

**Making and managing  
femaleness, fertility and motherhood  
within an urban Gambian area**

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*For  
Marit Skramstad,  
Mama Jamba,  
Aji Rugie Jallow  
and all other great mothers*



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## General introduction

One morning in the early 1990s, before most tourists had finished breakfast and arrived the beach outside the hotel area in Bakau, The Gambia, local fruit sellers gathered at their stalls and were discussing their friends among the tourist. Most of them had succeeded to get long lasting friends who had opened bank accounts for them and regularly transferred money for their children's school fees. Haddy had friends in Bergen where I lived. They were an elderly couple who visited The Gambia regularly and always brought money and presents for her and her children. Haddy called them her "mother and father" in Norway since they supported her like parents do. Their condition for the support was, however, that she used contraceptives and avoided having more babies. Haddy was still young, and wanted to have another child. She asked me to visit her Norwegian parents and ask them if they would let her have another baby. She was afraid to do anything that annoyed them and made them stop the support. They had been very explicit that if they helped her, she had to help herself by avoiding more child births.

On this Gambian beach, as well as in the international development discourse, those in power and with money had the privilege of defining both the problems and their solutions. In the early 1990s, there was a lot of international concern about population issues, illustrated for instance by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD).

Western worries about stably high fertility rates in most of Sub-Saharan Africa constituted a central part of this concern. On the other hand, this concern was not shared by many of the Africans who experienced the consequences of high fertility rates in their own lives. For instance, the necessity to regulate fertility according to the ability to pay school fees was not a view generally shared by Gambian women. Behind the beach, inside the compounds of Bakau, most people considered children as a blessing and very few used contraceptives. Rather than sharing the Western view that Gambians would benefit from reducing their fertility rates, many of my informants seemed to be more interested in health services aimed at solving their fertility problems.

This research project was in other words planned and carried out in an era of strong international interest in population dynamics and reproductive health processes. In The Gambia, there were several activities before, during and after the International Conference on

Population and Development (ICPD).<sup>1</sup> On the national level this interest was reflected in a national survey about contraceptive prevalence and determinants of fertility (See for example Republic of The Gambia, 1993) and in the Parliament's approval of a National Population Policy in November 1992 (Republic of The Gambia, 1992). A National Population Commission Secretariat was established directly under the President's Office and a curriculum for Population/Family Life Education was developed to be taught in public schools. The existing Gambia Family Planning Association, established in 1968, experienced strong competition from other, newer NGOs (non-governmental organisations) because of increased interest in and allocation of funds to population activities. In spite of the fact that the ICPD Programme of Actions (PoA) document clearly states that reproductive health implies both satisfactory sexual relations as well as the possibility of having the number of children one desires at the preferred time, in The Gambia most of the "population activities" implicitly intended to reduce fertility. Fertility reduction was also the focus for the Gambian government as well as bi- or multi-lateral organisations. Very little was done to assist infertile couples and address STD and abortions. One exception was a study to determine the extent of infertility problems in The Gambian population (Sundby, 1997, Sundby and Mboge, 1995, Sundby et al., 1998) that would constitute a basis for planning health interventions for infertile individuals and couples.<sup>2</sup> The overall intention behind both international and national interventions was population control, although Gambian authorities seemed to use a birth control approach.<sup>3</sup> At a seminar to disseminate and discuss interventions on the basis of findings of the national survey, the Gambian Contraceptive Prevalence and Fertility Determinants Survey 1990 (GCPFDS) (Republic of The Gambia, 1993), the Ministry of Health did not state goals for fertility decrease, rather emphasis was placed on birth spacing and women's health.<sup>4</sup> This focus was believed to be more acceptable to most Gambians than

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<sup>1</sup> The Safe Motherhood Initiative was also in its first decade since it was launched in 1987 and a large World Bank initiated project Women in Development had a reproductive health component.

<sup>2</sup> In polygamous unions one woman may be infertile while another is not, it will probably thus be seen as the infertile woman's problem rather than a problem for a couple.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between population control and birth control has been elaborated by Gordon (1974). While population control implies strategies to reduce fertility and often privileges global or national interests at the cost of the individual, birth control intends to give women best possible opportunities to control their own reproduction. Birth control implies that the woman herself is enabled to decide for herself how many children she wants and at what time, even if it implies increased fertility.

<sup>4</sup> I participated in the seminar at Atlantic hotel, 21.-24.06.1993

fertility reduction.<sup>5</sup> It was also believed that the aggregate effects of longer birth intervals would be a reduction in fertility.

In spite of these national and international concerns about fertility levels that were considered too high, most of my informants seemed to be more worried when their fertility failed. My focus is on urban Gambian women within an area of Bakau. My informants were in different fertility situations, from primary infertile women who had never been pregnant to women who had given birth to nine children. Their way of dealing with their fertility was highly influenced by their life situation as Muslim, mostly married women, without formal education or formal jobs. My interest was held by the process that valued high fertility and the context and social practices in which fertility was discursively produced? And how did the married women in question position themselves within these discourses? What were their desires and options and how did they manoeuvre in order to adjust their own fertility to the desired levels? In order to carry out the type of analysis the following main research questions had to be discussed using both theoretical and empirical approaches:

**How are fertility and motherhood socially constructed?**

- a) What are the ideas about ideal fertility and how are these (re)produced and adopted by girls and women?
- b) How is fertility linked to motherhood, i.e. what does it mean to be a birth mother rather than a foster mother, and how does the significance of this potential difference affect fertility behaviour?

**How do women manage their fertility within concrete life situations?**

- a) To what extent could women be said to have agency in fertility matters?
- b) To what extent do women have agency in kinship matters?

These questions are explored within a number of social practices and relationship areas in the daily lives in the compounds of Bakau; interaction in social networks extending to colleagues, friends and relatives in rural areas or abroad, ritual performances such as namegiving (*kun-lio*), female initiation (*nyaakaa*), transfer of the bride rituals (*maañoo bitoo*) and rituals to

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<sup>5</sup> This was much in line with the shift in international discourses in the period before the ICPD conference, with a focus on women's or couples needs rather than numerical targets.

enhance fertility and child survival (*Kanyaleng* rituals). Also important are use of health services, marabouts (*moro*) and prayers in regulating fertility.<sup>6</sup>

The focus of the thesis is on femaleness, female fertility and motherhood, and not on maleness, male fertility or father hood. The processes whereby identities and subject positions are formed are gender specific and elaborate. Men and women also have differing positions and interest in kinship, fertility and parenthood. Although focus on both male and female positions, and the dynamic in the interaction between them, would given a lot of new and important insights, the topic would be far too wide for a single thesis.

### **Organisation of the thesis**

The thesis is organised in three main parts. In Part One I discuss how girls are made to become women and later wives. Through an analysis of the *nyaakaa* initiation ritual as well as a discussion about how girls are made to become women through everyday upbringing, I show how certain qualities are cultivated to prepare them for wifehood. These qualities are: appropriate management of signs of sexual (in)accessability, respect, secrecy and endurance, as well as willingness and skills in doing domestic work.

In the discussion about marriage rituals, marital life and polygamy, I show how normative “wifehood”, including respect, secrecy and endurance, is dealt with in rituals and negotiated in everyday interaction with husbands. If husbands fail to provide adequately for their wives and children, women are willing to go to some lengths to find the means to support themselves and the children, even if it puts them in conflict with expectations of secrecy and endurance. Important functions of the *nyaakaa* initiation and transfer of the bride rituals seem to be the embodiment of hegemonic discourses, for the first time for the initiands and the bride, as reiterative performatives of femaleness for other participants.

In Part Two of the thesis, the ontologies of making babies and having children are explored. This involves a discussion about how being related is conceptualised and enacted through the social organisation of child care. As child fostering is widespread, I explore the relative importance of relatedness based on substance/materiality (relations of blood, milk and birth) *versus* relations built on practical parenting through fostering. Furthermore, the urban social organisation of residence and family units, together with child fostering practices, constitute a challenge to the categorisation of kinship and families. The focus on urban

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<sup>6</sup> *Moro* is a Mandinka term referring both to Muslim scholars and healers.



women as actors directs attention to aspects of kinship and parenting, that were not included in former, mainly rural studies in The Gambia. Firstly, my study shows that kin relations on the mother's side is much more important than formerly assumed, implying a stronger emphasis on cognatic aspects of Mandinka and Wolof kinship.<sup>7</sup> Second, in spite of the fact that according to formal law children belong to their birth fathers, de facto children often belong to both their birth and their foster mothers. Third, women fostering children from their own kin and friends get an opportunity for women to produce children for themselves and their own kin. Finally, a dynamic view of families as ego-based units of "activated kin" opens a way for new understandings of the social organisation of childcare and the significance of being a mother. Spouses "manoeuvre" in different ways within separate but overlapping networks of kin, affines and significant others. Conjugal joint decision making seems rare among my main informants, rather decisions seem to be taken individually based on advice from and cooperation with kin, friends, colleagues and neighbours.

Part Three deals with the management of fertility through the use of contraceptives and other birth spacing practices as well as with quests to resolve problems of infertility and sub-fertility. Western and "black people's medicine" represent different discourses about bodies, health and well being. Various means based on both principles are applied in order to avoid or space pregnancies, give birth to healthy babies or enhance fertility. Women seem, to a large extent, to be in charge of these practices and in several cases they found contraceptives, sought cures or participated in rituals to solve fertility problems without involving their husbands. The last chapter deals with infertility and childlessness, and particularly with attempts at solving these problems through participation in rituals. Although the expressions and behaviour within the *Kanyaleng* ritual present counter-hegemonic significance and resistance to prevailing ideals about Islam, male control, modesty etc., the overall aim, namely enhancing fertility and child survival, is clearly in line with the dominant discourses.

### ***Subject formation, discourses, hegemonies and resistance***

My attempts to explore urban Gambian women's experiences and perspectives on fertility beg some epistemological considerations. How does one assess a woman's needs and desires for children if it is assumed that she is heavily imbued with a hegemonic discourse valuing high fertility? If men and older women benefit from and reward younger women's high fertility,

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<sup>7</sup> Mandinka was the largest ethnic group The Gambia, followed by Fula, Wolof, Jola and Serahuli and a number of smaller ethnic groups (see page 31).

how likely is it that younger women develop their own interests if these are contrary to the hegemonic discourse? Butler presents the dilemma as follows:

How can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency? If subordination is the condition of possibility for agency, how might agency be thought in opposition to the forces of subordination? (1997b: 10)

One of the recurring issues throughout the thesis is how discursive practices generate and regulate the phenomena they deal with, while at the same time they subjugate the actors involved in the discourse.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, different participants have different positions in this dual process. The girls being initiated through the *nyaakaa* ritual are in different positions, are subjugated in other ways and contribute differently in the generative process than do the elders who have participated in these ritual innumerable times. Although the elders have more agency in shaping the ritual content than the girls, they are still subjected to a set of rules and regulations passed on from their “great grandmothers”. They are also bound by the *ngasingba*, the local spiritual women’s leader and authority on traditions, to do as their great-grandmothers did.

Butler (1997b) builds on Foucault and argues that “subjection” signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject. She refers to Althusser when she continues to argue that ideology has a subject-constituting power through “...recourse to the figure of a divine voice that names, and in that naming brings its subjects into being”(Butler, 1997a: 31). The divine not only makes what it names, but also subordinates what it makes.

Within this framework, both men and women assume their identities through processes of “subjection”, where they become subordinated through ideological processes. Male and female positions within the ideology are, however, different. The “subjection” of girls in childhood and adolescence typically takes place through training at home, in schools and through the *nyaakaa* ritual. The transfer of the bride to the husband’s home may be a climax but it is not the endpoint of subject-constituting processes whereby appropriate women are shaped. The process of subjection hardly stops, as there always will be “a divine voice”, a

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<sup>8</sup> My use of the concept of discourse is in line with Abu-Lughod’s definition referred below (Abu-Lughod, 1986: 186).

being with more authority and/or power, be it Allah, a Muslim scholar, “the traditions”, an elder or a husband.

I argue that in rituals with counter-hegemonic forms of expressions, such as in the *Kanyaleng* ritual a ritual re-subjection takes place.<sup>9</sup> The appropriated and dignified femininity that has been acquired through childhood and adolescence is temporally inverted as the women have to behave like dogs, thieves and even shameless women whose genitals are bared. One of the questions to be discussed in subsequent chapters is whether re-subjections or other inverted (re)presentations of femininity may penetrate and disseminate into other non-ritual contexts. If the *nyaakaa* can produce permanent transitions in personhood through its teachings and experiences, why should not the *Kanyaleng* ritual potentially have similar effects?

### **Ideology, hegemony or dominant discourses**

Ideology, hegemony and dominant discourses are all concepts frequently used without further specification. When referring to other authors my intention has been to use their concepts without discussing the appropriateness of the concepts every time they occur. As I am interested in the discursive production of concepts, ideas, culture and ideology as well as social practices, I am primarily interested in how these concepts work. There are a number of difficulties related to questions of truth and intentionality. I do, for example, have problems with the distinction between the imaginary and the real in Althusser’s definition of ideology as a “...representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Bloch 1986: 175).” Bloch discusses the ritual function of ideology as producing imaginary relationships as a way of maintaining, or misrepresenting, real power relationships, implying that there exist real and authentic and false versions of relationships. In the case of the Gambian kinship system, perceptions of who is classified as kin and marriageable versus belonging to an incest category appear imaginary to a western observer since the classification appears unreal to a Western mind. As there is no position from where ideologies can be compared neutrally (Winch, 1997), the idea of the imaginary is a rather impossible analytical concept. One possible reading of Althusser’s definition is that imaginary relationships are upheld by political interest while the real relationships are not. Several authors have shown that claims that something is real or natural serves to sustain political interest and power relations (See for example Butler, 1993, Harding, 1986, Martin, 1987). Foucault counts the

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<sup>9</sup> I this was suggested by Bruce Kapferer, at a PhD. seminar several years ago, although he probably phrased it differently.

distinction between true and false as the third source of exclusion in “the order of the discourse”(Foucault, 1999). He discusses how the principles for a true discourse have changed over time, and - it should be added- that these vary across cultures and may shift from context to context.<sup>10</sup>

Another problem are assumptions about why certain forms of ideology are produced. How did it come into being and whose interests does it serve? How did they come into being and whose interests do they serve? In the definitions of both hegemony and ideology, it is implicit that their intentions are the maintenance of power relations. Bloch (1986:177) argues that it is ridiculous to hold that ideology is produced as plot by those holding power. He also finds it problematic to assume that ideology occurred at a certain point in time which cannot be identified. As my focus is on how fertility is produced in everyday and ritual settings, I do not intend to speculate about the origin of ideologies involved, but rather focus on its present discursive productions.

Gramsci's definition of hegemony does not carry the distinction between the real and the imagined, but requires a clear assumption that there is a close link between power relations and a general conception of life and a scholastic programme:

...the permeation throughout civil society ... of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it...to the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the broad masses, it becomes part of “common sense”...For hegemony to assert itself successfully in any society, therefore, it must operate in a dualistic manner: as a “general conception of life” for the masses and as a “scholastic programme.” (Gramsci 1971, cited in Martin, 1987: 23)

Gramsci's concept of hegemony and ideology for Marx and Althusser are special types of power, which do not manifest themselves through open conflict, but are characterised by making opposition of interests invisible and differences legitimised (Lukes, 1974). According to de Almeida, hegemony is lived consensus; it is a form of domination where the dominated

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault for example argues that among the 6<sup>th</sup> century Greek poets, the true discourse was led by the one who had right to it, but a century later the truth was what it said and thus a shift to its meaning, its relationship to its reference. One could argue in a similar way that within the Mandinka girls initiation rituals, the elders were the speakers of the truth as they had the authority to control knowledge (see also Bledsoe 1984 and Johansen 1996(Johansen, 1996)), while the in other context the context of what was said mattered.

participate in their own domination (de Almeida, 1996: 163). This is precisely in line with Foucault's ideas of subjection and how discourses work.

Abu-Lughod (1986) uses Foucault (Foucault, 1972, Foucault and Gordon, 1980) as her point of departure when she defines discourse as a "...set of statements, verbal and nonverbal, bound by rules and characterized by regularities, that both constructs and is patterned by social and personal reality" (Abu-Lughod, 1986: 186).

Abu-Lughod emphasises that discourses do not simply refer to linguistic forms, but also to other practices that take the form of statements. A number of non-verbal practices thus become discursive in the sense that they can be seen as utterances bounded by rules and regularities, and by being repeated, they produce patterns. These patterns again produce their effects. Examples here are signification through non-verbal statements during *Kanyaleng* rituals. Baring genitals or eating like dogs are powerful statements within the discursive logic of the ritual. Similarly, acts of genital cutting during the *nyaakaa* initiation ritual are statements within the discursive logic of the *nyaakaa* and probably beyond. A boy who washed his own clothes in the village (see more in chapter one) violated the discourse about the gendered division of labour. The boy's mother and grandmother suggested reformulations of the discursive rules, but his father, who had the authority to regulate the dominant discourse and its consequences, at least in his own compound, refused.

### **The discursive production of sex, gender, sexuality and fertility**

The processes whereby gender and sex are discursively produced are discussed at length by Butler (1993) and her arguments can easily be extended to the production of fertility. Butler builds on Austin's notion of the performative as "an act of enunciation that brings into being the object it names" (Morris, 1995: 572). According to Morris, Butler's perspective implies that gender is not a fact or an essence, but a set of acts that produce the effect or appearance of a coherent substance. Morris goes on and states that Butler argues:

..., although gender is a set of acts, it works and derives its compulsive force from the fact that people mistake the acts for the essence and, in the process, come to believe that they are mandatory. Performatives are thus both generative and dissimulating. Their effect, if not their purpose, is to compel certain kinds of behaviour by hiding the fact that there is no essential, natural sex to which gender can refer as its starting point.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that there are no natural differences between men and women, rather such differences exist, but should be considered arbitrary in the sense that they are conceptualised differently during different historical epochs and in

Sex identity is said to be materialized by the gender system in the imitation or reiteration of ideal corporal styles. (Butler, 1993). In theories about gender performativity, gender is thus defined as the effect of discourse, and sex as the effect of gender (Morris, 1995).

Although sex is an effect of gender and both are discursively produced, it is difficult to grasp the potential consequences of doing away with sex as an analytical category. As I discuss in chapter one, female genital cutting and the labelling of some people as *gor-jiggen* (man-woman) or prostitute-like, based on certain types of (manly) behaviour combined with a bodily morphology defined as female, are examples on informants' essentialisation of sex. Without clear expectations about the concurrence of certain morphologies (sex) and certain forms of behaviour, these ideas would not have been an issue.<sup>12</sup> This is discussed in more detail at the end of chapter one.

### **Women's positions, mutedness and resistance**

Related to this, are questions about how the classification of people into gendered categories, based on the morphology of their bodies, shapes their experiences and perspectives and possibilities of representing them. In an influential paper, "Belief and the problem of women", E. Ardener (1972) argued that women had become muted by anthropological methods, language and male points of view. Female informants were rarely talked to and if they were included in ethnographic descriptions it was on the same line as cows, they were hardly listened to. Men were mostly consulted because they knew a foreign language and their models of the world were more concurrent with the models of the anthropologist. When women were asked, their experience and points of view could not easily be represented because they had to express themselves in male-dominated languages and models of the world. Ardener's suggestion was to look at women's rituals as privileged sources for women's points of view. He argued that Bakweri mermaid rituals gave access to alternative representations of women's experiences and points of view. Through rituals women could express what otherwise could not be said.

I argue that although study of rituals may give alternative insights into women's perspectives, rituals are no less muted than other representations, neither do they make the

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different cultural contexts. Not all societies operate with chromosomes or DNA and the bodily attributes associated with femaleness vary. For example are female and male conceived of as the difference between flesh and bone in Nepal (Moore, 1994): p.14.

<sup>12</sup> Doing away with these kind of ideas, could be seen as an emancipatory, but an unlikely potential.

anthropologist less deaf than other sources of information (See also Skramstad, 1999). The Bakweri women had their own ritual mermaid language, the Gambian girls were taught secret signs, riddles and proverbs during the *nyaakaa* ritual and the *Kanyaleng* women have developed their own system of signification (for example: “sand is like sugar for the *Kanyalengs*”). Most anthropologists would need these expressions to be explained in the dominant male language, and the analysis of rituals would be a supplementary source of information, but they are by no means a way to evade the problem of mutedness.

Another objection to seeing rituals as a privileged approach to muted experiences is the role of rituals as bearers of ideology. Initiation rituals often pass on ideologies and contribute to the maintenance of power relations. Bledsoe (1984) emphasises the strictly hierarchical and ideological aspects of the Sande initiation rituals. In a similar way, Bloch (1986) focuses on the ideological function of initiation rituals for boys among the Merina on Madagascar. Bloch argues that religion and kinship are melted together into one simple ideological apparatus that manifests itself through rituals such as the circumcision ritual. The Merina circumcision ritual has thus a central function as a carrier of ideology. If rituals carry ideology and ideology makes women muted, rituals will not solve the problem of gaining access to women’s authentic experiences and point of view. Although potentially counter-hegemonic rituals, like the Zar ritual (Boddy, 1989), the Bakweri mermaid rituals (Ardener, 1972) or the *Kanyaleng* ritual discussed below, have different forms of expression, the problem is that the more counter-hegemonic and alternative the forms of expression are, the less accessible they become to the observer/interpreter. Decoding inversions of the muted poses a number of challenges. To what extent can presumably counter-hegemonic rituals be interpreted as representing women’s point of view at all? And do they have an empowering potential that may produce changes beyond the ritual context?

In Gluckman’s (1954) analysis of what he called rituals of rebellion, he emphasised the preserving, reiterative aspects of the ritual. The rituals were structured outlets of frustration and opposition intended to preserve the status quo and prevent revolutions rather than focusing on the potentially subversive elements:

Whatever the ostensible purpose of the ceremonies, a most striking feature of their organisation is the way in which they openly express social tensions: women have to assert licence and dominance as against their formal subordination to men, princes have to behave to the king as if they covet the throne, and subjects openly state their resentment to authority. Hence I call them rituals of rebellion. I shall argue that these

ritual rebellions proceed within an established and sacred traditional system, in which there is dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself. This allows for instituted protests, and in complex ways renews the unity of the system.(Gluckman, 1954: 3)

The dilemmas of rituals as expressions of resistance while at the same time conserving the existing order by confirming it through symbolic inversions, can be seen as a strong thread from Gluckman's rebellion to the recent work of feminists such as Boddy in her analysis of the Zar cult in Sudan. Any attempt to parody or invert the existing will in the end secure its position. While Boddy recognises the preserving/conservative effects of the Zar rituals, she also suggests that they may be a rare opportunity for the women to reflect upon their own identity. More than in any other context, they are shown that female identities are arbitrary and not natural. There are other possible identities although being a woman have been made synonymous with morally appropriate fertility and having sons that grow up. Boddy's description of how Hofriaty identities are established is similar to Butler's description of subjection where the subject formation takes place under strong regulations. Ideology and language restrict identity formation. In the same manner as Boddy describes for the Hofriaty Zar rituals, *Kanyaleng* rituals are an opportunity to reflect on alternative ways of being.

One of the questions to be discussed below is to what extent the challenges of ordinary social relations and codes of moral conduct may be utilised by the *Kanyaleng* women outside the ritual context. The ritual parodies or inversions of ordinary *kun-lio s* may be considered as a critique, not necessarily of Islam, but of the male authority executed in these rituals and elsewhere. Does the ritual performance of male, animal-like or obscene behaviour have any bearing on ordinary non-ritual identities?

Three major rituals are central; girl's initiation (*nyaakaa*), transfer of the bride rituals (*maañoo bitoo*) and rituals to enhance fertility and child survival (*Kanyaleng*). This presentation of the rituals is not exhaustive, as the focus is limited to how these rituals contribute to discursive productions of female fertility. The *Kanyaleng* ritual is the only ritual that explicitly deals with fertility as it aims at enhancing fertility and child survival. The two other rituals do, however, contain several elements that focus on appropriate female conduct, including management of sexuality and thus fertility. The *nyaakaa* initiation ritual intends to transform girls from uninitiated *solimas* to initiated girls, implying that they have got to know the secret knowledge of the *nyaakaa* and they have been genitally cut. Some believe that it is a precondition for marriage and thus legitimate fertility. The *maañoo bitoo* ritual is a



consummation of the marriage when the bride is transferred to the husband's compound. Although the bride has been formally married since the marriage was tied (*futoo sitoo*), which might have happened long before the formal transfer, the *maañoo bitoo* demarcates that the woman fully becomes a wife. There are several ritual elements that refer to appropriate female behaviour, while there is surprisingly little focus on making and taking care of babies (i.e. motherhood). One explanation may be that I did not see everything that was going on, another explanation may be that the aim of a marriage, namely parenthood, is so obvious and taken for granted that it goes without saying. These issues are perhaps mainly expressed during the *Kanyaleng* rituals where fertility has failed and become precarious.

The rituals above are intended at transforming the subjects to initiated, wives and fertile women/mothers respectively. But there are also a number of transformations going on in everyday life without ritual celebration. Transforming women into mothers is not accompanied by a specific ritual celebration directed towards the mother, unless one interprets the name-giving ritual, *kun-lio*, as a simultaneous celebration of the mother and the child.

### ***The discursive production of relatedness***

There are, however, several ways of becoming a mother; giving birth to a child is one, fostering a child is another. In addition, a woman's sister's children and a co-wife's children are also categorised as the woman's children. The latter forms of motherhood can vary from a classificatory relation only, to shared care when several mothers of a child live together in a compound, and to full transfer of rights and responsibilities when the child is fostered. Through chapters three and four, I explore how these different ways of being a mother are acted out differently and have different consequences.

### **The ontologies of kinship and belonging**

The ontology of kinship among Wolof and Mandinka people is based on the belief that children are begotten when fluids are mixed during sexual intercourse. If Allah consents, these fluids develop into a child who shares blood with both birth parents and their kin.<sup>13</sup> This

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<sup>13</sup> I speak about bodies, substances and birth relationships, and avoid use of "biology" when I speak of informants' perceptions of bodily. Biology is a specific Western ontology about natural phenomena, in most cases only vaguely known to my female informants (for a discussion of bio medicine as one among several models of bodily functions, see E. (Martin, 1987) I find it disturbing that so many anthropologists apply biology as a descriptive term, while these descriptions make it clear that informants' perceptions of their bodies, have little to do with biology. This is highly surprising in the contexts where the anthropologist have set out to investigate the peoples' emic categories about bodies and relatedness (Carsten, 2000) Irvine (Irvine, 1978)).

blood carries a lot of qualities such as “kind” (*sifa*, W: *xed*) that can be translated into ethnicity and caste, habits and belonging. Breast milk is another substance that is supposed to carry qualities and produce relatedness. Children who have suckled at the same breast become siblings and cannot marry. The third link through substance is the birth relationship. Those who are begotten and born by the same mother and father (*ba killing*, *fa killing*) are considered to be the closest relatives.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to motherhood through substance, women become mothers if they foster a child. By feeding, caring and otherwise doing what mothers do for children, a woman becomes a mother. Through these acts, belonging and relatedness are produced and the relationship between the mother and child extends to the woman’s kin; her children become sisters and brothers of the foster child and the child becomes involved with her kin network. In Irvine’s discussion of the Wolof caste system, she argues that its “...philosophical emphasis on *biological* aspects of kinship as fully determinant of social aspects” makes no distinction between genealogy and biological relationship possible as long as the latter is recognized” (Irvine, 1978: 654-55, original emphasis). Irvine further argues that there can exist no kind of practice where genealogical parentage can be distinguished from biological parentage, thus, adoption cannot take place. She argues that only temporary fosterage may take place. Although she may be right if one speaks about normative representations of how genealogies should be produced and accounted for, practical acting out of such relationships and representations of attachment are somewhat different. I discuss the similarities and differences between birth and foster motherhood and the ways these produce claims in children in chapters three and four. I also suggest some potential consequences for managing fertility. As Page (1989) argues: “...the distinction between child rearing and childbearing is not only sufficiently deep-rooted but also sufficiently widespread to constitute a crucial element in discussions of reproduction in sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 408). As the fostering practices are so deeply integrated in the kinship system, it challenges conventional perceptions about “kinning” (Howell, 2006). As women frequently foster children of their own kin, it appears to be a possibility of producing children “for themselves” or their relatives rather than for the husband and his kin.

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<sup>14</sup> The terms for birth father and birth mother are literally “the father who has borne me” (*na wulufa*, W: *suma papa ku ma juur*) or “the mother who has borne me” (*na wuluba*, W: *suma yei ku ma juur*). These words for birth (*wulu*, *juur*) are used both for the act of giving birth and for breeding or reproducing as flowers and trees do (see Sommerfelt (1999) for a discussion).

