



M A N S A

Newsletter Number 14 — DECEMBER 1990

Minutes of the Fifth Annual MANSA Meeting

The fifth annual MANSA meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m. on Friday evening, November 2 at the Omni Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, David Conrad presiding. Recorded attendance included Tom Basset, Stephen Belcher, Sarah Brett-Smith, Barbara Frank, Adria LaViolette, David Skinner, Mathew Stevens, Michael Gomez, Philip Ravenhill, Patrick McNaughton, Bruce Oudes, J. Malcolm Thompson, François Manchuelle, Richard Warms, Konstantin Pozdnyakov, Ousman Kouyate, Lansine Kaba, David Rawson, Stanley Tarver, Tammy Iralu, Carol Thompson, Barbara Hoffman, Richard Roberts, Martin Klein, Mary Jo Arnoldi, Jean Bazin, James Webb, Luyindu Ladio, Alpha Barry, Marian Ashby Johnson, Lamin Sanneh, Valentin Vydrine, Barbara Lewis, B. Marie Perinbam, Maghan Keita, Kassim Koné, Olabiyi Yai, Ellen Suthers, Claude Ardouin, Mamadou Diawara, Mahamoud Zouber, Pathé Diagne

Financial Report: At the meeting last year in Atlanta we took in \$360 in dues and the year's total came to \$742.50. \$718.00 was paid out for mailings and expenses plus bank service charges of \$73.69. The President reported that he has moved the MANSA account to a different bank and changed it from the business category to personal, which will eliminate service charges that have been draining the equivalent of three sponsorships from the account. Copying, supplies, and mailing costs for newsletters: #10 = \$225, #11 = \$200, #12 = \$197, #13 = 125.57. MANSA Newsletter #13 was cheaper than the previous ones thanks to a free mailing courtesy of Professor Geraldine Forbes, Coordinator of the International Studies Program, SUNY-Oswego. Nevertheless, funds for the last newsletter fell short by \$77.07.

This financial statement led the President to inquire if the membership wished to continue operating so close to the edge, and at the same time he noted that several members had expressed opinions that the dues should be raised. Lansine Kaba moved that the membership dues be raised from \$5 to \$10. The motion was seconded. Barbara Hoffman suggested that the payment schedule of \$5 for students should continue at that level. Barbara Frank's opinion was that most people could afford to pay more and that the dues schedule as it had been was not necessary. After more discussion the members voted that the dues be raised to \$10, with one vote opposed. Barbara Hoffman's subsequent motion for a student membership rate of \$5 carried.

DAVID C. CONRAD, *President*, State University of New York-Oswego

B. MARIE PERINBAM, *Vice President*, University of Maryland

KATHRYN L. GREEN, *Secretary*, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Advisory Board:

LANSINE KABA, University of Illinois-Chicago

ROBERT LAUNAY, Northwestern University

The President then brought up a problem in our arrangements for French franc payments by European members. While Robert Launay has gone to considerable trouble in faithfully and uncomplainingly handling the changing of francs to US\$ through his own account in Paris, it has caused problems for him that have led to extended delays between the dues payments and the recording of renewed memberships in the newsletter. After some discussion the problem was left unresolved with several members suggesting that the option of paying in French francs be withdrawn, with those members being asked to send international money orders for their dues payments directly to the President.

David Conrad then welcomed overseas guests to the meeting: Mamadou Diawara of the Frobenius Institut in Frankfurt, Konstantin Pozdnyakov of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad, Valentin Vydrine of Leningrad University, Pathé Diagne of Dakar, and Mahmoud Zouber of the Centre Ahmed Baba in Timbuktu.

Stressing that deadlines for panel proposals for the next ASA meeting is March 15, 1991, the President announced that the 34th annual ASA meeting will be held in at the Sheraton St. Louis Hotel, St. Louis, Missouri, October 24-27, 1991. Suggested for MANSA panels were:

Barbara Hoffman suggested WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE MANDE WORLD, and offered to chair.

Tom Bassett suggested LAND TENURE ISSUES IN THE MANDE WORLD

Lansine Kaba suggested NINETEENTH-CENTURY ISLAMIC RENEWAL IN THE MANDE WORLD

Alma Gottlieb suggested FUNERAL AND BURIAL CUSTOMS IN THE MANDE WORLD

Members are encouraged to submit paper topics for these panels to the members listed. In addition, members are encouraged to form other panels or submit any paper topics of their choice to the MANSA President. Paper and panel proposals and abstracts should be sent to: 1991 Annual Meeting, African Studies Association, Emory University, Credit Union Building, Atlanta, GA 30322, U.S.A. Panel participants must be members of the African Studies Association. MANSA panel participants must be members of MANSA. The President asks that all panel chairpersons keep him informed of how their panels are developing, and that they provide him with names of panelists and titles of the papers.

Barbara Hoffman then introduced the question of whether or not it would be a good idea to have by-laws for the Mande Studies Association. Mary Jo Arnoldi suggested that the ACASA by-laws could be used as a model. The members gratefully accepted Dr. Arnoldi's offer to prepare such a model for consideration at next year's meeting.

