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# Reconstructing the History of an African Ceramic Tradition

Technology, Slavery and Agency  
in the Region of Kadiolo (Mali)\*

The potters of the Kadiolo region of southern Mali present a paradox to those familiar with the broad outlines of West African art history. Distinguished as Mande from the majority Senufo population in the region,<sup>1</sup> they are not the wives of blacksmiths as expected within the ideology and practice of most Mande peoples. Their husbands are griots whose iden-

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1. I share with many of my colleagues a concern that the ethnic map as we know it today is largely derived from the efforts of colonial authorities to define and delimit the peoples they sought to bring under their control (see AMSELLE 1990, AMSELLE & M'BOKOLO 1985), and that ethnic labels should be used with caution, especially with reference to historical times. The terms "Senufo" and "Mande" are used here in the very broadest sense to refer to a variety of peoples whose languages are part of these major language families. The peoples identified as Senufo in southern Mali define themselves according to more local terms based on features such as present location, place of origin, and the presence or absence of *poro*, *koré* or other men's age-grade societies (KONÉ 1989; RONDEAU 1980: 55-63). Mande-speaking peoples include those we have come to know as Bamana, Malinke, and Dyula of Mali, Guinea and northern Côte d'Ivoire.

tity is tied as much to the artistry of their wives as potters, as to their more distant heritage as oral artists. Who these women are and how they do what they do challenges the validity of the generally accepted blacksmith-potter model of craft production in Mande societies, raising intriguing questions concerning relationships among Mande and Senufo artistic traditions, and the role of women in the creation and maintenance of artist identity. In trying to determine the origins of their artistry, I examine distinctive aspects of the technology these women use in pottery production in comparison to techniques employed by other potters in this part of West Africa in order to look for possible historical links among different potter communities. Then I explore the identity of these women, or more precisely that of their “mothers”, how historical factors, especially slavery, may have shaped their lives, and how in turn they seem to have responded to these circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

This effort is part of a growing emphasis by scholars on exploring various ways of reconstructing the history of African artistic traditions. The art object and its context of use have been the primary focus of attention, with distribution patterns of styles, types and cultural significance effectively analyzed in order to suggest the diffusion of ideas and the interaction of peoples over time and space. In this article, I explore the potential of an alternative approach which examines the specialized knowledge of craft technology and the social identity of the artists for what information these domains might contribute to our understanding of how these traditions developed. I suggest that linking social identity, technology and artistic tradition may be especially important for reconstructing the histories of women artists, thereby beginning to redress the balance of attention generally given to men in the process of reconstructing Africa’s cultural past.<sup>3</sup>

## Identity and its Link with Artistry

The study of identity and especially those aspects of social differentiation that appear to have a long and relatively stable history is critical to our efforts to understand how these traditions have come to be what they are today. Examining gender and ethnicity with respect to craft production in a comparative framework provides an avenue for reconstructing inter-

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2. Throughout this article, I use the term “mothers” in the way that my informants would often employ the phrase “our fathers” (*anw faw*) to refer to their ancestors of an unspecified time in the past.
  3. For recent assessments critical of the neglect of women’s roles in studies of artistry and artist identity in Africa, see especially ARONSON (1991), BERNS (1993) and LAVIOLETTE (fthcg); and for an approach to this issue based on material outside the African context, see WRIGHT (1991).

actions among peoples over time and space. Who performs which tasks is often bounded by social expectations firmly embedded in a culture's ideology.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of identity takes on special significance in the Mande world where artists and bards are separated by endogamy and occupation from the rest of society, a distinctive and persistent social construct that may have had its origins in the major transformations accompanying the rise and fall of the empires of Ghana and Mali.<sup>5</sup> Among Bamana and Malinke peoples, potters are the wives of blacksmiths (*numuw*, sing. *numu*), a social pattern found elsewhere in West Africa.<sup>6</sup> The endogamy of potters and blacksmiths, as with that of griots and leatherworkers, is maintained in Mande ideology and generally continues in practice as well.<sup>7</sup> These identities are not taken lightly. Notions of difference are actively maintained by members of these societies, whether or not a particular trade is practiced. While the persistence of this ideological framework separating artist and farmer identities and assigning particular activities to certain men and women allows us to recognize a shared heritage among different groups of people, it also makes it all the more significant when variations in the pattern are observed.

