

MALINKE: MAN FROM MALI

BY CHRISSIE FAUPEL



Joking Cousins – a Camara and a Danfakha

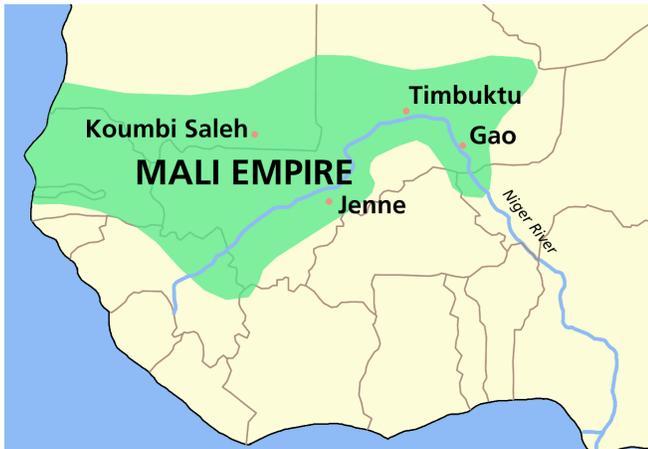
“The exact colors or designs on the flag that is flown at the local primary school matter less than does one’s traditions, one’s history, and one’s ancestors”

The Mali Empire was founded by Sundiata Keita, the (original) Lion King. The story of Sundiata was told for generations through oral storytelling tradition, until it was finally incorporated into the *Epic of Sundiata*. The story details the struggles and ultimate success of the young emperor. After being teased throughout his childhood for being born lame to a hunchback mother, he would later unite an empire encompassing present-day Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal.

During Sundiata’s reign in the early 13th century, compassion and selflessness were central pillars to the culture of society. The story of two brothers hunting *en brousse*¹ exemplifies the extent to which Sundiata’s people cared for one another. The brothers were out for some time without finding anything to eat when the

younger brother began to complain of hunger. The older brother left him to rest, while he went in search of game. Much later, he returned with an armful of meat, which was cooked over the fire and eaten with much gusto. When the younger brother finished his meal, his curiosity drove him to wonder how his elder was able to make a kill in a seemingly empty forest. Only then, after looking at his brother’s form stretched out on the ground, did he notice the damp cloth tied around his brother’s upper thigh. The deep red color of it was a clear indication of the willing sacrifice his brother made to keep him from starving. These brothers are said to be the ancestors of the modern-day Bozo and Dogon people, who live in present-day Mali. It conveys the extent to which the *cousinage*, or joking cousins, will protect each other.

I had only recently been placed in my



Extent of the Mali Empire

Peace Corps village of Diakhaba, a village of about 1,000 people in southeastern Senegal, near the border of Mali at the time. I was living with the chief of the village, Sina Danfakha, my host father. In Malinke culture, one has a special responsibility to look after one's *toxoma*, or namesake, and I was given a name after Sina's first wife, Fatoumata. The historical traditions associated with *toxoma* broke down the barriers of appearance and background. After dinner, the children would surround me, cuddling up to me, wondering what I was reading, braiding my hair, reaching over me to hit their siblings. And, eventually, they would fall asleep, curled up right next to me.

When the children went to bed for the night, adults would begin to go around from compound to compound to greet each other. This is an important part of the day: after the work is done and the meal is served, the greeting began. Greeting is a cheerful tradition between visitors and residents woven into the fabric of daily life. There are three rounds of tea, each of which distinguished by the weakening strength of the tea. It was considered rude to leave before the third round was finished, so the tea provided a timeline of how the evening would go. If it was still early, but we already had the third round, I knew I could excuse myself for bed. If, however,

it was already late and somebody was only just then finding the coals to heat the water, I knew I was in for a long night.

One particular night, Sina's best friend, a chauffeur by the name of Bocande, sat down beside me and began chatting. At one point, he said to me, "You're lucky to have learned Malinke. It's the national language, you know."

