

Sexual Hegemony and Mormon Women: Seeing Ourselves in the Bambara Mirror

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AT FIRST GLANCE, people from a middle-class, educated, medically, technically, and industrially sophisticated country may be tempted to see the culture of a developing country as not merely different but as a polar opposite. We immediately see people who are impoverished, malnourished, illiterate, and perhaps barbaric, if we follow media accounts of bloody revolutions and coups. We might even seduce ourselves into believing that, if we could nourish these bodies, we could possibly nurture their souls, teach them "right" thinking and acting—more like ours. The apparent oppositeness between them and us would decrease; we could all live peacefully and healthily as sisters and brothers—one family—on this planet.

It was with the intent to better combine the human family—to encourage cultural interaction between two disparate countries and to work physically and economically as partners with the people of Ouelessebougou Province, Mali, West Africa—that the Ouelessebougou-Utah Alliance was formed in Salt Lake City. Since 1986 the Alliance has raised money to finance development projects like well-digging, fence-building, and health-care training. The purpose, of course, is to enable these agrarian villagers, Malian by nationality and Bambara by culture, to sustain life on their drought-ravaged land and to improve their health and literacy while becoming increasingly independent of outside help.

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Any project in a developing country relies upon its primary laborers to initiate and effect change for the community. In Ouelessebouougou that is the women. They maintain the family's private garden while assisting their husbands with the planting, weeding, and harvesting of village or money crops; they are the water-carriers, the millet-grinders, and the fuel-gatherers; they tend the animals, cook the food, and care for the children. Women are not only central to health-care change but are also more likely than men to direct their educational and economic skills toward their family's welfare. However, second-class citizens in their own country, the women of Ouelessebouougou have, until recently, been ignored by male-dominated development groups, who prefer to work with other men.

The Ouelessebouougou-Utah Alliance board, whose membership was 90 percent male until 1989, has not been insensitive to Malian women's involvement in sustenance development. Male fact-finders traveled from Utah to visit with village leaders in 1985 and 1986, and they invited women as well as men to contribute to a needs assessment. In 1988 the board became convinced that, because of Bambara cultural prohibitions, Utah women would be needed to mediate with Mali women, so they established a separate women's board to advise them on related issues through the voice of its representative.

It was the Ouelessebouougou Women's Board that decided to sponsor the expedition of March 1989, in which I participated. Four board members and the female project director formed the nucleus; they were joined by the executive board chairman, his wife, and two other women—I was one—connected to the project only by interest. The expedition was designed to accomplish two main goals: (1) the women, all from Mormon backgrounds and seven of us unmarried and professionally employed, would participate in medical or construction projects and hold discussions with Bambara women; and (2) the Alliance board chairman, a former LDS bishop, would introduce the expedition's female contingent to leaders of this patriarchal culture and evaluate the newly hired Malian director's management effectiveness.

We eight women did not know each other well. A latecomer to the expedition arrangements, I assumed that the others clearly understood our goals. Only well into the trip did I realize that they were making the same assumptions. Still, I think it is fair to say that we were all anxious to involve the Malian women in the neglected but critical planning stage of production. We hoped to be able to live with them briefly to observe their routines, to gain their confidence in our commitment, and to ask them to prioritize their needs. Bambara and Mormon together, we thought, could create substantive ways to address women's concerns. In actuality, the closest we came to staying with

villagers was sleeping and eating for four days in our own compound within the largest of the seventy-two villages. Consequently, our knowledge of the Bambara people could never surpass the superficial. I suspected this; but I did not expect how profoundly our presence among them would allow us to view our selves against their images.

This essay reassembles the images I collected of Bambara and Mormon women. It is not an anthropological report but a simulation of the process we use to define personal identity. We all rely upon reflecting devices like language and other people to create a temporary image of the self. Seeing the Bambara women, interacting with them, and attempting to understand them forced me to look at my self in my own culture from a new angle. This essay is my attempt to make meaning of both cultures. It is natural for both mirror and reflection—in this case the Bambara and the Mormons—to resist specular penetration. People desire to create and project an image integrated, impervious, and perfect according to their own standards. But we all have edges that somehow become exposed and thus vulnerable to scrutiny. By exploring values, motives, and discernible differences and similarities beneath the dense gloss, it isn't difficult, eventually, to dissolve opposites. These particular Bambara and Mormon images are two-dimensional and fragmented because my own vision is slanted, limited, and determined by a multitude of influences, including education, religion, and experience. Far from ultimate reality, this paper is yet another slivered and splintered pieced-together truth, a momentary reflection from my astigmatic feminist third eye.