### Challenging the Model in the Kadiolo Region

Craft specialization in the region of Kadiolo contrasts dramatically with the blacksmith-potter model that dominates iron and ceramic production in the Mande heartland. Nor does it match that of the central Senufo to the south but seems instead to reflect a rather complex shifting of ethnic

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4. See, for example, the study by GARDI (1985) of craft tools and technologies and their identification with different ethnic identities in the pluralistic region of Mopti.
  5. While the literature on Mande society is suffused with references to the "lower" social status of artist groups, it is important to emphasize that this is not an assessment shared by the artists themselves. How these relationships are characterized in terms of hierarchical position, rights and responsibilities, depends entirely on the perspective of the speaker. When artists speak in hierarchical terms, it tends to be about how indispensable their particular skills are to the majority population, and how the remuneration they receive in return for their services is due to respect for their expertise and the esteem in which they are held. For an examination of the status and identity of the various artist groups from multiple perspectives, see CONRAD & FRANK (fthcg).
  6. McNAUGHTON (1988: 7), SMITH (1989: 64), VAUGHAN (1970: 83; 1973: 167, 182-184); see also BARLEY (1984).
  7. For example, of the forty or so active potters I recorded in Kolokani, Kangaba, and Banamba, all were daughters of blacksmiths and all were married into blacksmith lineages. This conservatism in marriage patterns holds true for the leatherworkers I interviewed in 1983 and 1984, and was equally restrictive for blacksmith men I interviewed, none of them had wives from non-blacksmith families, though not all of the women were practicing potters.

identities and occupational pursuits between the two cultural centers.<sup>8</sup> While potters in this area are identified as Mande, more specifically as Dyula, they are not the wives of either blacksmiths or brasscasters. Their husbands are “mute” griots who say they no longer practice *jeliya* (singing the praises of patrons in return for gifts of food and money), a practice for which Mande griots generally are both acclaimed and disparaged. Some of the men do leatherworking, an activity done by *jeliw* (sing. *jeli*) elsewhere and one that seems to have become increasingly important for the southernmost extensions of griot families (Frank 1988, fthcg). Today they assist in marketing their wives’ wares and engage in farming and small trade. Some also have moderate livestock herds.

Ironworking in the Kadiolo region is the domain of a group called *fono* (or *vono*), and although they are said to intermarry with the Mande *numu* of the region, and indeed share certain Mande patronyms, their specializations are seen as quite distinct. The *numu* are recognized primarily as woodcarvers; in the past they used to do iron-smelting. Rather than work the metal themselves, they would provide the fruits of their labors to the *fono*, who would then forge the hoes and other equipment so essential for the livelihood of local Senufo-Bamana farmers. The wives of *fono* blacksmiths specialize in producing small square-bottomed flared baskets.<sup>9</sup> The wives of the *numu* of the region are known for the various traditional soap products they sell in local markets, but do not practice a particular craft activity. They say that neither they nor their ancestors within living memory have ever done pottery.

During our first trip to the region, we were able to identify two villages well known for the extent and quality of ceramic production.<sup>10</sup> Doguélé-dugu, located several kilometers southwest of Kadiolo, is a village of about 500 inhabitants, almost all related in some way to the founding family who still hold the chiefdom. The dominant family name is Kouyaté, familiar to Mande scholars as an exclusively griot patronym. They all speak Dyula, though some are conversant in the Senufo language of their neighbors.

8. See RICHTER (1980: 12-15) for a discussion of the conflicting information on classifications of artist groups in the literature of Senufo society. See also GLAZE (1981: 5, 26-45), KNOPS (1959; 1980: 240-261), and HOLAS (1957: 70-71, 127).

9. Baskets of this type are also made by the wives of blacksmith-carvers of the central Senufo known as “Fono” according to GLAZE (1981: 5, 30-31, 226 fn 20). However, in the area of Oulessebouyou south of Bamako, Malinke *numu* potters produce them.

10. A third village, Dioumaténé, was also identified as having a significant population of potters in one of its dispersed quarters, but the scale of production is no match for that of either Sissingué or Doguélé-dugu. However, it is worth noting that the dominant griot-potter lineage in Dioumaténé is not Kouyaté, but Diabaté, not to be confused with the Diabaté of Sissingué (see below). It is with the Kouyaté of Sissingué and Doguélé-dugu that the Diabaté-*jeliw* of Dioumaténé have marriage relations.



Sissingué is a small village located about 30 kilometers northwest of Kadiolo, with a population of less than 500. Unlike Doguéledugu, it is geographically and culturally divided between two major lineage groups: the Senufo Diabaté family who holds the chiefdom and the Kouyaté griots whose women are all potters. Although Mande scholars might recognize Diabaté as a common Mande griot patronym, these Diabaté identify themselves as a different kind of Diabaté—as noble and Senufo. In fact, Diabaté (Jabaté or Diabagaté) is one of a number of Mande patronyms adopted by Senufo peoples of southern Mali and northern Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>11</sup> The women and young children on this side of the village all speak the local Senufo dialect, with greetings to strangers in Dyula. The men seem to speak mostly Senufo among themselves, though they usually addressed me in Dyula. The Diabaté say that it was their ancestor who settled out in the bush founding what became known as the village of Sissingué. Some time later they discovered that someone was stealing clay from a pit on the outskirts of the village, and as a result invited the Kouyaté griots and their potter wives to come and settle with them. For their part, the Kouyaté of Sissingué acknowledge that they came to the area because of the high quality of clay available nearby, though they claim to have settled first, giving up the chiefdom of the village upon the arrival of the Diabaté.<sup>12</sup> They speak Dyula and refer to their Diabaté neighbors as Bamana, or more precisely as formerly Bamana, since the latter have now at least nominally adopted Islam.<sup>13</sup>

