

## Labor Migration, Gender, and Social Transformation in Rural Mali

Maria Grosz-Ngaté

Originally published in *Democracy and Development in Mali*. R. James Bingen, David Robinson, and John M. Staatz, eds. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000.

Labor migration is a significant demographic and politico-economic phenomenon in Mali, as in neighboring Sahelian countries. Yet in contrast to migration in Senegal and especially in Burkina Faso, labor migration in Mali has attracted little attention on the part of researchers. As a result, available data are largely restricted to aggregate statistics and fail to provide an appreciation of the long and complex history of migration in the country. Although several “Women in Development” survey-based studies of women migrants in the major urban centers of Mali<sup>1</sup> have recently started to improve our understanding of migration in Mali, these studies do not examine the rural context or origins of the migrants. This chapter builds on recent theoretical developments which help us rethink connections between the rural and urban, the local and global, and thus present an opportunity to take a fresh look at migration.

My own interest in labor migration stems from long-term research in an area east of Segou locally known as Sana, which coincides with the administrative subdivision of the *Arrondissement de Sansanding*. The majority of Sana inhabitants speak the Bamana language as their mother tongue, although most of the citizens of Sinsanni and Shibla,<sup>2</sup> the two largest towns, identify as Maraka rather than as Bamana. There are also Bozo speakers settled in villages along the Niger River and a small population of semi-sedentary Fulbe dispersed throughout the province. Sana is densely populated so that villages are within easy reach of each other. My research has concentrated on Bamana cultivators who engage in rain-fed production of millet and, to a lesser extent, peanuts and fonio. In addition, most households cultivate 1–3 ha of

irrigated rice within the confines of the government rice development agency *Opération Riz*. People identify themselves as “cultivators” (*cikèlaw*) if asked about their occupation, but agriculture is not self-sustaining and the reproduction of social life is predicated on a combination of agriculture and seasonal labor migration. Any analysis of rural social dynamics and cultural configurations must therefore take into account those who are away for periods of time, their projects, and their interactions with those who remain at home.

Exploring the local social context challenges us to rethink the analytical constructs which have been used to analyze rural society, even though the social analysis of African societies has undergone considerable changes over the past thirty-five years. For example, concepts like *lineage* and *tribe* have given way to *household* and *community* in recognition of integration into “wider stratified political and economic systems under a state form of government.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the construction of typologies of local structures has been replaced by an emphasis on processes of change. These shifts, however, do not represent a uniform analytical framework: ‘household’ and ‘community’ originate in the study of European peasantries, and processes of change are conceptualized differently in neo-Marxist analyses than in studies drawing on dependency theory, for example. In recent years, researchers have stressed the connections between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ (or the ‘translocal’ and the ‘transnational’) in recognition of the fluidity of boundaries of all kinds, but the challenge of conceptualizing these connections remains. We still seek ways to apprehend “continuity and change,” as Jane Guyer noted more than fifteen years ago. Labor migration is only one of the phenomena that links local socio-cultural formations with wider structures and processes. Studies of labor migration in Africa have concentrated above all on typologies of migration and on causes and consequences, the latter conceived mainly in terms of the impact on rural social structures and economy. This approach assumes that there is an active external force acting on a static local structure and overlooks the dynamic

inherent in each that needs to be understood and whose interactions (and the meanings given to them) require analysis.

In this chapter, I concentrate on labor migration in Sana as a process linking local socio-cultural formations with wider structures and processes. Local social dynamics and cultural constructs shape labor migration, and in turn, challenge these very same dynamics and constructs. This chapter explores issues that have arisen around migration—matters that have preoccupied villagers over the years—and suggests what they can tell us about social transformations in the Bamana villages of late-twentieth-century Mali. In short, this chapter seeks to elucidate social process and cultural meanings rather than characterize migratory flows or assess causes and economic impact. The focus is on the rural dimension of migration rather than the urban dimension or the regional and global historical forces that have helped produce migration. I have found it necessary to disaggregate labor migration into male and female migration. Men and women occupy different positions within the household and rural society, their objectives in migrating differ, and the tensions and ambiguities around their respective migration vary and meet with different responses. It will also become evident that ‘male’ and ‘female’ are not monolithic categories, but that the men and women involved are distinguished by generation and occupy specific social positions.

