

Social Speech and Speech of the Imagination: Female Identity and Ambivalence in Bambara-Malinké Oral Literature

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Normative discourse and social reality

In the wake of the feminism debate, socio-ethnological studies on the place of women and femininity in occidental civilizations have been multiplying. So have they as well for “archaic” or “traditional” civilizations, which share among other common features the domination of men over women by means of patriarchal, patrilineal, and virilocal family organization. It is not surprising, then, to find that this fate of being dominated appears in the ideological discourses produced by these societies, particularly in the collective representations that are objectivized in religious texts, folklore, and oral literature. In this essay, I propose to examine two female figures in some relevant texts from Bambara-Malinké (West Africa) oral literature. Despite the many resemblances, I do not mean to assert that the social functions attributed therein to women are characteristic in the same terms of other patriarchal societies of Black Africa.

At the outset, I must say that the image of woman visible in my texts unquestionably arises out of the male vision of social and gender relations. Men’s control over the “strong speech” that is verbal art is as unlimited as their power over other domains of action and standards of social behavior. This control is spread mainly by channels of collective socialization larger than the limits of the family, especially societies of initiation, in which the fundamental values that initiated adults are obliged to respect are implanted in the rising generation by means of songs, proverbs, and exemplary stories.

A reader of these texts realizes immediately their strong tendency to

polarize the types of female identity. The paradigm is organized around binary oppositions: the woman is either good or bad, giver of life or purveyor of death, nourishing or poisoning. Furthermore, these differing and contrasting roles are always manifested at transitional occasions in the life cycle and in connection with a male relative, especially a son or husband. It all happens as if the essence of a woman's social relations is confined to domestic functions and narrowly restricted to the family circle, while men take on a succession of external functions, professional or political. From the outset, then, the difference between the positions of the two sexes in society is implicitly expressed by their degree of liberty, or the range of choices as to which social roles, private or public, will be accessible and open to the two sexes.

The importance of the process of initiation in sexual socialization and apprenticeship to social roles has already been noted. Young candidates for initiation learn this as one of their first teachings. The contrasting destinies of the two sexes result first of all from exogamy. Men, all their lives, remain in the universe of their infancy, within the compass of their village and their family. Girls, by contrast, leave their home environment at the time of marriage, aged about fourteen or fifteen, and spend the greatest part of their lives in the house of their in-laws, those "other" strangers, who will regularly ensure that they feel their position as intruders. Girls begin at seven or eight to be prepared for this decisive separation from childhood. They are given to understand that in their own family they are only in transit. René Luneau, who spent many years among the Bambara, sums up the situation (1981:58):

A foreigner in her own family, so much so that she is condemned to be separated from it—her children will be the children of another house—she is just as much a foreigner in her in-law family. Completely integrated nowhere, living under her husband's sway, yet prepared, as a last resort, to obey the dictates of her brothers (for an eventual divorce would oblige her to return to the familial house), she recognizes herself only with difficulty.

Thus the Bambara woman is condemned to a sort of permanent alienation, which can only be alleviated by her unreservedly internalizing the principles of the constraining ideology to which from infancy she has been constantly subjected. The two opposed loyalties she is expected to be able to reconcile are enough to trouble her sense of identity and weaken her sense of belonging to one or another collectivity. Moreover, it is difficult for her to

establish any concord among the range of social duties and affective alliances that imprint tensions on the whole course of her existence.

Initiation is no more than the institutional form of that ideology. Its principles—implanted in girls as much as in boys—postulate that a person's main social duty is to participate in a network of relations comprising blood relatives and relatives by marriage; that collective interests always take precedence over personal interests; and, finally, that one owes absolute respect to all persons conventionally designated as having precedence, by virtue of age or social status. It is in this context that girls learn that their "departure for the others" constitutes a vital act on behalf of group survival, for it is the exchange of women that perpetuates the organic attachments between families: they are the "paths that link the villages" (Diarra 1985:559).

The words of initiation songs emphasize the qualities girls must acquire and exercise in the course of their adult existence. These are qualities of work, patience, and especially obedience towards their male relatives. They must bear to "stand up all day and stand up all night if their husband asks" (*ibid.*:189), since the husband embodies in this particular the same kind of authority as the father.

These decrees of subordination are compensated, at least symbolically, by the importance granted to the maternal function. Motherhood, indeed, is interpreted as the principle whereby feminine destiny is realized. The royal road to social recognition for women goes by way of numerous offspring. Hence the theme of motherhood is one of the main subjects of oral literature, elaborated in initiation instructions in several ways. A related theme is the link between women's suffering as unloved or mistreated wives and their success as mothers. The most ill-fated women, it seems, give birth to the most beautiful children, "children of renown who will never fail in life" (*idem*). Is this hypothetical correlation dictated by a masculine ruse? In any case there is a striking contrast between the consideration shown to mothers, the sources of life, and the disdainful attitude, ready criticism, and frequent scorn cast at women in general and wives in particular. A saying declares, "Every man is between his mother's hands." Therefore a mother's curse is considered the height of misfortune; a deep-rooted belief has it that such a curse never ceases to torment the receiver until the end of his days.

The Speech of the Tale

This brief glimpse at the normative social discourse about women during their initiation period makes possible an interrogation of narratives on the “speech of the imagination.” This is assuredly not the discourse of the unconscious, but nevertheless a register of speech that does not align itself with dominant social values; it even opposes them. In these texts both registers appear concomitantly. The fundamental polysemy of this genre is inscribed in a discourse of such semantic density that several strata of signification are therein intermingled. The task of analysis is to distinguish in these texts the reflection of social practices, the normative discourse, and the symbolic modes of linking the two.