Our first sight of Ouelessebougou villages confirmed previous knowledge of the Bambara people and their living conditions: The women were straight-backed and beautiful, and, like us, of multiple colors, but darker—warm bronze to velvety black to dull ash—some gaunt-faced and thin, others round-faced and sturdy, all thick-necked and strong-armed, muscles distinct beneath scant and often ragged, bright motley cotton prints wrapped around. They were encircled by and balancing on hips or backs numerous wide-eyed children, and all worked against a backdrop of single-roomed mud and thatch huts on dry red dirt where bony oxen and goats roamed at will.

Other information about the Bambara, the most populous culture in Mali, we had accumulated earlier: They are mostly Muslim, a male-dominated and conservative religion which in Mali sanctions a man's having as many as four wives. Since France granted them independence in 1960, they have lived under a harsh dictatorship that has deprived them of modern medical, educational, and sanitation facilities. (Currently Mali is controlled by a transition government, having endured a revolution in early 1991, and the people are trying desper-

ately to make democracy a reality.) Ninety-five percent of the women are illiterate, unrecorded numbers die daily of traumatic childbirth, and the infant mortality rate is the highest in the world (Population Reference Bureau 1989).

We saw, then, a people and land opposite from our suburban life glutted with brick and glass homes, multiple vehicles, sprinkling systems, hospitals, schools, dance lessons, contraceptives, and eye-glasses. Major distinctions seemed clear: They spoke colloquial Bambara and, if educated, French, a hold-over from colonial days; we spoke English. They were impoverished; we were wealthy. They polygamous, we monogamous. They politically oppressed, we free to vote for laws and people to represent us. They were Muslim, we Christian. Finally, obviously, they, the Bambara, were needy, we Mormons appeared need-fulfilling.

Our group arrived at the village of N^oTintoukoro and jumped from the back of our pickup truck, anxious to meet the people and address those needs. Our job was to help build the first village chain link fence in Ouelessebougou, its purpose to prevent animals from grazing on vegetables the people needed year-round. A throng of women, children, and men surrounded us, all shouting *I ka kene* ("greeting") and extending calloused hands to shake. As our chairman and Malian interpreter busied themselves with the men, we women pretend-worked, danced, joked, and spoke with the village women. The old women laughed delightedly at our ineptness with their musical instruments; they gently poked and patted us and teased us for mispronouncing their names while indicating that our names were too strange to repeat. The young women smiled shyly, some handing us their bare-bottomed babies to hold and admire.

Each village, like N^oTintoukoro, greeted us ceremoniously. Men led us to seats of honor under a shady tree where they and the older boys sat, grouped age-ascending, around us. Females and infants formed a separate circle or worked at household chores outside the gathering. First the community leaders—the chief, patriarch, and priest—welcomed us with speeches and gifts of peanuts and live black-and-white-speckled chickens inert from hanging upside-down. Then our chairman accepted the gifts and replied: "We are happy and grateful to be here with you. We come from a country and a city where there is a lot of money. But there isn't the happiness and the caring for each other, and the feeling of unity that we feel here."

Although I was uncomfortable, even angry, that our representative had clearly designated our culture as generally rich, uncaring, and unhappy, I understood his observations about Bambara connectedness. Each time we traveled from one village to another to visit a garden, or when we strolled among the huts, shaking hands and scaring

toddlers with our whiteness, I watched the women, particularly, about their chores on property without boundaries. They exhibited a camaraderie we Americans could not see within the walls of our closed homes and a casualness we saw missing from offices intense with concentration.

They worked together. They jointly bathed howling babies in plastic buckets, painstakingly and intricately corn-rowed each other's hair, and walked arm-in-arm to the wells or fields or far into the bush for fuel. Some strolled down rutted roads three or four abreast while balancing immense loads of laundry or firewood on their heads, babies bound to their waists with swaths of brilliant cloth, and they laughed and waved to people passing. Standing side-by-side, the women pounded millet fine three times daily in huge gourds, tossing the heavy wooden pestles high to clap rhythmically before catching them mid-air or gracefully trading for a neighbor's, never missing a beat.

I saw how simple and uncluttered life could be without carpools and balance-books, without furniture to clean and appliances needing repair. Garbage was nearly invisible because every item—each cloth or chicken bone or empty can or broken rubber thong—was used and re-used in new form until it disappeared. This was subsistence-level living. Our group, resting in the cool of our compound's mango tree, agreed that it appealed to a part of us—to a purer, more basic desire that sought freedom from the labor and drive of conspicuous consumption.