### **The Social Context of Migration in Sana**

One of the fundamental social units in Sana is the household, an analytical construct that has gained currency in African studies only within the last twenty-five years. Its use in the African context has benefited from a feminist critique<sup>6</sup> that questioned an earlier conceptualization of the household as a solitary pooling and sharing unit. Research has shown that relationships within the household cannot be assumed and that internal differentiation (for

example, age and gender hierarchies and the power relations these imply) needs to be elucidated. Moreover, households cannot be treated as isolated units but must be examined within a wider context. Taking into account these feminist concerns, the following sketch of the structure of Bamana households and their interrelations refers to the 1980s and 1990s.

Bamana households in Sana comprise people who cultivate and eat together. Ideally, they unite classificatory brothers,<sup>7</sup> their wives, sons- and daughters-in-law, and their children. However, many households consist of only a segment of these, often married brothers who are sons of the same mother as well as their offspring. Although labor migration enhances the possibilities for individual accumulation and may thus contribute to divisiveness, there is no evidence to support a direct relationship between accumulation and any increase in the establishment of nuclear units. Households have always experienced fission, and interviews with elders from different villages indicate that the anthropological model of a unified corporate kin group has rarely been the rule.

The eldest living man represents the household and makes decisions in consultation with the other adult men. He, or a younger man delegated by him, directs agricultural labor in the household fields and provides the grain and condiments for daily meals. A few large households also have subunits composed of different brothers or the sons of different wives who cultivate additional common fields, known as “evening fields” (*surò forow*). Where this is the case, each subunit derives one of its daily meals from the harvest of the evening field.<sup>8</sup> Married women and unmarried daughters work alongside men in the fields but can only cultivate their own plots if they receive permission from the household head. Women who are no longer required to participate in household agriculture, on the other hand, are entitled to their own field<sup>9</sup> if they wish to cultivate one and are able to pursue non-agricultural income-generating activities while other household members work in the fields. Following the harvest, the men and women who

constitute the household's agricultural labor force also engage in various kinds of work—making mats or fans, spinning cotton, or cultivating onions, for example—that bring them a small income.

In addition to kin ties, a dense network of marriage alliances links households within the village and with others in neighboring villages and north into Kala. The preferred marriage is still one based on kin ties; that is, where an in-law relationship (*buranya*) has been transformed into kinship (*balimaya*) over generations.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, marriages are a highly desired form of inter-household ties as they turn neighbors into kin and in-laws with all of the social obligations this entails. To facilitate collaboration and enhance social life, members of village households participate in mutual aid groups and in various associations (*tònw*).<sup>11</sup> Although inter-village relations have for the most part been smooth over the past two decades, differential relations with the state have produced shifting solidarities on a few occasions.

### **“ In the Interest of the Collectivity”: Men in Migration**

Male labor migration in Sana dates from the early part of the twentieth century when the French colonial government required that taxes be paid in cash rather than in kind. When attempts to impose cotton as a cash crop failed and the drought of 1912-13 devastated the region, households were increasingly compelled to look outside the province for the cash to pay taxes. Junior men were therefore delegated to leave in search of wage work and Senegal became a favorite destination. Given the distance, men would be gone for two or three years at a time. Migration, however, remained intermittent: not every junior man went on migration nor did those who left necessarily make more than one trip during their life time. In part, this was because departures had to be balanced with forced labor requirements that removed men from the household labor force periodically to participate in public works projects or act as

messengers between the *cercle* government and the province. Other men, therefore, had to remain at home to ensure that work in the fields would be completed in a timely fashion.