For the sake of focusing analysis on texts, and on essential aspects of the feminine condition among the Bambara-Malinké, I confine myself here to studying these two most decisive roles of women, wife and mother, as these are presented in two frequently occurring stories. I select these from the available repertoire because they are structurally related and because they offer a true paradigm of possible cases in the triangular relation comprising the son, the mother (or her substitute the maternal aunt), and the wife (or potential betrothed). The first narrative, built on the action of a beneficent mother who saves her son from the mortal danger represented by the doings of a potential daughter-in-law, is structurally the exact opposite of the second narrative, which introduces a maleficent mother who is a source of perils for her son and daughter-in-law. Thenceforward, the first narrative clearly responds more to the pedagogical care for “social speech”; the second moves away from it. Thus we observe parallel elaborations, in two different directions, of the same problematic. The ways in which the two types of public message handle this theme in narration must be closely observed. The comparison I make between the two tales is also based on various other thematic elements, that seem to be contingent, but whose simultaneous occurrence seems to go back to an ensemble of collective representations forming a system. The manifest elements to be observed include the disguise of feminine protagonists, the place of wrongdoing, the mediating role of a tree in the action, the recourse to magic protective objects serving to retard the action, the interjection of songs in the guise of appeals for help, and finally the presence of helpful animals, namely dogs.

I shall summarize here a tale of which several versions are known (Görög-Karady 1979:106-11, Travele 1977:129-35, Camara 1978:253-55);

one version is translated in the appendix. My summary will be followed by an analysis and by some ethnographic details.

Tale no. 1: The Hunter and the Buffalo

1. A hunter hunts so effectively that the animals fear for the survival of their species. They gather to decide on a course of action to pursue. A female buffalo promises to lead the hunter into the bush so that the others, who will be holding themselves ready, can catch him.

2. The buffalo transforms herself into a beautiful girl with a swelling bosom and presents herself to the hunter invitingly. The hunter receives her warmly and offers to kill for her a bull, a castrated sheep, or any other animal. The girl says she eats only dog meat. The hunter kills his dogs one after another.

3. The mother or aunt of the hunter warns him against the girl, but the hunter does not listen to her. The mother or her surrogate gathers the dead dogs' bones and puts them all into a receptacle. The girl questions the hunter about his secrets; she gets him to say how he escapes from animals that attack him.

4. When all the dogs are exterminated, the girl tells the hunter she is going back to her family. The hunter wants to accompany her with a weapon (a gun, sword, or axe) but the buffalo girl dissuades him. So the hunter goes with her, armed with only a hunting whistle or a magic powder entrusted to him by his mother.

5. The hunter and the buffalo girl go deep into the bush; each time the hunter wants to retrace his steps, the girl dissuades him. Having reached a clearing, the girl asks the hunter to wait for her and goes away. She comes back in her buffalo shape, with the other animals, who prepare to attack the hunter.

6. The hunter takes refuge under a tree (baobab or bastard mahogany), which the animals begin to cut down. (In some versions, the hunter re-erects the fallen tree thanks to his magic powder.)

7. The mother or aunt is warned by the hunter's call to his dead dogs, by means of a whistle or song. The mother or aunt resuscitates the dogs by breathing or spitting on their bones.

8. The dogs go to the aid of the hunter.

The initial conflict opposes the animal kingdom to human beings, represented by the hunter. He renders himself culpable by failing to respect the contract that links the two realms of the living—civilization and bush—to each other. Though bravery is a professional virtue for a hunter, the excess of it is a fault. A hunter may legitimately kill animals, if he scrupulously observes the ritual governing such action, but he must never abuse his powers by overstepping the limits that have been set on his conduct for the sake of guaranteeing the survival of species. The discipline imposed by this self-limitation is undoubtedly one of the tokens of the high social status accorded to the hunter, whose actions are commonly recognized as dangerous, and to whom magical knowledge and power are attributed. Hunters are known to establish strongly structured fraternal orders. Their numerous charms are believed to protect them against the perils of the bush and abet the results of their hunt. The charms are effective too against human adversaries; hence the fear and respect that surround hunters in the Bambara-Malinké setting. The highly developed ritualization of the hunt (a sign of its collective quality), implies also that each member of the fraternal order has a restricted degree of liberty to exercise. It is just this restriction that the hunter in the tale ignores when he overturns the equilibrium between wild animals and human beings, to the animals' cost. The conflict rests, then, on a *social fault*, though one that affects the animals. Their reaction finds its legitimacy here.

This collective, coactive reaction of bush animals is registered by the Bambara-Malinké imagination as part of what is construed as normal. On the one hand, the animal kingdom is regularly represented after the manner of human civilization, as a sort of counter-society organized around collective interests. Especially vital among these is the survival of the collectivity in general, here, concretely, the conservation of the species threatened by the hunter. On the other hand, to pass between the two realms in either direction is conceived as perfectly possible. Finally, the animals' plan for revenge is an obvious inversion of the model of conduct that hunting represents. Instead of the hunter hunting the game, the game proposes to hunt the hunter. The hunt, however, is a regulated and regular practice, which in these representations is based on the basic inequality between men and beasts, quite apart from all the analogies between their behaviors. The reversal of roles, therefore, necessitates exceptional means; hence the buffalo girl's ruse.

