Chapter Eighteen

Women's Organizations, the Ideology of Kinship, and the State in Postindependence Mali

Rosa De Jorio

Until very recently, women were absent from scholarly accounts of Malian politics. Only in the past few years and with the work of Ba Konaré (1991, 1993) and Turrittin (1993), have women's contributions to local and national politics begun to be taken into account. In general, however, these authors present a limited vision of women's national associations as essentially subordinated to the single-party state—the political system that dominated Mali from its independence in 1960 to the coup d'état of 1991, which finally led to the progressive democratization of state institutions.[1] Missing from these studies are analyses of both the symbolic order underlying women's associations and the power relationships between women. The complexity of women's associations is reduced to the level of gender analyses, without much consideration for other relevant social distinctions, such as class, or the distinctions between the semiendogamous professional groups (Meillassoux 1970; McNaughton 1988; Conrad and Frank 1995). In contrast, the inclusion of issues such as class and local social distinctions ultimately leads me to suggest a more complex relation between women and the state, a relation not only of subordination, but also of gender specialization in partially independent political domains (cf. Okonjo 1976). Central to my analysis is a discussion of how both Malian women themselves as well as state officials are employing ideas and metaphors of kinship to reformulate women's relationship to the state.

In this chapter, I contribute to current debates on women's political activism by highlighting the pervasiveness of patron–client relations across Malian society (Amselle 1978, 1985, 1992) and, in particular, its structuring force within Malian women's official organizations (De Jorio 1997). In fact, during my fieldwork, it soon became quite clear how some women, far from being voiceless witnesses of male-dominated historical processes, had progressively suc-

ceeded in carving out distinctive spaces in the political arena.[2] A consideration of women elites brings me to problematize the unifying and victimizing portrait of local women we find in most of the available literature for this area. This does not mean that gender becomes an irrelevant category for the analysis of the leadership of women's associations. Indeed, in Mali, women leaders built upon women's specific competencies and women's distinctive political contributions to push forward and legitimize their ascent to power.

My perspective leads me to problematize a vision according to which the study of women elites is not pertinent to gender studies. Scholars such as Moore justified this exclusion by arguing that elites' privileges would not have any impact on the status of women in general: "In any event it [elite privilege] only effectively empowers elite individuals and groups within the community rather than working to improve women's overall political representation and decision-making power" (Moore 1988: 154).

In an approach similar to that of authors such as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) and Ortner (1996), I intend to bring some complexity to the study of gender relations. I show how the organization of women's groups as well as women's political practices cannot be understood without taking into account power relations between women in addition to gender dynamics.

In this chapter, I first question the image of women's past subordination to the state prior to 1991 and present a more diversified account of women's relations to the state. Second, I focus on the ways in which the relationship between women's national associations and the state was imagined in the general public discourse. In this respect, I show how kinship categories played a crucial mediating role in the formation of new forms of citizenship and national identity. More to the point, kinship categories mediated the specific contribution of women's organizations to the national enterprise. This leads me to suggest that Malian nationalism, far from constituting an egalitarian message, found in kinship a seemingly egalitarian idiom through which to enforce gender and status differences. Third, I examine the organization of women's groups and the structuring role of patron–client relations within women's associations. This system of patronage reflects and contributes to the development of a dynastic model within the Malian national rhetoric—again linking the domains of politics and kinship at the level of practices.

From One to Many: Changes in Women's Organizations, from Single-Party State to Democracy

Malian historian Ba Konaré (who is also the wife of the president of Mali, Alpha Oumar Konaré) has analyzed the relationship between the state and women's national organizations prior to the coup d'état of 1991. Her work stresses women's subordination to the one-party system and women's reduction to the role of puppets in the hands of male politicians (1991, 1993).

Ba Konaré's work represents a sort of founding charter of contemporary women's organizations and has indeed inspired recent institutional changes. According to her account, women's national associations were subordinated to the one-party structure prior to 1991, but the progressive democratization of Malian state institutions, which began with the coup d'état of 1991, has basically freed women from such relations of subordination.

In contrast to Ba Konaré, I suggest that while women's relations of subordination to the state did not end with the coming of Malian democracy, subordination is not the only way to describe the relationship between women and the state. Indeed, women have been progressively able to carve out independent political spaces in the postcolonial nation after independence in 1960.[3] To appreciate the complexity of women's participation in the national enterprise, we have to go beyond institutional political changes and look at women's political and symbolic practices in the long term. Let me start with some background information on the history of women's groups in postcolonial times.

From 1960 to 1991, the Republic of Mali was governed by a one-party system—the Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (US-RDA) from 1960 to 1968, and the Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM) from 1979 to 1991 (Imperato 1989).[4] Two women's national organizations corresponded to these parties, the Commission Sociale des Femmes (CSF, 1962–1967) and the Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali (UNFM, 1974–1991). These organizations represented the only accepted medium for women's political expression for three decades. The CSF was the women's branch of the US-RDA. Its general secretary was automatically a member of the national political bureau of the US-RDA. She was understood to be the go-between between women and the party; in other words, she was to inform party leaders of women's activities and transmit the party's orders to female militants. This situation did not substantially change during the years of the UNFM. Though this association was initially created in 1974 as an independent force, it was integrated into the UDPM party structure following that party's creation in 1979. From then on, the UNFM president was automatically appointed to the board of the UDPM—the Bureau Exécutif Central (BEN)—where she played a function similar to that of the general secretary of the CSF (Ba Konaré 1993: 73).

