

## From Guild to Rotary: Hunters' Associations and Mali's Search for a Civil Society\*

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*Marifatigi bée tē donso ye*  
“Not every owner of a gun is a hunter” – Mande proverb

### INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN THE MANDE DIASPORA

Any kinship system will challenge the people who use it with structural tensions that require socio-cultural organizational solutions; no kinship system is perfect, and societies change,<sup>1</sup> while most societies depending for their existence on agriculture face a structural problem for younger brothers. If an agricultural way of life is carried out in one place, as it is in most of sub-Saharan Africa, people tend to settle in a particular area for a long time, and most such systems combine patrilineal kinship with a patrilocal settlement strategy. That means sons remain on their father's compound or homestead and marry women from “elsewhere”, regulating both biological reproduction and political support. The system works perfectly until population growth and scarcity of food and land or personal ambition put pressure on it. Since inheritance rights to the homestead will belong to the eldest son, that pressure can lead to fission or to the departure of younger brothers.

A good way to deal with the resulting tension is awarding to younger brothers tasks and duties outside the homestead or compound, hunting being the external activity *par excellence*, which I will illustrate by discussing developments in the “Mande World”, particularly in modern-day Mali. The Mande World is a concept that came into fashion in the 1980s and is now widely accepted and used to describe the culture, social organization, and history of a cluster of ethnic groups that now inhabit large parts of modern

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1. This general statement is based on a widely accepted critique of British functionalist anthropologists (most notably Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes) who – in the 1930s and 1940s – equated African politics with kinship.

western Africa.<sup>2</sup> They are now the majority in Mali, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Gambia, and sizeable minorities of them live in Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Senegal.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of these “Mande peoples” in large parts of western Africa is due mainly to twentieth-century developments: migration in search of labour,<sup>4</sup> and a huge increase in population partly due to the introduction of biomedical health strategies.<sup>5</sup> The people involved took advantage of the fact that their first language was Bambara or Dioula, the local *lingua franca*.<sup>6</sup>

These developments had their precedents, although much smaller in scale, long before the twentieth century, when people moved around prompted by either commercial or political ambitions, or in flight from war and famine, whether caused by bad harvests or population pressure. These predecessors of the modern Mande created fertile ground for the diaspora which the world witnessed in the second half of the twentieth century.

As a consequence of the spread of the Mande diaspora, geographical delineations of orally remembered polities can seldom be reconstructed if traditions are not embedded in the landscape and corroborated by reliable

2. Scholars who study the people of the Mande World are united in the Mande Studies Association (MANSA), which has edited the *Mansa Newsletter* since 1986 as well as the *Mande Studies* journal since 1999. See <http://www.txstate.edu/anthropology/mansa>

3. A map showing the extent of the Mande languages in West Africa can be found at <http://www.sil.org/silesr/2000/2000-003/silesr2000-003.htm>

4. For instance, more than a million Malians moved to Côte d'Ivoire in the 1960s and early 1970s, a country that had a flourishing economy based on cocoa production until the cocoa price dramatically fell in the mid-1970s. After the mid-1970s, many Malians were forced from their home country by severe droughts and famines. This was migration on a scale without precedent in West African history.

5. At the end of the nineteenth century, the French chose Bamako, a town of a few thousand inhabitants, as their administrative centre because of its excellent strategic location. Nowadays it is a metropolis of about two million inhabitants. An isolated area such as Sobara (whose size is estimated at 1,500 square kilometres) – where I have conducted fieldwork since 1999 – had 13 villages with 1,795 inhabitants in 1950 (sourced from Archives Nationales of Mali and given in Jan Jansen and Mountaga Diarra, *Entretiens avec Bala Kanté: Une chronique du Manding du XXème siècle* (Leiden, 2006)). Civil servants whom I interviewed in 2005 estimated its current population at between 50,000 and 100,000. In relation to the topic of this article – “guilds” – it is important to note the absence of large towns in the West African savannah; the famous old towns of Jenne and Timbuktu are north of the area studied as the Mande World. The major towns that flourished in pre-colonial times due to the slave trade are located some distance southward, in an ecologically different zone; these towns were inhabited by groups that cannot be classified within the Mande World.

6. It should be noted that monolingualism, as we know it in some European states, has never existed in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the ethnic groups included among the Mande World speak a Mande language as their first language – but a large minority (including the Fulbe and the Peulh) do not. Most people in the Mande World speak Bambara or Dioula, two highly related Mande languages. (It is confusing to see that the term “Mande” was used as a linguistic marker, and is nowadays *also* used as a social and cultural marker.)

external sources.<sup>7</sup> Ethnic groups in the Mande World imagine or experience the major parallels in their cultural and social principles by relating themselves to the oral epics through which they trace descent from prestigious “empires” such as the Wagadu, Ghana, Mali, Sonrhay, and Fulbe “empires” that are geographically imagined in what is now, roughly speaking, the southern half of the republic of Mali.<sup>8</sup>

For historians not acquainted with the history of sub-Saharan Africa it is probably difficult to grasp the immense dynamics of the discourse used by ethnic groups to forge their own identities. Amselle's classic *Les négociants de la savane*<sup>9</sup> is still a good illustration. In it, he describes how the ethnic group of the Kooroko came into being in the twentieth century, included at certain moments thousands of “members” – according to the French administration, which had a policy of “fixing” identities<sup>10</sup> – and had disappeared almost completely by the end of the 1970s.

The terminology that ethnic groups use is dynamic and meanings are bound by context. To give two striking and much-quoted examples: in some parts of the Mande World *Soninke* means “pagans who do libations”, while elsewhere the term is used as an ethnic marker for a highly Islamized group. In some parts it is used in both ways. The term *Bambara* or *Bamana*

7. If such reconstructions are possible, professional historians from the country in question may feel frustrated by the idea that their oral traditions tell of a more recent history than they generally think. See my *Epopée, Histoire, Société: le cas de Soundjata, Mali et Guinée* (Paris, 2001), p. 153, and Jean-Loup Amselle, *Les négociants de la savane* (Paris, 1977). For a reconstruction of the history of the Ségou “warrior state”, see Richard L. Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1987).

8. The name Mali Federation was adopted in 1958 when the French colonies Senegal and French Sudan became “autonomous”. This federation soon disintegrated, and in 1960 Mali became an independent state. It has no historical connection with the Mali empire. The same holds for present-day Ghana and the medieval empire of Ghana, and present-day Benin and the kingdom of Benin (in present-day Nigeria).