In collecting oral traditions about how the Kouyaté griots came to the

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11. Other patronyms include Coulibaly (Kulibali), Ouattara (Watara), Kondé or Koné, Traoré (Tarawele), Bamba, Fofana, Konaté, Dembélé and Sissé, according to RONDEAU (1980: 73-75). It is uncertain when these names were adopted, but informants today say they have had them for a long time. Some could have been adopted during the hegemony of the Kenedugu state which rose to power in the nineteenth century. However, although founded by Dyula, it was perceived by its members and others as a Senufo state. According to RONDEAU (*ibid.*: 309), Senufo and Dyula languages coexisted during the Kenedugu era. The primary language spoken today in Sikasso (the former capital) is Dyula, but this is more the result of colonial practices to encourage the spread of the Dyula language at the expense of Senufo, than a diffusion of Dyula during the precolonial period.
  12. It is a generally held perception that artists cannot be chiefs and thus are expected to give up the chiefdom upon the arrival of a noble family, something which did not happen at Doguéledugu because the entire village is Kouyaté. However, the evidence in support of the Diabaté side of this story is stronger, as the village of Sissingué is reported to have fallen to Daoula Traoré's Kenedugu troops in 1845 (PERRON 1923: 508-509), while the arrival of the Kouyaté appears to have been sometime later (see below).
  13. In speaking Dyula, informants often used the labels "Bamana" and "Senufo" interchangeably to identify categories of individuals who have not accepted Islam. In this context, to be Senufo and to practice *bamanaya* meant being non-Dyula and non-Moslem and performing traditional sacrifices to various spirit identities (*jinn*). The use of this terminology is not limited to this particular region, as LAUNAY (1982: 17-18) has reported similar usage among the Dyula of Korhogo.

region, fairly consistent patterns emerged in the accounts given by our diverse sources. The ancestors of the Kouyaté are said to have left Kaaba (Kangaba) at some point in the distant past, leaving behind the practice of *jeliya*, and eventually arriving in Sikasso.<sup>14</sup> From there, they are said to have traveled south to establish the village of Lofiné. It is from Lofiné that three brothers split apart and went their separate ways to the villages of Doguéldugu, Donyena(?) and Diou. It was from Diou that the Kouyaté who are now in Sissingué came. It is not clear when these migrations took place, but references to Sikasso, warfare and Samory suggest the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Having briefly sketched the complexities of identity and heritage as presented by Kouyaté griot men, I now come to my central question: What about the women? Who are they and from where did their mothers come? I referred above to the women potters of this region as Mande, and indeed that is how they identify themselves and how they are identified by others. They speak Dyula as a first language, it is the language they use with their children, it is the language of the songs they sing, it is the language they use to identify the different tools and types of pots they make. They, like their husbands, are Moslems, observing the fast of Ramadan, never firing on Fridays, due to the importance of attending prayers (though this was apparently a prohibition from pre-Islamic times). In my discussions with these women, they say that when their ancestors

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14. Kathryn GREEN (1991: 127-135) argues that claims to a "Mande Kaaba" ancestry need to be treated with caution as a relatively recent phenomenon based on the erroneous identification of Kangaba as the ancient capital of the Mali empire, due in part to its ever-increasing significance as a cultural center in recent times. Informants, especially those geographically removed from the Mande heartland, expect their claims of descent from Kaaba to be accompanied by a rise in stature and prestige by association with the presumed heart of the ancient empire.
  15. According to RONDEAU (1980: 297-299), Sissingué is one of the villages identified as having been deserted during the great deportation, an apparently brutal campaign to turn the outer reaches of the Kenedugu state into a wasteland in order to deter the advances of the Samorian army which relied on the granaries of local villagers to feed the troops. According to her informants, entire villages were rounded up, young children and the elderly summarily executed, while the remaining able-bodied population was marched to Sikasso where they remained for three years before returning to their villages. It is uncertain as to whether the Kouyaté were established in the town before that event, or whether they may have come with or followed the returning Senufo. DIABATÉ (1987: 54-55) provides a somewhat different scenario of the movements of the Kouyaté. Based on information given by an elder from Doguéldugu, Diabaté reports that the Kouyaté settled first in Nieguanso(?), then in Misirikoro (just outside Sikasso). When they came to Kadiolo, they were given permission to settle in a hamlet not far from town which became known as Doguéldugu, after the name of their leader "Short Do". According to Diabaté, the Kouyaté of Doguéldugu were among those taken to Sikasso under Babemba's command, but at least some of them went on to Sissingué rather than returning to Doguéldugu after Babemba's defeat.

left Kangaba for Sikasso, Lofiné and eventually Doguélédugu and Sissingué, their mothers brought with them their knowledge of pottery production. They say that there are Kouyaté griot women to this day in Kangaba making pottery the same way they do it in the Kadiolo region.

So what is wrong with this picture? In the first place, pottery production in Kangaba (and in Bamana and Malinke regions generally) is the domain of blacksmith women. The Kouyaté women of the Mande area are griots, and while they may or may not practice *jeliya*, none would willingly consider taking up pottery production. These factors led me to reconsider how these women and their artistry fit into the broader picture of craft traditions in the region, so I turned my attention to examining their technology in search of clues to their history.