The French colonial government abolished forced labor in 1946. By the 1950s, households began purchasing ploughs and oxen, thus increasing the requirement for cash. With forced labor no longer a drain, men became involved in migration to meet these needs. New opportunities within the Soudan (as Mali was called at the time) allowed men to make shorter trips to destinations closer to home and spend a few months away during the dry season, rather than leaving for two or three years at a time. The droughts of the early 1970s and 1983–84 further entrenched labor migration as a part of village life. The season of migration lengthened once again when technology shortened time-consuming labor processes: households adopted the plough for the cultivation of all crops, instead of confining it to peanuts, and began hiring tractors to thresh millet. At present, nearly all young men, beginning in late adolescence, leave every year for five to seven months. They continue to do this into their mid- to late 30s unless the head of household dies prematurely or requires their assistance. Some go as far as Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire to work as contractual laborers while others work in the 'informal' sector of Bamako and, more rarely, Segou. Despite the pervasiveness of labor migration, at least one adult man always remains at home during the dry season, except in the case of a few small households that have no sons earning cash. This is in stark contrast with practices elsewhere on the continent, particularly in southern Africa, where women are left in charge of rural households once labor migration becomes entrenched.

Men's involvement in migration is couched in the idiom of service to the collectivity. As members of a patrilineal household it is incumbent upon them to help maintain and, if possible, increase the patrimony. We leave "*ka so dila* (to put the house in order)," migrants first told me in 1981. Elders, too, stressed that migration was a necessity rather than a choice because the

money for taxes, marriage expenses, and agricultural equipment could not be generated through agricultural production alone. At the same time, they noted that migration was no longer the same as during their own youth. One man who had made several trips during the late colonial period said: “We were dirty, we even looked like slaves; but see today’s young men, they are clean and well-dressed.” By pointing to the change in appearance, he commented not only on the difference between the work carried out then and now but also on the respectability—and therefore the desirability—of contemporary migration. Junior men themselves would sometimes say that they “missed Bamako” with its animation and excitement. Elder men acknowledged that it is impossible to prevent a young man from going, and thus admitted both the pleasurable side of migration and the fact that dependence on cash had diminished the authority they once enjoyed within the household. The major change between the early 1980s and the late 1990s is that a greater number of households, regardless of size, now accept that one of their members continue working in the city during the rainy season. They often accommodate a junior who wants to stay away even though this may put greater pressure on those at home.

The manner in which male family labor is reorganized in the context of contemporary needs and desires is evidence of a remarkable cohesiveness. It nonetheless makes power relations among the men of the household subject to continual renegotiation. This is best exemplified by the fact that, once in the city, migrants can delay returning home or change destination (for example, go to Abidjan from Bamako) against their elders’ wishes. Elders then may feel compelled to send letters to Bamako exhorting their sons or younger brothers to return home as the cultivation season gets underway. And anxious mothers, worried that their sons’ absences place too great a burden on household members, frequently query other returning migrants about their sons’ plans.

Lewis<sup>12</sup> has argued that the *ci kè tòn* (the youth association composed of all the age sets until roughly the age of thirty-five) is instrumental in keeping young migrants at home for cultivation and thus indirectly maintaining the status quo of gerontocratic control. He contends that in the area near the Bani River where he conducted research in the mid-1970s villagers were loath to pay taxes with migrant earnings; the *tòn* helps make it possible to cover them with agricultural surplus. According to Lewis, villages with a strong *tòn* have less outmigration than villages with a weak *tòn*. He fails, however, to outline what makes a *tòn* strong or show just how the *tòn* checks the duration and permanence of migration, giving the impression that it is due to the moral force of the collectivity. Lewis does not say that the *tòn* works for a fee, therefore potentially favoring wealthier households, nor that it imposes fines—which may be very stiff—on members who neglect to participate. Although the system of fines is collectively decided and thus implies a political will, it still needs to be analyzed. In Sana, the *tòn* has at times turned down requests for work sessions when made by households from neighboring villages, judging it more important for members to labor in the fields of their respective households than to fill the *tòn* treasury. Unfortunately Lewis provides few ethnographic details to substantiate his argument so that it is difficult to assess differences in local conditions and social arrangements between Sana and the area along the Bani.

