human relationships (for instance, the goodwill of her mother's cowives). For an extended discussion of this issue and male fears concerning their exclusion from the reproductive process, see Brett-Smith (1994:222–223).

32. See Brett-Smith (1994:206) for a more extended discussion of this example.
blood can empty a man's carefully husbanded store of ritual objects of all their power, and women are not always careful to say when they are bleeding. The list of dangers inherent in male contact with the female sex is endless, but our immediate concern is with the practical rules generated by this overriding sense of danger.

Because of its uncanny power, young men are taught that they must never approach the female sex casually. The Bamana and Malinke consider that the female genitals are too dangerous to be seen directly or clearly. A man is free to initiate sex with his wife, but he must avoid gazing directly at her genitals. If a man breaks this rule and looks at the naked female sex and breathes its vapors, he will either go blind or become sick and die of incurable tuberculosis (Brett-Smith 1994:208–209, 319, n. 16). Elders also caution young men to use only their left hands to handle their penises during sexual encounters and to begin and end sexual relations abruptly; kissing, lengthy embracing, or touching the woman's sex is considered almost as dangerous as the sight of female genitalia (Brett-Smith 1994:210).

Furthermore, many men take the precaution of washing with special medicinal leaves after sexual relations in order to remove the nyama, or unreleased energy, that attaches itself to them from the experience.  

As these examples suggest, the Bamana and Malinke surround sexual activity with a series of ritualized rules that channel and control men's behavior. These rules, and the atmosphere they engender, are strikingly similar to those that surround ritual objects, whether they are blood-soaked menstrual rags or Komo masks. In the light of these associations, Nyamaton's comparison does not seem eccentric, but rather logical and rational. Let us then return to his statements and see whether we can get a better grasp of their meaning.

When one rereads Nyamaton's declarations, it appears as though the Komo leader is saying several things at once. He begins by asserting that seeing any female sex is the equivalent of seeing the Komo. He then gives a reason for this equation: such a sight might lead a man into initiating incestuous sexual relations, and such relations are just as forbidden as seeing the Komo. However, Nyamaton's enigmatic way of speaking leaves us unclear as to whether seeing a female sex is similar to seeing the Komo simply because both involve the breaking of ritual rules (tanaw) and the committing of forbidden acts, or whether the female sex in and of itself is an object equivalent to a Komo mask.

I suggest that Nyamaton intends to convey both meanings and that each is relevant for an analysis of the Komo mask. Just as a woman who views the Komo mask is immediately executed, so too the incautious man who sees a female sex will die from tuberculosis as a result. The female sex and the Komo mask are "the same," because both are sacred objects whose sight results in the viewer's death. Secondly, the sight of a female sex may lead a man to incest, and the traditional punishment for incest was and continues to be suicide by both participants. Thus the viewing of a woman's sex may lead to an even more dangerous situation—incest—female sex without bringing its inherent nyama down upon him. This defense system is more subtle than it may seem at first; both Nyamaton and Kojugu are well aware that a man will not recoil and curl up to die immediately if he does see his wife's genitals, but they are not worrying about short-term consequences. Rather, their perspective on sex is colored by long-term fears, since nyama inherent in the female genitals usually manifests itself in the unexpected aftereffects of sexual activity, not in the sexual encounter per se.

For a more thorough definition of nyama, see Brett-Smith (1994:38). For the nyama attached to the female genitals, see Brett-Smith (1994:209, 215, 319–320, n. 17).

For the most succinct current summary of this concept, see McNaughton (1988:15–16).

33. The information concerning the use of the left hand was first told to us by Nyamaton. See Brett-Smith (1994:210, n. 21) for Nyamaton's exact words.

34. Nyama is a concept that is almost indefinable, so pervasive is the idea within Bamana society. Bird describes it as the "energy of action," or the energy released by any act, whether positive or negative (1974:vii–ix; Bird & Kendall 1980:16–17, nn. 4–6). This ever-lurking but invisible force, which flows through both animate and inanimate things, inevitably seems to have more negative than positive consequences. Few will attribute success in difficult, and seemingly hopeless, marriage negotiations to nyama, but everyone can explain a woman's recurrent miscarriages as the result of unleashed nyama.

Perhaps the woman touched her husband's hunting shirt, inadvertently letting loose the nyama of the animals he had killed on their unborn child, perhaps she unknowingly ate a sauce containing a nyama-filled medicinal plant, or perhaps the long-term nyama from her constant attempts to injure her cowwife's many sons rebounded on her own pregnancies.

As this example suggests, reproductive failure provides fertile territory for the action of nyama. Nevertheless, the female sex itself is invested with a sacredness that cannot be defined simply by saying that it has nyama or is nyama-filled, since the female genitals have important powers of creation as well as destruction. Nyama flows through a woman's sex, but the sex itself is conceived of as separate from and different than this abstract energy.

The rules of sexual behavior described in this paper are essential defensive tools that allow a man to have creative contact with the
and this, in turn, leads to an immediate and violent, if self-inflicted, death. Whatever way one turns, the result of viewing both a woman’s sex and the Komo is death.