On the other hand, we all observed through Western eyes, this life did not offer much choice. Books, ballet, symphony, paper and pen, crayons, fancy foodstuffs, canvas and oil paint also did not exist. How sad for the painters and engineers and mathematicians among these women, I thought, who would never, lacking time and material, know and express their talents. Concerned with feeding their children and following culture-prescribed duties, they largely ignored the outside; they accepted some goods and services offered but otherwise kept themselves distinctly different. Only fragments of Western civilization intruded: the plastic buckets, an occasional bike, a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, traditional and European prints combined into one body wrap.

In short time I realized that simple living was for them a creative enterprise. They transformed their hair and bodies into works of art; they recited stories and sang both traditional and occasion-inspired songs, danced alone and in human chains at public gatherings, and chanted as they swept the village grounds and cooked, washed, and weeded, the older women accompanying the workers with rattling gourds and thumping drums. Their expressive mediums were natural,

less dependent than ours on supplies manufactured and purchased in the market.

We interlopers thus noticed fewer opposites than simple difference in surface detail between the two cultures. We discovered that our feelings were ambiguous. We admitted our appreciation for opportunities at home that Bambara life could not provide, even as we felt a bit of guilt for our self-indulgence. But our entry into the Ouelessebougou villages also resembled, I see in retrospect, what James Clifford has called an allegorical retreat to the garden (Clifford 1986, 113-14).

Village life seemed a refuge, an Edenic sanctuary from civilization, a momentary satisfaction of nostalgic yearning for something gone, for life simple and primitive, uncluttered by industrial effluvium, motors, and material possessions, but replete with communal affection, innocence, and benevolence. Here we could understand why our expedition leader's wife said that these people possessed "peace of mind, companionship and a oneness with [themselves]." Women chanting and cleaning, preparing food in pastoral quiet, colorfully wrapped or unabashedly bare-breasted, babes on backs or playing peacefully with older siblings, chickens underfoot and donkeys rummaging, life natural, classless, outside of time—surely this was life lived the way God had intended.

For we have been taught—here in Western civilization, particularly in America where the agrarian myth helped blaze the trail across the continent, opening the frontier and domesticating the land; perhaps especially here in Utah where we revere pioneer ancestors for making the desert "blossom like a rose"—we have been taught that people close to nature's heart, tillers of the soil performing the most useful and necessary of labors, are people most integrated, closest to their authentic selves, to their core, to God.

Perhaps because we desired to adopt some of that "authenticity" in addition to substantiating memory, we Utahns collected evidence—photos, recordings, Bambara blankets and carvings, all kinds of material images and objects—to certify our presence in this recent Edenic past—a presence and past both disintegrating as we lived them. Metonyms of something larger, frozen paradigms of gestures, feelings, and relationships too brief, the physical evidence stands for the "something" we desire; we desire the illusion of peace and unity portrayed by and transmitted through association with a less sophisticated and more pristine people.

Wanting to capture and hold something so elusive yet so "essential" as integrity is only human. Yet the very words "capture" and "hold" indicate a problem. For by photographing the Bambara women at work and recording their music on tape, by hanging upon Salt Lake

City walls their images and cultural artifacts, I see how we convert them into permanent objects for review. The mementos, which radiate a facsimile of the aura possessed by the too-fleeting, too-perfect moment, become fetishes, as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan explains: they substitute for that something—the sense of wholeness—impossible for us as human beings in constant transformation to realize. And they thus provide narcissistic pleasure through identification (see Wright 1984, 93, 127, and Gallop 1985).

The paradox is that while the displays objectify people who are living and vital, they also mean hope. For me these visual icons—the photographs of Bambara and Mormon together dancing, working, playing, laughing, watching—serve an idealistic purpose: rather than emphasizing radical difference, they capture in a single frame the integrated image of mirror and reflection. They celebrate the idea of synthesis, the reconciliation of such Western-conceived dichotomies as black and white, pagan and Christian, ignorant and learned, poor and wealthy, student and teacher, receiver and benefactor. The photos and memories honor equally the most common of Western symbols, dark and light. Dark, of course, connotes everything unenlightened and therefore evil as opposed to things white and radiant and therefore good. The idea of uniting these disparities feels good to someone, like me, who desires to accomplish both world-wide human commonality and individual spiritual wholeness.

However, as the pictures and recordings naturally gloss over the heat, sweat, smell, and physical discomfort we Utahns experienced, so, too, we know, life is not so ideal. Evidence proves that beneath Malian nature's pastoral surface lie other, less savory aspects. Parasites and worms forage in human stomachs; malaria, cholera, and yellow fever attack and meet no resistance; domestic animals such as oxen, chickens, goats, and sheep contaminate water with feces and trample or eat vegetables tenuously cultivated for children's nutrition; rain falls too infrequently and sometimes too harshly when it comes; dust suffocates, clogs nostrils and lungs, permeates clothing and interiors; and heat bakes the earth too hard for tilling.

