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Secrets and Lies:

Context, Meaning, and Agency in Mande

Over a decade of work in the arts and social sciences has drawn our attention to areas of misunderstanding of Mande culture by Western (or Western-trained) scholars. Amselle (1985), Bazin (1985) and Conrad & Frank (1995) have called into question the notion of ethnicity and explored the flexibility and malleability of Mande ethnic categories. McNaughton (1988, 1995) has dismantled the mapping of Western morality onto Mande evaluations of sorcery. My own writing (Hoffman 1990, 1995) has attempted to deconstruct the notion of hierarchy with regard to inter-caste relations and to explore the complexities of the negotiation of status. Underlying all of these works is a developing view of social life and the culture it produces as comprised of what anthropologist James Clifford refers to as “contested codes and representations” (1986: 2). Central to this view is the recognition of the agency of the social actor in creating and transmitting meaning commensurate with the social context in which communication takes place and of the profusion of perspectives at play in the production of cultural forms.

This view of culture as a multi-faceted set of complex understandings is resonant with the early writings of the Russian scholar Bakhtin, who wrote that all communication has multiple meanings—a condition which he termed “heteroglossia” which has been defined by his translators as:

“... that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve” (Bakhtin 1981 [1935]: 428).

The idea that meaning is a product of a heterogeneous cultural and interactional context is further supported by the work attributed to Bakhtin’s colleague Volosinov, for whom all meaning arises in the interstices of social communication, in the act of dialogue between one human and

another, with all the contingencies such contexts imply, e.g., varying perspectives deriving from age, education, gender, and occupational differences, all operating at once in the speech situation (Volosinov 1986 [1929]).

Finding ways to give voice to the various perspectives that operate in the theater of the production of meaning, including the political negotiation of meaning, as part of our description of the creation and maintenance of cultural forms, is a major theme in sociocultural anthropology today. No longer acceptable are monolithic descriptions, univocal analyses; no longer unchallenged is the authority of the scholar whose perspective may be merely one of many and whose legitimacy must be well established through dialogue with the voices of those described. That legitimacy can no longer be simply stipulated by indicating "presence in the field." Many have spent a year or two "in the field" and come away with distorted and flawed understandings. We need now to be made aware of the process by which the knowledge of the scholar developed; in addition, the cultural intricacies surrounding the practices we describe need to be thoroughly delineated. Thick description, as proposed by Geertz (1973), is called for now more than ever in any study of aspects of one culture by members of another, no matter the disciplinary field; what is more, our descriptions need to take into account the manifold points of view that may be held on the cultural practices we attempt to depict. Without this kind of background, we are left with a tangle of unanswerable questions about the conclusions drawn; this is particularly true when the research focuses on that most complex of human cultural forms: language.

Mande Language and Culture

And so I begin this discussion of Mande language and culture with a brief overview of my own history in Mande studies. Issues involved in studying Mande languages and their speakers are familiar territory to me: as a linguist and an anthropologist, I have been studying Mande cultures for twenty years, over four of those spent in Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso. During the period of my initial fieldwork, my research focussed on linguistic and cultural distinctions between griots and nobles; as an apprentice griot in the Maninka and Bamana griot communities, I learned much about the subtleties of verbal communication in Mande, enough so that I was entrusted by the Mande griot community with recording and interpreting the artistry of the bards as demonstrated at one of their most historically significant performance venues (Hoffman 1990 and forthcoming). However, my grasp remains limited, my struggle to understand constant: even a lifetime of intensive study would gain the best scholar only a small

portion of the complex knowledge Mande native speakers develop. In this article, I would like to discuss some aspects of the intricacies of communication in Mande as I have apprehended them thus far.

Meaning and Context

A recent article by the Dutch historian Jan Jansen, claims to “show that social aspects determine the control over the meaning of shared knowledge” (Jansen 1994: 120). What the author means by “social aspects”, “control”, and “shared knowledge” remains unclear: the terms are neither defined nor explicated from either a Western or a Mande point of view. However, a case study is offered in which it is explained how the griot Lansine Diabate of Kela was called upon as the *kumatigi*, or master of speech, to explain the phrase *safunetawulu* from Sunjata’s praise song. On one occasion, when the phrase was preceded by a proverb referring to the influence of mothers, Lansine explained that the dog who seized the soap was a female, and that since she had done something extraordinary, her children would as well, the implication being that Sunjata, the son of a remarkable mother, had made extraordinary achievements as a result of his maternal inheritance. The second time he explained it nearly a year later, the context included a statement that the dog was *jugu*, which Jansen translates as “evil.” Lansine described this as a warning: “If a dog seizes soap he is not dangerous, but it certainly is something extraordinary. Therefore, when the dogs get the chance to seize a bone, this particular dog will surely manage to do so at the cost of the other dogs present” [126].