The meeting then moved to a consideration of the projected conference in Bamako, Mali in January, 1992. Kathryn Green, who is organizing the conference, prefers to inform the membership of her progress through separate mailings rather than through the MANSA Newsletter, and she asks them to await her next mailing which should arrive in December. The meeting adjourned at 7:30 p.m.

Have You Paid Your Dues?:

A Friendly Reminder to our North American and European Members

If your name does not appear in the "New and Renewed Members" section of this issue, or in MANSA Newsletter #13, it is probably time for you to renew your membership. We are continuing our policy of sponsoring some of our African colleagues residing in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Further Correspondence Regarding
"The Voice of the Bamana is Hard"
by Sarah Brett-Smith**

MANSA Newsletter 6 (August, 1988) contained a letter signed by nine North American members of the Mande Studies Association, and one by another MANSA member who sent his in from Mali. In these letters the members criticized the above-named article. Below is Sarah Brett-Smith's reply to those letters. The MANSA Newsletter was originally conceived as a forum for communications between specialists in Mande studies, and the editor agrees that any response to the letters about the Brett-Smith article should have been promptly published. The letter in question, by Douglas Newton, follows that of Dr. Brett-Smith.

-- Editor

Dear Colleagues

I have waited to reply to your letter concerning my article, "The Voice of the Bamana is Hard," published in No. 6 (August, 1988) of the MANSA Newsletter in order to examine the issues raised completely and fully. I am now writing out of the conviction that a frank evaluation of the points you brought up will add to our understanding of the Bamana. In so doing, I am writing in the belief that you are committed to an ethic of scholarly objectivity and am assuming that passages from this letter will not be taken and used out of context.

The goal of scholarly work is always to add to knowledge and understanding through the positive process of debate and the airing of different points of view. While I will discuss, point by point, the contents of your letter to give you the current state of my thinking, I would like to emphasize that the disagreements my article has raised are a normal part of any intellectual dialogue; they are not a justification for the moral condemnation of your recent letter. Every scholar makes both contributions and errors; a just evaluation of any work conveys both a sense of its limits and its achievements. Like any scholar, I tend to stress certain issues more than others. I happen to believe that issues of power, violence and gender relations are central to a profound study of any culture. I also believe that it is only by examining these aspects of human existence that we can free ourselves from them: repression and denial are not the answers.

I regret that MANSA has not chosen to publish Douglas Newton's letter regarding the published criticism. It is common practice for any scholarly journal which aims at objectivity to publish not only criticism, but the response to it, whether it comes from the author or from other scholars of note. While Newton sent copies of his document to both myself and the board of the Barbier-Mueller museum, allowing us to see his response (not always favorable to myself), MANSA has not responded in any way. This decision not to publish Newton's letter suggests that MANSA has taken a partisan position and seriously undermines MANSA's stature as an objective scholarly journal.

I would like to begin by clarifying the methodological issues raised by my colleagues' letter. On page four they take issue with the single footnote appended to the end of the article and my methodological approach. The first part of the article was not designed as a formal scholarly piece loaded down with footnotes; it was written as one scholar's synthetic view among many and in actual fact relies on twelve years of field experience and both conversations and formal interviews with many different informants.

My colleagues' criticism suggests that there is only one way to write art history and that is theirs. Under this rubric only extensively footnoted and matter-of-fact descriptions would ever be

published. Analysis, let alone a synthetic view of any but a culture's "good" points is systematically banned. One has the impression that one is reading a political credo, not a scholarly criticism. Certainly such a party line does not encourage risk taking and creative thought. I believe that when so moved each scholar is obligated to set down on paper, not just a literal interpretation of mundane facts, but their own conception of the lived reality of their subject. My colleagues write as though academic freedom had entirely disappeared.

Throughout my text I deliberately adopted a somewhat poetic style in an attempt to express what I perceived to be the emotional truth of Bamana society. In so doing I was particularly concerned to convey what it would have felt like to be one of the dominated, a woman or a slave. This is not because I endorse the oppression of women or of people in general (something that the MANSA letter conveys without stating outright) but because I feel that without identifying with those placed in this situation, there can be neither understanding nor change. It is important for us to know how a woman who has no say as to the disappearance of her child responds to this event.