I learned that beneath the Bambara surface of real human kindness, graciousness, beauty, and intelligence, other factors exist. Hiding behind the romanticized noble savage image of gentle fecundity—numerous children hand-holding, arm-entwining, baby-balancing—is the reality of child mortality: two deaths out of five before the age of five. These are due largely to birth complications, measles, and dehydration caused by diarrhea; infection runs rampant because uninformed mothers harvesting grain, hauling water, and chopping wood with a new infant suckling have neither the time nor means to treat a sick

toddler. When we examine reasons for obedient and stoic children and hard-working, cheerfully working, obedient women, we find culturally sanctioned child-beating and wife-beating. And we discovered, to our horror, that the beautiful harlequin *boubous* (robes) or skirts on adoring mothers concealed mutilated, infected, genital organs.

It is customary among the Bambara, like some other African and Middle Eastern cultures, to circumcise young children of both sexes. While the ritual usually is performed at least by age fifteen, it may take place when the child is an infant. Eight is the typical age. We learned these facts with great distress a few days into our visit. Circumcisions are not primarily religious—Islam does not require it—but cultural, originating back in the days of Egyptian pharaohs. Their avowed purpose is to mark the flesh with a sign of the culture. Boys are circumcised by removing the penile foreskin. Girls are “circumcised” by slicing out the clitoris and inner labia at the very least; more commonly, in the villages, it means removing the entire vulva, all the external genitalia.

Male circumcision, while painful, reduces neither the ability to reproduce safely nor to experience pleasure in sexual activity. Radical female excision eliminates both. Performed with the same blade that dismembers the chicken for dinner, the excruciating excision immediately inflicts upon the unanesthetized girls infection and constant bleeding. Bleeding is exacerbated by continual ritualized scrubbing throughout the weeks set aside for healing. Later, coupled with the Bambara compulsion to produce innumerable children whose births are endured under conditions at best nonsterile and usually medically unassisted (if the mutilation has not rendered the woman infertile), the excisions subject the women to genital tearing and an inhibited delivery that may result in death for either the infant or mother. Frequently, the women hemorrhage constantly, inevitably suffering a painful and early death.

Female genital mutilation imbues the popular Western feminist idea of “liberating the clitoris” with new meaning (see Moi 1985, discussions on Lacan, Cixous, Kristeva, Derrida, and Irigaray). Possessing a clitoris connotes the ability to actualize sexual pleasure. More important, in theory formulated by these Western women and men, its presence emblemizes a general female desire for psychic freedom, for desire and expression outside the control of the male economy. This is the freedom to become the subject in one’s own discourse rather than the object in an other’s. This is the freedom to speak and act and think for the self and to fulfill the self’s desire for creative, sexual, intellectual, and spiritual expression. The clitoris represents the desire and possibility of a woman to be more than solely a helpmate, a per-

son of secondary importance: first the object of the male gaze and thus the object of his desire and then the support for his psychic and sexual fulfillment.

We women know the boundaries of psychic freedom, what we call "subjectivity." From the teachings of psychology, which defines "subject" according to grammatical terms as the doer of action, we realize that even if we possessed political and economic freedom equal to men's, we would not really be subjects absolutely free to make unlimited choices, as we would like to believe. We are instead, just like men, subjected to and determined by internal and external—physiological and social-historical—factors that reduce "free" agency to a margin perhaps no broader than a thread. But the human impulse, the ego's drive, is to assert subjectivity nonetheless. To deny it is to be psychotic, to live forever in an imaginary realm where we are kept, non-functioning, little more than fetishes like our photos of the Bambara women—possessions to be collected and exhibited, or used and ignored, and eventually forgotten.

We Western women know, too, that no one can "liberate the clitoris" for another. To assert herself as a subject, an agent with the power to act, a woman must freely acknowledge, whether or not she possesses a clitoris, that she does indeed desire and that she must consciously and actively pursue whatever might satisfy that desire rather than to depend passively on another.

I have been speaking of the clitoris metaphorically as much as literally. Obviously, even though the Bambara woman's desire for sexual pleasure may be removed before she is old enough to recognize that it exists, she feels desire and experiences other pleasures. She enjoys her own realm of power. However, it is generally the case that her economic and intellectual freedom are as controlled as her sexual activity.