Jansen concludes from these two explications that “no one knows the meaning of the expression *safunetawulu*”, but that Lansine, by referring to textual content and cultural content, “solves intellectual problems in a keen manner” (Jansen 1994: 127). There are a number of problems with this conclusion, among them the assertion that these explications are unrelated; however, not enough information is presented to the reader to make the nature of the exegesis clear—Jansen’s representation of the interactions leaves the reader wondering what Lansine actually said and what he might have meant, and how Jansen arrived at his interpretations of that meaning. It is important to note that the formulaic nature of the proverb places it in a category of speech that can be interpreted in manifold ways; as has been recognized in a body of literature on the use of proverbs in African discourse, that some interpretations may appear to be contradictory is not an indicator of “lack of meaning” (e.g., Yankah 1983, 1986; Meider 1994; Koné 1996).

More significantly, from a theoretical point of view, what is missing from Jansen’s analysis is the nature of the intellectual problem: the contrast between the Western question “what does this mean?” and Mande under-

standings of “meaning.” Deriving from our literate traditions, Western notions of “meaning” include historical background, development of phonological, syntactic, and semantic systems, how words and phrases were used in the past, and how they have come to be used the way they are now—all developments that are typically recorded in writing and preserved for the collective memory. Mande notions of “meaning” are based on orality where no such systematic record has been kept or would have been considered important, where “definitions” are contextually constructed and subject to alteration, to nuance, to subtle manipulation and even drastic change from one speech context to another, from one speaker to another. The work of the linguistic anthropologist Charles Briggs reminds us that our interlocutors can have very different notions from our own about what is happening when we pose our questions and that it takes more than asking direct questions to uncover those understandings (Briggs 1986).

One Mande way of asking for the meaning of a word or phrase is to inquire about what lies “underneath” the sounds (*a kòrò ye di?*). Of “what is underneath,” some aspects can be articulated, but others cannot. Always, part of “what is underneath” is the social history of the people in the communication context, in addition to the ways in which the word or phrase has been used and understood by those people and others in the past. The imaginative process called for by this spatial metaphor is much different from that associated with Western notions of “meaning” as signification, as pointing from a set of sounds or letters to a particular object, action, state. Mande words are polysemic; a great sensitivity to and understanding of context is required to be assured of communicative competence (one of the qualities that makes Mande languages so difficult for outsiders to master, as the great bard Bazumana Sisoko used to sing, *Bamanakan ka gèlèn, bèè t’o si don!* “The Bamana language is difficult, not all can know it!”). One implication for researchers asking the question, “What does this mean?” is that it must be understood that the response will be an indication of what is meant at that time, in that place, by that speaker replying to the particular person asking the question. We should not be surprised to see that the same question evokes a different response under another set of circumstances; in Mande ways of speaking, meaning is as fluid as the changing social circumstances of its production. This does not imply, however, that the varying responses are necessarily unrelated, or that our respondents are ignorant or secretive. A more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of the language and the communicative process is called for.

In addition to discussion of the exegesis of the phrase *safunetawulu*, Jansen attempts to explicate the nature of Mande “secrets” or *gundo*. He states, “In daily life *gundo* refers to things which must not be said in public. A *gundo* « est une chose qui reste entre nous . . . » *gundo* are often widely known, but it is impolite to admit to know them” (Jansen

1994: 122). From this, he concludes that “the well-known formulaic praise lines [spoken by griots] are also *gundow*” (*ibid.*: 123). The *fasaw* or praise lines could indeed be construed as *gundow*, depending on the context of their utterance. They might be especially emphasized as *gundow* in the context of a foreign researcher seeking information about secrets, and paying informants fees to learn about them. An easily marketed commodity, in other words. On the other hand, in the context of an apprentice *jelimuso* (female griot) learning her art, the *fasa* are not *gundow*, but *donniya*—the knowledge which she needs to know and practice in order to develop her skills. Jansen’s account fails to take into consideration many such complexities of the “cultural context” he endeavors to explain. Certainly, someone of noble status would not utter *fasaw* in public, although, as I have reported elsewhere (Hoffman 1995), they often do so in private. To do so in public would be to violate a *hòròn* norm of decency, not to divulge a secret.