## Objects and Technology

Archaeologists and art historians have long recognized the efficacy of style distribution in establishing relative chronologies and suggesting lines of interaction among peoples. In his study of the distribution of ceramic footed bowls, Roger Bedaux (1980) cautiously suggests that the presence of this rather distinctive form in the Mande heartland region of Niani and Kangaba and along or within reach of the Upper Niger River may reflect the movements of peoples, objects and ideas along this major thoroughfare. Oral traditions support a pattern of population movements at various times between these two regions, not least of which are those concerning the dispersal of peoples following the dissolution of the empire of Ghana. In addition, the Mali empire's domination of this region and its encouragement of trade suggests another means by which this unusual ceramic form might have travelled. In examining the Tellem bowls from Bedaux's excavations in the Bandiagara region, it was concluded that they were made by pressing clay into a concave mold, the sides completed with the addition of coils, leaving a horizontal ridge around the base where the edge of the mold would have been. If a similar technology was employed in the forming of the footed bowls from the other regions, it would suggest more than simply the diffusion of style. While objects may be seen to move easily along trade routes as reflected in the widespread distribution of particular styles and types, it is by focusing on the technology of manufacture that we begin to find evidence for the movements of peoples, more specifically, of the artists themselves.

My argument for closer attention to be paid to craft production is based on the premise that these technologies, as culturally learned behaviors, are sophisticated, distinctive and relatively conservative. In the case of pottery production, although tools and materials may appear to be rudimentary, the technical knowledge required to successfully form and fire is anything but simple. It is not a craft that someone could simply

take up upon seeing a skilled potter work, much less upon being presented with the finished product. This product reflects specialized knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next and augmented by individual experience. Although potters may attempt new forms, they are much less likely to experiment with the process itself. The style of their technology, how and why they make pots the way they do, is more distinctive than the style of the objects they produce. Yet despite, or perhaps because of the conservatism of ceramic technology in West Africa, differences in methods of forming employed by potters are surprising. In fact, it is precisely this combination of sophistication, conservatism and variation that makes the study of ceramic technology such an effective tool in reconstructing history.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, while the Kadiolo potters do share a similar repertory of pottery types with their Mande blacksmith counterparts, the way they make these pots is fundamentally different.<sup>17</sup> Potters from the Mande heartland create a relatively dry gritty mixture of clay and temper. They begin the forming process by pounding a large pancake shape over an old pot serving as a mold. If the potter is making a water jar or some other vessel requiring a foot, it is added at this point. The bottom is allowed to harden somewhat and is then removed from the mold. The walls of the pot are built up with coils, the surface is smoothed, and molded or incised decoration is added. Decorative patterns (particularly for water jars) are either painted on with slip or drawn with a red stone after the pots have become leatherhard or completely dry.

In contrast, the clay mixed by the griot potters of the Kadiolo region is wetter and more elastic. They form the clay into cylinders and place them on small pieces of broken pottery that will serve as turntables. They position themselves on a long wooden plank with the cylinder of clay and turntable in front of them and begin by pounding a depression in the center with the heel of their right hand, turning it with their left. They then switch to pounding with the tips of their fingers. When the desired depth is nearly reached they combine pounding with pulling the clay upwards, very quickly forming it into a vaguely hemispherical shape. The interior of the vessel is then smoothed and shaped with a large seed pod while the clay is still quite loose and pliable. They will set the pot aside while starting two or three others before adding coils to the sides and rim. Once the rim is completed and the pot has been allowed to become leatherhard, the exterior surface is scraped and smoothed with

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16. For a discussion of the concept of technological style and its relationship to culturally learned behavior, see LECHIMAN 1977.

17. These types of pots include cooking vessels and serving bowls, water jars, incense burners and pots for steaming couscous. Stylistically, the pots made by the Kadiolo women have more in common with those of Senufo potters to the south (see below).

a variety of tools. Decorative patterning is added by means of wooden and fiber roulettes and sometimes with a red stone similar to the kind used in the Mande heartland. Once the rim has been polished and designs added to the shoulder and neck of the vessel, the pot is removed from the ceramic turntable and excess clay on the bottom is scraped off to form the appropriate shape. The surface is smoothed and decoration added as well as a foot, if desired. Just before the firing, the vessels may also have a red slip rubbed into the smooth upper surfaces. In both the directness of the initial forming method and the extent of excess clay scraped off, this process is fundamentally different from that employed further north, a difference that cannot be ascribed solely to differences in the quality or character of the available clays.

