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Article begins on next page
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Symbolic blood: cloths for excised women

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The most interesting problems in fieldwork usually arise when one runs into outright unhelpfulness on the part of informants. When I first arrived in Kolokani, armed with photographs of numerous mud cloths from European museums, I was puzzled by the reaction to one particular image: the Basiae cloth. At the sight of this pattern, my informants burst into embarrassed laughter then became mute. Several months later I observed a N’Gale cloth and was equally confused by Fatmata Traore’s reluctance to paint its black and white stripes on the wrapper I offered her. Why should these two cloths, the Basiae and N’Gale, arouse such resistance? No one was reluctant to explain the meanings of other patterns. Do these cloths have a different kind of meaning; if so, what is it?

As time passed small clues emerged: both Basiae and N’Gale are worn following excision—the ritual surgery that transforms young girls into women—and both cloths are said to possess nyama, an unseen but potent spiritual power. Since my informants refused to explain either the Basiae or N’Gale designs directly, I had no choice but to begin with these clues. Whereas photographs of the Basiae and N’Gale cloths evoked silent horror, questions concerning nyama elicited extended commentaries. Informants were quite willing to discuss the use of the two cloths in the various stages of the excision ritual and the ensuing nyama attached to them. Yet these explanations further confused me, for I could not understand why this harmful spiritual force should enter the apparently innocuous cloths used to wrap virginal young women. Eventually I realized that the nyama associated with both the excision rituals and the N’Gale and Basiae cloths could be explained in terms of the Bamana view of children.

To the Bamana, children are vessels charged with unknown powers. They possess inordinate amounts of spiritual force and may even be sorcerers. The importance of the Basiae and N’Gale depends on their ability to both absorb and deflect this spiritual force, or nyama, as young girls pass from childhood. To understand the meaning of these mysterious cloths, I had to retreat from adulthood and study the nyama of children. Like the Bamana themselves, I had to begin with childhood. If the reader is surprised that an article on cloth symbolism begins with a discussion of infancy before moving to excision and finally to the cloths themselves, remember that the Bamana explain the N’Gale and Basiae in terms of nyama and that nyama, like original sin, begins at birth.

Excision for the Bamana is a spiritual and physical cleaning, a voyage from the disorderly dirt of childhood to the regulated cleanliness of adult life. When they prepare to “have their hands washed,” ka boloko, to be excised or circumcised, Bamana adolescents are not reluctantly abandoning a period of transcendentinal innocence; rather they make haste to put behind themselves a longstanding accretion of noxious spiritual power, or nyama, acquired during years of thoughtless, childish activities.

What is nyama that necessitates surgery of a most painful and radical nature to obtain its release from the human body? In 1906 Hippolyte Bazin defined nyama as “fumier, ordures,” or “punition” (Bazin 1906:447), but the Bamana appear to conceive of it more as a general principle of life than as a particular event or action. It might be defined as the negative power filling any action, thing, or human being, always waiting for a catalyst to unleash its disastrous effects. This contained power, hovering on the edge of release, is much more dangerous than the real consequences of the human activity that first sets off the nyama. For a blacksmith, the physical task of cutting a tree is not an inherently

1. Although Bambara is the term used by most authors, I prefer the original name, Bamana, also because this is the name suggested by the Ministère des Sports, des Arts et de la Jeunesse in Bamako.

2. This article deals almost exclusively with the transformation of the young girl’s personality from child to young woman through excision and the ensuing period of retreat. Although I have considerable data on the sexual ideology that the Bamana readily offer as an explanation of the necessity for removing a woman’s clitoris, I have preferred to concentrate on the philosophy underlying the shift from childhood to adulthood, believing that more research by trained medical personnel is absolutely essential before any statement whatsoever can be made about the physiological effects of the operation on sexual response. I also consider my data on sexual ideology to be strongly influenced by Islam, and, therefore, I believe somewhat inappropriate in this article, which attempts to discuss a pre-Islamic matrix of beliefs concerning the necessity for and function of excision. These ideas have far more to do with the cyclical repetition of generations and the necessity to produce ‘pure’ and socially acceptable descendants than with sexuality.
terrifying operation, but the spiritual effects of the nyama, which is unleashed as the axe hits the trunk for the first time, are devastating. If a spark of incense burns a hole in a new and costly robe, the Bamana elder rejoices, because the spark has released the pent up nyama of the garment, thus protecting him from physical harm as he wears the robe for the first time. While every human activity releases some nyama, bloodshed, whether human or animal, sets loose the highest degree of this power. Paradoxically, sacrificial bloodshed, which is surrounded by ritual and ordained by societal tradition, does not release the nyama of the victim to harmful effect, but uses it to discharge some other contained and therefore threatening power.

Sacrificing a sheep may not prevent the death of an elder, but it will help dissipate the powerful nyama let loose upon the world by the disappearance of a famed and learned man.

Most sacrifices expunge the nyama possessed by ancient beings: masks, trees, elders, and the dead. How can children possess a nyama so strong that it requires the shedding of their own blood to become adults? First, children come into the world from the realm of the ancestors. Even today, the Bamana carefully scrutinize a newborn baby for physical marks (birthmarks, deformities) that reveal the reappearance of a deceased family member. In the words of Abbé Henry:

Et les vieillards eux ne reviennent-ils pas à la vie? Dès qu’un enfant rappelle les traits d’un ancien décédé dans la famille, n’en reçoit-il pas le nom? Un Bambara n’emploie jamais en vain et mal à propos le nom d’un homme qu’il respecte; aussi à ces enfants animés par l’âme du vieux, on donne un second nom, un nom d’emprunt, le nom vrai n’est connu que du père, de la mère, des intimes et de celui qui le porte. A beaucoup pourtant on donne un nom des plus expressifs et qui témoigne de cette croyance, on les appelle segi, sagi “qui est revenu à la vie.”

Translated, this reads:

What about the old men, don’t they return to life? Does not a child receive the name of a deceased elder as soon as he evokes any characteristic traits of the relative? A Bamana never uses the name of a man he respects uselessly or inappropriately; indeed, to these children who
have received their spirit from a deceased elder, one gives a second name, a borrowed name, and the real name is known only to the father, the mother, close friends, and the person who bears it. However, one often gives a more expressive name to these children, which bears witness to this belief; they are called segi, sari, "the one who has come back to life." (Henry 1910:58)

As the infant grows, this tie with the world of the dead becomes blatant; children are known for breaking the most severe rules with apparent impunity. When the greatest hunters gather together, they sit down to eat from the same bowl into which each member of the fraternity has cast his own poison, fighting chemical warfare in a desperate competition for the personal glory of survival. It is always a small boy who walks calmly into their midst to eat, drink, and return unscathed, while the doyen of the group mysteriously dies. Thus, it is said that the greatest sorcerers are really children, for only they are capable of effortlessly killing the most renowned elders.