The norms of behavior expected of *hòròn* and *jeli* differ in myriad ways, but there is a particular emphasis on linguistic differentiation. This distinction is marked in the text of a song:

<i>Hòrònya ka gèlèn,</i>	Nobility is difficult,
<i>Hòrònya ka gèlèn,</i>	Nobility is difficult,
<i>Hòròn ye jelikuma kan k'o fo,</i>	A noble speaking griot language,
<i>Hòrònya ka gèlèn.</i>	Nobility is difficult.
<i>Hòrònya ka gèlèn,</i>	Nobility is difficult,
<i>Hòrònya ka gèlèn,</i>	Nobility is difficult,
<i>Hòròn ye jelikuma kan k'o fo,</i>	A noble speaking griot language,
<i>Layidu ka gèlèn.</i>	Keeping one’s promise is difficult.

The Bamana anthropologist Kassim Koné explains that this song illustrates a convention between noble and griot regarding who may say what. Nobility entails as a birthright the promise not to breach those rules, especially with regard to using the language of griots (personal communication).

In another perplexing section of Jansen’s article, he outlines a case study of “The secrets of Siramuri Diabate.” Without ever explaining what kind of *gundow* he is talking about, he reports that, before her death, Siramuri was renowned for her knowledge of *gundow*, and that her two daughters, Sanuje and Bintan, were considered unworthy repositories of that knowledge. After her death, he found generational differences in people’s responses to the two younger *jelimusow*: older men of Kela still insisted that “Siramuri was unique and stated that Bintan did not match her mother” while “men of Bintan’s generation repeatedly expressed their joy that there was still one person who could equal Siramuri.” This, Jansen says, “shows that knowledge depends on the prestige of generation to which someone belongs” and that meaning (*koro*) “remains always a *gundo* guarded by the old, since respect for seniority precludes any doubt

about the validity of the interpretation advanced by the old people” (Jansen 1994: 124). What he does not mention is that one’s peers or elders can always question the validity of one’s interpretation, no matter one’s age. What constitutes “old” in such a cultural system is always relative and dependent on the social context.

Jansen is again confusing knowledge *lonniya/donniya* here with *gundo*. A *gundo* is certainly a form of knowledge, but not all knowledge is secret in all times and all places. The question is to illustrate when it is and when it is not.

Secret or Knowledge

What kinds of information can be considered *gundow* in Mande society? Anything that a speaker wishes to endow with “insider” status: if I tell you a secret, I impart to you information that includes both of us in a group that has a claim on that information, which is ideally restricted from access by other people. That claim may be a right of possession, of use, or of both.

However, there are significant differences between categories of *gundow*. Jansen mentions the secret of the identity of the father of the child of an unmarried mother as a *gundo*. This type of information—which often everyone knows, but may refrain from talking about except in intimate company—a choice between discretion and gossip—is of vastly different character than the secret of the formula of a *korote* (poison), or of a *kilisi* (incantation), which is very private, very secret and powerful knowledge, almost never uttered aloud in the presence of others. The usual exception would be the situation in which these secrets are being taught to someone else; in the case of the *kilisi*, always orally; for *korote*, sometimes oral instructions are given, sometimes the method is demonstrated wordlessly.

In between these two categories—social “secrets” shared in gossip and powerful secret knowledge which can be used to help or harm another unseen—are numerous types of information which can be made public knowledge or framed as a secret depending on the circumstances. There are many specialized techniques, for example, which may be well known to one group but mysterious to another. In collaboration with Frank and Koné, I once videotaped the firing of clay pots by smith women (*numumusow*) in the village of Kunogo in the Beledugu. The construction of the ring of wood on which the pots rested was a skill belonging to the women, a form of knowledge or *donniya* which they held to be their own. When the husband of the chief potter clumsily attempted to lay wood around the pots (performing for the videocamera since he would normally not be a participant in the process), the women quietly removed each piece of wood he laid and replaced it in its proper position. The

knowledge of how to place the wood was a property of the women, but not necessarily a *gundo*. Had it been a secret, it is unlikely the husband would have joined in.