I would like to return to the issue of style. My colleagues' comments suggest that they have not understood either the intention of my article or the poetry in Bamana speech. Bamana is an intensely poetic language and even everyday speech is wonderfully symbolic and metaphorical. For instance, the title of my article, "Bamanakan ka Gelen," appears to be a point of dispute. I wrongly assumed that all Bamana specialists would identify this as the first line of a famous popular song about Segu sung by the Malian orchestral group, the Biton National. Of course, as in any song, there are probably multiple meanings to this line, but my own is as follows. The singer is not just saying that it is hard to understand the speech of Segu (the ostensible and literal meaning of the phrase), but he is implying that the way of life demanded by Bamanaya or Bamana-ness is extremely difficult. The singer throws the phrase, Bamanakan ka gelen out into the audience as a challenge to achieve the behavior demanded by the kings of Segu, men not known for their softness. In transition I deliberately distorted the literal meaning of the phrase - kan can mean voice as well as speech - in order to paraphrase the poetic meaning in the Segu song which seems to tell us much, much more about Bamana culture than the fact that "the Bamana language is difficult." The poetry refers not only to the difficulty of interpreting the many proverbs and sayings with which traditional Bamana speech is filled, but to the strength of character demanded of those who would incorporate the values of Bamanaya. This reference and indeed the poetic nature of the article itself seems to have been either missed or deliberately misunderstood.

In terms of methodological nuts and bolts, I agree with my colleagues that there is some legitimate confusion arising out of the structure of the article, the form of the note and the designation of my informant as "Fulani." In the fall of 1987 the Barbier-Mueller Museum asked me over the phone whether they could put together certain pieces of my writing to form an article. Since they were facing a deadline, I said yes, causing a number of structural problems in the resulting piece, "The Voice of the Bamana is Hard." Thus, I regret the major break in the middle of the article where the general essay on the Bamana was sandwiched with specific catalogue entries. Due to the Museum's deadlines this discontinuity in the text could not be rectified. Thus, while pages 3-5 stem from ten years of field work with many informants, it is pages 6-15 that result from work with the "Fulani" informant. Again time pressure prevented either the Museum or myself from making much needed editorial changes.

I would like to address the criticism concerning my use of the "Fulani" informant. My colleagues charge that I should not have used a "Fulani" informant to provide information on the Bamana. This is tantamount to stating that the only truthful information about any ethnic group comes from its

members, something that no historian and certainly no fieldworker should espouse. It may, in fact, be that information given from a non-group member is more realistic than that reported by someone within the group. I chose to label this particular informant as Fulani because he explicitly requested such an identification and his last name is indeed a Fulani last name. However, my critics should be aware that he is a Birgo Fulani from the Kita area and he, like others in this area, does not actually speak Fulani, but only Malinke. His family migrated to the Birgo several generations ago from the Ouassoulou (an area even more famed for its animist Fulani) and wholeheartedly adopted Malinke culture. Due to his joking relationship to the blacksmith family attached to his village he was apparently able to witness many blacksmith rituals that most Malinke would not have seen. (Blacksmiths are joking partners to the Fulani.) In most cases Fulani herdsmen would not want to participate in these rituals, but in this case the informant was a sedentary person who was culturally Malinke and was interested, and, as a technical "Fulani" could not be refused admission to blacksmith ritual observances due to the blacksmith/Fulani joking relationship. There are of course problems in using an informant with a Malinke cultural identity to discuss the Bamana, but I felt that these were corrected by the close correspondance between his information and that collected over the previous ten years in the Beledougou, Bougouni and Segou areas.

Moving beyond the methodological issues, I find it difficult to understand what appears to be a compilation of to some degree mutually contradictory views in the original MANSA letter.

In paragraph two my colleagues state that I define the Bamana as a people "defined entirely by the violence of slavery and a harsh Sahelian environment," and that I assume "there is a single Bamana personality, characterized by greed, mistrust, jealousy, inability to communicate, murderousness, and an unfeeling disdain for human life."

I describe a population whose boundaries of action were traditionally set by a political/economic system inextricably linked to the slave trade and the realities of the sahel environment. I describe the constraints imposed by such a system of life and then I move on to state that certain Bamana rise above these constraints to become, "superlatively powerful human beings," who develop an ethic of nobility in the face of disaster akin to that of Homer's heroes. It is the reader's assumption, not my own assertion, that I limit my definition of the Bamana character exclusively to the results of the environmental and political constraints I describe.

My praise of Bamana women, their extraordinary fortitude in the face of human tragedy and their magnificent generosity, should alert my critics to the fact that I see many depths in many "Bamana" personalities. If I began by sketching the often painful psychological responses to a political and environmental situation, I certainly do not stop with these images, but balance them against the achievements of the Bamana.

One passage seems to have been critical in creating the misunderstanding just mentioned. On page 5 of my article I describe the process whereby "individuals who undergo the suffering required by Bamana life but who cannot master their pain become empty shells." It has been suggested that I am applying the description of such people to every Bamana. Such is not the case. By using the word "This" rather than some other modifier such as "all" or "every" or simply stating "The Bamana" rather than the phrase "This is the Bamana..." etc. which indicates a select group of Bamana, I am limiting my reference only to the minority of Bamana who could not overcome the negative effects of the educational system necessary to prepare a community for the reality of ongoing warfare. The fact that in the previous paragraph I laud the strength of Bamana women with, as Douglas Newton says, almost "reverential praise" confirms that I do not refer to all Bamana. It seems to me that if there is

a criticism to be made here it is perhaps that I am too generous to Bamana women and too harsh on Bamana men, not that I place all Bamana in the same boat.