According to Ba Konaré, during the first thirty years of the single-party state, women's participation was limited to specific political events such as elections, visits of political delegations, and participation in national holidays. In her view, women, mobilized by their leaders, worked mostly as supporters and facilitators of political events, certainly not as their main actors. As Ba Konaré detailed, there is little doubt that women participated as cooks, hosts, and entertainers for official political events. However, Ba Konaré did not fully examine the meanings and implications of women's discursive practices in the political arena. In the course of their supposedly "subordinating" activities,

women developed competencies and strategies of political action that they could claim as their own, thus symbolically mobilizing a "traditional" competence and authority (that is, based on culturally specific gender distinctions) to exert active and novel political influence in the emerging Malian nation-state. To this day, Malian women do not question traditional gender roles within the family, yet they do claim, based on these traditional values, a greater level of women's participation in state institutions.

A connection between women and the domestic sphere was indeed clearly articulated by women leaders. Since the establishment of the CSF, the household was perceived by male and female political leaders alike as women's specific field of political intervention (Anonymous 1965a, 1965b, 1965c; A. Touré 1965; UNFM 1974). This perception was reflected at the public level where women in practice came to play a "maternal" role. In other words, women's initial political contribution consisted of the extension of their role within the household to the national level. For instance, in one 1982 interview, the then UNFM president described women's contributions to the Biennale Artistique, a landmark of the cultural policy of the first two Malian Republics (Y. Touré 1996), mostly in terms of the service that women offered to the Malian youth who had come as delegates to Bamako from all parts of Mali. Women's participation consisted of "the reception of [youth] delegates, their accommodation, and their nourishment" (Anonymous 1982: 5).

Nonetheless, while women were playing this conservative role, they extended their national organizations throughout the whole of Malian territory and came to play a progressively greater role in local decision-making. Indeed, oftentimes scholars forget that although women were scarcely represented in the institutions of the state, they were indeed well represented in the party structure. Since the time of the CSF, and even more so during the earlier UNFM time, women's branches were formed in every neighborhood and village in Mali. Women leaders sat on all local party boards, and their weight in decision-making grew significantly with time.

While we thus have to recognize that gender-based discourses opened up real opportunities for women's political intervention, I do not agree with the vision of Ba Konaré that women's subordination to the rule of the party is a past affair. The process of democratization of Mali, which began with the coup d'état of 1991 that overthrew Moussa Traoré's dictatorship, did not change the dominant one-party logic of Malian politics. The Malian case shows the difficulties of overcoming thirty years of one-party rule and of developing a culture of opposition.

On the one hand, there has been a progressive segmentation of the women's movement—which reflects segmentary trends running across the whole of Malian society. Since 1991, Malian women have formed more than a thousand groups, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) specializing in women's development and women's associations. The aspirations and strategies of these organizations are so different as to make any coordinating attempt

a rather fruitless endeavor. There is a profound gap between the aspirations and political goals of Western-style women's associations and the more traditional, often religiously inspired women's associations. For instance, these organizations differ radically on the issue of female circumcision—the elimination of which is energetically pursued by one of the largest women's organizations, L'Association pour le Progrès et la Défense des Droits des Femmes Maliennes (APDF, with 25,000 members), while being resisted by the Moslem national association.[5]

On the other hand (and partly in reaction to the segmentation of women's forces), the current democratic government is becoming increasingly more involved in the coordination of women's associations, claiming a need for a more cohesive development program for women. This has resulted in a number of institutional changes such as the formation of a ministry for women (Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme, de l'Enfant et de la Famille, MPFEF)[6] and the institutionalization of the links between this ministry and a presumably grassroots umbrella organization, the Coordination des Associations et Organisations Non-gouvernementales Féminines (CAFO), which is composed of eighty-five different women's groups.[7] However, such institutional changes are clearly favoring certain women's groups—those closer to the majority party—over others. The CAFO was initially created by women themselves to coordinate their activities and thus make their voices more widely heard at the national level. In 1994, some women leaders decided to transform the CAFO into a structure of coordination between the women's associations and the state.[8] Yet it was clear that the CAFO was not representing all women's groups across the Malian territory, but only a fraction. Thus, early on, the CAFO and its representatives developed a privileged link with state institutions, whose ideology and strategies the CAFO came to embody.

Criticisms of the current government's program and strategies quickly developed. During my last visit to Mali in the summer of 1999, several women inside and outside the CAFO lamented how this umbrella organization has increasingly become the voice of the majority party rule and a means to control women's activities. Women do feel that some important political goals have been partially achieved, such as a greater freedom of association and a greater representation of women in national politics; however, they feel that these goals are yet not satisfactorily realized and that certain democratic gains are in jeopardy. Women's associations as well as other sectors of Malian civil society are currently struggling to maintain a voice independent of the dominant party logic.

Imagining Women's Contribution to Nation Building

It is important to analyze the ways in which the relationship between the women and the Malian state was imagined in the public sphere and, in par-

ticular, how it was viewed by the women themselves.[9] This analysis will also lead us to problematize certain discussions of nationalism (Anderson 1991). Indeed, the Malian case suggests that nationalism may not be a homogeneous and coherent public discourse, but a complex and often contradictory one. The Malian national community, even at the level of discourse, is far from being represented and articulated in terms of a close community tied together by linkages of comradeship and solidarity (Anderson 1991). Malian nationalism is full of conceptual references that highlight the differential contributions that women and men make to the national enterprise, but is also full of references to the complex Malian system of social stratification.[10] Let us now turn to the analysis of such gendered national discourse by reconstructing the role of kinship tropes in politics.