Reversed motifs, moreover, notably the reversal of normal roles, are

constituents of the modalities that the animals' strategy utilizes. First there is the direction of movement: the agent from the bush comes to the village, and the hunter's route is exactly opposed. Then, though the hunter is carrying out a masculine activity par excellence, for which his physical strength and courage as an adult male are regarded as essential for success, the character of the avenging animal takes the form of a girl exercising her charms. Thus the reversal is not only of situational roles connected to the narrative action (woman-animal hunting man-hunter) but of quasi-universal sexual roles (think of the expression "skirt-chaser")—roles strongly loaded, at any rate, in the Bambara-Malinké setting; girl chasing man. Reversals follow one another through the succeeding episodes, as the hunter kills his hunting animals instead of hunting the animals with their help, the girl eats only dogs, and the hunter goes into the bush without a weapon and exposes himself to wild beasts. Finally this cascade of reversals leads to the denouement: the hunter's initial flaw and then his later ones overturn the order of established things. As a result, the character becomes so desocialized that, by the end of the story, he has lost all his hunter attributes. Having fallen prey to his flaw, he owes his survival only to his mother and the helpful animals, as well as bringing his magic powers into play. At its base, this story fully develops a conflict that has been unleashed by the violation of an interdiction; subsequent transgressions provoke a repercussion built on a paradigm of reversal, the hunter hunted. The force of the narrative comes from the fact that all his flaws and reversals are given sufficient psycho-sociological motivation to remain credible and to expedite the unrolling of the events almost like a sequence of logical fatalities.

The same is true of the maleficent function assumed by the buffalo girl, which corresponds completely to the prevalent representations by Bambara-Malinké men of the baneful traits of feminine character. We perceive a fear of feminine seduction, which is augmented by the fear inspired by a woman as a being of nature over against men associated with culture and the social world. This vision of "nature women" fits perfectly with the appearance of the buffalo-girl. The woman-animal corresponds to the image of the woman too distant in origin for her family to be known to her husband's relatives. Toward such a woman it is well to impose prudence on oneself, even to manifest frank distrust; this is generally defended. This is the reason why matrimonial affairs are considered so delicate. Wisdom has it that wives should be chosen from known villages and from families

with whom relations go back several generations, since, notwithstanding these favorable conditions for marriage, a woman remains ever a foreigner in her husband's family, where attitudes reserved for a potential enemy are directed at her. Thus a man who trusts too much in an unknown woman goes against the grain of custom and puts himself in a vulnerable position. He forgets the saying, "Woman is dangerous and destructive." Trusting the woman, he risks taking leave of his peers, withdrawing from public life and betraying himself.

To betray secrets is another social misdeed, doubly so. A hunter is expected to share his secrets only with the members of his fraternal order. Now he confides in a woman, a foreign woman indeed, a confidence that aggravates the misdeed; many sayings assert that a woman is incapable of keeping secrets. All versions of the tale make a point of the buffalo-girl's beauty and femininity, qualities that lull the hunter's vigilance into somnolence. Here again is a classic male representation about woman: she is dangerous by reason of her sexual attraction, even unto the domestic functions she exercises. Thus men are taught early to distrust a woman's sexual charms. Even her nurturing quality can appear threatening. Nefarious powers are sometimes attributed to her: she is reputed to be capable of draining a man's vital forces in the course of sexual relations, as well as of concocting potions out of poisonous ingredients and mixing them into the meals served to men.

Reversal of the direction of appearances prevails also in the theme of the buffalo-girl's ruse. Prestigious models for this reversal are known in West Africa. In the Manding national epic *Sundiata* (Niane 1971; Johnson 1986), the hero's sister disguises herself as a beautiful girl to extort the secret of the familiar adversary; the adversary remains invincible to the hero by the usual means. The analogy goes farther: again in *Sundiata*, when the adversary has been circumvented, in honor of the beautiful seductress he kills a bull, an animal whose meat is prized above all others and is offered only to a host of rank.

In both this text and the epic, the girl's ruse unfolds in two phases. In the first, she undergoes temptation, implicitly a sexual prestation, which exacts compensation from the man in the form of a hunter's prestation: offer of the most desirable meat in *Sundiata*, offer of *desired meat* in my tale. The divergence between the two manifestations of the theme is significant. Here the hero commits his second great misdeed by killing his dogs. He breaks the link of solidarity a master owes to his domestic animals,

and he deprives himself of his helpful animals. He wrongs himself morally and weakens himself as a hunter. This is the first stage of the social death toward which he is proceeding. The narrative puts tellingly on stage the effect of blindness that the buffalo-girl's ruse produces. The hero injures himself, remaining unaware of the peril he is liable to, which the kinfolk around him, represented by the mother, perceive immediately. The opposition between kinship links, so trustworthy and reassuring, and external, contingent relations, based on sexual attraction and bringing peril into the household, could not be clearer.

The design especially contains a real consecration of the mother's function: she puts her son on guard against the danger, she provides him with protective objects, and she prepares revenge against the adversary-seductress. The opposition extends also to the two women, beneficent mother and incognito foreigner, woman as donor of death (who has the dogs killed in order to have the man killed later) and woman as giver of life (who arranges for the recall of the dogs to life). The mother continually employs magic: she provides her son with magic powder or a whistle, and she resuscitates the dogs through a positive act of magic.