My colleagues suggest that I have ignored "the wealth of current as well as colonial-era scholarship on ethnicity and history." I have read the abundant literature on who the Bamana are and have presented an analysis of the ethnic diversity of the "Bamana" in the fourth chapter of my unpublished dissertation, "Iron Skin: The Symbolism of Bamana Mud Cloth." The fieldwork on which this chapter is based was carried out in 1976-79, but it is interesting that my conclusions have received independent verification from Richard Roberts Warriors, Merchants and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700-1914 (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987), and Jean-Loup Amselle's presentation on Bamana ethnicity at the 1988 ASA meeting.¹ It is clear that many diverse ethnic strands have flowed together over time to make up the people who now call themselves Bamana, but it is also clear that these people do identify themselves as members of a distinct ethnic group with a distinct ethos. "The Voice of the Bamana is Hard" was intended as an interpretive essay of that ethos.

Charles Bird's observation at the 1988 African Studies Meetings, that the scholar must deal with the corpus of "Bamana" cultural beliefs, myths, epics and proverbs (let alone the Segou and Kaarta kingdoms) still remains true. For instance, in 1984 I collected a history of origin concerning the father of blacksmithing and sculpture, M'Fa Djigi in Kolokani from a non-blacksmith Bamana informant. In the same year blacksmith informants in the Djitumu region near Bougouni recounted a similar history of M'Fa Djigi's migration on tape with additional details. One informant could be labelled "northern" Bamana and one "southern" and yet they recounted the same historic/mythic account. My informants did not know each other and it is quite evident from the tapes of these interviews that the Bamana language spoken by the "northern" informant is considerably different than that spoken by the Bougouni area informants. Despite their geographic separation, "northern" and "southern" informants recounted essentially the same story; they also used similar concepts in the telling and elucidation of the M'Fa Djigi history. The scholar cannot simply deconstruct the "Bamana" into various historic strands or an artificial "text" invented by colonization. "Bamana-ness" or Bamanaya as informants continually refer to it, is a living and active cultural reality. Given these continual references by our informants, we cannot truncate our examination of common cultural characteristics and the historic forces that have produced them. One might just as well condemn all attempts to analyze American society on the grounds that life in Georgia and life in Montana are hardly the same.

My colleagues suggest (p.3) that I am singling the Bamana out as being remarkable for their involvement with the slave trade. What I find remarkable is that with so much literature on the inescapable intertwining of the slave trade with Bamana political structure and ethos, my colleagues still prefer to evade this important issue in their own work. Even mythic accounts of the formation of the Segou kingdom (the nexus of Bamana identity) reveal the intimate relationship between warfare for the purpose of capturing slaves and the development of the state. In his recent and excellent book on the relationship between the Bamana Segou state, the diversity of ethnic groups involved in slavery (the Maraka and Maninka Mori primarily as traders, the Bamana primarily as warriors and the Minianka and Senufo primarily as victims), and the economy in the Middle Niger delta, Richard Roberts dissects the complex economic and political relationships that gave rise to the Bamana kingdom of Segou.² In discussing the formation of the Segou kingdom Roberts states, "In the course of supplying slaves, warfare and enslavement became foundations for state power," (p. 18) and in the next paragraph "For the professional warriors of Segou, slaves were a commodity produced

in order to be exchanged," and "At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Bambara established a warrior state in Segu." (p. 22) On pages 23 through 46 of his book Roberts elaborates these statements into a compelling description of the way in which slave recruits were turned into warriors or tonionw fighting for the Segu king whom they might then depose or support depending on the fortunes of the next battle. Slavery fueled the economic and political motors which formed the Segu kingdom and kept it going, but it also contained the seeds of its incipient dissolution and re-formation. Roberts, other scholars such as Bazin, and my own field research made clear that slavery was endemic to the Middle Niger area in the late 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The Bamana were certainly not the only ones to enslave, although the data presented by Roberts and Bazin suggests that they became key specialists in the capture and symbolic transformation which created "slaves," while the Maraka specialized in post-capture trade. What is important for my article, however, is that the Segu kingdom's dual economic and political dependence on slavery created a warrior ethos among the Bamana intimately identified with the making of slaves. As Bazin and the Beledougou migration history describing the poignant liberation from slavery I collected in 1976-1979 suggest, much of this ethos was tied to the fact that today's warriors were often yesterday's captives. We cannot ignore Bazin's statement:

Ce jeu est d'autant plus large dans l'Etat de Ségou que, dans l'appareil central tout au moins et parmi ses dépendants directs, il n'est personne qui ne puisse, d'une manière ou d'une autre, être qualifié de jôn, si l'on tient compte de la diversité des principes et des points de vue. Même la position extrême d'une hòrònya ("état d'homme libre") absolue et absolument reconnue reste théoriquement inoccupée, puisque le clan dynastique des Jara-Ngolosi descend lui-même d'un jôn de la dynastie précédente.³

Nor can we escape the conclusion that at one remove or another an enormous proportion of Bamana families had passed through a period of servitude.