Recent contributions to the study of kinship have critically questioned a number of the basic assumptions of earlier kinship studies (Carsten, 2000, Carsten, 2001, Carsten, 2004, Edwards and Strathern, 2000, Howell, 2006, Lien and Melhuus, 2007, McKinnon, 1995, McKinnon and Franklin, 2001, Strathern, 1992a, Strathern, 1992b). Kinship is not always more significant than other forms of relatedness and there are other principles than blood that constitute kinship (Carsten, 1995, Weismantel, 1995). Schneider even argued that there was no such thing as an idiom of kinship (Schneider, 1984). With this in mind, I found it necessary to investigate to what extent social organisation of child care was kin based and whether there were other ways of becoming a mother than through individual fertility.

Howell uses the concept of “kinning” to denote the ...process by which a foetus or newborn child is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people, and the connection is expressed in a conventional kin idiom. (Howell, 2006: 8)

Howell reserves the concept for previously unconnected persons. I find it useful also to refer to processes where already existing relationship are strengthened. Giving a child to a sister or a brother for fostering, or naming a child after a parent, should be seen as a part of the kinning process.

Relatedness and belonging seem to be useful concepts in studies of kinship as they call for a more open investigation of the processes and principles involved, than is the case in traditional kinship studies. With regard to the Gambian case I suggest that the ontology of kinship is based on belonging and relatedness through cognatic principles while juridical rights in children privileges patrilineal principles. What are people’s ideas about belonging, when children on one hand belong to two kin groups or to foster parents while at the same time they argue that the child is owned by its birth father? What does belonging and ownership imply in relation to children, and how is such ownership produced? What kind of ownership comes from transfer of substance, what comes with birth and what comes with acts of mothering? And finally, to what extent is paternity actually imbued with rights that set aside all practical efforts by mothers (i.e. birthing and fostering).

Edwards and Strathern (2000) discuss the concept of belonging and what it means to have one’s own child. They argue that “English-speakers know that what is claimed as one’s own encompasses as much as a claim to identity, adduced in ways of ‘belonging’ to a place or a family as it does to rights of possession” (149). Furthermore they argue that one may claim a person as one’s own but not that one owns him or her. Although this is generally true also in a Gambian context, there are traces of survivals from the times of slavery when claims of ownership were legitimately made. Until slavery was abolished, it was widely recognised that

the master was the owner (W: *borom*) of the slave (W: *jam*). The master had claims to a wide range of services from his slave, while the owner had some obligations towards the slave – according to my Wolof teacher, he even had to pay the bride wealth if the slave wanted to marry. On ritual occasions, cross cousins, father’s sister’s son or daughter, are defined as the *jam* of mother’s brother’s daughter or son who is the owner (*borom*). The *jam* must provide a number of services for his or her *borom*.<sup>15</sup> Otherwise, the concept of *borom* is also used with regard to Allah, who is believed to own everybody, and about husbands in marriages. A husband could legitimately claim his wife to be his own, without owning her.

In an attempt to make a joke during field work, I unintentionally learnt something about ownership. On one occasion I jokingly said that my “owner” (i.e. my husband) had sent me to borrow some sugar (W: *suma borom mo ma yoni*). A young woman protested immediately and said that a person could not own another person (W: *nit mounul mom nit*), while the elderly woman said they could, it was a sign of respect (W: *respect la*).

There seem to be different perceptions about how literally one should understand the concept of ownership. While the young woman totally dismissed the idea of ownership, the elderly woman related it to respect. I interpret the latter as an expression of willingness to be submissive to the husband. Furthermore, one could ask if payment of the *futuunaafuloo* (literally marriage wealth, or in Wolof *halisi juur*, “birth money”) should be interpreted as payment for the wife’s reproductive capacities and thus ownership to this aspect of the wife. As I discuss in chapter two, the marriage money could also be considered as a gift and an investment in a mutual relationship where none “owned” the other.

There are fine nuances between owning (*mom*) in the sense that one has legitimate claims in another person and owning in the sense of having total control. In both Norway and the Gambia, the expression “my/our child” (*ungen min/vår* (N), *suma dom, suunu dom* (W)) implies not only belonging in the sense of identity and connectedness, but also a number of juridical rights and obligations towards the child.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It is actually quite interesting that the ritual relations between cross-cousins, who have been considered to be ideal marital partners, is marked by such a degree of asymmetry and in several cases the wife becomes the ritual owner of her husband.

<sup>16</sup> This is to a certain extent valid in the relationship between husband and wife in The Gambia, as she is “handed over” from her parents to her husband. Formally, according to Gambian Statutory law, adult women are juridical autonomous subject, although the idea that the husband is responsible for his wife is quite widespread.

## Claims, rights and obligations

Several authors (Bledsoe, 1980a, Edwards and Strathern, 2000, Sommerfelt, 1999) seem to prefer to use the word claims rather than rights and duties, as some of the expectations involved in the rights concept are not met. Common perceptions about rights and duties or obligations are, however, often at the base of the claims made. The ability to make successful claims rests on the perceived legitimacy of the claims as well as the power relations involved. Even if the parties in a case agree about rights, conflicting interests and unequal power relations may cause unfulfilled expectations. Rights and duties/obligations are discursively produced, although Radcliffe Brown conceptualises this differently:

A right exists in, and is definable in terms of, recognised social usage. A right may be that of an individual or a collection of individuals. It may be defined as a measure of control that a person, or collection of persons, has over the acts of some person or persons, said to be thereby made liable to the performance of duty. Rights may be classified as three main kinds:

Rights over a person imposing some duty or duties upon that person. This is the *jus in personam* of Roman law. A father may exercise such rights over his son, or a nation over its citizens.

Rights over a person “as against the world”, i.e. imposing duties on all other persons in respect of that particular person. This is the *jus in rem* of Roman law in relation to persons.

Rights over a thing, i.e. some object other than a person, as against the world, imposing duties on other persons in relation to that thing. (Radcliffe-Brown et al., 1979:32-33)

Gambian kinship comprises a number of rights *in personam*, where a number of kin share rights in and responsibilities towards the child. As the child grows up, his or her services and labour can be claimed by several relatives and even neighbours. Also elder children, related or not, may consider they have the right to send a younger child to do some errands (for

example, run to buy things at the shop, make *ataya* etc.).<sup>17</sup> The child on the other hand, has rights to ask any parent or grandparent for food or protection.

The *jus in rem* are exclusive rights in other persons. In cases of fostering major decisions that are exclusively held by one or only a few care takers and which is transferred in cases of fostering. In cases of permanent fostering, the right to give a child in marriage is often transferred to the foster parents. Initially these are rights held by the father, his brothers and perhaps the mother (and her sisters). The right to the main bulk of the child's labour, at least in the case of girls' domestic work, is also an exclusive right for the major care taker. Not just anybody can come and ask the child to cook for him or her or to take care of children without the permission of the parents or foster parents with whom the child lives. Foster parents have hopes and insecure claims about relationships with their foster children in the future. Some foster children start to support their birth parents rather than their foster parents when they grow up, while others feel more loyal and attached to the foster parents.

While presenting a claim is a discursive act with an unknown result, a right is the result of an already established agreement that may become renegotiated. Some claims may not be based on juridical rights *per se*, but on expectations about reciprocity in efforts and gift giving. R.G. Goodenough (1970a: 328) reports that on Truk, if the real (*sic*) parents want to take back a child reared by others, they must reimburse the foster parents for the care they have given. To my knowledge, it is highly unlikely that something like this would take place in a Gambian context, still the idea of investment in children and expectations of delayed reciprocity is present. Some of the gifts from parents, be it birth or foster parents, puts the child in "debt" as it is supposed to be reciprocated by the child later in life (Jacobsen, 1998). Some of these efforts or gifts are, however, producing blessing (*barke*) and are supposed to be rewarded by Allah.

Jacobsen (1998) has argued that formal education can be described as a "Maussian gift" in the context of the parent-child relationship. She argues:

The "Gift of Education" always expected gifts in return; hence when children grew up, the material and social resources resulting from educations and subsequently employment were expected to return to those who had presented the first and costly

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<sup>17</sup> *Ataya* is a bitter green tea prepared with a lot of sugar and served in small glasses in social gatherings. The tea is cooked in the middle of the gathering and the leaves are cooked four times. During the preparation process, the tea is poured from glass to glass, making it skim, and returned into the kettle several times. The distribution of the *ataya* follows certain rules and the whole process may take an hour or more.

gift. Mauss showed how the social aim of the gift is to bind together the giver and the receiver. (1998: 4)

Giving a child for fostering may be likened to giving children as a gift (Lallemand, 1993). Lallemand suggests that exchange of children is a parallel to exchange of women as analysed by Lévi-Strauss. In some of the Gambian cases, transfer of children to foster parents is much like gift giving (W: *meie*) in gift relationships. Other child- fostering arrangements do not fit, as they may be temporary arrangements in order to meet practical needs (W: *dimmale*), such as a place to live close to the school, somebody who can pay for the school fees, care for the foster parent (elderly grandparents) or the child.

## **Reproductive health and fertility in anthropology**

During the late eighties and throughout the nineties there was a fast growing anthropological interest in reproductive health and fertility issues. As it is impossible within the scope of the thesis to present an exhaustive list of references, I rather refer the reader to the discussions in the different chapters and the literature list of the thesis. Issues discussed were relationship between production and reproduction, fertility, infertility (including use of new reproductive technologies) , sexuality, HIV/AIDS, female genital cutting, child fostering, adoption and child mortality.

The major contribution from anthropologists to the study of fertility, that had formerly been dominated by other disciplines (mainly medicine, psychology and demography), was spelling out the situatedness (Greenhalgh, 1995), contextuality and contingency (Bledsoe and Banja, 2002) of fertility. Bledsoe and Banja's work is based on data collection in rural Gambia at the same time as I conducted my major fieldwork. The contingency frame

...posits that at person's ages (that is, becomes senescent, or "worn out" as the Mandinka notion of aging is best translated) as a result of the traumas encountered over the course of personal history. The organizing idea of contingency is that of proximity or contiguity, usually both physical and social. The fact that one person is proximate to another implies that the acts of one will be likely to have repercussions for the other." (Bledsoe and Banja, 2002: 20)

Their findings about local ideas about aging and reproduction, have a number of implications for management of fertility, and are discussed in more detail in chapter six. Their concept of proximity implies that when people are close to each other, the action of one have

repercussions for the other. Proximity may be beneficial but also imply a sense of vulnerability and needs to deal with uncertainty.

In Part two of the thesis , I discuss the interrelatedness involved in motherhood, fostering, polygamous marriages and kinship in general and argue that, this interrelatedness in social organisation with uncertainty and unboundedness, have implications for management of fertility.

### ***The Gambian setting***

The Gambia is a small, predominantly Muslim, West African country with 1.4 million inhabitants (Republic of the Gambia, 2004)<sup>18</sup>. The GNP per capita was \$302 during the first part of the 1990s (Republic of The Gambia, 1992) and was recently estimated as \$340 in 2003 (Jatta, 2003). The Gambia was a British colony until 1965 and English is the official language. A democratically elected government was overthrown on 22 July 1994 by a military coup, and the country was taken over by five young professional soldiers, headed by Colonel Yaya J.J. Jammeh. Jammeh is still the head of state and President of The Gambia. Multiparty elections were held in 1996, 2001 and 2006, but opinions about whether these elections have been free and fair are divided (Saine, 2002, Wiseman, 1998). The economy is based on subsistence farming, re-export (West African trade) and export of peanuts and fish, and tourism.

In 1993 the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was a high 6.0 (Republic of The Gambia, 1996a) and it had been high since the 1960s (Weil, 1986). Recent figures show that the TRF has dropped to 5.4 (Sonko, 2007). Infant mortality is still high, in 1993, 129 out of 1000 children died before they reach the age of five (Yamuah, 1995). Although estimated primary infertility rates in The Gambia seem relatively low, between 2 and 5%, secondary infertility rates are estimated to be between 6 and 19% (Billewicz and McGregor), 1981, (Republic of The Gambia), 1993, (Sundby et al., 1998). Ericksen and Brunette (1996) have ranked the infertility level of The Gambia among the lower middle of sub-Saharan African countries. Still, having given birth once or twice does not preclude a woman from experiencing fertility problems.

As the age at first marriage increases, it is likely that the number of premarital pregnancies increases unless there is a proportionate increase in contraceptive use. As these

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<sup>18</sup> The population has increased from 1 million in 1993 (Republic of The Gambia, 1996b).



pregnancies were not in focus of my study, I have concentrated on fertility within marital relationships.

For my interviews, I therefore selected mainly married women or women who had been married.<sup>19</sup> Of the 31 women, 27 were married at the time of the interview. In my compound survey, 60% or 107 out of 179 women aged 15 years or older were married, while the percentage for Kanifing (the administrative area in which Bakau is situated) was 61% (Republic of The Gambia, 1996b). In this survey, 27% of the married women in the area lived in polygamous relationships.

Women marry earlier than men. The national population and housing census in 1993 (Republic of The Gambia, 1996b) shows that 26% of the women and 1% of the men between 15 and 19 years of age in the urban area were married. In the 20 to 24 age group 60% of the women and 8% of the men were married.

### ***The fieldwork area***

The women in focus in this study were living in Bakau, a small town of about 20,000 inhabitants on the Gambian coast. Bakau is situated 13 kilometres from the capital, Banjul, and 3 kilometres from Serekunda, the country's largest city with more than 200,000 inhabitants. Some Bakau people work in Banjul and Serekunda, and several of my informants sold vegetables at the markets there. The fieldwork was mainly performed within a Mandinka-dominated neighbourhood. Most of my Mandinka informants were growing vegetables at the outskirts of Bakau or selling at the local market, street corners or tourist markets. Some were earning money from doing laundry for others, working as maids for foreigners or selling home made food such as porridge (*rui*), *akkara*, "almond toffe" or cocofry outside local shops. Their husbands were working as watchmen, electricians, taxi drivers, construction workers, fishermen, Muslim scholars (*moro*) and teachers (*oustaz*). Others earned an income from odd jobs such as repairing bicycles, assisting politicians etc. Some husbands were working abroad and some were unemployed. According to their wives, husbands' incomes were low, irregular or hardly anything at all. The only women interviewed who reported high incomes from their husbands were not part of the Mandinka community and both had Wolof husbands. Because of the population density within the fieldwork area,

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<sup>19</sup> One woman who was living with her boyfriend and had a baby with him, was included. The reason they were not married was that his family did not want him to marry the girl.

most of those who did not have their own land, but wanted to build a compound, moved out of Bakau as soon as they raised enough money.

All of my informants were Muslims, apart from my Wolof teacher. Both women and men had attended *daaras*, Koran schools, during childhood. Some still attended *daaras* regularly. They were all Sunni Muslims, most of them belonged to one of the three main Muslim *sufi* brotherhoods in Senegal and Gambia; Tidjaniyya, Qadiriyya and Muuridiyya (Callaway, 1994, Coulon and Cruise O'Brien, 1988, Cruise O'Brien, 1971, Sanneh, 1979). While some young people fast during Ramadan and observe the five daily prayers, others take this lightly and start praying regularly and keeping the fast when they grow older. Women also attend Gamo (Ziyara) (the celebration of The Prophet's birthday) where they spend the whole night praying. Islam has been in the Gambia at least since the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Sanneh, 1979) and is deeply integrated into cosmologies and social life. There are different perceptions about what is considered correct Muslim behaviour, this subject is discussed in Part Three.

None of my main female informants had been to school for more than a couple of years, but they all struggled to pay school fees for their daughters as well as for their sons, so they could have an opportunity to get better jobs than they had. Several of their husbands could read and write Arabic and some could also read and write English, which had been the official language since the colonial days.

## **Kinds of persons**

Gambians belong to different social categories such as ethnicity, caste, class, neighbourhood and age sets. The terms *sifa* in Mandinka and *xed* in Wolof refer to both ethnicity and a categorisation of "caste". Children are considered to inherit *sifa* from their birth fathers, but the *sifa* of birth mothers and foster parents are made relevant in certain contexts.

At the time of my fieldwork, Mandinka was the largest ethnic group both nationally and in Bakau, and the relative size of ethnic groups in the country in 1993 was; Mandinka 39.5%, Fula 18.8%, Wolof 14.6%, Jola 10.6%, Serahuli 8.9% and a number of smaller such as Serer (2.8 %) and Creole/Aku Marabout (1.8%) (Republic of The Gambia, 1996b: 12). In some contexts, ethnicity seemed irrelevant, in other contexts it was an issue of great concern. Ethnic belonging and language were occasionally politicised and there was a lot of mockery between the ethnic groups although it rarely turned into open conflict. There were a number of ethnic markers and among women there were visible differences in dress codes, dancing

styles etc. There were also ethnic differences in economic adaptations – the most striking in the Bakau area is that only Mandinka women grew vegetable gardens. (For a discussion about the relevance of ethnicity in adaptation to jobs as civil servants, see Aspen (1986)). The main differences of importance for the issues discussed here, is that Mandinka women had two social institutions the Wolof did not have, namely the girls' initiation ritual (*nyaakaa*) and the *Kanyaleng* organisation and rituals for women who were infertile or had lost many children. Fula girls often participated in the initiations arranged by the Mandinka and Jola women had their own *Kanyaleng* organisation (Fassin and Badji, 1986, Niang, 1995). For reasons discussed below, my original aim to do a systematic comparison between Mandinka and Wolof management of fertility was impossible to carry out within the limits of the project.

Mandinka dominated the fieldwork area and they always spoke Mandinka amongst themselves. Many of the Mandinka and Fula women who had recently come to town could not speak much Wolof, the urban lingua franca.

Mandinka, Wolof and Fula have stratified classification systems, originally related to occupational positions. This aspect of *sifa*/W: *xed* has been translated into “caste” (Gamble, 1957, Klein, 1977, Weil, 1968) although there is no concept in Wolof (Irvine, 1978, Sommerfelt, 1999) or Mandinka that corresponds directly to “caste”. The descriptions often refers to Lowie's definition as it is utilised by Maquet in a Rwanda setting: “...a caste society as one composed of several graded groups, each of which is endogamous and practicing an hereditary occupation, membership of which can be obtained by birth” (Lowie 1948 cited in Maquet 1961: 135).

According to Sommerfelt (1999: 38), all the *xed* categories are given their labels from occupational groups with the exception of “non-professional freeman” (*geer*) and slave. The categories were; the freeborn (*forro*, W:*jambur/ger*), the low “castes” (*nyamalo*, W:*nenyo*) and the slaves (*jongo*, W: *jaam*) (Gamble 1957, Sommerfelt, 1999, (Weil, 1968). The first category historically consisted of royalty, nobles and peasants, while the second consisted of smiths (W: *tega*), leather workers (W: *ude*) and musicians/praise singers (*jali*, W:*gewels*). According to Klein (1977) there were three types of slaves among the Wolof; trade slaves (W: *jaam sayor*), domestic slaves (W: *jaam juddu*) and administrative slaves (W: *tyeddo*). Slaves could be acquired through kidnapping, purchase, war or as judicial penalties (Klein, 1977). However, *sifa* rarely decides occupational careers in The Gambia today. Rather, belonging to such categories regulates other forms of social interaction, such as whom to marry and patron-client relationships.

Today people are ambivalent as to whether slaves still exist. There are persons known as descendants of slaves, but people are reluctant to claim that somebody is a slave. One man had problems getting married when a man from his village told the bride's parents that he was descended from slaves. The bride said she did not care about who he was descended from, but the marriage was not consummated until the rumour was disproved. While the girl rejected that the category of slave had any significance, her parents insisted on investigating the matter since they found it to be of utmost importance. To them, the descendant of a slave was incompatible as a marriage partner for their daughter.

Such lack of compatibility between people of different categories was emphasised by a man, who against his mother's warning had involved himself with the daughter of a silversmith. The girl had been so beautiful that he could not resist. Immediately after he had sex with her he had started itching all over. The itching only stopped when he had purified himself with ashes.

Those who seem to make the most of their *sifa* category in daily interaction seemed to be the *jalis*. *Jalis* were of different kinds, some were highly skilled musicians, others were praise singers, story tellers and historians. Some *jalis* specialised in cooking at other people's parties and did not give any artistic performance. When there has been a long standing relationship between a *jali* family and a freeborn family, there are certain expectations between them. On one occasion some of my informants received a visit from *jalis* from their rural village. As they had "always" been the *jalis* of their family, they were obliged to give them something when they came for a visit.

The *nga mano*, the female circumciser, used to come from blacksmith families. Male circumcisers also used to be blacksmiths. Nowadays, however, many boys are circumcised by a hospital doctor.

It is not clear how literally the incompatibility between people belonging to different "castes" is regarded. It is said that the children of parents belonging to different categories, particularly slaves and freeborn, would not be well, but it was not clear whether my informants expected physical impairment or rather ritual impurity from confusing the categories (Douglas, 1966).

## **Compounds and residence units**

The majority of my informants rented rooms in other people's compounds. Several of them lived in two-room flats with their husbands and children; some also shared the flat with a co-

wife and her children. The terms for compound in both Mandinka (*suo, korda*) and Wolof (*kerr*) may refer both to physically bounded units as well as “homes” as units of belonging. Urban compounds varied between 100m<sup>2</sup> and 1000m<sup>2</sup> and were composed of one or several residence units.<sup>20</sup> Some were family compounds, where most of the inhabitants were related to each other through kinship or marriage. In other compounds most of the rooms were rented out. The houses were made of brick or mud (*banko bungo*) and fences were made of concrete walls or corrugated sheets. Most compounds had two or three dwelling houses. Typical “family houses” had a common sitting room, several bedrooms and sometimes a bathroom. Only some newer houses had inside kitchens. Houses for rent often consisted of several two-room flats or, for “boys’ quarters”, several single rooms. Flats for rent typically consisted of two rooms, with the entrance door facing the yard and the back door facing a small private backyard fenced with corrugated iron. The other backyards were often divided into a cooking and a washing area, sometimes with a corrugated sheet between the two parts. The washing area was used for washing (W: *sango*), small laundries and urinating. Some backyards also had a private latrine. In some compounds there were common washing places and latrines. Others depended on public toilets or neighbours’ latrines.

Most of the flats had beds in both rooms, but the room adjacent to the yard usually served as a sitting room and was used for the reception of guests. Some of these rooms were also furnished with a sofa and/or armchairs and a cupboard. Clothes and personal belongings were kept in cupboards, baskets under the bed or metal coffers with padlocks. Drinking water was kept in clay jars (W: *ndal*) inside the house while water for washing and cooking was kept in open basins in the back yard. Some of the houses had no permanent ceiling, but cardboard was frequently put up in order to increase privacy.

While few had access to tap water inside the compound in 1987, several compounds had their own tap in 1998. This represented an immense saving of time for girls and women who otherwise could spend endless time waiting in line in front of the public taps at the side of the road.

The yards in front of the houses were used for laundry and drying clothes, ironing, playing, relaxing and praying. In the afternoon and evening people often brought straw mats or chairs into the yard to sit and chat, plait each other’s hair and drink *ataya*. During Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month (*sunkaro*), common prayers were arranged in the open space in front of the houses.

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<sup>20</sup> This is the case in Bakau and Serekunda, in Banjul compounds may be substantially smaller.

Rooms and flats were densely populated, two grown-up brothers could share a single room and co-wives would have to share a two-room flat, where they had to pass frequently through each other's rooms. Privacy was thus a scarce resource and the significance of private space became tremendously important.<sup>21</sup>

## **Residence patterns**

In my compound survey, which included 26 compounds and 692 residents, the average number of people per compound was 26, varying from 57 to six people (see Appendix 5). Relatives of the compound owner were in the majority in 17 of the 27 compounds. Among persons aged 15 years or older, men constituted the majority, 57%. One reason why men outnumbered women was that men, and even boys, frequently migrated to the urban areas, while women would rarely migrate alone. The estimated average size of co-residential units was 5.6 persons. 53% of the units were nuclear, 13% were composite units, consisting of two or more brothers and sisters with their spouses and children, and 34% were single men's units.

About half of the people within my compound survey area (350 of 692) were related to the compound owner through kinship.<sup>22</sup> The patri-viri-local residence pattern that was frequent in rural areas was rare in the urban areas. Some women moved to their husband's compound but the majority lived in neo-local units. This residence pattern had consequences for the organisation of the daily care of children. For most women there were no kin or co-wives to share cooking and child care tasks. The easiest way to get help in taking care of a child was through child fostering arrangements. Only nine of the 107 married women lived in the same compound as their mother-in-law and 28 women lived with one or more brother or sister of their husband. By implication, only few of the women had to relate to in-laws in their daily lives. This does, however, not say anything about how close, involved or influential affines were in fertility decisions or in practical care and economic support of the children. Among the women I interviewed; nine lived in compounds belonging to their husbands' kin,

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<sup>21</sup> In the survey, 19% of the married women and 48.2% of the married women I interviewed lived in the same compound as the co-wife.

<sup>22</sup> The interview data showed that four of 31 women lived in compounds belonging to their own kin while 19 rented rooms from non-relatives. In the survey, more married men than women lived in a compound owned by their parents or themselves. Two married Serahuli women lived in their own family compounds with their husbands. Two married Wollof women lived in their father's compound, one of them had an absent husband and one of them was married to her father's sister's son. A third married Wollof woman lived in her mother's compound, but also she was married to a cross cousin (MoBrSo) who had kin relationships within the same compound.

four lived in compounds belonging to their own kin, while 19 rented rooms from non-relatives.<sup>23</sup>

In the survey area, 20 % (22 of 107) of the married women lived in the same compound as co-wives. Among the interviewed women, 48% (13 of 27) of the presently married women lived in the same compound as one of their co-wives.<sup>24</sup> Among the polygamous women in the survey area, 17 had one co-wife (*sina*), eight had two co-wives and three had four co-wives.<sup>25</sup>

The dynamics of management of fertility in large rural family units, as discussed by Madhavan and Bledsoe (2001), is not likely to be as relevant in the smaller urban units. Still, as I argue below, one should be careful to define family dynamics on the basis of residence units only. Often, inhabitants of nuclear-like residence units were part of extended networks of cooperation with other urban, rural or foreign based kin.

## ***Research setting and methodology***

### **Fieldwork – participant observation**

The study is based on thirty months of fieldwork within a Mandinka-dominated neighbourhood in Bakau. The fieldwork periods varied from one to eleven months between 1987 and 1998. In 1998 and 2007 I used the opportunity to combine holidays with field visits to follow up some of my research questions. Between 1987 and 1995 I carried out fieldwork at least every second year. During the first fieldwork, the focus of study was cultural adaptation to Western tourism, but much of the information gathered then has been highly relevant to my PhD study. Due to the sensitivity of some of the issues researched in the project (female genital cutting, infertility, sexual relations etc.) I decided to remain in the same fieldwork area for the whole period. The long lasting contact with informants over 20 years, made it possible to study dynamics in management of fertility and changes in

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<sup>23</sup> Two married Serahuli women lived in their own family compounds with their husbands. Two married Wolof women lived in their father's compound, one of them had an absent husband and one of them was married to her father's sister's son. A third married Wolof woman lived in her mother's compound, but also she was married to a cross-cousin (*mobrso*) who had kin relationships within the same compound.

<sup>24</sup> I have no explanation for this discrepancy. The survey area and the area several of the interviewed women came from were slightly overlapping.

<sup>25</sup> The husband had taken an elderly widow as his fifth wife. The marriage was a pro forma marriage with few practical consequences. Such marriages are allowed in Islam.

residential units over time, and among other things, to establish three extended cases of residential development over a 20-year period. It also made it possible to see how child fostering arrangements changed over time.

During the first fieldwork, which focused on gender differences in responses to tourism, the field areas were fruit stalls, beaches and clubs where the boys and tourists met, as well as the neighbourhood where some of the fruit sellers and I lived. I also travelled to visit friends and family of some of the fruit sellers. Later, major fieldwork areas were the compounds in the neighbourhood and the vegetable gardens. Much time was spent “helping” cooking, growing vegetables and occasionally visiting the fruit sellers at their stalls at the beach. I also went with informants to visit relatives, health facilities, healers and sacred places, attend rituals, court cases, visit public offices, local markets, the lands office, schools etc.

Although I explained the purpose of my study to informants, it is unlikely that they actually could have known what kind of work I was doing and what kind of text I was writing. Many people probably also forgot that I was doing research. With the exception of those listed below, or mentioned in the introduction, all names are pseudonyms. Some may recognise themselves or their kin or neighbour, but I hope this recognition is due to the fact that the information is already known to them and that I do not disclose any secrets. There is a fine balance between secrecy and discretion in the text and writing boring stories that would not illuminate the point I am trying to make.

### **Extended cases**

One important data source became accounts of the development of residential and family units over time, presented here as three extended case studies of kin and residential units of three women. One of my informants, whom I call Binta, lived in four different compounds in Bakau as well as in her mother's and her in-laws' compound for shorter periods. Another woman, whom I call Mariama, stayed in one compound the whole time, while most of the other people in the compound came and went. The economical, practical and emotional support (and lack of such) over these years varied a lot, and the apparently stable situation was actually quite chaotic. Finally, the woman I call Omi lived in an expanding, but exceptionally peaceful family compound during these years, until 1997 when she moved to Europe.