Apart from their ability to determine the timing of their return, migrants' control over their earnings contests household power relations. Ceding only a limited amount of cash to the household may introduce tensions between household head and migrant as well as between the juniors of a household. The ambiguity over the disposal of migration earnings is present in the very conception of work and its products: work on a collective project entitles each participant to a proportionate share of the product whereas the revenue of an individual project belongs entirely to the person who initiated and executed that project. This becomes problematic when applied to

labor migration. Already in 1981 migrants did not agree on whether their work should be categorized as individual labor (*jòn foro* or *surò foro baara*) or as labor on behalf of the collectivity (*foroba baara*). Some held that it should be the latter, since wage labor is undertaken to provide for household needs. Others argued that it should be the former, since it is the individual who goes on migration and first satisfies his personal needs. Still others suggested that labor migration has an element of both categories.

It is recognized that the earning power of individuals varies and this is taken into consideration in evaluating a contribution, hence it is not differential contribution that is at issue but disproportionate withholding. No one objects to the migrant retaining earnings for small personal expenses and to purchase clothing, a radio, bicycle, or even a moped. The portion retained by the migrant, however, becomes a divisive issue and a “shameful matter” (*maloya ko*) for the household vis-à-vis other households if individual gain is visibly put above the common good or if it openly favors the “evening field.”<sup>13</sup> One migrant, for example, was criticized for buying an oxen with his earnings. But he defended himself by saying that although it was his oxen, he was making it available to the household for pulling the plough. More frequently migrants use some of their earnings to buy small animals like goats or sheep. Interestingly, I have never heard any complaints that the migrant owes the household a certain level of contribution because those remaining behind have to work harder if he delays his return home. Outright requests for cash are generally made only when taxes or marriage payments are due, though migrants frequently told me that they preferred to go to Bamako rather than to Sinsani or Segou because being within easy reach of home made it more difficult to save. A household head has little leverage against his junior unless the junior’s wedding is still pending and the elder can warn that he will be unable to make an upcoming marriage payment without the potential bridegroom’s remittance.

Handing over only a limited amount to the household head may be less an expression of individual self-interest than a manifestation of an already existing tension. The migrant may be signaling disagreement with the household head or differences among the men of the household which are threatening household unity. In the latter case, the migrant may cast his interests with a smaller unit within the household such as that of the evening field and deploy his earnings on its behalf, because household fission generally takes place along the lines of evening fields.

### **Endangering the Collectivity?: Women in Migration**

Unmarried girls between the ages of approximately sixteen and twenty began migrating in the mid-1970s. Most go to Bamako to work as domestic servants in Malian households with the goal of earning cash to help their mothers prepare the “wedding goods” (*kònyò minanw*), a pattern established for other areas of Mali as well.<sup>14</sup> Wedding goods consist of things such as calabashes, kerosene lamps, flashlights, enamel bowls, blankets, and cloth that brides bring with them when they get married. Mothers are expected to accumulate these items on their daughters’ behalf but have found it ever more difficult as goods considered necessary have increased in range and quantity. Initially, migration may have been precipitated by the penury created by the drought of the early 1970s when many women sold their cloth, gold, or animals to help prevent their families from starving. Girls going to the city reduced the number of mouths that had to be fed and provided a new opportunity for generating some income. Over time, with the continuation of migration even during periods of improved weather, migration has contributed to the inflation in wedding goods. Unlike their brothers, girls have no obligation to contribute to household needs and there is never any question over the allocation of their earnings.<sup>15</sup> Labor migration, however, effectively ends for girls at the time of marriage. A married woman does not migrate unless her husband asks her to accompany him, and this generally happens only if he stays in the city for more than one dry season.