However coherent Nyamaton’s statements may become, once one understands the Mande view of human sexuality and what the Bamana and Malinke believe are the consequences of seeing the female genitals, these passages still reflect the views of a single informant. In June of 1984, Kojugu Cissoko, a sculptor who had carved seven Komo masks and who was currently the head of his village’s Komo in the Kita area, independently confirmed Nyamaton’s statements. After listening to the tape recording of the earlier interview with Nyamaton, Kojugu commented:

If you have heard that you don’t leave the place of sacrifice to the Komo to have sex with a woman, the meaning of that, the thing which the old man said about the Komo, where he explained to you, saying that it was the same thing as the sex of a woman, that is the truth. But whoever shall say that this is not the truth, may I become a child once again and put us together sitting side by side, and I will interrogate him severely and pursue him so that at that moment he will realize that he doesn’t even know about the fact that the Komo can kill people. The person who said that, that it isn’t true, he doesn’t know anything at all. In fact, it is made with the sex of a woman. . . .

Initially, Kojugu refused to explain in detail what he meant by his tantalizing statement, “it is made with the sex of a woman. . . .”, but later in the same interview he did repeat his assertion that seeing a woman nude was “the same” as seeing the Komo:

To say that to see a woman nude, that is to see the Komo, it is to see the Komo, it is to see the Komo, the old man [that is, Nyamaton] didn’t lie about that.

In assessing Kojugu’s statements, it is important to know that the sculptor did not personally know Nyamaton,

nor was he even aware of Nyamaton’s name or village, since we concealed this information from him. It is also significant that Kojugu’s desire to convince us that he was more knowledgeable than any other informant actually gave him a strong inducement to contradict the tape recording in order to enhance his status in our eyes. Yet, despite his competitiveness, Kojugu unhesitatingly confirmed Nyamaton’s assertion.

Furthermore, two of Kojugu’s own statements reinforce the idea, already raised by Nyamaton, of an explicitly physical correspondence between a woman’s sexual parts and the Komo mask. When Kojugu says, “in fact, it is made with the sex of a woman. . . .” (A dilala de k’a ni muso nyékun . . .), he uses a verb, ka dalan, that means, “to make” or “to fabricate,” in the sense of “physically construct.” Sculptors commonly use this verb to describe the actual carving of an object, while they employ an entirely different verb, ka dan, or “to create,” to express the idea of conceptual thinking and creative invention. Muso nyékun simply means “a woman’s front parts.” Kojugu’s Malinke is unequivocal; the mask is made with the sex of a woman.

When pressed to explain this abrupt and disturbing statement, Kojugu implied that constructing a Komo mask with the sex of a woman probably belongs to the domain of history. In the following passage he grudgingly reveals that the female sex used to make the first Komo headdress was taken from a child of the griot ‘caste.’ According to Kojugu, this is the reason why these bards and oral historians are the one social group completely excluded from the Komo:

Question: You spoke about the manner of making the Komo?
Kojugu: It is a child. Nhun. It’s not made with an old woman.
Question: Of approximately what age?
Kojugu: At the time when it was [first] made, aya, my grandfather didn’t tell me the number of her years. If I

36. N’i y’a mën, i té bô Komoxon yôrò ka taa muso ko kë, a kòñò ye. cëkôròba dò ñ in ye, min fi ye ko, komo, a ye yôrò min yiri’ la kafô ani muso nyékñè ye kelen ye, o ye tìñyè de ye. Min ko, ko. tìñyè té, ne ka kë demisièñin ye, n’i y’ an sigi nyôgon kan, n’ bi a fësètësè k’a gën k’a lò a rò, kafô a té hali Kômo moyôgà a yôrò lôn. Min ye nin fò dë, ko tìñyè tè dë, a t’a lôn. A dilala de k’a ni muso nyékun. . . .


38. Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 6/14/84, Cissoko6-14, Book 7, pp. 75–76 of transcribed tapes

39. For an extended discussion of both ka dilan (ka dalan, “to fabricate”) and ka dan (“to create”), see Brett-Smith (1994:169).

40. Of course women of all ‘castes’ are automatically excluded, as has already been stated.
should say something and speak about it, I will lie and that isn't good.

Question: But was this a blacksmith child, or a child of some other caste?
Kojugu: It was a griotte.

Question: Hun?
Kojugu: It was a griotte.

Question: Aa?
Kojugu: Haven't you heard that griots don't enter the assembly of the Komo? The reason for this comes from this [the fact that a griotte child was used to construct the first Komo].

Both the use of the past tense and the reference to Kojugu's grandfather as the source of the information suggest that we are dealing with a longstanding oral tradition, not with an account of something the sculptor had experienced in his lifetime. Furthermore, the interdiction that forbids male griots to participate in the Komo is so old that no one knows when it began, thus Kojugu's reference to it places the use of the child's sex in early, if not mythic, times. Nevertheless, the statement and its explanation remain somewhat unclear, except that the sculptor's words imply a physical use of the female sex in the construction of at least one Komo mask.

Kojugu's statements tell us that a Komo mask and a woman's sex possess some kind of physical correspondence that goes far beyond the fact that the sight of each object may cause the viewer's death. Furthermore, in a postscript to his confirmation of Nyamaton's statements, Kojugu implies that a Komo mask and a woman's sexual parts are visually similar:

The Komo is made to become like the sex of a girl. If you have learned that women don't see the Komo and that women never eat meat from its sacrifices—indeed, this has many meanings.

