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Obscure Powers - Obscuring Ethnographies
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**Obscure powers, obscuring ethnographies:
"status" and social identities in Mande society.**

1. Introduction

There is, I want to show, a serious misunderstanding, even mystification, current in many ethnographic accounts of the so-called griots (praise singers and entertainers) of West Africa. Clearing up that misunderstanding will, I hope, permit me to contribute to an actor-oriented and dynamic understanding of the ways in which individuals play upon and strategically employ their "status" that is, the role expectations, rights, and duties attached to their position in a social hierarchy (Goodenough 1965).

In Mali, the "griots" (French) or jelis (in Bamanankan) belong, together with other artisans, to the professional group of nyamakala. The nyamakalas are considered a separate social category, distinguishable by birth and endogamous marriage from people of free birth (hòròn) and from descendants of serfs (jon). In the ethnographic literature, the jelis and, more generally, the nyamakalas, are commonly said to have an "ambiguous" and "contradictory" status because they control a vital and potentially dangerous force called nyama. This idea derives from a particular conception of West African society which posits that social forms derive from cosmology and cosmogony, a master chart for ordering all aspects of life. This conception can be traced to Griaule's "Conversations with Ogotomeli" and has been adopted by numerous scholars working on Mande speaking societies. I want to show, in contrast, that the preoccupation with nyama to understand nyamakalas' status in Mande society is misleading, because it renders the activities of nyamakalas exotic and puzzling, and adds a distortion that makes the interpretation unrecognizable to members of Mande society. Moreover, the notion of "status ambiguity" is not useful, because it implies that some status are "ambiguous" while others are "unambiguous." Instead, I argue for approaching the position of nyamakala by asking why free people in Mande society have ambivalent feelings towards them. To understand these

mixed feelings, we need to tackle two dimensions having to do with the patterning of relations between representatives of the two social categories. First, the relationship between nyamakalas and free people is one of patronage, and it is strongly shaped by norms of mutual obligation and favors. However, what is worthy of note in this interdependence is that the rate of exchange is never clearly defined; it is constantly negotiated by nyamakalas and their patrons. The open-ended nature of encounters between nyamakalas and patrons engenders ambivalent feelings in patrons who see their clients' services as both a blessing and a nuisance. Second, nyamakalas perform specific tasks of mediation for their patrons through which nyamakalas establish themselves in a strategic position between private and public realms of knowledge and political action, a position that instills fear and respect in free people.

2. The problem

The nyamakalas, professional specialists of the Mande speaking world, have been the subject of numerous studies in folklore, linguistics, art history, and anthropology. The interest in these specialists of forging iron, the spoken word, and of other crafting activities can be traced back to the writings of travellers and colonial administrators. These authors usually referred to the nyamakalas as "casted" people, a denomination that suggested strong analogies between Mande social organization and the Indian caste system. Early writers were fascinated by the nyamakalas' various activities of crafting and oral arts and repeatedly noted that these people were, in spite of their often outstanding artistry, held in contempt by people of free birth (e.g. Park 1799; Bérenger-Féraud 1882).

More recent research on the life situation, artistic production, and activities of diverse groups of nyamakalas draws attention to regional and historical variation in specializations and craft production (Diawara 1990; Tamari 1991). Some of this research situates historically the emergence of specific groups of craftspeople in particular local settings and illustrates the changing power structures constitutive of their emergence as a group of specialists. These studies thus help de-essentialize nyamakalaya and jeliya as social categories (see Conrad and Frank 1995b). Several authors are deeply puzzled by the fact that the nyamakalas are highly respected, yet also held in contempt by people of free birth. Their work is thus guided by the wish to understand what they see as the "ambiguous" status of nyamakalas (e.g. McNaughton 1988; Hoffman 1990, 1995; Conrad and Frank 1995b). They suggest that there must be

something particular to the activities of the nyamakalas that explains why "the Mande" talk about them with both disdain and respect. What is common to the different occupations of nyamakalas is transformation. They turn useless raw materials into objects of everyday use and current words and sounds into artistic expression that is, speech and musical performance. The authors conclude that the reason for the nyamakalas' "status ambiguity" resides in the occult force of transformation, nyama, that jelis, "praise singers and speakers," numun, "blacksmiths," and other groups of nyamakalas control.

Four points in this argument need further exploration. First, although the proponents of these accounts occasionally mention the substantial changes that have affected Mande social organization and the living conditions of the nyamakalas, in particular over the last 50 years, they nevertheless locate their analysis in a traditional and mostly rural setting, thereby assuming tacitly that "authentic" Mande are rural and traditional. Second, the institutional context in which the nyamakalas' position in society must be understood is noticeably absent from these analyses. Also, the focus on nyamakalas prevents some authors from paying close attention to differences within the category of free people: all hòròn are referred to as "nobles." The translation of hòròn with "noble" is misleading because it does not account for the substantial differences in power and wealth among people of free origin, of their heterogenous family background, and the fact that only some are actually patrons of nyamakalas. The Bamanan term hòròn (from Arabic -hurr, "free") simply indicates that the individual was not born into a family of serfs (jon) or nyamakala clients.