During the struggle for independence from French colonialism and then during Mali's first postcolonial government, US-RDA political leaders dedicated only limited attention to the "woman question." The subject of political concern were the masses, the Malian people, without apparent recognition of social distinctions. Paradoxically, given this focus on homogeneous masses, women were attributed a limited role in the enterprise of nation building in the rare instances in which gender issues were directly addressed. At the approach of independence, Modibo Keita, who was to be Mali's first president from 1960 to 1968, commented:

> Women must be concerned with the defense of women's specific interests, with the protection of women and children, with the modernization of family life through the exploitation of local resources. Women must be convinced of the relevance of their role in the achievement of an African personality, of the creation and development of a national consciousness. (Anonymous 1959)

For Keita, women's contribution to the emerging independent nation was conceived primarily in terms of their role as mothers and wives.[11] They were to "modernize" consumer practices (to make better use of local resources) and family care as well as to ensure the transmission of African values and nationalistic sentiments to the new generations. Women's contribution to nation building was confined to the domestic sphere, to prepare the new (male) generations for a responsible and engaged participation in politics. Keita's opinion was certainly not unique, and we can find examples of this very same attitude in the speeches of several female and male politicians of this period (see Gologo 1960; Doumbia 1966; Camara, pers. comm. 1994).

And yet, almost ironically, women played an important role as cementing forces in nation building.[12] To develop an awareness of national unity, Malian politicians engaged in what I call the feminization of public politics. Even more paradoxically, this process was paralleled by the initial exclusion of women from public politics. Women's images—in particular, kinship terms indicating links through the mother's side—became the language through

which new political (nationalistic) concepts were conveyed. It is in this frame that we have to understand one of the most advertised national values since independence: the reference to national solidarity. Local politicians translated the word *solidarity* (used mostly in French, the national language) into Bamana (the most widely used local language) as *sinjya* or *badenya*,[13] terms that express the relationship between siblings of the same mother, a relationship characterized by feelings of affection and mutual care.[14]

The concept of *sinjya* (see Bagayogo 1987) stresses the "physical" bond created between children who "have been fed by the same breast" (Bérehima Wulalé, pers. comm. 1994). This concept allows me to bring to the fore the specificity of the Malian notion of motherhood in a predominantly patrilocal and patrilineal society (to be juxtaposed to popular notions of motherhood in the West; see, for instance, Stone 1997). The mother in the Mande language (the largest family of languages in Mali) and cultural universe is not necessarily the biological mother; she is the woman who has actually raised the child. There are a number of occasions in which a mother may give one of her children in fosterage to a co-wife or sister. For instance, this may be done in the event of the other woman's sterility or in an attempt to overcome the jealousy between different co-wives and the competition between children of different mothers. Thus, in my host family in Ségou (Mali's second largest city), two of the co-wives had raised each other's sons in the hope of developing a better mutual understanding. Likewise, on certain social occasions, women other than the biological mother may take on certain attributes of motherhood in relation to a child. Today, when a girl is to be married, it is often the mother's co-wife or a mother's sister who acts as the "main mother" (*denba*) in front of the community. In this context, being a mother is not necessarily an individualizing experience, but rather a transferable property, as is indicated by the term *sinjya*. Motherhood is seen not so much as founded on an individual biological relationship, but as based on a reproductive capacity that unites all women and that finds its full realization in the praxis of motherhood. Indeed, children's education is one of the major attributes of motherhood in national public discourse. Thus motherhood is a process more than a status; it is based on the development of common experiences between the mother and the child. From this comes the idea that women's contribution to their children is not automatic at birth, but rather is a gradually transmitted influence. More precisely, women's contribution is seen as directly dependent on their behavior within the household; the household, in turn, is viewed as the locus for the transmission of traditional knowledge and traditional values from a mother to her children.

In Bamana, the trade language of Mali, there are two proverbs that capture the differential contributions that fathers and mothers make to the development of their children. According to the proverb *Ba ye barika ye* (lit. the mother is the success), it is the woman who, through her behavior, and in particular, her capacity to passively withstand her often bitter fate as a spouse, se-

cures her children's success in life (*barika* or *fanga*). According to the other proverb, *Fa ye togo ye* (the father is the name), it is the father who automatically transfers at birth a name to his child. Through his father, a child receives a position within a chain of birth events and comes to partake of the reputation of his patrilineage (Karim Traoré, pers. comm. 1999).[15] The father's contribution to molding his child's identity seems to be less subject to verifications and trials than is the mother's.

This idea of the maternal contribution is directly linked to another crucial aspect of the Mande conception of human nature (in Bamana, *maaya*). I refer to the idea of honor (*danbe*) whose retention is based on the ability of individuals to adapt their behavior to expected social norms. *Danbe* is something that one inherits from the past and must be preserved if not further accrued in the present. As the female Malian sociologist Maiga observed, *danbe* is a very conservative force that encourages women to comply with society's expectations and continue to fulfill a traditional role within the family (pers. comm. 1999). This *danbe* is not the same for everybody, as different categories of people in the complex hierarchy of the Mande social universe follow different rules of conduct.[16]

There are three important points to emphasize about this conception of womanhood. First, *danbe*, far from being a leveling concept, ratifies differences among women. For instance, women from different social strata are expected to follow different norms of conduct. The idea of *danbe* is attached to a specific worldview, one that emphasizes the reproduction of precise distinctions between women and men, and between nobles and those of perceived lower social status such as the *nyamankalaw* (a semiendogamous group of professional workers such as smiths, leatherworkers, and praise singers). As Bird and Kendall (1980) have remarked, *nyamankalaw* women and, in particular, women bards or praise singers (*griottes* in French; *jelimusow* in Bamana) can afford to subvert the strict code of honor followed by women of noble status or noble aspirations (*horonw* in Bamana). Both *jelimusow* and women whose ancestry can be traced to former-slave origins can be much more expressive, direct, and ironic than noblewomen can afford to be. Noblewomen are expected to exhibit a much more discreet and austere conduct. For instance, "To speak loudly in public was a sacrilege for a woman from a good family" (Keita 1975: 298).