The second stage of the hero's course brings his departure from home to follow the buffalo-girl, a potential wife. In the order of things, such a departure is normal if the hunter is equipped with his usual professional panoply of dogs and weapons—he would then be departing for the hunt—or if he left temporarily for another village to take a wife and bring her back to the hearth. Here, in a double reversal of the normal, the hero leaves without weapons for the bush, as if he were going to visit his in-laws. At the heart of the episode is only one form of the more general message about the preference to be given, in existential choices, to social regulations over individual impulses. Custom and collective norm are equivalent to wisdom; they must take precedence over personal desires. Thus such desires and impulses are opposed to collective values, with their protective and beneficent function.

The same message is expressed in the denouement. The hero, threatened by beasts of the bush and deprived of his hunter's resources and aids, as a last resort rejoins his people and the social world he so imprudently left behind. His first reasonable act in the tale, according to social norms, is to take refuge on the tree. The tree in fact is the refuge par excellence in Bambara-Malinké representations; it is a characteristic mother figure. I may mention here a few relevant tales in this connection by way of

example (cf. Görög-Karady 1970).

In these tales the motherly tree helps an orphan girl, who has been starved by her evil stepmother, by lowering its branches so that she can pick its fruits. In others, orphans driven from a village will find lodging and protection on a tree as on a mother's lap, or an unfortunate orphan consoles himself for his adversity under a tree growing over his mother's tomb. These parallels all demonstrate that the sanctuary tree has nothing neutral about it, but clearly represents a kind of mother substitute. The mother function of the tree in my tale extends beyond immediate protection. It is precisely there that the hero makes use of the magic powder he received from his mother on his departure, a symbolic prolongation of the protective care linking him to her. It is there that he makes use of his hunter's whistle, which he has brought with him at his mother's insistence, and which will enable him to warn his family of his plight. Again it is the mother who, as she completes her preparations for revenge, calls the dogs back to life to rescue him. At every point, the opposition between the beneficent mother, whose resources exceed the merely human, and the baneful animal-girl, a potential wife, can be seen developing and becoming more specific. Of course materially the hero owes his safety to the intervention of the dogs, which accomplish their duty out of loyalty towards an unworthy master, but it is always the mother who controls the action. She gives warning of danger, equips her son against snares, and finally organizes his rescue.

If I were to sum up the significance of the story, I would say to begin with that we are dealing with a narrative of apprenticeship or, what comes to the same thing, a moral tale aimed at young men of an age to marry. Young men must be warned that relations with women, like relations with the animal world, must keep to the rules that society prescribes. Any failure of social precept will not be slow to bring serious consequences. Here two complementary and fundamentally related misdeeds are involved. Excessive ardor in the hunt, which upsets the equilibrium of the fauna, and excessive trust in the "foreign woman," which arises from ill-advised concession to sexual impulses and upsets human relations, both go back to the same source, a failure to observe the rules of moderation, self-mastery, and self-discipline, which must regulate relations between the realms of the living as much as relations between the sexes. These rules also imply that it is appropriate to keep a certain distance from the animal world as from women, especially non-kin. In this connection, a mother who is a beneficent relative and a "foreign" woman who harbors risks may be

allowed to stand in opposition.

The tale transmits overall a strongly norm-oriented social discourse, whose message emphasizes respecting collective law, suppressing one's impulses, and denying one's individual choices. As for the specifics of female roles, the tale proclaims the superiority of men's bonds with their mothers, the blood relative par excellence, over any bond they can create with a future wife, who is a potential source of threats.

Tale no. 2: The Sorceress Mother

The second tale (Meyer 1985:24-25 and several unpublished versions collected by Görög-Karady and Meyer; translated in appendix) partakes more than the first of an imaginary, fantastic universe and of unsaid or concealed words. It puts before us the character of the cannibal sorceress mother who initiates hostility towards her son or sons or his wife or wives. I point out at the start that this narrative, which has numerous variants in the Bambara-Malinké setting, has not been collected among neighboring ethnic groups like the Peul, Dogon, or Samo, despite the close relations maintained by Bambara-Malinké with them and the sizable literary and mythic patrimony they share. Where in the preceding tale the danger comes from outside, from the exogamous potential wife, here the "danger is in the house"; it comes from the main blood relative.

Knowing that many narratives are held in common by these other groups and the Bambara-Malinké, we may interpret the absence of this tale as a form of social censorship aimed at a subject considered iconoclastic. Such an interpretation seems particularly appropriate to the Peul: their excess of affective investment in the maternal image and in the mother-son relation is an obvious fact of their culture. We may justifiably assume that Peul ethics, the *pulaaki*, could not allow so blasphemous a representation of this supremely privileged relationship, even in a fictional work. However that may be, the non-uniform distribution of this plot in the region poses the fundamental problem of the social status of the tale. More specifically, how much liberty or license is allowed to leave the well-worn paths of social convention in oral literature aimed at public and collective consumption? This amount of liberty seems larger among the Bambara-Malinké than among the Peul in this case, but it might be different for other themes. Only a methodical comparative study of the narrative repertoires of each ethnic

group in contact in this region of Africa would allow an objective approach to this question, which is connected to the still vaster problem of “universal” themes or principles of selection that operate in each culture’s repertoire, owing among other reasons to human migration and the intercultural transmission of cognitive goods. Here is a summary of the tale.

1. *Initial sequence, type A.* A mother-sorceress devours her children at birth. The lastborn son succeeds in escaping death and grows up; he arrives at circumcision, then marriage.

Initial sequence, type B. The mother-sorceress devours her daughters-in-law. The villagers refuse out of fear to give their daughter in marriage to the sorceress’s son. An old woman, herself possessing “powers” (against sorcery), provides her daughter with a protective charm (a bead belt or magic powder).