The circumcision of such children may develop into an outright battle between sorcerers, as the adolescent magically resists the surgeon who would deprive him of his inborn powers. Solomanna Kante describes this struggle as follows:

5. The surgeon is either a male or female blacksmith, depending on the sex of the children. Male blacksmiths can never excise, but, if necessary, elderly women are said to be able to circumcise. I never encountered this practice, and it would appear to be entirely hypothetical. Blacksmiths (nomoum) are an endogamous group, often called a caste (the Bamana call such groups "races," or siw), known for their artistic abilities as sculptors and smiths, their social skills as intermediaries and intercessors, and their expertise in medicine, especially surgery. Despite this professional renown, the Bamana believe that blacksmiths are born with an unusual potential for acquiring and controlling large quantities of nyama. They are therefore tainted and impure in the eyes of nobles (horonw), who will not sit on mats, eat from dishes, or wear clothes belonging to blacksmiths.
Il y a certains, si tu veux les circoncire et qu’ils soient sorciers, il faut que le circonciseur soit sorcier également. . . Certaines même disent: “le forgeron est arrivé.” Le forgeron est alors devenu circonciseur. Ils sont tous également sorciers. Ainsi, certains enfants à circoncire montrent au circonciseur qu’ils connaissent la sorcellerie peut-être mieux que les adultes. Alors, si vous circoncisez un jeune pareil, il faut connaître beaucoup de secrets, assez d’arbres, si non, tu seras malheureux ou tu n’auras pas longue vie. Si un jeune à circoncire veut montrer au circonciseur qu’il est sorcier, ce dernier le montrera qu’il est maître. Après la circoncision le nouveau circoncis meurt. On dira qu’il s’est battu avec le circonciseur la nuit, et qu’il est mort parce qu’ils ont fait la lutte des sorciers (lutte de nuit).

Translated into English, this passage reads:

There are some children, when you come to circumcise them, it turns out that they themselves are sorcerers, and therefore it is imperative that the surgeon be a sorcerer also. . . . Some people even say: “the blacksmith has arrived.” Thus, the blacksmith has become the surgeon. Likewise, they are all sorcerers. Thus, when certain children go to be circumcised, they show the surgeon that they are adept in sorcery, perhaps to an even greater extent than the adults. So, if you are going to circumcise such a young man, you must know many secrets, many plants; if not, you will be unfortunate and you will die shortly. When such a young man attempts to show the surgeon how much sorcery he knows, the surgeon must prove his mastery. After the operation the newly circumcised young man will die. People will say that he fought with the surgeon during the night, and that he died because they fought the sorcerers’ battle (the battle of the night).6

Small children display their extraordinary powers by eating anything and everything. Rats, bats, snakes, and old food covered with mold are delicious to the very young. The impurity of these mouths extends to language. Children are often the best informants in a Bamana village, because they never fear discussing the most arcane and serious matters in full daylight. Discretion is a virtue acquired only at the time of circumcision or excision. Furthermore, children revel in dirt; there is no part of a child’s body that is not in intimate contact with the ground, perhaps the most powerful entity and magical ingredient known to the Bamana.8 This mysterious, organic contact with the unseen powers of another world also determines the structure of children’s associations, such as ntomo,9 or

kénêkêla labënya subayala, o fana be se ka ta sara, cëbaya tê men o tigï be sa, a be fo ko a ni kénêkêla le këleda sufu, ko ani o de ye sukkële kë.” Interview with Solomanna Kante, July 30, 1978, pp. 59-61 (transcription), p. 24 (translation).

6. Interview with Solomanna Kante on male circumcision and female excision, July 30, 1978. Solomanna is a blacksmith by birth and a famous traditional healer by profession. He speaks fluent French, Malinke, and Bamana but expresses himself most freely in his mother tongue, Malinke. This interview was conducted in Malinke and French, with Solomanna switching from one language to the other in order to clarify his discussion. Adama Mara translated my questions from French or Bamana into Malinke. Since I do not speak Malinke, I have used Adama Mara’s translation into French of Solomanna’s Malinke in the text of this article. I hope that his idiomatic French and my own English translation convey the flavor of Solomanna’s idiosyncratic and very personal use of Malinke. For those readers who speak Malinke, I include the original text: “Dolu ye a rô ni i ye ala tigï, n’ka o be ta a yêrë ka subayala le kan, bilakoro min ye suba ye, o ni kénêkêla bë kakkan ka ke subale di . . . Fo d’u be a fô ko numu bara na. Numu bara kë o rô kénêkêla i yà nomne de kénêkêla. Bao kénêkêla caman ye numu de ye. O be tana ye suba le ye, örô kénê de bo be ye o ye a yiralale oula ni oulu be xé subayala la ale fana be se, o be se ka bô d’u kamayo d’u la. O dî ko kë mana kënedd d’ula tigï i ma kô, i ma yëri caman dôn, i b’la ta bë ko sôron, i te si sôrôn bu tunun. Ni kënedd min ko ye a tara ka be.


8. Shoes are extremely dangerous articles of clothing, because they continually touch the primeval, nyama-filled dirt of the ground. If one should return home to find evidence of witchcraft outside one’s house, the most effective method of averting the impending evil is to grind the construction into the ground using the heel of the shoe. One must never touch any suspect object with the hand. The supreme power of the earth is also shown by the multiple sacrifices made to and on it, and its importance as an ingredient in boliw (magical assemblages).