She learns early that her body has many uses, primarily in a practical realm since book-learning and speculation are considered superfluous, even physically impossible for her sex. If she survives to the age of five, when she begins carrying pots on her head to strengthen neck muscles, her body will serve others. From this time on she works alongside her mother to produce the means to clean and feed the family. She and her mother will eat only after the men have their fill. As she approaches the age of fifteen, her parents select her husband, and her body earns the father a bride-dowry, providing she is a virgin and her vaginal region is, according to our Malian interpreter, "clean"—acceptable to a male, purified of excess flesh. A thorough excision will guarantee pain during intercourse, discouraging promiscuity, and thus reassure the groom that his property of wife and offspring will remain

in his possession. For the real reason for the excisions, the interpreter eventually admitted, has been control.

The honeymoon reinforces the Bambara girl's knowledge of her body's duties—to satisfy her husband's sexual desires, to exhibit his virility, and to begin to reproduce both the parents' labor pool and their chance for immortality (as the more offspring that survive, the more likely the parents will be remembered through the generations). To stimulate procreation immediately, two days before the marriage ceremony the bride is given an herbal medicine that induces diarrhea to make her internally "clean" and outwardly "docile." During the honeymoon week, a first bride and groom, accompanied by their female teacher to instruct them in sexual matters, stay in a hut where others provide them food. Among the food is hot cereal for the bride to heighten "athleticism" and sour milk for the groom to increase his potency.

The girl will generally have a child within the year and another each year or two until death or menopause. Her body will likely deteriorate quickly due to malnutrition, disease, exhaustion, the stress of multiple births, and continuous bleeding resulting in severe anemia. The Bambara female, then, knows early, probably unconsciously, that her body is a tool to raise capital and to provide labor, status, immortality, and pleasure—perhaps for herself, but first for father, brothers, and husband.

Ouelessebougou meant physical and psychic exhaustion: dancing in temperatures that reached 115 degrees, sleeping on hard ground with goats baaing and cocks crowing at first light, bouncing in the bruising back of a pick-up truck over rutted donkey paths enveloped in fine dust, communicating in languages unwieldy or totally unlearned, and feeling overwhelmed by a flood of sensory details and emotional overload. It was only after leaving Ouelessebougou that I slowly perceived how unmistakably I, a Mormon woman of dissimilar appearance and opportunity, am psychic sister to these Bambara women.

In more subtle ways our bodies also become material means for illustrating a male's power, beginning with the ritual of the father's bestowing, without the mother, his own name upon his infants. A proper surname assigns place, confirms genealogical belonging. Later, we are taught as adolescent girls to heed a Young Women officer's warning that honorable young men do not want to eat "the doughnut with the frosting licked off" or "the Twinkie with the filling sucked out." We could discuss the perversions beneath the Mormon surface, some of them applicable to any community, many of them inherent in a patriarchal society: the incest, wife-beating, rape, lower wages for women, the scarcity of women in management positions, white-collar

crime, and coercions by General Authorities to hide or neglect an incriminating fact. But I am more interested in exploring examples of Mormon women—particularly those of us who consider ourselves liberated from overt male control—who recognize and attempt to satisfy our desire to assert autonomy and then unconsciously excise the means, thereby thwarting our own purposes.

Although Mormon women sometimes exhibit signs of physical and sexual abuse, genital mutilation is not culturally mandated or acceptable. The clitoris's presence does represent possibility. Metaphorically, we women on the Ouelessebouyou expedition realized many of these possibilities. First, we were in Africa. Thus, we had the freedom to travel beyond our domestic environment. Except for the board chairman's wife, who came primarily to accompany her husband, each of us knew that we were able to be there because we had economic means derived from an education and the ability to use skills to earn and manage an income. Granted, our group was not typical; again with the exception of the chairman's wife, we others were all single and over thirty years old; only two of us had children. Had we been married, most of us likely would not have been on that expedition. We seemed free from the sexual hegemony that marks the Bambara women both psychically and physically. Yet we are only slowly admitting that Mormon sociological patterns for both sexes may be psychically suffocating and ultimately destructive. Witness documented depression among housewives, fear among homosexuals, and attempts to suppress symposia and honest speaking from people who believe that the glory of God is intelligence. Furthermore, sexual hegemony exists no less in the Mormon culture than in the Bambara. Regardless of secular leadership possibilities open to women, authorities in the LDS Church feel more compelled now than ever before to control Church structure, capital, ritual, and administration. And LDS women feel compelled, no matter how "liberated" we may regard ourselves, to allow men that privilege.