Kojugu makes this identification even more explicit when he says of the Komo's mouth:

It resembles a woman. It really resembles the sex of a woman.

Here, it is worthwhile to examine the words that Kojugu uses. He says:

A bôlen muso la. A bôlen muso lasiri yèrè yèrè la.

Kojugu's refusal to explain his statements, one can only speculate about the significance of the sacrifice at this point.

Kojugu seemed to indicate that the offering had a very important meaning that might be quite different than anyone could reasonably expect and that he was not going to reveal it. My own guess is that his reluctance to explain the griotte offering had to do with the balance of power and the inter-'caste' relationship between griots and blacksmiths. It is possible that any mention of this sacrifice still carries political overtones having to do with the origin of the griot and blacksmith 'castes' and that the 'meaning' of the offering is to be found more in the domain of politics than of ritual.

42. Komo de dilala k'a kë o [this particle refers back to the subject of the preceding sentence, dennsin nin musoman, or "a young girl"] nyëfëla cogo ye. N'i 'a ye, u ko, muso të a ye, muso të a sôn sogo damu, a kòrò ka ca dë.

43. A bôlen muso la. A bôlen muso lasiri yèrè yèrè la.

Intelligence of the griotte in very vague terms and that it would be useless to ask him what his own interpretation of the offering was. Given
The expression A bòlen . . . la or A bòlen bë . . . fe is commonly employed when discussing a physical likeness between two things or people, as in the phrase, “He resembles Mamadou.” By using this construction, Kojugu is stating that there is a visual similarity between the appearance of a Komo mask and a woman’s sex. Furthermore, Kojugu does not use one of the more euphemistic expressions, such as ju (“base”) or nyëfela (“front”), that men usually employ when they refer to the female genitals. Rather, he makes a deliberate choice to use the word, lasiri. Lasiri is far more specific than either ju or muso nyëfela (“a woman’s front parts”), since it is a technical medical term that midwives use when they refer either to the uterus or to the actual entry into the vagina. Kojugu’s choice of lasiri suggests that he is making a specific visual comparison between the gaping jaw of the typical Komo mask and the entrance to a woman’s vagina.

Given the appearance of Komo masks, the reader may well view the sculptor’s assertion with skepticism (figs. 2–6, 8). However, I would suggest that when Kojugu says, “The Komo is made to become like a woman’s sex,” and, “It really resembles the sex of a woman,” he is not stating that Komo masks are realistic depictions of the female genitals as we, in the West, understand them. Rather, he is viewing the mask as a graphic exaggeration of all those visual characteristics that make the female sex so terrifying to Bamana and Malinke men. Kojugu’s Komo does not correspond to an illustration in a Western biology book, but to a nightmare image, rapacious and devouring.

In fact, this graphic image of an intensely destructive female sex occurs in the description of one of the most important women in Mande oral literature, Sogolen Wulen Condé. Many versions of the Sunjata epic describe the marriage of the great king’s father, Fara Magan Cenyi, to his short, hunchbacked, limping, bald mother, Sogolen Wulen Condé. Although Sunjata’s father has been told that he will obtain a famous son by marrying Sogolen, he is not anxious to consummate the marriage when she arrives in his courtyard. Sogolen is brought to Sunjata’s father by two hunters who have won her by killing the mysterious and destructive buffalo of Do (an aged sorceress with powers of animal transformation). Not only is Sogolen the epitome of ugliness, but she is also a sorceress with the power to defend herself against the loss of her virginity. Sogolen has already successfully resisted the advances of the two hunters, and when she is finally married to Fara Magan Cenyi and enters the marriage chamber, she brings forth an entire armory of defenses. From her eye she shoots an iron needle at her husband, trying to pierce his eyes. She also attempts to spear him with an iron-tipped staff and bombards him with other, similar rods. In some versions, Sogolen’s pubic hair is transformed into porcupine quills to prevent both the hunters and her royal husband from touching her sex (Laye 1978:65–66; de Zeltner 1913:6). Such defenses—iron spikes, rods, needles, and porcupine quills—are exactly what one finds on Komo masks (see figs. 3–6).

44. Bazin (1906:175–176) defines ju as “base, foundation, lower part, behind.” He also gives a second definition as “beginning, end.” He does not give the sexual meaning.

Bailleul (1981:89–90) defines ju as “the buttocks” in an anatomical sense, and when used in an insult, as “the sexual parts.” When used in a figurative sense, he translates it as “base, beginning, origin, motive, and cause.”

Today, the most common use of the word ju occurs in sexual insults. Neither Bazin (1906), Dumestre (1981–1989), or Bailleul (1981) define nyëfela.

45. Bazin (1906:364) defines lasiri as “to be full, pregnant.”

Dumestre (1989, no. 7:1085) defines lasiri as “to be pregnant, to be full, to make pregnant, pregnancy; sex, anus, base, cause, reason, the bottom of a basin.”

Bailleul (1981:129) simply translates lasiri as “to make pregnant.”