9. Ntomo is an association of uncircumcised boys who enact their own rituals and perform their own sacrifices, usually of lizards. Despite its informal structure, the ntomo is a dijë, or secret association, formally recognized by the elders in every Bamana village. It not only coexists with the adult organizations but operates as an independent and parallel association at a different age level. The Bamana believe the ntomo to be far more ancient than any of the other secret male associations. The ntomo is particularly famous for its flagellation duels, during which pairs of young boys whip each other until someone cries out, betraying defeat. At these competitions, which take place during the period of millet threshing, several boys may appear in the association’s masks. These usually represent a human face crowned by eight horns (although some masks may have as few as two horns). The masked dancers wear cloth costumes that cover their hands and feet, completely disguising them, and they too whip each other in silence. The society appears to train uncircumcised boys to bear intense pain stoically and thus to prepare them for participation in adult secret associations. For other mystical meanings attributed to the society, see Zahan (1960:39–128). For another detailed description of the function of this society, see Dieterlen (1951:170–175).
among the Minianka, the childrens' nya.\textsuperscript{10} Appearing on first view as playful imitations of adult associations, ntomo and the childrens' nya possess extraordinary forces only fully appreciated by the truly wise. For in their songs, sacrifices, and ritual acts the children do not ape their elders, rather they proclaim their untrammelled access to overwhelming powers. They dare to play with ritual, sacrificing anything they catch — toads, lizards, and even cats, according to the hazards of chance — to their nya.\textsuperscript{11} It is said that a village can survive without its adult associations and their objects, but that fate has deserted the town when the children abandon their ntomo or nya, and its disappearance is imminent. Playing haphazardly with their objects, but that fate has deserted the town when the children abandon their ntomo or nya, and its disappearance is imminent. Playing haphazardly with the most serious matters of life and death, children embody the superhuman authority of chance as it swells up from the world of the dead.

For as long as they are indeed children, the Bamana can support this untrammeled play of nascent power and its inherent nyama, but the approach of psychological and intellectual maturity signaled by puberty presents a grave threat to society. Although the height of a boy and the appearance of a girl's breasts and her menstruation vary greatly from individual to individual, the Bamana characterize certain ages as fixed points at which the child's conception of the world changes radically. Formerly, no grandfather could legitimately betroth his grandchild before the age of 4 or 5, because younger children were not thought to be capable of saying yes or no to any decision. It was only at about 5 years of age that the child was considered to have developed the rational power of assent or dissent. Similarly, no hypothetical delay in the process of puberty explains the traditional preference for late circumcision and excision (14 to 16 years old for girls, 15 to 20 years old for boys, and occasionally even later).\textsuperscript{12} The Bamana believe that the child's intellect is adequately developed to understand and obey the rules of adult behavior only at this late date. Today, Bamana elders lament that children may be circumcised or excised as young as 7 or 8, attributing this change to the fact that children first enter European-style schools at this age rather than to an earlier onset of puberty. It is knowledge that enables children to begin making reasoned decisions, and it is the possibility that knowledge and reasoning might combine with the supernatural power of an infant unchecked by any human rules that necessitates the surgical eradication of nyama. If a small boy can eat with the greatest hunters, killing the oldest among them with complete impunity, what will he not do, once he becomes aware and can reason? Puberty signals that the age of reason is approaching; it does not in itself provide a sufficient reason for circumcision or excision.\textsuperscript{13}

Girls need to master the ability to make reasoned decisions at a much younger age than boys, because

\textsuperscript{10} Among the Minianke, the adult nya is a witch-finding society. In its ceremonies possessed priests bathe themselves in flaming brands, which are also passed through the four gates to the nya so, or "house of nya," before the priests remove the sacred bags filled with ritual objects from the nya so. The bags are taken out of town to a grove where high initiates perform sacrifices in private. The next day a procession encircles the town carrying the witch-finding medicine (apparently a knotted ball of strings), so that it may fly from the priest's hand to land wherever it detects witchcraft substance. The populace then falls upon this thing, or person, and beats witchcraft out of it. The children's nya is far less dangerous, but the Minianka believe it to be absolutely essential for the successful continuation of the adult nya and the village. Without the children's nya, neither will survive.

\textsuperscript{11} When children hunt for a sacrifice to their nya, they must use whatever animal they see and catch first.

\textsuperscript{12} For comparative data on the ages at which circumcision and excision were performed among the Bamana, see Dieterlen (1951:170); Zahan (1960:47); Cheron (1933:297); and Imperato (1977:186-190).

\textsuperscript{13} To my knowledge, the most complete article on both circumcision and excision is John G. Kennedy's "Circumcision and Excision in Egyptian Nubia" (1970:175-191). In contrast to Kennedy's view of Nubian rituals, I do think that the Bamana use these operations to cut the person away from childhood and to propel him or her into adult existence, but I agree with Kennedy's belief that puberty, which marks the physiological transition to adulthood, is not the cause of these rituals. Kennedy deals with a culture where boys were circumcised between the ages of 3 and 5, and girls were excised at approximately the same age. Traditionally, the Bamana seem to have had a strong preference for circumcision as late as 20 and excising at about 16, ages at which puberty is already well advanced and a woman may have borne her first child. (This occurs in the everyday reality of life, not in the idealized scheme of existence where women do not have intercourse until after excision.) The Bamana view excision and circumcision as central to the formation of adult personality and, secondarily, as important to the development of adult sexuality. I would agree completely with Kennedy when he says: "... the Nubians have no notion of erasing opposite sex attributes in children. ... The notion that such practices imply changes from prior membership in the opposite sex category is unwarranted here. When the child is circumcised he is surgically purified. His nascently existing sexuality is thus magically perfected, and he is ritually endorsed as a social person belonging to the appropriate sex category" (Kennedy 1970:186). It is clear from the literature and from conversations with informants that so little research on the physiological and psychological effects of these operations has actually been done (as distinct from polemic, of which there is all too much) that no one really knows how they relate to puberty, if at all, or what their sexual effects are, if any.
menstruation endows girls with the capacity to produce children, an economic potential that cannot be allowed to lie fallow. Because a girl's body produces and nourishes the infants so desperately needed by society for its continuation, she must acquire knowledge and sagesse at an early age. Otherwise, her childish playing with sexuality will wreak havoc with the alliances of marriage and produce children whose only destiny is to be abandoned to die in a clump of kunjè shrubs deep in the bush.14

Menstruation as a sign of physiological capacity was formerly made manifest to all by the wearing of a leather belt decorated with four rows of cowris (faraban), among the Malinke,15 and a completely black children's skirt (mpogo), among the Bamana. Wearing the faraban or the black mpogo does not signal that excision must occur to banish the recurring impurity of menstruation (an impossibility), rather it indicates the heavy responsibilities the girl must assume along with the capacity to give birth, and charges her relatives with the task of forming her character and reason so that she will fulfill these responsibilities with honor. The untrammeled power, the thoughtless force, the nyama of childhood have no place in adult life and would, in fact, destroy, it. Girls who played freely in and with the dirt of the ground must be taught to bathe;16 boys who spoke of sacred objects without fear must hold their tongues. No longer can either sex consume the moldy remains of their elders' food without fear of poisoning.