Third, some authors interpret free people's contradictory assessments of a nyamakala's tasks and the diverse accounts that nyamakalas give of their own position and role as an indication of the latter's "status ambiguity." Unfortunately, they never clarify what they mean by "status ambiguity." Nor do they discuss whether a status can be ambiguous at all. This association of "ambiguity" with the notion of "status" is problematic. Ambiguity refers to the meaning of a term, while status indicates a social position. The status of an individual, such as a worker, wife or whore can not be ambiguous, but the meaning of a word certainly can.

Information collected during my field research suggests that Mande people do not accord nyama a pivotal place in their accounts of the significance of nyamakalas. That appears as a puzzle and a "contradiction" to Western researchers is not seen as such by nyamakalas or free

people.

Clearly, the assumptions that nyamakalas' place in society is characterized by an "ontological" contradiction and that their control of the force nyama is at the origin of their "status ambiguity" are in need of critical assessment. Could it be that people's comments on nyamakalas do not relate to the latter's "ambiguous status," but simply consist of statements made in different situations which, when put back to back, reveal that the statements are not coherent? Has nyama been given too prominent a place in the account of nyamakalas' roles and social recognition in society? Does the notion of "status" used in this fashion conceal rather than reveal some of the significance of nyamakalas' activities in Mande society?

Answering these questions is the goal of this article. All the ethnographic information is drawn from my research on jelis in the Cercle de Kita and the Arrondissement de Kokofata, two units of administration in southwestern Mali. Instead of exploring the "status" of nyamakalas in the abstract, I favor a dynamic understanding of the conflicting attitudes of free people towards nyamakalas by paying attention to the historical context and the particular situation in which they are expressed. In this, I follow a strand of anthropological theorizing that favors a shift of "focus from categories to practice" (Herzfeld 1997:164; cf. Bauman 1996: 188-204). I will historicize current interactions between jelis and free people in a discussion of jelis' political and social significance in 19th century society and its transformation under colonial rule. I will show that nyamakalas' handling of nyama does not fully explain free people's ambivalent feelings towards their clients. I thus depart from many previous accounts of nyamakalas' status in Mande society and suggest that a useful way of exploring nyamakalas' position and image in society is to take two dimensions into consideration. The first is the social and political setting in which claims to high and low status are enacted, a context in which nyamakalas and free people interact as clients and patrons, and in which they and represent and negotiate the terms of their relationship. The second dimension are tasks of mediation that place jelis and other nyamakalas at the boundary between realms of public and intimate knowledge. I will argue that jelis' position invests them with a particular influence through which they intentionally instigate in other people feelings of ambivalence and emotional insecurity.

It is not only free people who contradict each other in their assertions about the moral

disposition and significance of their clients. Jelis too make conflicting and often inconsistent claims about their relationship to their patrons. Taken together, these various facets of jelis' interaction with hòròns support the central argument of the present article: status cannot be seen as either "ambiguous" or "consistent." Rather, it is constituted by judgements and claims that vary with the interests of the speaker.

2. The jelis and their clientage relations to powerful patron families in nineteenth century society

When French colonial troops occupied southwestern Mali in the second half of the 19th century, jelis lived in the proximity of their patron families. Some of these patron families lived primarily from agriculture, others were engaged in warfare and the trade of captives. The patrons usually belonged to the wealthiest families of the locality, with the highest number of men to mobilize for agricultural production and, when necessary, for military endeavors. Some patron families were rich enough to keep several families of clients. Among the jelis, the most successful performers and musicians travelled around during the dry season and stayed for extended periods in the different "houses" of the patron clan. Jelis entertained their patrons and praised their name in the presence of other families. They received grain, cattle and other gifts, on which they lived upon their return home.

Patrons called upon members of jeli families, women and men, young and old, whenever they needed the jelis' mediating skills: to smoothe out tensions within the family, to resolve conflicts with other hòròn families of the locality, and to establish or reaffirm alliances with other families, through marriage arrangements for instance. For a hòròn, it was not honorable to speak on one's own behalf during such negotiations. Thus, free persons valued their clients' willingness to intervene and act on their behalf. That the clients had to publicly address "touchy" issues was to their patrons both a source of dependency and a reason to make scornful remarks about their "shameless" jelis.

Whether and how often particular jelis were called upon depended first and foremost on what they had to offer: rhetorical and musical skills, psychological insight, age and life experience, and the closeness and mutual trust between them and the individual members of the patron family. Still, certain tasks and services were assigned according to jelis' sex and age. Older jeli women were often highly respected for their assistance in intimate intrafamilial

matters and conflicts between families. I heard of several cases in which the intervention of an experienced jeli woman was the ultimate resort in situations of fierce interfamilial confrontation. The task of jeli men was to intervene in public encounters between hòròn families and to recite the patron family's genealogy and family history. A favorite task of women jelis was to add praise lines and songs to the men's public commemoration of historical events and deeds. Another important source of social recognition for women were performances of a variety of songs for their women patrons in more intimate settings.