After the firing, however, certain pots were removed and “treated” with a liquid *fura* or medicine. The composition of this concoction was represented as a *gundo* belonging to the older women potters. They would not talk of its components, only the eldest of them did the treating or touched the pots that were treated with it, and the leafy branches that were used to apply the liquid were burned afterward. Another type of *gundo* with different access restrictions was the location of the marsh where the potters obtained their clay. Several of the women, young and old, talked as though they had experienced going to the marsh to collect clay, but the men claimed not to even know where it was. In that case, what was a *gundo* to one gender was common knowledge to the other.

With regard to the specialized knowledge of griots expressed in praise songs or *fasaw*, Jansen asserts that “As every praise line is linked to a particular set of clans names, they may evoke a lot of emotions in anyone. Young people only recite them, if the very old give permission. This shows that the old have the prestige of knowing the correct use of these words, and thus their deeper meaning” (*ibid.*: 123). Several issues are confused here. The “correct use” of the words is not the same as knowledge of “their deeper meaning,” in the Western sense of “knowing what something means.” As I have discussed at some length elsewhere (Hoffman 1990, 1995), it is often the case that griots know how to use the phrases without being able to explain their referential meaning. Even the most accomplished griots or *ngaraw* unaccustomed to Western ways of thinking about “what something means” usually interpret and explain the meanings of formulaic praise lines as “how and when they are used” rather than explicating the historical background of a reference to a particular person or place, or identifying the source of a seemingly obscure phrase. It often takes informants long periods of exposure to the Western researcher’s questions and ways of thinking to be able to provide the kinds of answers that reply in a Western sense to the question of “what does it mean?” For instance, the ability of Wa Kamissoko of Kirina to give researchers the kinds of responses they seek progresses through time as one examines the transcription of the 1975 SCOA conference in Bamako and the later work published (posthumously) with Cissé in 1988.

However, even apprentice griots can master “the correct use” of the phrases starting in their early teens. The fact that they would refrain from demonstrating their knowledge before their elders is a sign of politeness, not a comment on their access to secrets. As an illustration, Siramori Diabate and I were once at a naming ceremony together in Bamako. While the elder *jelimusow* there, including Siramori, were singing a Traore/Diabate *fasa*, I danced, as expected of one of the Diabate clan. Afterward, Siramori and I posed for photos together. One of

Siramori's compatriots teasingly invited me to join the singing, which would have included public repetition of *fasaw*. Siramori knew that I had learned the song and was capable of performing it, but she smiled and told her friend, "*A te son! A te son ka donkili da ne nyena!*" ("She won't do it! She won't sing in front of me!") Siramori knew of my (admittedly limited) capacities in praise singing, but she also wanted her friend to know that I was a well-educated and polite young *jelimuso* who would not display the audacity of taking the stage in front of her elders without the appropriate permission. I've no doubt that Siramori would have given that permission had I asked for it, as she and other respected *ngaraw* had in times past, but I did not want to perform that day and so did not press to be allowed to. The interchange between Siramori and her friend was not a test of my access to *gundow*, but a demonstration of my knowledge of appropriate levels of politeness in a particular performance context.

Another illustration of the strategic malleability of the notion of *gundo* is the use made of the concept by Nakunte Diarra, a fine artist from the Beledugu, renowned for her specialized knowledge of the art of making *bogolanfini* (mudcloth). Few *bogolan* dyers rival the beauty of her work, from the deep colors she achieves in the dyes to the brilliant clean lines of the designs, to the complexities of their combinations. There are many components to the knowledge she has acquired in her years of experience as a designer of mudcloth, and many of these can be, and are, referred to by her as *gundow* or secrets, in particular contexts. In other situations, however, she may feel perfectly free to discuss her techniques or to demonstrate them for the many who come to learn from her, whether foreign researchers or local Bamana individuals whom she has agreed to teach her artistry. Nakunte is also a midwife and is skilled in the knowledge of childbearing and feminine sexuality. There is much information in these gender-specific areas that can be classified as *gundow* when the occasion calls for it, much that she can divulge or withhold, depending on who is doing the asking.