If we examine the technology of the firing process, we again find significant differences between the two regions, only partially attributable to variations in available materials. At first glance, the relatively small firings of the work of one or two blacksmith women contrast dramatically with the large number of pots in the communal firings of the Kadiolo region. However, even in Mande centers where pottery production attains a scale comparable to that of the Kadiolo women, such as the village of Kalabougou near Segou, the treatment of the pots during and immediately after the firing process is also fundamentally different.<sup>18</sup>

The blacksmith women of the Mande heartland use wood as the primary source of fuel. The large pots are stacked upside down either on a bed of wood or raised above the ground on stones. Smaller ones are placed around and on top, and the entire pile is then covered with wood and occasionally with straw. The fire is lit and allowed to burn no more than 30 minutes or so before the women begin removing pieces hot from the fire to be dipped into, or splashed with, a special vegetable solution that seals the surface and turns them a rich shiny black.<sup>19</sup> Cooking pots are sometimes also smothered in rice chaff or a similar material to enhance the oxidation of the surface. Only the water pots and small incense burners are allowed to remain the red color of the fired clay. While stacking the pots can take an hour or more, the actual firing

18. Most of the firings I attended in Kangaba and Kolokani had between 15 and 45 pieces, the largest one was the work of four women and had 72 pieces. In contrast, the firings witnessed in Doguélédugu in 1991 were composed of two great piles of 700 to 800 pieces each. A firing in the spring of 1992 in Sissingué was mostly the work of eight women, each of whom had between 100 and 150 pieces in the firing, though many other women contributed anywhere from two or three up to 30 or 40 pieces. These large communal firings occur approximately once every three weeks during the height of the dry season. Smaller firings are also done periodically by individuals and small groups. For information on the Kalabougou firings, see RAIMBAULT (1980: 463-471).

19. Various materials can be used to make the liquor, including the seed pods of *bagana* (acacia), the seed pods or bark of *nèrè* (*Parkia biglobosa*), the bark of *npekuba* (*Lannea microcarpa*), and the leaves of *kunjè* (*Guiera senegalensis*).



to the removal of the last vessel from the still hot coals rarely lasts more than an hour.

In contrast, the griot potters create a thick bed of narrow sticks on which the pots are carefully placed. The large pots are placed upright in the center with smaller pots stacked around and on top of them. Carefully placed pieces of broken pots form a protective shield around some of the pots on the outer tiers. The pile is then covered with multiple layers of straw and lit. For the next several hours the women watch for openings in the burnt straw where the partially fired pots are exposed, onto which they toss additional armloads of straw. Even though the fire is subdued after the first few hours, the pots are allowed to continue baking until just before dawn of the following day. Although the women are familiar with the process of turning the pots black hot from the fire in the manner described above, the vast majority of what they produce remains the red color of fired clay.<sup>20</sup> The distinctive forming and firing technology of the Kadiolo women adds another layer to the paradox of their identity as Mande griot potters.

## A Search for Origins

When I returned to the United States after my first field season with the Kadiolo potters, I was convinced that these women, or at least their technology, was not Mande in origin. At the time, I thought that among the various Senufo artist subgroups was the most logical place to look, in part because the Senufo share with their Mande neighbors to the north the ideological separation of artists from the farmer majority, a conceptual pattern that suggests a long history of interaction and exchange between these peoples. However, even though northern or Mande origins have been proposed for most of the major artist groups now well integrated in Senufo society,<sup>21</sup> significant differences among the various Senufo sub-

20. The women of Sissingué say they used to blacken some of their pots, but since sales were fine without taking the extra steps to blacken them, they decided to abandon the practice. At Doguéledugu on the same day as the major firing, a couple of women fired a small group of sauce bowls, treating each bowl hot from the fire to a bath of water and the seed pods of *nèrè* (*Parkia biglobosa*), but this represented less than 2 % of the day's production.

21. PERSON (1968, I: 57) and TAMARI (1991: 243, 246-249). Not all authors agree with blanket identifications of Mande origins for Senufo artist groups. GLAZE (1981: 5, 31, 37, 227 fn 28) identifies the Tyeduno (Cedumbele) *numu* blacksmith-potters as being of Mande origin, and suggests that the Kpeene (Kpeenbele) brasscaster-potters and Kule (Kulebele) wood and calabash carvers (following Richter) may also be of Mande origin. See also RICHTER (1980: 15-17) for a discussion of Kulebele origins, and SPINDEL (1989: 68) for a word of caution on theories as to the origins of the Kpeenbele. GLAZE's hesitance (1981) to ascribe Mande origins to the Senufo Tyeli (Jeli, Dyeli) leatherworkers is based in part on the mistaken assumption pervading the literature that leather-



groups and between Mande and Senufo traditions generally reflect the complexity of their development over time.