The idea of honor, or *danbe*, rests on a historical and, I would say, stratigraphic conception of personhood. Indeed, according to a leading *jeli*, Bakary Soumano, *danbe* can be best translated as "prestige of genealogy [origin]" (*le prestige de la souche*, pers. comm. 1999). Family members are seen as drawing their success from their ancestors' exceptional conduct. Indeed, according to Bakary Soumano, a person's *danbe* is measured with respect to the *danbe* of his ancestors. Moreover, the *danbe* can generate a symbolic struggle between descendants and their ancestors in that the descendant must aim to equal the ancestor's prestige. For instance, members of my host family in Ségou still

capitalize on the sacrifice of one of their ancestors, Fassighi, who gave his life for the victory of the army of the Islamic warrior El Hadj Omar Tall (1794–1864). Thanks to Fassighi's selfless act, his descendants are men who have distinguished themselves in the arts of trade (for example, the transport company La Bonne Etoile) and politics. Likewise, the rupture of deep-rooted social norms is seen as being capable of bringing misfortune onto the following generations and must be eliminated whenever possible. Thus, one of the daughters of Modibo Keita supposedly committed suicide because of her liaison with a *jeli* (bard), which had resulted in an undesired pregnancy. Her behavior subverted expected social norms—that nobles should neither have intercourse with nor marry people of lower social status—and was to some extent redeemed by her suicide (it is significant that the mother of the woman who committed suicide was blamed for her dead daughter's unconventional behavior).

This leads me to my second point: this conception of motherhood has important implications at the level of popular explanations for social problems. In Mali, as elsewhere, women are often the scapegoats for larger social problems, as seen, for instance, in the media's representation of Mariam Traoré as the main culprit for her husband's political flaws. In the rhetorical struggle against corruption that periodically resurfaced during the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré, there were a number of newspaper articles inflating women's responsibility in the process. Women were scolded for their "lack of civic maturity" and their "useless sumptuary expenses" on the occasions of family events, acts that, according to the articles, led their men willy-nilly on the path to corruption. It may not be a surprise that the writer of those articles was a female journalist who traditionally dealt with women's issues for *L'Essor*, the oldest, and for a long time the only, Malian national newspaper.

My third point is that Malian women and their leaders did not question their association with the domestic sphere. On the contrary, they made it their main reason for participating in national politics—who else could take care of their specific interests and concerns if not women themselves? In an article published several years ago, Okonjo (1976) rightly defined this pattern of political action as an example of the dual political systems that have characterized many African societies since precolonial times. This indeed had been a recurring characteristic of the Malian women's movement since the struggle for independence. Since the US-RDA days, women militants have emphasized the transformative role of women at the household level—even though this political strategy that did not allow for radical changes in terms of the gender division of labor within the household. As I mentioned earlier, women's contribution to household changes was seen as their major contribution to nation building. Women were asked to improve their family members' health; to substantially change consumer practices, thus privileging nationally produced goods over imported goods; and to inculcate an appreciation for Malian cultural traditions and a love for their country in their children. Similarly to the

CSF, UNFM leaders adopted like goals. Most of the UNFM initiatives consisted of small and narrowly conceived development projects mostly aimed at reducing women's daily work. UNFM leaders never questioned the gender distribution of work within the household.

Instead of challenging their association with the domestic sphere, women challenged the distinction between the public and the private by making political use of the private and, thus, internally subverting the excluding power of the dichotomy between public and private.[17] In other words, women responded to their initial exclusion from postcolonial politics by politicizing the domestic sphere. UNFM women campaigned even more aggressively than CSF leaders for their rights to be represented in greater numbers in state institutions and they based their requests on the specificity of their contribution to the national enterprise. Women were directly involved in questions that were considered relevant to their specific competence, such as issues pertaining to the family, women's activities, and children's health.[18] In recent times they have been able to move somewhat outside these boundaries and enter—if still as minorities—more traditionally male-dominated political fields.

Patronage, Gender, and Power

I suggest that patron–client relations constituted an important structuring force within women's associations.[19] In other words, I argue that some women built on their dynastic capital (real or fictitious) to establish relations of patronage with other women. On the basis of their women followers' political support, leaders claimed a right to enter the political arena. My discussion starts with an analysis of the strategies by which the newly emerging female elites—who belong to what Amselle (1987) has called the bureaucratic classes—legitimized their power position in the public sphere (Amselle and Grégoire 1987).

It is well known that the Malian bureaucratic classes engaged in "the reproduction of the aristocratic model of state domination" (Bagayogo 1987: 106). However, this process has not yet been accounted for from the perspective of the actors involved in it—the authors quoted above have indeed privileged a third-person perspective—nor from within a frame of systematic discussion of the relationships between politics and kinship in Mali. Moreover, very few scholars have analyzed the patronage system from the women's perspective, with the exception of the work of Lambert de Frondeville (1987) on women traders. In addition, the women I talk about are not simply negotiating with male authority but are in a position to form relations of patronage with other women.