## **Compound survey**

In 1995 I conducted a compound survey over 27 compounds in the fieldwork area. For the survey I selected one of the enumeration areas from the Central Statistics Department (CSD). The area consisted of 28 compounds, but information from one compound could not be obtained and in one of them fairly inaccurate information was given. The number of inhabitants in the 26 compounds included in the analysis was 692. The details of the findings are presented in chapter three. The procedure was to interview one person in each compound with the help of an interpreter. The compound representatives were asked about who lived in each of the flats and houses; names, ethnicity, age, gender, origin, profession/job and relationship to other compound dwellers and to the compound owner were also asked. On the basis of this information I made genealogical charts for each of the compounds and counted numbers of men, women, birth children and foster children. We asked for children fostered in and out from the compound. It appeared that the person who answered the questions probably did not know all the children that had been fostered out, at least not those who had been fostered out before people moved into the compound. The numbers turned out to be extremely low compared with numbers of children fostered in and was thus not included in the analysis of foster relationships.

The main purpose of the survey was to explore the composition of residential units and determine to what extent residential units were kin based. Since most of the anthropological literature from The Gambia is from rural villages, I was curious to know to what extent urban social organisation was based on similar family and kin relations. The information allowed me to distinguish aspects of residence from other aspects of social organisation and kinship. As there has been a tendency to collapse many different principles of kinship into one single aspect, namely linearity, the data is needed to illuminate nuances.

One could argue that the information that was supplied may be inaccurate as only one person per compound was asked. I agree that it would have been preferable to make the data collection more inclusive, however, my method coincides with that used to collect data for the National Population Census. Comparing my findings with national data, there are few differences. The most striking difference was an exceptionally low rate of polygamy (25%) compared with the urban average.

## Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were performed with 31 women, most of them living within the fieldwork area in Bakau. They were recruited through the “snowball method” and most of them were neighbours and colleagues of my main informants. In my original project design I wanted to compare Mandinka with Wolof, and several of the “Wolof” women my Mandinka informants found for me were Fula or Serer. Male assistants interviewed ten men before I decided that it would be too difficult to include the data into my analysis. Most of the interviewed men were substantially younger than my female informants’ husbands, and the information could not shed much light on my female informants’ fertility.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with several key persons whom I selected because of their professional capacities: three marabouts, a female circumciser, and people in NGOs such as Gambia Family Planning, Women’s Bureau, BAFROW. A list of people interviewed is provided in Appendix 3.

Information on infertility was also collected in collaboration with Johanne Sundby. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted in rural villages as a part of a national study of infertility (Sundby 1997, Sundby and Mboge, 1995, Sundby et al., 1998).

## Rituals

I participated on several ritual occasions, where girls’ initiation rituals, transfer of the bride rituals and *Kanyaleng* rituals were in focus of the thesis. Other ritual I visited were name giving rituals, coming out rituals for initiated boys and girls, Koranic school graduation, receptions after Haj<sup>26</sup>, marriages, charity after burials, visit to Folonko in Kartong, *Eid al-fitr (salo)*, *Eid al-adha (Banna Salo)*, New years eve, *Musu Koto Salo* etc.

All ritual participation was positioned either by informants’ or my own relationship to those who arranged the rituals. When those I knew well arranged the rituals I was involved in preparations as well as in large parts of the ritual itself. On other occasions I accompanied informants who only attended the rituals to pay a visit; greet people, give money, have some food and leave. Having in mind other anthropologists’ detailed accounts of full ritual sequences, the realization that participation is more about social relations than a detailed representation of all the elements in the ritual only came in the later stages of the fieldwork.

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<sup>26</sup> Haj is pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon return, pilgrims are titled *aja* (W, female) and *alhaji* (W, male).

Parts of two initiation (*nyaakaa*) rituals, two transfer of the bride rituals (*manyo bito*) and one *Kanyaleng ritual* were tape recorded.

### 1) *Nyaakaa*

The initiation songs were sung in Mandinka and were tape recorded, first transcribed in Mandinka, and then translated into Wolof with the assistance of two of the participants. The translations and interpretations of the Mandinka songs were provided by Mandinka informants in Wolof and translated to English by me. My interpretations and selections were again based on these interpretations.

During one of the *nyaakaa* rituals I used photographs and discussed them with informants, primarily to map out relationships between major participants in the ritual.

### 2) *Maañoo bitoo/jebale*

The speeches of advice made in the transfer of the bride rituals were transcribed and interpreted in cooperation with informants and with my Wolof and Mandinka teachers.

### 3) *Kanyaleng ritual and organisation*

The *Kanyaleng* group in focus here consists of 17 women, only one of them was not Mandinka (a Fula woman married to a Mandinka man). Several of the performances and *Kanyaleng* songs to be discussed here took place in a *Kanyaleng* name-giving ritual (*kuy-lio*) for a three-month-old girl, whose mother had lost several children. The songs were sung in Mandinka, were tape-recorded, first transcribed in Mandinka, and then translated into Wolof with the assistance of two of the participants.

I also mapped short versions of the reproductive histories of the 17 *Kanyaleng* members.

## **Statistics**

Statistical data from population censuses and surveys to assess Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA-reports) are used to discuss my findings and observations from Bakau in a wider context.

## **Position within the field**

During my first fieldwork I was 28 years old, a graduate student studying tourism. I was married to a Norwegian who was present for only two weeks during the fieldwork period of eight months. From a Gambian point of view I probably had much in common with female

single tourists and was frequently treated like one. As an apparent tourist, I was approached by the fruit sellers at the tourist market. One of them became my friend and I spent much time with her among the other fruit sellers and the people in her compound in Bakau. My network gradually expanded as I moved into her neighbourhood. During the second fieldwork period I spent much time also with the boys who followed tourists to become tourist guides, friends and lovers. In a Gambian context, women who spent time with men who were not family, talking to these boys on the beach, along the road and at clubs during night-time, were considered like prostitute. As the comparison between the fruit sellers and the young men's relations to tourists were important in my project, I was not willing to give them up in order to appear more respectable. At that time I was first and foremost a *toubab*, a white Western woman, generally seen as different and judged by different standards.

During the third fieldwork I brought my son, who was 13 months old. Being a mother among mothers, who lived under economically difficult conditions and frequently lost their children, was emotionally very challenging. On a visit to one of my informants' mother's brother, I felt extremely uncomfortable. He lived with his four wives and thirty children in a big house, and I was shown a child who was sick, but there was no money for medicine. When I (involuntarily) imagined how I would feel if my son became seriously ill and there was nothing I could do to help him, I was overwhelmed by desperation. To protect myself, I avoided questions about how informants felt about such matters. What started as a feeling of acute unease, turned into a strong non-relativist emotional position. On a personal level, the western bio-medically inspired folk model about bodily functions and health was so strong I would under no circumstance substitute chloroquine with anti-witchcraft treatment if I believed somebody were suffering from malaria. Although I could appreciate a piece of charcoal as protection against witches at dusk, I could not appreciate the power of witches more than I appreciated bio-medicine.

Also other aspects of parent-child relations, such as child fostering as a social practice, became emotionally incomprehensible, and I could not fully understand the practice intellectually. When I later had been divorced for some years, at my wedding to my Gambian husband, I could not resist when the *Cadi* (Muslim judge) asked if I wanted any conditions in our marriage contract; such as for example, "only one wife", he said. Although polygamy seemed to work quite alright for some of my informants (but not all), I had not the slightest interest in testing it out in my own marriage. Finally, I do not want my own daughter to be circumcised.

From an epistemological point of view, only the relativist position can be defended. As an anthropologist I have tried to pursue this perspective during fieldwork and during writing and analysing my material. Still, it would be arrogant to argue that my personal position is a totally relativistic position. When I cannot choose polygamy for myself or circumcision for my daughter, it is condescending to argue that it is good enough for my friends, in-laws and informants.

Growing up in a middle class family in Norway, within an egalitarian ideology, leaves one almost totally unprepared for how to handle social inequalities. In my childhood and also as a grown up, all traces of social difference were systematically under-communicated. When I started doing fieldwork I found it embarrassing that even as a student I was better off than most people around me. After a while I realised that inequality was integrated into the Gambian society and portrayed as “natural” through the caste-like ideology, and differences in socio-economic positions seemed more acceptable to informants than it was to me. Patron-client relations were frequent and both parties used it for what it was worth. When I realised that relatively well-off Gambians dealt with this on a much larger scale on a daily basis, it became easier to handle.

Coming and going over a period of twenty years obviously does something to one’s position within the field. One aspect is that one becomes part of social networks and cannot “float around” independently. “Belonging” to the Mandinka community made it impossible to even think of a comparative fieldwork among Wolof within the same area. The mutual dependency between me and some of my friends and informants (I needed information and contacts, they needed a share of my money) restricted both my opportunities and theirs. In addition, some of them became friends and not just sources of information. Knowing that I knew a lot of other people made some informants become more careful about what they said. And I became more careful about what I asked about in order to show respect to informants. Perhaps I would have known more if I had asked? At a seminar in Norway I presented a paper about mutedness in relation to female circumcision. One of the critical questions from the audience was whether I had tried to ask, and I became aware that in some cases the mutedness was actually mine.

Another source of change over time was the obvious political changes in The Gambia. During my first fieldwork periods I was surprised about how frequently my female informants discussed politics. I was not very interested in the beginning, but when I became involved with my husband, , it became impossible not to be involved. After the military coup of 24 July 1994 few people talked openly about politics, but rather whispered in closed circles.

In 1994/95 and in 1998 I lived in my husband's family's compound in Serekunda, 3 kilometres from my fieldwork area. I went to Bakau and spent time there at least five days a week. Apart from one *jebale* (transfer of the bride) ceremony where I accompanied women from my husband's family, very few of my interactions with my in-laws have become data in the thesis. Some anecdotes and comments are however included. My relationships and interactions with them have, however, hopefully sharpened my analytical and comparative perspectives. Because of the differences in ethnicity, educational level and economic position between my in-laws and my informants, it has become necessary to be specific and not to talk about Gambians in general.

### **Language and (re) presentation**

As mentioned above, my main working language was Wolof. Most matters were discussed with Mandinka informants in Wolof. Informants, teachers and assistants translated Mandinka expressions into Wolof or English, and I processed these words and sentences as a native Norwegian-speaker. As most of the songs and expressions discussed in the thesis were in Mandinka, for the sake of readability, I chose to give priority to Mandinka terms in the text and to present the Wolof equivalents in a glossary in the Appendix 2. When I use a Wolof word or sentence in the text, I refer to it with a W the first time it occurs in that paragraph. In a few cases, I have also used Arab and Norwegian words and marked them by A or N respectively. The words "marabout" and "jinn" are found in Webster's dictionary and are thus treated as English words. Mandinka and Wolof have been made written languages through the efforts of anthropologists, missionaries (WEC) and peace corps teachers. I have followed advices from Karin Knick, David Gamble and also used the Peace Corpse Dictionaries.

In the text, I frequently refer to "a Mandinka woman" or "a Fula man" as if ethnicity is relevant to the argument. In some cases, I know that ethnicity is significant, for example, it matters whether a statement about the female initiation is uttered by a Mandinka or a Wolof woman, just as it obviously is important whether it comes from a man or a woman. In other contexts I am not sure whether the ethnicity of the speaker matters at all. Examples are discussions about polygamy or child fostering where my material is too small to conclude about whether Mandinka, Wolof or Fula women have different perceptions. In the three case studies, where two are Mandinka and one is Fula, I cannot tell from my material whether the Fula case has a lot of "Fula traits" to it or whether it reflects typical dynamics of families and

residence units who have been urban dwellers and compound owners for decades. By leaving some information in the text that might be superfluous, I open for different readings and interpretations, as an offer to readers interested in the specific ethnographic context, rather than pleasing readers that are more interested in the argument than in the specific ethnographic details.

I frequently use the term “my informants” to emphasise that I do not speak generally about all Gambians. Although most of the cosmology, rituals, kinship, child fostering practices and others were shared by large numbers of both men and women, there were several women in the urban area with a high level of education, professional careers and sufficient money to make other choices than my informants could.

I also use the expression “up-river” (*bolongkono*) (i.e. the banks of the Gambia river), which informants frequently use to refer to their birth villages. “Up-river” is a place, but it also represents a different way of living.

*Toubabo* can be translated as white, Western, European etc., but the term also refers to an attitude or lifestyle. According to a male informant who had studied abroad, he was accused of being a *toubabo* when he closed his door and read books, rather than keeping the door open inviting anybody to come in and chat.

The unit of currency in The Gambia is the Dalasis, and this was highly devaluated during recent years. In 1994 and 1995 the average rate of exchange was 0.07 GBP for 1 Gambian Dalasis (FXHistory ©1997-2007 by OANDA Corporation, 2007). The rate was 0.05 in 2000, 0.04 in 2002 and since 2003 it has been fluctuating around 0.02.

Finally, there is the problem of expressing the phenomenon of genital cutting. Almost all Mandinka girls go through the *nyaakaa* initiation ritual some time between the age four to ten years. Through the *nyaakaa* ritual, they are transformed from uninitiated girls, *solima*, to initiated girls who know the secrets of the *nyaakaa*. The ritual is supposed to make the girls ready to become married women and mothers later in life, but does not bring any immediate changes apart from a status as initiated and access to other *nyaakaa* rituals. The purpose of the ritual is thus to initiate the girls. During the two to three weeks the ritual lasts in the urban areas, girls get to know the secrets of the *nyaakaa*, but also other forms of knowledge. This includes knowledge about valued qualities in women such as respect, obedience, endurance and privacy/discretion. They also learn practical skills, songs, dances, proverbs and riddles and secret signs. Generally formulated, they receive knowledge about the world (*W: loi neka chi aduna*). Last, but not least, the girls genitalia are cut during the ritual.

The choice of concepts to describe the genital cutting has been the object of heated discussion between scholars, politicians, health practitioners, feminists and others (almost everybody apart from those involved in arranging the rituals, who don't need them). Obermeyer (1999) argues that any use of an all-encompassing acronym tends to "objectify the practice as if it were a rare and complicated syndrome" (Obermeyer, 1999: 84) She suggest that one uses the full expression as a reminder that "there are no easy equivalents and no simple way to understand" (84). Obermeyer herself uses the expression "female genital surgery", which also has been criticised because it is intended as a value-neutral description but "lends the practice an air of...medical necessity, that is at best suspect" (Gifford 1994: 333 in Hernlund, 2003: viii).

I choose to refer to female genital cutting because, in spite of the surgical associations, it seems to be the most neutral of the expressions. While circumcision tends to put the cutting on the same footing as male circumcision and thus trivialises the intervention, "genital mutilation" implies that those who put their daughters through the intervention seriously injure them and make them impaired for the rest of their lives.<sup>27</sup> I have never witnessed the genital cutting myself, but have observed the girls shortly after and during the healing period. As I have suggested elsewhere, these painful experiences are likely to be muted and misrepresented due to ideology inherent in the practice, but as long as I don't have data that substantiates the mutilation approach, I prefer to use "cutting". This is obviously controversial. Schweder argues that the practice poses a puzzle to the intellect and the imagination, for one must "try to imagine how it might be possible for a moral and rational person....to rationally link ritual initiation and the marking and alteration of genitals to virtues such as civility, loyalty, respect, purity and self control" (Schweder 1996: 1 in Obermeyer, 1999: 89). If the anthropologist succeeds in understanding the perspectives of informants and tries to convey the meaning to a Western audience, she is very likely to be misunderstood and be cited in support of the practice (Talle, 2003).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Professor Johanne Sundby has been made aware that within medical terminology all unnecessary damage of healthy tissue may be referred to as mutilation.

<sup>28</sup> As this is not the focus of the thesis I refer to further reading on the controversies in other sources (Gruenbaum, 2005, Hernlund and Shell-Duncan, 2000, Mackie, 2003, Obermeyer, 1999, Obermeyer, 2003, Obermeyer and Reynolds, 1999).



## **Part I Creating appropriate wives and mothers**



The focus in this part is on how girls are shaped through their upbringing to become good wives and mothers and how women work out their marital relationships. Aspects of gendered constructions of fertility are partly made up by appropriate management of sexuality and partly through other aspects of health, well-being and relationships with husbands, boyfriends and others involved (a part of this is dealt with in chapter 3). Gender, sexuality and thus also fertility are also constructed through the training of girls to respect others (*horomo*), to endure (*sabati*), and to be discrete/secretive (*suturo*). Most Mandinka girls learn these qualities through upbringing (*kullu*) at home and through participation in the girls' initiation ritual (*nyaakaa boyoo*). These values are emphasised in both *nyaakaa* and marriage rituals as well as in everyday life. As the daily performance of tasks and ritual participation constitute rather different discursive contexts, their effect on shaping fertility might be rather different. The power relations involved differs as well, and girls' and women's position in them changes over time.

To what extent are these discourses generative in the sense that new forms and content may develop? Who are able to affect these discourses? Which of the discursive arenas are open to changes? While it is widely acknowledged that rites of passages are transforming individuals, individual transformations at the same time contribute to confirming the social order. In a similar way children are brought up in everyday settings and transformed into appropriately behaving adults while the adults in the role of educators to a large degree confirm the social order. In the *Kanyaleng* rituals, discussed in chapter seven, women are in a context where all they need to think of is themselves and their ability to bear surviving children. They may well challenge the social order, as there are no *nga singolu* to train or brides to advise. While the *nyaakaa* and *maañoo bitoo* rituals are presented in the following chapters, the *Kanyaleng* ritual is described and discussed in the last chapter.

In this context the relationship between corporality, including bodily experiences and constructions of the body, and other forms of knowledge, are discussed in relationship to the reshaping of female bodies through the genital cutting and the training involved in several parts of the ritual.



## Chapter 1 Shaping female bodies and persons

Common Gambian perceptions of appropriate management of female fertility as well as individual women's actual ways of dealing with their own fertility are shaped through elaborate processes in a number of arenas. In this chapter I present how girls are trained during their upbringing, at home and through the *nyaakaa* initiation ritual, to embody appropriate gendered qualities. This includes, in addition to performance of a number of female tasks, a display of obedience and respect towards parents and other elders, towards a future husband and in-laws. It also includes a general conduct of appropriate signification of lack of sexual accessibility. Metaphors for inappropriate gender identities such as prostitute (W: *chagga*) or trans-gender/homosexuality (W: *gor-jiggen*) are applied in the construction of "pure" and appropriately gendered persons (Skramstad, 1990b). Girls who smoke in public and walk about in the street without a legitimate purpose, as well as girls who refuse to help their mothers, may be said to be like prostitutes or manly.<sup>29</sup>

The initiation comprises shaping of the female body and the female person through genital cutting and training during the weeks of seclusion. The ritual initiates the girls into the secrets of *nyaakaa*; they will no longer be the uninitiated, *solima*. Although some informants argue that the ritual is a precondition for marriage, it does not imply an immediate transfer from childhood to womanhood. Rather, the immediate change is from being uninitiated to being initiated. A major focus in this chapter is to explore how fertility is constructed and shaped through the ritual. I argue that this is done, not through the genital cutting, but through training the girls to manage their sexuality in appropriate ways. Girls learn how to respect their parents, their elders and future husbands. Genital cutting, as performed in The Gambia, generally implies removal of all or part of the clitoris and all or part of the labia minora. In contrast to infibulation, where the purpose is producing closure and protecting or creating virginity (Boddy, 1982, Boddy, 1989, Johansen, 2006a, Talle, 1993), Gambian cliteridectomy and excision leave the vaginal opening almost "as it is". Although some Gambians not involved in the *nyaakaa* ritual argued that the cutting contributed to control of female sexuality, none of the Mandinka women involved in the ritual expressed such ideas I discuss

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<sup>29</sup> "Prostitutes" and *gor-jiggen* are made up as images of unviable identities. Whether such identities actually are unviable, depends on the particular context. Although a woman's behaviour may lead to rejection by her family, she may lead a decent life within a different social context.

some of the epistemological difficulties involved in deciding about the intents and effect of the ritual below.

In this chapter I discuss different aspects of gender identity construction. First I examine what is considered as proper female behaviour, and how parents and other caretakers attempt to cultivate such behaviour in girls. Secondly, I discuss Mandinka female initiation as one of the ways of cultivating “girls of the right kind”.

### ***Producing respectable and respectful women***

Child rearing takes place in the daily activities at home and in various forms of more or less formal education, including Muslim (Ar.: *madrassa* ) and “Western” schools, Koranic education (*daara*) and the initiation ritual (*nyaakaa*).<sup>30</sup> The latter is considered a period of moral and practical training. Peer groups and social clubs are also important in shaping gendered behaviour and identities.

Gender differentiation in treatment of children and upbringing starts early, and already at the name-giving ritual (*kuy-lio* ), there are some slight variations depending on gender.<sup>31</sup> Wittrup (1992) argues that the *kuy-lio* is larger if the child is a boy. My experience is that although many people prefer the first child to be a boy, the size of the *kuy-lio* depended less on the child’s gender than on other factors. *Jamboos*, the most minimal versions of the ritual, were arranged during Ramadan, on account of the recent death of a family member or neighbour , or because the child’s parents were unmarried. Rather than making gendered differences, it was often emphasised that the same procedures should be followed for all the children. If a hen was sacrificed for one child, a hen should be sacrificed for the next. If parents wanted to sacrifice a sheep for the second child, they would have to sacrifice one for the first child as well, if it was not done at the first *kuy-lio* . If the mother of the child was sitting outside during the first *kuy-lio* , she should do the same with all her babies.

In the introduction, I discussed different forms of knowing and potential representation of knowledge. Gendered knowledge and patterns of behaviour are incorporated through elaborated processes in everyday upbringing and in rituals. According to Moi (1991), one important aspect of acquiring a gender habitus is:

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<sup>30</sup> In the urban area many children attend *daaras* in the afternoon, in addition to Western schools. Some boys attend full time *daaras* and live with an *oustaz*, a Muslim teacher.

<sup>31</sup> As in the West, Gambians define the child’s gender on the basis of the genitals. I am not sure whether there are other criteria that might be made relevant. Since informants apparently categorised the gender of babies the same way as I did, I never questioned their criteria for evaluation. The need to reshape genitals are discussed below.

...the inscription of social power relations on the body: our habitus is at once produced and expressed through our movements, gestures, facial expressions, manners, ways of walking, and ways of looking at the world. The socially produced body is thus necessarily also a political body, or rather an embodied politics ...Thus even such basic activities as teaching children how to move, dress, and eat are thoroughly political, in that they impose on them an unspoken understanding of legitimate ways to (re) present their bodies to themselves and others ...the body-...- becomes a kind of constant reminder (un pense-bête) of sociosexual power relations (Moi, 1991: 1031).

There are few differences between acquiring a habitus and undergoing a process of subjection as discussed in the introduction. I borrow Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, doxa and heterodoxy occasionally, without involving everything that is implied, such as for example the concepts of fields.<sup>32</sup> Gender habitus is inscribed into Gambian children in a number of ways. Girls' ears are pierced at an early age, often on the day of the name giving. Piercing and plaiting of hair are important markers of gender. People mistook my two and a half year old daughter for a boy since she had no earrings, neither was her hair plaited. Gambian girls' hair is plaited already as babies, accompanied by their loud protests. Hair plaiting is often painful, takes time and may be one of the first times the child's abilities to bear pain and endure are tested. Hairstyle may thus signify levels of parental care and control.

Dress codes also signify gender. As girls get older they have to cover larger parts of their legs and in some social milieus, their hair and shoulders. In some social groups this dress code is strict; in others it is quite relaxed. In recent years several young girls have started to wear a headscarf, the *hijab*. To my knowledge there is little research done on the use of the *hijab* in The Gambia, but findings from elsewhere suggest that such dress codes are used as identity markers in complex ways (See for example Jacobsen, 2006, Tjomsland, 2000).

Learning gender specific tasks is a part of the subject formation. Several of the female tasks, such as carrying big buckets of water on their heads, growing vegetables and carrying children on their backs, require very specific bodily techniques. During my fieldwork, girls of four or five years started taking care of younger siblings, sweeping, fetching water and washing bowls. As they grew older they also assisted in cooking and doing the laundry. Some

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<sup>32</sup> Moi (Moi, 1991) argues that a gender habitus would have been part of a general social field. The notions of fields are useful in certain contexts, but in this context it would probably complicate things rather than bringing analytical clarity.

boys were involved in such tasks, some because their mothers thought it would be good for them, others because they had no sisters of an appropriate age to do the work.

One Fula man told the story of a rather well-to-do man who wanted to marry a nice looking young girl. The girl's parents accepted the proposal, but the marriage did not last long. After a few months, the man returned the girl to her parents and said he could not have a wife who could not cook. The man who told the story emphasised how shameful the event must have been for the mother; she was after all the one who had failed to teach the girl how to cook.

The gendered division of labour is taught through imitation and instruction, where girls follow their mother's and sisters, and boys follow fathers and brothers. The apparent naturalness of women doing women's work often made the gender differentiation invisible and rarely challenged. When gender boundaries were crossed, however, it became extremely visible and the subject of disputes.

On a visit to a female informant's in-laws "up-river", I witnessed an episode where gender-specific tasks were questioned and sparked off a situation of heterodoxy. One of Aminata's sons had lived many years with his father's relatives and gone to primary school in a neighbouring village. He had just started secondary school in Bansang, where he lived with a friend of his father. With no female relatives around, he had got used to washing his own clothes. Back in the village during a school holiday he took his dirty clothes to the washing place beside the well. Neither his aunts, nor his grandmother said anything. When his father (the birth father's elder brother) and head of the compound saw what was happening, he was furious. He told the boy to stop immediately. When the boy's grandmother and aunts interfered, the father objected that there were a lot of young girls in the compound who could do the laundry, and that boys had never done the laundry in his compound, and they would never do. When the women argued that it was good for the boy to know how to do it, the father told his own mother, "You are the grandmother, I am the father. I am the one to teach boys what to do". After the incident I discussed the matter with Binta who said she supported the boy's father's point of view. The elder brother, however, told the boy to wash his own clothes in Bansang, but not there. "These people don't understand school life", he added.



In this context, the boy challenged the dominant discourse about gendered divisions of labour. Although he was supported by his mother and grandmother, the father successfully opposed them and re-established gendered labour patterns. Firstly, the father had authority as the head of the compound and had a general right to make decisions, secondly, men trained boys and thirdly, he was backed by tradition as “men had never done the laundry in their compound and never would.”

In Bakau, where the majority of young girls went to school, they did most of their household chores before they went to school and in the afternoons and evenings. In town there were few tasks for boys.<sup>33</sup> They could run errands, such as bringing somebody his lunch, buying things at the shop, conveying messages or making *ataya*. Generally boys were free to do their homework during the afternoon or evenings and had more time to concentrate on homework than girls. A couple of girls, who were pursuing higher education – one at the Hotel school and one at Gambia Technical Training Institute – did the majority of their homework late in the evening or around five o’clock in the morning when everybody else was asleep.

### **Moral space – sexual signification**

During their upbringing girls were taught the appropriate signification of sexuality. Different people interpreted signs of sexuality differently and some signs may not have been considered sexual per se, but were given sexual connotations. My use of the concept “management of signs of sexuality” is an appropriation of Rasmussen’s (1984) concept “management of erotic” (N: *erotikkforvaltning*). Rasmussen describes how young girls in a Norwegian harbour area spent a lot of time carefully managing a set of cultural signs of sexual accessibility. Because the signification of erotic or sexual accessibility is gender specific and of little public interest when it comes to men, Rasmussen entitled her book chapter, “A bad reputation is women’s fate” (“*Dårlig rykte er kvinneskjebne*”). This is certainly also the case in The Gambia, where “prostitute” is an exclusively female category, and men rarely gained a bad reputation due to sexual behaviour. In earlier studies, I have discussed how young boys who had frequent sexual relations with tourists were rarely criticised because they had sex with too

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<sup>33</sup> In rural areas, where Binta’s in-laws lived, boys helped in farming, herding animals, doing errands and driving female relatives in donkey or horse carts if they were going for visits etc.

many women, but rather because they were trying to gain economic benefits from them (Skramstad, 1989, Skramstad, 1990b). Receiving money from female tourists placed the men in subordinate positions, which could only be counteracted by showing excessive masculinity in other areas. Being sexually active was a way of expressing masculinity and most informants rejected the suggestion that men could possibly be called prostitutes.

“Prostitute” (W: *chagga*) or “prostitute-like” (W: *chaggaya*) were used as metaphors not only for signification of improper female sexual behaviour in particular, but also for improper female behaviour in general (Skramstad, 1990a). Walking in the streets with men who were neither husbands nor kin, idling around, dressing inappropriately, smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol were all signs that a woman was a prostitute or prostitute-like and therefore not a respectable woman. A woman who smoked in public signified that she did not care about following norms for proper female behaviour. I suggest that the problem was not the act of smoking in itself, but rather the act of disobedience; the failure to conform to the norms of femininity was similar to acting like a man. Such behaviour implied transgression of gender boundaries. One woman, who behaved extraordinarily independently was considered to contradict the social signification of femaleness. One of my male informants said she was “*gor-jiggen*” (lit. man-woman or homosexual). He said she talked like a man and walked like a man. She did not care about what people said. Women commented that she never cooked or did domestic tasks, and never helped her mother. There was no doubt that she had sexual relations with men, and the comment about her being “*gor-jiggen*” apparently referred to a rather non-sexual crossing over, or more precisely, sexualisation of an otherwise non-sexual transgression.