Whether the particular technique is classified as a secret or as knowledge to be imparted by a responsible teacher to a dedicated student may largely depend on the relationship between the possessor and the one desirous of possession. I have witnessed, and heard Nakunte describe, situations in which rival *bogolan* artists have sent students to Nakunte to learn her techniques for particularly intricate designs. There is a wide variety of socially acceptable dodges which can be employed to avoid sharing that knowledge, among them the designation of the information as a *gundo* handed down through the generations of the artist's matriline. However, when trusted individuals ask for the same information, it is often freely given, with no reference whatsoever to "family secrets." Whether one is asking for the kind of leaves used in making the mordant for one of the dyes, for the technique of washing the eyes to ease the

strain caused by the hours of close work, or for the ingredients in a medicine to increase one's lover's desire, the relationship between master and supplicant is more of a determinant of the status of the knowledge imparted than any inherent quality in the information itself.

In a similar vein, McNaughton mentions the "secret skills" that smiths develop in forging and carving; these skills are part of the *dalilu* of the smith, secret to the outsider in the same way that any highly specialized expertise is secret to the uninitiated (McNaughton 1995: 53). McNaughton's reference to the smith's secret skills is couched in an enlightening discussion of the relativity of semantic and moral systems. He analyses the various interpretations that have been made of smiths and their activities in Mande lore, from the origin myths to the epic traditions surrounding Sunjata and the Blacksmith King of Soso, Sumanguru. While many of the smiths are described as benefactors of the community, many of their works are also depicted as dangerous and often deadly, but the interpretation of their value depends entirely on the perspective of the one making the evaluation. As McNaughton points out, Sumanguru, who is frequently described as having committed many atrocities, including wearing clothing made of human skin, was viewed with approbation by his allies until they were no longer on the same side. Fakoli, his nephew, is one such case. McNaughton reminds us that "Fakoli is portrayed as a brilliant fighter and strategist and one of the Sorcerer King's most valuable supporters. It is not until Sumanguru steals his wife that Fakoli condemns his uncle and becomes a leading general in Sunjata's army" (*ibid.*: 50-51). Like the semantics of good and bad (*nyi* and *jugu*) that McNaughton sensitively elucidates in that article, the semantics of *gundow* are relativistic and dependent on the persons and circumstances of the context of their production. Every specialty, whether one of caste, craft, or of gender, has its secrets that function as defining parameters separating members of the specialized group from those outside. Does this mean that Mande people lie when they describe something as a secret to one person, but are unconditionally forthcoming with the information to another? Again, the issue is one of definition and politics: what constitutes lying and who gets to make the determination?

Truth, Falsehood and Agency

In literate societies, "accuracy" and "truth" are typically measured in terms of the capacity for substantiation by witnesses or by documentation of some sort, either written or visual. This method of "proof" is an important building block in the construction of our "scientific" method which has become a kind of worldview pervading our ways of thinking about nearly everything, not just biology and chemistry. In response to the question, "What did the President say?" we expect a reporter to give us a verbatim

account, one that will match any other reporter's (proof via witness) or that will be supported by an audio recording of the exact words of the President (proof via documentation). The technologies of writing, audio and video taping give us the means to preserve people's exact words in the first medium; words, intonation and phrasing in the second medium; and all these plus body language in the third. Of course there may still be variable interpretations of what is documented through these methods, but that is the nature of language more so than an attribute of the technology. The words are preserved in their original state, perhaps for all time.

This does not mean, however, that we have captured their meaning. The heteroglossic nature of language prevents the totality of "meaning" from ever being fully seized; each person present in a given act of communication may have a different understanding of "the meaning" at the time of utterance; those understandings may change with time so that later questioning regarding "the meaning" produces quite different interpretations. In addition, our technology is still quite limited: even with videotape, we can "capture" only so much of the context. We will not see what is happening behind the camera, or off to the side of the lens.

When we consider issues of veracity and proof in the world of orality, we are confronting a very different apparatus for registering what happened or what was said, and a correspondingly different set of criteria for judging veracity. In an oral world, the human ear is the recording device and the human brain the receptacle for storage, the memory and subsequent accounts the only "documents" that result. I have often been impressed by Mande people's ability to commit to memory lengthy narratives explaining precisely what they saw, what they heard, or what was done on a particular occasion. Their observational facilities with regard to the level of detail usually far outstrip my own. However, the freshness and exactness of the account is, understandably, correlated to the length of time that has passed since the events took place. In addition, what gets included in the "document"—the memory of what happened—and the resulting accounts given over time can vary following perceptions of the context of delivery of the account. I often had occasion to observe this in the person of a young Bamana man in my employ as a driver during a period in which an injury prevented me from driving.