The appeal to the dynastic model was the most effective strategy of power legitimization for the new Malian elites after independence. On the one hand, the new female elites allied with representatives from local noble fam-

ilies by involving the noble women in the organization of their groups, thus benefiting from their prestige and social support. This was a tactic systematically pursued by US-RDA leaders since the emergence of the first women's groups in the mid-1950s during the struggle for independence. For instance, Aoua Keita (1975: 300–301), presumably from a noble family but most importantly a representative of the new literate elites, made sure that the presidency of the women's association of Nara in the Koulikoro region was given to Yâ Diallo—a woman from a well-respected local family.[20] Keita took for herself the position of general secretary, which involved literacy skills and competence in the handling of bureaucratic procedures. The process of leadership construction did not just reproduce traditional power positions, but also entailed a more creative dimension. While seeking the support and involvement of traditional leaders, party representatives such as Keita were contributing to the remaking of traditional leadership roles, as Yâ Diallo's recruitment within women's political groups shows.[21] The authority, though, was often in the hands of the general secretaries who had the necessary knowledge of the bureaucratic system to actually run the group and represent it in appropriate institutional contexts.

On the other hand, the new elites[22] often claimed prestigious ancestry and adopted aristocratic practices on the basis of which they justified their claims to political leadership. Indeed, they relied on the generous use of their resources and the dedicated services of *griottes* and women of humble origin (such as women who could trace their ancestry back to former slave families).[23] In particular, the *griottes*, as the master of words and authoritative reinterpreters of local histories, were quintessential in helping leaders refashion their family backgrounds. In other words, the formation of women's associations—which essentially consisted of local female branches of the ruling party—was a quintessential step for those literate women in search of upward social mobility. It provided women's leaders with the possibility of extending their patronage relationships well beyond the habitual sphere of the nobility.

Women's associations came to constitute microcosms reflecting the complexity of the local social structure, but they also allowed for new syncretic fusion between old and new elites through the strategies described above. This was possible because there was no strictly unified system of social distinctions in Mali: "It is difficult to make clear distinctions among the social classes. Indeed, people still belong to various milieus, old and new, which interpenetrate" (Meillassoux 1968: 40). It has rightly been suggested that in Mali, classes per se (as conceived in sociologies of Western societies) are in an embryonic phase, since the Malian elites did not reinvest their capital in product-generating activities (Bagayogo 1987, 1989). Modern leaders, following traditional noble practices, made systematic use of *griottes* in their organizations, and not only as praise singers for ritual events (which is not to diminish the importance of their praises in the process of leadership construction). Certain positions in the exclusive directive boards (*bureaux*) of women's associations

were typically occupied by *griottes*, such as the positions of *commissaire aux conflits* and *commissaire à l'information*. In other words, *griottes* (but also apparently *wolomusow*, women of slave origins) took up the tasks such as disseminating information and appeasing conflicts among group members, which represented an extension of the roles that these categories of people played in Mande societies (Wulalé, pers. comm. 1994). Leaders' success was based on their ability to rethink and negotiate between partly competing social distinctions (e.g., nobility vs. class). Through social practices and processes such as these, women's associations de facto became very effective pressure groups in the hands of their leaders.

From the previous discussion of the pervasiveness of patron–client relationships throughout Malian society, it follows that membership in women's associations is based primarily on personal connections rather than explicit ideological similarities (see also Bagayogo 1987). For instance, many women's political groups are known not so much under their official name, but as "the women of such-and-such leader." This practice also reflects people's awareness of the differential role women play within their organizations. Another consequence of this focus on an individualized approach to politics is the continuity of the country's political leadership despite coups and governmental changes. An extreme case in this direction was represented by a Ségouvian female leader who has been the president of the women's association of her neighborhood since 1962. Likewise, very few UNFM leaders withdrew from the political arena after the coup d'état of 1991—many have by now entered the ADEMA, the majority party, or the parties of the governmental coalition.[24] Several among them have become deputies or local political representatives. In my last visit to Ségou in July 1999, I was informed that of the two former UNFM presidents of women's political associations who had initially withdrawn from politics in 1991, one had recently become a political deputy to the ADEMA.[25]

Personal considerations also constitute the main reason women join a women's group. Rather than following ideological convictions, women members have a myriad of social and economic motives. Given the low literacy rate among Malian women (approximately 20 percent), women leaders are able to secure access to the benefits of the development bureaucracy (NGO projects, bank accounts, employment opportunities, new technologies, and so on). Indeed, women leaders put their professional knowledge and their entrepreneurial capacity at the service of their female constituents. For instance, one neighborhood leader, Ina, who was also a retired nurse, had transformed her house into a clinic for pregnant women. Moreover, female leaders often organize small-scale development projects for the production and commercialization of items such as soap, spices, and so on. Finally, they often serve as mediators and resources in times of family crisis. As one prominent Ségouvian woman leader said to me, speaking of the recipients of leaders' help: "This really makes a moral debt that the women have incurred

vis-à-vis you. . . . So that when you take a side, all the other women follow you. . . . They know that if they do not follow, you can break that link."

The relationship between leaders and group members has an economic component, particularly in times of draconian state budget cuts and devaluation of the local currency by international monetary institutions and donors. During a family's food or money shortages and/or during a period of tension within the household, female political leaders are frequently asked to intervene, which they often do. This obviously creates some obligations on the part of those who benefit from the leaders' help.

Another characteristic of such a personalistic conception of power in Mali is its extreme centralization. Decision-making is firmly in the hands of the leader–patron, who shares her programs and their rationales with a handful of selected board members. Group members typically follow their leaders' objectives (political, development-oriented) and often compete with each other in the attempt to gain their leader's attention and recognition.