Women could, however, have premarital or extramarital relations without attracting a bad reputation or being considered prostitute-like, if they avoided making it public. Women who had lovers, but tried to hide this from the public eye, and who managed appropriate public signification of lack of sexual accessibility, were not stigmatised as prostitutes. People might have known that she was “not steady”, but as long as her transgressions were kept private, they has no significant repercussion on her reputation.

One woman became pregnant while her husband was abroad, and had left her in the care of his sister. There was a slight sense of scandal as as her pregnancy progressed, as she persistently refused to acknowledge her state until she was about to give birth. When the child was born it was named after her husband’s father, and she remained married to her husband. Her sister-in-law said it was not only the woman who was to blame, but was also the husband who had left her, and she herself who who had failed to take care of her.

Extramarital affairs were, however, not always excused. In a similar case in a village “up-river”, a husband divorced his wife and required the bride wealth, *futuu naafuloo*, to be returned. A woman who lived with her in-laws in Bakau while her husband was absent, was considered “not steady”, but to my knowledge she was never confronted.. She was careful about meeting her lovers, and cancelled appointments without warning when she was not able to leave the compound without arousing suspicion. Why her behaviour was apparently tolerated might have been due to the fact that her in-laws realised that the economic support she received from her husband and in-laws was insufficient and having lovers supplied what she was lacking. Another reason might have been recognition of women’s sexual needs. While some people talked as if sexual abstinence was unproblematic, others argued that both men and women would get health problems if they abstained too long. The most well known symptoms were problems with the womb (W: *biir bu meti*) and headaches, and there were stories about health personnel who had diagnosed the source of such problems as sexual abstinence. In one case the doctor had suggested that the woman should get contraceptive pills and find herself a lover.

Above I have shown that there are clear expectations about appropriate gender conduct, both when it comes to performance of practical tasks and when it comes to signification of appropriate sexual accessibility. There are, however, differences in display of gendered conduct in public and in private and there are also differences in what is tolerated by different individuals and different social groups. Below I discuss how the *nyaakaa* ritual contributes to producing female persons with appropriate management of sexuality and fertility. I argue that the ritual process of the *nyaakaa* to contribute significantly to shaping sexual behaviour while the genital cutting could be considered less important for female sexual conduct and for fertility. As the latter is a rather controversial statement, it will be discussed in some detail at the end of the chapter.

### **Girls’ and women’s initiation rites**

Initiation rites for girls and women are widespread over Sub-Saharan Africa. In most cases they are closely linked to female sexuality, fertility and appropriate female conduct as future wives and mothers. Several of the societies with female initiation rites have a dual focus on pleasure and control in sexual relations. Sometimes both values are emphasised in one ritual, otherwise, there are different rituals or institutions focusing on the two different aspects of sexuality (Diallo, 2004). In Mali the *bolokoli-kêlaw* practitioners carry out female

circumcision, among other reasons, to “diminish women’s sensuality”, at the same time other institutions exist such as the *magnongmakanw*, nuptial advisors intended to “teach, promote and sustain healthy and enjoyable sex among couples and adult members of the communities” (Diallo, 2004: 173).<sup>34</sup>

Some of the initiation rituals take place just before marriage, as among the Bemba (Richards, 1982 (1956)), Masai (Talle, 1988) and Meru (Nypan, 1991). Others take place during childhood, mostly between the ages of five and ten (Ahmadu, 2000, Boddy, 1982, Boddy, 1989, Hernlund, 2003, Kratz, 1994, Skramstad, 1990a, Talle, 1993). Most of these rituals include some form of genital cutting. The West African initiation rituals are often collective rituals with a content and significance far beyond the genital cutting (Dellenborg, 2004: 79, Hernlund, 2003, Johnson, 2000, Skramstad, 1990a). The infibulation practices in Somalia, Egypt and Sudan are more individualised in the performance and seem to have a stronger focus on the symbolism around the genital cutting/infibulation itself (Boddy, 1982, Boddy, 1988, Boddy, 1989, Johansen, 2006a, Talle, 1993). I found very little focus on the genital cutting and its effect on sexuality among my informants and Dellenborg reports similar experiences from neighbouring Senegal (Dellenborg, 2004). The informants’ tendency to essentialise culture (Hernlund, 2003) may “fit well” with the anthropologist’s tendencies to do the same, and make her underestimate the significance of genital cutting in the ritual.<sup>35</sup> Johansen (2006a: paper II, page 12) argues that there has been a polarisation between a “sexual mutilation approach” and a “rites of passage” approach, where my approach fits into the latter category. There is a risk that the focus on cultural signification in the ritual leads to underestimation of the importance and negative effects of genital cutting, such as pain and other negative effects on women’s health and experience of sexual pleasure. I argue that my focus on signification in the ritual as rites of passage reflects my informants’ emphasis, and they never complained about lack of sexual lust or pleasure due to genital cutting. Rather they talked about sex in positive terms, but could complain that they would rather not have sex with their husbands when they had failed to visit, care for and support them and their children. Still, one should not categorically reject the possibility that women felt pain without talking about it, as pain is discursively muted and it is a cultural value to bear pain without complaint.

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<sup>34</sup> I use the authentic concepts used by the author, and do thus not change Diallo’s circumcision to genital cutting.

<sup>35</sup> There is a similar risk that those who hold the “sexual mutilation approach”, in a similar vein, could be accused of essentialising bodily functions.

## ***Shaping persons through initiation***

All Gambian boys and almost all Mandinka girls, as well as the majority of Fula, Jola and Serahuli, undergo an initiation that includes genital cutting (see table in Appendix 4). Mandinka girls are usually initiated between the ages of four and ten but some girls are genitally cut while they are babies.<sup>36</sup>

In the beginning of the 1990s, almost all Mandinka girls went through the initiation ritual. Lately it has become more common simply to have the girls genitally cut without any ritual participation.<sup>37</sup> There have also been rituals without cutting, but most of the participants had been through the ritual earlier and were already genitally cut (Hernlund, 2003).

Urban initiation rituals normally last for two to three weeks during the school holidays such as Christmas, Easter or summer holidays. Formerly, rural *nyaakaa* rituals often lasted up to three months.

The Mandinka female initiation ritual is called *nyaakaa boyoo*, or only *nyaakaa* in everyday speech. According to Hernlund's informants, this is a contraction of *nyaamo* ("grass" or "weed") and *kaa* ("to cut clean") and refers to the genitals that must be cut clean just as farmland must be weeded (Hernlund, 2003: 58).<sup>38</sup>

During the ritual, girls are transformed from uninitiated (*solimas*) to those who are initiated and who know the secrets of the *nyaakaa*. *Solima* is also associated with "those who know nothing", "rude", "ignorant", "immature", "uncivilised" and "unclean" (Hernlund, 2003, Hernlund and Shell-Duncan, 2000, Johnson, 2000). The ritual process consists of a number of acts, the explicit purpose of which is to transform individuals into initiated persons. The women who organise the *nyaakaa* ritual for their daughters, nieces and grandchildren argue that they perform *nyaakaa* because it is their culture/tradition (*ado*); they follow their grandmothers in doing it. One woman said it would have been an insult to her grandmothers if she did not initiate her daughters. At an initiation observed by Gamble and Rahman in Bateling in 1949, such a perspective was expressed by the senior *ngansingbaa*.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In Morison's study 79% reported having been circumcised between the 4 and 7 years of age, 16 years was the highest age reported. In the rituals I observed, the youngest was one and a half and the eldest was ten years old.

<sup>37</sup> In 1997 one Malian woman had genitally cut several girls, including one of my informant's daughters, and told them to leave the girls to do whatever they otherwise did as soon as the wounds were healed. During my visit in 2007, people talked as if this was commonly practised.

<sup>38</sup> According to Hernlund *boyoo* means "fall, loss or process" (ibid.)

<sup>39</sup> The *ngansingbaa* was the spiritual leader for the women in the area.

You are now adult women and are supposed to be sensible. This is a custom we did not invent, but a thing which has been observed by our ancestors from time immemorial. That is why we do it. Any woman who does not pass through this is not clean and will never be married or be fit to be trusted with any domestic duties. Besides that, this is a women's concern and must be kept secret... (Gamble and Rahman, 1998b: 46).

Hernlund interprets this emphasis on the need to perform the ritual because it is their culture as cultural essentialism (Hernlund, 2003: 312). I would add that cultural essentialism was contrasted by the biomedical essentialism of Western scholars, to which I return below.

After the genitally cutting is performed, the girls stay in seclusion for two to three weeks. In rural areas a circumcision shed (*jujuwo*) is put up outside the village, in the urban areas girls stay inside a house. During seclusion girls are protected and trained by elders (*karamba*) and young assistants (*kintam*). The girls are taught songs, dances, riddles, secret non-verbal signs, practical skills, and how to relate to other people in the society. The knowledge the girls gain during this period is of different kinds. Some issues are elaborated verbally, qualities are cultivated, knowledge from experiences of genital cutting, pain, fear and submission are embodied. The use (and potential abuse) of authority and power during the *nyaakaa* rituals is obvious, but rarely explicitly thematised (See also Bledsoe, 1984).

During the healing process, the girls are protected by the supernatural powers of the elders who stay with them in seclusion, the *nga singba*, the spiritual leader of the women in the area and kin with powers to see and fight evils from a distance. Also medicine from marabouts (*moros*) protects the girls. The vulnerability associated with going through the *nyaakaa* ritual is discussed in more detail below.

## **A rite of passage**

The ritual follows a pattern similar to Van Gennep's "rites of passage" (Turner, 1967) with the three stages of separation, liminality and re-integration. On the evening before the girls are taken outside the village to be genitally cut, women gather to sing and dance the whole night. The girls' hair is plaited and they are given protective medicine. Early the following morning female relatives, friends and neighbours gather for breakfast and follow the procession out of the village/town. The girls are covered with a piece of cloth (*fano*) and carried on women's

backs to the place where the cutting takes place. At the outskirts of the town, there is an invisible line in the landscape where only initiated women are allowed to pass. The already initiated girls and women form a circle, singing, dancing and clapping, while the initiands (*solimas/nga singolu*) are taken aside one by one, to undergo genital cutting. A female circumciser (*nga mano*) performs the cutting. The girls' personal clothes are removed and they are given dresses sown from a common piece of cloth. Carrying the girls out of the village/town, passing the line and changing from personal to common-style dresses constitutes the separation stage. The separation is not only from their mother, the family and the society at large, but more than anything it is a separation from their former selves, their identity as *solima*, uninitiated girls.<sup>40</sup>

After the cutting, the girls are carried back to where they will spend the period of seclusion. During this period their wounds are healed and they are taught secret knowledge. This is the liminal phase where the girls are “betwixt and between”, they are neither uninitiated nor initiated; they are still called *solimas*, uninitiated girls, in addition to *nga singolu*.

At the end of the seclusion period a large coming-out ceremony (*nga singolu bondi*) is held. The next morning the girls, their helpers (*kintam*) and the elders (*karamba*) go from house to house in the neighbourhood to inform its members that the girls have come out of seclusion and are initiated. The coming-out ritual and greeting people in the neighbourhood marks the reintegration into the society. The reintegration implies that the children return to the community to occupy a different position than they had before. The most important change is that the girls are no longer *solima*, but are those who are initiated and know the secrets of the *nyaakaa*. In the transition rituals of other societies, there are more substantial changes in the participants' positions before and after the ritual, such as among the Masai, where the ritual is performed at puberty and the girls' fertility is legitimised by the ritual (Talle, 1988). The immediate effect of the Mandinka ritual is that the girls can participate in all settings where only initiated girls are allowed and they can help younger sisters and cousins when they go to through the *nyaakaa* ritual. The position as initiate is, according to informants, important to make the girls marriageable in the future.

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<sup>40</sup> At a *nyaakaa* ritual in 1995, the mother of one of the *ngasingolu* came from the circumcision site, carrying a plastic bag with her daughter's personal clothes.

The presentation and analysis below is mainly based on observations and interpretations of Mandinka initiations performed in Bakau during school holidays in 1992/93 and 1995.<sup>41</sup>

### **Kumba's daughter's *nyaakaa boyoo***

In the beginning of November in 1992, while harvesting rice at the rain-fed swamps in Katchikally, Kumba informed me that she hoped to take some children to the *nyaakaa* ritual during the Christmas school holiday. I heard no more about the issue until a few days before Christmas when she had been to her home village to inform her relatives that the *nyaakaa* would soon take place.

The Friday before Christmas, relatives, neighbours and friends of Kumba gathered in her compound to prepare for the ritual. They pounded rice and groundnuts for *churagerte*, a porridge that would be served for breakfast next morning. Some left after the work was done and returned later in the evening. Around nine o'clock some women gathered inside Kumba's house. They were chatting while Kumba prepared protecting charms (*saffo*) for the girls and the elders who would look after the girls during the seclusion period. A marabout had made the charms by writing Arabic words on pieces of paper and Kumba wrapped them into pieces of green and white fabric tied to twisted cotton strings. Her daughter held the candle and read the names on each *saffo*, while a woman helped her to twine cotton threads. Adama and Awa, the four-year old twin daughters of Kumba's brother were going to the *nyaakaa*. As twins they were supposed to possess certain spiritual abilities which could be potentially harmful to other initiands, and needed a special charm to neutralise the potential dangers. Awa had a white cotton strip tied around her right wrist, leading down to her left ankle. Adama had a similar bond tied in an opposite fashion, from her left wrist to her right ankle. A Fula woman from the neighbourhood came and gave Kumba *saffos* for the two Fula girls who would participate in the *nyaakaa* with the Mandinkas.

The dancing and singing started around 11 p.m. in a small two-room flat in Kumba's compound. Some of the initiands were sleeping in the inner room. Some elderly women stayed with them throughout the night. Some of the participants came later because they first had been to a similar ceremony elsewhere in the

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<sup>41</sup> The Fula girls participated only in parts of the *nyaakaa* rituals and did not stay in seclusion with the Mandinka girls.



neighbourhood. Before the dance started, the bed, chairs and even the carpet were removed from the small room (4 x 4 m). During the first hours of the dance, the room was filled with between 50 and 60 women. Except for the two drummers everybody was standing. The drummers played on a water drum (*djitango*) and a mortar (*ginno*) with a piece of wood. Most of the participants were dressed in t-shirts or blouses (*dendiko*) with a cloth wrapped around their waist (*fano*) and a head tie (*tiko*). The different parts of the outfit were mostly “old” and not of the same material, signifying an everyday, “inside the compound” situation, as opposed to other ritual events or visits.

Few of the *Kanyalengs* had dressed in “*Kanyaleng* outfits”; only one woman wore extraordinarily light clothes, a very short slip. She also played a small drum of Western fabrication. Some of the women had big and colourful necklaces with flutes. The women sang and danced continuously until morning. The singing was interrupted only once, when they found that the hair one of the *nga singolu* had not yet been plaited. Hair plaiting and drumming were among the few tasks paid for and there was a discussion about who should do it. When the job was done, the other participants paid them any amount they could afford.<sup>42</sup>

Each song lasted from three to ten minutes. The singer sang a verse, and the audience repeated. Some of the verses were repeated as many as ten times. The topics could be classified into the following categories: (1) themes related explicitly to the *nyaakaa* ritual; (2) songs about social relationships; (3) cultural topics, proverbs and historical events; (4) questions of identity and (5) parodies and jokes about everyday experiences of the participants and those related to them. Some of the songs were new; others had been song frequently in various related contexts. After a while everybody moved out into the open yard inside the compound. A big circle was formed and those who wanted to dance, stepped into the middle of the ring, danced and then returned to their position within the circle. The rhythm of the dances changed between three types: *musuba*, *lenjengo* and *yorroboro* throughout the night.

Around 1.00 a.m. Kumba’s brother, a twin who was said to have second sight (*kungfano*), came to check the children. He was supposed to see whether anybody intended to disturb the girls.

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<sup>42</sup> When I asked about what was considered as an appropriate amount to give, the answer was often “what you have” (W: *li nga am rek*).

Between three and four in the morning, some started cooking *benachin* with chicken for a night meal.<sup>43</sup> Others kept dancing and singing. Some slept outside on the porch, but most of the neighbours had gone home. Around six in the morning some of the women prayed the Morning Prayer (*al-fajr*). After the prayer, food was served. Later in the morning they cooked two big kettles of porridge (*chura gerte*).

Between 7 and 9 a.m., most of the neighbours who had gone home during the night returned. Several of them were dressed in costumes considered weird or funny by the others. Some dressed in men's trousers, wore hats, sunglasses, Western style skirts and t-shirts, police uniforms etc. Others wore rice bags, Christmas tree decorations and the like, outfits generally worn only by *Kanyalengs*. When I asked why they wore such clothes, the answer was, "to make people laugh".<sup>44</sup>

Around half-past nine, they formed a procession and "marched" from the compound to the "bush" (*wuleokono*) outside the village.

The initiands were carried on women's backs covered with a piece of cloth (*fano*) from the compound to outside the dwelling area. Apart from one girl who was carried by her elder cousin, and one who was carried by a distant relative, there was no kin relationship between the girls and those who carried them. All the other women were members of Kumba's club (*kafo*).

When the procession approached the outskirts of the village some participants told me to go home, others grabbed my arm and said I should come along. As I preferred not to create problems, I went home. Later, Kumba came to apologise that I had not been allowed to enter the *wuleokono*, circumcision site, literally "the bush". She said it would not have happened if she had been there and she felt ashamed because I had been with them all the night before and had to go home. Had she been there, she would have argued that I already knew everything from the books.

Kumba had an appointment with the woman who was supposed to do the cutting, the *nga mano* who was supposed to come at 10 a.m. When she did not show up, Kumba went to Banjul to see her, but found that she had gone to another *nyaakaa*.

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<sup>43</sup> *Benachin* (W, lit.: one kettle), is a rice dish with meat or fish, and everything is, as the name suggests, cooked in one kettle.

<sup>44</sup> Cross-dressing is widespread in ritual contexts with perhaps Bateson's (1989) Naven as one of the most famous cases. While it might be that the Mandinka women did it only to make people laugh, as they said, it was a significant element elsewhere, for example, where mixing of male and female elements crucial in production of fertility among the Sande (Bledsoe 1984)

The girls had to wait for several hours at the outskirts of the village before the *nga mano* finally came around two o'clock.

Sunday evening, the day after the operation, I passed by where the girls were staying. It was night time and the girls had gone to sleep; only the elders were awake. I greeted the elders and glanced into the room where the girls were sleeping. The room where the girls slept had been emptied and there were only some thin mattresses on the floor and some pieces of cloth the girls used to cover themselves with. In the room where the elders were sitting there was a double bed, a cupboard and a sofa. One of the elders asked me to give them “cola nuts”.<sup>45</sup>

I was invited to see the girls the next day and was instructed to bring sweets and biscuits. The girls greeted me and made a curtsy before they started to dance. The *nga singolu* wore dresses sown out of the same fabric, a yellow and white floral pattern cotton. They all had head ties containing a protecting charm in addition to charms tied around their necks. They asked me to take photos of them, so I returned with the camera the following day. Also the next day, they demonstrated their dancing skills and posed in front of the camera.

During the period of seclusion, the girls were taught songs, dances and practical skills and how to interact with other people. One of the days they had been cooking in Mariama's kitchen.

After two weeks there was a small ceremony called *kuringo* or *buloku*. *Kuringo* literally means small wash while *buloku* means hand wash. This was a ritual purification ceremony, and traditionally this was the first time for several weeks the girls were allowed to wash their hands. I wanted to observe the ritual and was told that I could go with Kumba when she was bringing porridge to the girls. Time went by and several hours later, I understood that Kumba probably had got second thoughts or some kind of indication that my presence was not wanted.

On Thursday afternoon female guests came, mainly from Newtown. They sang and danced for about an hour and a half before they were served *nyangkatang*, a dish based on rice and pounded groundnuts, without any sauce.

The coming-out ritual (*nga singolu bondi*) was arranged on the Saturday three weeks after the girls were taken to the *nyaakaa*. Preparations had started a long time in

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<sup>45</sup> Cola nuts (W: *guru*) are stimulant nuts of ritual value included in a number of ritual exchanges. Giving cola nuts to elders is considered a sign of respect. Asking for cola nuts or “the price of a cola nut” (W: *jeggi guru*) is considered a modest question about a gift or economic support and may be used as a metaphors for any amounts of money to be given.

advance. The female participants prepared *assobi* for themselves and for the *nga singolu*.<sup>46</sup> While the fabric was bought collectively, everybody had to take their piece of cloth to the tailor and choose their own style. The girls had blue batik while the women (including me) had *fanting* in red, black and yellow.<sup>47</sup> The girls also received new shoes and a *fano* to cover them during the coming-out ritual. They had their hair plaited and some had beads sown into their hair.

Food was bought and prepared several days in advance. On Wednesday, women gathered for work in Kumba's compound. Millet was pounded for *tia futoo*. On Friday, 30 to 40 women again gathered in Kumba's compound. Some were working, others were chatting. Some pounded rice, others prepared millet. The millet (*futoo*) was steamed and was mixed with peanut butter and sugar to *tiofuto*. Lemonade drinks and *wonjo* were prepared in big basins before they were filled into small plastic bags for the guests. Other women cleaned the fish. It was late in the evening before the last tasks were finished.

On the last night before the *nga singolu* "coming-out" ritual, supernatural beings like the *Fang bondi* and *Mama* were said to roam about. It was believed that the *Fang bondi* never enters a house, while a *Mama* might enter. The *Mama* was considered invisible and would only enter after dark, with flames coming out of its mouth and a sound like "woul woul" (as if an object connected to a metal wire is flung round and round). This last Friday night of the *nyaakaa*, after midnight, some women gathered inside the house where the *nga singolu* stayed. The elders and some of the young assistants (*kintam*) were sitting inside the room with the *nga singolu*. The rest of us were sitting in the other room. They song four or five songs; the women sang a short verse, and the *nga singolu* replied.

Apparently to protect the girls and themselves, one of the women locked the door. Candles were still burning. Somebody knocked on the corrugated iron doors, first on one side, later on the other side of the house. Some of the women looked very scared as they ran in to the inner room where the *nga singolu* stayed. The candles were blown out. I expected the *Mama* to enter, but it never came.

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<sup>46</sup> *Assobi* means wearing dresses made from the same piece of cloth, mostly on ritual occasions. *Assobi* is often made by a group of friends, neighbours, club members etc. to signify unity. It is also worn by the initiates during the period of seclusion and replaced by a different set of *assobi* on the day of coming out.

<sup>47</sup> *Fanting* was a colourful, relatively inexpensive cotton fabric, popular among my Mandinka informants at the time.

Early next morning *churagerte* was cooked. Preparation for lunch started around midday. One big kettle of white *benachin* was cooked in the neighbour's compound and two big kettles were prepared in Kumba's compound. Mai Muna, the mother of one of the *nga singolu*, contributed with a huge bowl of rice, a bowl of vegetables and about 2 kilogrammes of meat.

Around 1 p.m. a small bus full of visitors from Yundum arrived with several of the relatives of Kumba and the *nga singolu*. The bus had a purple batik flag on the roof. The guests were served *churagerte* with sour milk (W: *sow*) before they proceeded to greet and talk to other people in the neighborhood. Lunch was served around half-past three.

As Kaddie's son and some other boys also had been initiated during this period, they arranged a common coming-out ritual for both boys and girls. The boys came out around five o'clock, the girls after six. While the boys came in a procession from Katchikally, the girls came out of the house in Kaddie's neighbours' compound. The two Fula girls, who had participated on the first day when the genital cutting was performed and had spent the three weeks in seclusion elsewhere, came to the house where the other girls were staying. The girls wore similar dresses in blue batik and they had beads tied around their newly plaited hair. While walking out of the house and into the neighbouring compound where the boys and the guests were waiting, their heads and shoulders were covered by a cloth (*darifano*). The girls were seated on one side, the boys on the other side. Visitors formed a big circle around them. The *Nga Mano* and some of the other elderly guests of honour were seated in chairs behind the girls. Two to three hundred people participated in the ceremony.

One *Kanyaleng* woman from Sere Kunda started singing and dancing. She was followed by some other women before the boys started to show their dancing skills. The boys were led into the middle of the circle, one by one. The guests pinned money to their shirts (*dendiko*) with a safety pin. They danced for about one minute each, but because the place was so crowded, only a few people could actually see them dance. When the boys were finished, the turn came for the musicians to collect money. Finally, the girls were brought, one by one into the middle of the circle. After the girls had been presented and had collected money, the ceremony was over and most of the guests left.

In the evening, women gathered and danced, accompanied by the drummers. Most of the women at the evening dance were dressed in *assobi*.

The next morning the girls, their helpers (*kintam*) and the elders (*karamba*) went from house to house in the neighbourhood to present themselves and collect money.

The above representations cover the *nyaakaa* ritual I observed in most detail. I did not observe the genital cutting and I did not spend time in seclusion with the girls and the elders looking after them. At a *nyaakaa* ritual in the same neighbourhood in 1995, I was invited to meet the girls in seclusion, listen to the songs of the *nga singolu* and watch their dancing skills. It is still obvious that I have missed out important parts of the ritual. Compared with initiation rites elsewhere, I would have expected more focus on sexuality and fertility. I would have expected that these would have been more current issues during the songs the night before the girls went to the *nyaaka* and the songs of the *nga singolu* themselves. Below I discuss the contents of some of these songs.

### **The teachings of the *nyaakaa***

In addition to the overall teachings of the *nyaakaa* that deals with bodies, power relations and knowledge, there are some specific issues that are recurring in several parts of the ritual (in interviews and in the songs). These issues are respect (*horomo*), secrecy/discretion (*suturo*), pain (*diming*), endurance (*sabati*), vulnerability and fear (*silla*). Several of these, particularly respect, secrecy and endurance are emphasised in marital rituals when women are transferred to their husbands (*maañoo bitoo*).

### **Discretion/privacy**

*Suturo* is an important aspect of the ritual and can be translated to secrecy, privacy or discretion. One of the reasons for keeping the ritual secret is to protect the girls against evil forces. The girls are vulnerable and enemies are many.

At a *nyaakaa* ritual in Bateling in Western Kiang in 1947, the *ngansingba* mentioned all these enemies as she stirred the protective medicine she was preparing:

In the name of our ancestors and their knowledge, by the power of the kankurango, we seek refuge from all evil spirits, Satan, jinns, wizards and witches; we seek protection from all bad breezes and winds in honor of the Kabaa Nyunkoo<sup>48</sup> (Gamble and Rahman, 1998b:46, originally underlined)

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<sup>48</sup> *Kabaa Nyunko* was an old tree in Batelingding that was worshipped by the ancestors.

As discussed more in the context of vulnerability below, and in chapter five, all these are evils that represent potential threats to humans in general and more so in certain life phases (*nyaakaa*, *maañoo bitoo*, child birth). Secondly, the secrecy seems necessary to give the *nyaakaa* experience its exclusive position. The secrecy gives the knowledge and experiences an unchallengeable and incontestable position that is discussed in more detail below. Thirdly, *suturo* is an important aspect of Mandinka femininity, as well as of being a proper person. *Suturo* is highly important in marital relationships and is also discussed in the context of marriage. Women are not supposed to reveal the secrets of her husband or of the house. The fourth reason is suggestive: that *suturo* is a vehicle to alienation of painful and unpleasant bodily experiences, in order to be able to endure. One aspect of *suturo* implies that things are covered and not talked about. The question is whether ideology about *suturo* and *sabati* (endurance) is so strong that it leads to repression that prevents women from realising some of their difficult/unpleasant experiences. One of the songs the girls learn to sing during *nyaakaa* may support such a suggestion:

<i>Fenne selle tanna kenne jarra ballo</i>	Something climbed up the dry tree
<i>woimballa</i>	my body
<i>a selle ta, a jita na</i>	it climbed up, it came down
<i>konko wulum bangoto</i>	the farm under the hill
<i>woimballa</i>	my body

(1995)

According to the interpreter, this song reflects a situation where the children pretend not to know what happened to them during the *nyaakaa*. When the elders ask the children whether they will tell about it, the children assure them that they know nothing about what happened to them. Although girls obviously know very well what they went through, the representation is intentionally blurred. Discursive regulations of these representations seem to make the experiences muted.