When I first arrived in Sana in February 1981, girls were away working in Bamako but returned for the rainy season. Some left again when cultivation was completed in August; others stayed until after the harvest. Although the aims of female migration were not in question, there was a good deal of discussion by both women and men over some of its effects. Girls working in the city were said to be interacting with men in unseemly ways, becoming too intimate and risking pregnancy. In short, the city was thought to have a corrupting influence over which elders at home had no control. Mothers were concerned but felt that they had no choice except to let their daughters go, and fathers acquiesced.

In 1983, however, representatives from the various Sana Bamana villages (also referred to as the *Bamana tòn*) raised this matter at a meeting whose primary agenda was to discuss the growing burden of marriage expenses. The (male) elders in attendance debated and then concurred that no girls should henceforth go to Bamako. Any girl who contravened this prohibition would pay a fine of 25,000 Malian francs.<sup>16</sup> Each household was therefore obligated to help unmarried daughters find alternate ways of earning cash and prevent them from going to the capital city. Yet by the fall of 1986, girls from all but one village were again working in Bamako. A few were even staying there during the rainy season. When I inquired what had happened, I was told that the agreement had broken down; the fine was so high that once a household found itself in violation and was unable to pay, the prohibition lost its force and migration resumed.

That the perceived problem had not changed was driven home to me by a request made as I was getting ready for a trip from Bamako to Sana in December 1986. The brother of one of the girls (himself working in Bamako at the time) asked me to tell his eldest brother, who was also the head of household, to send someone to Bamako to get his sister because she was behaving very badly—“running after men,” as he put it. I conveyed the message, but still did not find the

girl at home during another visit several months later. When I asked about her, I was told that an elder brother had indeed gone to Bamako to fetch her but that she had left again after only a short stay, implying that they were unable to prevent her from leaving. In contrast, the one village that had collectively upheld the decision seemed to have no such problems. Their prohibition remains in force and has even been tightened: girls are not only prevented from going to Bamako but also to Segou or Markala. They are only allowed to go to Sinsanni and Joro, where villagers regularly attend the weekly markets, and to Niono. Niono is a considerable distance to the north, but is seen as an agricultural town and girls going there generally work in the rice harvest and reside with a relative during their stay.

The debate over female migration, the way of dealing with perceived problems, and the failure to maintain the Sana-wide prohibition raises several questions: Why were objections to female migration couched in terms of a decline in morality rather than, for example, the nature, conditions, and rewards of domestic work? Why the focus on girls' promiscuity rather than on men's lack of restraint? Why did the prohibition against migration break down so quickly in all but one village? And why was one village able to prevail where the others failed?

To say, as some feminists might, that the preoccupation with girls' morality is an instance of a universal double standard that puts the burden on women to protect their virtue is not very useful. Pointing to a pattern does not help us understand the dynamics behind it or explain what happens in a particular place and at a particular point in time. De Jong has detailed how Jola villages in southern Senegal have used the *Kumpo* mask performance to control girls' labor migration to Dakar, but this performance did not involve a discourse on morality.<sup>17</sup> There is evidence that in colonial Zambia (then northern Rhodesia), however, women's departure for the urban areas generated a similar discourse on morality.<sup>18</sup> According to Chauncey, women's migration deprived elders of agricultural labor and, more important, of the possibility to attract

sons-in-law who would provide bride service or its equivalent in cash and goods.<sup>19</sup> In short, the concern with morality was closely tied to the threatened material interests of a relatively privileged group within rural society. This is suggestive even though the colonial Zambian case involves a difference in social structure (matrilineal rather than patrilineal) and occurred under different historical circumstances.

Bamana girls participate in agriculture, but households are less dependent on their labor because junior men and married women constitute the core of the labor force. A girl's capacity for labor receives social recognition only upon marriage when she joins her husband's household and is obligated to cultivate alongside junior men. Household elders arrange marriages without obtaining the consent of the potential bride or that of her mother. Migration raises the possibility that unmarried women will not return and is enhanced by the fact that girls, unlike their male counterparts, have no share in the patrimony. Women's control over property is limited to the wealth they themselves accumulate and the opportunities for doing so are greater in the city than in the rural area, at least during the agricultural off-season. In addition to such structural incentives, staying in the city, despite the insecurities connected with life there, may be preferable to an undesirable marriage. Malian law requires the consent of both spouses to a conjugal union and would therefore support a recalcitrant girl. Girls' refusal to return would not only undermine the marriage system, but also increase the possibility that a greater number of men—whose search for wives might become more precarious—would not return.