Marriage negotiations, wedding ceremonies, and other festivities provided a platform for any powerful clan to reaffirm its claim to a leading political position through the spokespersonship of the performing jeli. To support the high rank assertions of their patrons, jelis evoked the family's prestigious past in elaborate speeches and reminded the audience of the deeds by which particular ancestors had contributed to the well-being of the community. Jeli men adapted the rendering of past events and alliances between families to the exigencies of the current political climate. They omitted details or historical events that shed an unfavorable light on the patron family itself or on any political ally present in the audience. Jeli praise, besides procuring a powerful family with an aura of legitimacy, also encouraged a patron to excel in courage and moral perfection, by praising the bravery of his ancestors.

Jelis' social mediation and public praise of the powerful were seen to follow from their affection towards their patrons. Patron families, on the other hand, reciprocated their clients' loyalty and services with favors, by offering them a homestead, political protection, regular provision in food and clothing and more or less generous gifts. Clients and patrons referred to their alliance as a relationship based on emotional attachment and mutual trust.

Because jelis were allies and confidants of dominant clans, nobody in the audience, not even political adversaries, expected jelis to describe "real" historical information. On the contrary, listeners felt that, jelis' duty was to recite past events in a way that would suit the interests of their patrons. Listeners did not really believe jelis' descriptions of the noble origin or the prestigious family history of the patron. What mattered most in the performances was that they moved people, instigated feelings of awe, and incited the lauded patrons to live up to the expectations placed upon them in accordance with the reconstructed family background. Still, the longstanding affiliation between noble families and their jeli clients extended beyond the life span of individual members of both families and gave jelis an aura of credibility. Jelis'

assertions to be truthful, trustworthy, and faithful spokespeople of their patrons could not be questioned or dismissed easily.

Today, many jelis and commoners talk about their former alliances as relations ruled by harmony and empathy. But this harmonious picture only corresponds to the ideal image that clients and patrons sought to present to the outside. Tensions and conflicting views of mutual duties and "favours" were certainly already part and parcel of patronage affiliations in 19th century society. An important reason for these tensions was that the rate of exchange of mutual goods and services was not clearly defined. Disagreements between jelis and their patrons over the exact value of a rendered favor were common. Another source of mutual distrust was that jelis could desert their patrons for another family or individual promising to be more generous towards them. However, comments by jelis and free people today suggest that it was the mere threat of desertion, rather than the action itself, that put patrons under psychological pressure to give their clients what they asked for. Because a patron could never be protected against the versatile nature of jelis' "attachment" and faithfulness as allies and confidants, many patrons considered the jelis' praise a mixed blessing. Jeli speech was full of metaphors and multi-layered meanings, and could therefore easily convey subtle allusions and threats. As a proverb puts it: "a jeli enhances your name, but he may also destroy it". Patrons both respected and feared jelis for their intimate knowledge of their family history and for their capacity to publicly address sensitive topics. This task of "articulation" in the double sense of the term, that is, as speakers of the powerful and as mediators between public and more intimate settings, invested jelis with a position that engendered ambivalence towards them.

3. The transformation of patronage relations under colonial rule

French colonial rule triggered social and economic changes that undermined in decisive ways the basis of patronage relations between dominant clans and their various client families. In the southern French Sudan, the suppression of warfare and the gradual manumission of slaves deprived the dominant clans of their most important sources of wealth, namely raids and agricultural production. New trade routes, centers, and networks emerged offering individuals of various social backgrounds new avenues to economic success. New groups of traders and other economic entrepreneurs were able to gain influence over the new channels that granted access to resources, institutions, and representatives of the colonial state. Colonial schooling, as

the precondition for employment in the ranks of the colonial and later postcolonial bureaucracy, opened up further opportunities for social and political ascent. Most pupils of the first generation were of slave or nyamakala origin or from marginal families of commoners. In this fashion, schooling and literacy gradually subverted previous social hierarchies (cf. Schulz 1997).

How did these profound changes affect the life situation of client families and their relationship to their patrons? First of all, many patrons were no longer capable of supporting their clients to the extent that they did in precolonial days. In some localities, the dominant clans continued to have an important political weight, yet their influence remained restricted to the local realm, unless some of their members were able to access the institutions of the colonial state or the independence movement parties. Jelis, who were also threatened by the impoverishment of their patrons, had to find new ways to make a living and to remain important in political life. In remote rural areas, jeli families could "no longer wait for their patrons to give them their due share," as their descendants put it today. Jelis increased their own agricultural production and relegated entertainment and performance to the post-harvest period, when people had more leisure and their patrons were more likely to give generously. More income opportunities existed for jelis and other nyamakalas who lived in the proximity of the new urban centers. Some jeli sons had to cultivate on the jeli family fields; others, often musicians or gifted orators, approached the nouveaux riches of the "white power" (tubabu fanga) in town. They specialized in public flattery and praised their often invented prestigious family origin of the upstarts. In this fashion, they helped justify the new elites' power in a way that conformed to the previous logic of accounting for political success.

Particularly since the 1950s, with the expanding urban job market, the life situation and occupations of jelis have diversified. In urban areas, literate nyamakalas work as teachers, in the national broadcast station, in the administration and other institutions of the state. The job market in urban areas provides a regular income to jelis, and facilitates access to positions of political influence and decision making. The social background of jelis is no longer relevant to the exercise of a particular profession. The new job opportunities make it possible for most jeli families from the countryside to expand their branches and connections to the urban centers of Mali. But even though many jelis benefit from the new job market in the city, most of them remain firmly rooted in their home villages, through family ties and obligations.