The most important potters among the Senufo in terms of scale of production are the wives of the brasscasters known as Kpeenbele. In fact, some of the types of pots made by Kpeenbele potters are quite similar to those of the Kouyaté women. However, as suggested above, style and type are often the least reliable marker of identity, flowing easily across geographical and cultural boundaries. Even though both the Kadiolo and Kpeenbele firing techniques rely heavily on straw rather than wood, the choice of fuel is probably more dependent on the environment than any other factor in pottery production. It is not surprising that potters in a similar ecological zone would employ similar materials. It was the forming process employed by Kpeenbele potters that brought this line of inquiry to a halt. Their use of an old pot as a convex mold has more in common with techniques employed by potters in the Mande heartland than those of the women of Doguéledugu and Sissingué.<sup>22</sup>

If we turn now to look at the technology of other potter groups in this part of West Africa, we find that most potters employ some kind of a mold in the initial stages of forming. The convex mold used by Kpeenbele and Mande potters is employed by a second Senufo artist group—the Tyedunbele (Cedumbele)—blacksmith-potters who are said to be of Mande origin. This technique is also used by Soninke and Bwa potters and by some Mossi, Fulani, and Dogon potters. A concave mold with variations on a paddle and anvil technique is used by Songhai potters as well as by other Mossi, Fulani and Dogon potters. Somono potters of Mopti and Jenne combine the use of a concave mold with a coiling technique in the initial phases of construction.<sup>23</sup>

A third technique found east and south of the Kadiolo region is that

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working among Mande peoples was the exclusive domain of a different artist group known as *garanké*. In fact, my own work with Mande leatherworkers (FRANK 1988, fthcg) revealed the extent to which Mande *jeliw* practice the trade of the leatherworker in the absence of and in competition with Mande *garan-kéw*. See also LAUNAY (fthcg) for an extended discussion of Dyeli identity. In addition, I suspect Glaze's assessment of the origins of the central Senufo *fono* blacksmith-basketmakers might be revised with information concerning *fono* groups in southern Mali.

22. SPINDEL (1989: 66-73, 103). The medicine pot known as *tolorokodoli* in Senufo (*ibid.*: 71 fig. 10) is very similar to those made by the Kouyaté potters also used for storing traditional medicines. The latter is called *bamadaga* (lit. "crocodile pot" in Dyula), a reference to the textured surface meant to warn others of the potentially dangerous substances contained within.
23. On Tyedunbele potter techniques, see SPINDEL (1988: 11-12, Appendix II); on Soninke (Sarakole) potters, see GALLAY (1970); on Somono and Fulani potters of Jenne, see LAVIOLETTE (1987, fthcg); on Fulani and Somono potters of the Mopti area, see GARDI (1985: 224-262); on Dogon potters, see GALLAY (1981) and BEDAUX & LANGE (1983: 26-29); and on the various potter groups in Burkina Faso, see ROY (1987: 50-60). See also GALLAY & HUYSECOM (1989) and DROST (1967).

for which Christopher Roy has suggested the term “direct pull” since it does not involve the use of a mold. Variations of this technique are used by a broad spectrum of potter groups in Burkina Faso and Ghana. Roy’s description of a Lobi potter at work presents some parallels to the techniques of the Kadiolo potters:

“The potter begins by placing a small, fired-clay dish on the floor of her work area, which will serve as a support for the base of the new pot. She then forcefully slaps a large mass of kneaded clay into this dish. Using her right fist, she forces a hollow into the center of the mass. Then, bending over the clay, with her right hand inside the pot and her other hand outside, she begins to force the fresh clay upward, pulling the clay toward her chest, and simultaneously thinning and heightening the walls with the pressure of her fingers as they slide over the plastic material. Her back is parallel to the ground as she bends, and her elbows and arms do all of the work”.<sup>24</sup>

Potters among the Mo peoples of Ghana also construct pots without the use of a mold. In one method, the potter commences by placing a large ring of clay onto the cleanly swept ground. She then proceeds to pull the walls of the pot up until the desired size and shape is achieved. As in the technique used by the Lobi potters, the vessel remains stationary, the potter moving around it as she works. In another, the potter forces a depression with her fist in the center of a mass of clay before pulling up the sides.<sup>25</sup> While Mo and Lobi potters share with the women of Kadiolo the lack of reliance on a mold and the technique of forcing the moist clay upwards, there are significant differences in the initial phases of constructing the pot—in the shape of the clay when starting (mass and ring *vs* cylinder), in the position of the vessel under construction (stationary *vs* rotating), and in the posture of the potter (bent over and working around the vessel *vs* seated with the vessel turning in front). Although an historical link among these methods is possible, a conclusive connection must await more detailed analysis of the techniques employed by these and other potter communities in Burkina Faso, eastern Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana.

There is, however, one group of potters among the central Senufo whose techniques in the beginning stages of forming a pot seem to correspond more closely to those employed by the women of Sissingué and Doguélédu, but whose identity and occupational specialization raise just as many questions about their origins as that of the Kadiolo potters. In her research on the Nafanra potters, Carol Spindel was faced with

24. Roy (1987: 52). Roy goes on to say that if the vessel is a small one, the potter may work seated turning the vessel in front of them, which is the way that the Kadiolo potters begin every pot, regardless of the intended size or type of vessel.