9. Amselle, *Les négociants de la savane*.

10. As a result of this policy and the research that supported it, the nations of West Africa now all have national histories in which the modern nation was preceded by “empires” that can be related to the ethnic groups that live in the nation-state. These histories are taught at schools and universities, but they are considered to be a colonial construction by most academics outside Africa. It should be noted that the organizational structure and size of these “empires” and “states” is not known, and by “academic” standards will never be, because of a lack of written sources – most of the territory nowadays occupied by the Mande World was explored and colonized only after 1880 in the process of “The Scramble for Africa”. Thus, although the first contacts between Europeans and Mande peoples can be traced back to the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese established trading posts on the West African coast, it took three centuries before Mungo Park “discovered” in 1796 that the river Senegal and river Niger did not originate from the same source (an imagined lake that can be found on old European maps of Africa), and it took four centuries before the French occupied the hinterlands in order to establish their long-desired trade route between the Atlantic coast and the river Niger.

is equally difficult to interpret, referring to many forms of identity: to descendants of the eighteenth-century kingdom of Segou, but also to “pagans” as well as to “people not from here” – Bazin’s famous title “A chacun son Bambara” is a good summary of the principle.<sup>11</sup>

When gaining a presence in the public sphere, or in order to gain it for that matter, any group in the Mande World, ethnic, social, or cultural, will develop a historical identity for itself that creatively and convincingly relates its history to oral histories of great “empires” and “states”. The fact that such groups produce new traditions does not mean that they “invent” them, as seems to be suggested in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s 1983 classic *The Invention of Tradition*.<sup>12</sup> Any “new tradition” cannot emerge *ex nihilo*, but needs to meet many criteria to be acceptable.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the emergence of any tradition is a highly complex political, social, cultural, and historical process; this is reason enough for those who study the “invention” of tradition usually to prefer the term “reimagination” – a term actually proposed by Ranger in that 1983 volume.

This long introduction to the active processes of historical imagination or reimagination in the Mande World is necessary to understand the dynamics of hunters’ associations, which is the subject of this essay. Although hunters’ associations might have elaborate oral traditions about their founding fathers from the Ségou state or the Mali empire, one should note that most of the traditions are of a recent origin. Epics about empires,<sup>14</sup> often based on hours-long recordings with “professional” storytellers, frequently mention hunters and hunting, quite logically of course since “they all hunted”,<sup>15</sup> and warriors

11. Jean Bazin, “A chacun son Bambara”, in Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M’Bokolo (eds), *Au Coeur de l’ethnie: ethnies, tribalisme et État en Afrique* (Paris, 1999 [1985]), pp. 87–127.

12. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

13. Illustrative for this line of argument is Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA [etc.], 1998).

14. For the most detailed study, see Stephen Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Bloomington, IN, 1999). Anthologies on African epics include John W. Johnson, Thomas A. Hale, and Stephen Belcher (eds), *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent* (Bloomington, IN, 1997), and Lilyan Kesteloot and Bassirou Dieng, *Les épopées d’Afrique noire* (Paris, 1997).

15. Martin Klein wrote the following to me in relation to a draft of this article (personal communication, 18 March 2008): “If you rely on oral tradition, the hunters’ association becomes the nucleus of the Segou and Kaarta states, but I think that there are two variables that are important here. The first is that the tradition of origin is a charter concerned to legitimate. Hunters are important in traditions, but since most men probably hunted, we have to ask what those traditions all mean. The second is that Bambara society [Ségou] was divided between those who participated in the slaving state, or those who did not, or at best, were subjects of that state. But *they all hunted* [italics added]. Or did they? I think that they did.” The history of Ségou (along the river Niger in present-day Mali), which was a powerful state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is full of references to hunters’ activities and to a new elite with a relatively egalitarian ideology that is also characteristic of present-day hunters’ associations; these references also suggest the idea that an owner of a gun with a sense of responsibility resembles a hunter. One should realize that all these traditions have been recorded in the

are often depicted as hunters because hunters are obviously owners of weapons. I will insist therefore in my analysis on including a strong emphasis on the omnipresent task of "hunting" as a structural characteristic of life in the Mande World, which I would combine with a rejection of attempts to relate today's hunters' guilds to some precolonial polity.

Nowadays, almost every village in these countries has a hunters' association. The importance of hunters should not be explained by their skill in hunting game, since game has almost disappeared from that part of Africa. Rather their social functioning, and in particular their intermediary skills, are what require close analysis. In retrospect, it is almost self-evident that hunters have been put forward to deal with civil wars in the region, including those in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, or challenges set by national governments in shaping a civil society. Examples of these efforts will be described in the second half of this article.

Mande hunters' associations are organized according to practices that reflect the principles of European guilds. That in itself clearly demands attention, since when writing about Mande hunters we are certainly dealing with a phenomenon labelled by Pfister<sup>16</sup> as "a guild [that] is not necessarily a guild". However, before I elaborate on that I will first discuss the *nyamakalaw* (singular: *nyamakala*), the allegedly "casted" artisan groups among Mande ethnic groups, which have often been described (incorrectly, I shall argue) as guild-like organizations. By describing the *nyamakalaw* I will, however, introduce cosmological dimensions of the Mande World which will serve to explain why hunters are still part of the present-day political scene.

#### WHY MANDE ARTISANS ARE NOT ORGANIZED AS GUILDS

The *nyamakala* artisan's activities should be analysed in terms of a combination of spatial, social, and cosmological characteristics. Ethnic

twentieth century and thus may contain *twentieth-century* descriptions of hunters. I am very critical of efforts to represent polities in this area as geographical entities; political centres had highly dynamic and often overlapping spheres of influence, and control over land was not an issue. For the issue of whether these "states" depended on slavery, and "the general bias in historical analysis toward states and empires", see Martin A. Klein, "The Slave Trade and Decentralized Societies", *The Journal of African History*, 42 (2001), pp. 49–65, and especially p. 50. See also *idem*, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 3, which elaborates on an idea by Meillassoux: "Within the warrior or aristocratic sector slaves were soldiers, servants, concubines, and farmers. These farmers existed primarily to feed the court and army. The aristocratic state reproduced itself primarily through war and enslavement. By contrast, merchants approached slaves as an investment and developed slave modes of production."

16. Ulrich Pfister, "Craft Guilds and Proto-Industrialization in Europe: 16th to 18th Centuries", in S.R. Epstein *et al.* (eds), *Guilds, Economy and Society* (Madrid, 1998).

groups in the West African savannah share the characteristic of a tripartite division of “social status categories”: noblemen or free men (*hòrònw*), the unfree (*jònw*),<sup>17</sup> and *nyamakalaw*. To the last group belong blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and bards (*jeliw/jalilu* [“griots”] and *finaw/funèw*, religious (which is to say “Islamic”) singers of praises).

The three status categories are endogamous, in that they do not marry outside their own group. The *jònw* are, in the Mande historical imagination, descendants of free men, captives in wars often long forgotten. The *nyamakalaw* have always been excluded from warfare and in the ideal image were never captured in wars, since they are attributed a diplomatic function and their skills are imagined to be in craftsmanship instead of warfare.

Everyone in the Mande World can trace a relationship to Sunjata, the legendary founder of the Mali empire. Sunjata’s deeds had already reached the ears of Ibn Battuta when he travelled along the river Niger in 1349–1351. Sunjata’s history has been transmitted for centuries in standardized form and has served as a charter for Mande society.<sup>18</sup>

Mande people all bear a *jamu*, a patronymic derived from a heroic ancestor who fought in the era of Sunjata. After conquering “Mande”/”Mali”, Sunjata allotted a task to each ancestor. The resulting division of tasks has been the blueprint for public discourse on the social and political organization of Mande society down to the present day. Due to changes brought about by colonial regimes and social changes in general in the past century, the divide between free men and unfree has vanished,<sup>19</sup> and since both have the same patronymics, so much migration has taken place, and everyone in Mande shares the same discursive models to produce oral historical narratives,<sup>20</sup> original status is difficult or even impossible to trace. As a result many unfree families have “upgraded” their status in the past century.