The secrets of the *nyaakaa* were safeguarded by different means. Girls were told that if they revealed the secrets of the ritual they would have no luck later in life. Formerly the threats were harsher. According to Gamble and Rahman, girls who revealed the secrets would face a sudden death. The quote below is from a female circumcision ritual in Western Kiang in 1949. One of the elders said:

You are now adult women and supposed to be sensible. This is a custom which we did not invent, but a thing has been observed by our ancestors from time immemorial. That is why we do it. Any woman who does not pass through this is not clean and will never be married or be fit to be trusted with any domestic duties. Besides that, this is a women's concern and must be kept secret. If any of us reveal the secrets to any man, the spirit will take revenge on us. It is not a question of sickness or bad luck, but of immediate death. So you see how strong our faith must be in the grandfather spirit and its laws. As from today you are in his hands. He protects you from all evils while you are in the juujuwo and the only way you can offend him is by telling any of these secrets to men. You also have the kankurang to aid you. The kankurang will help you where we fail (i.e. if witches raid the girls). The kankurang is neither male nor female, he is a spirit sent by the old spirits to guard you. He is very powerful and brave, and if he suspects that secrets are being told he will kill us (Gamble and Rahman, 1998b: 46, originally underlined).

This was a powerful threat and to my knowledge, girls are no longer told that they will die if they reveal the secrets of the *nyaakaa*. Lack of luck or income is perhaps considered as powerful today.

## **Pain**

During the *nyaakaa* ritual pain seems important in a number of respects. Pain is obviously caused by the genital cutting and during the healing process, but the elders also inflict pain on the *nga singolu* during the seclusion period. This is done in order to train them; to discipline them, to remind them about their subordinated position and finally to accustom them to endure pain and suffering. The idea is that if the girls become able to bear physical pain without complaints, they may also be able to bear other forms for pain and unpleasant experiences. These “uses” of pain are discussed below.

### (1) Pain from genital cutting

Genital cutting in The Gambia in most cases implies cliteridectomy and excision (Morison et al., 2001, Singateh, 1985). When most of the clitoris and the labia minora are removed, the cutting in itself is clearly very painful. Some argue that the girls might be given anaesthetic injections, but to my knowledge, this rarely happens. The healing process when scars are forming is also painful. As the genital cutting was considered as a necessary part of the



procedure, by implication, the pain involved is also considered necessary and the girls are supposed to bear the pain without complaints. It is not clear to me whether use of pain relief would make the procedure inferior to one without anaesthesia. While Johansen's Somali informants saw the pain invoked by infibulations as an unfortunate and not a necessary part of their initiation (Johansen, 2006a), Shell-Duncan (2000) argues that some of the performers of female circumcision in Kenya saw the experience of pain as a necessary part of the initiation ritual.

### (2) Pain as a tool to create discipline

Pain is used as punishment in order to train the girls during the seclusion period. The girls may be beaten if they make mistakes, to make sure that they will not do it again. A Mandinka girl told that she had been seriously beaten because she had failed to give water to some elderly visitors during seclusion.

Using pain to discipline children is widespread in non-ritual contexts. In the upbringing of children, parents and teachers may use a stiff straw from a broom or a ruler to beat the children when they misbehave. The idea is that the pain will make the child do the right thing next time. On one occasion a small girl was misbehaving and her father's sister beat her with a broomstick. Still, the girl did not stop and the father's sister said: "She is a donkey" (W: *ki mbam la*).<sup>49</sup> The utterance implied that if the girl had been like an ordinary person, the pain would have stopped her. A donkey, on the other hand, does not care about whether it is beaten; it obeys only when it wants.

### (3) Pain as a device for subordination

The situations where elders intentionally inflicted pain on the girls could also be interpreted as ways of humiliating them. Through these actions they demonstrate their power. Singateh (1985) reports a case where, during the seclusion period, masked figures called the "Bondo devils", came and danced and stepped on the girls' legs as they sat on the floor with their legs stretched out.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Mbam* in Wolof means both donkey and pig. In this context *mbam* refers to a donkey as nobody ever tries to control the behaviour of a pig.

<sup>50</sup> Most of the Mandinka masked figures are considered to have strong supernatural powers and have specific ritual functions (Weil, 1971 and 1988). *Kankurang* is the masked figure most frequently appearing during Mandinka boys' circumcision, but according to Weil it also has important roles in controlling women.

La Fontaine emphasises that the initiands realise who controls knowledge: "... initiation is a patterned performance whose purpose is action to achieve transformed individuals but whose effect is to demonstrate the power of traditional knowledge and legitimize a continuing social order" (La Fontaine, 1985: 187).

#### (4) Bearing pain – endurance (*sabati*)

In addition to the pain of the genital cutting, pain is also inflicted on the girls in order to teach them to endure hardship. Some girls told how they had been forced to lie on the ground staring at the sun with palm oil in their eyes and to stand in the burning hot sand.

The idea of enduring pain without complaint is related to the value of endurance or the ability to bear (*sabati*). Endurance is valued in both men and women, but more than anything it is a female virtue (see also Wittrup, 1990, Wittrup, 1992). Implicit is the idea of ignoring the body's signs of pain, weariness, hunger etc., as well as feelings of anger, irritation and disappointment. If unpleasant and painful experiences and feelings cannot be ignored, they should ideally be born in silence without complaints. Married women who were disappointed or angry with their husbands should simply bear and conceal their dissatisfaction. They should by no means reveal their husbands' weaknesses in public, according to the ideal of *suturo*. Bearing requires that a number of experiences never should be expressed or represented.

Parents and elders expect the girls to be able to bear the pain induced by the genital cutting. The ability to endure the pain of initiation is considered to make it easier to endure other painful situations, such as childbirth. In a conversation about a forthcoming *nyaakaa* ritual, the pain involved was discussed. When I argued that the pain must be so unbearable that the practice should stop, the two Mandinka women asked me whether I considered childbirth as painful. When I said that I found childbirth very painful, they replied, "But you still do it, don't you?"

Anecdotal knowledge from maternity wards in Gambian hospitals, reflects little tolerance for women who scream or in other ways reveal that they cannot bear the pain. When it is argued that it is easier for women who have been genitally cut to give birth, this may refer not only to the idea that the birth opening has become larger, but also to the fact that they have been exposed to pain and showed their ability to endure.

There are several somewhat conflicting messages about how to deal with pain. When used as a disciplining device, the underlying idea is that the children will seek to avoid pain, and thus try to behave as expected of them. On the other hand, pain cannot always be avoided and one has to endure the pain without complaints. A similar double message is conveyed in relation to how to deal with fear. Fear is considered useful to alert a person in order to avoid dangers. But as with pain, there are several occasions where fear cannot be avoided and rather should be handled bravely.

### **Be brave but fearful**

Being at the *nyaakaa* is considered dangerous and scary, both for those who have been there and for those who have not. In everyday speech, *wulukono* is used as a metaphor for the *nyaakaa*. Literally the word means bush/forest or wilderness. Grown ups try to scare children who are afraid of nothing, by threatening them with taking them to the forest (i.e. *nyaakaa*). They may say “*I buka silla, mbe samba la wulukono*” (“You are afraid of nothing; I will take you to the forest/circumcision site”).

Although urban *nyaakaa* rarely takes place in the forest, the forest seems to function well as a metaphor in an urban setting. The *nyaakaa* and the forest are considered to share qualities. Both are potentially dangerous, but also beneficial. Girls must go through the *nyaakaa* ritual in order to become initiated and one must go through the forest on the way to a farm, vegetable garden or another village. The forest is also the place to gather firewood and useful plants or to go hunting. Two wild beasts, the crocodile and the monkey, are both metaphors for the *nga mano*, the woman who performs the genital cutting. In the song below, which was sung by the *nga singolu* during seclusion, both the crocodile and the monkey appear.

*Bamba singkilling nebe bambo le kono*

The crocodile with one leg is inside the crocodiles den

*Sulla seita jareko*

The monkey went home until next year

Here both the crocodile and the monkey refer to the *nga mano*, the circumciser. The song tells the girls that they don't have to be afraid of *nga mano*, since she has left and won't come back until next year. The song emphasises that there is a reason to fear *nga mano*, she may hurt you, as *bamba*, the crocodile, may bite or kill you.

The monkey is known to destroy vegetable crops, but in this context it is probably other qualities that are more relevant, it climbs down the tree, but very quickly it disappears again. So also with *nga mano*, she arrives from nowhere, does her cutting and disappears again. (*Nga mano*'s work is painful, but beneficial, the monkey's work is to destroy others' crops – he feeds himself from other people's work). The crocodile, which is a more frequently used metaphor for *nga mano*, is considered dangerous as it may kill people. One of the songs from the place where the cutting took place, says that a gun was sounding, one of the *nga singolu* had killed a crocodile.

*Eh Sawo lu wo kido kumata bireto*

Eh Sawo the gun sounded at the circumcision place

*Sawo yala bamboo fa*

Sawo killed the crocodile

Sawo is the name of one of the *nga singolu*. To kill the crocodile is a metaphor for the bravery it takes to endure genitally cutting. The child faces the crocodile (the circumciser) with the risk of getting killed herself, but she handles the situation and thus renders the *nga mano* harmless. This implies that in a fight concerning life and death, the *nga singolu* was the toughest. It is interesting to note that hunting metaphors are used. Guns are, to my knowledge never used by women. Guns are also used exclusively to kill wild animals; domestic animals are killed with knives.

## Social relationships

Social relations are also the topic of several songs.

*Buru aning dibong I la kilia*

Duck and hammerkop put their eggs together

*Wo ye nying juma la*

Who is that good for?

*Ning bading jowya wonte*

When children of the same mother are wicked

*woye nying juma la*

Who is that good for?

*Buru* is a duck, *mansa dibong* is a big wild bird that lives in the bush (hammerkop). The explanation was that if you and somebody in your family (W: *njobot*, lit. dependants) are

trying to do something together, but you don't like your family, who would that be good for? One example is, if you put money together to do something, and you start to quarrel, who would that be good for?

Literally, to put eggs together, implies a very close relationship where you trust your own offspring to somebody else. As eggs need to be brooded to develop and be hatched properly, children need patience and thoughtful care to develop into proper human beings. If parents cooperate about care for children, in this case fostering is involved as the birds are two different kinds. Or – how can there be success in cooperation between different kinds of individuals when even children with the same mother are wicked towards each other?

### **Vulnerability and uncleanness**

During the seclusion period of the *nyaakaa* ritual, the girls are considered unclean. This uncleanness is emphasised by the prohibition to wash during the length of the seclusion.. One Mandinka woman told that during her own *nyaakaa* period they were not allowed to touch water during the whole seclusion period up to the “handwashing” *ku ringo/bulo ku* ritual. Both their faces and hands were extremely dirty. They ate all the food with their hands and after the meals; they were allowed to rub off their hands against a big pole. When they ate food such as *rui* (porridge) with their dirty hands, the *rui* became black. One fair coloured Fula girl had become completely black because of the dirt.

Two potential explanations for why the girls should be made dirty relates to protection from witches and to fertility. Ames argued that women who had had lost many children, not only gave their subsequent children “ludicrous” names, but also, left the children’s body and hair unwashed and let the hair grow long in order to invoke pity from the witches (Ames, 1959: 269).

Another connection is made between dirt and fertility in relation to *Dimba Tulungo*, a fertility ritual that seems to precede the *Kanyalgeng* rituals (Gamble and Rahman, 1998a). During the fertility ritual, spit and sand were dusted on the food before it was “devoured”.

It is a common belief that suckling mothers are naturally dirty. Nothing upsets their minds because the infants defecate, vomit, and urinate on them, so a mother or a suckling woman cannot be upset or sick over any dirty or offensive thing. It is a common saying in Mandinka “May Allah make your bed dirty”. This means may Allah give you children. To them a woman must be dirty to get children. (Gamble and Rahman, 1998a: 98-99)

Although it is intriguing to connect the dirtiness of the *nga singolu* to fertility, this link was never brought up in our discussions about the ritual. Other potential connections between *nyaakaa* and fertility are discussed further below.

The vulnerability of the girls is one of the reasons why the ritual is surrounded with secrecy. This vulnerability is also shared with newly-wed brides and mothers who have recently given birth. Firstly, there are bodily openness and bleeding and, according to Ames (1959), the blood seems to attract witches (W: *doma*):

*Doma* are said to eat the liver, fat, and heart, and to drink blood. The blood associated with childbirth and circumcision is said to attract them... They definitely prefer younger people, particularly initiates at the bush circumcision school, a mother or child just after child birth, and new brides. And this is the main reason why at all the life-milestone ceremonies, except funerals, there are elaborate and often costly precautions to ward off *doma*. (Ames, 1959: 265, italics original)

Secondly, there is ritual liminality, being betwixed and between, ambiguous and ritually impure and dangerous (Douglas, 1966). One explanation is that the girls are bleeding and it is the blood that makes them impure. Based on perceptions of ritually purity in the *Qur'an*, women who are menstruating or who have recently given birth are ritually impure and thus should not pray. Ritual purity before and during Muslim prayers requires that nothing passes through bodily openings. Cutting with a knife, penetration with a penis or a child passing through the birth canal all represent “violations” of bodily orifices in addition to bleeding and make the *nga singolu*, brides and women who have recently given birth ritually impure. The increased openness is also considered dangerous as evils may enter through these openings (see also Boddy (1989)). In everyday lives thresholds and openings are protected by rituals. Before the door is opened in the morning, doorsteps are sprinkled with water and *Bismillah* (A.) is uttered.<sup>51</sup> In name-giving rituals (*kuy-lio s*) small rituals are sometimes performed in addition to the formal *nyambo*. In one of them the baby is carried from the compound gate to the door and returned three times (four times if it is a girl) before it passes the doorstep and enters the house. During *maañoo bitoo*, the transfer of the bride ritual, the ritually washed bride crept on her knees through the door and back three times before she left the house and

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<sup>51</sup> *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim* is often translated as: “In the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate”.

went into the compound. Finally, during the Muslim new year's eve (*musu koto saloo*, lit. old woman's prayer), the compounds are swept and litter burnt. The burning rubbish forms a line and is jumped over seven times.

### **Respectful and appropriate behaviour – self control vs. social control (*horomo*)**

The final and perhaps most important aspect of the teachings during the *nyaakaa* ritual is about respect. In Mandinka and Wolof, respect is called *horomo* and *kersa* respectively, but many other words and expressions that are interpreted as respect. In conversations and interviews about the importance of *nyaakaa*, the need to teach children respect was frequently mentioned. One female circumciser said that the respect the girls learn to show their parents is the same respect they will show their husbands when they later get married. In rituals where the bride is transferred (*maañoo bitoo*), respect is one of the main issues emphasised and is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. One of my elderly female informants suggested that girls who are disobedient towards their mothers will be obedient after they had been to the *nyaakaa*.<sup>52</sup>

Girls who had been to the *nyaakaa* are expected to have incorporated or embodied appropriate behaviour. This is reflected in the following song:

<i>Nga sing dingo la tamtano</i>	The walk of the <i>nga sing dingo</i>
<i>batung nga kali</i>	wait, I'll show you
<i>werre ja, werre ja, wo kumaaree be leokon</i>	<i>werre ja, werre ja</i> the crowned crane at the side of the water,
<i>Solima nding la tamanya</i>	The uncircumsised, their walking,
<i>batung nga kali</i>	wait, I'll show you
<i>surunya surunyawo ko wuliye surujibong</i>	<i>surunya surunyawo</i> like the dog eating <i>surujio</i>

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<sup>52</sup> There are, of course, many children who are disobedient both before and after participation in the *nyaakaa* ritual, still there is a belief that participation in the ritual really makes a difference.

The explanation given about this song was as follows: Uncircumcised children were said to know nothing. They would also lack the dignified ways of moving and walking as a crowned crane as they are taught during the *nyaakaa* ritual. They would not greet people properly and say *Salam aleikum* (A: peace be upon you). If they came to visit and nobody answered when they knocked the door, they would rush in and misbehave like clumsy dogs that spill the food. The spilled food referred to in the song was not an ordinary meal, but the early morning meal eaten before sunrise during the month of Ramadan. I would add that, by implication, if children are not taken to the *nyaakaa*, they will not only behave foolishly, but fail to understand the appropriate ways of Islam.

In addition to respecting their parents, husbands and elders, girls also learn to respect themselves. As discussed above, this includes appropriate signification of sexuality. If there is a link between the *nyaakaa* and control of sexuality, it goes through the teachings about respecting others and respecting oneself. Respect (*horomo*) is not accumulated, but is given to others through respectful behaviour. Respect has the same cultural importance in the Gambia as honour and shame has in the Middle East. Self-respect implies a dignified behaviour and the ability to be ashamed (*malu*).<sup>53</sup>

Above I have discussed some of the most important qualities associated with appropriate female gender conduct. When incorporated properly these qualities should result in female self-control of sexuality and thus appropriate fertility.<sup>54</sup> What is less clear is how genital cutting contributes to appropriate female sexuality and fertility. Some possible interpretations and connections are discussed below.

## **Reshaping the genitals through cutting**

As mentioned in the introduction, genital cutting as part of the *nyaakaa* ritual is mostly removal of a part of the clitoris and labia minora.

Genitals are decisive in ascribing gender to a newborn child and the child is raised accordingly. According to Boddy (1988), although a Hofriyati child is identified as male or

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<sup>53</sup> *Jom* can be translated as to shame and is used mostly in its negative form, where a shameless person lacks *jom* (W: *ku nyaka jom*) and makes a fool of herself. A person who has *faida* has an aim in her life and does not waste her time by idling around (like lazy or prostitute-like women do).

<sup>54</sup> As various contraceptive methods make it possible to control fertility in situations where sexuality is less “controlled”, this is not a necessary connection. Still in The Gambia, controlled fertility is strongly associated with controlled sexual behaviour. This is discussed further in part three.



female according to its genitalia, it is not formally initiated into its gender until the child is between five and ten and has developed a minimal degree of reason or self awareness (*agl*) and ability to recognise and follow Allah's law. This is the time when the child becomes circumcised (p. 57). In The Gambia, the child is identified as male or female on the basis of its genitalia at birth. The gender identification is further developed through upbringing and initiation, but although the *nyaakaa* is highly directed towards developing qualities that are valued in women, I would suggest that it is a purification of a gender that already existed. At the time a girl is initiated her gender identity has already become highly elaborated. Furthermore, there is nothing in the rhetoric of my informants or the content of the ritual that indicates that initiation is a time when she fully becomes a girl or a woman.

The active use of metaphors as prostitute (W: *chagga*) and *gor-jiggen* in day-to-day upbringing, are reminders of cultivating "pure" and appropriate female qualities, but even a person considered *gor-jiggen* is doubtlessly defined as a man or woman as a starting point. Ascription of gender and expectations about a clear gender performance and appearance is the premise for speculations about a person being *gor-jiggen* or prostitute-like. While avoiding tendencies of ambiguous gender behaviour is done through training, physical ambiguities may be avoided through genital cutting.

According to informants, removing a part of the clitoris is done to hinder it growing to become like a penis and avoid it obstructing childbirth. Some informants said that the genitals became more clean (W: *set*) by cutting. Cleanliness was also given as a reason for the practice by 31 % of the women interviewed in the Women's Bureau survey (Singateh, 1985). It is, however, not clear what type of cleanliness this refers to. *Set* (W) may refer to "hygienic", ritual and moral cleanliness. An important aspect here is the need for pure categories (Douglas, 1966) and in this context, pure female bodies and conduct. A pure female body would imply removal of penis-like elements.

If a penis were the focal point of male sexual pleasure, logically a penis-like clitoris would be the locus of female sexual pleasure. Ahmadu (2000: 297) argues that Kono women of Sierra Leone found it necessary to remove the clitoris to avoid masturbation. If they could satisfy themselves they would not be interested in heterosexual intercourse and their fertility would be less. Such views were, however, never expressed by my female informants. It was said that an uncut clitoris could grow to resemble a penis, but they did not express any fear that this would lead to exceeding interest in sexual pleasure or lead to either masturbation or promiscuous behaviour. Weil argues that: "...excision is a culturally conceived technique for controlling female sexuality", although it is not so clear whether the latter part of the quote is

his or his (male?) informants' point of view. Neither is it clear if it refers to the cutting or the training aspects of the *nyaakaa*..:

It is strongly felt by Mandinka men and women that females have greater sexual desires than males, and have little ability of their own to control their sexuality. It is felt that uncontrolled female sexuality is socially bad (i.e., resulting in adultery) and magically dangerous (i.e. threatening and weakening the males). The community has available to it a rich variety of social structures, which may serve many other purposes, to use as social mechanisms for its control of female sexuality. These structures include family and kinship; superior male leadership positions and age grades; and the female age grades which require, for adult status excision, a culturally conceived technique for controlling female sexuality. (Weil, 1976: 190)<sup>55</sup>

One interpretation is that removing the clitoris reduces sexual desire and thus make female sexual behaviour easier to control. Another interpretation, more in line with my findings, is that excision refers to the whole *nyaakaa* ritual, which if successfully performed would have trained girls to exercise self-control. Only two of my female informants, who were initiated, but not involved in the Mandinka *nyaakaa* ritual, mentioned possible connections between the clitoris and sexual pleasure. One was a Fula woman who asked me whether it could be true that uncircumcised women enjoyed sex more. The other was a Hausa woman who had heard from her husband that his uncircumcised girlfriends enjoyed sex more than she did. As he seemed to prefer having sex with them, she regretted that she was circumcised. A Wolof woman I met in Norway said they used to mock the Mandinka and say that they always ran after men because circumcision made it so difficult to become satisfied. The Mandinka, on their part, teased the Wolof and said that they could not control themselves because they were uncircumcised. Also in Gambian newspapers, one could read letters from male readers, arguing that uncircumcised women would become prostitutes. These arguments did not, however, seem to be integrated into any discourse between the women organising the *nyaakaa* ritual for their daughters, nieces and grandchildren.

In spite of my numerous leading questions to women involved in the *nyaakaa* ritual, none of them suggested that women who were genitally cut enjoyed sex less or could control

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<sup>55</sup> For Weil the concept of excision probably includes cliteridectomy as his paper was written long before the WHO typology was developed (see Appendix 4).

their sexual behaviour more than others. Dellenborg reports similar experiences in her attempt to find such ideas among Jola in Cassamance in Southern Senegal (Dellenborg, 2004). They argued that women were cut in order to become initiated and be able to pray. Among her Jola informants the practice of female circumcision was more recent and was attributed to influence by Mandinka. The practice was considered as modern and a part of Islamisation. For them, removal of the clitoris was considered necessary to become ritually clean and thus be able to pray. A circumcised woman was considered a better Muslim (Dellenborg, 2004: 82). It is interesting to note that my female informants never used Islam as a reason for *nyaakaa* or genital cutting. They also never suggested that they were better Muslims than Wolof women who were not genitally cut.<sup>56</sup>

Dellenborg argues that chastity and virginity was not a concern for her informants. This is different than for my informants. In The Gambia, the stereotypes about the Jola were that the women who came from Cassamance on labour migration were more promiscuous than the Gambian women. No other ethnic group practised labour migration by single women, unless they stayed with close kin. For my informants, women living alone or with a friend risked a reputation as a prostitute. Both chastity and virginity was a virtue and celebrated and the ability of sexual self-control was cultivated through the *nyaakaa* ritual.

In general, sexuality was referred to by women as a positive experience and regular sexual intercourse was considered a married woman's right (unless the husband was sick or absent). In Muslim marriages a man should not only provide economically for his wife, but also have sex with her. If the husband does not have sex with his wife, it is considered as a legitimate claim for divorce (See also Imam, 1997). In polygamous unions, unfair distribution of sex between the wives was likened to stealing (W: *sacha*).

One may ask, if Mandinka women who perform the *nyaakaa* do not wish to reduce sexual pleasure or control female sexual behaviour, why then are the genitals cut? Parker (1995) is among those who are concerned about how sexuality is detached from female circumcision in the studies of such rituals in Africa and the Middle East (See also Hernlund, 2003, Johansen, 2006a). Parker refers to Lyons (1981: 507) who attributes this partly to influence from Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1960) which:

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<sup>56</sup> Some of the Mandinka stereotypes about Jolas were that they were mostly Christians or *cheddo*, worshippers of local deities and even of devils. This relationship with the devils was considered to make sacred/sacrificial places, the *jellango*, very powerful and thus attractive, but sinful for Muslims to visit. Taking up a Mandinka tradition to become better Muslims may indicate that these Jolas in some respects saw Mandinkas as more "Islamised".

encouraged anthropologists to “look beyond the ‘genital’ in genital mutilations and to see them in relation to other social and cultural forms”. Several of these studies suggests that circumcision is “a physiologically trivial but socially important procedure mainly concerned with establishing clan membership and adult status” (Lyons, 1981: 508). It thus appears that many anthropologists are reluctant to admit that “the genital is not a nose” (Vizedom, 1976: 23).

(In Parker, 1995: 517).

Johansen argues that this is a part of the tendency to deemphasise sexuality in studies of initiation rituals with genital cutting (Johansen, 2006a). My argument concerning the “nose versus genitals” is that cutting the genitals signifies a need to modify genitals and the choice of genitals rather than the nose is not arbitrary. But cutting genitals gives little information about the purposes of cutting them. Male circumcision implies cutting of the genitals, but the purpose has to my knowledge never been to reduce male sexual pleasure or to control male sexuality.

There is also a difference between purpose and effect. Boddy argues that although pharaonic circumcision restrains Hofriayti women’s sexuality, this is not its purpose (Boddy, 1989: 6). The surgery is “hot” or “painful” (*hārr*), prepares a girl for womanhood; makes her body clean, smooth, and pure; renders her marriageable; confers on her the right to bear children; and invests her with fertility ( Boddy, 1982).

The cutting for any purpose and with any side effects serves to give the body particular morphological shape that is considered appropriate for the gender one is and has much in common with transsexuals’ operations to become the gender one already is (was already from the start). Hird argues that “transsexuals particularly focus the assumption that you need a particular morphological configuration to ‘know’ yourself as female. Beauvoir’s signature statement that ‘one is not born, but becomes a woman’ seems to anticipate transsexual claims” (de Beauvoir 1953 in Hird, 2000: 349).

In the film *Todo sobre mi madre* (Almodovar, 1999), there is a monologue by a prostitute transsexual woman called Agrado:

“Aside from being pleasant I am also very authentic.” And without losing a minute, she starts to run down the full list of surgical operations she has undergone to be so authentic, along with their corresponding price in pesetas: “almond shaped eyes, 80 thousand, silicone in lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and ass... the litre costs sixty

thousand pesetas... you add it up, because I stopped counting... Tits? Two. I'm no monster. Seventy each, but these have been fully depreciated...It cost me a lot to be authentic. But we must not be cheap in regards to the way we look. Because a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself." (Sony Pictures)

While surgery is performed on transsexual individuals who experience a mismatch between their morphological shape and the gender they are, female genital cutting is performed on whole groups of girls, based on dominant discourses about appropriate female forms pertaining to the specific ethnic group involved.

The need to reshape both female and male genitalia in order to produce appropriate gendered bodies shows that Gambians do not find the natural bodies sufficiently gendered. The "sexed" body is not complete and becomes more of its "sex" (or female body) through the *nyaakaa* ritual. This shows clearly how the natural category of sex is socially constructed. What is constructed as male and female substances and characteristics vary historically (Laqueur, 1990) and cross-culturally (Moore, 1994). The history of how the clitoris has been ascribed qualities and contributed differently to its owner's gender, also shows the instability of bodily categories and their value (See Dellenborg, 2004, Hernlund, 2003, Johansen, 2006a). According to Talle (1993), the Somalis consider the clitoris as a hard, male part of the body that has to be removed to produce a woman, and the infibulation represents sewing women into their patriline. The vulva needed to be smoothed and closed in order to look beautiful. Johansen (2006b) argues that when Somali immigrants become aware of the qualities Norwegians attribute to the clitoris, it is as if the gender of the clitoris changes. In the Somalian context, the clitoris was a hard, male part of the body that had to be removed in order to create a complete femininity, while the Norwegian discourse gave the clitoris a vital and feminine quality as the source of sexual pleasure, without which a woman could not be a complete woman.

Although sex obviously is a discursively produced category referring to bodily distinctions, as a part of a gender discourse, it remains unresolved to what extent it is desired and/or possible to do away with sex (Butler, 1993, Hird, 2000). According to Hird, the debate has initiated "a selfreflexive effort to return feminism to its foundational grounding" (Hird, 2000: 347). While the transsexual discourse implies the coexistence of sex and gender, the intersex discourse by implication seeks to dissolve both concepts, claiming intersexed identities able to accommodate a number of combinations of morphological forms (ibid.).

*Gor-jiggen* or prostitute-like girls and the morphology of Mandinka girls (not Wolof girls) represent unclean categories that ideally are dealt with through training or genital cutting respectively. While it is necessary for the viability of intersexed persons that they and the society around them are able to accommodate the “numerous combinations of morphological forms”, the viability of *gor-jiggen* or prostitute-like girls requires abilities to accommodate various combinations of morphological forms and sets of behaviour. It would then be socially acceptable for the boy discussed in the beginning of this chapter, to wash his own clothes in his father’s compound, in spite of the fact that he was born with a penis.

## **Health effects**

Studies of health effects of female genital cutting in The Gambia are limited (Coleman et al., 2006, Morison et al., 2001, Singateh, 1985). Morison’s study was a community-based study where reproductive morbidities were compared between women who were genitally cut and those who were not.