Male elders in the village that has upheld the prohibition contend that girls change in the process of migration: while in Bamako, they often become involved with a man and then decide that they do not want the one their elders had chosen for them. It goes without saying that this jeopardizes the arrangement and, ultimately, social relations and the continuity of the patrilineal household. It also undermines the power of elders vis-à-vis women. When I asked if migrating

junior men might not also withdraw from an arranged match, elder men asserted that this wouldn't happen, that men's interests lie with the interest of the kin group. Evidence, however, contradicts this assertion of patrilineal ideology. I know of instances where marriage agreements were dissolved because the bridegroom-designate decided that he did not want to marry the bride-to-be despite the fact that, unlike their female counterparts, young men are asked for their opinion before a marriage alliance is concluded.<sup>20</sup>

Male elders acknowledge that the prohibition makes the mothers' task of preparing a trousseau for their daughters more difficult, yet contend that it eliminates the earlier problems and therefore justifies the hardship. They *do* permit girls to migrate as soon as the wedding or a preliminary wedding ceremony (known as *singa*)<sup>21</sup> has been held, assuming the husband agrees. Frequently the couple migrates together from that point on. The advantage of migration to Bamako rather than to Niono or to rice fields near Kè-Macina to the east seems to lie more in the availability of work year-round. (Reports of what girls have brought back from their work in the rice harvest indicate that their earnings are not inferior to those in Bamako.) Girls say that work in Bamako is hard but that they like to go there more than anywhere else.

Mothers' main concern is that they might be shamed by a daughter who becomes pregnant in Bamako. Only recently did a woman friend tell me that 'you worry that your daughter might get pregnant in Bamako. But you counsel her and hope for the best.'<sup>22</sup> In spite of women's uppermost concern with their daughters' chastity, they—like their migrating daughters—say that girls' refusal of a designated marriage partner is the major reason for the prohibition in the village that has sustained it. Two young girls noted in the course of a conversation with me that another village had now instituted a similar prohibition and allowed that their own elders might yet do the same.<sup>23</sup>

I believe that the severe drought of 1983–84 hastened the demise of the prohibition on female migration in all but one village. Rainfall dropped to half the normal level during those years and dramatized the limited possibilities for generating cash locally. Desperate households might have permitted their daughters to depart in order to relieve pressure on the food supply, and their inability to pay the fine undermined the *tòn*. However, drought is only a context for change rather than its cause. That the agreement should have collapsed so quickly suggests that a Sana-wide *tòn* has less force than a village *tòn*; in short, individual households feel less bound by it. The reasons for this have to be sought in the history of Sana, in the tensions between household/kin group and non-kin collective interests, and in the effects of market relations on social solidarities. While wage labor is virtually absent in agriculture, commodities have become integral to social reproduction. The resumption of migration on the part of adolescent girls highlights that the items that currently constitute the wedding goods have become essential consumption goods for a young bride rather than dispensable luxuries. Women and men must concur in this or girls would not be leaving for Bamako, since most abide by their elders' wishes. Given the frequency with which weddings are postponed because a girl's trousseau is not ready, I asked some people if such postponements could not be avoided by having couples acquire any missing items jointly when they migrate after the wedding. A few men responded affirmatively, but others said that "people wouldn't agree to such a thing." And women did not like the proposition at all and found it unacceptable. Clearly, my suggestion would invite complications in the prevalent separation of spousal property, the control over and distribution of migration earnings, and the potential of *kònyò minanw* as a basis for women's greater autonomy.