17. I deliberately avoid often-used translations such as “slave”, “serve”, and “captive”, since they may seduce a non-Africanist reader to speculate about unfree labour and slavery. The emphasis on control over relationships – the main characteristic of the indigenous political organization – rather than over people or land often leads to such speculation missing the point.

18. The “Sunjata epic” is famous, since it is a unique phenomenon: an oral tradition that is standardized in a vast area inhabited by illiterate people and that is reproduced without a centralized system of either rule or formalized education. For a critique on literary premises, see Jan Jansen, “The Sunjata Epic: The Ultimate Version”, *Research in African Literatures*, 32 (2001), pp. 14–46.

19. The French seem to have abolished slavery very late, in 1903 in the case of large parts of their West African colonies for instance. This seems late, but one should bear in mind that it was only in this period that West Africa was brought under French administration; the French could not therefore have abolished slavery earlier.

20. This model has been analysed in detail as a “status discourse” in Jan Jansen, “The Younger Brother and the Stranger: In Search of a Status Discourse for Mande”, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 36 (1996), pp. 659–688.

The *nyamakalaw*, however, have their own patronymics, making their status more obvious, but it is a mistake to think that their inherited status automatically implies any professional practice or competence, although the *nyamakalaw* themselves deny that in their self-representation: for public consumption they are all wonderful craftsmen, tracing their descent from heroic ancestor-artisans. But only the most talented *nyamakala* families derive an income from *nyamakala* activities. Most of the *nyamakala* live from agriculture, like most others in their society.

Furthermore, the *nyamakalaw* cannot change their status easily, since their public behaviour is a little different and their attitudes, absorbed from childhood, are difficult to conceal. *Nyamakalaw*, who make up 5–10 per cent of the population, still practice endogamy and there are many reasons why the other two groups are unwilling to marry them. For example, *nyamakalaw* will excite anyone's imagination, since the term "nyamakala" itself is related to "nyama", a generic term for "occult" or "supernatural" powers which the *nyamakalaw* are said to be able to wield.<sup>21</sup> Then again, the *nyamakalaw*'s special position becomes clearer when we look more closely at the cosmological processes in which they are involved.

The French colonial administration designated the *nyamakalaw* as caste people, thereby transposing an Asian model into West African Sudan.<sup>22</sup> This designation has been met by a great deal of criticism.<sup>23</sup> In a review of Conrad and Frank's *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*, which is the most quoted work on them, Amselle argued that in current research on *nyamakalaw*, dynamics, contextualization, and deconstruction are key concepts:

The process of deconstructing the notion of caste that can be observed in the best contributions in this work [...], processes analogous to that which have been attempted in the domain of ethnography, reveals, on the contrary, the polysemic character of the terms used to designate each group as well as the contextual character of these groups. It also reveals the relative openness of each group and the social mobility that this openness allows. Finally, this attempt at contextualization uncovers the absence of fixed relations between profession and status, as well as the dynamic nature of the acquisition of different specializations.<sup>24</sup>

21. See Charles S. Bird, Martha B. Kendall, and Kalilou Tera, "Etymologies of *Nyamakala*", in David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (eds), *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande* (Bloomington, IN, 1995), pp. 27–35.

22. Ed van Hoven, "Representing Social Hierarchy: Administrators-Ethnographers in the French Sudan: Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 29 (1990), pp. 179–198.

23. See Conrad and Frank, *Status and Identity in West Africa*.

24. Jean-Loup Amselle, "Review of *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 36 (1996), pp. 830–834, 832.

The “relative” openness of each group is for present-day researchers the main reason to avoid the term “caste”, although it still appears to be very tempting, in particular to scholars who study only the *nyamakalaw* in depth.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of such openness, the Mande artisans are, by definition, unsuitable candidates for description as a guild since, following De Moor in the present volume, a minimal definition of a guild should include some form of collective action. On the contrary, however, a family of *nyamakalaw* will strive to establish a relationship of dependency on the family of prestigious free man, who will then be their *jatigiw* (“hosts”).<sup>26</sup>

#### HUNTERS DEAL WITH *NYAMA*, BUT ARE NOT ARTISANS

When they kill game in the bush, hunters liberate the dangerous and evil *nyama* forces, but why are they not then *nyamakalaw*, and what makes them so special? The answer lies for me in the spaces of their activities and their social organization. When analysing activities by *nyamakalaw* the dichotomy between village and wilderness is crucial. John Johnson described the difference between them for Mande as follows:

The geography of the cosmos, like the structure of society, begins in the nuclear family’s compound (*lu*) and works its way outwards. [...] The compound is considered the safest locale for a person in terms of the cosmological forces of cohesion. [...] The farther away from one’s home one goes, the more social dislocation will be encountered and the greater will be the need for assistance from such institutions as the occult arts. [...] An even more dangerous step is taken when the village border (*dankun*) is crossed, and the ring of women’s vegetable gardens (*na-ko*) is entered. A village fetish, a religious object the function of which is to protect, is often placed here on the border under the village garbage (*nyama*), the word for garbage being a homonym for the word for occult power (*nyama*). The cosmological ring outside the vegetable gardens is that of the toilets (*bò-kè-yòrò*), which is followed by a ring mixed with the men’s fields being cultivated (*foro*) and those being left fallow (*sangwan*). Beyond this ring lies the most dangerous area of all, the wilderness (*wula*), which continues until the fields of the next village are encountered.<sup>27</sup>

25. For instance Barbara G. Hoffman, *Griots at War: Conflict, Conciliation, and Caste in Mande* (Bloomington, IN, 2000), whose call to reintroduce “caste” has not garnered much support. Some scholars (including many scholars of African origin in search of a glorious paste for their nation, but also Tal Tamari, *Les Castes de l’Afrique Occidentale: Artisans et Musiciens Endogames* (Nanterre, 1997)) have attempted – and were severely criticized for this – to relate medieval Arabic-language documents to twentieth-century oral traditions.

26. Some of these relationships last for generations. This is the case for instance for the *jeliw* of Kela and the rulers of Kangaba. See Jansen, “The Sunjata Epic: The Ultimate Version”.

27. John W. Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (Bloomington, IN, 1986), p. 10.



Johnson's description illustrates that the people in the wilderness are differently socially positioned from those in villages,<sup>28</sup> and that is precisely why hunters, distinctively *nyama* specialists, are not *nyamakalaw*. Hunters work in the wilderness, in contrast to *nyamakalaw*, who work in villages, at least partly.<sup>29</sup> Since they work in the bush, hunters are not considered to be "deliberately disrupting social harmony",<sup>30</sup> while *nyamakalaw* are.