The type II genital surgeries performed during childhood in this population were associated with significantly increased prevalences of Bacterial Vaginosis and Herpes Simplex Virus 2. The higher prevalence of Herpes Simplex Virus 2 in cut women suggests that they may be more vulnerable to HIV infection. No other significant adverse associations with cutting were found.

Morison et al. conclude that the relationship between female genital cutting and long-term reproductive morbidity is still not clear, especially in settings where type II cutting predominates. They also argue for cautiousness in conclusions since there are confounding factors in that ethnic group determined circumcision status in two of the three main ethnic groups in the study area (i.e. Wolof and Mandinka).

In the report from Women’s Bureau (Singateh, 1985) 28.8 % of the circumcised women reported problems related to the operation. Almost half of those experienced pricking under the skin at the clitoral zone. The other problems were grouped as cracks, infection and psychological problems. 35.3 % of the women had not had any problems while 35.9 % did not respond to the question.

Among my informants there were known cases of children who had died during the initiation (both male and female), but these cases were rare and not linked to the cutting per se, but to attacks from evil forces such as witches (*buwaa*) and the like. It was argued that a

child might die anyway, whether it went to the *nyaakaa* or not, a statement that was supported by experience and the high child mortality rates.

When I discussed pain and potential health problems with informants, they agreed that the cutting could be painful, but not so severe that the practice should stop.

None of my informants complained that sexual relationships were painful or not enjoyable due to the genital cutting. The situations where having sex was referred to in negative terms, were all related to difficult relations with husbands, mostly due to the husband's lack of spending time and money on his wife and children. This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, it is possible that the ideology around sexuality as something positive and enjoyable is so strong that any negative experiences would be hidden and not expressed. The idea that problems during the *nyaakaa* ritual are caused by evil forces, is another reason for keeping quiet about pain and ill health related to the cutting.

### ***Nyaakaa* and fertility**

To my knowledge, the links between the *nyaakaa* ritual and fertility were subtle and only indirectly produced. This is in contrast with other studies of initiation rituals elsewhere, where the link between initiation rituals and fertility seems quite clear (Bledsoe, 1984, Boddy, 1989, Talle, 1991, Talle, 1993). Bledsoe argues that Sande ritual and symbolism emphasise male-female sexual mingling and integration as much as sexual separation. It was necessary to mix male and female symbolic elements in order to achieve powerful personal potency as well as fertility (Bledsoe, 1984: 463).

Fortes argues that initiation rites which focus on political and juridical rights and citizenship give an initiated person the possibility to involve him- or herself in adult sexuality, fertility and legitimate parenthood at a later stage:

What I have in mind can be exemplified by reference to initiation ceremonies. In terms of van Gennep's model they are means of marking and organizing the transition from childhood to socially recognized adulthood. Restated in terms of the model I am proposing they are the means of divesting a person of his status as a child in the domestic domain and of investing him with the status of actual or potential citizen in the politico-jural domain. Ordeals and mutilations are more than the new status. The right to exercise adult sexuality, that is sexuality in marriage for procreative purposes, as opposed to childish sexuality, is one of the distinctive prerogatives and responsibilities of citizenship. One purpose of initiation rites, and for that matter, the

main purpose of female initiation, is to confer this right and to do this in such a way that the commitments implied in its acquisition are accepted as a necessary moral and jural concomitant of citizenship. (Fortes, 1962: 87).

A similar belief about legitimate fertility is found among the Masai where some believe that unless Masai girl is genitally cut a she cannot be married give birth (Talle, 1991, Talle, 1988). Should this nonetheless happen, the child is believed to be impaired.

It was argued similarly that a Mandinka girl who had not been to the *nyaakaa* could never have a baby. When I tried to clarify how this mechanism was working, the answer was that nobody wanted to marry an uninitiated person, a *solima*, and she would thus have no baby. According to this argument, it was not the cutting in itself or the details of the *nyaakaa*, that affected fertility as such, but the need to be initiated in order to be married and have legitimate fertility.

The most obvious other link between the *nyaakaa* and fertility was the way the girls were trained to respect themselves. The girls learn proper conduct through the *nyaakaa* implying appropriate management of signs of sexual accessibility and to restrict sexual relations to the husband resulting in legitimate children. This, however, would not affect the level of fertility. The *nyaakaa* cultivate in girls qualities that are important for a successful marriage, but to my knowledge they do not influence fertility levels.

If the *nyaakaa* is successful, the girls will incorporate the ideology of female submissiveness, endurance, secrecy and respectfulness. Women of all ages, from the girls' elder sisters and cousins who assist them, via the parental generation to grand- and great-grand- parents pass on this ideology. In the next chapter it becomes apparent that there is continuity between the teachings of the *nyaakaa* and the messages during transfer of the bride rituals. Only in the last chapter, about the *Kanyaleng*, is there a ritual breach or opposition to the otherwise unbroken ideology of appropriate femaleness.

## **Chapter summary**

In this chapter I have shown how girls were shaped to become appropriate women through everyday training and initiation. Through these processes female behaviour and female bodily morphology are altered to fit into a single unified category of womanhood. Contrary to what has been generally expected, I have no reasons (apart from my Western prejudices) to believe that genital cutting of girls is performed in order to reduce sexual pleasure or to control the



sexuality of girls and women. Rather, the cutting seems to be performed in order to produce a pure unambiguous morphology of the female genitalia. Control of female sexuality was by contrast cultivated through the training of the *nyaakaa* ritual and in everyday life, by teaching qualities such as being respectful, submissive, able to endure and bear pain, secretive and brave. The *nyaakaa* ritual contributes to appropriate sexual conduct through the emphasis of self respect, which for women implies showing appropriate signs of sexual inaccessibility in public. Lack of compliance with normative gendered behaviour is interpreted as a transgression rendering the woman in question prostitute-like and/or man-woman like. A number of initially non-sexual, but perhaps manly acts (wearing trousers, smoking in public, “idling about” etc.), become stigmatised and sexualised.

My focus in this chapter is on the teaching of the *nyaakaa* as possibly related to fertility, but the girls were also taught practical skills, “knowledge about the world”, what kind of knowledge they might legitimately possess and pass on and what must be kept secret.

The *nyaakaa* ritual is a transition ritual where girls are transferred from uninitiated (*solima*) to initiated girls. The transition gives the girl a new position as she is allowed to participate as an assistant to other girls in the *nyaakaa* rituals, and carry a number of collective secrets. As the initiation takes place before puberty, the ritual does not mark any immediate transfer to womanhood, but rather implies the potential of wife- and motherhood. Some argued that Mandinka women could not be married and have children unless they had been through the *nyaakaa* ritual. Others did not see the ritual as a prerequisite for married life. It is thus not clear to what extent the *nyaakaa* ritual actually produces legitimate fertility as has been argued for other initiation rituals (see for example Talle, Meyer Fortes). Several of the values cultivated during the *nyaakaa* ritual are, however, also emphasised during the transfer of the bride rituals discussed in the next chapter.

The next chapter about marital relations shows how some of the values taught during upbringing of girls are reproduced during marital rituals and relationships. I do, however, also show that marital relations are negotiated in practical married life. Although the dominant discourses maintain that women should respect and obey their husbands, irrespectively how they are treated, practically disobedience and autonomy often come as a reaction to husband’s failure to fulfil their part of the marital contract.



## Chapter 2 Marital relations

*Lutah mbahana jagga chi boppi* Why does the cap stay long on its owner's head?

*borom am?*

It's light.

*Oiof*

Wolof riddle about how a woman may stay long in her marriage.

In The Gambia marital relations are the only relationships in which fertility can be legitimately acted out. It is generally expected that everybody gets married, women earlier than men. This is confirmed by statistics, in urban areas only 6% of men and 4% of women above 50 years of age had never been married (Republic of The Gambia, 1996b). According to informants, people consider something to be wrong if somebody never marries, or if young divorced or widowed women do not get married again.

In this chapter I am interested in the significance of marriage as it is expressed through the marital rituals and through everyday relationship between spouses, co-wives and other kin. How does the marital contract allocate rights between the spouses; in each other and towards children? What are the rights and responsibilities following the bride when she is transferred to her husband and sometimes his kin? In this context I question whether the bride wealth and the gifts involved can be seen as payment or compensation for the bride's reproductive capacity or if they should rather be seen as a gift signifying an investment in fatherhood and in social relations between the two families.

The messages conveyed through speeches of advice given on the evening of the transfer of the bride seem to continue the emphasis on certain values that were elaborated during the *nyaakaa* ritual. These values were respect, endurance, secrecy/discretion and obedience. However, if the incorporation of the female ideals were total, the subjection process would result in subjects able to bear almost anything. Women would rather starve than spend the whole day at the vegetable gardens or revealing the secrets of the house (violating the ideal of *suturo*) by going to their brothers and ask for money to buy food. There where various forms of resistance, these are discussed in context the marital relations.

At the end of the chapter I discuss polygamous unions.

## ***The marriage process***

In The Gambia four types of marriage are recognized: customary, Muslim, registry/civil and Christian. The latter two are covered by the Matrimonial Cause Act (Statutory law) (Veronica Wright, Ministry of Justice, personal communication 24.05.95). All my informants were married according to customary law, and when I speak about marriages, I refer to this type.<sup>57</sup>

The customary laws and traditions (*ado*) are not codified and vary considerably between regions, ethnic groups, *kabilos* and even families. However, certain elements are common to all customary marriages; sending cola nuts, “tying the marriage” (*futuusitoo*), paying bride wealth (*futuunaafuloo*, lit.: marriage wealth) and transferring the bride to the husband’s home (*maañoo bitoo*). During the *maañoo bitoo* the bride brings a substantial amount of equipment (W: *bagasj*) that can be considered as dowry, if dowry is seen as a type of pre-mortem inheritance to the bride, as suggested by J. Goody (1973b). The value of this equipment may be much higher than the value of the bride wealth, and by consequence the amount spent on the marriage transactions may be highest for the bride’s kin.

When *futuu siti* or *taka* (W) is performed, the couple is considered married, even if the groom has a debt to the bride’s parents or the formal transfer of the bride (*maañoo bitoo*) is not done. In such cases the groom may borrow (*donto*) his wife until the debt is paid or the transfer is performed.

## **Divorce**

Divorce is common, but even though the procedures for having a divorce are uncomplicated, the families of the spouses may oppose the divorce and try to negotiate a settlement.<sup>58</sup> In one such case, a woman turned to her brother to help her to be divorced. Instead, he promised to support her economically only if she remained married otherwise she would have to manage on her own. As the brother’s financial support was crucial to the woman, she remained married. In the case of a young woman who wanted a divorce and had returned to her parents’

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<sup>57</sup> Customary marriages among Muslims are not to be seen as in contrast with Muslim marriage, but in this context referring to a formal juridical distinction. Muslim marriage here refers to those marriages that are contracted in the Cadi department of the magistrate court. The Cadi is a Muslim judge dealing with family affairs, mainly marriages, divorce, child custody and inheritance. The only marriages I knew that took place at the Cadi were two cases (one of them was my own, the other one was between two Gambians) where a Muslim man married a Christian woman. In customary marriages it will often (but not always) be required that the Christian woman converts to Islam.

<sup>58</sup> The man may say “I leave you” (W: *fasse na la*) three times in front of his wife and the couple is formally divorced. The wife may return the bride wealth to her husband (or his family) and say “I take it off” (W: *simmil ko*) and then be divorced.

compound, her father insisted that she should return to her husband. The young woman refused to do so, challenged her father and succeeded in obtaining a divorce and she stayed unmarried in her parents' compound until she remarried some years later.

### **Relationships between spouses**

Parents normally chose marital partners for their sons and daughters, but this has gradually started to change. In my interviews with women in Bakau, most of the women said relatives chose their husbands for them. Some did not know their husband before they married; others knew them because they were relatives or neighbours. Only two of the 30 women who had ever been married, said the husband was their boyfriend before they married. In 2007, several of my informants' daughters had married boys they had got to know on their own without their parents' involvement. But also in cases where the couple knew each other, the marriage process was more or less the same as when the parents had chosen a spouse for their child.

In The Gambia, the preference has been for cross-cousin marriage. To my knowledge, the first large scale systematic study of marriage practices in The Gambia has just recently been carried out by Tone Sommerfelt in a rural village (Vogt, 2007).<sup>59</sup> The marital patterns among the 500 adults that were part of her study, shows that they are involved in 151 marriages. One-third were married to cousins, one-third to other kin and one-third to friends of the family. In most cases, marriages were arranged by their families. Among the 31 women I interviewed, the distribution into the three categories was similar. Nine were married to cross-cousins, four on their mother's side and five on the father's side. Ten of the women married kinsmen in their parents' generation; seven of them were categorised as their mother's brother, while three of the women were married to their father's cousins. The rest of the marriages were with non-kin.

One Serahuli woman had been married to her father's brother's son. Such marriages were usual among Serahulis, but according to my informants rare among Mandinka, Wolof and Fula, since parallel cousins were classified as sisters and brothers and generally considered to be too close. It is interesting to note that several of the marriages among the Wolof in Sommerfelt's study reported to have involved parallel cousins (Vogt, 2007).

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<sup>59</sup> Ames (Ames, 1955) registered marriages between 84 men and their 147 wives in his study of two Wolof dominated villages.

Sommerfelt suggests that it may be related to influence from other Muslim countries where such marital practices are widespread.

At a visit in a Mandinka musician's (*jali*) compound I was surprised to hear about a married couple whose fathers had the same mother and father. When I asked, they said it was not unusual in their family. Among other Mandinka informants, one woman from Baddibou said she had never heard about it, while one Mandinka woman from Basse knew about one case. There had been a man in their family who had been so difficult and had beaten his wife so seriously that she left him. His father's brother had given him his own daughter, and said that he could not possibly be so wicked that he would beat his own sister.

According to my Mandinka teacher, traditionally there have been forms of "engagement" where marriages have been agreed upon already when the person was a baby, *jabba jibongo*, literally "onion watered". Such marriages implied that the girl was nursed, but not fostered, by her future husband's kin since she was small. The qualities of a future wife were discussed as I commented that such engagements must have been risky as the girl might grow up to become very ugly or bad mannered. The Mandinka teacher replied that it was not the beauty that counted but the manners and the home of the girl could thus give an indication about what the daughter would be like. The expression "The girl's teacher is her mother" (*ding musso karamo mu a ba leti*), indicated that if the mother had respect for her husband, it was likely that the daughter would respect her husband too. A Wolof saying was that if you look for a wife, you should look for in-laws (W: *su uti jabarr, otal goro*).

As I show below, much of the marriage transactions should be considered as ways of producing social relations between kin and in-laws. The classic debates about marriage in social anthropology deal with marriage as a political system for organising social groups. Within the structural-functionalist tradition the focus was on descent as basis for social organisation. Marriage was seen as a union between one man and one woman that established the legitimacy of children (Borneman, 1996). Lévi-Strauss' exchange theory focused on marriage as the central unit where "relations among groups, regulated by preferential marriage and the incest taboo, established the conditions for exchange and thus comprised the elementary structure of human organization" (Borneman, 1996: 221).

### **Contracting rights and duties through transactions**

Several authors have focused on the economic aspects of Gambian marriages and the contributions of the spouses to the upholding of the unit (Ames, 1955, Carney and Watts, 1990, Schroeder, 1996, Schroeder, 2000, Weil, 1976). There is an ideology that husbands

should provide their wives with regular sex and economic support. It has also been argued that wives have been dependent on their husbands' prayers for life after death.<sup>60</sup>

As observed in my field work, Gambian marital relations were relationships between spouses and the spouses' kin groups. From when the first introductory contacts were established, until the bride was transferred, there were numerous transactions performed and many relatives involved. Most of these transactions had the form of gifts. There are no specific words for gift in Mandinka and Wolof, but there were words for giving (*diiroo*, W: *meie*). When parents, formally the father(s), gave their daughter, it was the concept *meie* that was used. *Meie* was also used about some of the obligatory gifts such as "give first" (W: *meie bu njekka*), involving several items given to the bride and her family. Bridewealth is spoken about as "payment"; "*fei halisi juur*"- literally to pay "birth money". Although the money is "paid" it is questionable what the money "buys". One could ask whether this *halisi juur/futuunaafuloo* rather than being payment or compensation for the wives' reproductive capacities, could be seen as an investment in the husband's right to become a birth father. As becomes clear in the next chapter, both the birth mother and the birth father (normally the birth mother's husband) and their kin, become related to the child through blood, and this sense of belonging become shared, but they are not transferred as a result of the paid bride wealth. What may be considered to be transferred to the husband are unique rights in the wife's sex (*jus in rem*) and the jural right to formally decide over the child. In cases where all the required transactions are not yet fulfilled, the groom may only borrow his wife (*donto*). In most cases it is the bridewealth that remains to be paid fully or the wife's mother has been unable to collect all the equipment the wife is supposed to bring at the transfer of the bride.

On a general basis, Comaroff discusses a number of different suggestions about how to interpret a variation of marriage payments (Comaroff, 1980). He rejects some of the speculations that the payments are based on the logic of cost-benefits: "If it were the economic logic of loss and gain entailed in marriage which gave form to prestations, it follows that there ought to be some relationship between their value and the extent of the costs and benefits involved" (Comaroff, 1980: 6).

I return to Comaroff's suggestions in the discussion of paying bride wealth below and suggest that the logic of gift relations make more sense in analysing these transactions.

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<sup>60</sup> It was expressed as the husband had his wife's key to heaven (W: *chave i aljenna*). Although some talked about this in a serious way, some women joked about this and said that some men did not even have their own key.

## Finding a wife

In 1995, after I had been to two transfer of the bride rituals, one performed in Mandinka and one in Wolof, my Wolof and Mandinka teachers collectively explained the process of contracting a marriage in detail. As they both were elderly men and former schoolteachers, the processes presented below may have been slightly more detailed and formalistic than actual marriages are.

Before “tying the marriage”, several introductory contacts are made and gifts in the form of cola nuts and money are given. “Sending cola nuts” (W: *yoni guru*) is a metaphor and common expression for a marriage proposal. The first step is when the man’s father(s) sends the first cola nuts to the woman’s fathers. These cola nuts are called either *ñininkari kuruwo* (lit: asking/investigation cola nuts), *bungkono kuruwo* (lit: inside house cola nuts) or *lafî kuruwo* (lit: wish-for cola nuts) and are sent with a messenger (*sillanyatonko* or *sillatio*). The amount of cola nuts is not fixed, but should be at least half a kilogramme.

According to my Mandinka teacher the message brought together with the cola nuts may be formulated in the following way.<sup>61</sup>

<i>Seni le ye n ki, a ko,</i>	Seni sent me, he said,
<i>nga fo ye ko ai fengne ye I bolu</i>	I tell you that he has seen something in your hand
<i>a lafita ming na a ding ke ye ming ketta</i>	that he wants for his son and that is
<i>i ding Fatou ti</i>	your child Fatou.

If the offer is accepted the cola nuts are shared between the girl’s fathers (i.e. father’s younger brothers, *fandingolu*). The youngest of the brothers may take these cola nuts to the elders while the girl’s birth father may abstain.

The girl’s opinion is heard in some families. In such cases the father calls the girl, shows her the cola nuts and tells her, “X has sent these and he says he wants you. Should we share it or should we return it?” Formally he should ask her three times to make sure that she has made her decision. If she agrees, the nuts will be shared among her fathers and the mother will be informed. Sometimes the mother will be called and told to ask the daughter. On other occasions the mother will be asked to check the home background of the man before a decision is made. There are also examples of men who make the decisions in opposition to

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<sup>61</sup> A Mandinka woman from a different part of the country formulated the request with almost identical words, implying a standardised way of posing the question.



other members of the family. During a visit “up-river” a woman complained that her daughter was getting married to one of her father’s acquaintances in spite of the fact that she and the girl wanted to wait until she had finished her secondary education.

If the nuts are shared, the messenger will be informed. He will also be presented with a list of names of the bride’s relatives whom the groom must go and visit. These are mostly the bride’s father’s kin.<sup>62</sup> While greeting them the suitor will bring along some cola nuts and some money. According to my Mandinka teacher, formerly no money was brought. Bringing money would be interpreted as if he wanted to display wealth. On some occasions money was changed into small coins, as if the amount was collected from others. He thus tried to signify that he was a modest person who was not exposing his riches.

*Badomoro* (lit: mothers eat) and *fadomoro* (lit: fathers eat) are money to be given to the girl’s relatives on the mother and the father’s side respectively. The girl’s father decides the amount the man has to give. The girl’s mother divides the *badomoro* among her kin, if the amount is 100 Dalasis; she may keep 50 Dalasis and share out the rest to her family, 5 Dalasis to some, 1 Dalasis to others. If the girl is under fosterage, the groom may be told to go and greet her birth parents.

The second bundle of cola nuts sent by the groom’s relatives is called *kabila longdang kuruwo* and is distributed in the bride’s ward (*kabilo*) to inform all their neighbours about the marriage decision.

The third bundle of cola nuts is the *nongkongla kuruwo* (meaning six-pence cola nuts), amounting to 120 cola nuts tied in a new head cloth (*tiko*) with 70 Dalasis. The 120 cola nuts are shared among the people of the ward, both men and women.<sup>63</sup> The 70 Dalasis is shared among the girl’s fathers. In addition there is 15 Dalasis called *Kabila kebba la kurto*, the trousers of the head of the ward. The head tie (*tiko*) where the *nongkongla kuruwo* were brought is given to the oldest wife of the head of the *kabilo*. If the head tie is not new, there will be a fine of 10D (out of which a new one can be bought).

The tradition of Wasulungkunda, a part of Bakau, was that the *nongkola kuruwo* was brought in a new calabash together with fruits of a fig tree and *nongkola kodo* (30 Dalasis).

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<sup>62</sup> A Wolof informant said he had to go and greet the bride’s mother’s relatives. Are there different emphases in representation due to gender bias, or is ethnicity of major importance?

<sup>63</sup> The *futu siti kuruwo* (tying the marriage colanuts), 10–15 cola nuts, may be taken from these 120 nuts if the marriage is tied at the same time.

All the cola nuts, money and clothes may be considered as gifts, and there is a commitment in receiving them. The first cola nuts and the money should be returned and not consumed unless the bride's kin consented to the marriage. Although the cost of each of these prestations is not very high, the total sum spent in this process may be substantial

The description above, which only involves the preliminary transactions in the marriage, illustrate how many people are concerned in the marital union. If the groom does not know the relatives of the bride already, he has to go and greet them and give them gifts during this preparatory part. In this phase he and his relatives will get to know the demands of the bride's relatives.

### **Give first (W: *mei bu njekka*)**

*Mei bu njekka* is a part of the transactions between the groom and the bride's family. As for bride wealth (*futuunaafuloo*), *mei bu njekka* (W) is also given on request from the girl's family. Local variations of *mei bu njekka* are several and were discussed after one tying of a marriage (W: *taka*) in Serekunda. The groom had invited his friends for supper. One of the men said that the "standard" in this area was to ask for a radio, a watch, jewellery and money. In other social groups and in other parts of the country, a woman's family could require gifts such as a TV, video player and money, amounting to more than 15 000 Dalasis. While the groom is responsible for acquiring money and goods, he may receive contributions from friends and other family members. One of the groom's friends said that, provided he could afford it, he would have bought a radio with record player and given it to his friend so he could give it as a part of *mei bu njekka*. *Mei bu njekka* must be given before the "tying of the marriage" (*futuusitoo*).

### **Bride wealth**

The bride wealth (*futuunaafuloo*) is an amount of money given by the groom and his family to the bride and her family. It is the bride's father or somebody who is representing her (such as her father's brother, a foster father or her own brother) who decides the amount. The bride wealth may be used by the girl herself, her mother or be spent by her father or some other relatives.<sup>64</sup> If the wife later wants divorce, this money must be returned. If the husband wants a divorce, the woman and her family may keep the money unless the woman is the direct cause of the divorce as in the case in the last chapter.

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<sup>64</sup> Mostly to buy household equipment for her daughter.

Bride wealth is called *futuunaafuloo* and *halisi juur* in Mandinka and Wolof respectively. The Mandinka expression simply means “marriage wealth” while the Wolof expression means “the money of birth”. The Wolof expression thus links the bride wealth symbolically to the bride’s reproductive capacities. Still, the amount is negligible compared to the value of children, and thus cannot be considered as a compensation (Comaroff, 1980).

If the bride wealth actually was a compensation for reproductive rights, a wife paying bride wealth for a co-wife, should by implication be the one who “owned” her child. Ames refers to situations among Wolofs where the husbands turned to their wives and asked them to pay the bride wealth for another wife:

“A few women have cattle, and these too they may dispose of as they see fit. It seems not unusual for the husband of such a woman to beg her to sell some of her cattle so that he may get another wife; and in one of the cases observed, the wife refused” (Ames, 1955: 396).

Elsewhere, such as among the Igbo of Nigeria (Amadiume, 1987), the Nandi of Kenya (Oboler, 1980), the Nuer of Sudan and several West-African groups in the former Dahomey (Herskovits, 1937) women actually got rights in other women’s reproductive capacities by paying bride wealth for these women. During my interviews I came across one woman who had contributed to the bride wealth of a co-wife. She was a Serer woman, who had only one daughter and was rather desperate to have another child.<sup>65</sup> After some time she had found another wife for her husband and contributed to the bride wealth. She had hoped that she had a so-called “jealous womb” (*kono killiata*) so she would get pregnant as soon as she saw that her co-wife became pregnant. This plan failed as she did not get pregnant again and rather than claiming any rights in her co-wife’s child she divorced her husband. In The Gambia, however, women do not need to pay bride wealth to get rights to other women’s children. In chapters three and four, I show how women may get children to foster from sisters, brothers, co-wives and friends. Some of them take over all the rights and obligations towards the child also permanently transferred.

Bride wealth amounts vary widely between different social environments. These differences are based on belonging to groups of people located geographically, economically,

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<sup>65</sup> Serer is one of the smaller ethnic groups in The Gambia, but more populous in Senegal. My Mandinka informants introduced her to me as a Wolof at the time I made my interviews.

ethnically rather than to any expected value in the girl (such as virginity). However, my Mandinka teacher argued that twice as much was given when the bride was a virgin. According to him *futuunaafuloo* for a virgin in Bakau used to be 33 Dalasis in opposition to 15 Dalasis for those who had been married before. The amount for a virgin was 66 Dalasis in Wasulungkunda.<sup>66</sup> In Bakau in 1995, bride wealth amounts typically varied between 300 and 500 Dalasis. One Mandinka woman said her husband had paid 66 Dalasis, the normal amount, in Kiang more than twenty years ago. He had also given her clothes, but no bed.

When we visited Fulladu East district in 1987, a Mandinka man had required a divorce and the bride wealth of 800 Dalasis to be returned, as his wife had become pregnant while he was travelling. One of his brothers had married his mother's brother's daughter and had paid only 400 Dalasis in bride wealth. The explanation why the bride wealth varied from 400 to 800 Dalasis in the two cases, was that one of them had married family while the other had not.

One Mandinka woman said that the *futuunaafuloo* was not much when she married because her brother did not need a lot of money at that time. A Fula woman said a similar thing about her father in relation to her own marriage. It was his pride to keep the bride wealth at a minimum, signifying that he was not greedy and did not accept the marriage proposal in order to get any economic benefit from it.

Few of the women I interviewed knew exactly how much their husband or his family had given their family as bride wealth. One Wolof woman said:

“You know we Wolof, who makes somebody (i.e. the bride's mother) an in-law (*goro*), will give her (your mother) money and clothes, she will know that.”

Another Wolof woman was among those few who knew what was given:

“He himself gave me something. At that time giving was not much (*meie barreoul*), the tradition was not so (*ado bi melut ni*) ... 400 Dalasis and sewing machine, radio, watch and bed”.

I asked her whether the Wolofs “upriver” gave more money than the Mandinkas.

“Wolof women have a lot of traditions. He (i.e. the husband) will see, he will buy cola nuts and give it to your mother's brother (*nijie*), he will buy cola nuts and bring them to your mother, he will buy cola nuts and bring them to your mother's sister (*tanta*), he

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<sup>66</sup> Now an administratively a part of Bakau, but formerly considered as an independent village.

will buy cola nuts and bring them to your elder sister and brother (*mak*). Thank you, thank you. This he should do, he should include money. We have that tradition (*ada*)”.

One Fula woman said her husband, who was an Aku from Sierra Leone, gave a watch, earrings, sewing machine, tape recorder, clothes, bowls and two beds.

According to my teachers, the decision on the amount of *futuunaafuloo* may also be a result of negotiation. The girl’s father may ask for 500 Dalasis, while the one representing the groom may insist on 300 Dalasis. The amount may also be paid in several instalments over a year.

In the interview situation I did not ask the informants to differentiate between bride wealth and other types of gifts.

## **Tying the marriage**

*Futuusitoo*, literally tying the marriage, is the most important part of the marriage procedure, and the only part that is absolutely necessary for the couple to be legally married. Men perform the tying of the marriage, preferably on Thursday or Friday immediately after the five o’clock prayer. It may be performed in a mosque or in the bride’s family’s compound. Male representatives of the two parties perform the ritual, frequently with the assistance of the Imam. The bride is never present, the groom decides for himself whether he wants to participate or not.