A similar hierarchy is also present among local leaders. For instance, several former UNFM neighborhood leaders in Ségou claimed limited knowledge of the internal affairs of the organization. They were not involved in the decision-making process, but rather at the level at which such decisions are executed. For instance, the aforementioned leader Ina described her participation in local politics simply in terms of readiness to mobilize her own and her followers' efforts in response to the requests of more powerful women. Even today, meetings among former UNFM leaders are kept very secret, and attendance by current ordinary members and other observers is discouraged—as I experienced on more than one occasion.

The fuzziness of the boundaries between the personal and public and between kinship and politics also finds expression at the level of activities in which women engage within their associations.[26] Indeed, as I mentioned early on, the activities of women's groups never consisted solely in participating in meetings or national festivities and welcoming official delegations. Besides small-scale development activities, women invest time and energy in the celebration and partial sponsorship of each other's family events such as marriages, naming ceremonies, and the like. These constitute important moments for the renewal of social bonds among the members of existing groups but also are occasions for the formation of totally new political enterprises. The president of a Ségouvian branch of the APDF stated that she recruited most of her group members on occasions of such ritual events. Participation in other women's family lives, during ritual events and life crises, represents one of the most effective strategies for political persuasion and one of the reasons for leaders' public success. This political strategy has been actively pursued since the time of Modibo, Keita and according to some women leaders, this was the very reason for the US-RDA's political success over the competing party, the PSP, in the 1950s. In fact, during my fieldwork in Ségou, this was the political strategy systematically used by one of the most appreciated local

leaders—a woman who rose to success during the heyday of the UNFM and is today one of the ADEMA deputies at the National Assembly.

To sum up, modern political leaders rely upon a dynastic model—based upon a claim to aristocratic prerogatives—to legitimize their political power and recruit political followers (via the establishment of patron–client relations). This model finds expression at the level of practices in the establishment of patron–client relations between the woman leader and her female constituency. Leaders contribute part of their intellectual and financial capital to help their constituency, while in return, their followers both directly and indirectly help the leaders to achieve noteworthy political and economic power—indeed, most leaders have a standard of living well beyond what their salaries would allow. Thus, rather than simply being sites of mutual help, women's groups are aggregates of people who concentrate around the figure of the leader in contexts where women of different social status exchange different goods and services.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Malian women's discursive practices from at least three different angles. First, I have challenged the image of women's subordination to state institutions before the coup of 1991. I have suggested that Malian women did not reject what they perceived as the prerogatives of womanhood. On the contrary, they built on their gender identity to claim their own space within Malian politics (such as women's organizations, women's branches of political parties, and a governmental ministry for women). In recent times they have built bridges to justify their presence outside their perceived fields of competence and have begun to assume typically male-dominated political positions, though without radically challenging what are locally perceived as typical gender roles (including women's domestic tasks).[27]

Second, I have looked at cultural images of Malian women and in particular at the ways in which women were imagined in the process of national construction. I examined the ways in which kinship relations have been reinterpreted and used to mediate new political situations. Overall, I have argued that kinship is erroneously read as a unifying and leveling idiom, since it reproduces a symbolic order of gender and social distinctions as inscribed in the Malian worldview. Within this framework, I have discussed the feminization of Malian politics and the trope of motherhood as a cementing force in nation building. However, I have also remarked that although women share certain experiences, their *danbe* reminds them of their substantive differences.[28] The *danbe* is a mechanism, or, better, a motivating force, that divides rather than unites women along status lines. The rules underlining the notion of *danbe* are not the same for all women, since women are expected to follow the norms of conduct proper to their position in the social hierarchy

(that is, according to people's genealogy), a position that is based on a seemingly ancient, yet profoundly modified, logic of status differences.

Third, I have analyzed patron–client relations as an important structuring force within women's associations. Patron–client relations are the outcome of the adoption by the modern elites of a dynastic model, a model that legitimizes their current claims to power. I have also observed that, in spite of the existing power structures among members of women's associations, there are certain forms of solidarity between women—although they follow an aristocratic code of behavior and are governed by the principle of noblesse oblige. This chapter ultimately shows the relevance of considering both gender and power practices, and how they intertwine, in an analysis of women's organizations in Mali. Women elites are the core of women's associations that can be viewed as an extension and formalization of their client groups. Women's access to the state depends on these elites, and in turn, the state asks these leader–patrons to interpret and represent women's needs in institutional contexts.

Notes

I would like to thank Alma Gottlieb, Hans Herbert Kögler, and Linda Stone for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this chapter.

1. Ba Konaré and Turrittin give some attention to the political contributions of some exceptional woman—in the style of classic historiography whose limits were already recognized by British structural functionalists (e.g., Nadel 1951).

2. This essay is based on my doctoral fieldwork on women's official organizations in Mali in 1993–94, and recent follow-up research in the summer of 1999.

3. During the struggle for independence, Malian women had hoped for a higher degree of involvement in postcolonial politics. Over time they in fact succeeded in reversing male party representatives' attempts to delimit women's contribution to the household level.

4. From 1968 to 1979, Mali was ruled by a military committee, Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale (CMLN), which was presided over by Moussa Traoré, the future leader of the UDPM party and president of the country from 1968 to 1991.

5. Indeed, one of the leaders of the APDF declared that she had received numerous death threats from the Association Malienne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam (AMUPI) to induce her to abandon the organization's objective of immediate elimination of the practice of excision from Malian society.

6. The Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme, de l'Enfant et de la Famille is the heir of the Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes. CAFO's first president, Mme Diarra Afoussatou Thieró, is now the new minister for women.