2. The son warns his wife not to leave the village with his mother.

3. The mother attempts to kill her daughter-in-law in the village. She orders her to accompany her into the bush to collect wood. The girl protests but finally gives way to her mother-in-law’s insistence.

4. In the bush, the mother-sorceress (version A) sends her daughter-in-law to the top of a tree, which she then begins to chop down. In version B, she tries to throw her daughter-in-law into the fire. Perceiving her mother-in-law’s strategem, the girl causes a tree to grow by means of her magic powder, and takes refuge in it.

5. The husband’s dog runs into the village to warn his master. From the top of the tree the wife calls her husband with a song of distress.

6. Now warned, the husband, with some other men, goes into the bush, kills his mother, and liberates his wife; he returns with her to the village.

Both variants of the initial sequence, which are widespread, are significantly distinct, though the difference does nothing to disturb the narrative economy of the tale. In the first variant, the protagonist’s birth is preceded by the disappearance of several of his elder brothers, “eaten” by the mother. The hero will know a better fate, thanks entirely to the resistance he poses to his mother’s scheme. In the second variant, the beginnings of the son’s marriage are passed over in silence, in order to come to the mother-sorceress’s attempts against the life of her daughter(s)-in-law. The first variant is richer, showing the divided character of the mother’s attacks. The son defends himself by his natural attributes; his wife will defend herself with the aid of magic objects she has received,

as dowry or otherwise, from her own parents. In some versions the girl's mother is apostrophized as "sister sorceress." Thus magic power is opposed to a counter-power of the same order. The plot of the tale is clearly organized around the powers of sorcery.

To understand its import and significance, we should recall the general status of sorcery in West Africa and the beliefs attached to it. According to the observations of Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues, "sorcery arises out of a conception of evil as a persecuting force coming from outside." A sorcerer is defined as one who "eats the flesh of the night." The fantasy connected to this act of devouring evolves in two directions: "Following the first theme, it is the sorcerer's double who invisibly devours the victim's double. A person under a sorcerer's influence feels inwardly emptied The sorcerer may [also] transform himself into an animal to frighten his victim and take his or her vital force" Second is the theme of anthropophagic meals. The sorcerers assemble at night by trees or at a crossroads and eat human flesh together. A person who for the first time, deliberately or through trickery, eats "the meat of the night" thereby contracts a debt. He will have to seize other victims and share their flesh with the other sorcerers who have become his confederates. A sorcerer's relation to his victim is unstable; it may undergo a reversal of roles. As for the female quality often attributed to sorcery, it seems linked "to the ambivalent position of woman on the hinge between nature and culture, between private life and public life" (Ortigues and Ortigues 1973:236, 242, 248-50).

According to psychoanalytic interpretation, anthropophagy corresponds to fantasies accompanying the oral, pre-genital phase of personality development. The literature presents quite an extended array of images embodying the various dimensions of cannibalism as oral incorporation: love, destruction, preservation in one's interior, and appropriation of the qualities of the object.

In our tale, the murderous oral aggressiveness of the mother-sorceress is aimed as much against her own son as against her daughters-in-law. This attitude may represent several facets of anthropophagic fantasies. One is the imposing presence of the abusive mother who refuses to admit the necessary separation between the one born and the one who gives birth to him, and who specifically sets herself against his independent sexuality by eliminating his partners. According to the analysis by Geneviève Calame-Griaule (1982:191), "the theme of being devoured by the mother . . . offers one

obvious interpretation: the ogress mother, or abusive mother in all senses of that word, whether she ‘eats’ her son sexually—an imaginary representation of incest with the accent on the mother’s responsibility—or whether she ‘eats’ him in the affective sense by loving him too much and by reintegrating him into her breast, which is the surest way of preventing him from escaping her by becoming an adult and marrying.” Devouring her son’s wives is indeed an expeditious and radical way of removing her rivals. Calame-Griaule further poses the question whether the “incorporation” of daughters-in-law, who are also beautiful young women, should not also be interpreted as the mother’s attempt at rejuvenation. At the fantasy level, she may be seeking to take the wife’s place at her son’s side. At least one Bambara tale, collected but not published by Gérard Meyer (1985), is known in which the mother goes so far as to act on the incestuous desire she feels: she slips into the place of her son’s lover under cover of night. He commits suicide when he discovers the substitution, and his younger brother kills the guilty mother.

To clarify the possible meanings of the murderous impulses between mother and child in one direction or the other (not that the direction of the vector makes no difference), I turn to Gérard Meyer’s ethnographic observations of the Bambara-Malinké. Many parallels, in fact, exist between beliefs whose validity is part of daily life-experience and the narrative matter of the tale. For example, it is not unusual among the Bambara-Malinké to accuse a young woman who has lost several young children of having “eaten” her offspring. Her husband is recognized as having the right to repudiate her and send her back to her family. Conversely, the same suspicion may be attached to children whose parents have died within a short time. Cases are also reported in which a grandmother is charged with having “eaten” her grandchildren. Maternal over-possessiveness is also often a fact of daily life. Malinké boys may find in it the source of their failures in school: “It’s because of my mother; she doesn’t want me to succeed” (cited by Meyer, personal communication). The recurrence of such testimonies suggests that young Malinké consider it quite possible that a mother could act in a supernatural way so as to keep them from extensive schooling, which would be bound to remove them from the family hearth on both geographic and sentimental planes.