Frustrated by the sexual discrimination she observed in early twentieth-century America, anthropologist Elsie Clewes Parsons noted that "women cooperate in their own subjection . . . by trying 'hard to live down to what is expected of them'" (in Rosenberg 1982, 172). Philosopher Antonio Gramsci observed that hegemony works from both directions: a group dominates only with permission from subgroups. Subordinate groups, be they racial, ethnic, religious, economic, or gendered, may resist suppression with language and action, but until they actually revolt (and risk becoming tyrannical themselves), they primarily acquiesce to or support the ruling order (Lears 1985, 568–78).

For us the ruling order is a white, Euramerican, middle-class, male-dominated, capitalistic system within which we have grown up and which therefore appears perfectly natural—thus God-created rather than manmade—though not many of us believe God personally provided us with language, the basis for law, interpretation, and symbols—hence, meaning. It is impossible for language and meaning to be fixed ideals, transparent to truth; they are dynamic like the people who write and interpret them, constantly changing and expanding with knowledge and cultural needs. And the people who control them control the culture.

While we Mormon women might condemn Bambara women for permitting their daughters' sexual mutilation to continue, we, too, cooperate in shaping the language and culture that in turn shape us. As socially constructed beings, we, too, must negotiate for personal identity within our culture's bounds. And on the Ouelessebougou expedition of March 1989, we eight women contributed actively to male domination, as do our sisters in our own country, no less than the Bambara midwives who perform the sexual excisions in dirt huts with dull knives for economic, traditional, and social reasons.

In the process of sorting out the implications of Bambara tradition, I recalled incidents and relationships from my notes that illustrate our group's participation in female suppression. For instance, the Mormon bishop's wife, having learned her part from many years of following direction and former models, played sentinel for her husband. Two of us in the group, reduced to six women when two departed earlier as planned, expressed not only grief but outrage when we learned of the culturally sanctioned genital mutilation. Our first impulse was to do something—anything—to stop it. Although vocal about our feelings in the privacy of our compound, we had sense enough to realize that revealing our knowledge and extending our anger beyond those walls would only result in our being expelled from the "garden."

Nonetheless, when this newly observed, order-threatening "feminism" was exposed, the wife took it upon herself to keep the situation in order: "Don't you think we're being divisive, only talking to the women?" she said to us after we insisted on holding discussions with the Bambara women focused on their needs and issues against her husband's obvious wishes. "Shouldn't we give the men equal time?" Forming her objections as questions rather than assertions, she signalled her own uncertainty while remaining dutiful to her role.

A guardian mentality assumes the position of surrogate super-ego; its function is to remind offenders of cultural obligations, its "shoulds" and "should nots." It also reports to the patriarch when his presence is required to keep ideas in line: "Do I need to be here?" her husband

whispered over her shoulder when momentarily visiting one of the Mormon/Bambara women's meetings. "No," she whispered back. "They're the same questions as last night." Safe questions, her response suggested—not related to male supremacy and female slavery as he might have expected from radical feminists, and therefore non-inflammatory.

The meetings were, indeed, safe. We Mormons sang songs—"Frère Jacques" and "Itsy Bitsy Spider"—we thought they might know or mimic. The village women explained their daily work patterns and we described ours. Their list of needs always centered on the children, but we were troubled by their reluctant personal complaint of backaches, stomachaches, and "inside" pains (our translator did not know the English word for female organs). They were troubled by our situation as women without husbands and children. One woman sweetly (and jokingly) began to arrange a marriage between me and a young man of "great courage."

I was impressed by the intelligence of another woman on the expedition who demonstrates her social autonomy by having established a home and directing a major business department, the latter a task requiring strong administrative and arbitration skills. She has chosen to devote her life to teaching young people to become professionals, to working for environmental safety, and to leading women's organizations in the Church. Yet on the expedition she protected the bishop/chairman's indiscriminate right to lead by smilingly obeying, not protesting, when he told us we should not engage in the women's discussions—one of the journey's original goals.

This woman has never, to my knowledge, discussed the Bambara female sexual excisions. However deplorable she finds the practice, she avoids the issue altogether and thus inadvertently protects the practice. Silence, somehow, makes it bearable. Fearful that the Alliance might intrude into the sacred realm of cultural tradition, she believes we should not interfere, even through Bambara channels, by supplying health information or specific medical assistance.

I am troubled by her attitude, even as I acknowledge that the Alliance must carefully approach any proposed change in Bambara life. We not only do not want to disguise American cultural colonialism as altruism; we also do not want to offend the people and eliminate the opportunity to help. But our presence is already an intrusion. Any change in procedure from gardening to hygiene alters traditional Bambara methods. We must constantly draw lines between assistance and interference. And we cannot ignore a blatant assault upon the

human right to have a whole and healthy body.¹ It was recognition of that right that originally propelled men from Utah to seek out the suffering and starving in Mali.