*Nyamakalaw* are able to transform "nature" into "culture". They shape or mould events to fit them into village life by activities in which *nyama* is liberated: the male blacksmith transforms ore into iron, and then turns it into tools; the male blacksmith works with wood too and turns that into furniture and masks; the female blacksmith works with clay, turning it into pots and other household utensils. Blacksmiths, male and female, give young children a position in society by performing ritual circumcision or excision,<sup>31</sup> and the blacksmith's role in the arrangement of marriages is an example of how *nyamakalaw* mould or even create the social world.

Transformation into a cultural entity features in both the terminology for the blacksmith's work and for social change: they are both phrased in anthropomorphic terms. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the work of the blacksmith is often imagined as a process of giving birth, the forge being the womb, the iron being the product.<sup>32</sup>

The other artisans are just as occupied with transforming "nature" into "culture". The leatherworker transforms animal skins into clothing; bards create social identities for people by relating them to the past through their ancestors, and weaving, forging, and talking are all activities referred to by the verb *da*, the first meaning of which is "to create".<sup>33</sup>

All these activities take place, at least to some extent, within the borders of the village. By contrast, the hunter liberates *nyama* by killing game

28. Jansen, "The Younger Brother".

29. Forges are often found outside the village (see Eugenia W. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), p. 195), possibly because of fears that they might explode. It should be noted that in several African cultures, working in a forge is considered to be more dangerous than working at the anvil.

30. Patrick R. McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa* (Bloomington, IN, 1988), p. 71.

31. The extract from Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara*, p. 10, above also demonstrates that *nyama* articulates processes of transformation. The two meanings of the term *nyama* – the most common, occult power, and the secondary, garbage – illustrate the transformation from nature to culture, and back again. Garbage is ejected from society, into nature, but when transformed into compost it can serve to transform nature (fields) back into culture (crops and food).

32. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power*.

33. For example, singing is translated as *donkili da* ("creating a call to dance"). *Da* also means "mouth". One should note the great power attributed to the spoken word in societies that do not intensively use a system of writing. See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London [etc.], 1982).

and transforming it into food, but that happens outside the village.<sup>34</sup> The crucial features of *nyamakalaya* are therefore derived from *nyama*-related activities that take place within the village.

Space is therefore central to understanding the *nyamakala*'s status. The status of artisans is related to their ability to transform nature into culture, and so mould the human individual into a social being *within* the space of the village. Against Amselle and Conrad and Frank, whom I have quoted above, I claim that this ability of the artisan is the basis of a "fixed relation between profession and status".

The *nyamakalaw* have been called ambiguous or ambivalent. In explanations about their status, "polysemy" has been the guiding principle, but ambiguity and ambivalence are incorrectly applied to *nyamakalaw* by Conrad and Frank because positive as well as negative assessments of *nyamakalaw* are, inevitably, context-related. In times of trouble, the *nyamakalaw* are welcome to direct the process of "change", and then they are positively valued, but when people live in harmony and peace, *nyamakalaw* are despised, because they threaten *by definition* to transform harmony into disharmony.<sup>35</sup>

A *nyamakala* does not have "an" ambivalent status: *nyamakala* status is assessed monovalently, but it changes in relation to the temperature of the situation. Since radical change is never appreciated, *nyamakalaw* are supposed to guide the process of heating and cooling down. If *nyamakalaw* were really "utterly alien" and "the Other"<sup>36</sup> as compared to free men, there would be no grounds for free men to maintain their inherited relationships with *nyamakala* families, which they definitely do.<sup>37</sup>

#### TOWARDS A HUNTERS' GUILD

Hunters are, as we know now, agents who deal with *nyama* outside the village. From an empirical point of view, hunters' associations among the Mande ethnic groups meet the criteria for a guild. The trajectory to

34. Jean Devisse and Samuel Sidibé, "Mandinka et Mandéphones", in *Vallées du Niger* (Paris, 1993), p. 147, give an analysis of a well-known theme narrative in the Sunjata epic that corroborates my argument on the nature-culture dichotomy: "The old woman then reveals to them that she is the invincible buffalo of Do and will deliver herself to them. She reveals the means by which they can kill her: a cotton spindle, the cultural and chronological signifier *par excellence* of occidental Africa. Killing the queen of a wilderness replete with dangerous animals with a spindle, a tool symbolizing clothing, and thus opening a new era for the Mandinka people, is evidently of great importance."

35. Processes of change are talked about in terms of "heating" and "cooling down" (see Jansen, "The Younger Brother"); this terminology also describes the blacksmiths' practices.

36. Bird, "Etymologies of *Nyamakala*", p. 31.

37. For an illuminating study on the way *jeliw* and freemen continue their relationships in times of modernity, see Molly D. Roth, *Ma Parole S'Achète: Money, Identity and Meaning in Malian Jeliya* (Munster [etc.], 2008).

the status of *donso sinbon* (a master-hunter) is open to everyone and not a family affair as is the case with the *nyamakala* status. However, similarly to a guild member's trajectory it is an apprenticeship full of initiations and tests and a non-formalized process of learning a broad variety of hunters' skills and one that embodies complex obligations. Being a hunter is more than knowing how to track and kill game; it is an ethos, or a lifestyle,<sup>38</sup> well expressed in a proverb often quoted among the speakers of Mande languages: "Not every owner of a gun is a hunter". Even if someone has acquired a technical skill, that does not mean he has the capacity to use it properly.

In terms of organizational form the hunters' association is a brotherhood that, though hierarchical, is governed by meritocratic values. In a society with a hierarchical ideology in which belonging to a status category, and kinship position largely determines someone's role in public life from cradle to grave, the relatively open structure of hunters' guilds is an important counterweight, making the society more dynamic.

In Bamanakan the word for hunters' guild is *donso tòn*. A *tòn* is the generic name for a voluntary association.<sup>39</sup> There is no more specific word for a *hunters'* guild in the Mande languages. Hunters consider themselves to be blood brothers and children of the legendary ancestors Sanin and Kontoron, a mother and her fatherless son. The alleged blood tie with Sanin and Kontoron and, as a result, the image of all hunters as belonging to the same lineage, obliges the hunter to value his fellow hunters over his own immediate family, and according to the Malian researcher Youssouf Tata Cissé, himself a member of a hunters' guild, any hunter should think "tu n'as de parents que Sanin et Kont[o]ron? Tu n'as de frères que les chasseurs."<sup>40</sup>

As structurally occupied with external activities, hunters, younger brothers, as we might remember, have had an important role in *regional* management in the savannah zones where they practised hunting. By definition their activities were not family directed; as specialists in killing game they provided meat to a localized population producing agricultural

38. In an article on the "philosophy" of West African hunters, Fodé M.B. Sidibé, "La confrérie des chasseurs traditionnels et les valeurs authentiques d'enracinement de la société civile africaine", *Quest*, 12 (1998), pp. 91–104, 92, speaks about "les fondements idéologiques de la confrérie des chasseurs (la fraternité universelle, le respect de la vie, l'abolition de toute forme de discrimination, la reconnaissance du mérite de l'individu, le sens des devoirs, la protection des défavorisés, la construction et la défense de sa patrie, la recherche du savoir), et la moralité des chasseurs traditionnels (l'entente, l'union, la maîtrise de soi et de ses pulsions)."