25. Descriptions of the techniques employed by Mo potters are based on research by Roy Sieber in Branman, Ghana, in 1967 and by Marla Berns in Bonakire in 1978.

the dilemma of trying to explain how the wives of Senufo farmers had come to make pottery, something which goes against the grain of Senufo ideology. Initially she hypothesized that these women might have learned from Tyedunbele or Kpeenbele potters who sought refuge among the Nafanra from the warriors of Tieba, Babemba and Samory. But she ran into the problem of explaining the fundamental differences in the forming process between the Nafanra potters and their supposed teachers. Their identity as the wives of farmers and their particular technology make them an anomaly in the Senufo world. Ironically, it is this group of potters whose past may be linked to that of the women with whom I worked in the Kadiolo region.<sup>26</sup>

### Identity, Slavery, and the Agency of Women

Leaving aside questions about the origin of the technology for the moment, I would like to examine other fragments of information on the history of the Kouyaté women. On one occasion, during a household inventory of ceramic objects and their makers, the husband of one of the potters apologized for not being able to provide the family name of his mother because she had been a slave and was “given” the name Kouyaté when she entered the service of the family. He added that the same was true for many of the women of her generation. Later, on the day of the firing when there was not much to be done beyond keeping an eye on the fire, some of the women began singing what they identified as slave songs. While I suspect the performance was primarily for our benefit, the possibility that it was slavery that brought the mothers of these women to the region merits further investigation.

The institution of slavery, wide-spread in West Africa for at least several centuries of the precolonial era, seems to have escalated during the course of the nineteenth century. Throughout this period, the regions of southern Mali, southwestern Burkina Faso and northern Côte d’Ivoire suffered tremendous disruptions due to the slave-raiding activities of the warriors of Segou’s Bambara and Umarian states, of Sikasso’s Kenedugu under the rule of Tieba and Babemba, and those of Samory. Without the protection of centralized city-states, peasant populations across the savanna region offered little resistance. In addition, in order to meet the demands of tribute and to feed the market for slaves, villages in the

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26. SPINDEL (1988: 10-16). Spindel suggests a possible connection between Nafanra (Nafara, Naffara) and Baule potters through their use of what she refers to as a “pinch pot” technique in the beginning stages of forming a pot, as well as similar decorative techniques and certain parallels in their respective apprenticeship systems.

region mounted raids against neighboring villages creating ill will that continues to color informants' comments today.<sup>27</sup>

Particularly relevant to the subject at hand is the fact that more women and children were taken captive than men, and a much higher percentage of those remaining in the Sudanic and savanna regions of West Africa were also women and children. The men were more likely either to be killed during the raiding, conscripted into the army, or transported to the coast for the Atlantic trade. Throughout the region, female slaves were preferred, and in fact demanded higher prices, primarily because of their productive capacity. Contrary to what might be expected, it was not the ability of female slaves to produce offspring that made them valuable, since it was more expensive to raise a child from birth to a productive level than to purchase a slave outright. Rather, it was their own labor in the fields and the enhanced performance of male slaves when provided wives that made female slaves a desired commodity. In addition to their work in the fields, female slaves also supplied a wide range of domestic services (drawing water, preparing food, cleaning, etc.) to both slave and free populations.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas agricultural and domestic labor would have been reason enough to keep the demand for women high, they had other skills that augmented their value. During the dry season, when there was little work to be done in the fields, slaves were encouraged to engage in craft activities, especially those related to textile production. Even old women whose usefulness in the fields had all but disappeared with age could command high prices if they were adept at spinning.<sup>29</sup>

While the value of skills such as spinning and dyeing (done by women) as well as weaving (which remained a man's task) can be directly tied to the commercial importance of the trade in textiles, the value of other craft activities is more difficult to assess. Male leatherworkers and blacksmiths would certainly have been in demand for maintaining the effectiveness and power of the various slave and free armies, producing and repairing weapons and cavalry horse trappings. In his extended study of Samory and his military organization, Yves Person (1968, II: 920) men-

27. RONDEAU (1980: 104), KLEIN (1992), and ROBERTS (1987: 113 *sq.*). In her thesis on Senufo society in southern Mali, RONDEAU (1980: 293-295) notes that while Sikasso's warriors were a constant threat throughout the region of what is now southern Mali, they were not the only problem, as the smaller states of Nyele (Niéllé) and Mbinge (Mbengué) to the south mounted slave raids against their northern neighbors in on again-off again subservient alliances to Sikasso and Samory.

28. ROBERTSON & KLEIN (1983) and KLEIN (1983: 67-92). For a discussion of the importance of the productive as opposed to reproductive capacities of female slaves, see MEILLASSOUX (1983). For a table of comparative prices for male and female slaves, see KLEIN (1983: 74-75; 1992: 40-41); see also ROBERTS (1987: 116-118).

29. MEILLASSOUX (1975: 202, 249-250); ROBERTS (1984: 229-250; 1987: 108, 125-126).

tions the establishment at major garrisons of teams of artisans, primarily blacksmiths, who were provided grain and thus expected to work full time on the production of weaponry.<sup>30</sup>

But what about women potters? Person notes that the wives of the blacksmiths stationed in military camps by Samory were involved in carefully pounding gun powder in their mortars, but makes only passing reference to their “past” roles as potters.<sup>31</sup> Yet it must have been potters who would have supplied the cooking vessels used to prepare the vast quantity of rice and millet to feed the armies of the various warlords and the workers in the fields, it was potters who would have made the jars for cooling water and brewing beer. For the time being, the question remains open as to whether these services were provided by slaves or by free women, but if the skills of other craftpersons were tapped, it seems likely that those of the potters would have been as well.