Given our motivation for being present in the Ouelessebougou region, why then does an educated and sympathetic woman not speak out about this problem? Does she fear addressing the topic of women's mutilation because our culture has inured us to it in other forms? Do an American woman's motives for not interfering differ substantially from the Bambara mothers' who accept their daughters' continuous and extreme agony because they consent to life as the only way they have known it for centuries? Or, on the other hand, and more pragmatically, do they recognize that disobedience would socially punish their daughters by forever excluding them from the marriage market—forcing upon the daughter ostracism or lifelong parental dependence and upon the parents unbearable humiliation and financial loss?

Another young expedition member is a doctor. She used her medical knowledge and skills decisively and expediently in Mali when she administered care to a taxi driver who had inhaled too much dust through the car windows and was suffocating to death. She saved the man's life. We women were promised during the expedition that we would be invited to join the Alliance board of directors. Yet after four months of complaints and no action, the doctor advised that we be patient, not "too pushy."

At that time the active Alliance board, purportedly a community organization of more than twenty members, was 90 percent male, 95 percent LDS, and 100 percent white-complected. Although a separate women's board existed, the dozen women who comprised it shared a single vote. (I was not even a member of that group.) We women who had physically and emotionally committed ourselves to an expedition and to the people of Mali at our own expense wanted an expression of the self. We wanted for our own selves what we desired for the Bambara

¹ A case illustrating a twenty-one-year-old Mali woman's defiance of mutilation now stands before the French court. The court must decide whether to award Aminata Diop, from the village of Sikasso, refugee status. Diop fled Mali, fearing for her life, when she "scandalized her village and enraged her family" by refusing to submit to the blade. Her father had to return the money paid by her fiancé at the betrothal four years earlier. Diop said, "Each rainy season in my village, they perform excisions. Girls scream, suffer, are terrorized. One of my girlfriends was excised on a Thursday; by Sunday, she was dead." This case presents a problem to the court because the Geneva Convention protects refugees persecuted for political and religious reasons, but not for issues of gender. Diop's attorney, Linda Weil-Curiel of France, says, "This would be the first acknowledgement of a woman's right to flee patriarchy" ("Women Right Now," *Glamour*, Nov. 1991, 118).

women: self-representation in development planning as well as production. We wanted to speak and to vote. Do the doctor's reasons for tolerating men's rudeness and neglect and promoting women's passivity—moves contradicting her professional behavior—differ from the Bambara woman's who has submitted to playing a silent and obedient role in organized village politics—a role outside the inner circle—that she accepts because it is what she has been taught and what she knows her leaders, all male, expect of her?

Two other women on the expedition hold professional positions by right of education and experience in powerful LDS Church community institutions. One has also fought to retain her briefly held assignment as first female in a traditionally male-occupied Church position. When this woman reported to the former Alliance board of directors on the information gained from the Bambara-Mormon women's talks, she omitted any mention of female clitoridectomies and associated physical problems, although women's health has an obvious and direct bearing on their physical ability to carry out development goals. Did she fear the information might offend delicate ears? (Incidentally, the board agenda scheduled the women's report, supposedly the most important item from the expedition, for the end of a long meeting; many members had left before it could be delivered.)

The other woman works for the *Deseret News*. Although she resists intimidation from political figures to stay silent on volatile issues, she succumbs to pressure from editors to censor her own work if she wants it printed. She knows which point of view must be ignored and which prioritized. If she feels a story requires true but abrasive information that might challenge LDS values, she knows she must bury it toward the story's end. Might the motives behind these two women's solicitude resemble the fear underlying even educated Bambara mothers who submit their daughters to mutilation because they themselves are silently threatened with beatings or loss of financial security?

It is impossible for me to omit my own complicity in the scheme of things. At the beginning of the expedition I felt like an outsider; I lacked recognized authority and knowledge of administrative channels; I was careful not to offend. I allowed the board chairman to order me not to participate in a short but important information-gathering excursion that would have inconvenienced no one. Even though the man offered no viable reason for his command, I meekly descended from the truck and returned to my "proper" place.

I was a woman too respectful of propriety, one who does not protest loudly or vehemently enough about injustice until she feels sure that her remarks are appropriate or valid. Until she feels safe from

recrimination. I could have stopped the process and asked for clarification about expedition objectives and procedures. I could have challenged assumed authority. Instead, a woman acting as I did habitually confirms the existing hierarchy that categorizes her female self as subordinate. She frequently acts too late to make a difference.