During the *futuusitoo* the girl’s fathers (or other male guardians) give her (W: *meie*) to the husband and his family. It is not uncommon that the right to give the daughter is ritually transferred to other male relatives and friends. In a *futuusitoo* in Sere Kunda in April 2007, this right was passed on five times. The girl’s father said he would leave it to his close friend to give the girl to her husband. The father’s friend decided, however, that he would ask another of his and the father’s friends to give the girl. The second last “giver” passed on the honour to give the daughter under the condition that he would finally give the girl rather than pass on the right to give. I interpret this as signifying the value of sharing, including rights in children. It also signified the close relationship and the trust between the men involved, as the father was willing to entrust the most valuable thing he had, namely his daughter, to his friend.

During *futuusitoo*, verses from the *Qur’an* are read and conditions for the marriage are spoken about. There are often sequences of praise giving and advice given about the

conduct of the husband in marital relations. The husband is responsible for clothing, feeding and giving shelter to the woman. When the marriage is tied, they may say: "Today it's late, but from tomorrow you will be responsible for her feeding". It means that the man will start supporting her economically, whether they live together immediately after the *futuusitoo* or not. The bride wealth may be transferred to the bride's family before or during the *futuusitoo*, in accordance with the agreed amount.

When the marriage is tied, 4 Dalasis and 25 Butut is paid by the groom's representatives (*futu siterang kodo*, W & Arab: *mahr*). The four Dalasis are for the bride, 25 Butut is for the Imam or for the one who represents or helps him. The amount for the Imam used to be one shilling, and 16 shillings were for the grooms representatives (Gamble, 1957: 66) Nowadays the amount paid to the Imam may be 5D<sup>67</sup>.

Largesse in the form of cola nuts and drinks (canned or home made in plastic bags) is distributed.<sup>68</sup> Both the bride and the groom's families may arrange big celebrations in relation to the *futuusitoo*. Several cows may be slaughtered and it has become popular to play live music with hired bands or DJ's with portable discos. Sometimes more modest celebrations are held, called "*taka i gor*"(W).

### **Making the young girl's bed stand**

"Making the young girl's bed" stand (*sunkuto larango lo*), is a ritual where the groom buys a bed for his wife and raises it in her parents house. If he visits his in-laws (*bitang*) on later occasions he may use that bed. It is considered disrespectful if he sits or lies on his in-laws' bed. The *larang lo* may be accompanied by other parts of the marital ritual transactions.

A *sunkutu larang lo* was arranged at Sinchu baliya, a village close to Sukuta one Friday afternoon in the middle of June (1993). According to informants, that *larang lo* was to take place on the day of the transfer of the bride (*mañoo bitoo*). In addition to the new bed, a radio, a gold necklace, earrings and bracelet were given. The man's family gave a box full of clothes and 1000 Dalasis to the woman and her family. The bed and the radio would be left with the girl's mother when the girl was transferred to her husband.

When we arrived at Sukuta we made visits to my informant's family and friends, before we entered the compound of the groom's father. The groom had already married twice,

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<sup>67</sup> The registration fee at the Cadi was 20 Dalasis (1995).

<sup>68</sup> According to Gamble (1956) the cola nuts for distribution should be 99.

but had divorced one of his wives. Lots of women were sitting inside the compound. We were shown at least ten pieces of clothes, which had been prepared to be taken to the bride and her family. The groom's sisters had contributed with most of the pieces. One big piece of *basseng* was for the bride's father. One of the pieces was already sown as a *fano*, *dendiko* and *tiko*.<sup>69</sup> When we left the groom's compound, several women were singing and dancing in the road. Three drummers were playing and the procession blocked the traffic completely (the drivers seemed to accept this with no sign of anger). Most of the women wore *fanting* dresses. After the procession had moved down to the market and back up again, almost one hundred women boarded hired mini buses and left for the bride's village. The women were singing and clapping inside the car. When we arrived after 6 p.m., lots of guests were already seated. Circles were formed for dancing. In one huge circle the dancing was led by male drummers and in a smaller circle one man and three women were drumming. The women played a water drum (*jitango*), a mortar (*turuo*) and metal sticks. The small circle was dominated by *Kanyalengs*. A woman from the local *Kanyaleng* group used a calabash hat with beads to collect money from the participants.

After a short period of dancing and singing, food was served. When the meal was finished, friends of the groom raised the bed. One woman sprayed the sponge with perfume, another woman took the bedcover, put it down on the bed and lifted it up again three times before she spread it out. A man put on one of the pillowcases, a woman put on the other. Somebody took a photo of those who raised the bed.

The suitcase with all the pieces of clothes was opened and displayed in the yard. A sum of 1000 Dalasis was also part of the gift.<sup>70</sup> According to my informant these "givings" (W: *meie*) were not a part of the bride wealth (*futuunaafuloo*) and would not be paid back in case of divorce. The amount was, according to her, decided by what you "can give" (W: *li nga moun*) or "your purchasing power" (W: *sa dole*). A watch, radio and jewels for the bride may be given, but this is not obligatory.

Later *benachin* and salad, with meat, sauce and bread were served with *wonjo*<sup>71</sup> and canned drinks.

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<sup>69</sup> *Fano*, *dendiko* and *tiko* is a set of wrapper, blouse and head tie from the same piece of cloth.

<sup>70</sup> This would be approximately 70GBP in 1995.

<sup>71</sup> *Wonjo* is a red drink made from dried *bissap* flowers mixed with water.

Transfer of the bride (*maañoo bitoo*) should take place later in the evening, but several of the guests left before it started. We returned after 9 p.m. with several other women who were singing and clapping all the way back.

The bed given in this ritual is a gift from the groom to the bride that will remain in her parental compound. The bed will be used by the bride's relatives and it was argued that the man could sit on the bed when he visited his in-laws because it would be disrespectful for him to sit on his in-laws' bed. Both women and men contributed to preparing the bed; the groom's friends represented the groom and a woman represented the bride in putting on the pillowcases. Together with the generous spraying of the bed with perfume, this signifies the sexual aspects of relationship between the couple (and potentially the fertile outcome of the sexual relation). The combination of the male and the female elements in rituals have often been interpreted as necessary for fertility.

A lot of other gifts for the bride's family was also presented. The money and the different pieces of clothes for the bride's parents signified the groom's interest and care for his in-laws; and emphasised the gift relations between the two kin groups rather than between two individuals.

## **Transfer of the bride**

The transfer of the bride (*maañoo bitoo*) to her husband's compound is normally the most ritually elaborated and celebrated part of the marriage. In Mandinka the ritual is called *maañoo bitoo* which literally means "covering the bride", in Wolof it is called *mur* (lit. "cover"), *chetale* or *jebale* (lit.: hand over).<sup>72</sup>

Among Mandinka, the girl's mother is responsible for providing all the equipment (W: *bagasj*) she needs in the house. In some parts of the country, standards for what should be included are extremely demanding. In addition to items such as kitchen equipment, water jar, bed sheets etc., one example is an area of Baddibou where the mother is supposed to include one hundred beautiful pieces of cloth (*darifano*), each of them costing as much as 100 Dalasis. These pieces of cloth constituted security for the girl and she could use them as gifts or sell them in times of hardship.<sup>73</sup> Although the mother gets assistance from family and

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<sup>72</sup> *Jebale* (hand over) is different from *jebalo*, which means to hand oneself over. The latter is often used about disciples (*talibes*) in the Sufi brotherhoods who hand over themselves to a master (*serign*). When a bride is transferred, it is her guardians handing her over to other guardians.

<sup>73</sup> In an evaluation of horse-cart ambulances, Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) reported that a *fano* was standard "payment" for birth assistance (Skramstad, 1993)



friends and she often starts to collect the items several years before the marriage, it may take years after the marriage is tied until everything is collected. The transfer of the bride may be postponed for a long time due to these requirements. In other social groups, the groom may contribute economically and give money to his mother-in-law to buy this equipment. One Fula man told that he had given 1000 Dalasis to his mother-in-law to buy *bagasj* (W) for the *jebale* (W), but the mother-in-law had complained and he intended to give her another 500 Dalasis on his next pay day.

The husband may ask to “borrow” his wife (to whom he is legally married after the *futuusitoo*) and they may have several children before the *maañoo bitoo* takes place.

The first part of the ritual takes place in the bride’s compound. Before the bride is transferred, other women wash her. When she has been washed, she is dressed in white *dendiko*, *fano* and *tiko* and her head and shoulders covered by a *fano*. Seated on a mat in the middle of the compound, she is given advice about how to behave when she lives with her husband and his relatives. Beside her is a big basket (*paneo*) which contains cloths and other things she may need for the first days in her husband’s house.

Late in the evening, she is transferred by foot or by car, depending on the distance. Several people follow her, sometimes singing and dancing along the road. The girl following the bride is called *sering patto*. According to my teachers, the bride may choose her *sering patto* among her friends, neighbours or classmates. She may stay there a few days to help the bride to do her work. The bride may feel pain after she has had sex for the first time and may be exempted from work for some days.

There will also be a married woman who accompanies her on her way to the husband. This woman will be the *jongo* or another relative of the bride and will carry the basket.<sup>74</sup> People from the groom’s compound go to collect the bride. In the Fula–Wolof *jebale* I attended, the grooms “sisters” went to collect his bride.<sup>75</sup>

Wolof tradition is to bring porridge (W: *rui*) with sour milk with the bride to the husband’s compound. If any of the bride’s relatives lives on the way to the groom’s compound, Mandinkas will stop on the way and eat *nyassikinno*.<sup>76</sup> If there is somebody who can function as a “father” (*fa*) for the bride, somebody she can turn to in case of difficulties,

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<sup>74</sup> *Jongo* literally means slave, but is used about father’s sister’s daughter/son in ritual contexts.

<sup>75</sup> They were mother’s brother’s daughters, and mother’s sister’s daughter, but they had grown up together and considered each other as sisters and brother.

<sup>76</sup> *Nyassikino* is the name of food prepared when one expects a stranger.

on the way to the husband's compound, a stop will be made there. They may be served food before the procession continues to the groom's place. In the *jebale* I attended, both the bride and the other participants were going by cars from one compound to the other.

The bride's agemates may block the entrance of the house. The groom must pay them to let the bride enter. The *sering patto* enters the gate in front of the bride creeping and the *maañoo* will creep after. The husband will lift the bride into the bed. Another version is that when they enter the room and reach the bed where they will spend the night, the *sering pattsos* will stand there and push both the bride and the groom into the bed.

The bride, the groom and their *sering patto* will eat together. According to my teachers, if the husband eats more, the bride will know that he is a big eater and she must cook quickly and make a sufficient amount. If the woman eats a lot it is because she works hard and always needs food. Another version is that the bride and the groom compete about who is first to eat the *rui*. If it is the bride, their first child will be a girl, if it is the groom, their first child will be a boy.

The *serign patto* will leave; somebody else will lock the door and pass the key under the door (or see below). An old woman has prepared the bed beforehand. She will ask the husband to buy two yards of white satin or other suitable material for a *fano*. When the bride comes to the room, the old woman asks her to give her the *fano* she wears and wraps the new *fano* around her. The old woman will come back early in the morning to check; if the bride is a virgin, the *fano* will become bloodstained<sup>77</sup>. If it is bloodstained the woman will tell her parents that the daughter has done well; she was found to be a young girl *a ya la sunkutuya taara*.<sup>78</sup> The *fano* is brought to the mother's place, where the women may start dancing. The father of the girl may slaughter a bull and the husband may give her a present, such as money or a golden chain.

A woman who acts as a messenger goes from compound to compound to show the blood-stained sheet to relatives and neighbours. I am not aware of how many people actually see it. Once, while I was visiting a *Kanyaleng* woman in Bakau, a woman entered and brought her an envelope. She pulled out a white sheet, looked at it and rushed out into the compound

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<sup>77</sup> If she is not a virgin, the husband may ask the woman to find a small chicken for her. The husband will kill it and sprinkle the *malan* with blood. Socially she may pass as a virgin unless others know that she is not and start talking.

<sup>78</sup> *Sunkuto* (M), *ndow si*, *haley bu jiggen* (W) literally mean young girl, but in this context they mean that she is a virgin. A virgin is like a child compared to a sexually experienced woman (W: *sa dom feka nein ko mu di ndow*).

yard and started dancing. I thought she had got a present that pleased her and asked to see what she had got. When I saw the blood-stained sheet, I felt pretty embarrassed.

According to my Wolof teacher, a long time ago, if the girl was not a virgin, they would take a calabash and make a hole on each side at the top to signify that the girl had been penetrated before the marriage. The calabash was hung over the entrance, if the girl was a virgin, a whole calabash would be put there.<sup>79</sup> If the girl was a virgin when they married and the man is nasty to her, she may answer that “you taught me”. Some men emphasise the advantage of marrying young girls because they can teach them “everything”, not only sexual behaviour but how to be a good wife and person in general.

According to my Wolof teacher, the bride is washed and dressed in white in order to make her leave in perfect cleanliness, all errors are left behind. White symbolises purity, like a new born child. The bride covers her face so as not to exhibit beauty, which is not what she came there for. Being clean, innocent and as a child are associated with virginity. However, in spite that virginity is valued, the actual importance of being a virgin at marriage these days seems rather unclear. Apart from a party arranged for a girl who “proved” that she was a virgin on the first night with her husband, and the blood-stained sheets I accidentally got to see, I observed few clear expressions of celebration of virginity.

### **Cherno and Kombe’s *jebale***<sup>80</sup>

In January 1995 I went with Kaddie and Awa to a *jebale* in Serekunda. The wife of their “brother” Cherno was about to be transferred permanently to his family compound. Their *taka* had been performed more than a year ago and he had been borrowing (W: *aba*) his wife since then. They had a five month old son. Cherno, Kaddie and Awa were all Fulas who had grown up in a Wolof-speaking milieu in Sere Kunda. Kombe, the bride, was a Wolof.

While they were preparing for the *jebale* (*waatch tai*), a friend of Cherno asked him if the woman’s mother was responsible for providing everything the bride would need in her husband’s compound, as was the case with many Mandinkas. He said the wife’s mother was responsible, but expected others to contribute. He had contributed

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<sup>79</sup> On a visit to a recently married couple in Fulladu East, a whole calabash hung outside the bride’s door. I did not dare to ask whether the signification was as described by my Wolof teacher.

<sup>80</sup> As this transfer of the bride ritual was all performed in Wolof, all the italics here refer to Wolof words.

1000 Dalasis, but his wife's family considered the amount to be too small. He intended to add 500 Dalasis, when he got his next salary.

Kaddie was Chernó's *njekke*. According to Sommerfelt a *njekke* means *jekerr bu jiggen*, a female husband (Sommerfelt, 1999). The sisters and (parallel) cousins of the groom were the bride's female husbands. In this case Kaddie was an elder cousin of Chernó who was given the responsibility for organising parts of the ritual.

When we arrived at the groom's compound around 8 p.m., several men were sitting, talking and watching guests and passers by outside the gate of the compound. After greeting people we were seated in the sitting room with other women. We were shown the bedroom that was prepared for the bride. There was a bed with new linen and the incense (*churai*) was still burning, giving the room a good scent. Kaddie and Awa complimented the bed and said it was beautiful (*raffet*). We were served supper in the bride's living room and were talking about marriage. Isatou, a cousin of Kaddie and Awa, insisted that I should convert (*toub*) to Islam, so they could give me a similar celebration.

After nine o'clock, a group of people left to go and bring the bride from her family compound. Kaddie wanted to leave the task to Isatou, but Chernó's brother insisted that Kaddie should go. We brought new plastic sandals for the bride and her *pallale* and a straw mat (*bassan*) for the bride to sit on.

When we arrived at the bride's (*seet*) compound, many people, mostly youths and children but also a few men, were seated on mats in the yard in front of the house. Somebody was "drumming" by beating a kettle cover.

We entered a two-room flat filled with women. We were sitting in the first room while the bride was ritually washed. A woman, who seemed to be a bit confused, came into the room. She stopped in front of me, lifted up her malan and showed me her under malan a drawing of a man with a large erect penis. On the other side of the malan, the drawing showed a woman sitting naked on the floor, her legs spread out with her genitals exposed. The last drawing showed the couple having intercourse. Finally the woman showed me/us some black beads hanging down from her waist in three rows with some fringes at the tip. Kaddie smiled indulgently while Awa looked offended. One woman said that they had tried to cure her (*faj*). For a moment I thought this was a part of the ritual, teaching the bride about sex, but from the reactions of the other participants, it was more likely that this was not supposed to happen.

We went into the room closest to the backyard where the bride had been washed. Isatou gave money (*genso*) from all of us to one of the women representing the bride. Isatou gave 100 Dalasis from Kaddie, the “main *njekke*”, 50 Dalasis from Awa, 50 Dalasis from me, 10 Dalasis from herself and 20 Dalasis from another woman. The amounts were written down on a piece of paper.

When the *seet* had been ritually washed and dressed, she and her *pallale*, who also had taken a bath and was dressed in white, were sitting down on the floor in the inner room. The *pallale* was sitting to the right of the *seet* with their legs stretched forward. The *seet* wore white clothes and her head and shoulders were covered by a white piece of cloth with a black ribbon. The *seet*'s mother was called to come in. She was standing behind them and sang something like “*weital nga ma*” (you make me lonely) repeatedly.

The *njekke* was called to come and rise up the bride. Kaddie asked Isatou to do it for her. She lifted her and put her down again three times, until she finally left her standing. An elderly woman was standing in the doorway between the two rooms, holding up the curtain for the bride to creep under. The bride crept on her hands and knees from the inner room, through the doorway, turned and crept back again three times, until she finally rose. They told her that she should not touch anything, neither people nor furniture. The *pallale* came into the room, walking. They proceeded into the yard, first the woman carrying the basket with the bride's things went in front, behind her Kaddie, and there after came the bride followed by her *pallale*. Awa went behind.

Lots of people sat waiting in the yard. Mats were spread out on the ground; including the new mat that was brought for the bride. Advices were given, first by the bride's father, a friend of the groom's elder brother and finally by the bride's mother. The mother said nice things about both the bride and the groom. The bride was crying silently.

After speeches of advice and prayers were said, the bride and her company left for the groom's compound. The woman with the basket went first, after her Kaddie, the *njekka*, then the bride and finally her *pallale*. After them came Awa and Isatou. We all went by car to the groom's compound.

On arrival they entered the gate to the groom's compound in the same order. Inside the yard, the bride was put down and raised up three times before she remained

seated<sup>81</sup>. Also here advices, praises and prayers were said, mostly by the groom's elder brother and his father. The groom's father spent some time joking about Serers, with whom the Fulas have a joking relationship, and produced a humorous atmosphere. He praised his wife as he said, "I am not the owner of the compound" (*man duma borom kerrga*). One woman suggested that he was talking about his eldest son, but he said it was his children's mother (*yei am*). He said the work of the mother (*ligei yei am*) is the reason for all good things. He also referred to an old Wolof riddle by saying: "The cap, if it is not heavy it will remain long on the head of the owner" (*bahana - su oiof, dinaa yagga chi boppi borom am*)<sup>82</sup>. The riddle is about how a wife should be to her husband, light as a cap to its owner. If she were no burden to her husband, she would stay long in the marriage.

When the advices were finished both the bride and the *pallale* were raised again three times, before she was left standing. The time had come for the bride to enter the room where she was supposed to spend the night with her husband. The entrance was blocked from the inside by the bride's *jami* (pl. of *jam* – lit. : slaves, ritually father's sister's children). They said they would not open the door unless they got 100 Dalasis. The groom or his people were supposed to pay, but at that moment the groom was already locked inside the bedroom (*cabinet*), waiting with his male *pallale*. Somebody called his sister who gave them some money, but they were not satisfied. Isatou said they should just give them what they asked for, she had recently been to a *jebale* where 200 Dalasis were given. In another *jebale* just the day before, somebody had given 100D. One woman argued that they should rather have blocked the entrance of the main gate. Another woman said there were too many traditions (*barrena ada*). When Chernó's sister had given them 90 Dalasis, they opened the door.

The room was crowded. Both the bride and the *pallale* crept on their hands and feet. I couldn't see anything until they reached the bed. They were brought *lah*, and there was a competition between the spouses about who could get their hand in the *lah* first. If the husband was first, their first baby would be a boy. If the wife was first, the

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<sup>81</sup> Chernó's brother said sitting and raising up again three times symbolised that one should not easily leave the husband's compound in case of difficulties.

<sup>82</sup>The riddle is: *Lutax mbahana jagga chi boppi borom am? Oiof.*

first baby would be a girl. The groom won the competition. After the evening meal was served, we went home.

This *jebale* (W) and the *maañoo bitoo* I witnessed in 1995 dramatised several of the values related to marriages. Some of them were acted out through the ritual purification, the white clothes, the new items (shoes, mat etc.), covering of the bride and the creeping over thresholds, raising up and sitting down three times etc. Some of the meanings related to these performances were explicitly spelled out through utterances and speeches of advice presented below.

There are a number of similarities between the *nyaakaa* rituals and the transfer of the bride rituals. They can all be considered “rites of passage” and share the same structure of separation, liminality and reintegration. There are also a number of common issues that are highlighted both through verbal and non-verbal utterances. One of the most obvious non-verbal issues is use of the cover (*bitoo*). Firstly, the whole transfer of the bride ritual is literally called *maañoo bitoo*; “covering the bride” in Mandinka and *mur* (cover) in Wolof.<sup>83</sup> The brides are covered from when they are ritually purified to when they enter the husband’s room. In the *nyaakaa* ritual, the girls are covered and secluded throughout the ritual and until the day of coming out. The *ngasingolu* are also covered by dirt for a major part of the ritual. One of the suggested reasons for covering in the *ngasingolu* was their vulnerability. Brides are also considered in a vulnerable position and an easy pray to evil forces.

The cover is also metaphorically linked to looking down or bowing the head, which may signify respect and submission. According to my Wolof teacher, *gumbo du ruus*, literally: a blind person is not ashamed. This is because shame is in the eyes of a person. Avoiding to look into the eyes of somebody is because of shame. People who are shameless are said to *nyaaka joom* (W), *buka malo*, *ruusul darra*.

The cover also emphasises the value of *suturo*. Both men and women, young and old are expected to have *suturo*, but it is particularly emphasised that wives should show *suturo* towards the husband (see below).

The cover of the *maañoo* and *ngasingolu* is contrasted by the uncovered or revealing attitude of the *Kanyalengs*. *Kanyalengs* disclose what otherwise should be hidden and they are considered shameless.

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<sup>83</sup> In Wolof it is also called *jebale* – to hand over

The separation process for the brides starts with the ritual purification. Through the washing they become pure and new and dressed in white clothes. As with the *ngasingolu*, who remove their personal clothes and put on similar clothes (*assobi*) with the other *ngasingolu*, the brides also put on bridal clothes that are not similar to any other clothes. While the *ngasingolu* undress their *solima* identity, the brides undress their maiden (*sungkoto*, W: *jangha*) identity. The “uniforms” mark the liminal period, as all *ngansingolu* are similar, all brides become similar.

The bride’s mother stands behind her and says she is going to make her lonely, before she gets up and sits down three times and finally is ready to leave. The *ngasingolu* are carried out of town.

During the liminal period, the brides are not maidens and not yet wives, they have not yet embodied their position as married women.<sup>84</sup> When the woman leaves her parents compound and is transferred to her husband, she is no longer a part of her parents’ compound and has not yet been integrated into the husband’s compound. This transit is neither-nor and betwixt and between. For girls who leave their parents compound for the first time, this is a rather dramatic moment in their lives. They do not know how life will be as a wife and if a bride moves to her in-laws, she does not know how she will be treated. If the girl is a virgin and is supposed to have sex with her husband for the first time, she may also be scared and/or excited about what kind of experience that will be. From her married friends she will probably have anecdotal knowledge about their experience of the wedding night. In situations where virginity is at stake, the moment of reintegration may perhaps be when her in-laws and her family get to know that she is a virgin and this is celebrated. According to my Wolof teacher, girls are exempted from work in the husband’s compound for the first week. In such cases, the moment of reintegration may be the time when she starts working and thus enacts her position as a wife. If Weil (Weil, 1976) is right when he suggests that women are integrated into the husband’s village by bearing children to his patriline, the moment of re-integration is at the name giving (*kuŋ-lío*) of the first child. As I argue below, urban women do not depend on their husband’s patriline or bearing children for social integration, as there are a number of arenas for social integration and there are other children than birth children they can foster and mother.

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<sup>84</sup> When women have lived with their husband for a period before the *maañoo bitoo* is arranged, this is only true in a ritual sense.



As explained in the previous chapter, four values in young women were emphasised in the *nyaakaa* ritual. These were respect (*horomo*), secrecy/discretion (*suturo*), endurance (*sabati*) and obedience. These values were also stressed during rituals of *maañoo bitoo* and are supposed to be signified through daily interaction with the husband. Before I discuss married life in practice, I will discuss the most important qualities of marriages as presented during *maañoo bitoo* rituals.

### ***Respect***

Respect is one of the overall virtues in Gambian society and is an important concern in the upbringing of both boys and girls. A person showing respect to others and who respects herself signifies that she is well brought up (*kullu*). The initiands (*ngasingolu*) are trained to show respect towards others, and according to the female circumciser referred to above, the respect they learn to show to their parents is the same respect they later will show their husbands. Respect is shown in a number of ways and the example given by the circumciser is a form that could be labelled *teranga*:

In the morning, before he goes to work, she will heat water and give it to him and say “Uncle (*nijie*), hot water is here”. When he returns in the afternoon she will greet him: “Uncle, I greet you (W: *nijie nyu na la*)” and serve him good food.<sup>85</sup>

In this case, respect is shown by submissiveness and providing services for the husband, in other cases, respect is a version of politeness.

In the speech below, the bride’s mother talks to the audience on the day the bride is transferred to her husband’s house. In her speech, different forms of respect are mentioned. Several of the different words marked with \* are translated as “respect” although they actually have various different meanings.

*Cherno, bu mu dugge suma nek beh legi*

Cherno, since he entered my house until now

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<sup>85</sup> It is not clear why she will greet him by calling him mother’s brother. Actually several of my informants were married to their mother’s brothers. Mother’s brother belongs to the parental generation and should thus be addressed with due respect, still Radcliffe-Brown argues that the warmth of the maternal bonds may be extended to the mother’s brother, combining the maleness with maternal aspects (Radcliffe-Brown et al., 1979) Another woman discussed a similar situation and said that in the olden days women used to do courtesy 10 times in front of their husbands.

<i>mingi ma joch teranga*</i>	he gave me respect,
<i>wonuma xammadi*</i>	never showed me disrespect
<i>lolu la ma joch, lolu la nekee ak man</i>	That's what he gives me, when he is with me
<i>yakkar na ne dina mouna amee suma dom</i>	I hope he will be able to maintain my child.
<i>Legi , Kombe, so demee nanga seei</i>	Now, Kombe, when you go you must marry
<i>lolu la santa</i>	that's what I order you to [do],
<i>te nga japa sa goro*</i>	and respect your in-laws.
<i>japa sa njekke*</i>	Respect your husband's sister
<i>te topa sa maki jekerr</i>	and imitate your husband's elders,
<i>lolu la la santa</i>	that's what I order you.

*Jebale, Sere Kunda 1995*

I find it interesting to note that my Wolof teacher, who more than anybody knew the details of the Wolof language, translated *teranga*, *wonuma xammadi*, *japa sa goro* and *japa sa njekke* simply and uniformly as “respect”.

The bride's mother praised her son-in-law and his attitudes towards her. She emphasised that he always showed her hospitality and respect (here: *teranga*). The word *teranga* means both hospitality and to pay tribute to. It may also be used about holding a reception after returning from Mecca or generally to treat people in a certain way. The example above, of the wife who served food and did courtesy in front of her husband, could also be considered a form for *teranga*.

The bride's mother continued to praise her son-in-law and said that he never showed her disrespect or rude behaviour (here: *wonuma xammadi*). *Xammadi* means rude or disobedient, and a person who never shows any such bad manners is well behaved and respectful. As discussed in the previous chapter, children were believed to be rude until they went to *nyaakaa*, but they became obedient and respectful towards elders as a result of the *nyaakaa*.

The bride's mother praised her own daughter and ordered her to respect her husband and his family and take them as her own: “That's what I order you to [do], and respect your in-laws” (W: *lolu la la santa te nga japa sa goro*). To “*japa sa goro*” means to attach herself to the in-laws and do what they want her to do. *Japa* generally means to catch or keep well. It is often mentioned that women should take their in-laws as their parents, i.e. respect and obey them as if they were parents. This was also mentioned by the groom's brother in his speech to the bride:

“You are a child in the compound and you are a wife in the compound” (W: *dom nga chi kerrga, jabarr nga chi kerrga*).

Finally the bride’s mother also told the bride to follow or imitate (*topa*) her husband’s elder sister. This may imply both to do as she does as well as to associate with her.