## **Conclusion**

In the effort to assist their mothers in preparing a trousseau, female migrants, like their male counterparts, have been drawn into wider sets of power relations that affect the construction

of identity. While it is widely accepted that young men gain autonomy in the course of migration, the autonomy young women gain is perceived as a risk and a potential threat to the integrity of the collectivity. Girls' travel to and work in the city helps constitute them as independent agents and undermines kin-based power and the very conception of the household. The discourse on female morality and the efforts to keep girls from leaving for the city signal the ambivalence over this process.

The different significance attached to male and female migration is underlined by the nature of the response they have elicited. Men may return late or not at all for a given cultivating season, or they may make contributions perceived to be inadequate, but these problems are always dealt with by individual households. There has been no effort on the part of village elders to put collective pressure on young men to return home at particular times or make specific contributions to the household, nor has a *tòn* been put in place toward this end. Only when millet was still being threshed manually was a fine imposed on those who left after cultivation was finished and returned late or not at all for threshing. The risks men's actions might pose for the household (*du*) thus are not seen as something to be mitigated or regulated by communal intervention. This shows that once labor-saving technologies such as the plough or the threshing machine had become widely embraced, production and control of the labor force, like accumulation, were considered to be internal matters—issues to be resolved by the kin group segments encompassed by the household. It also highlights an inherent tension between a communal ethic and an emphasis on household (that is, kin group) control over production and its products, a tension Mali's first president, Modibo Keita, ignored at his peril in some of his policies. Although there is a certain correlation between commoditization and greater stress on household control, this is not an entirely new phenomenon.

The responses to the concerns that have arisen in connection with the migration of men and women suggest that men are responsible to the household and women to the wider community. Women's actions potentially affect not single kin groups, but relations between kin groups that extend beyond the village. An initial response at the level of the province, which is the primary terrain for marriage alliances (or, more graphically, "marriage paths"—*furu siraw*), is therefore not surprising. Moreover, girls' refusal of a designated marriage partner challenges the control elder men still exercise over the constitution of those relations. The elders have accepted that young men have a say in the selection of their wives—men are asked if they agree to a match with a particular woman before negotiations go forward—but young women are not accorded the same privilege. I do not believe that this is simply a question of "patriarchal control" as an abstract universal phenomenon. Girls' actions threaten the existing process of household formation and raise the specter of social relations determined more by individual will than by principles inherited from the past, a form of chaos. This is not to argue that marriage alliances have continued unchanged.<sup>24</sup> Instead, I contend that girls' migration evokes such resistance and fears because it alters the balance of power between men and women as well as between the kin group and the individual. There may be some parallels between the focus on women's actions at the household level and the role often ascribed to women in nationalist movements since both involve the construction of an imagined community.

### Footnotes

1. Diarra et Koné 1991; Institut des Sciences Humaines 1984; Vaa, Findley, and Diallo 1989; Van Westen and Klute 1986.
2. 'Sinsanni' became 'Sansanding' in French colonial records and 'Shibla' became 'Sibila'. Sansanding and Sibila remain the official names of these towns today.
3. Guyer 1981, 87.

4. Guyer 1981.
5. For an overview of this vast multidisciplinary literature, see Stichter 1985.
6. See, for example, Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Guyer and Peters 1987; and Yanagisako 1984.
7. Classificatory brothers are men who are considered brothers in the local kinship system but who may not be brothers within the European kinship system.
8. Despite the name, “evening fields” are not cultivated in the afternoon or evening. They are simply secondary to the “common field” (*foroba*) and their cultivation is integrated with the cultivation of the *foroba*. Before labor migration became a widespread source of income, individual household members might also cultivate their own personal field known as *kò karila*, or “broken back.”
9. These fields are also termed *kò karila* (broken back).
10. See Grosz-Ngaté 1988.
11. The most well-known of these in the literature on Mali is the “cultivation association” (*ci kè tòn*), sometimes referred to as the “youth association” (*kamalen tòn*).
12. See Lewis 1985.
13. “Evening field” refers not only to the field that constituent units within the household might cultivate, but also to those units themselves.
14. Institut des Sciences Humaines 1984; Diarra et Koné 1991.
15. Rosa de Jorio points out that this may be quite different in the cities where women are expected to contribute, if in varying amounts, to their paternal household. Personal communication, July 1998.
16. At a monthly wage of 7,500 Malian francs (MF), this was equivalent to more than three months of work in the city. Not being able to go to Bamako diminished earnings considerably since girls working in Sinsanni earned only 3,000 MF per month at the time. In the early 1980s, and until 1984 when Mali reintegrated the CFA zone, the currency was still the Malian franc. It equaled .50 CFA.
17. De Jong 1997.
18. Chauncey 1981; Hansen 1989.
19. Chauncey 1981.