This transition from the wild impurity of childhood to the ordered, regular cleanliness of adult life is artificially induced and effected through the imposed crises of excision and circumcision. The Bamana belief in the transforming power of both excision and circumcision is based on their conception of a child's character and its formation. Up to this crisis the Bamana believe that children do not possess a stable character. While they acknowledge the strong will and indiscipline of uncircumcised boys and unexcised girls, they do not attach much importance to these manifestations of personality, for in their eyes the child's behavior during circumcision or excision will form the base for the adult character. Solomanna Kante describes this belief as follows:

Nos parents disent: "Si tu adoptes un caractère dans le fafa (Malinke term for the hut that shelters the newly circumcised as they heal), tu ne pourras jamais l'abandonner le reste de ta vie." C'est pourquoi on confie les circoncis au gardien qui est chargé de l'éducation et de la santé (soins médicaux). Ainsi, le jour même qu'ils sont circoncis, le gardien les réunit en disant: "Si vous adoptez de bonnes habitudes ou de mauvaises habitudes vous resterez avec cela jusqu'à votre mort. Même si c'est le vol, alors que chacun mène ses gardes pendant les deux ou trois mois qu'on sera ici." Tu dois sortir du fafa avec de bonnes habitudes pour que tu puisses t'entendre avec la société — certains gens, même s'ils sont grands, urinent dans leur lit, on soignera ces gens avant qu'ils sortent du fafa. Si on n'arrive pas à soigner au fafa, ils ne seront jamais plus guéris.

Translated into English, the passage is even more forthright:

Our people say: "If you assume a certain character in the fafa (Malinke term for the hut that shelters the newly circumcised as they heal), you will never be able to escape it for the rest of your life." It is for this reason that one entrusts the newly circumcised to a guardian who is charged with their education and their health (medical care). Thus, the day of the circumcision, the guardian assembles the young men and speaks as follows: "Whether you adopt good or bad habits, you will keep them until you die. Even if you steal, this will be true. Therefore, let each one of you watch himself carefully throughout the two or three months that we spend together." One must leave the fafa with good habits in order to accommodate to the demands of society — some people, even when they are mature, urinate in their beds; these people are healed before they leave the fafa. But if the guardian is not able to heal them in the fafa, they will never be healed.17

14. Interview with a group of women elders at Tioribougou, May 21, 1978, p. 2. "Hali ni min balola, n'ka fo bilakoro mana kono ta, o den be taga wolo fo kunje tu ro, ka na k'o to yen, kunje tu ro yen. Bilakoro den te don so konon." The English translation of this passage is as follows: "Even if the child should live, if it is conceived by an uncircumcised boy or an unexcised girl, the mother will travel into the bush, to a clump of kunjè bushes, to give birth and leave the infant there, in the midst of the kunjè bushes. The child of an uncircumcised boy or an unexcised girl does not enter the house."


16. Women are required to bathe three times a day (early morning, noon, and evening) as long as they are able to bear children. Postmenopausal women often bathe only twice a day, and young girls wash once a day at most. The Bamana despise a woman of childbearing age who does not bathe at least three times every day for her lack of cleanliness, and they consider her to be either sick (i.e., insane) or not respectable. The lazy bather's lack of respectability is displayed by her reputation among her female neighbors, not in male attitudes. Lack of cleanliness seems to drive men away; it does not attract them with an aura of prostitution, as one might inadvertently assume.

17. Interview with Solomanna Kante, July 30, 1978, pp. 52-54 (transcription), p. 22 (translation). For my use of Adama Mara’s French translation in the text of this article, see footnote 6. For those readers
A woman's character is formed not only through excision, but also through marriage. The Bamana believe that a firm or weak husband materially affects the behavior of his wife toward the world, but they also believe that the severe ordeal of excision is the only way to ensure that a girl goes to her husband with a firm base for the construction of a good character. This belief that the excision surgery and the succeeding period of seclusion and surveillance by a guardian (zeman) provide a foundation for the woman's subsequent personality is expressed in a common term for the operation. Although women generally use the verb ka boloko (to excise or circumcise), to describe the actual moment of operation, they invariably use the verb ka sigi, "to put, place, sit down." The girl is indeed seated for the excision, but the verb also means to establish, fix, or even to found (a town). Considering the goals of the entire ritual, the girl is not only being physically seated, her very character is being founded and fixed for life. Her personality is about to be formed and shaped in the period of retreat, just as her body is shaped by the blacksmith woman who excises her.

If a woman's character is shaped and given a base during the four-week period of seclusion that today follows excision, what is the goal of this formation and training? It is the zeman or guardian, an older woman past menopause, who is assigned the task of transforming children into young women, and it is the critical childbearing role about to be assumed by the newly made women that determines her teaching. The zeman does not spend hours instructing her pupils in the practical details of infant care, as one might suppose. Such skills will eventually be learned when and as they are needed. Rather, the zeman emphasizes the value of bonya, or "respect." In the eyes of the Bamana, obedience to the heterogeneous assortment of obligations that comprise bonya is a more solid guarantee of healthy and socially viable children than any instruction in the minutiae of child care. Bonya encompasses almost every variety of proper behavior, from washing both hands thoroughly before eating to addressing one's mother-in-law with the proper greetings. The most crucial manifestation of bonya is complete obedience to the commands of both father and mother, and a young girl who questions their authority will never produce satisfactory descendants.

In a cyclical pattern, the newly excised woman's submission to society's rules of respect, first to her parents and then, by extension, to all those older than herself, guarantees the obedience that her own children will one day offer her, thus establishing their moral character in the eyes of the world. For indeed, no child begins life without weighty obligations of respect. Even as an adult, the child is forever indebted to both parents, and especially to the mother, because no anguish can match her suffering in the labor of childbirth. To contravene the direct commands of either father or mother is not merely the rebellious flouting of authority, it betrays an asocial disregard and a profound lack of awe and respect (bonya) for the difficulties encountered by both parents in conceiving and producing legitimate offspring. A child who lacks such respect may watch both parents die cursing him (or her). Even today, no future exists for someone cursed either by father or mother. Abbé Henry was not far wrong when he said:

Etre maudit, et maudit de son père est le plus grand des maux, ses femmes le fuiraient, ses enfants rougiraient de lui donner le nom de père, ses amis l'abandonneraient, les gens du village trembleraient de lui adresser la parole, il lui faudrait s'enfuir. Et où ira-t-il? Le gnama du père, le gnama de l'ancêtre, du tne du fétiche s'attachera à ses pas, pour lui il ne reste que la souffrance; il le suivra en tout lieu. Pour lui il ne reste que la souffrance; la maladie, la faim, la pauvreté et l'humiliation seront son partage et rebut de l'humanité, il mourra en désespéré.