The problem of the ethnic diversity of the "Bamana" cannot be separated from the issue of slavery. In the Middle Niger region it was slavery which rearranged and reconstituted ethnic identities, for it was the political and economic system described by Bazin, Roberts and my own field research that provided the most efficient means to move and re-order people geographically. The name "Bamana" now encompasses people with diverse ethnic origins precisely because warfare and slavery uprooted many different peoples in the 18th and 19th centuries, removing them from their original environment and integrating them into a new and more centralized economic and political system. In fact the history of the Segu state is just such a history of conquest, enslavement and re-ordering into Bamanaya or "Bamana-ness" as one Segu informant revealed in 1989 when he said "we are really all Minianka." If we wish to attack the issue of diverse ethnic sources for the people we now call "Bamana" we cannot escape investigating slavery, one of the thorny issues that my colleagues desire to avoid.

My colleagues also suggest that slavery was not widespread among the Bamana. Field research since 1976 in an outlying province of the Segu state, the Beledougou, an area frequently cited by the Bamana themselves as exemplary of Bammanaya, has successively revealed that more and more of its villages had at one point or another passed through a period of servitude. If we move to the heartland of Bamana political hegemony, the Segu state, and look at Roberts' data the percentages of the population estimated to live in servitude in the late 19th century are stunning. On page 119 of his book Roberts reports that the French commandant of Segu estimated that slaves made up 53 per cent of the total population of the cercle, the French administrative unit. By 1904 another commandant was estimating the slave population at 15.6 per cent of the total population, still an enormously high

figure. Roberts suggests that the commandant may have manipulated the figures in the later estimate to suggest a smaller rather than a realistic overall slave population. Roberts further reports that in 1894 the region around Sinsani had a slave population which comprised about 31 per cent of the total population. Despite Roberts' notes that percentages must be evaluated in terms of the specific area surveyed and its place within the economic network of slave using and slave producing areas, these are extraordinarily high percentages of the population. While many of the slave holders described by Roberts were Maraka, not Bamana, and while the incredibly high late 19th-century figures cited by Roberts probably depend on the social disruption brought about by the Umarian state, the social contract endorsed by that state was borrowed from a Bamana model. Holding such high percentages of the population in servitude was possible because the Bamana kings of Segu had already established a particular cultural, economic and political system in the Middle Niger. Slave holders might be ethnically diverse, but they bought their supplies first from the Bamana warriors of the Segu state and then from Umarians, and they depended on the state to protect their commercial dealings in cloth, salt and slaves. Segu was the heart of Bamana politics and the conquering, warrior ethos of the Bamana described in my article was an outgrowth of the constant warfare and the slave based economy which were the driving motors of state formation. One cannot eradicate the history of Segu from the formation of "Bamana" ethnic identity nor can one ignore the importance of warfare and enslavement as an economic and political factor in the formation either of this state or of the "Bamana." The fact that art historians have by and large ignored this history of warfare and enslavement as a tool of the growing pre-colonial state tells us as much about ourselves as it does about the Bamana.

It is never pleasant to discuss slavery and violence in any society, but we cannot ignore them, especially when the violence involved is so often carried out against women and/or children (as in the example given in my article). A responsible scholar cannot sweep either slavery or violence under the carpet by saying that Bamana society (or any other society including our own) is non-violent, loving, generous etc. and that all social problems are resolved by masquerades in which "social tensions are resolved." This seems to me a classic case of westerners looking for paradise lost. Masquerading and other artistic forms (as we know all too well from European and Mayan history) can as easily be used as a tool for repression (both political and psychological) as an instrument for "resolving social tensions."

Many of my colleagues write as though slavery had seldom existed and had certainly never influenced art production among the Bamana, although we know that the diffusion of certain art forms, such as marionettes, are linked both with the spread of slavery and the liberation of former slaves under colonial rule. In fact, my 1985 research among Beledougou Bamana and Malinke from the Kita area suggested that the existence of slaves was essential to the production of important traditional sculpture. Field interviews from several informants in 1985 document that traditional payments for important ritual art were always requested and given in human kind: one could not commission a major ritual object without paying for it with either a young male or a young female slave together with her child of breast feeding age, and some objects required that both be presented to the sculptor. My informants told me that this payment could not be replaced by any other (such as cattle, etc.) and that the object itself could not be carved without the assurance of the gift of a slave. My 1985 interviews strongly suggest that this categorical insistence on the presentation of a slave to the sculptor in exchange for his work had important symbolic implications tied to fundamental concepts about the nature of ritual objects, the ethos I describe in "The Voice of the Bamana is Hard," and to the ever present political reality of the slave trade.