4. The variety of jeli life situations and their current relationships to patrons

The kinds of activities that jelis and other nyamakalas pursue today vary with their location: in the proximity of a town, jelis are first and foremost farmers who employ a multiple income strategy. They combine various tasks of social mediation with agricultural production and an often substantial reliance on their migrant worker sons' financial remittances. In remote rural areas, jelis are first and foremost farmers - similar to their patrons. They also work in the service of noble patrons as interlocutors, spokespeople, and eyewitnesses at events of public interest.

Marriage negotiations are key events during which free families negotiate and sometimes redefine their relationship, and these meetings necessitate the participation of a jeli. A jeli's intervention is often decisive in avoiding a serious confrontation between two families in latent hostility, as when she or he portrays the former relations between these families in an uncompromisingly positive light, even though reality may be different. Public or intimate negotiations between families are important occasions for jelis to prove their devotion to their patrons' interests, illustrate their knowledge of family matters, and display their diplomatic skills. Public interaction with their clients offers patron and members of his family the occasion to beef up their reputation, through the jelis' public praise and flattery, but also by providing an opportunity to engage in ostentatious display of his wealth and generosity. Patrons usually remunerate their jelis in goods (food, clothes, cattle) and sometimes money or work prestation (agriculture, construction work).

Jeli singers, instrumentalists or storytellers are highly sought after as entertainers during social events. At night and especially during the dry season, when people have the time and energy to socialize, jelis mix in their performances embellishments, subtle criticism, and irony - a source of great entertainment and amusement for listeners. Jelis sing the praise of the free families of the village, but also other popular songs. Listeners have great appreciation of these musical performances, because they articulate practices and identities that are closely tied to the families that are influential in the village. The host family usually compensates the jelis immediately for these entertaining services.

Whether in the presence of other people or in private, jelis often use informal encounters with members of a patron clan to flatter them and encourage them to prove their "attachment" to their clients. This praise may be set up in a spontaneous way when the jeli encounters his

patron by coincidence. Both the noble and the jeli consider this public praise a part of the routine everyday services of jelis towards their patrons, for which they may not be directly remunerated. But a jeli may ask his patron a favor at any moment. Each encounter is an enactment of a long-term-relationship, but this does not preclude constant attempts of both parties to rearrange the terms of trade for their own interests that is, to achieve favorable conditions of mutual services: a jeli will openly declare that he considers the amount of recompense to be a measure of the patron's attachment to his client, thereby motivating the patron to give him more.

The situation of jelis whose homestead is close to a town is different: here, many cultivate their fields, but try to live as much as possible off the gifts and money of "patrons" in town. Compared to their relatives who live in town, the income situation of jelis from villages near a town is often better, because they combine agricultural production with income derived from donations. A jeli may pursue agricultural and performance activities at different times of the year as in the old days, or else different members of a family may split the tasks, complementing and supporting each other economically. What distinguishes the way jelis earn a livelihood today from the ways their mothers and fathers did is that a growing number of jelis no longer consider themselves a client affiliated with only one patron. Rather, they may be solicited by various commoners and fill out their conventional tasks of mediation as one-off services performed in exchange for immediate recompense. In town, many of these activities have become monetized (Schulz, *forthc.*).

As in the colonial period, in the countryside differences between jeli families with respect to their economic standing lead to jealousy, resentment, and occasional conflict. Jelis rely more than before on their own agricultural activities, because even well-to-do commoners are neither willing or able to support their client families. Thus, if several jeli or other nyamakala families live in a village, their frustration in the competition with other jeli families will be as much a function of their own success as agriculturalists as it will depend on their patrons' wealth and generosity. Competitiveness and resentment among jelis is more marked in the interaction between jeli families who live in remote rural areas and those living in the proximity of a town. The former are anxious to distinguish themselves from the latter and frequently assert, in a derogatory fashion, that "these jelis" are "no real agriculturalists" because "they just live from asking money (from patrons) in town." Clearly, in these situations, jelis

having internalized the values of farmers, present agricultural activities as the only appropriate way to earn one's living. However, the same speaker might claim on a different occasion that in former times "his family did not have to cultivate at all" - usually to emphasize his ancestors' success as clients and the good relations they had with their patrons. Therefore, what is represented as the ideal "jeli way of life" becomes a reproach or even an insult directed at other jeli families. Jelis living closer to town, on the other hand, tend to portray jelis from remote areas as backward "bush people" who might be industrious agriculturalists but who "do not know how to really praise patrons."

To conclude, today relations between jelis and free people, although highly variable in political importance and the types of transaction involved, are still shaped by the terms and rhetoric of patronage. Jelis' affiliation with hòròn families entails potential for disagreement, conflict, and distrust. Far from constituting a homogenous category, jelis have, for a long time, been performing a broad range of mediating and oratory tasks. Also, relationships among jelis are characterized by internal divisions and hierarchies, as well as by conflicts and competition. Their affiliation with patron families of diverse economic and political standing places only some of them in a privileged position of full satisfaction by their patrons' generosity.