My own experience is that lasiri tends to carry an objective, anatomical connotation and that it denotes either the uterus itself or the entry into the vagina. Whereas a young man or woman might use lasiri as a general term for the female sex, an experienced midwife or a knowledgeable male elder, like Kojugu, would employ it in a specific sense.

46. Sunjata is the famous thirteenth-century king who first defeated the great blacksmith sorcerer and tyrant, Soumaoro, then united the entire Mande area into the kingdom of Mali, and finally set forth the code of traditional law, which was observed in principle up until colonization.

There are multiple published versions of the Sunjata epic. I have consulted Johnson (1986), Laye (1978), Niane (1960), and de Zeltner (1913) and have also made extensive use of Conrad’s forthcoming article on the image of Mande women (1997). I am indebted to Stephen Belcher for drawing my attention to some of the texts cited above.

Sunjata’s father has a variety of names. Here, I am using the one suggested by Stephen Belcher (pers. comm., 9/17/95). Conrad prefers Farako Manko Farako Ken (pers. comm., 9/2/95). Niane (1960) uses Maghan Kon Fatta.

47. My description of this event is drawn from Conrad (1997:10–13).

48. The reader may question how the feathers attached to the Komo masquerader’s tunic and the resulting image of a predatory bird (Dieterlen’s vultures, swans, and eagles) relate to the interpretation.
Sogolol's mystical equipment fits well with Nyamaton's and Kojugu's statements, and we must conclude that the appearance of the Komo mask expresses a similar belief in the possible danger of the female sex. The mask gives a concrete shape to the ideas (such as quills replacing pubic hair) that we might view as exclusively metaphorical when we find them in Mande oral literature.

Given that the nightmare image of the female sex has an important role in epic poetry, we might expect to find some mention of the female genitals in the oral literature associated with the Komo mask and Komo ceremonies. Unfortunately, Kojugu was only willing to divulge one of the songs and speeches used in Komo society celebrations. We had asked the sculptor whether any songs existed that related the Komo to the female sex. He replied that certain Komo songs focused on this theme, and he reluctantly agreed to recite two stanzas from one such song:

Byè ka dun de  
Byè ka jan de  
Byè sima da dumani  
Byè bo diyaro.  

Byè ka bon de  
Byè ka jàn de  
Byè si ma  
Nanyumani byè bo  
Diyà ro.

The vagina is deep  
The vagina is large  
The hairy vagina has a small, sweet mouth  
to reach the sweetness of the vagina.  

The vagina is broad  
The vagina is large  

but no vagina has ever achieved the sweetness of the thing of Nanyumani.49

As one might suspect, the song is ritual speech, not normal Malinke discourse, and the sculptor's voice became almost unbearably tense when he recited the verses. Kojugu then added that the song is learned mandatorily by all Komo initiates and that the day one sings it is "a red thing," that is, a time of many sacrifices. Beyond this, he would not elaborate.50

To understand the significance of the song and what it evokes for the Bamana or Malinke listener, one must comprehend the meaning of the word byè. This word does not simply refer to the female sex. Both men and women will use the words ju, or "root, base," and musoya, or "womaness," as somewhat impolite but vague terms appropriate in personal discussions of infertility and sexuality.51 However, byè is practically unpronounceable. Everyone knows the word, everyone knows that some people use it, but no well brought up person of either sex would ever employ it voluntarily, unless they are a midwife engaged in a serious medical consultation.52 Byè is a ritualized term that denotes the

49. Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 8/11/84, Djëns/Ciw-2, Book 14, pp. 94–95 of transcribed tapes.

50. At least not in terms Mr. Mara and I could understand. Kojugu continues by saying that on this day, water is turned into wine and into milk and that several other miraculous transformations occur, but he does not explain what he means by these comments or how they relate to the song. Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 8/11/84, Djëns/Ciw-2, Book 14, p. 95 of transcribed tapes.

Francesco Pellizzi commented that if the mask is the female sex, then the sacrifices made to or on it may correspond to menstrual blood. He suggests that the sacrificial blood, produced artificially through acts of violence by men, may function as a compensation for the disappearance of menstrual blood during pregnancy. He proposes that because women withhold their blood in order to create, men employ the words si.51

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vagina itself and, like the body part, the word is regarded as sacred, never to be uttered even in the privacy of one’s own bedroom. One can use ju or musoya in insults or lovemaking and be forgiven, but the use of byè will never be forgotten. Whereas ju and musoya have an abstract quality that blunts their meaning, and lasiri, although specific, has largely anatomical overtones, byè conjures up an obscene and grossly realistic physical image of the female genitals. In singing “byè is broad, byè is large,” the Komo initiates are evoking a visual confrontation with the vagina itself, a confrontation that is metaphorically acted out when the young men face the Komo mask for the first time during their initiation.