7. The CAFO is composed of eighty-five women's associations and nongovernmental organizations, according to a document issued by the Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes.

8. In 1994, the state institution in charge of women's issues was the Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes. This organism was recently replaced by the MPFEF.

9. During my recent stay, many Malians severely criticized the current effort by international financial institutions and donors to impose a Western-conceived model of democracy upon Mali. For reasons of space I cannot take up this important question, but I feel obliged at least to mention it.

10. For a similar analysis in another geographical context, see McClintock 1993, Hassim 1993, and Joseph 1997.

11. The same idea was expressed by Mali's second president in a 1970s speech published in *L'Essor*: "It is a commonplace to emphasize the three attributes of a woman, who, more than a citizen, is also a mother and a spouse" (Anonymous 1970, my translation).

12. This representation of women as a unifying force at the national level is certainly not unique to Mali. However, its articulation takes culturally specific forms that I want to elucidate here. For the development of this theme in other cultural contexts, see Hassim 1993, McClintock 1993, and Joseph 1997.

13. *Badenya* connotes cooperation, mutual support, and solidarity among the children of the same mother.

14. This choice finds some justification in the gender polarity typical of this cultural area before colonization. According to Camara (1992), the Mande woman was encouraged to develop a more emotional and more compassionate side than was the Mande man. On the other hand, the Mande male noble was encouraged to be more competitive, fierce, and proud. If Camara's analysis is valid, it should not be a surprise that to foster a sense of unity, solidarity, and harmony, Malian politicians appealed to the extension of feminine values to the general population.

15. However, not all births have this power, for the precondition for the passing of a family name (*togo*) from a father to his children is that the union be legitimate. On strategies for the acceptance of premarital motherhood, see Brand 1996.

16. Traditionally, Malian societies were divided into *horonw*, people of free or noble origin; *nyamankalaw*, a group of semiendogamous professionals sometimes termed "castes," such as bards, smiths, leatherworkers, and other occupational groups; and *jonw*, slaves (e.g., Meillassoux 1968 and McNaughton 1988). For a critique of traditional approaches to the study of social distinctions in Mali, and in particular, those overemphasizing the rigidity of social boundaries between different social groups, see Conrad and Frank 1995.

17. One character of Malian politics in general seems to me to be the rejection of the Western distinction between the private and the public (or, better, the fusion of those two elements). Malians are proud of their politicians' social sensitivity (their willingness to engage personally with their electorate), which they often juxtapose to the inhumanity of Western politics.

18. Women's political participation is also the outcome of narrowly conceived international development projects whose impact on the construction of gender identities still needs to be systematically appraised in this specific historical context. Development projects for women have at best consisted of income-generating activities, and initiatives geared toward the reduction of labor tasks, and so on. In other words, such development projects have not entailed a deeper reflection upon traditional gender roles. According to Ba Konaré, the developmental approach to women's problems "has increased women's subordination to men" (Ba Konaré 1993: 76).

19. On other aspects of the patronage system, see Amselle 1987, 1992; Lambert de Frondeville 1987; Bagayogo 1987, 1989; and Fay 1995.

20. In a similar vein: "The election of the other board members took place as planned, for a preliminary selection had already been conducted to single out influential and respected people in the different neighborhoods" (Keita 1975: 301, my translation).

21. One reason for this strategy of involvement of the local elites was also the greater mobility of the new literate elite (a strategy consciously pursued by the state to foster national unity among the elites). The new elites were, so to speak, in need of the connection and reputation that only longtime residents could offer (Hopkins 1972).

22. Most of the leaders are literate and professional women in a country where only 7.1 percent of women have a secondary education or higher.

23. This new elite became the new opinion makers and forged new cultural trends. It is interesting to note that the term that is most commonly used to refer to Mali's political leadership is *nyemògò* (people who are before the masses). Thus, in the 1950s, the electoral victory of the US-RDA depended on the party's capacity to recruit and involve the new elites such as the local doctor, the merchant, and the notable in party activities (Keita 1975).

24. ADEMA stands for Association pour la Démocracie au Mali (1991 to present).

25. Women's forms of patronage have been effective in helping women conquer a greater space in the political sphere—although such methods have not radically changed or questioned certain traditional gender dynamics (e.g., women's domestic tasks). Indeed, Malian women have become unavoidable centers of power. For instance, during the 1997 elections, many of today's male political leaders formed alliances with some of the most powerful women leaders to achieve power positions. The difference with regard to the past is that women today are more determined to secure positions for their own leaders within the state administration.

26. I agree with Bagayogo that "the economic, the political, the cultural, art and history do not constitute yet autonomous categories" (Bagayogo 1987: 104). Thus, rather than being sites of mutual help, women's groups are aggregates of people who concentrate around the figure of the leader in contexts where women of different social status exchange different goods and services.

27. It should also be clear that women's political participation does not go unchallenged but must be constantly reasserted and defended. Despite current enthusiasms for the democratization of Malian state institutions, some women's groups are experiencing marginalization in the public sphere.

28. The concepts of personhood (*maaya*) and family honor (*danbè*) are rooted in a stratigraphic conception of personhood that strongly depends on one's family origin and the behavior of one's parents (in particular, one's social mother).

References

Amselle, Jean-Loup. 1978. Le Mali socialiste (1960–1968). *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 72, XVIII–4:631–34.

———. 1985. Socialisme, capitalisme, et précapitalisme au Mali (1960–1982). In *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa*, ed. Henry Bernstein and Bonnie K. Campbell. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.

———. 1987. Fonctionnaires et hommes d'affaires au Mali. *Politique africaine* 26:63–72.