What about collective representations attached to the family triangle of mother, son, and daughter-in-law, which is one of the classic figures of the “family complex” in virilocal societies (where the daughter-in-law is

integrated into the husband's family)? Relations of authority favor the mother-in-law from the beginning, because of the authority of her age. Augmenting that authority is the daughter-in-law's foreign status, which again contributes to depreciating her family position. This objective relation of domination assigns daughters-in-law to an isolated position in the husband's family and leads them to take their mothers-in-law as beings they must mistrust. It is within this relation that the tale is inscribed, in the imaginary mode of course, in real life.

The character of the adult son, long passive in the face of his mother's maneuvers, especially in type B versions, is clearly opposed to the dynamic, enterprising child-hero, capable of defending himself even against his mother, found in type A. This opposition runs parallel to social norms that grant greater liberty to an uncircumcised child, who is less bound by family status and even affective status, than to an adult living at his parents' home with his wife. Thus it is that in the face of her mother-in-law's hostile threats, the daughter-in-law can rely at first only on protection from her own lineage, which eventually takes the form of counter-sorcery. Certain variants, moreover, underscore the son's tendency to see the conflict as "women's business" in which he neither wants nor dares to play judge (Görög-Karady and Meyer 1984:50):

"I will not come between her and you
for she is your daughter-in-law,
What you know, my mother-in-law knows too,
She is at your disposal."

Yet it is vain for the hero to hope to keep clear of the intrigue involving the two women to whom his fate is linked. He will be forced into it by a consideration superior to individual options of his convenience or prudence. It is society, in fact, that intervenes in the story, by way of the mediating dog, public opinion, and the word of the elders.

This intervention is dramatized in such a way as to mark the conventional spatial separation between masculine and feminine worlds and the precise motives prompting the son-husband to decide on his action at the last minute. In one place we are present at a life-and-death struggle between women in the bush, the space of nature, an isolated place under the sway of occult forces that, we have seen, are often associated with femininity. At the very moment of this struggle in the bush, we see the son drinking in the

company of the elders in a prominent public place in the village. This peaceable, sociable men's space contrasts with the savage universe of women. The message about the conflict is carried by the dog, principal agent of rescue here as in the first tale. This function, of course, is customary for a dog, as the domestic animal in charge of guarding the hearth and protecting both the herd and his masters; thereby he is the helpful animal that is closest to man. This proximate relation to man is here expressed in a double register. First, his master understands his language. Second, more than his intermediary role as message-bearer, the dog acts on his own account when he takes part in the deadly conflict at the mother's expense. At that point he is the first to express common sense or public opinion. It is his intervention, upheld by the villagers' feeling, that will unleash the hero's decisive reaction. According to the version cited above (Görög-Karady and Meyer 1984:52):

An old man said to him,
"Jasun, your dog is speaking to you,
you are sitting here drinking *dolo*
while your mother goes about eating your wife."

The son needs the approval of the collectivity for an action so loaded with consequences: he is eliminating his very first blood relative in order to save his principal relative by marriage. Without the weight of public opinion, his act is only a monstrous matricide, which could never be legitimized by a desire to protect his wife. Thus the elders' intervention constitutes a moral justification of the last hour.

Here again society gives its preference to the bond fixed by the rules, which will contribute not only to consolidating harmony at the heart of the collectivity but also and especially to the continuance of society. The wife in this tale is chosen judiciously: by no means is she a "foreigner" of unknown, hence dangerous, forebears as in the first tale. By killing his mother, the son affirms his right to adult existence, in particular to sexuality and procreation, which are all to the advantage of an individual responding to society's values. The abusive mother, by contrast, disturbs social equilibrium by blindly cultivating her libidinal and antisocial impulses, which weaken the community by the loss of children and wives and put its continuance in danger.

Conclusion

In the end the two tales are congruent in imparting the identical morality, which affirms the primacy of collective needs and values over individual choices based on impulses, desires, or affinities whose legitimacy is not socially approved. While between the two narratives there is a reversal of the moral quality of the two female figures, the potential wife and the mother, they play their different roles under the regulation of approved norms. The “social discourse” dominates throughout, but the narrative structures and characters of different connotations in which it expresses itself have divergent connotations. The “speech of the imagination,” in sum, only makes its contribution to the varied literary elaboration of what are rightly called social messages to the dominant discourse.

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Appendix 1

Siriman the Hunter (Görög-Karady and Diarra 1979:106-11)

I will tell the story of a hunter. This hunter exterminated animals. While he was still *bilakoro*, going hunting gray lizards with the other *bilakoro*, they killed five. By himself he killed ten. That was how it was the whole time he was *bilakoro*. He took his gun, went into the bush and killed animals. All this killing was bad for them.

The animals said, "Wait till we catch that hunter. If we see him, we'll have to find a way to kill him." The hare, who is cleverer than all the other bush animals, said, "It's not worth the trouble. Transform an animal, transform it into a beautiful woman and give her to the hunter." The hare went on, "When a man sees a beautiful woman, he can't sleep. We'll sneak up on him that way; otherwise we won't get him."

The man's name was Kariba, but because he was such a strong killer of animals they changed his name and called him Siriman. God willed that he go back to his house. He had killed two buffaloes and two antelopes. He went home. There was an antelope there.

The hare said, "Change her into a girl, give her to Siriman so we can catch him." They changed her into a girl. She went to Siriman's house. She didn't find Siriman. She went to the village chief. The village chief said to her, "Welcome. Siriman is out in the bush."

If you are good, you will be one of us. If you are not good, we will renounce you. God willing, I'll turn you over to Siriman's mother till he comes back." The village chief called the mother and turned the woman over to her.