I struggle, against my own rage and outrage, to be fair, to keep situations in perspective. Certainly all these women I have described, including the Bambara, have also contributed to improving women's status. We all have some power. A lack of certain body parts, while restrictive, does not determine complete social impotence. We all have found the means to exert individuality, a small degree of autonomy, an important measure of subjectivity. We have power to heal, to create, to nurture, to perpetuate and change cultural *morés* and traditions through story, to barter in the marketplace, to feed the world, to politic on both formal and informal levels, and to manipulate others, even men, for selfish or altruistic reasons. Yet we all generally behave as though moved by fear: fear of punishment—job loss or beatings or embarrassment—fear of hurting our children, fear of drastic change, fear of not gaining eternal salvation, fear of ostracism, fear of not pleasing others, or fear of being marked different and therefore evil.

It is my observation that behind all these fears lies another: fear of knowledge. If we, and this "we" certainly includes men as well as women, give or take the wrong information, we face the aforementioned penalties. If we would survive in our culture, we must constantly hide or refrain from listening to information that would make people squirm. We must stay silent or relegate facts to back pages and ends of meetings. We must constantly question any authority except that which our culture—the Mormon or Bambara—has deemed the highest on earth. Even God or nature, whoever or whatever gave woman a clitoris and invited her to desire, plays absent composer to the patriarchal conductor.

Bambara and Mormon alike contribute to societies that have created, according to Kenneth Burke, a "conspiracy of piety, a conspiracy about 'what properly goes with what' " (in Gunn 1987, 81). We devote ourselves to honoring practices like sexual excisions and ritualized violent gestures at one time performed during sacred endowments. We sustain these rituals in the name of religion or tradition because they demonstrate our loyalty. The word "piety," Burke says, "'contributes to the desire to round things out, to fit experiences into a unified whole' " (in Gunn 1987, 81). With women's cooperation, our culture conspires against the yearnings of the self and builds a network of systems to make sense of a chaotic world. This kind of unification requires a plan, a network composed of taboos and expiations, defini-

tions of proper behavior and thinking to keep people straight. It requires a bureaucracy headed by a logic-directed order such as the Mormon priesthood organization and Bambara social structure whose members also fear something—perhaps the exuberance, the unruly desire, even the climatic moment, of women.

All this looking behind must bring us back to the mirror's face; through scrutiny the self does not disappear into the reflector but becomes more visible, its qualities magnified. We see then that it is only the degree of any quality or characteristic—hair texture, eye and skin color, manner of dress, body condition, intelligence, need, intellectual or spiritual freedom—that determines the differences among people. We know that world cultures, represented by Bambara and Mormon, are not opposite; we, looking like the speckled chickens the villagers gave us, coexist as black and white together and a bit insensible from hanging upside-down too long. Certainly we create different cultures based on circumstance. But we also exaggerate difference in order to stand apart, to justify hierarchies, to create a special identity.

Each people must be the Dineh, as the Navajo call themselves: The People. Each must be, like the Jews, the Chosen. Each must follow, like the Muslims, the Prophet of the One True God. Each must inherit, like us, the Church of the Sign of the Greatest Good, for us Jesus Christ. The need to be special is why many Bambara women support the sexual excisions, a Malian female friend confides: they see their absent genitals as the sign of a "true" woman, a Bambara woman courageously facing pain and physically distinct, in a secretive, personal way, from a white Western woman. For similar reasons—to set themselves apart and to confirm oaths of fealty—Mormon men and women wear garments with their own hidden markings. And in order to feel securely embraced by the eternally protective aura of their religious leaders, most Mormon women, even the "liberated" ones, actively support their own subjugation. All people desire to assert an agency, a subjectivity that declares we not only exist but are absolutely essential to life and truth. A collective subjectivity, provided by membership in a community, increases our power. We suffer psychic or physical mutilation for the privilege of belonging.

To merely reflect upon the image in the mirror is not difficult. But if we would go further and be "intensely reflexive" as defined by Victor Turner—first look beneath the surface, then probe and analyze what we see and, most importantly, act upon our knowledge—we must sincerely ask "Who are we? Who am I?" (Turner 1982, 104). And in our need to negotiate identity with the people around us, we confront the three possibilities defined earlier by Gramsci: acquiescence,

support, and resistance. No easy solutions exist. Sometimes we compromise the self's desires for the sake of our selves and our children, for the sake of living harmoniously in the community. Often we have enough faith in the principles behind the system that we stay and work, we speak out, to create space for greater agency within it: we protest or rebel in hopes of transforming. A fourth alternative is necessary for some: the whole is altogether too unbearable and must be deserted. Whatever our act, we can at least be honest about our motives. Whatever our decision, we can recognize that we need and use others, our own kind and opposites, whether gendered or racial, to confirm our identity, to confirm what we see is our goodness by comparison.

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