———. 1992. La corruption et le clientélisme au Mali et en Europe de l'Est: quelques points de comparaison. *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 128, XXXII–IV:629–42.

Amselle, Jean-Loup, and Emmanuel Grégoire. 1987. Complicités et conflits entre bourgeoisies d'Etat et bourgeoisies d'affaires: au Mali et au Niger. In *L'Etat contemporain en Afrique*, ed. Emmanuel Terray. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

Anonymous. 1959. Mali. *Le Magazine Illustré d'Information du Gouvernement Fédéral* 2:6.

———. 1965a. Chronique féminine: la femme et son foyer, elle devra accorder une attention particulière à la salubrité des aliments. *L'Essor Quotidien* (jeudi, le 14 janvier): 4.

———. 1965b. Le militant vu de près: "Nous femmes de l'U.S.–R.D.A. Notre participation sera toujours effective dans la construction socialiste de notre pays." *L'Essor Quotidien* (vendredi, le 15 janvier): 4.

———. 1965c. Après le vote de la loi portant statut général de la profession de commerçant, le ministre des finances et du commerce nous accorde une interview. *L'Essor Quotidien* (samedi, le 3 avril): 1–3.

———. 1970. Discours par Moussa Traoré en réponse aux Voeux au chef de l'Etat. *L'Essor Quotidien* (samedi, le 3 janvier): 4.

———. 1982. Interview de Madame la présidente de l'UNFM. *Quotidien de la 7ème Biennale Artistique et Culturelle* 2:5–6.

Anthias, Floya, and Nira Yuval-Davis. 1989. Introduction to *Woman, Nation, State*. New York: St. Martin's.

Ba Konaré, Adam. 1991. Role et image de la femme dans l'histoire politique du Mali (1960–1991): perspectives pour une meilleure participation de la femme au processus démocratique. CODESRIA Workshop on Gender Analysis and African Social Science, 16 to 20 September, in Dakar, Senegal.

———. 1993. *Dictionnaire des Femmes Célèbres du Mali*. Bamako, Mali: Editions Jamana.

Bagayogo, Shaka. 1987. L'Etat au Mali: représentation, autonomie et mode de fonctionnement. In *L'Etat Contemporain en Afrique*, ed. Emmanuel Terray. Paris: L'Harmattan.

———. 1989. Lieux et théorie du pouvoir dans le monde mandé: passé et présent. *Cahiers des sciences humaines* (ORSTOM) 25, no. 4:445–60.

Bird, Charles S., and Martha B. Kendall. 1980. The Mandé Hero. In *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, ed. Ivan Karp and Charles S. Bird. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Brand, Saskia. 1996. Premarital Motherhood in Bamako (Mali): Negotiating Acceptance. Paper presented at the thirty-ninth annual meeting of the African Studies Association, 23 to 26 November, in San Francisco.

Camara, Sory. 1992. *Gens de la parole*. Paris: Karthala.

Commissariat à la Promotion des Femmes. n.d. Plan d'Action Pour la Promotion des Femmes 1996–2000. Bamako, Mali.

Conrad, David C., and Barbara E. Frank. 1995. *Status and Identity in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

De Jorio, Rosa. 1997. Female Elites, Women's Formal Associations, and Political Practices in Urban Mali (West Africa). Ph.D. diss., Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois.

Doumbia, Dramane. 1966. Visite d'une délégation parlementaire à Ségou. *L'Essor Quotidien* (mercredi, le 2 mars): 3.

Fay, Claude. 1995. La démocratie au Mali, ou le pouvoir en pâture. *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 137, XXXV–I:19–53.

Gologo, Mamadou. 1960. Le rôle des femmes dans la construction nationale. *Rencontres Africaines* 25:3–9. First published in *L'Essor Quotidien* (le 20 mai).

Hassim, Shireen. 1993. Family, Motherhood, and Zulu Nationalism: The Politics of the Inkatha Women's Brigade. *Feminist Review* 43:1–25.

Hopkins, Nicholas S. 1972. *Popular Government in an African Town: Kita, Mali*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Imperato, James. 1989. *Mali: A Search for Direction*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

Joseph, Suad. 1997. The Public/Private—The Imagined Boundary in the Imagined Nation/State/Community. *Feminist Review* 57:73–92.

Keita, Aoua. 1975. *Femme d'Afrique. La vie d'Aoua Keita racontée par elle-même*. Paris: Editions Présence Africaine.

Lambert de Frondeville, Agnès. 1987. Une alliance tumultueuse: les commerçantes maliennes du Dakar-Niger et les agents de l'Etat. *Cahiers des sciences humaines* (ORSTOM) 23, no. 1:89–103.

McClintock, Anne. 1993. Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism, and the Family. *Feminist Review* 44:61–81.

McNaughton, Patrick R. 1988. *The Mandé Blacksmiths. Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Meillassoux, Claude. 1968. *Urbanization of an African Community*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

———. 1970. A Class Analysis of the Bureaucratic Process in Mali. *Journal of Development Studies* 6, no. 2:97–110.

Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme, de l'Enfant et de la Famille. 1998. *La Malienne en chiffres* edition 1998. Bamako, Mali.

Moore, Henrietta. 1988. *Feminism and Anthropology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nadel, Siegfried Frederick. 1951. *The Foundations of Social Anthropology*. London: Cohen & West.

Okonjo, Kamene. 1976. The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria. In *Women in Africa*, ed. Nancy I. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1996. *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Boston: Beacon.

Stone, Linda. 1997. *Kinship and Gender: An Introduction*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.