Siriman came back. Coming back, Siriman killed two big antelopes and a *koba* and came home. When he arrived, his mother told him, "You have a wife, but I don't like her. I'm afraid of this woman. In fact I asked her about what she eats. She said she does not like anything except toads and plants. People's food can't be made up of toads and plants; that's why I'm afraid of her." Siriman answered, "It's no big thing, mother; everyone to his own kind of food. And if she settles here, she'll get used to our food." The girl settled there.

A week and seven days went by. The girl wanted to go home. On the seventh day, she said to the mother, "Today I am going home." The mother answered, "You're going home." At that moment Siriman said, "Tell me the thing you like best in the world. When you have spent two weeks here, I'll go with you to your parents' house." She answered, "All right," and added that she didn't want anything for the two weeks except dog. Siriman had some fine dogs. Siriman killed all his dogs, cooked them, and gave them to his wife. She ate them all.

Old women are smart. The mother gathered all the bones, put them in a vessel, and shut them away. Right. God made it that she was going to leave next day. That night, she addressed herself to Siriman: "Dear man, when I arrived at your house, your hunting of animals knew no bounds." She went on, "When you hunt an animal, what do you change into?" "When I attack an animal and if I know he wants to catch me, I change into a tree stump." She insisted, "After that, what do you change into?" "I change into grass and the animals walk over me." She asked again, "After that, what else?" "If I attack and miss them, and if I know I can't escape them, I change into a gray lizard and climb a big tree." She said, "Right, I see. Today I'm going home."

The mother said, "Go ahead, I'll have a *bilakoro* come with you. In case you come back, Siriman will go home with you." The girl said, "No, I can't be separated from Siriman." She got ready to leave with Siriman. Siriman said, "Mother, it's no harm, I'll go with her. If I go myself, that'll be a walk in the bush for me."

His wife said, "Now you're carrying your gun; are you going to kill me?" "No, I won't kill you." He left the gun. She went on, "You're carrying your knife; are you going to kill me?" "No, I won't kill you." He left the knife. She went on, "Now you're carrying your axe; are you going to kill me?" "No, I won't kill you, I'll leave it here." He followed his wife, emptyhanded. They walked and reached the bush. She asked, "Do you know this place?" "I've killed antelopes here," the man answered. Then they left. She asked, "Do you know this place?" "I've killed elephants here," he answered. Then they left. She asked, "Do you know this place?" "This is the place where I kill buffaloes." Then they left. They reached an endless bush with no bounds. She asked, "Do you know this place?" "This place, no, I don't know it," he answered. "Right, our house is here. Stay here, I'm going to relieve myself."

She put down her things. She entered the bush [where] Siriman couldn't hear. She put her hand on her head and shouted, "Animals of the bush, all come, I have Siriman in person, animals of the bush, all come, I have Siriman in person!" The animals rushed on Siriman. The whole bush filled up with animals. While they were getting ready to attack

him, Siriman transformed into an anthill. They said, “Hey, he disappeared!” The girl said, “Blow on the anthill, he is there, he told me himself.” They blew on it and came up on him. He ran and transformed into grass. They said, “He disappeared.” The girl said, “No, blow on it, he said he would change into grass.” They arrived at a tree shoot, which ran away. She said, “Blow on it.” They said, “He disappeared.” She said again, “If he disappeared, he has transformed into a tree stump. Catch him, he has become the stump.” They blew on the stump. Siriman transformed himself and became a gray lizard. They said, “He disappeared.” She kept on, “Look hard for him. He said he would change into a gray lizard.” They did not find Siriman. The girl said, “Look at the tree.” There was a big tree at the door of the house; he had climbed it. She said, “The gray lizard you see there is Siriman. Warthog and Buffalo, cut down this bastard-mahogany and bring Siriman down so he falls to the ground and we’ll catch him. He has made us suffer, he has made us suffer.”

The hare said they ought to cut the tree with their teeth. They cut the tree, they cut it, they cut it. They were on the point of hacking it down and felling it. Siriman’s mother took the axe and went out of the house to go fetch wood. As soon as she went out, she saw her son on the top of a tree.

Right, the song Siriman sang, you are going to sing it for me. Siriman sang:

Hmmm, black-mouth, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm, my red-foot, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm, mothers, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today

The mother took out the axe. She said, “That’s my son’s voice.” She went on, “My son is caught in a trap by animals.” With the little wood she had gathered, she went quickly and made a fire. She gathered the dogs’ bones and put them on the fire in a pot. She gathered the dogs’ bones and put them on the fire. The water boiled. All the dogs came back to life and stood up. She said, “Right, your master is caught in a trap by animals in the bush, come, go to him.” She left the house with the dogs.

As soon as they reached the door, Siriman sang:

Hmmm, black-mouth, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm, red-foot, yo
 Hmmm, *kabajan* yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm, my mothers, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today

The mother said, “Right, that’s your master’s voice, go that way.” The dogs

hurried, they went forward. They went on and got to the tree. At the moment when the tree was about to fall, Siriman saw the head one of the dogs and shouted:

Hmmm, black-mouth, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm, red-foot, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm, *kabajan* yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today
 Hmmm, my mothers, yo
 Hmmm, animals are going to kill me today

The dogs rushed on the animals. The ones they killed they killed, the ones they let live they let live. They brought down Siriman; they brought him down off the tree.

That's why, ever since that day, you must not argue with your mother. If Siriman had not given everything away, the animals wouldn't have hunted him. I put this tale back where I found it.