Let us look at this moment when mask and initiate come face to face. According to Dieterlen (1951:155), the young man does not simply view the Komo mask, but he is forced to lick both the headress and the metal hooks carried by the masked medium three times, while swearing that he will place the Komo ahead of everything else in his life, even his father and mother. In the concrete action of licking, the initiate comes face to face, and one could even say mouth to mouth, with the mask. The action of licking is so physically explicit, one can even suggest that prior to 1960, it was this confrontation with a metaphorical vagina that was a young man’s initiation into sex, not the loss of his virginity with a real woman. Significantly, this confrontation involves the performance of the most forbidden and dangerous sexual act—licking—within the boundaries of a ritual context. By committing this metaphorical transgression and by subsequently swearing allegiance to the Komo, the young man acknowledges that unbridled, ‘wild’ sexuality belongs within the domain of the Komo, and that he accepts the association’s charge not to let his own sexuality break the established boundaries of daily life.54

Although the postindependence dissolution of traditional sexual mores has obscured the connection between Komo initiation and sexuality, a Komo leader such as Kojugu still views the young man’s traumatic entry into the society as fundamentally similar to sexual experience. When he discusses Komo initiation, Kojugu compares this ritual to the experience of having sex for the first time:

The first day that you enter into the Komo, the thing that you have never seen, you will see that thing, the thing that you have never done, you will do that thing. That is like the fact that you have never had sexual intercourse and then you touch a woman [that is, her sex]. Yes, your hand touches first of all, your hand is placed on her breasts, good, and then when you mount her, too, it will be another experience that you aren’t accustomed to. That is the same thing as entering the Komo.55

Both Kojugu’s song and his description of the initiation into the Komo evoke images of the society’s mask as a vagina in disguise, but the song also makes a somewhat confusing declaration. After praising the depth and sweetness of the female body part, it concludes by asserting that the vagina cannot provide a man with the ultimate in human satisfaction:

no vagina has ever achieved the sweetness of the thing of Nanyumani.

What is the “thing of Nanyumani,” and how can it be sweeter than the real vaginas that await the young men after they are initiated? Kojugu never explained his phrase, “the thing of Nanyumani,” directly, but data collected from Nyamatom Diarra suggests a plausible interpretation.

Nanyumani is similar to many Bamana and Malinke names for women, and the sentence construction itself (“the thing of Nanyumani”) suggests that we are dealing with the name of a person. Among knowledgeable

53. Francesco Pellizzi suggests that if the initiate licks the “top” of the mask, the section that Kojugu insists is the most dangerous, he may be licking the area that represents the ‘clitoris’ of the unexcised griotte who was sacrificed to make the first Komo. It would be very interesting to find out if the top of the Komo mask is in any way associated with the clitoris and if this is one of the reasons it is so dangerous, but so far my field data is silent on this point.

Furthermore, Dieterlen’s description does not really clarify where the initiate licks or even if there is a chosen spot. What my interviews with Kojugu do suggest is that the initiate is licking the two objects most likely to be covered with poison—the mask and the metal hooks carried by the masquerader.

See note 13 for citations concerning the poison carried by the masquerader’s iron hooks. Also see my discussion of the Nyè Tenen horn further along in this article. The Nyè Tenen horn contains poison and is inserted into the top of some but not all Komo headdresses.

54. I am indebted to Francesco Pellizzi for this analysis of the licking procedure.

55. I don don fòlò Kòmò lā, i ma deli ka tên min ye ban, i b’o ye. I ma deli ka ko min kè, i b’o kè. O ye komi i ma deli ka muso ko kè ban, e sera muso ma. Awa, i bolo fòlò ser’a ma, i bolo dara si kan, bon, n’i dun nana yèlèn fana, aa, i bè kè cogoya dò la min ma deli ka k’ti la. O ni Kòmó donni cogo bée kan.

Interview with Kojugu Cissokko, 8/11/84, Djinn/Ciw, Book 14, pp. 96–97 of transcribed tapes.
elders, it is fairly common to use a code word, such as a woman’s name, to refer to a secret association and its objects. We also know that at least one woman’s name does function as such a code word and that it explicitly refers to the *Komo* mask. When questioned about the meaning of the common female name Tenen and its associated but less common variant, NyèTenen, Nyamaton Diarra revealed that Tenen is a name that can be given to a baby girl by the owner of the *Nyè Tenen* ritual object. Nyamaton then explained that the *Nyè Tenen* is actually a horn (presumably filled with ritual substances) that is placed in the center of the forehead of a *Komo* mask to endow it with power. The *Nyè Tenen* horn functions as a type of lie detector, since it enables the *Komo* that possesses it to detect uninitiated men within the crowd at a *Komo* celebration. In daily life, it is quite common for women to be called Tenen, and this name does not necessarily have the direct relationship to the *Nyè Tenen* horn mentioned by Nyamaton. However, Nyamaton’s comments tell us that when the name Tenen or the phrase *Nyè Tenen* is used by elders in the context of a discussion about *Komo* matters, the name has a specific meaning that is disguised by its everyday usage. Furthermore, as we shall see later in this paper, both male and female elders preserve traditions that attribute the origin of the *Komo* to women, so that it would make sense for elders to refer to pieces of *Komo* equipment, or even the society itself, as “the thing of X,” where X is a woman’s name with specific associations to the *Komo*.