39. In daily language the term *tòn* is nowadays used also for savings and credit associations, agricultural working groups, and even local NGOs.

40. Youssouf Tata Cissé, "Notes sur les sociétés de chasseurs Malinké", *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 34 (1994), pp. 175–226, 182. An additional remark to illustrate the complexity of discourses on "historical" identities in the Mande World: while Kontorong is known in most parts of the Mande World as the son of Sanin, in the Senegambia area a *kondorong* is a dwarfish bush spirit; see, for instance, Stephan Bühnen, "In Quest of Susu", *History in Africa*, 21 (1994), pp. 1–47.

produce.<sup>41</sup> Hunters have always gathered “traditional” medicine too from bush flora, so as a corollary to their interest in game and other bush products hunters have always been concerned in the wellbeing of the forest.<sup>42</sup>

An even more important consequence of their activities outside villages, particularly in relation to the argument set out in this article, has been their role as inter-village diplomats. Where *nyamakalaw*, in particular bards and blacksmiths, have been responsible for negotiating matters to do with kinship, such as initiation, marriage, and family rivalries, hunters are active in diplomacy between villages.<sup>43</sup> Hunters have the image of being somewhat outside village politics, wherein an older brother’s authority is unquestioned, and that is probably because the bush, like common fields in premodern Europe, is not village property.

Given the fact that hunters’ associations deal with collective action to manage the commons, it is correct to label them as a “guild”. Following De Moor in the present volume, I would argue that the institution of hunters’ associations in the Mande World may be seen as a form of collective action that represents a set of “agreements [that] can be considered to be forms of risk avoidance and as a way to benefit from economies of scale in the management of natural resources that are necessary or even vital to the agricultural system but cannot be [...] commercialized”.

#### A GUILD IN A SOCIETY BASED ON AGRICULTURE: COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE MANDE WORLD

In the case of the Mande peoples hunting is not the act of killing game, which can be done by any *marifatigi* (“owner of a gun”). Rather, hunting is a role model for men who are not born to a position with inherited authority; it is a mould to channel their ambitions. Purely economically, the ultimate goal

41. An important aspect of meat is the difficulty in conserving it – in contrast to agricultural staple food. Once you have killed, for instance, a warthog, it should be consumed within twenty-four hours. This means that the entire village will eat meat that day. Of old, cattle are kept only for marriage arrangements, never for consumption. Even now, many people in my area of research – Sobara – are very reluctant to keep cattle as a means of production – they leave cattle management to the Fulbe, another ethnic group (of nomadic pastoralists).

42. Hunters feel a particular responsibility for avoiding and battling bush fires. The savannah is easy prey to bush fires, which could have devastating effects if they are not kept under control. Although a bush fire, if it occurs at the right time during the season, might have beneficial effects on the flora, it is a constant source of social tension; immigrants, rival villages, and wandering pastoralists are all likely candidates for being accused of causing a “spontaneous” bush fire. A groundbreaking study on bush fires in the Mande World is by Paul Laris, “Burning the Seasonal Mosaic: Preventive Burning Strategies in the Wooded Savannah of Southern Mali”, *Human Ecology*, 30 (2002), pp. 155–186.

43. One notes here a structural difference with the *za* (see the article by Mary Louise Nagata in the present volume, pp. 121–142), which was closely related to the village organization and mediated in village and intravillage conflicts.

for a "hunter" in the Malian countryside is always to become a respected *cultivateur* (*sènèkèlè*).<sup>44</sup> Hunting is an institutionalized role, and thus a hunters' "guild" is an ever-present and powerful sociological force.

In the Mande World the structure of hunters' guilds is related to their lack of inherited authority. By definition, hunters negotiate their identity and activities in relation to formal political authorities, the "older brothers" who are the heads of families. Whether a killer of game, a diplomat in inter-village conflict, or a medical expert, a hunter lays claim to all those activities, which are "external" in that they have an aspect that goes beyond the kinship group.

Now it is clear that hunters' guilds were a serious and structural factor in the *imagination* of collective action in the Mande World, but one might ask what hunters *really* contribute to the present-day world? That is the subject of the second part of this essay, in which I shall describe themes and activities that are propagated by today's hunters. I will argue that hunters have established a successful self-representation as "traditional", on the basis of two factors. On the one hand, hunters' activities are a response to challenges and opportunities offered by the republic of Mali, which is in search of a civil society that subscribes to the classical idea of a division between religion, in its case Islam, and state. On the other hand it is the result of the belief in "tradition" as a panacea for the problems Malians, and Africans in general, face in coping with "modernity".

#### THE HUNTERS' REVIVAL IN WEST AFRICA SINCE THE EARLY 1990S

When I visited Mali for the first time, in 1988, hunters had almost disappeared from the public scene. Only occasionally I spotted a person dressed as a traditional hunter, and because of their appetite for alcoholic beverages,<sup>45</sup> and their disrespect for Islam, such persons were never highly respected by

44. One should not underestimate the importance ascribed to agriculture among the Mande peoples. This is illustrated nicely by the history of the armies of Al-Hadji Oumar Tall, who organized men for his mid-nineteenth-century *jihad* against the kingdoms of Kaarta (in the west of present-day Mali) and Ségou. Al-Hadji Oumar Tall raised volunteers for his armies in parts of present-day eastern Senegal which were suffering from high population pressure. These armies successfully fought Kaarta and Ségou, but then the "holy fire" of the *jihad* was extinguished. After several years of warfare, the soldiers tended to prefer to settle (as agriculturists). The diminished *jihad* spirit could thus not be related to an ideological crisis. The line between organized warfare and mass migration was therefore very thin. This case is drawn from John H. Hanson, *Migration, Jihad, and Muslim Authority in West Africa: The Futanke Colonies in Karta* (Bloomington, IN, 1996).

45. People in West Africa drink alcohol to reach a different state of mind. In contrast to what "we" do – by representing the public consumption of alcohol as a social activity and pretending that it has no effect on our ideas and behaviour – most people in Mali gulp down all their alcohol (half a litre of cheap red wine for instance) in just a few seconds; that has quite a rapid effect on them (which they appreciate).

local people. Hunters believe in fetishes to help them to battle the material and spiritual beings of the bush and they sometimes need drugs, such as alcohol, to arrive at deeper insights or to please their spirits (*djinns*).