5. "Contradiction" and "ambiguity" reconsidered

How does the patronage relation between jelis and hòròn shape the interaction between representatives of the two categories? How do the specific tasks that jelis perform affect the views that free people hold of their clients? To answer these questions, we should look at some previous interpretations of the position of jelis and other nyamakalas in society, and delineate the main lines of reasoning on which current assumptions of the "status ambiguity" of nyamakalas are based.

McNaughton (1998, see also 1995), who gives us the most thorough description of the "knowledge, power and art" of Mande blacksmiths, is nonetheless puzzled by what he considers to be the contradiction between the respect and fear that nyamakalaw inspire among "the Mande" (1995:52) and the fact that they are held by people of free birth in contempt. The fact that the activities of the nyamakalaw are so much in demand, that free people treat them with respect and care in on-stage encounters, but in their absence refer to them condescendingly as "being just nyamakalas," reveals for the author, contradictory attitudes towards the

nyamakalas' activities and the "status ambiguity" of nyamakalas. McNaughton argues that this "status ambiguity" has equivalents in other social institutions in Mande society ruled by "ambivalence and ambiguity" (1988: 9-10; 160). In his view, social practice can be read like a language. Its skillful reading will reveal the "grammar" of society, that is, "ambivalence and ambiguity" as fundamental patterns of belief and practice in Mande society. McNaughton argues that this ambiguity is most prominent in beliefs about the capacities of nyamakalas. People's ambivalent attitudes of respect and fear towards nyamakalas are due the latter's knowledge of an occult force, the nyama. Following Bird (1974), McNaughton characterizes nyama as a spiritual, "enabling" force of action which is set free in activities of transformation - and which he once again seeks to link to general patterns of Mande social organization and belief system:

Nyama, then, is a little like electricity unconstrained by insulated wires but rather set neatly into a vast matrix of deeply interfaced social and natural laws. But it is more than energy. When the Mande tell folk stories, recounts legends, or explain things to researchers, it becomes clear that they view nyama as a rationale for their most fundamental behavior patterns and as an explanation for the organization of their world. (McNaughton 1988:16)

However, the statements of informants which McNaughton presents in support of his argument suggest that what we have is not quite "status ambiguity" but simply ambivalent feelings on the part of free people towards individual nyamakalas and their important, yet also threatening activities.

Hoffman also sees a contradiction between free people's (whom she refers to as "nobles") disparaging views of jelis and the fact that they often solicit jelis to perform various services on their behalf (1995: 37, 43). She explores the "interdependency of nobles and griots" as a useful avenue to understanding the puzzling status of jelis (and, by extension, of all nyamakalas) in Mande society. Jelis' control of nyama makes people of free birth dependent on jelis, because nyama is at the origin of the compelling force of praise performances. Hoffman describes nyama as a kind of material that grows "thicker" as a praise performance proceeds. It moves the lauded person and makes her "swell with pride," so that, in the end, the "emotion thus stirred is literally dripping with nyama" (Hoffman 1995:42). Hoffman concludes that the

moving force inherent in a jeli's speech is the reason why nobles are afraid of jelis.

This insight is relevant for an understanding of free people's reservations towards nyamakalas. People of free birth are afraid of the capacities of jelis to transform silent knowledge into action through the spoken word. Free people are also aware of their own dependence on jelis' encouragement and reputation management. Yet the fact that free people have mixed feelings towards nyamakalas does not necessarily indicate that the status of nyamakalas is "ambiguous," as Hoffman and Mc Naughton present it. What becomes evident, however, is that free people's claims change from situation to situation and contradict each other.

The contingent nature of free people's assertions becomes even more evident in their evaluations of nyamakalas' moral disposition and behavior. McNaughton notes that a free person might solicit a nyamakala client precisely because he knows that this client will serve his interest and show his trustworthiness; in other situations, in contrast, when the nyamakala client is absent, the same free individual will assert that his client "does not have shame." But once again, McNaughton takes these contradictory statements about jelis' behavior as an indicator for their "ambiguous" status (McNaughton 1988:7, 160).

Hoffman (1995) establishes a similar argument. She notes that the interaction between jelis and "nobles" is strongly determined by an "asymmetry of mutual accountability." That jelis are not scolded for their "shameless" behavior, and may even receive a gift in exchange for their embarrassing speech, indicates that jelis will never be held responsible by free people for what they do. From the difference in standards of behavior to which they are held, Hoffman even concludes that a jeli will actually never *feel* ashamed. In her view, this asymmetry of moral standards for jelis and free people points to an ambiguity in jelis' status.

Certainly, the behavioral codes that are appropriate for people of free birth and to nyamakalas differ substantially, and in the definition of conduct, "shame" (maloya) plays a central role. Yet, to conclude that jelis do not have feelings of shame or will not display it, because they are not scolded by free people for their "shameless" behavior, conflates two levels of analysis and two usages of "shame."