On page three of the MANSA letter my colleagues suggest that I have tried to promote

"racial-ethnic tension." If, indeed, this is the case I am very sorry. The line between the description of the cultural profiles of particular ethnic groups and the promotion of bias is certainly thin. However, even given the peaceful symbiosis characteristic of Malian ethnic groups, tensions and cultural differences do exist. A society, such as that of the Bamana, which was economically and politically tied to the institution of slavery has a very different nature than one, such as the Malinke, where slavery had a different impact (despite Samory the Malinke frequently seem to have been victims rather than exploiters of the slave trade). The legal system, for instance, is hardly the same. Furthermore, one must explain the comment made to me by several informants, both Bamana and Malinke, that the Malinke convey three warnings to any offender before the community decides to punish him or her with death, whereas the Bamana practice is for one individual to poison another on the basis of personal jealousy (*keleva*). I have published just such a case for the Bamana in my article, "The Poisonous Child."⁴

If we move to a more directly art historical issue, my colleagues state that, "it is not at all clear what possible relationship geometric forms can have with the ideas of slavery and freedom." If indeed this is the case, then art historians might just as well abandon any idea of writing a cultural history of art and retreat to a pure stylistic analysis. If Timothy Clark can discuss the relationship between the cultural understanding of prostitution in late 19th-century France and the stylistic innovations of Manet's "Olympia," then it seems appropriate to similarly analyze the famous and so-far unexplained idiosyncracies of the Bamana style. Why is it different than that of the Senufo, for instance? Can we eliminate the fact that the Bamana kingdoms were slave raiding and the decentralized Senufo villages were slave sources in a coherent and meaningful explanation of the stylistic differences in the art of the two groups? Is it accidental that the Bamana style is more severe and geometric than the rounded forms of the Senufo?

If we accept that style carries meaning, then we must also attempt to describe and explain that meaning. Both Bamana sculptors and dyers can identify works of art in "Bamana" and non-"Bamana" styles and both constantly refer to *Bamanaya* as an explanation for style. A Bamana dyer who prefers a hard-edged line on a textile to the fluid line used by Senufo dyers is talking about a deep cultural preference; a preference which reflects an entire educational system, an awareness of the strict patriarchal hierarchy of Bamana village organization and a stylistic history intimately linked to the population movements described in Chapter Four of my dissertation and Richard Roberts' book on the links between slavery and the building of the Bamana kingdom of Segu. If we are not to write the cultural history of art, then we are condemned to write merely a series of stylistic descriptions, descriptions which tell the reader that a certain mask is red and then go on to report that the author has no possible idea as to the meaning of this color. Such work is certainly safe, since no one in their right mind will accuse the scholar of bias or distortion, but is this scholarship? Remaining at a descriptive level of discourse is not evidence of a thinking mind at work. I have the impression that we are living in an era of Africanist scholarship where fear of "distortion" excuses lack of thought and justifies a retreat into meaningless verbiage.

In the next paragraph my critics state that it is inadvisable to publish the material on human sacrifice and that such material is inflammatory. First of all, material on human sacrifice occurs over and over again in my field interviews, although not associated with the particular object discussed here. For instance, in 1978 I collected a myth of migration into the Beledougou which describes the ritual murder of a female leader of ex-slaves by building a tower of bricks about her in the wilderness and leaving her there to die.⁵ On April 4, 1984 a Bamana Beledougou informant responded to the question, "What sacrifices did the Bamana of former times make in order to cure problems of sterility?" by stating that men of former times were not concerned with such problems,

but rather with gaining fame. According to this informant, the principal sacrifices were made in order to conquer a neighboring village. Before setting out for war a chicken was sacrificed to determine whether the expedition would be successful. If the omens were propitious the expedition set out. When capturing the opposing village one paid particular attention to obtaining its leader alive. One then returned home with this leader in order to sacrifice him on a boli or ritual object⁶ called Kuntigi ("leader") which was then guarded in a bag made from this man's trousers. This particular informant reported that he had observed this boli in his youth.

In addition to my own data, other researchers have documented very common references to human sacrifice and violence. For instance, Dieterlen cites the well known practice of cutting an albino in half at the waist as a sacrifice performed by the kings of Segu when facing grave difficulties, especially a possible defeat in battle.⁷ What we find in Dieterlen's description, as in a broad diversity of field interviews and other documentary references, is the widespread acceptance of a high level of violence which includes human sacrifice, although it is not limited to it. Clearly the banal acceptance of violence was one of the most hideous consequences of the war machine generated by the slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries, but this does not mean that one should suppress the data when it is offered to one.

What I ultimately find most disturbing about my colleagues' letter is not that they disagree over the extent and impact of human sacrifice, slavery and violence (although they run the risk of contradicting Bazin, Roberts, Dieterlen, Amselle and the field data itself), but that they seem to think that any writing which attempts to present the reality of lived violence must necessarily be twisted. One has the impression that we have created our own ritual interdiction in the West, an interdiction which forbids us to discuss violence and its impact on art, particularly when it affects the third world. Have we ourselves set up a system of repression which allows us to escape any discussion of how it feels to be a victim or conqueror (a single individual often plays both roles at different points in his or her lifespan) in a violent society? My colleagues suggest that African governments may be offended by articles such as "Bamanakan Ka Gelen." I wonder if these authors have not suggested such a response to African governments by writing their letter, and if, in so doing, they did not wish to block certain types of research which upset them rather than Africans. My own experience of African scholars and the many extraordinary people who assisted me in my research was that Africans are far more ready to confront the most difficult issues of human life than we are. The informant who gave me the information concerning human sacrifice was not aware of breaking any interdiction. He merely said that this was how things used to be, making it clear that such a sacrifice was deeply tragic, but also an inevitable act, and that the era he was talking about had passed. I would suggest that it is precisely because our own society is so violent that we may find it very difficult to discuss a similar level of violence wherever it may occur.