A decade later, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the scene has changed dramatically, and in a positive direction for the hunters. Leach explains: "Hunters' organizations appear to be helping construct emergent forms of collective solidarity and citizenship practice, linking the phenomenon with another major debate about contemporary forms of African sociality and governance, and with the broad question to what citizenship is coming to mean in West Africa."<sup>46</sup> In spite of the disappearance of game, hunters' associations flourish nowadays. Each village has a hunters' association, and educated people from the cities organize themselves into hunters' organizations.<sup>47</sup>

It is generally agreed that the popularity of hunters' associations is due to their attempts to transfer the state's demand for citizenship to the rural population that, in colonial times, experienced and represented itself as subject to a polity with coercive power, but was still a population that had never learned to be citizens.<sup>48</sup> Ferme observes for Sierra Leone an analytical dichotomy between hunters in urban and rural areas.<sup>49</sup> For instance, the figure of the Sierra Leonean *kamajô*, a militiaman dressed as a hunter who featured in newspaper pictures in reports of the civil war, was a deliberate but urban creation of Mendé<sup>50</sup> "authentic" culture.

The security guards in Abidjan in the 1990s were an urban invention too.<sup>51</sup> Hunters created an urban security service in the neighbourhoods

46. Melissa Leach, "Introduction to Special Issue: Security, Socioecology, Polity: Mande Hunters, Civil Society, and Nation-States in Contemporary West Africa", *Africa Today*, 50 (2004), pp. vii–xvi, viii.

47. And this is justified and followed by the relatively large numbers of scholars who nowadays study hunters; the degree of academic attention hunters attract is comparable to the focus on griots in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

48. See Joseph Hellweg, "Encompassing the State: Sacrifice and Security in the Hunters' Movement of Côte d'Ivoire", *Africa Today*, 50 (2004), pp. 3–28, which was inspired by a famous book by Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1996). The issue described here may be analysed in an even wider framework: African states are nowadays facing challenges in organizing public security, and they sometimes solve these by allowing (or even hiring) private security forces. This has, of course, severe consequences for the image of the state's sovereignty and legitimacy (see Thomas Blomberg Hansen, "Performers of Sovereignty: On the Privatization of Security in Urban South Africa", *Critique of Anthropology*, 26 (2006), pp. 279–295).

49. Mariane Ferme, "La figure du chasseur et les chasseurs-miliciens dans le conflit sierra-léonais", *Politique Africaine*, 82 (2001), pp. 119–132.

50. A note for non-Africanists: Mendé is an ethnic group in Sierra Leone. It is culturally, linguistically, and historically unrelated to the Mande peoples who live in the West African savannah. Most confusing is that many American scholars incorrectly pronounce "Mande" as "Mendé".

51. This case is drawn from Yacouba Konaté, "Dozoya et Ivoirité. Qui A Peur des Dozos?", in Ministère de la Culture du Mali (ed.), *La Chasse Traditionnelle en Afrique de l'Ouest D'Hier à*

in Côte d'Ivoire's capital, claiming to transfer traditional values to the present-day multiethnic society there. That initiative was appreciated at first as a step forward in the creation of a civil society, and the image presented was that of hunters, thanks to their diplomatic skills, being able to encourage "relaxation" in village and town. Although "owners of a gun" they were supposed, as hunters in the Mande World are, to be able to deal with security in the public sphere.

In Côte d'Ivoire, only those with an official *dozo* (the Dioula term for "hunter", cf. *donso*) identity card could be hired as security guard. This meant in reality that the people from the north (the Dioula, a Mande ethnic group that has absorbed many migrants from Mali) created an ethnically based security service monopoly for themselves, which was met with heavy criticism, and when the association appeared to be unable to correct criminal behaviour by some of its own members, the hunters' prestige in Côte d'Ivoire soon decreased dramatically. In urban areas they are now feared.

In Mali, however, hunters are a dominant presence in public life, and apparently more successful than elsewhere in West Africa. Hunters are nowadays omnipresent: their songs are broadcast on radio and television, they are consulted for advice on social problems, and people love to wear attributes or clothing related to hunting.

I will now argue that, for Mali, Ferme's urban-rural dichotomy is more or less absent, and that the popularity of the hunters both expresses and disguises serious problems that the nation-state is facing.

#### THE MANDE HUNTER REIMAGINED: ON MODERNITY, ISLAM, AND OCCULT ECONOMIES

Nowadays, Malians tend to emphasize that the hunters' presence in public life is "traditional" and that *it has always been this way*. That is not true. As I will explain in this section, hunters owe their recent popularity to two global developments. First, the International Monetary Fund's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which forced African governments to reform their budgets substantially. Second, contradictorily as it might sound, the upheaval of Islam.

The SAP policy has increased the IMF's grip on the poor African nation-states and has had catastrophic consequences for the continent. Before the end of the Cold War, most African governments were dictatorial regimes supported by either the Soviet Union or the United States. The end of the Cold War marked a transition to democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, since African states, having lost their sponsors from one side of the Iron

Curtain, were allowed to receive foreign aid and IMF loans only if they introduced “good governance” (democracy, elections, transparency).<sup>52</sup>

The IMF policy aimed to combat the enormous “gaps” in the national budgets of African states, and to make those gaps disappear African states systematically cut their budgets for education and health care. The decrease in the health-care budget resulted in a dramatic rise in prices for biomedical health-care services, and, in effect, an increased demand for “traditional” health-care remedies. Since hunters are specialists in “bush medicine” of old, they benefited both economically and socially from the desperate search for treatment of various health problems.

However, this economic dimension is only one side of the coin. The recent turn to hunters’ “traditional” services and knowledge should not be seen as a step back in time, forced by lack of means.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, it has become attached to images of modernity, and people spend more money than ever before on a wide spectrum of health-care services, including “traditional” practices.

All over sub-Saharan Africa images of “tradition” have been “reimagined” in order to provide people with answers to questions about modern life. Sorcery, for instance – a phenomenon that was considered to have disappeared on the introduction of “modernization” (new technologies, large-scale production, rationalization, monetization) – is nowadays typically in Africa a prerequisite for successful participation in the modern market economy.

Hunters, by definition associated with the bush, the realm of the spirits, and *nyama*-containing wild animals, are therefore considered mediators to successful participation in the world of “modernity” which most people in sub-Saharan Africa do not experience as predictable. “Why success and why not?”, they ask. The modern world is a source of danger, sorrow, and uncertainty. Anthropologists have introduced the concept of “occult economies” to describe this phenomenon in which tradition is by definition analysed as a discourse on modernity.<sup>54</sup>

The second global development that helped to improve the hunters’ image is, contradictory as it might sound, the strong upheaval of Islam in the public sphere in African countries. The upheaval of Islam faces the

52. In discussions on present-day hunters it is often stated that they provide security. This is a concept that might make sense only in urban areas; outside these areas I have never heard of a need for more security nor of any role hunters might play in this.

53. Peter Geschiere’s contributions to this debate have been of great importance. See, for instance, Peter L. Geschiere, “On Witch-Doctors and Spin-Doctors The Role of ‘Experts’ in African and American Politics”, in B. Meyer and P. Pels (eds), *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford, CA, 2003); Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh, “Witchcraft as an Issue in the ‘Politics of Belonging’: Democratization and Urban Migrants’ Involvement with the Home Village”, *African Studies Review*, 41 (1998), pp. 69–91.

54. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony”, *American Ethnologist*, 26 (1999), pp. 279–303.



states with new challenges in their attempts to shape a civil society, which is an IMF criterion for "good governance". Why then, one may ask, does a government in search of a civil society choose alcohol-consuming hunters as a public relations instrument, although more than 90 per cent of its population is Muslim?

Islam's role in the public sphere in West Africa is a topic that had been attracting attention many decades before "9/11". The French colonial administration, at least from the beginning of the twentieth century, closely watched how Muslims in West Africa locally organized themselves and the French actively promoted particular groups and leaders of Islamic brotherhoods.<sup>55</sup> Islamic brotherhoods and Islamic traders' networks have often been considered an alternative to create the civil society necessary for efficient administration. However, introducing Islam into state politics brings with it a Trojan horse into any state that strives for the constitutional separation of "Church and state". The danger in inviting *sharia* is ever present, as the cases of present-day Nigeria, and, to a certain extent, Turkey, demonstrate.

Silences are often very meaningful, as any historian knows. Hence, it is interesting to see the upsurge of the hunter in government-supported representations of national culture, since it always implies an *indirect* denial of Islam. Here is an example. In September 2006, Mali's biggest printing company, Groupe KLEDU, launched the full-colour magazine *Simbo* (*sinbon*, the honorary title for a master-hunter). Its table of contents shows a vision of society, because it contains chapters about society, with articles on the Lions and Rotary Clubs in Mali; then articles about the railway system, the oil economy, tourism (with an article on hunters of course!), culture, and sport; and development and new technology. Perhaps it is a suspicious mind that prompts me to interpret all this as anti-Islamic, but to me the magazine reinforces a classical modernization agenda embellished with culture, a dimension that was added in the 1980s to the development policy of many Western states.

In the 1990s, as part of their attempts to shape a civil society, the Malian government depended on *nyamakalaw*, in particular on griots (*jeliw*), which led to a lot of criticism stemming from the long-felt ambivalence about *nyamakalaw* referred to above. Moreover, a *nyamakala* family is connected to a particular noble "host" family, and that resulted in accusations of nepotism.<sup>56</sup>

Hunters, in contrast to griots, represent the image of an "open" society, because of the formally "democratic" nature of hunters' associations and because hunters' associations are organized outside kinship structures.

55. See, for instance, Robert Launay and Benjamin F. Soares, "The Formation of an 'Islamic Sphere' in French Colonial West Africa", *Economy and Society*, 28 (1999), pp. 497–519; Leonardo L. Villalon, "Islamism in West Africa: Senegal", *African Studies Review*, 47 (2004), pp. 61–71.

56. See the rise and fall of Bakary Soumano in his struggle to become the "chef des griots du Mali", in Roth, *Ma Parole S'Achète*, ch. 7.

Therefore, hunters are a better alternative for a state in quest of a civil society, although in practice hunters follow formats of “tradition” that had been “imagined” previously by griots.

For instance, hunters now feature in public “conciliatory” events that used to feature griots,<sup>57</sup> exemplified by the hunters’ festival that took place in Mali’s capital, Bamako, in January 2001. It was attended by hunters and scholars from Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Niger, Guinea (Conakry), and Mali. Moreover, there were scholars from France and the United States. The event was broadcast on radio and television and the festival’s proceedings were published in a volume distributed by the Malian Ministry of Culture. A government representative argued that these “traditional” hunters had to be supported because of their potential to become an “integrative force” that must shape a future civil society.<sup>58</sup>

#### HUNTERS AS AGENTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PRESENT-DAY MALI

The urban–rural dichotomy observed by Ferme in Sierra Leone is not to be found in Mali. The very popular hunters’ bards (*donsojeliv*) owe most of their prestige to songs they learned when they were young and lived on the land. Hunters, including hunters’ bards, travel back and forth between towns and the country, but as we saw from the examples above of the festival and the full-colour magazine *Simbo*, the image of the “traditional” rural hunter features in the urban media.

But how “traditional” are these hunters? The following case illustrates well the inevitably hybrid identity any Malian has to accept when becoming a hunter; the state needs the hunter and the hunter needs the state. The case is based on a hunters’ performance that I attended in January 2007 in the village of Farabako, in the isolated and thinly

57. Cases of such “conciliatory” events have been described by Hoffman, *Griots at War*, and Jan Jansen, *The Griot’s Craft: An Essay on Oral Tradition and Diplomacy* (Münster, 2000), ch. 3. Illuminating studies on griots and the nation-state are Dorothea E. Schulz, *Perpetuating the Politics of Praise: Jeli Singers, Radios, and Political Mediation in Mali* (Cologne, 2001), and Clemens Zobel, *Das Gewicht der Rede: Kulturelle Reinterpretation, Geschichte und Vermittlung bei den Mande Westafrikas* (Frankfurt, 1997).

58. Mamadi Sow, “Introduction”, in Ministère de la Culture du Mali, *La Chasse Traditionnelle*, pp. 5–10, 7. Another interesting feature is that hunters are nowadays claimed to be the inheritors of a kind of Declaration of Human Rights that was drawn up in the thirteenth century at Kurukanfuga (a “mythical” plain north of Kangaba where the Sunjata [the alleged founder of the Mali Empire] gathered his armies). For the text of this declaration and for a highly interesting discussion on the present-day symbolism attributed to this plain, see the discussion on the H-Africa Discussion Network (<http://www.h-net.org/~africa/>) in May 2007, and in particular the contribution by Etienne Smith. See also Stephen Belcher, “Some Observations on the Textualization of the ‘Charte de Kouroukan Fougan’”, in Stephen Belcher, Jan Jansen, and Mohamed N’Daou (eds), *Mande Mansa: Essays in Honor of David C. Conrad* (Münster [etc.], 2008), pp. 48–54.



Figure 1. Hunters in Farabako, 30 January 2007. Two hunters play the *jinbi*, the “hunter’s lute”. Photograph by Lien Pelckmans. Used with permission.

populated Monts Manding (Mande Mountains), 100 kilometres south-west of Mali’s capital, Bamako.

The government of Mali promotes a health-care policy that advocates the construction of health centres with a radius of activity of 15 kilometres, a goal achieved in the isolated Monts Manding: since 2003 there has been a health centre in both the administrative centre, Sandama, as well as Nioumamakana, two very small towns, each about 15–20 kilometres from Farabako. The village of Farabako lies between Sandama and Nioumamakana, and on 30 January 2007 a maternity clinic was officially opened there on a day of joy for the local people. Although the 15-kilometre radius is reasonable enough for most of Mali, which is a flat country, it is a serious problem for the inhabitants of the Monts Manding. It takes them a long time to cross the 15 kilometres through a mountainous area with neither roads nor bridges, and the price of fuel for transport by motorcycle might easily be double the price of the medical consultation or the Western medicine a doctor will prescribe. Many economic activities there have not yet been monetized, so since money is rather scarce in the area most people live with a complex system of debts. Hence, a health centre in Farabako was an important improvement for its 400 inhabitants and for the people of some of the neighbouring villages, each of fewer than 1,000 inhabitants.