On the one hand, "to have shame" or "being shameless" are stereotyped role expectations associated with the rank of free people and jelis respectively. Free people are urged to avoid actions that are considered to be shameful. For instance, a free person is expected to display a

sense of modesty and self-control in her speech - and to feel - at least in retrospective - "shame" if she has not complied with this code. If an individual of free birth lives up to the expectations placed on her according to her social rank, people might approvingly assert that this person has really acted with "dignity" and in a way that proves her birth as a free person. If she acts otherwise, she will risk losing face. In contrast, nobody will expect a nyamakala to act like a free person. Nor will one expect that a nyamakala should feel embarrassed or "shameful" because of her assertive, loud, and demanding demeanor. If a jeli behaves in a manner that would be outrageous for a free person, people will simply assert that such a behavior, offensive as it is, does not come as a surprise because, the person in question is "just a jeli," after all.

On the other hand, "to have shame" is a criterion of evaluation of a person's conduct, regardless of his or her origin. "Feeling shame" is a judgement a jeli's behavior as much as that of a person of free origin. The use of "shame" to evaluate an individual's conduct is frequently associated with the notion of "free" rank (hòronya). For example, free people will say that a jeli showed true signs of horonya when, in a speech intervention on behalf of his patron family, he acted like a trustworthy client. To resolve a conflict, a jeli certainly takes advantage of the fact that, as a nyamakala, he is authorized to address "touchy" and unpleasant matters and to use words that a free person would be embarrassed to even overhear. At the same time, the jeli's "shameless" words may be proof of his enormous psychological insight, diplomatic skills, and his thorough knowledge of family matters. Therefore, to assert that a jeli behaved "like a free person (hòron)" means to acknowledge the client's moral integrity. In this situation, "horonya" does not indicate a social status, but a pattern of conduct.

Thus the contradictory statements that free people make about the moral disposition and behavior of jelis do not constitute a proof of nyamakalas' status ambiguity. The contents of the claims, expectations, and mutual allegations of "feeling shame" or "lacking shame" are very much dependent upon the situation in which they are expressed. Free people's judgements of jelis' behavior are simply a way of defining their own social and political position.

6. The mixed blessings and mixed feelings of patronage

Nyamakalas too make very contradictory claims about their relationship with free people. In what follows, I argue that there are reasons other than the strategies of mutual positioning that create feelings of ambivalence and tensions between jelis and free people.

Some tasks performed by jelis create ambivalent feelings in people of free birth, and motivate them to make contradictory statements about their jeli clients. I also explore what is at stake for jelis in their interaction with patrons, to understand why the statements of jelis too vary with the situation and contradict each other.

Jeli women and men who are confidants of a noble family are often solicited as counselors in intimate family affairs. In these situations, the hierarchical relationship between the patron and the jeli, strongly emphasized in public settings, is absent or even inverted. Thanks to his psychological insight and life experience, and to his knowledge of the "weak spots" of his patron- friend, the jeli will find a solution that is advantageous for the patron and save his face.

The previous section illustrated that the pattern of public "shame" ascribes different norms of conduct to jelis and to nobles. For an individual of free birth, to pronounce certain words or to address sensitive topics in public is considered to be un noble and shameful. In contrast, jelis are authorized and even expected to address sensitive issues in public; their speech may substantially contribute to resolve tensions and conflict. Patrons depend on jelis for their mediating tasks but also fear them: the jeli's intervention endows her with a knowledge potentially harmful for the patron. Any embarrassing detail of the patron's family history, when told in the presence of other people, would undoubtedly harm the patron's reputation. Thus, the mixture of distrust, respect and disdain that nobles often show towards jelis is a result not only of the "shameless" nature of jeli's public and loud discussion of sensitive issues, but also of the jeli's potentially harmful knowledge. The fact that some jelis hold a thorough knowledge of the patron's family history invests them with considerable political influence over the patron. Because they can publicly pronounce their knowledge of intimate family matters, hòròn people will carefully avoid disappointing a jeli.

In jeli families still in a long-term affiliation with a patron family, the senior members are often central figures in local communication networks and managers of public opinion. Because of their roles as mediators and advisors, jelis have access to all public and more intimate settings of social gathering and discussion. They may articulate in public what they know or what they consider to be appropriate to divulge in certain situations. They can describe situations in new ways, explain them by drawing on alternative frames, and thus they can influence the interlocutors and listeners' opinions and determine the outcome of decision

making processes. Considered "masters of the word," they occupy a unique position of "articulation" (in its double sense, cf. Wright 1989) at the boundaries between private and public realms. This strategic position instills feelings of respect, but also of reticence and worry in their patrons and other people of free birth.

We can draw two conclusions pertinent to the exploration of the relationship between jelis and free people. Patrons' ambivalent feelings towards jelis have two sources. First, the patrons depend on their clients for the accomplishment of services central to the social and political harmony, even though free people may publicly declare that these activities are "shameless." Second, the particular nature of some jeli services puts them in a strategic position between the realms of public and intimate knowledge.

Jelis and nobles have conflicting expectations towards each other in a way that is similar to the situation in the 19th century. Their disagreements, combined with a rhetoric of mutual empathy and trust, are characteristic of many patron- client relations. Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) point out that strong interpersonal obligations between patron and client are typically couched in terms of a mutual attachment. The rhetoric of friendship conceals the ambivalences and tensions inherent in the relationship involving unequal power positions between the two partners. Tensions between the exchange partners may lead to conflicts. This observation is valid for the relations between jelis and patrons, but there is a further twist specific to their relationship. Many jelis, instead of avoiding situations with an unclear outcome to the negotiation, may on the contrary invest a lot of energy to keep the situation tense and emotionally uncertain, because it is to their own advantage to do so.