Given the kind of evidence I have just cited, it should be clear that I did not publish the data concerning human sacrifice lightly. In fact, I wonder whether my critics are not perhaps distorting the facts to suit a specifically "violence free" view of both the Bamana and other ethnic groups caught up in the slave trade of the 18th and 19th centuries, a view which does not conform to the available data. I have the impression that my colleagues inadvertently take the position which is often taken with regard to violence directed towards women and infants; that one should shut up and pretend that it doesn't exist. I would suggest that the suffering and nobility of the women quoted in my article fully deserves a written memorial. In this era of gender studies and post-modern theory it seems anachronistic to neglect the history of slaves and women, or to transform it into something more palatable than the reported reality simply because it gets us into less trouble. If we were to deconstruct my colleagues' construction of the term "Bamana," I think we might find that it is

entirely constituted of men. What about the history of Bamana women?

In conclusion I would like to state that I wrote the article "Bamanakan Ka Gelen" seriously and honestly and on the basis of my own experience among the Bamana. This is of course only one point of view among many. Although I was pained by my colleagues' comments, I believe it is important that we begin to discuss a series of issues which have been neglected for too long.

Yours sincerely,
Sarah Brett-Smith

1. Richard Roberts, Warriors, Merchants and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700-1914 (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987). My analysis of population movements into the Beledougou presented in Chapter Four of my dissertation ("Iron Skin: The Symbolism of Bamana Mud Cloth") is based on textile pattern distribution from Sikasso to Kolokani. This research was carried out between 1878 and 1979 and I wrote Chapter Four of my dissertation prior to reading Richard Roberts' work. When his book was published I was delighted to discover that we had come to essentially the same historical conclusions using different methods independently of each other (analysis of cloth distribution as an index of population movement versus oral history). I would suggest that such an independent concordance is extremely important evidence for the validity of the historical analysis presented both by Roberts and myself.

2. See note 1 and Roberts, Warriors, Merchants and Slaves, pp. 17-75.

3. Jean Bazin, "Guerre et servitude à Ségou," in L'Esclavage en Afrique Précoloniale, ed. Claude Meillassoux (Paris: François Maspero, 1975), p. 139.

4. Sarah Catherine Brett-Smith, "The Poisonous Child," Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics, Vol 6, pp. 47-48.

5. Sarah Catherine Brett-Smith, "Iron Skin: The Symbolism of Bamana Mud Cloth," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1982), pp. 139-141.

6. Interview with healer and ritual expert in a small Beledougou village 4/4/84, pp. 65-69 of transcribed text.

7. Germaine Dieterlen, Essai sur la Religion Bamana (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), pp. 94-97.

The following letter from Douglas Newton of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is dated April 18, 1989.

--Editor

Dear Colleagues

I begin this letter with these words, as you do yours in MANSA Newsletter concerning Sarah Brett-Smith's article "The Voice of the Bamana is Hard." Yours is a statement cobbled together from a number of letters; so I assume that it expresses a general consensus to which you all subscribe, even though the reader cannot detect any attributed individual opinions.

As you are all no doubt aware, it is a letter of unusual vehemence as far as scholarly debate is commonly expressed. Words such as "loathsome", "racial-ethnic" (I am not sure what this means,

except that it is meant to be unpleasant), and the letter's general tone, are fairly rare in these circumstances. They call for considerable justification. You are all evidently driven to them by deep feeling, and your reasons for that feeling call for investigation. After all, as you remark yourselves, you might have let the article die on the vine; you chose not to. Disregarding that for the moment, one must look for the core of the document. It seems to be in three parts at least: substantive objections to Brett-Smith's data, her methodology, and the principles governing research and publication.

I would like to comment briefly on your strictures; and I want to stress that my letter is not intended as a defence, or a rebuttal: those are the business of Brett-Smith if she cares to take the matter up. It is your attitudes to the handling of data, methodology, and, loosely speaking, the principle of truth with which (and by which in your case) I am concerned.