The passage is no less damning in English:

To be cursed and cursed by one's father is the most serious of all evils; his wives flee from such a man, his children are embarrassed to call him father, his friends abandon him, and his neighbors are frightened to speak with him: the only solution is flight. But where can he go?

who speak Malinke, I include the original text: "An baramogow ta foli ko: keneden ba son min ta ka fo fafa, o sôn te bôla a bolo o kô, o kôson olou ye karifala sema min na, a basi ni a la 'education' bê le karifala ola, o bê u la fê kabini u tigi don: aw mana bóko min ye yan ni ko nyumè wala sôn nyur. 3 o be too aw bolo fo ka aw sa. Mi aw dun fana bóra ni kojugu min ye yan fo aw sa don o ko tê bô aw bolo, halî ni sonyali don. Orô bê ye i bolokê i yêrê ro an ye karo fîa ni saba min ye kêla yan, i ye bó lihala nyumarô min dê kê i ni 'société' di bê. Halî mogo dow bê ye alu kumbayanen di suguna kê la fên kan, alu di basîlu bô walasa o ye o boloka sani k'u bó fafa, bani ni a bana a la fafa si kêla nyêgnë kêla, ko a te se ka boloka a si tô rô basi si nyê."
His father's nyama, his ancestor's nyama, and the nyama attached to the interdictions imposed by ritual objects will dog his footsteps and follow him everywhere. Nothing remains for a man so cursed except suffering; hunger, poverty, and humiliation will be his lot, and ostracized by humanity, he will die despairing. (Abbé Henry 1910:26–27)

For a child thus cursed, life is barely worth living, because every business negotiation, every divination session and its ensuing sacrifice, every discussion of his or her personality ends with the pronouncement: “But his mother cursed him, why should we expect anything at all from him?”

To inculcate the respect that will ensure the benedictions, not the curses, of both father and mother and that forms the keystone of a good character, the Bamana believe that the child must undergo excision or circumcision at a late age. It is not enough to submit to the operation; one must do so at an age when one can fully experience its pain and fully understand the instruction surrounding it. Today, in Bamako the widespread misbehavior of children and adolescents is commonly attributed not to city living, but to the fact that such children have been circumcised or excised far too early to gain the proper moral benefits from the experience. I often heard Western-educated government officials futilely insist that their children would be circumcised or excised at 15 or 16 so that they might emerge properly respectful of their parents.

Learning bonya is particularly important for women, because their moral character will be passed on to their children as a direct, almost physiological inheritance. While learning, esoteric knowledge, social position, and skills are usually acquired from the father, both boys and girls inherit their moral fiber from the mother. If one’s own character is honorable, this will be recognized through a gift to one’s mother, for her strength of character is thought to be the direct cause of her child’s behavior. The visitor who gives the mother of a family a gift is simultaneously honoring the character of her husband, who elicited such fidelity and respect, and her children, who have inherited her moral strength. Since the degree of bonya (respect) shown by a woman in her married life certainly

20. The highest form of respect for one’s husband is, of course, complete sexual fidelity. The Bamana acknowledge that this is an extremely rare occurrence, and they will often criticize a woman not for having a lover, but for having one in the part of town where her husband’s house or his family’s house is located. In a small village it is preferable to have one’s lover a short distance away in a nearby town. If the woman arranges her assignations so that the husband and
Fatmata Traore, zeman for Nansun Suko and Araba Diarra. Fatmata wears an aged N’Ga/e cloth presented to her by her own daughter after the daughter’s excision. Fatmata used the torn N’Ga/e while she painted mud cloth or washed laundry within the family compound. Kolokani, compound of Fatmata Traore, January 22, 1977.

It is not only instruction that inculcates bonya, for without surgery there is no possibility that correct behavior will take root. The force of childhood, the nyama acquired from the ancestors and the indiscriminate play with powerful objects, must be cut out of the child. To master the intricacies of bonya and responsible adulthood, the adolescent must first be cleansed (ka sanunya, “to purify”).21 Such cleansing, such expiation or eradication of nyama, ordinarily occurs through sacrifice (ka saraka bô), and while the Bamana do not explicitly categorize excision as a sacrifice, it functions in much the same way. In both situations it is the shedding of blood that releases the potentially dangerous nyama. In the words of M’Baye Djamcoumba, a blacksmith woman from Shuala north of Segou: “A bè nyama bô, bolokeli ka nyi, a ka nyi

21. Bazin (1906:510) defines sanunya as follows: “propre, pur, saint,” or as a noun, “pureté, sainteté morale,” and as a verb, “purifier, parfaire quelque chose, affiner, bien travailler quelque chose.” In the sense of finishing, completing, or achieving something, sanunya aptly describes the sense of completion and fulfillment the

Bamana feel when they see young girls and boys emerging from the weeks of seclusion that follow excision and circumcision. The personality is indeed perfected and finished off by means of the operation and its surrounding ritual.
Basiae cloth. Collected in Bamako, August 1979. Even in a black and white photograph, the darker ("red") color of the unbleached design shows up as a dark gray, in contrast to the pure white design of a kanjida, or "white" cloth. Collection, N. Kayem. (S. Sloman)

muso ma kojugu," or: "Excision releases the nyama, it is good, it is very good for a woman." 22 The same informant goes even further, saying: "The reason for excision is cleanliness; don't they say that this is dirty? It is because of dirt; if you get rid of the dirt, the woman is completely clean." 23

If human bloodshed releases an extraordinarily high degree of nyama, and excision is designed to expunge all the impurities accumulated throughout a lengthy childhood, how do the Bamana handle the free-floating nyama set loose by the surgeon's knife? Allowed to roam unchecked, this force would soon attract malevolent sorcerers, who would turn it against the newly excised girl and prevent her successful transition to adult life. However, the released and uncontained nyama is localized in the blood from the wound of excision. The blood of surgery is the physical correlate to the unidentifiable but tangible presence of spiritual nyama. By examining the precautions that surround the boloko denw (the name given to excised girls and circumcised boys during the retreat period) and the blood from their wounds, one may understand how this force is controlled throughout the dangerous voyage to the respectful order of adult life.

Currently, excision is performed early (between 5:00 and 6:00 A.M.) on a Thursday morning in mid dry season (late January or early February) by a female blacksmith.