Jelis are excluded from any formal position of political decision making, and have only mediated political influence in their function as counselors. In public, jelis often underline their subordinate position. But one should not be misled by the jelis' apparent display of social and political inferiority. Jelis may become crucially relevant to political affairs, because speech interventions of jelis sometimes constitute a turning point in negotiation processes. Their relevance may not be explicitly stated, either by themselves or free people. For jeli clients, it is easier to "bend" the actual distribution of powers to their own advantage by publicly emphasizing the patron's unchallenged superior position. This situation gives them the opportunity to threaten the patron's powerful allure in subtle allusions. Jelis' preference is to

"convince" a patron that his client deserves a higher remuneration. Many public encounters with jelis are experienced by free people as situations of extreme emotional insecurity, precisely because they are so unpredictable in outcome. Clearly, jelis turn such open-ended encounters into an advantage by enhancing their own bargaining position. At the same time, because these inherent tensions tend to threaten the stability of the affiliation between jelis and patrons, jelis subscribe, at least in public, to a discourse of friendship and mutual attachment, to maintain feelings of mutual trust.

When the relationship is depicted in this manner, we can understand that in many situations, jelis, instead of contesting free people's view of them as "shameless" and "inferior," accept their patrons' characterization. Jelis even intentionally create and sustain feelings of ambivalence, insecurity, and distrust towards them, because these feelings puts them in a stronger position.

7. Patronage as nostalgia and nuisance: jelis' and patrons' conflicting definitions of their mutual obligations

The information presented so far shows how rhetoric, be it one of friendship, affection, respect or disdain, is a central element of jelis' and free people's definition of their relationship. The conflicting opinions and allegations are part of discursive strategies that can bend the terms of exchange and mutual obligation to one's own advantage. None of the claims made in this discourse can be taken at face value, that is, as indicators of the addressee's "status." Instead, they have to be understood as moves motivated by particular situations and interests. To illustrate this point, I will take up in greater detail one central issue of disagreement between jelis and free people. In different settings, patrons and jelis take on various and contradictory stances, and use their respective representations strategically to enforce the interests they pursue in a particular situation.

One way in which patrons and clients define the nature of their current relationship is to refer to the past as an authoritative point of reference. Patrons and clients often disagree over the extent to which patrons provided food and board for their clients in 19th century society. Their statements often concern the size of the *jatigi makònò*, literally "the little spot one cultivates while waiting for the patron (and his support)," that is, the field that jelis cultivated on their own to meet their subsistence needs. Very often, the same person's claims may change

considerably from situation to situation and even contradict her previous assertions.

In the initial stages of my research in two villages 40 miles from the town of Kita, jeli historians asserted that, at the times of their fathers, no jatigi makònò existed because "their fathers did not have to cultivate at all." Members of the jelis' patron family who were present at these discussions never contradicted these statements. Some older men of the patron family even explicitly agreed with the jelis' assertion, and, in the same breath, deplored the hardships of the current economic situation in which patrons are no longer able to "give jelis their due share." However, after a few weeks, it became evident from casual remarks made by both free people and jelis, that "before the whites came," jelis, similar to other clients, had in fact "had their little spot." How can one make sense of these contradictory statements? One reason for the jelis' assertion was that they sought to stress, in the presence of free people, the extent of their patrons' generosity in the past. It was intended as flattery and as moral pressure. It subtly "suggested" that patrons should imitate their ancestors' generosity and "noble" attitude. Another reason for the jelis' claim was certainly that, seeing in me a potential patron, they sought to convince me how much they suffered from the recent social and economic changes that left them without their patrons' material support.

However, in another village, during conversations where no patron was present, representatives of the jeli family emphatically stated that in previous times, they had cultivated their own fields to "render their patrons' burden lighter." Some members of this jeli family count among the most eminent musicians of Mali. Their national success has brought this family a high reputation, but also bad press: many people in the surrounding villages, free people and jelis alike, accused them of "not working at all, but rendering life difficult to their patrons by asking for money all the time." Aware of these allegations, the jelis wanted to stress to me that previously they had some economic independence to rectify their public image as "sycophants."

Yet in another village, hòròns and jelis made dramatically contrasting statements about the patrons' former contribution to their clients' livelihood in different situations. The background to these contradictory claims was a series of confrontations between members of the jeli and the patron family. This surprising sequence started for me when one day, I discussed the size of the jatigi makònò with members of the village chief's family and in the presence of some jelis. Family members told me that, before the arrival of the whites, the jelis' plot had been insignificant. I gathered from this remark that they wanted to underline the wealth and the

generosity of their fathers. The present jelis remained silent during the conversation. Later one jeli told me that he was reluctant to confront my interlocutors' statement in public, but that their assertion was 'just another instance of these people's boasting,' because jelis had, of course, already in previous times secured their livelihood themselves. Several weeks later, my jeli interlocutor was asked to speak for his patrons, the chiefly family of the village, at a wedding celebration. This time, he held a long and moving speech in which he elaborated on how lucky the in-laws of his patron family should be considered. They were about to conclude an alliance with the most generous families of the area with a long-standing history of moral eminence and generosity towards weaker and dependent people. After all, the clients of the patron family had never been forced to cultivate themselves, because their patrons had provided them with all they needed. Clearly, on this occasion of highest public interest, the jeli presented a picture of the past most favorable to his patron, but also to himself, because the flattery was sure to induce a generous remuneration.