As far as the first two points go, I need hardly announce that I have not the least claim to be a Malinian expert, or even in the vaguest sense to be an Africanist. The little I know about Mali I have largely gleaned from some of your own work. Your letter, I must tell you, will not educate me further. The resentment which informs the first part of it seems to be based somehow on Brett-Smith's remarks about the ancestral Bamana as slaves and slavers, which are either founded on historical facts or are not. I do not see that they are a cause for emotion, or that the Bamana need to be justified by saying that others (Africans, Europeans, Arabs) were just as bad (or as good). "For a reader ignorant of African history", such as myself, you deny Brett-Smith's interpretation: but you offer not a single fact to refute it. You are content to "cringe," but you do not say why. Brett-Smith may make statements which are "unsubstantiated," but your claim that they are such is equally unsupported. Possibly the nine of you, speaking to other specialists, know what you mean and can rely on your colleagues' understanding you. Beyond your own circle, your meaning is obscure.

You take exception to Brett-Smith's reading of the spirit of Bamana art as a product of history. I personally would think that Brett-Smith's method was based on a now perhaps dated, though still conceivably useful, school of art history that derives the formation of styles from politico-historico-ecological factors. If Brett-Smith is wrong in doing so, you might have explained how and why. As it is, this part of your letter produces not so much illumination, as venom.

I will add one note about your lengthy objections to Brett-Smith's use of a Fulani informant on Bamana affairs. She is candid about this, and gives her reasons for it, and her reasons for trusting his veracity. I do not find this objectionable. An outsider of a culture, if he is intelligent, can often have valuable insights about the culture that many members of it may not share (isn't that a condition that we ourselves aspire to?) and surely most field-workers have taken advantage of it. Here again I find the language of your letter astonishing: the Fulani's information about child-sacrifice is "inflammatory". Who is being inflamed? This is a rhetorical question - you do of course make the answer quite clear, and I will return to it.

An important part of your letter amounts to being a defence, which you seem to think necessary, of the Bamana as people. You evidently feel that in some way they have been defamed as existential personalities, let alone as the end result of an historical heritage. I would myself concede that Brett-Smith seems to bear down hard on Bamana men, and perhaps this is drama, setting the scene, or a balance for what else she proceeds to say about Bamana women. As I read it, her discussion of Bamana women amounts to a paean of almost reverential praise for their courage, fortitude and "artistic brilliance". Is this derogatory, "vengeance", or "ingratitude", (in Mr. Kone's words)? I would not have said so.

With your evident admiration and affection for the Bamana, who could quarrel? In many ways I understand your defensiveness, called-for or not. From my own experience I know that is natural, not to say usual, for all of us who have done field-work among people as strange to us as we are to them, to acquire powerful friendships and loyalties which are sometimes, we hope, reciprocal. As Evans-Pritchard says, "An anthropologist has failed unless, when he says goodbye to the natives, there is on both sides the sorrow of parting" (*Social Anthropology* 1962:79; and in respect to Brett-Smith's generalizations about the Bamana, I suggest you look at Evans-Pritchard's about the Azande on the last pages of the same book). Possibly he exaggerates, but very few of us would not agree to that.

If that had been the sole message or even the main message of your letter, it would have been sympathetic and even honourable. Lamentably it is not. Within the first few lines, out pops from the apple the wormy head of naive self-interest. You will, surely, admit that your communication is not a critical review of a peer; it is a manifesto, even a denunciation, and a highly purposive one at that. You make it very explicit that although Brett-Smith has the right to respond, you wish to reject her from your society, telling the world that she has been "irresponsible"; she has published "inflammatory" material; she has insulted people; she may by doing so have jeopardized the future of research in Mali. This is a thought which Mr. Kone, somewhat disgracefully, develops into an open threat towards not only American but all Westerner researchers - quite a burden to lay on Brett-Smith's shoulders. Your message comes through all too loudly: "Never mind telling the truth; for god's sake don't rock the boat, or we'll lose our visas, research permits, grants, chances of jobs." You clearly detest what Brett-Smith has to say; you make it amply clear that you have no intention of defending her right to say it. You are, as it were, bundling her out of the sleigh and into the snow, when there is not even a single wolf (except possibly Mr. Kone) on the horizon.

It is no secret that, in many countries, officialdom and government often find anthropologists, art historians and scientific researchers generally, awkward guests because they are likely to uncover unwelcome facts that fit poorly official views of the past and present. May your prompt and sweeping disavowal of a colleague save you, for now, from some of the possible consequences of truth-telling. In the long run, it will not save your necks from pressures that you already obviously feel to modify your work so as not to give offence to the authorities. It is a pity that those of you who are historians have not learned by now that conformity gains nothing except further demands for conformity. You have disowned dispassionate controversy, but I doubt if it will do you much good the next time you run into controversial material.

You end with a call to the Association Committee of the Barbier-Muller Museum (of which I am a member) for "responsibility" in future publications. Looking at the list of the professionals among the Committee, I am not too aware that any of us need feel too many pangs of conscience for previous irresponsibility. I would be more impressed if I did not interpret what you are saying as, "Think the way we do". Thank you, but no. I for one do not care to censor fellow-scholars, nor to exercise self-censorship. I do not know by what right you demand that my colleagues and I should join you in those activities.

Douglas Newton
Evelyn A.J. Hall and John A. Friede Chairman
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To the Editor, MANSA Newsletter

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