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22. Interview with M'Baye Djamcoumba, August 28, 1979, p. 100.
23. Interview with M'Baye Djamcoumba, August 28, 1979, p. 116. ("A sanunya kóro de ye o ye, u t'a fósísan nin ye nógo de ye wa? Nin ye nógo ye, n'o nógo bôrâ yen kabân, a sunyara nhun.")
A Bogolanfini cloth of the “white” category, called kanjida, worn at secular festivities and for everyday work. This cloth was probably destined to be tailored into a man’s shirt. Collection, K. Silver. (S. Sloman)

Throughout the operation, the girl is accompanied and held by her mother’s cowife, or another close female relative, who acts as a sponsor and helps the surgeon apply traditional medicines. Immediately after the operation, the sponsor dresses the new adult in “red” Bogolanfini (mud cloth) of either the Basiae or N’Gale design. For seven days, the girls remain closeted in a straw enclosure with their guardian, the zeman, who ensures that they heal properly and remain isolated from men. At the end of the first week, the “red” Bogolanfini, which have been worn continuously since excision, are washed, dried, and reattached. At the end of each succeeding week, the cloths are washed and reattached, until the final coming out rite, four weeks after the operation, which ends the period of seclusion. Following this ceremony (called the burning of the nyama), each girl who has worn the N’Gale design, composed of straight horizontal lines, gives the cloth to her sponsor. Each girl who has worn the Basiae design of circles keeps her cloth to wear when she journeys to her husband’s home for the consummation.

24. Traditionally, a Bamana mother did not raise her own children, but rather those born by her cowife or cowives. In all respects except their physiological inheritance, the children were considered to be their foster mother’s offspring. If a child wished to offer a gift to his genetic mother, he had to present it first to his foster mother and ask her to present it to her cowife. The child’s behavior could never betray that his foster mother was not his “real” mother. The shame associated with being barren was largely occasioned by the inequality that arose between cowives when a barren woman could not reciprocate in the exchange of children. It is still unclear to me whether the sponsor of a girl undergoing excision was traditionally the cowife who had replaced the girl’s mother under this system of exchange or another woman who had neither borne nor reared the girl. However, my informants insisted that no ‘real’ mother will watch a child she has born undergo excision. The only exceptions are a few blacksmith women who are so tough in spirit they may excise their own daughters.

25. Cheron (1933:299) cites two traditional medicines used to heal the wounds of circumcision: water containing the fruits of the saba tree (Landolphia senegalensis), and a leaf of sana (Colocynthis vulgaris), but he says that no similar treatment is used after excision surgery. Imperato (1977:189-190) mentions these medicines and also describes the application of a paste made from the crushed leaves of dala (Khaya senegalensis) and tiékala (Cymbopogon giganteus) to the wound. He agrees with Cheron that no medicine is applied to the excision wound. My own informants vaguely mentioned that a konyofura, or “medicine for marriage,” is applied immediately after excision, but they refused to specify the nature of this treatment or drug. I suspect that traditional medicine is used, but that its composition is a secret guarded carefully by the blacksmith women who specialize in excision.
of their marriage. At the beginning of the rainy season, in late June or early July, all the newly excised women will be summoned to their husbands' homes; those who wore the N'Gale design for excision will then receive a newly made Basiae, which they will wear until they enter the marriage chamber. After the successful consummation of the marriage, all the girls will present their Basiae to their sponsors.26

What is the meaning of this cloth, which is so critical to the survival of the excised girl that refusal to wear it is grounds for a severe beating by her father? 27 Basiae is the generic name the Bamana give to the category of Bogolanfini worn by newly excised girls, and it encompasses two different cloth designs. The first type of cloth, the N'Gale, is a severe pattern of black and white lines divided at regular intervals by a white zigzag design (sungurun sën kêlèn). The word N'Gale means "formerly," and, indeed, research among the Minianka of Koutiala suggests that this may well be the oldest of all Bogolanfini. The second type of Basiae is itself called Basiae, thus confusing the generic term for mud-dyed cloth used by excised women with the specific term for a design composed of large and small white circles on a dark ground framed by a rectangular grid. At excision a girl must follow her mother's example by wearing the same pattern her mother wore at her excision. However, for the zeman, who is held accountable not only for the physical healing of the young women, but also for their protection from malevolent sorcerers who might be attracted by the nyama that the operation has released, it is not the allotment of N'Gale or Basiae to different girls that is important, but the fact that both designs are generically Basiae, or "red" Bogolanfini.

The last two illustrations show the difference between Bogolanfini of the "red" type, or Basiae, and "white" Bogolanfini, or kanjida. The russet of the unbleached Basiae pattern in the illustration on page 24 appears as a dark gray in the black and white photograph, while the design on the bleached kanjida cloth in the illustration on page 25 remains pure white. In normal light, an outsider would have difficulty distinguishing the reddish tan of Basiae cloth from the light tan of "white" Bogolanfini, but Bamana women make this significant distinction at first glance. For them the terms "red" and "white" Bogolanfini denote a practical difference in the technique of cloth production, as well as a critical difference in use. All Bamana women use leaf dye to fix the mud used in making Bogolanfini, but kanjida cloths receive a bath of Changora 28 and/or N'Galaman 29 leaves whereas the far more spiritually dangerous operation of producing Basiae cloth requires the addition of Golobè 30 to the leaf solution. It is Golobè that gives both the N'Gale and Basiae designs their characteristic yellowish orange tinge. For the Bamana, the yellow-orange color indisputably places both N'Gale and Basiae cloths in the "red" category and gives rise to their generic name of Basiae.