So far, I have not collected data that directly associates the name Nanyumani with the *Komo*. However, the NyèTenen example suggests that one can interpret the name Nanyumani in a similar fashion. Thus it is plausible to hypothesize that when Kojugu says, “no vagina has ever achieved the sweetness of the thing of Nanyumani,” he means that no vagina has ever equaled the sweetness of the *Komo*. This interpretation would also make sense when one considers the literal meaning of the name, Nanyumani. *Na* is an alternative form of the honorific prefix, Ma, or “mother,” which is often attached to female names. Among the Malinke (and Kojugu essentially speaks Malinke rather than Bamana) especially, one tends to say Ma Tenen or “mother Tenen,” instead of the simpler “Tenen,” in order to show respect for a woman. Thus, Nanyumani can be broken down into Na Nyumani, where Na means “mother,” and Nyumani means “sweet thing,” or “good thing.” A literal interpretation of the name Nanyumani would then be, “mother sweet thing,” or perhaps even “mother of sweet things,” an honorific title that would be entirely appropriate for the *Komo* society.

If we accept this interpretation as a plausible working hypothesis, the last line of Kojugu’s song can be recast as:

but no vagina has ever achieved the sweetness of the *Komo* society.

In teaching the young men this song, a song whose meaning seems completely at odds with the reality of sexual experience, the *Komo* elders were asserting their categorical power over the initiates. For unless the new society member could accept and memorize the declaration that no sexual experience with a living woman would ever compare in sweetness to membership in the *Komo*, he was not allowed to pass out of the initiation and marry. Only after swearing primary loyalty to the *Komo* mask, the metaphorical vagina owned by the group of men, could the young initiates gain access to real vaginas.

The elders who teach the young men Kojugu’s song are trying to convince them that the mask, the objectified wooden vagina, has something special to offer, a power that real women lack. Yet their insistence on the mask’s “sweetness,” a sweetness that will shortly be disproven by the physical experience of the initiates’ marriages, suggests a profound sense of lack, a fear of that very “sweetness” represented by the mask. For, in fact, it is women, not men, who possess vaginas. Despite the generalized belief that the *Komo* mask and its accompanying *boli* can inflict sterility or impregnate women, it is still women, not men, who conceive and bear children. In a society where one can still reasonably expect only half of one’s children to survive,


57. Many scholars have already noted that the *Komo* dignitaries use the association’s mask to control both younger men and women socially and politically. See McNaughton (1979:17–23) for a thorough and cogent overview of different scholars’ opinions of the *Komo’s* origins and function.

Dieterlen and Cissé (1972) identify the *Komo* as the most important initiation association among the Bamana (p. 17). Their description of the *Komo’s* functions underlines the society’s ability to organize and train young men in arcane knowledge (pp. 17–19) and its absolute closure to women (p. 35).

Dieterlen (1951:164–165) stresses the extent to which the *Komo* infiltrates every aspect of Bamana life.
children are essential, and men cannot make them. In an environment where only reproduction guarantees survival, men are profoundly aware of their deep dependence on women, for they and they alone can produce children.

Nyamatoro’s and Kojugu’s statements and Kojugu’s song tell us that Komó members perceive their mask as the metaphysical transformation of an ideal vagina. Clearly, understanding the mental equation, mask equals vagina, is a critical first step in understanding the mask. However, this identification does not tell the full story, for the owners of the mask are men, not women. Why do men own a power object that functions as a symbolic vagina? Does our analysis of the Komó mask reveal anything more general about gender relations and the power to reproduce in Banama and Malinke society?

Several elderly men and one female elder agreed that a myth about the Komó’s origin explains male ownership of the association and its mask. The myth explores the imbalance of power between men and women, and it also leads to a more subtle interpretation of the mask-eququals-vagina equation. The story suggests that the Komó headress represents generative power and not merely a feared and desired body part. While M’Fa Sory Traore and Kojugu Cissoko recounted truncated versions of the myth and other male elders agreed on the story’s general outlines, the only informant able (or perhaps willing) to recite the full version was a woman, Salimata Kone.58 She told us that:

I learned something from my grandfather. He was talking in front of us when we were children. The thing which caused the Komó to belong to men—we women were having a celebration and the Komó [the mask] jumped [out of our grasp]. Some were in front, and some were behind. The

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58. M’Fa Sory Traore at Kurusa provided us with a truncated version of the myth while we were sitting with him and several other elders under an outside shelter on a hot afternoon. The shelter happened to be just outside Salimata Kone’s room; at first she was silent while the men were talking, but then she interrupted M’Fa Sory to give us a fuller version of the myth. This is the version translated here.

Later, when we interviewed Kojugu Cissoko in Bamako, he told us another version of the myth:

Kojugu: They said it [that is, they recounted the myth]. The beginning of the Komó is with women. People say it. The Komó fell in the space of knowledge for women.

Interviewer: What is the meaning of the space of knowledge for women?

Kojugu: The meaning of their space of knowledge, no one has told me that. We simply hear the word lünkëné [see explanation below]. The lünkëné is a thing, but is it that it is the place of knowledge, or is it that it is the place of sorcery, or is it that it is the place of the nyaguan [a redoubtable all-female association of “sorcerers,” which no informant, either male or female, was able or willing to define further], in any case, people say lünkëné. The men and the women met each other in this place. The Komó [that is, the mask] fell in the well [this implies that the lünkëné is a flat open space, since such spaces are usually created around wells]. The women were unable to get it out until the men brought it out. That is the meaning of this (that the Komó began with women).