One story may serve as illustration. I sent him one day to pick up a Malian friend of mine to bring her to my home. It took much longer for them to arrive than I had expected, and even longer for him to return after taking her back home once the visit was over. When he came back to the house, I asked him what had caused the delay, and was rewarded with the details of every stop my friend had asked him to make: the fabric merchant's shop, the tailor's, followed by a sidetrip to her cousin's place nearby where she found an aunt who needed to go to her grandmother's house, so they gave her a ride over there, then grandmother needed some

medicine, so a trip to the pharmacy was called for, but the closest pharmacy didn't have the right medication, so they had to go across town to the one where her sister worked. Her sister had just got word that her daughter was taken ill, so they gave her a ride home, then took the medication back to grandmother's house where they found a friend who wanted to go to a neighborhood close to mine, so they dropped her there before coming, finally, to join me at my house. The return trip was similarly peripatetic.

This young man's favorite expression when offering accounts of his whereabouts was *Wallahi, n'ma ngalon tige*, "[I swear to] Allah, I'm not lying." Accuracy of report was very important to him, both on a personal, moral basis, and because he saw it as his professional duty to account for every kilometer run in the car, every liter of gas consumed. Once he had stopped talking, I was mentally swimming in much more detail than I had ever wanted to know, and so I pressed him no further after he responded in the affirmative when I asked if nothing else had happened.

The next morning, when we got into the car, I noticed the tank was nearly empty, so I suggested we stop to fill it up. I had no cash at the time, but I kept a 1,000 CFA note tucked into the car papers for just such occasions. When I opened the papers, however, the money was gone. I asked him what had become of it, and he told me my friend had taken it. At the time, the note was worth about \$4, not a large amount of money, but a significant enough sum. Many things could be purchased with a thousand francs. My Western reasoning told me that somewhere in his "I'm not lying" account of the previous night's perambulations, he might have mentioned the circumstances under which my friend had discovered and appropriated the cash. However, a number of perfectly legitimate reasons for skipping that particular detail presented themselves when I tried to think about it in Mande terms.

For one, he was very familiar by that time with the nature of my relationship with this particular friend, who was one of my closest women friends, and just enough older than myself to stand in the position of classificatory elder sister. We had a long history of "doing for" one another that included just such types of appropriation of goods and services as she had done the night before; I had, on occasion, taken similar advantage of opportunities offered me through my association with her. The young man saw no particular reason to mention the money, which he knew I would have willingly given her had she asked, until I specifically questioned him about it. The expression on his face, and the tone of his voice when he replied, told me that he wondered why I was asking, why I didn't just know that she had helped herself, and that he was somewhat concerned that I might think he had taken it instead. He first said, in an unremarkable tone, that my sister had taken it. When he saw the look on my face, he followed this with more heated emotion that he had not told her where it was, that she found it herself and took it without asking.

He was ready to side with me if I chose to be angry about what she had done. My raising the question altered the circumstances of interpretation of the action from an acceptable act of appropriation by an older sister to an act that was of questionable morality.

To calm his fears, I laughed and made some exclamation about the ways of older sisters, but then I told him he should have mentioned it to me the night before, when he was telling me about their trip, just so I wouldn't be surprised when I discovered it, or ask awkward questions about it, possibly in the presence of my older sister. He laughed too, and indicated that he understood my concerns, and then we never spoke of the matter again.

However, I told the story of the drive about town to one of my American friends as a way of illustrating some differences between Western and Mande conceptions of friendship and kinship. I did not, at that time, mention the money, since that was not my focus. The American some weeks later had the opportunity to ask my Bamana driver to tell him the story of "the last time he picked up Hawa." The version of the account the driver gave my American friend, an older male of high rank in the American embassy, focussed on the taking of the thousand franc note, to the exclusion of all that wonderful detail of who was taken where for what reason. It is possible that, despite my attempt to offer assurances, the impression the young Bamana man came away with was that it was alright, in American ways of thinking, to drive my sister all over town, but she should not have taken that bit of money without asking me, and that if my American friend was asking about what happened that night, that would be the detail he would want to hear about. The driver presented the story as gossip about the greed of my sister, and made me look like a forgiving saint, much to my dismay, since my American friend knew my sister well too and had highly respected her until then. Undoubtedly, the driver thought he was building up my reputation with my important friend while making sure that he himself was kept above suspicion. But, since his version of the story at that time and the version I had already told my friend had entirely different content, my American friend wondered if the driver had understood his question, or if he was talking about a different set of events.