Bamana women readily allow that Basiae is used at ritually significant moments of transition in a woman's life,31 but my informants would not directly state that

27. Pageard (1967:109–110) identifies N'Galaman as Conocarpus biocarpa, according to Tauxier, as Anogeissus leiocarpus, according to Mgr. Molin, and as Anogeissus leiocarpus, according to Aubreville. Imperato identifies N'Galaman as Anogeissus leiocarpus and Changora as Combretum glutinosum (Imperato and Shamir 1970:32–41).
28. Pageard (1967:87–140) identifies Golobè as Combretum micranthum, according to Dominique Zahan, or as Preleopsis habeensis, according to Aubreville.
29. The Basiae is worn at the critical moments of transition to adult, childbearing status: after excision, and prior to the consummation of a girl's marriage. It is also worn by elderly postmenopausal women. Finally, it shrouds the corpse of any women who has born a child as she is buried. The presence of the Basiae during burial of a woman is so important that, if the dead woman herself possessed no such cloth, a young girl would be sent out into the village with absolute license to bring back any Basiae she could find, however beautiful, for use as a shroud. In addition, the Basiae was traditionally worn by women who had just given birth, probably to absorb the flow of blood that continues after childbirth, before the woman heals. This event is a period of transition not only for the newborn child who has just arrived in the world, but also for its mother, whose status in the extended family may change substantially with the arrival of the baby. It is not accidental that women are traditionally forbidden to enjoy sexual intercourse after excision, after childbirth, and during old age. The use of the Basiae in marriage is an
the word possessed any meaning beyond being the traditional name for “red” Bogolanfini. Despite such denials, which often point to a connection the informant does not wish to reveal, an examination of Mgr. Hippolyte Bazin’s Dictionnaire Bambara-Français, published in Paris in 1906, proffers some suggestive definitions. The word Basi is defined first as “arbrisseau donnant une teinture brune,” and then as “couleur brune.” In a separate definition of the same word, Bazin lists Basi as “sang,” adding that it is less commonly used than the standard word for blood or a wound, joli. Finally, Bazin defines Basi as “remède,” and “grisgris, remède superstitieux” (Bazin 1906:59). Although the actual word Basiae does appear in Bazin’s dictionary, it is defined only as “bitterness.” Today Basi is a term commonly used to describe any powerful or nyama-charged ritual object belonging to a secret association, and its meaning is often extended to include any protective medicine, whether pharmacological or magical. The multiple and related meanings of Basi as redness, blood, a sacred object, and medicine point to the central importance of Basiae, or “red” Bogolanfini, immediately after excision and throughout the critical retreat period, when the young woman’s character is given a fixed shape.

The porous Basiae cloths that ritually cover the girls and the blood of their wounds are able to absorb the nyama set free by excision. The painted cotton drinks in the girl’s sweat and her blood as she heals, and these highly charged substances transmit not only the physical detritus of the operation to the cloth, but the incomprehensible forces of childhood, the unrestricted power of original nyama. No wonder that nyama-infected Basiae is an object of fear and awe,32 the complex circular motif seeming to lock this formidable power into the very fabric of the cloth.

Once the nyama released by excision has come to rest in the Basiae, the cloth is treated in a distinctive way. It is worn continuously by the girls 33 and is washed only three times, at one-week intervals. After the period of seclusion has ended, the Basiae with the circular design is worn just prior to the consummation of the girl’s marriage, and Basiae or “red” Bogolanfini of both designs (N’Gale and Basiae) are eventually entrusted to the girl’s sponsor at excision. The nyama-charged Basiae clearly protects the girl as she heals, shielding her throughout the period of seclusion. One informant stated that the color and pattern of the cloth are designed to terrify anyone who might want to interrupt the cicatrization of the wound: “Les excisées portent le Basiae et le N’Gale pour faire peur aux gens. Quand il y a d’autres femmes qui n’aiment pas que la fille soit excisée, quand elle est excisée et elle porte le Basiae, ces femmes auront peur. Toutes les personnes qui t’aiment pas auront peur de t’approcher dans les pagnes rouges.” Translated, the passage reads as follows: “The newly excised women wear the Basiae and the N’Gale in order to frighten people. Perhaps there are other women who are not pleased that the young girl has been excised; if she wears the Basiae after the operation these women will be afraid. Whoever hates you will be afraid to approach you when you are wearing red cloth.”34 Who are these “personnes qui t’aiment pas,” whose evil behavior necessitates that constant protection of the nyama-filled Basiae? Another informant, M’Baye Djamcoumba, dared to describe them more explicitly: “Ko n’i bolokora sisan, i suma, i suma de be ke komi sogo

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32. It is extremely difficult to persuade Bamana women to look at pictures of Basiae, much less to make one of these cloths or discuss them. Typically, the only response is embarrassed laughter followed by silence.
33. A woman will normally wear a cloth for two, or at maximum three, days before washing it, and it is not uncommon for a fastidious married woman to use two or three wrappers during the course of a day. Young girls and older women are permitted to wear cloths longer and to wash them less frequently. Wearing the Basiae for a week without washing it is thus a radical departure from the established norm of cleanliness, even for very young girls.
34. Interview with Blaman Diarra, May 25, 1978, interpreted by Alou Koné. The only text of this interview is my transcription of the interpreter’s French. I cite his French in order to convey the original sense of the interview as it was translated to me. Soon after this interview my Bamana became accurate enough to begin tape interviews.
just been made into women. According to Lagno, men thought to be even more dangerous than men's because although any reputable savant can command a vast repertoire of poisons at will, women's poisons are considered incapable of guarding someone else's secrets, they are said to guard their own ferociously. Lagno's description suggests why sorcerers present such a powerful threat to the children who have just been made into women. According to Lagno, men may well be sorcerers, but women are more likely to be, because, by definition, "suya ye musow ta baara de ye," or "sorcery is women's work." Sorcerers are said to work in absolute secrecy, and while women are considered incapable of guarding someone else's secrets, they are said to guard their own ferociously. Although any reputable savant can command a vast repertoire of poisons at will, women's poisons are thought to be even more dangerous than men's because of their smallness, their lack of visibility, and their bizarre effects. Normal, or male, poisons usually act on a long-term basis, but women's poisons cause the victim to swell up in one day from the foot to the tips of the hands and the top of the body, until the victim drops dead. This is female sorcery par excellence, and its symptoms are almost identical to tetanus, a common complication of excision or circumcision occurred among girls and resulted from complications occur frequently.

The Basiae serves to localize the untamed supernatural forces of childhood, which left uncontrolled would inevitably invite malevolent attack. Moreover, the Basiae can withstand the shock of sorcery and hurl it back upon its practitioners — in reality, those older women who are brought one step closer to death as the newly excised girls acquire sexual and reproductive powers. The Bamana have few illusions about the viciousness that can underlie relationships between cowives in a society where polygamy is the accepted norm. If the goal of excision and the instruction of the zeman, or guardian, are to instill a pattern of respectful behavior that will ensure the young woman's acceptance by her husband, his mother, and jealous, older cowives, then some defense, some assurance of security, must be given to the vulnerable girl. She has a practical need of the spiritual defense provided by the nyama-imbued Basiae, since the teachings of excision forbid her to refuse the demands about to be made by her female in-laws.