Interview with Kojugu Cissoko, 8/9/84, Questions-1, Book 13, pp. 83–84 of transcribed tapes

The Malinke text is as follows:


Interviewer: Lünkëné, o ye mn yè?


Kojugu uses the term lünkëné, which I translate as “space of knowledge for women.” This is a location chosen as a meeting place by senior women who meet there to exchange secret knowledge and to display the depths of their expertise to each other. It is unclear whether the lünkëné is a secret clearing in the depths of the bush (like the men’s tu or sacred wood), whether it is a village square, or simply some other meeting place agreed upon by all women. Because women’s secrets are both more dangerous than men’s and also subversive of the overt political structure, the lünkëné is very carefully hidden. While men acknowledge that it exists and that they are afraid of what happens there, they never know its location and are reluctant even to discuss it.

For the reasons why Salimata had access to this information from her grandfather, and for a discussion on her personality and our work with her, see Brett-Smith (1994:5–6).
that if they succeeded in getting it out, we would give it to them. They agreed. They asked us if their eyes were going to be blindfolded. We said that they would not be blindfolded. The first thing that they had to do however, they all had to go and get a chicken and bring it to us. They went and got the chickens and came with them. These chickens for releasing the blindfolds, we killed them; once they had been killed, the men went and took the cords for their trousers, and then they tied them together one by one, and took the Komo out of the well. When the Komo got near the top of the well, it cried out. When the Komo came out of the well, it said that whatever women had stayed there, if they didn't offer the chicken for entering [the Komo], they would die; they would vomit and die. And if there were a child born after this time, if the child were a girl, if it were not given to it [the Komo], and if the child saw it [the Komo], she would also vomit and die. And, if it [the Komo] saw an uncircumcised boy, if it were a young man, if he were circumcised and did not enter its place [that is, the Komo association], the chickens that were taken from the men [as the sacrifice necessary to take the blindfolds off], if that chicken were not to be offered, and if his eyes were not to be blindfolded [presumably a part of the young man's initiation into the Komo], then he too would die vomiting—he would die. My grandfather recited this account to me. Then, all the women fled, running into their houses. And the young boys, those who were about the age of this one here [pointing one out], those who could not yet reflect on things seriously, they also ran away and they entered the houses with the women. Then, they shut the doors. My grandfather told this story to me—this is the story he told me. It was in this way that the Komo came to belong to men. Originally, however, the Komo belonged to us. However, we couldn't get it out of the well—that was the reason that we lost it. My grandfather recounted this story to me—this is the one he told me. However, it did not occur in my lifetime.  

59. Here it is unclear whether “it” refers to the sacrificial chicken or to the baby girl. When a child is born, it is often “given” or dedicated to a particular cult.

60. As discussed above, Salimata recited this myth in a spontaneous response to a statement by M'Fa Sory Traore that:

The Komo—long, long ago the Komo belonged to women. ( Interruption while the tape is changed from side A to side B.) Women—long ago, the Komo belonged to women. Men took it from them [the verb M'Fa Sory uses, ka boshi, implies the forcible alienation of something from someone].

The Bamana text is as follows:


Interview with M’Fa Sory Traore and Salimata Kone, 3/30/84, Book 3, p. 90 of transcribed tapes

If we use Nyamaton's and Kojugu's declarations that the Komo mask is a female sex as keys for decoding the myth, we arrive at some revealing equations. Women once possessed the group's vagina, but they were unable to control it, and it leapt out of their hands and into a well from which only men could retrieve it. The women then lost the communally owned mask/vagina to the men, who thereby acquired political and ritual dominance.

If we interpret the equation, mask equals vagina, broadly as a visual condensation of men's belief in women's absolute capacity to control conception and birth, Salimata's story makes sense. The myth suggests that among the Bamana and Malinke, each sex believes that the other controls fertility. Ritual, social, and marital life might well be described as a continual squabble over the reproductive process. Do women, with their exclusive control of childbirth, mastemind human reproduction or do men, with their secret objects,

Salimata's version is found in the same interview on pp. 90–92 of the transcribed tapes.

manipulate fertility? In the myth, women are seen as the original owners of generative power. After all, the mask belonged to them first. However, the women lose their control of reproductive power, just as the mask evades their grasp and falls into the well. By rescuing the mask the men are able to appropriate it, transforming it into a ‘man’s vagina.’ Salimata’s story informs us that men took creative power from women.