However, the opening of the centre unfortunately had to be a political statement in a complex political process. Farabako and the neighbouring village of Tamalen are involved in a long-standing dispute over a piece of land between the two villages. The land was once cultivated by Farabako, but abandoned in the 1970s; it has recently been put under cultivation by Tamalen. In the meantime, however, times have changed. Village populations have grown and the state nowadays pursues an active policy to set up a land register (*allotissement* in French); so what was once land temporarily withdrawn from the commons, cultivated on the basis of “custom” and mutual consent, has now become a commodity that can be sold. Hence, Farabako is reclaiming the land it abandoned long ago.<sup>59</sup>

The land issue has seriously damaged relations between the two villages. The people of Farabako withdrew their children from the Tamalen school, 3 kilometres from Farabako, and now send them to the primary school in Danbele Makandjana – a walk now of 4 kilometres. Even worse is that the villages chose different administrative centres when the state implemented its policy of decentralization in the mid-1990s.<sup>60</sup> Farabako joined Nioumamakana, Tamalen opted for Sandama.

The maternity clinic was more or less coincidentally constructed in Farabako, with money donated by Dutch sponsors. From the start, it was clear both to sponsors and locals that a maternity clinic in Farabako could – and should – have a regional function.

How was a peaceful setting to be organized for use of the maternity clinic by the whole region? That was a question that always worried me. I had expected that each neighbouring village would have been asked, by the village chief of Farabako, to send a delegation representing the village chief, but when I attended the opening festivities at the end of January I found that the Farabako people had solved the problem by inviting hunters from each village!

The opening festivities for the maternity clinic resembled to a large extent a hunters’ association’s meeting, starting the day before the official opening with a parade of hunters from all over the region. Many of them displayed a membership badge of the Malian National Hunters’ Association, attached to their costumes alongside their many “power objects” (*basiw* [“amulets”]). The next day, 30 January 2007, an official opening took place in which a hunter from each and every village

59. I should emphasize here that I am giving my perspective on this land conflict, which is a very sensitive “public secret”. My friends in Farabako might totally and angrily disagree with me.

60. This “sublimation” of local tension was often opted for in this region when its inhabitants had to organize themselves into “communes” in order to meet the demands of Mali’s programme for political decentralization; see Clemens Zobel, “Confronting Otherness: Politics, Identity and History in the Village Communities of the Manding Mountains of Mali” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis), University of Vienna and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2000.

solemnly declared that the clinic was for every woman who needed health assistance. Such public repetition was utterly necessary to ensure that people would tell the right story back home; that is what creates "social memory".<sup>61</sup>

These opening festivities represented the format of a classical "traditional" meeting, and appeared rather innocent and folkloric to those not involved in the local politics. On closer inspection, however, in sub-Saharan Africa the apparently traditional format is nowadays the appropriate method to deal with the tensions produced by rapid changes and the increased influence of the state (*allottissement* issues), the presence of Western-based health care, and the presence of money. All such changes fit the local idea of modern life, so, while they are greatly appreciated, the danger that these changes bring with them, dangers often expressed in terms of sorcery and local rivalry, is faced by attributing new roles to established players.

#### FROM GUILD TO ROTARY CLUB?

The case of the maternity clinic in Farabako demonstrates how hunters offer a template to deal with supra-local affairs; transferring a local issue to them is a way of transcending it, and probably solving it. Hunters can clearly deal with "modern" issues such as landownership and access to public health services, and in doing so they demonstrate a diplomatic function that goes far beyond the management of wildlife and the bush. Hunters can mobilize the tradition needed to cope with the future.

I compare present-day hunters' guilds, then, to a Rotary Club, or a Lions Club, in the sense that groups of that kind are characterized by male membership, certainly have a socializing dimension, are dedicated to good citizenship, and attach great value to the idea of a well-organized civil society. Members of hunters' associations are people not only from rural areas, but from cities too, who have strong, frequently family-derived, ties with rural areas and who claim that "tradition" is necessary to cope with the new complications of "modern" life.

In the kinship system of the Mande peoples, hunters have been imagined as being drawn from the never-ending cohorts of younger brothers, individuals with a clear local identity but without immediate hope of having a position with any formal, which is to say inherited, authority. That made younger brothers, hunters, the ideal people to become involved with matters unrelated to kinship, what one might call "external activities" or "collective action". The problematic structural position of the younger brother in the family does not diminish, so the format of "hunters" keeps being used, reconfigured in relation to modern issues, to deal with the *nyama*-laden "big world out there".

61. For an elaborate description of this mechanism, see Jansen, *Griot's Craft*, ch. 1.

In the circumstances of modern life, the diplomatic function of hunters is more relevant than ever. Hunting game is no longer the point and forestry protection is in the hands of civil servants and NGOs.<sup>62</sup> Today's standards are best covered by a variation of the proverb at the beginning of this article: "Why should a good hunter be the owner of a gun?". Even a crippled or cross-eyed person might be an excellent "hunter" these days, given the emphasis on diplomatic skills, dedication to public interest, and presentation of "authentic tradition".

The days of game hunting are long gone. The modern hunter has a membership card issued by the government, an artefact dating from the colonial era when French bureaucracy wished to regulate hunting; permits were issued to combat poaching. At that time, regulations were enforced in a context where the hunters were *subjects* in a system of centralized rule.

However, times have changed. Governments are actively pursuing a policy intended to produce a civil society by stimulating local initiatives of organization, and to achieve that, hunters are among the groups selected to be exemplary *citizens*, not *subjects* now; they represent "tradition" in order to realize modernity. However, hunters are *at the same time* active agents in the production of an "occult economy".

It is no coincidence that many hunters in Mali, both in towns and in the country, have proudly attached their membership badges, sporting the Malian flag, to the amulets on their "traditional" costumes. Of course, as with almost any form of citizenship nowadays, the hunters' citizenship is "flexible"; it is to a large extent a matter of calculation,<sup>63</sup> and a means to keep government influence at bay in local areas.

However, both state and hunters adhere to and reproduce the image of a secular society, promoted by the IMF and Western sponsors, which makes the hunters' guilds resemble a movement for responsible citizenship. As "traditional hunters" they help West Africans deal with the hardships of daily life, hardships caused in part by the severe Structural Adjustment Programmes. Hunters are "reimagined" as the backbone in a society of citizens, and hunters and state share allegiance to an agenda that has been interpreted in this article as a voice raised against the increasing influence of Islam in Africa's public domain. I wonder, however, if the hunters themselves are aware of this recent upheaval in their own lives, or are aware of being used as instruments in one of the major ideological clashes in present-day sub-Saharan Africa.

62. Nevertheless, hunting game still has a huge appeal to men. In 1997 I saw "grands commerçants" and civil servants from Bamako dressed as hunters (since they were official members of a hunters' association) touring through the bush in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, collectively chasing ... a partridge!

63. See Aihwa Ong, "Flexible Citizenship among Chinese Cosmopolitans", in Joan Vincent (ed.), *The Anthropology of Politics: A Reader in Ethnography, Theory, and Critique* (Malden, MA [etc.], 2002), pp. 338–355, 339.