There were yet other situations in which free people and jelis would agree that the latter had started only lately to cultivate for themselves. In these situations, my interlocutors were stressing the hardships brought by the social and economic changes that occurred since colonization.

The recurrent yet contradicting references to the jatigi makònò reflect first, that the earlier obligations between patrons and clients are no longer valid or realized. Second, the references point to the on-going disagreement and negotiation over the value of their mutual services and favors. The rhetoric around the extent of the patron's support in the 19th century shows that these disagreements are attempts to define the nature and extent of mutual obligations constitutive of on-going relationships between patrons and jelis. The evocation of a harmonious past in which both patrons and jelis were willing and capable of meeting the other party's needs and expectations serves as a template to deplore the current times, but also, to blame the other party for one's own degraded income situation.

However, it would be misleading to see the frequent reference to the jatigi makònò as mere rhetoric; instead, the contradicting assertions about its size reflect actual changes in the institutional arrangement of patron-jeli relations. The complaint that patrons are no longer fulfilling their obligations, and that jelis have become "greedy" points to crucial changes in the institutional set up that shaped their previous interaction (Schulz, forthc.).

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was twofold. First, it challenged the view that nyamakalas have an "ambiguous" status in Mande society - a view that has acquired almost a canonical status in the past two decades. I argued that a nyamakala's (and a free person's) "status," that is, the valuation attached to a person's position in a social hierarchy, is contested in the sense that diverse actors utter different opinions about it. These opinions are mutually exclusive, not different facets of one single underlying cultural category, the essence of which we can uncover by exegetic effort. To talk of ambiguous status implies the existence of an "unambiguous," fixed or unchanging status. This view derives from a non-conflictual model of social interaction which is not, as I have shown, valid for Mande society. Any lack of coherence in people's statements, in Mande society and elsewhere, should not be ironed out by trying to discover an underlying cultural notion that has consistency of a higher order and that would seem to resolve the contradictions that exist in the statements we hear. On the contrary, it should be brought to the center of our effort to understand the actors' statements by reference to the pragmatics (and perhaps politics) of social life.

The second purpose of the discussion was to show that there are reasons other than the nyamakalas' handling of nyama which account for free people's ambivalent attitudes towards them. The feelings of both respect and distrust of free people towards jelis can be explained by the fact that they maintain a patron- client relationship. Because clients and patrons exchange services and favors, the value of which can not be measured accurately, both partners try to bend the "terms of exchange" to their own advantage. In some public situations, patrons and clients try to minimize their own dependence on the partner's service or favors. These evaluations and devaluations are frequently expressed in the form of moral judgements. Jelis' public display of "shamelessness," that is moral inferiority works to their advantage because it underscores their position at the receiving end of the social hierarchy. Jelis purposefully engender and maintain feelings of ambivalence in their patrons, because they know that a patron's emotional insecurity will make it easier for them to induce the patron to greater generosity.

Nyama may be part of local conceptions as energy inherent in speech and other force-ful activities. Nevertheless, nyama is not needed to understand what people in Mande society mean

when they speak of the "moving" and transformative forces of speech that is once enabling and "obscure" (dibi, cf. Hoffman 1995: 42). When people say that there are invisible and "obscure" forces in speech, they are simply stressing that the emotions and the "courage" stirred by musical and speech performances are experiences that are difficult to express in words. People's emphasis on the forceful nature of nyama is an acknowledgment of the compelling sensual and aesthetic dimensions in the activities performed by nyamakalas.

Encounters between jelis and their patrons illustrate how role expectations and stereotypical assumptions that are attached to an individual's or a group's social position are mediated through practice. Encounters between jelis and their patrons have an outcome that is often anticipated, yet never fully predictable. The extent to which an individual will follow, play upon or subvert the stereotypes attached to his or her position depends on his or her initiative and ingenuity. Yet, while we may rightly emphasize people's possibilities to play upon the expectations that other people accord to them, we should not exaggerate the former's capacities, and even less so intention, to revise these stereotypes. On the contrary, in many encounters between jelis and hòròns, jelis have little motivation to subvert the stereotypic assumptions that many hòròns cherish about them. Nor should we assume that jelis' intentional and strategic enactment of stereotypes will substantially change their evaluation as clients. The instances of interactions between jelis and their patrons reported in the previous sections offer ample evidence for the fact that the mutual role expectations put severe limitations on both partners to revise the terms of mutual obligations and the expectations about the partner's conduct, services and obligations. In this sense, role expectations and stereotypic assumptions attached to an individual according to his or her social rank always present a frame of action that is restricting and enabling at the same time.

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