It is relatively easy to understand the protective function of the Basiae as it covers the girl throughout the critical period of healing and seclusion, but what is one to make of its transfer to the girl's sponsor, the woman who held her as she underwent surgery? This relationship and that with the zeman, the girl's guardian, are diametrically opposed in feeling and tone to what one might expect. As the period of seclusion draws to a close, both the guardian (zeman) and the new women (boloko denw) radiate tremendous joy and affection. Together they have driven away the terrors of sorcery using the nyama-imbued Basiae as a critical instrument of defense. The deep bonds of affection between zeman and boloko denw are not erased by the young girls' removal to their husbands' villages. It is no accident that when the new wife encounters serious problems with her in-laws, or when her child falls gravely ill, she turns first to her sponsor and to her guardian during excision. The symbol of this trust is the Basiae. Impregnated with the blood and sweat of the young woman, it is still too charged with the nyama of childhood to be safely kept in the strange and perhaps hostile village of the girl's husband. Given to the girl's sponsor, in whom both the girl and her parents place complete trust, the Basiae will be guarded from misuse and theft by sorcerers. By wearing the cloth daily in the fields and in her compound, the sponsor proclaims the honor in which she is held by the girl's family and the affection that binds her to the young woman. No one could suspect a woman so honored of

35. Interview with M'Baye Djamcoumba, August 28, 1979, p. 117.
36. Interview with Lagno Coulibaly, May 16, 1979, p. 115.
37. Imperato (1977: 187-189) reports that most deaths from excision or circumcision occurred among girls and resulted from hemorrhages. I was told of both boys and girls dying from hemorrhages. The Bamana also fear that poison will be introduced into the wound, and this fear obviously corresponds to the very real dangers of tetanus and gangrene. According to Imperato, these complications occur frequently.

38. Men often declare a joint circumcision or excision on the basis of their own friendship and their willingness to share expenses. In the case of Nansun Suko and Araba Diarra, Nansun's father and Araba's father were close friends. Nansun's father had been born in Guezenan, but his friendship with Araba's father became so strong that he moved permanently to Kolokani. When their daughters approached marriage, the two men declared an excision together. They chose Fatmata as zeman for their daughters because of her reputation as a healer and a preexisting blood relationship with Araba's father. (Araba's father's mother was Fatmata's aunt.)
sorcery. Not until the cloth is fraying and its designs fading (.... io k’a négé bó a la...., or “.... until the marks leave it....”) does the zeman put it away, the nyama having slowly dissipated over time. Thus, the Basiae both protects the excised woman from external sorcery and ensures that her sponsor does not come under attack as a sorcerer who has “spoiled” the outcome of the ceremony.

Despite the ability of the Basiae to absorb the greater part of the nyama set free by excision, it cannot protect the girls or the older women who support them as a group. Other remains from the four-week period of seclusion provide equally inviting opportunities for jealous sorcerers, because anything on which the young women have slept or lain can be used against them. To counter the vague threat of anonymous sorcery originating from any one of the multitude of women within a girl’s home village, the period of seclusion ends with a ceremony in which the straw shelter, the mats, and even the tiny fragments of rubbish lying in the sand where the girls have lived during the preceding four weeks are ceremonially taken to the edge of town and burnt. In the words of one zeman, Fatmata Traore of Kolokani, “Boloko denw basi bè jènè bi,” or “The basi of the excised women is being burnt today.”

The Basi to which Fatmata refers is not the blood of excision itself but the more mundane rubbish created during the period of seclusion. Its burning constitutes a kind of medicine, or “remède superstitieux,” in the words of Hippolyte Bazin (Bazin 1906:59). The Bamana use the smoke from certain plants both to cure illnesses and to drive away sorcerers. In this case, by setting fire to the rubbish and jumping over this fire, the young women literally smoke sorcery out of themselves. As the small fire gathers force, the young women, who are bare except for their shorts, leap over the mounting flames and race back to their guardian’s house. Behind them the elderly women of the village toss large mats onto the fire, which flames up fiercely. In mid dry season, with the outside temperature already 110° F. or more, this funereal pyre flames up with terrifying suddenness, a searing testimony to the reality of sorcery. Overseeing the violent blaze to its end, the women elders burn the past of the newly made women and destroy any opportunities for sorcery, pushing its threat outside the confines of the village and far into the bush, the natural home of witchcraft.

If the surgeon’s knife and the fire of burning rubbish, or nyama, slice out and burn away the accumulated impurities of childhood, how can this original nyama, which is absorbed into the Basiae cloth, come to rest with aging women no longer capable of producing children? Ostensibly so removed from the unmanageable nyama of childhood, these female elders, who embody wisdom and restraint, and possess unquestioned authority to kill all deformed or abnormal newborn infants, are slowly approaching death, the final transition that will bring them wholly into the powerful realm of the ancestors. Then indeed they will determine what children will be born into the world, endowing them with their nyama and protecting them with their benevolent surveillance.

Close to the dead in their control of life and death, elderly women nevertheless resemble their grandchildren in behavior: they play, they say whatever they choose with almost complete impunity, and they eat substances forbidden to women of childbearing age. Age bestows its freedoms liberally, and the overarching liberty of old age is equaled only by that of childhood. Wearing a Basiae cloth impregnated with the nyama of childhood, a powerful woman elder moves imperceptibly closer to the shadowy void where generations mix and fuse. Wrapped around an aged body, the mysterious powers of infancy are safe and secure as they slowly disperse into the invisible realm of the dead, leaving their bearer just this side of that final transition.

39. Interview with Fatmata Traore, September 20, 1979, p. 190.
40. Conversation with Fatmata Traore, April 1, 1978.
41. In 1978 Bamana girls wore bright red bloomers provided by their future husbands. Traditionally, a girl wore a mpogo fyn, or “black mpogo,” an undecorated young girl’s skirt. After the ritual leap over the fire, the girl’s sponsor burns the garment at night. If the girl herself were to burn it, she would become blind. The black mpogo was only worn at one other time, during a young, unexcised girl’s menstrual period. See my interview with Fatmata Traore, May 17, 1978.
42. The Bamana use the same word, nyama (no change in tone), to describe the harmful power inherent in every person, thing, and animal and, in a far more banal sense, to describe the garbage taken out to decompose at the edge of town. The two meanings are interrelated in that groups dealing with filthy substances, such as leather workers (garankèw), who are always stained with tanning acids, are considered to possess an extremely high degree of nyama. In conversation the Bamana play off the mundane and mystic meanings of the word against one another, often using mundane occurrences of nyama to explain its spiritual power.
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Acknowledgments

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