20. In fact, I believe that such a rejection played a role in the case of the young woman, cited earlier, who has stayed in Bamako against her family's wishes.

21. A *singa* is a wedding where no transfer of wedding goods (*kònyò minanw*) takes place. It is held when the groom's family wants the wedding to take place but the bride's mother feels that the trousseau is incomplete. The *singa* represents a compromise because it integrates the bride into the household labor force during the cultivating season and allows the couple to live together. This arrangement may continue for two, or even three, rainy seasons before the wedding proper (*kònyò*) is held. I have no indication that *singa* weddings are more prevalent in marriages involving girls from that village.

22. I place this in single inverted commas because I did not retain her actual words in my notes. Although direct quotes make for livelier reading, I prefer not to take license with people's words.

23. They told me about a local girl who had recently left Bamako for Abidjan, where girls had not gone up to this point, because she wanted to avoid a marriage, arranged by her kinsmen, at all cost.

24. Grosz-Ngaté 1988.

### Bibliography

Chauncey, George Jr. 1981. "The locus of reproduction: women's labour in the Zambian copperbelt, 1927–1953." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 7: 135–64.

De Jong, Ferdinand. 1997. "The power of a mask: a contextual analysis of the Senegalese *Kumpo* mask performance." *Focaal* 29: 37–56.

Diarra, Tiéman et Yaouga F. Koné. 1991. *Les migrations féminines au Mali. La main d'oeuvre domestique (Rapport final)*. Bamako: Institut des Sciences Humaines.

Dwyer, Daisy and Judith Bruce, eds. 1988. *A Home Divided: Women and Income in the Third World*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Grosz-Ngaté, Maria. 1988. "Monetization of bridewealth and the abandonment of 'kin roads' to marriage in Sana, Mali." *American Ethnologist* 15 (3): 501–14.

Guyer, Jane I. 1981. "Household and community in African studies." *The African Studies Review* XXIV (2/3): 87–137.

Guyer, Jane I. and Pauline Peters, eds. 1987. "Conceptualizing the household: issues of theory and policy in Africa." *Development and Change* 18 (2). (Theme issue.)

Hansen, Karen Tranberg. 1989. *Distant Companions: Servants and Employers in Zambia, 1900–1985*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Institut des Sciences Humaines. 1984. *L'exode des femmes au Mali. La main d'oeuvre domestique féminine à Bamako et à Ségou*. Bamako.

Lewis, John Van D. 1985. "Village-level restraints on the exodus from rural Mali." In *African Migration and National Development*, edited by Beverly Lindsay. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University.

Stichter, Sharon. 1985. *Migrant Laborers*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

Vaa, Mariken, Sally E. Findley, and Assitan Diallo. 1989. "The gift economy: a study of women migrants' survival strategies in a low-income Bamako neighborhood." *Labour, Capital and Society* 22 (2): 234–60.

Van Westen, A. C. M. and M. C. Klute. 1986. "From Bamako, with love: a case study of migrants and their remittances." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 77: 42–49.

Yanagisako, Sylvia. 1984. "Explicating residence: a cultural analysis of changing households among Japanese-Americans." In *Households. Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*, edited by Robert McNetting, Richard R. Wilk, and Eric J. Arnould. Berkeley: University of California Press.

### **Acknowledgements**

My profound thanks to Rosa de Jorio, Shelley Feldman, and Karen Tranberg Hansen for their constructive readings of this essay.