Was the driver lying when he told a different version of the story that fit his understanding of the person asking the question and the relationships involved? Certainly not in Mande ways of evaluating truth and untruth (nor in any but the most legalistic Western systems, either). Both versions of the story derived from an actual set of actions. Yes, his story was different at another time, in another place, for another person, but it had been shaped by intervening events (my conversation with him) and by developing understandings about the relationships between myself, my sister, and my American friend. His own personal interest in finding employment with another American after my departure—a quest in which

my friend could prove most helpful—probably also had a role to play in the way he shaped the account. It is an essential part of the agency of the individual to determine the version of the “truth” which applies to a particular context.

“Truth” in Oral Cultures

If such reconfiguring of facts and interpretations takes place on the level of ordinary discourse about immediate events in the lives of living persons, how much more latitude is found in the recounting of stories from the ancient past which no living person can claim first hand experience of? This is such a commonsense conclusion that most Mande people not under the influence of Western ways of thinking do not give “historicity” in the Western sense of the word much weight. The recounting of “historical fact” is not the purpose of the recitation of genealogies, or of epics. Goody elaborates at length on this important difference between literate and oral ways of thinking in his 1987 study, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*.

Goody examined the processes of the reproduction of an epic, the Bagre, among the LoDagaa people of Ghana to see what influences orality might have, how they might differ from ways of learning in literature cultures, and how notions of “correctness,” “accuracy,” “truth,” and “secret” might vary. He proposes that the differences are so profound that one must stipulate alternative paths to knowledge in oral and literature cultures, with associated variation in ways of construing what is true and what is false.

Scholars interested in oral traditions have long debated the concepts of verbatim performance, accurate rendition, true account. Goody deconstructs these ideas, pointing out that they are all based on the principle of an “original” or “true” version of the epic that is being reproduced in subsequent performances. With regard to the performance of the Bagre epic, he states: “Speaker and respondents are not working from an original that both have learned; the chorus repeats exactly what the Speaker says, and they are in no position to question him. It is he that has the authority of the ‘stool’ on which he sits; his words *are* the Bagre. [. . .] It is not simply that there is an absence of sanctions against deviation from the original, but rather that the whole concept of original is out of place” (Goody 1987: 170). In our Western, teleological ways of thinking, such an idea is perplexing. How can you have a story that is “true” if it does not conform to some original version of itself? For the LoDagaa, and, I believe, for the Mande as well, truth is not measured with that stick. Truth is not a mapping of detail onto some preconfigured mould. We need to accommodate in our analyses other ways of construing concepts of

truth and falsehood, other kinds of logic. Goody discusses the ways that writing has shaped our ideas about logic and inference:

“What writing does is to provide auditory information with a visual, and hence a spatial frame. In fact it changes the channel of communicated language from an auditory to a visual one. You hear speech and see writing; speaking with mouth, listening with ear; writing with hand, reading with eyes. To the channel mouth-to-ear is added the channel hand-to-eye. This process has a number of cultural implications. It makes possible the study of grammar, of the structure of language, since it is now possible to organize auditory stimuli into a simultaneous rather than a successive structure (or pattern), so that a sentence can have a synchronic character as well as a diachronic one. It does the same for argument, leading to the development of formal ‘logic’” (*ibid.*: 186).

What conclusions “follow” from which facts is not just a way of indicating that ideas are related, it is a spatial metaphor through which we conceptualize the relations between ideas, and the logic that drives our interpretations of them. Western logic is a linear logic: we think in cause and effect, we posit hierarchy when we find stratification, we infer relationships between A and C that depend on the nature of B.