Appendix 2

The Sorceress and Her Daughter-in-Law (Görög-Karady and Meyer 1984:49-55)

Right. I'm going to tell the story of an old woman. When she gave birth to a child, she ate it. Yes, when she gave birth to a child, she ate it. Right. She had a son. The day of his birth, when she sat down next to her son, she gave him a kick. She said, "Eh, little boy, aren't you asleep?" "Mother, if you give me the breast, I'll go to sleep." She gave him the breast; he went back to sleep. In the middle of the night, she raised her hand and gave him a hit. The child did the same. "Eh, little boy, are you really not asleep?" "Mother, if you take your hand away, I'll go to sleep." She took her hand away and her son did the same.

Right. Things stayed like that. The boy grew up. They fought every night, every night they fought. But the sorceress didn't succeed in eating her son.¹ The boy became a young man; he got circumcised.² She chose a wife for him, but she ate her. Then all the villagers slipped away: they would not give their daughters to that boy, for his mother was a sorceress.

Right. Her co-sister, another sorceress, had only one daughter. She gave her to the

¹ The son too possesses some power, either trickery or sorcery, that enables him to give blow for blow back to his mother.

² Literally "[became] a person." It is at the moment of circumcision that one becomes a fully recognized person in society.

boy. Yes, she gave her to him. Then the young man's mother decided she would eat her daughter-in-law. The son answered, "It's not serious. I will not come between her and you, for she is your daughter-in-law. What you know, my mother-in-law knows too, she is at your disposal." She tried to tempt her daughter-in-law by every means; no result. In fact, the girl was protected. Her mother had given her a girdle of *gris-gris*, and her body was covered with it. When the mother came, the daughter-in-law cut one [bit of *gris-gris*], and the sorcery did not succeed. Every time she came, the daughter cut a bit, and the sorcery did not succeed; it failed. One day she wanted to entice the girl; she said to her that they would go fetch wood. The girl answered, this was her answer, "I'm just washing my kitchen things." "Right, but first we're going to go fetch wood." "I'm cold," the girl protested.

But they went all the same. The sorceress saw a big dry *cangara*³ she wanted to get the girl to climb it, telling her to cut some branches. "Mother, I can't climb." "Sure, you'll climb. If you don't climb the tree I choose, I'll eat you." The girl climbed up the tree, she tried to cut wood, but she couldn't. The sorceress took the axe, the axe for sorcery, stopped down there just beneath the girl, and began to cut the trunk of the tree.

I must say that her son's name was Jasun. The mother was called Nasun. Right. The name of the girl's mother was Nyeba. Right. There she was, cutting down the tree. When it was going to fall, the girl cut one thread from her girdle, and the tree straightened up. Now the son's little dog was lying at the foot of the tree looking at the girl. She had used almost all her *gris-gris*. She began to sing:

Eh Jasun, eh Jasun!
 Jasun's mother really eats humans,
 Jasun's mother really eats humans,
 Jasun's mother is a sorceress, it's true!
 If you are named Jasun, I won't let you do it.
 If you are named Jasun, I won't let you do it.
 I am from the Kusu family,
 I am from the Kusu family,
*Kusu ba Kan liba Kusa Kusa*⁴
Kusu ba Kan liba Kusa Kusa

The girl cut one thread; the tree straightened up. But the girdle on her body was almost falling off; there were only two threads left.

The girl put her hands on her head. She cried from the top of the tree:

Eh Jasun, eh Jasun!
 Jasun's mother really eats humans,
 Jasun's mother really eats humans,

³ A tree that burns quickly.

⁴ These lines seem to lack meaning. They contain a pun on the word *Kusa*.

If you are named Jasun, I won't let you do it.
 If you are named Jasun, I won't let you do it.
 I am from the Kusu family,
 I am from the Kusu family,
Kusu ba Kan liba Kusa Kusa
Kusu ba Kan liba Kusa Kusa

Right. The little dog began to run. He knew that there were almost no more sons, that there was only one left. When this last one would be cut down, the girl would die. So the dog left. Jasun was engaged in drinking *dolo*. Many old men were sitting around him. The little dog ran up and lay down next to Jasun:

E wewu wewe wewu
e wewu wewe wewu
e wewu wewe wewu
e wewu wewe wewu

One old man said to him, "Jasun, your dog is speaking to you. You are sitting here drinking *dolo* while your mother is busy eating your wife." "Hmmm," said Jasun, "I see!" He got up, loaded his gun, took a club, and followed the little dog. They ran, they ran. The last thread of the girdle was already cut off and cast. The daughter cried:

Eh Jasun, eh Jasun!
 Jasun's mother really eats humans,
 Jasun's mother really eats humans,
 Jasun's mother is a sorceress, it's true!
 If you are named Jasun, I won't let you do it.
 If you are named Jasun, I won't let you do it.
 I am from the Kusu family,
 I am from the Kusu family,
Kusu ba Kan liba Kusa Kusa
Kusu ba Kan liba Kusa Kusa

While her mother was going to cut down the tree, Jasun arrived and placed himself behind her. He said, "Mother, here you are, aren't you?" "Sure I'm here." "Mother, it's really you, isn't it?" "Sure, it's really me." Then he said, "But today is your last day!" He took his gun, aimed, and fired. The bullet hit his mother in the head; it came out of her skull. The sorceress fell backward. He struck her with the axe handle. With his arm he held up the tree that was about to fall, got his wife down, and went back with her to his house. There where I got the tale I leave it.