Whether or not the mothers of the potters of Sissingué and Doguéledugu came to this region as slaves or as free women, there is little doubt as to the value of their particular expertise. After all, it was the work of the women, not the men, that occasioned the Kouyaté’s settlement in the village of Sissingué where good quality clay could be found. In a conversation with one of the Diabaté men concerning the Kouyaté, he commented that it is not surprising that the *jeli* “followed” their women to Sissingué, because the work of the women is clearly better and more secure as a means of earning a living. He said that while the men do nothing but beg, the women are feeding the family. He added that if the men return from begging empty-handed, then even the women will go out and beg.

While I am cautious in taking too literally the disdainful statements made about the “begging” activities of griots,<sup>32</sup> his comments led me to consider another element in the history of these women—who these women have become. If they became griots through the process of either slavery or intermarriage, then to what extent do they participate in *jeliya*? I mentioned at the beginning of this paper the identification of the husbands of these potters as “mute” griots who no longer practice *jeliya*.

30. PERSON (1968, II: 919-923). Person also mentions tailors and leatherworkers among the artists garrisoned by Samory, but suggests that their numbers were much less important than the blacksmiths and brasscasters. According to ROBERTS (1981: 187; 1987: 126), the grandfather of one of his Maraka informants (in the region of Sinsani) maintained a plantation exclusively of ironworkers. MEILLASSOUX (1975: 202) mentions that blacksmiths and weavers might be exempted from agricultural labor in return for the products of their particular expertise, and that the same might be extended to basketmakers, potters and cloth dyers.

31. MEILLASSOUX (1975: 202) includes potters among those who might be exempted from agricultural labor as slaves (see *supra* fn 30).

32. Discussions with Barbara Hoffman have made me particularly aware that words are not always matched by actions when it comes to attitudes towards griots. See HOFFMAN (fthcg).

We were told repeatedly by the men that they no longer ask for gifts, but that if someone wants to give them something, they will accept it. As one of the potters explained to us: “For me, *jeliya* means making pots (*bogo lo*). When they say *jeliw*, it means potters. There are two kinds of *jeliw*: *jeliw-nyamakalaw* are the ones who beg (*deli*), sing (*donkilida*), and walk around (*yaala*). We are not that kind of *jeliw*, but if someone gives us something, we take it. We are *jeliw-bobo* (mute griots)”.

However, the following year I was in Sissingué just after Ramadan when many marriages take place. One afternoon, this same potter cleaned up early in order to depart with several friends to a neighboring village where one of her patron families was celebrating a wedding. They were going to sing and dance all night and, she said, make some money. We saw them taking leave of the village the next morning, singing the praises of their hosts as they departed. Whatever the griot activities of the men may or may not be, the women appear to have incorporated pottery production into what it means to be a *jeli*, playing off their status as a distinctive kind of griot vis-à-vis their Senufo counterparts—singing praises and accepting gifts when it suits them, but focusing most of their attention on their own strengths as ceramic artists.

This brings me to the issue of agency and choice. Anyone who has spent time with women in Malian villages (as I suspect elsewhere in Africa) cannot escape being struck by the limited options they have in the way they live their lives. It is at times difficult to imagine the concept of “choice” entering into the history of the Kadiolo potters, particularly in light of the role slavery may have played. Yet if I am on the right track concerning the non-Mande, non-griot origins of these women, I suggest it is possible that somewhere along the line, a group of women forced by circumstance to lose their social identity, chose to keep their skills as potters and to continue making pottery in the distinctive way their mothers had taught them. They may have then shared their expertise with other women. Together these women were successful enough in their pottery making that whole families—men, women and children—were moved to support their trade and participate in its success. Thus while history may have shaped the lives of these women in unforeseen ways, they seem to have responded in the creation of a new identity. They have made a place for themselves as Dyula, as Kouyaté, as griots, and most importantly, as potters of acclaim throughout the Kadiolo region.

Weighing the claims to Mande origins stated by the potters and their husbands against the technological and historical evidence, I suggest that pottery production in this area reflects a distinct and probably southern or eastern origin. I propose that the discrepancy lies in differences in the origins of the women versus those of the men, highlighting the need to consider not only the official male histories of families and villages, but individual and collective histories of the women as well. I suspect that further documentation of the technologies employed by artists and careful



attention to the social identity of men and women will reveal more of the interrelated past of the Kadiolo potters and other peoples of this part of West Africa.

Although the puzzle of the origins of these women and their technology remains unsolved, it no longer represents quite the paradox with which I began this essay. Rather, the information presented here forces one to realize the complexity and dynamism of these societies. Recognizing the agency of both men and women in the creation, maintenance and continuing redefinition of their identity makes the study of their history all the more compelling. As we continue to accumulate data on individual artistic traditions, it is essential that we explore the implications of patterns that emerge among these various traditions. Linking artistic production, technology and social identity in a comparative framework is critical to the success of our efforts to reconstruct the history of these peoples and their artistry.

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