While the myth clearly reflects the ongoing struggle between men and women over reproductive control, it can also be interpreted more specifically in the light of what we know about Komo initiation. During the first stage of their initiation into the Komo, society members tell the new initiates that, “You will die; you will rot, we have summoned no one. Welcome!”61 After these warnings, the terrorized young men crouch down against the earth in a ritualized but explicit enactment of death. They must remain in this position until they are sprinkled with water drawn from the village’s sacred pond.62 The crouching gesture and the initiate’s resuscitation when touched with sacred water find echoes in Salimata’s myth. The men’s dangerous climb down into the well and their successful reappearance bearing the Komo mask can be interpreted as a representation of the Komo initiate’s death and rebirth. Specific details of the myth suggest even more precise interpretation; the “cords of their pants” may stand for the invisible ties that link Komo members through their initiation and oath swearing, while the water in the well may correspond to the sacred water with which the new Komo members are sprinkled. The newly circumcised young man descends into the well (the Komo society), dies there, and then reemerges as an adult who has mastered the coveted secret knowledge that allows him to have sex (the Komo mask) safely.63

The connection between Komo initiation and Salimata’s story becomes stronger when we explore a

third and even more specific interpretation of the descent into the well. We should remember that in a traditional setting, young men married and had sex for the first time shortly after Komo initiation. Thus the fall into the well can also be read as a metaphor for the pleasures and dangers of the sexual experience that awaits the new initiates. The young man, who in real life must avoid gazing at the female sex, in the myth removes both his blindfold and the belt of his pants to clamber down into the well naked. Furthermore, the male complaints that they cannot perform this feat blindfolded suggest that the descent into the well is dark and terrifying as well as thrilling. Who knows whether one will not remain in the shadowy depths of the well with the mask? The men’s fear suggests that the well represents the unknown territory of sexual pleasure, a territory where a man can easily lose himself. The metaphor is based on experience, for the gases that often build up in the lower reaches of a deep well can cause the man digging or cleaning it to lose consciousness, and deaths from well digging, although unusual, are not unknown among the Bamana and Malinke.64

This feared loss of consciousness represents something more sinister than the total relaxation of sexual release. If one wishes to use Freudian language, the treacherous climb down into the well expresses both castration anxiety and an identifiably Mande fear of losing vital energy during intercourse.65 We have already noted that, prior to Westernization, initiation into the Komo and a man’s first head-on sight of the Komo mask occurred on the sixth day after circumcision (Zahan 1963:123), an operation that was bound to arouse castration anxiety when performed without anesthetic on a fully adult young man.66 In fact, it was not unusual

“cords of their pants” can be viewed specifically as an umbilical cord, the mask itself as a child, and the hidden water of the well as amniotic fluid. In this reading, the Komo members become the ‘mothers’ of generative power, giving satisfactory birth to the reproductive secrets that elude women.


62. This is usually a pool of water located in the middle of the Komo tu, the circular area of uncult primary forest just outside the village dedicated to Komo rituals. For the Bamana and Malinke, the village tu serves a purpose similar to our churches, mosques, or synagogues. One might perhaps consider the tu as a kind of environmental architecture since, apart from the circular area on the inside where rituals occur, it is deliberately kept as virgin forest.

63. I have also considered a parallel interpretation where the descent into the well and the reemergence of the men carrying the mask is viewed as a metaphor for childbirth. Francesco Pellizzi suggested an interesting elaboration of this idea, proposing that the

64. It is interesting to note that the men known as specialists in well digging and cleaning are numuw, or “blacksmith/sculptors.” Komo leaders are also usually numuw, and it is quite possible for the local Komo leader and the best-known well digger in the community to be one and the same person.

65. Of course, similar fears are found in many other societies, but both the Bamana and Malinke identify this fear in proverbs and in the advice given to young men. Within the broad spectrum of traditional thought, the idea that men will lose vital energy during intercourse appears as a consciously acknowledged, known fact of life.

66. Also see note 8. It is important to realize that the analysis presented in this paper is based on the assumption of adult
for young men to be told that circumcision was only the beginning and that their entire sex would be cut off when they emerged from the circumcision retreat and were inducted into the Komo. During the Komo initiation, elders would counsel the initiates to steer a middle course between complete abstinence and sexual indulgence. The young men would be warned that women will delight in sucking them dry like oranges, and it would be suggested that they aim to take a second wife, so as to diminish the power of the first. In the myth, the descent into the depths of the well expresses deep-seated male fears about the irresistible pull of the female sex. For what both the circumcision ritual and the Komo initiation teach is that it is women who are the wild beasts; it is women and their sexuality that cause men to act out of character, to abandon themselves, to lose consciousness, and to vanish in a bottomless well of sexual pleasure.

Now, perhaps, we can begin to understand why informants have identified the fundamentally abstract mask with such a diverse array of animals and birds. If, at a fundamental level, the mask represents a nightmare vision of the vaginal mouth, it is hardly surprising that it should be difficult, if not impossible, to pin down a specific animal reference. In fact, the only thing that Dieterlen’s panthers, swans, eagles, elephants, vultures, buffalos, and crocodiles and Zahan’s hyena seem to have in common is their aggressive veneer and their rapacious or destructive powers. Similarly, what is constant in Komo masks is not their particular features or their relationship to a particular animal, but the sense of devouring aggression projected by the headdress’s ‘abstract’ forms. This animalistic voracity, which is such a fundamental characteristic of Komo masks, expresses the male conviction that women—wild beasts far worse than any in Dieterlen’s list—will devour their partners as inevitably as a hyena devours carrion. My data suggests that, at a conscious but deliberately hidden level, the Komo’s gaping mouth expresses men’s pervasive fears of women’s sexuality. The mask is much more than an instrument of male power; it is also a warning, an icon to the fears that haunt Bamana men.

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