So ingrained are these conceptual systems that it is difficult for us to imagine thinking in any other way. As Mary Douglas pointed out in her influential 1966 study, *Purity and Danger*, it is nearly impossible for humans to perceive the world other than through the perceptual apparatus given by the combination of our human senses tempered by the cultural systems we acquire in becoming fully enculturated adults. If our culture teaches us that blue, purple, and black are different than brown, we will see them as distinct, and find perfectly sound arguments for their differentiation. If, however, our culture groups all those points on the spectrum of light into one color category, “dark”, then our logic will argue that brown is as dark as purple, and should therefore be understood to be the same thing (cf. Kay *et al.* 1991).

To return to Jansen’s example of the different explications given by Lansine Diabate for the phrase *safunetawulu*, there is no reason to posit that because his accounts were different at varying times and under disparate circumstances, that he did not “know” the meaning of the phrase, or that he was not being entirely truthful in his explanation of it. It is erroneous to presume that there is one “true” meaning to the phrase, one “correct” account of its origin, or even one “accurate” rendition of the rest of the Sunjata praise the phrase is drawn from. As studies of proverbs reveal, there can be multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings ascribed to the same syntactico-semantic string (see Koné 1995). As frustrating as it might be for Western historians, Mande people don’t think about meaning in praise and epic, about their truth and accuracy in linear, historically based, ways. This is particularly true for griots, for whom the “meaning” of their art lies in its efficacy in the present, more than its

“accuracy” as a preservation of the past. Historian David Conrad notes a griot’s skepticism with regard to the historicity of oral traditions: “In everything concerning the origin of the world there are many lies. No one wrote things down in books in Africa. Here it is the mouth-to-mouth system” (Conrad 1995: 112).

When attempting to explicate Mande ways of thinking about the “underside” of words, phrases, concepts, or actions, we need to take into account the “contested codes and representations” of any cultural phenomenon, and the multiple perspectives—Bakhtin’s heteroglossia—that inform the production of layered meanings. To meet this challenge demands patience and much hard work, because we are not only working against the tide of our own logic, we are attempting to ferret out understandings and transform the very nature of them through the documentation in writing of ideas and meanings that are generated and sustained in the ephemeral universe of orality. We Western scholars still have a long way to go before we can claim a firm grasp of the ontological and teleological implications of orality. Taking into consideration the complexities of context and circumstance, and the social histories of the individuals involved, combined with their own strategic notions of self interest and agency, will help us reach that understanding.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the agency of Mande social actors and the profusion of perspectives at play in the production of meaning through language. It follows the interpretations of Bakhtin, Volosinov, Goody and Douglas in conceptualizing how humans communicate through categories such as truth and falsehood, accuracy and equivocation. Varying interpretations by the same person at different times of a single proverb or a single set of events illustrate significant differences between Western literate and Mande oral ways of thinking about these issues, as well as issues of the categorization of knowledge, and of access to it by Western researchers. The polysemy of Mande languages and the implications for research are explored, taking into consideration issues of veracity and proof in worlds of orality, particularly with regard to research on the speech of griots, for whom "the meaning" of an utterance may be very different from what the Western researcher expects.

RÉSUMÉ

Secrets et mensonges : contexte, signification et rôle des acteurs sociaux mande. — Cet article étudie le rôle des acteurs sociaux mande et la multiplicité des facteurs à l'œuvre dans la production de sens au sein du langage. Il s'inspire des analyses de Bakhtin, Volosinov, Goody et Douglas qui mettent toutes l'accent sur la façon dont les humains communiquent en ayant recours à des catégories telles que la vérité ou la fausseté, la précision ou l'incertitude.

Les différentes interprétations qu'une même personne donne, à des moments différents, d'un proverbe ou d'une série d'événements révèlent des différences significatives entre le mode de pensée écrit de l'Occident et celui, surtout oral, des Mande. Ces interprétations multiples sont également révélatrices de formes différentes d'entendement ainsi que du mode d'accès des chercheurs occidentaux à ces catégories.

Les implications de la polysémie des langues mande sur la recherche sont abordées, en insistant particulièrement sur les questions de véracité et d'administration de la preuve au sein du domaine de l'oralité. À cet égard, la recherche sur le discours des griots et sur le sens qu'il convient d'accorder à un énoncé donné peut réserver quelques surprises au chercheur occidental.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Mande, communication, lie, orality, secret/*Mande, communication, mensonge, oralité, secret.*