I knew that Senegal had two national languages: Wolof and French. Malinke was neither of those. In fact, Malinke was only a very tiny minority language in Senegal, though it existed in other countries. So why did Bocande call Malinke a 'national' language? In order to understand this somewhat paradoxical linguistic phenomenon, it is necessary to examine E.T. Hall's High Context/Low Context Theory. Hall's theory makes distinction of "the importance of orientation toward time and space in human interaction."² According to Hall, people that operate within a High Context culture view time as "rooted in the past, slow to change, and stable."³

"The historical traditions associated with *toxoma* broke down the barriers of appearance and background"

Another aspect of Hall's theory that is important in analyzing this incident is the issue of association. Claire Halverson and S. Aqeel Tirmizi sum it up by saying "one's identity is rooted in groups."⁴ In this case, the group in question is the Malinke ethnic group. One's identity in Diakhaba is closely related to his Malinke ethnicity. Each person's last name is a Malinke last name. One's last name places him in a 'family' of corresponding 'joking cousins',

whose affiliation is based on last names, and provides insight into one's history.

A village elder once told me a story about the village in Mali from where the Malinkes come (*Malinke* literally means "man from Mali"). This particular village has a collection of large rocks. In the legend, if somebody sits on one of the rocks, the rock will speak. It will say out loud the last name of the person sitting upon it. He continued to talk of an infamous scandal involving an important dignitary who thought his last name was Traore. When he sat on the rock, he was shocked and embarrassed to learn his real surname was actually Drame.

The emphasis on one's last name, and the responsibility it entails in Malinke culture, offers unique insight into Hall's theory about the importance of association by group. The Malinke peoples' descriptions of their lineage, which began in a single village in Mali and is now dispersed over several different countries of West Africa, reveal the pride and closeness of their culture. The shared history and rich traditions are timeless bonds between distantly related groups that contribute to the overall graciousness of their society.

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I was not being told that Malinke was the national language of Senegal; it was quite simply "the national language." Malinke is in the same language family as, and quite close linguistically to, Bambara. Bambara is a national language, but of Mali, not Senegal. What these people were

telling me, in their nuanced way, was that they felt more bonded to the country of Mali than to Senegal. Culturally, they are closer to Mali, which is where their ancestors originally came from (and it was not until a group of people in Berlin drew lines on some maps that these national boundaries were drawn).

West Africa today may be carved up in imaginary lines, but as Tirmizi said, one's identity remains "rooted in groups."⁵ The exact colors or designs on the flag that is flown at the local primary school matter less than does one's traditions, one's history, and one's ancestors.

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33. Gordon, 226 and Dower (1999), 93.
34. Gordon, *A Modern History*, 227.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 228-229.
37. Dower (1999), 43.
38. Seraphim, 89, 90-91.
39. Dower (2012), 61.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 54
42. Dower (1999), 25.
27. Dower (2012), 130.
28. Dower (1999), 66.
29. Dower (2012), 141.
30. Dower (1999), 88, 95.
31. Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 215.
32. Dower (1999), 91.
33. Gordon, 226 and Dower (1999), 93.
34. Gordon, *A Modern History*, 227.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid, 228-229.
37. Dower (1999), 43.
38. Seraphim, 89, 90-91.
39. Dower (2012), 61.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 54.
42. Dower (1999), 25.

Image 1: Yosuke Yamahata, Aug 10, 1945. <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/levine/bombing.htm>

Image 2: <www2images.blogspot.com>

Image 3: Katō Etsurō, in Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, 66.

Image 4: "Nuke opponents feud over bombs vs. power", *The Japan Times*, Aug 6, 2013, Accessed November 1, 2014.

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1. French: in the bush or outback.
2. Claire B. Halverson and S. Aqeel Tirmizi. *Effective Multicultural Teams: Theory and Practice*. Vermont: Springer, 2008, 31.
3. Ibid., 32.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

Image 1: Faupel, Chrissie. Unpublished photograph. Diakhaba, Senegal, 2012.

Figure 1: Creative Commons. Imperio de Ghana. Imágenes de Imperio de Ghana. Accessed September 19, 2014, <<http://www.fotosimagenes.org/imperio-de-ghana>>.