All these speeches of advice deal with how a husband respects his mother-in-law and how a wife should respect the husband and his family. In the case study above, the bride and the groom would stay in his parents’ compound where also his sister and one of his brothers’ wives lived. When the bride’s mother orders her daughter to marry when she arrives at her husband’s compound, this must be interpreted as to fulfil the expectations/obligations in marital relations (to enact or perform the marriage so to speak).

Obedience is implicit in being respectful, but explicit in the last two lines quoted below. The bride’s mother’s said:

<i>Nyun Yalla joch na nyou awo bu bax chi kerrgi</i>	Allah gave us a good principal wife in the compound
<i>Nanga dox ndanka beh chi bunti kerrga Nanga topa sa jekerr toppa sa mboka jekerri</i>	You must walk slowly up to the compound gate you must follow your husband and follow your husband’s family
<i>lunyu la wax nga def’ko lunyu la terre nga baie ko</i>	What they say, do it What they tell you not to do you leave it

*Jebale, Sere Kunda 1995*

*Terre* means to order people not to do something in an imperative manner. This is a clear emphasis of the wife’s subordinate role in her husband’s compound. Not only the husband, but his parents, brother and sister as well as other relatives may expect her to “follow” (*topa*) them.

Among the speeches of advice at the transfer of the bride in the Mandinka compound, the Imam gave similar advice about respect. In his speech he also reminded the girl and the audience about the limitations of money.

<i>I ba yemari minna bungokono</i>	What your mother advised you in the house
<i>yemari te tambila wola</i>	there is no better advice than that
<i>Ye yamari minna wou le mu kodo ti</i>	the advice is about money
<i>Kodo mang mo muta bi</i>	Money cannot keep anyone today
<i>bari horomo</i>	but respect [can].
<i>I bi ka fo kila<sup>86</sup> barakoo<sup>87</sup></i>	They don't say the prophet is blessing
<i>I Kamma l ka fole ko</i>	For the sake of that you should say
<i>I Kila horomo</i>	the Prophet is respect
<i>I ka fo le ko, ali karamo horomo</i>	You should say, respect your teacher
<i>I ka fo le ko,</i>	You should say,
<i>I ba ning i fa horomo</i>	respect your mother and your father
<i>I se i ke horomo</i>	You should respect your husband
<i>I ye fango horomo</i>	respect yourself

*Maañoo Bitoo, Sere Kunda 1995*

The main message here seems to be that respect lasts longer and takes you further than money can do. Not only should teachers/guardians, parents and husband be respected, but one should respect oneself. To have self-respect means to take oneself seriously and behave according to the social norms. Girls who lack self-respect are “prostitute-like” and in general those who lack self-respect degrade themselves. In the previous chapter I showed how lack of self-respect had different implications for men than for women.

For a girl who was married for the first time it was a virtue (and sign of self-respect?) to be a virgin (*sungkoto*). There was also an expectation that a wife should not be going out and about too much, the advice below from the husband’s brother suggests that the woman should focus on the family and not have too many friends:

<i>Bull deglo waxi mbedda</i>	Don’t listen to gossip (lit. saying of the street)
<i>Bull set mbedda (i.e. bull set nit ni chi mbedda mi)</i>	Don’t bother about what others are doing (lit.: don’t look at the [people in] the street)
<i>Lula warr nga def ko</i>	Do what you should do

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<sup>86</sup> *Kila* means the one who is sent, a messenger. Muhammad is frequently referred to by this term as Allah’s messenger.

<sup>87</sup> *Baraka* is a type of blessing that may be earned by somebody’s good deeds. If a mother is hard working and a good woman, her children will be blessed (*Bama barako*)

<i>Lula warrul nga bail ko</i>	Leave what you should not do
<i>Harit chi sei moi don sa harit</i>	The friend in your marriage is your husband
<i>Jiggen su barre harit gudda tanka</i>	Women, if they have many friends they have “long legs” (i.e. walking about too much)
<i>Lu waxtan barre barre so chi waxhul degga du werr</i>	In too much talking, if one does not say the truth, it will not be good

Jebale Sere Kunda 1995

According to the husband’s brother, the wife should not have too many friends, don’t gossip too much and have the husband as a friend in the marriage. Walking about too much (W: *godda tanka*) is not good. In a *taka* in 1993, the groom was also advised against walking about too much. Although it is only women who risk a bad reputation by walking about too much, it seems important for everybody to keep a balance between being sociable and talking nonsense.<sup>88</sup> Avoiding gossip and sticking to the husband is also a part of *suturo*, and keeping the matters of the house inside.

### ***Discretion /privacy***

During the *nyaakaa* rituals as well as during the *maañoo bitoo* rituals, *suturo* is emphasised. There is a strong ideology that matters of the house should be secret or covered (*suturo*); the husband’s behaviour is not supposed to be revealed in public. Whether he does good things or bad things, if he is generous or stingy, kind or wicked, the wife should not disclose this to others. In rituals where the bride is transferred to the husband’s compound, *suturo* is signified by the head-cover of the bride and both in Wolof and Mandinka the transfer ritual is called “covering the bride” (*mur/ manyo bitoo*). The rituals also had several sequences where both the bride and those who represented the groom were given advice about *suturo*.

The groom’s brother advised his new sister-in-law about *suturo* (W: *sutura*):

<i>Sei advice la, sei ndigal la</i>	Marriage is an advice; it is an order
<i>Su gisee yen yei set bi</i>	When you see the mother of the bride
<i>you la wax, ” nyu mur la” ,</i>	say to you, “we cover you” ,
<i>jangal, sei moi sutura</i>	learn that marriage is <i>sutura</i>
<i>nga wara am sutura</i>	You should have <i>sutura</i>

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<sup>88</sup> Having many social relations implying that many people have social obligations towards you, to “have people” (w: *am nit*) is considered good. See also Bledsoe’s concept of “wealth in people” (Bledsoe, 1980b)

*ni sa muruai bi amee sutura*

like your cover has *sutura*

*Jebale, Sere Kunda 1995*

According to this explanation, the cover which is worn by the bride at the day of transfer signifies the *sutura* she is supposed to exercise in her marriage.

Advice from the Mandinka father to his daughter exemplifies this principle, although he does not mention the word *suturo*:

*Ni ke ye mafe songo ming di la*

*I sa a sang fengolu la*

*Futuo munne ka tinya?*

*Tanyoo jawoo*

*I se do je a ye ala korrida*

*be mafe songo ta,*

*aye a la sinsingo fandi*

*asa fo ko nke le ye mafe songo dinna*

*asa tara tonyante*

*woye futu jamma tinyaa nying banko kang*

*ni ke ye ming di la*

*wou muta aning Baraka*

When your husband gives you “fish money”  
you shall buy things with that.

Marriage, what spoils it?

Bad people you move with

You will see some who from their compound  
fish money collected,

she will fill her basket

she will say my husband gave me fish money  
whereas it is not true

that spoils many marriages in this country

what your husband gives you

you hold it with blessing

*Maañoo bitoo, Sere Kunda 1995*

Husbands are expected to give their wives “fish money” (*mafe songo*) to buy vegetables, fish and other ingredients necessary to make lunch and supper. Some men, who have a little income or are unemployed, are unable to give their wife a sufficient amount of money. Women often spend their own money supplementing the little they get from their husbands and some are providing the whole amount themselves. If the husband contributes little or nothing, it creates a lot of tension between the spouses. Still, if the wife has *suturo* she will not talk to others about this problem, unless she has to. Rosander refers to a legend about how Mam Diarra Boussou, the mother of Sheik Amadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism, exercised *sutura* (Rosander 1998: 173). When her husband gave her insufficient money to feed the family, she went to a Fula woman outside the village and bought milk and millet, paying every day with a pearl from her necklace. She did not tell anybody until her mother

one day asked what had happened to the necklace. When she explained what had happened, the mother was so impressed by her daughter's good behaviour that she bought it back from the Fula woman and gave it to her daughter as a gift (ibid.)

When a husband does not provide sufficient amounts of money and the wife must solve the problem in silence it also requires a good deal of patience and ability to bear.

### ***Endurance (sabati/sabaro)***

According to Wittrup, *munya* (to bear, to be patient, to endure) is significant in characterizing the female role from birth to grave (Wittrup, 1990: 121). The concept *sabati/sabaro* also means to endure (as discussed in chapter 1).

The father of the brides advised them to be patient (*sabarro*) with their husbands:

<i>Mbe ndingolu yamarila sabarro la</i>	I am advising my children to be patient
<i>I kelu ye</i>	with their husbands
<i>ko I balu sabarrita nyaming</i>	as their mothers were patient

*Maañoo Bitoo, Sere Kunda 1994*

The mother of a Wolof bride advised her daughter:

<i>Lu mu la joch nga jappa ko</i>	Whatsoever he gives you only, accept it
<i>su de bu rei te bu ko janni</i>	If it is a penny <sup>89</sup> don't belittle him
<i>bull ko wax wax bu nahaddi</i>	don't say anything unpleasant/harsh to him
<i>sei nehoul</i>	marriage is not sweet

*Jebale, Sere Kunda 1995*

Patience is also necessary to bear the hard work many wives have to do. The groom's brother said to the bride:

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<sup>89</sup> *Bu rei* (lit: big) refers to a penny, a coin that was big, but was of little economic value.

<i>Morso bu nyul bi take sa boppa bi</i>	The black cloth tied to your head
<i>moi sa ligei</i>	is your work.
<i>nanga farlu ligei</i>	You should be quick to do your work.
<i>taka sa diga</i>	Tie your waist
<i>te Yalla tax</i>	because of Allah.
<i>so gisee nyu indil la tog</i>	When you see us bring you to sit
<i>mel ni ekati jenat nyetti yon</i>	and raise you up again three times
<i>lolu mandarr la, moi sei bu naharri</i>	it is honour; it is difficulties of marriage.
<i>bull merr merrlu</i>	Don't get angry

*Jebale, Sere Kunda 1995*

The latter part of the verse refers to a part of the ritual where the bride enters the husband's compound and is made to sit and rise up again three times until she is finally seated. According to the groom's brother, these acts signify the difficulties in marriage and the patience that it is necessary to have in order remain in the marriage. In the bride's mother's advice above, she also said that marriage is not sweet (*sei nehoul*).

The bride is reminded that hard work is a virtue for Gambian women. According to Ames:

Also, by hard work a woman attains favor for herself and her children from her husband, and work competition between co-wives is not uncommon. Hard work is part of the general Wolof ideal of good behavior – hard work, piety, and respect for one's elders. There is a Wolof proverb, “Dust on the feet is better than dust on the buttocks” (*pondəp tanka mo ɣɛn pondəp tat*). (Ames, 1955: 398, italics original).

According to the speeches of advice above, it becomes clear that a wife should be respectful, obedient, and patient and have *sutura* (secrecy, discretion). She should also bear the hard work of marriage without anger. There is less emphasis is on the behaviour of the groom, but if the groom is present during *taka*, speeches of advice may be addressed to him as well. During the *maañoo bitoo* the bride's mother's brother advised the representatives of the groom to take proper care of the girl:



*Ning i ko i a muta ku  
ma fo ko ya mu tulo la  
ning a ye sillo bula  
I se a londi sillo kang  
bari kana a muta ko jongo  
ali sa long ko mo le ye a wulu  
kodo ning dingo  
mu nung kono tio leti  
ni a sabba na jio se bo*

When you are told to keep her well  
we don't say grease her with oil.  
If she leaves the road  
you should put her back on the road  
but don't keep her as a slave,  
you should know that a person<sup>90</sup> has borne  
her.  
Money and child  
is hair inside the nose  
when you pull it tears will come

*Maañoo Bitoo, Sere Kunda 1995*

Although the husband is told to take good care of his wife, he is advised not to do everything she asks for uncritically. To grease her with oil is interpreted as to do whatever she likes, whether it is right or not. The mother's brother sees the dangers of abuse of obedient women. A good wife should do whatever the husband tells her to do, and if he takes the opportunity to ask her to do everything, she will be just like a slave.

The dangers of men who take advantage of women's ability to endure, and the need to balance rights to autonomy *versus* submission becomes an issue in the case below. In a court case from The Gambia in 2007, a woman was sentenced to death because she had killed her husband, allegedly because she feared that he planned to get another wife (Ceesay, 2007). It was also argued that the man had psychologically abused her. In the defence of the alleged murderer, her lawyer Amie Joof Conteh evaluated the difficulties of being married and women's ability to handle them:

...counsel Amie Joof Conteh said Madam Tabara Samba is a 42 year old who represents the voice of every woman in marriage, who are at some point provoked, beaten and abused in their matrimonial homes. Counsel Joof Conteh said some women are strong enough to endure the hardships they encounter while others are weak. "Tabara Samba is among the weak ones who retaliated". Mrs Joof Conteh pointed out that no woman has an intention to go into marriage to kill her spouse. She noted that

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<sup>90</sup> *Mo* may be translated both to be a human being or a person, depending on context.

the court knows without doubt that the accused was remorseful (sic) throughout the trial. “What has happened, has happened. We are urging on the most compassionate part of the court to have mercy on her. She was a devoted wife who mothered three sons all serving in the service.” A bad mother would not be able to raise such number of children in marriage. No marriage is perfect, no man is perfect and no woman is perfect. We urged the court to convict her with mercy,” said Mrs Conteh. (Ceesay, 2007: no page numbers)

The woman was sentenced to death and the judge pronounced the verdict:

Magistrate Jammeh pronounced the verdict, noting that it was difficult for him to deliver the judgment in the matter. He said he had observed the accused throughout the trial, that she had shown remorse but that her actions are inhuman. “Your actions were deplorable, disgraceful, dishonourable, distressing and unpity. You are a deceitful personality who can create nightmares for men. My hands are tied. I hereby convict and sentence you to death in line with section 18-2 of the Constitution of The Gambia” said Magistrate Jammeh (Ceesay, 2007: no page numbers).

Bubacarr Sankanu, a film producer, argued in *The Gambia Echo*:

I assume Tabara Samba is one of those countless women in our society who are only trained to cry and bear the terrors of their wayward husbands. Ignorance of the Law or frustration is unfortunately no excuse for one to take the Law into one’s hand. She stands to be corrected and helped but not killed. (Sankanu, 2007)

Magistrate Jammeh’s statement that she was a “deceitful personality who can create nightmares for men” can be taken to represent men’s fear of women who are unable to bear and be submissive, but who start to fight back and retaliate. One could argue that Jammeh’s expression represents male interests in a discourse about appropriately behaving wives and women. If a husband cannot count on his wife’s ability to bear suffering, it will give him nightmares.

Conteh refers to the abilities of Tabara Samba to raise children; if she was a bad mother she would not have been able to raise three sons. It is not very clear what she wants to

argue, but it can be interpreted as an argument that the court should have mercy with her, since her ability to raise three sons is after all a proof that she cannot be a bad person. She has shown that she has contributed as a wife should with bearing and raising children.

The arguments in this court case are introduced here to show how the value of endurance seems to be shared by a number of the dominant discourses. Endurance is a central issue for *nyaakaa* rituals as well as in *maañoo bitoo* and it was a shared value at the base of the court case. Below, I argue that although enduring women seems to be a construction of hegemonic status, it is disputed. The dispute is not whether endurance is a virtue, but how far women should enact endurance and what should be reasonable expectations from husbands. I argue that *suturo*, *sabati* and obedience are not totally embodied in a process of subjection, but rather enacted on a contractual basis in marriage. A husband who fulfils his part of the marital contract seems to have more legitimate claims in expecting such behaviour from his wives. If he fully supports his wife economically (W: *dunda*), takes care of her and her children both by presence and attention (*topotoo*) and provides regular sex, he may expect more secrecy, patience, obedience and care from his wives.

### ***Marriages in everyday lives***

When mutual expectations between spouses fail, the spouses often interpret it differently. Schroeder (1996) presents men in a rural area of The Gambia who provide insufficient support for their wives, complaining that their wives spend too much time in their vegetable gardens. While the lack of economic support from their husbands causes the women to depend on income from growing vegetables, the husbands rather blame the women for not fulfilling their marital duties towards them. The men employ marital metaphors in their complaints, to say that their wives are not at home, they express it as they have “gone to their husband’s” (*a taata a ke ya*). This refers to her neglect of marital responsibilities of staying close to her husband and providing services for him. Schroeder quotes the explanation of one of the gardener’s husband’s as follows:

“A wife is brought home to fulfill her obligations to her husband. She should be around her husband all the time to render such services. For the case of the garden

work, women are away from home almost the whole day. They do not perform what is required of them”. (Gardener's husband, quoted in Schroeder, 1996: 88).<sup>91</sup>

Women on the other hand, interpreted the phrase differently and emphasised the importance of garden earnings in meeting the household budgetary obligations. Their gardens replaced their husbands as the main source of cash for subsistence and other consumption needs (Schroeder, 1996).

Several of my informants grew vegetable gardens for exactly the same reason and some of them had as many as five different plots in order to make ends meet. Their potential “failure” to do services for their husband was thus an effect of the husband’s “failure” to provide for them properly. The same metaphor was also applied by a Wolof woman about her sewing machine. Due to fertility problems she had, after three marriages, decided to remain divorced and referred to her sewing machine as her husband (W: *suma jekker la*), implying that it was her main source of income.

Marital difficulties often occur when the husband does not fulfil his part of the contract. One such example came up while we were joking about relationships to our husbands.

In a name-giving ritual Mai Muna said she would definitely not kiss her husband when she got home, since she had argued with him about money in the morning. She had told her son to ask his father to buy sugar for the porridge. He had bought only one cup, and the children had used it all and left nothing for her. When she complained to him that he had bought nothing for her, he replied that he had only money for one cup of sugar since he had given all his money to the children for their school lunch. The reason why he had so little money was that he had been sick for two days. She told him that he was not the only person, who had been sick, she had been ill for two weeks. The whole last week he did not give her money to go to the market (W:*ndewal*). She said she had tried to find money, even if she was sick. She could not just sit and watch that the children had nothing to eat. By implication she blamed the husband for using his illness as an excuse for not making any efforts to provide for his family.

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<sup>91</sup> At first, it seems to refer to infidelity, but as far as the vegetable gardens are husbands rather than lovers, it refers to an unclear legitimacy, since husbands are legal, but only one at a time.

In cases where the husband's contributions were perceived as too small, the wife was brought into a conflict between the principle of *suturo* and the need to take care of the children's needs. For the sake of the children, she would feel obliged to go to others and ask for help and thus reveal the husband's lacking contributions.

In the interviews for this research, most married women reported that the husband paid for the house. Among the presently married women, 12 of the 31 women lived in a compound owned by their family, their husband or his family or their children. In these cases they did not need to worry about rent and the costs involved were relatively small.<sup>92</sup> For those who rented from strangers, their husbands generally paid the rent. The exceptions were husbands who had gone on labour migration, although some of them sent money, but at times on an irregular basis.

The staple food for urban Gambians is rice. Although some got millet from family members who were farming "upriver", most men with wage labour bought a bag of rice at the end of every month when they got their salary. Only three of the 27 presently married women at the time of the interview said they were the ones to buy the rice.

One husband living in Bakau complained that every end of month, when he got his salary as a security guard, he bought a bag of rice for each of his three wives and then the money was finished. He jokingly said it was not strange that he had to beg his wife for a few Dalasis to buy cigarettes. The consequence was that his contributions stopped there. All his wives paid rent for each their two rooms with the income they got from selling at the market. He had no money to contribute to "fish money", school fees or clothes for the children.

In many marriages, husbands' insufficient economic support was one of the major sources of conflicts. As most women go to the market every day to buy what is needed for lunch and supper, they expected to get an amount for this (*mafe songo*). On several occasions I went with women to the market and wrote down the costs of all the ingredients. In 1995 I estimated the necessary amount to cook a typical dish (W: *stew*) with fish for ten people for lunch and supper to be at least 25 Dalasis a day. Most of my informants' husbands did not earn much

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<sup>92</sup> These were compound tax and electricity and water bills for those who had these installed in their compounds. Several of my informants had no electricity in their compounds and depended on water from wells and public pumps. In the middle of the 1990s more and more people in Bakau got water and electricity inside the compound. Still, in 2007, several of my informants could not afford this and had to queue up by the public taps.

more than 25 Dalasis a day. The task of providing for a large family with one income was thus doomed to fail. The amount the husbands gave was often too small and women choose to add some of their own money or vegetables. With one exception all the women interviewed said they received between 10 and 25 Dalasis a day from their husbands.<sup>93</sup> Women married to the same man sometimes reported different amounts. This could be due to actual variations in the amounts given or it could be differences in how the wives wished to represent their husbands and their contributions.

It is also likely that women in polygamous units added their own money to compete with their co-wives about making the best meals. Women were also said to put aside the best food for their husbands to please them.

In my interviews, 14 of the 31 women said the husband provided money to go to the market (*ndewal W*). One woman who was divorced and lived in their family compound said the brothers provided *ndewal*. They gave *ndewal* to their wives the days they were cooking. A Wolof woman said her husband and her brother provided *ndewal*. When she was cooking, her husband gave the money, when the brother's wife cooked the brother paid. Five women paid *ndewal* themselves or shared the cost with their co-wife.

With failure of economic support, and also lack of visits from husbands, I got the impression that the willingness to cover up for the husband, patience and obedience were at risk. As mentioned by the woman above, in the argument over buying sugar, women could not just sit and watch when the children have nothing to eat. It does not mean that husbands did not care about their children, but some of them are not present (on labour migration or with other wives) and would not be aware of the day-to-day needs of their children. In other cases their lacking contributions were covered by contributions from their wives, and the children would not suffer, only the wives.

## ***Polygamy***

Madhavan and Bledsoe (2001) suggest that in studies of management of fertility within the contexts of polygynous households, it seems as a woman's success in pacing her childbearing, using contraception, and finally "retiring" from childbearing, depends not only on her own fertility status, but also on other co-resident women. There may be competition not only between co-wives, but also with the husband's brothers' wives, as well as other women of

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<sup>93</sup> During my interviews, a wife of a Senegalese fisherman reported to being given 125 Dalasis every day.

child bearing age in the compound. Below I will discuss polygamy as it is perceived and experienced by informants.

Co-wives who stay in the same compound usually cook two days each, mostly the same days as the husband sleeps with them. When co-wives live far from each other, the husband sometimes spend one week at a time with each of his wives and their children. Wives may each have their room in a two-room flat, leaving them few secrets and little privacy. Others may each have their room in larger family houses or each have their own flat in the same compound. Some wives have their own flats or even houses far from each other. The “women’s houses” (*muso bungo*) where all the women lived together, and wives visited their husbands’ huts in turn (Wittrup, 1990), were rare in the urban area, and none of my informants lived in a *muso bungo* at the time of the fieldwork.<sup>94</sup>

The regulations for how “taking turns” (*singfahlo*) was organised had to be followed strictly, or conflicts would break out. Even a husband’s little after-lunch-nap on the “wrong wife’s” bed, caused an outbreak of anger from the wife the man was supposed to “take turns with” and who was cooking that day.

Most of the women, both those I interviewed and others, seem to accept polygamy as a tradition (*ado*), and did not criticise the institution as such. What was criticised was individuals’ failure to behave as expected in their roles as co-wives or husbands.

One Mandinka woman who lived in the same house as three of her four co-wives, said: “Having co-wives is nothing but harmonious (*dia dorong*, lit.: only sweet) – laughing and dancing only”.

The woman laughed and wondered why I asked while I knew everything already. When I interviewed the youngest wife of the same husband, she said:

Sometimes it is difficult to have co-wives, other times it is not. It is left to the husband. If it is difficult, it is because of the husband. The husband can cause trouble by telling lies, and he may go to the other wives telling lies. It would have been easier if each wife had her own compound, but the husband will not have that [much] money.

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<sup>94</sup> Several of my informants came from rural areas where *muso bungo* was common, and when we went to visit “up-river”, the woman I travelled with spent the night in the *muso bungo* with her mother-in-law.

A Mandinka woman who lived in the same house as her co-wife said it was very difficult (*kolleyata dorong* lit.: only difficult), they had to compromise and understand each other. The co-wife on the other hand, said it was no problem to have a co-wife.

The problem of representation makes it difficult to judge whether they had different ideologies about polygamy or whether they actually had different experiences. As in the case below, two co-wives had a friendly relationship while the third one felt shut out:

The wife who felt shut out blamed her eldest co-wife for her difficulties. The eldest of the wives had a job and when she had money she bought things for herself and for the other co-wife, but never for the third one. When there was a name-giving they would inform her, but always in the last minute. Often they had already made dresses from similar clothes (*assobi*), but had never included her. Still, she tried to share what she had with both of them. When her son had died and they arranged a memorial ceremony (W: *sarah*) for him one week after, I noticed that she shared the 25 Dalasis I gave her with both her co-wives and her husband. While the co-wives got 5 Dalasis each, the husband got 10 Dalasis. Her action signified generosity and attempts to compromise with her co-wives.

I asked one Fula woman, who lived in a monogamous relationship, whether she wanted to have a co-wife. She replied:

If Allah gives one, it is good, we women, you know women...you should have somebody who could help you, with cooking, washing clothes and the like. If you have a maid it's good, if you have a co-wife it is good, nobody refuses to have a co-wife...my husband he does not accept. One wife is a problem [he says], two wives even more.<sup>95</sup>

A Fula woman had been married for 22 years before she got her first co-wife. Just recently, one month before the interview, she got her second co-wife. I asked if she liked having a co-wife.

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<sup>95</sup> I interpret this as the husband considers wives as an economic problem; none of the Gambian women I knew was likely to see themselves as a problem to their husband.



O: Eh, co-wife, that's our custom (W: *chossan*) because our mothers they met it (W: *dein ko feka*), thus I also cannot refuse/avoid (W: *banj*) it.

I: Is it good for you?

O: Ah, the co-wife. No. It's bad to me. The reason why it is bad for me is that I like her (W: *demma ko bugga*), but she does not want me. We cannot be united (W: *moununyu neka bena*).

I: If it she was a nice woman, would it not have been a problem to you to have a co-wife?

O: If I have, I give (the co-wife) because I am the eldest in the compound. If I buy something for myself, I buy something for her; I do not consider that she does not like me. I see what is between my husband and me only. He took me when I was a child (12) he trained me (W: *yarr ma*), I do not know anybody else, it is him I know.

I: Now it is two days, two days...?

O: Yes

I: The one who is taking turns in cooking two days, is also taking turns in spending the night?

O: Yes

One Wolof woman who was living in a monogamous union was asked whether she wanted a co-wife:

She said, laughing, "I don't want, I don't want". I said, "I don't want either". She said, "You don't want, and you ask me whether I want!". I said, "You know I ask many people who say that it is good to have co-wife, especially among the Mandinkas". She said, "The work is much, they have rice fields (*faro*), if she cooks, you will hurry to your work... that's why". I asked her whether Wolof take better care of their wives and give them money. She replied that the Wolofs take good care of their wives, but the Mandinkas, she did not know anything about their business. Then I asked the mother who was sitting there listening to us whether she ever had a co-wife. She used to have four co-wives. When I asked her, she said it was only good, they were all unified. I was wondering whether they ever quarrelled or fought. She said that, "We kids (W: *nyun haley*) – if you saw us you would think we had same father and mother".

Another Wolof woman who had a co-wife said “It’s good, they give her the name co-wife (W: *dein ko tudde touri woje*), but she tries to be a sister (of the same mother) (W: *dom i ndei*).”

One Fula woman who was presently living in a monogamous relationship had had two co-wives in her first marriage. She said that it was good as it was there (in her first marriage). They always spoke with “one voice” (W: *bena bat*). I asked whether there were any quarrels and she replied that there were no quarrels at all. She also said that there would be no problem to her if her husband found another wife.

One Wolof woman said she had never had a husband with two wives, and she did not want to have. She said she was very jealous (W: *suma hol bahoul* lit: my heart is bad). One younger sister and a younger brother have married *toubabs*. She thought that would have been good for her, since *toubabs* marry only one. Her husband had girlfriends. Some of them came all the way to the compound and sent a child to ask for him. Once she held the child and beat it.

One of the advantages with having a co- wife was sharing the work-load. With a co-wife in the same compound, they normally cooked in turns. When a co-wife cooked, the other wives were free to do other tasks. Without a co-wife, women had to wait for their own daughters or daughters-in-law to assist them or take over. Disadvantages were jealousy, competition and at times even fear that a co-wife could wilfully ruin one’s fertility or obstruct childbirth. In a part of my interviews dealing with infertility, one of the Fula women was convinced that a co-wife could cause infertility and even kill with the help of a marabout:

I: Could it (infertility) be the work of a marabout?

F: You have those who do it. If you have a co-wife (W: *woja*), she will “do work” (W: *ligeyi*) “...Work on my co-wife so she will not have a child!” (i.e. she tells the healer to do the work, see chapter five) The first wife can have a child, but the co-wife, if she doesn’t have, it’s the first wife’s work, and the first wife is the reason why she does not have a child. If you see she is afraid and sick, it’s her co-wife who worked it. That’s why, for us women, co-wife is bad. Co-wife, she can do something for you (*moun na la defarr darra*); if you eat it, you will die. You don’t know what kills you, but she kills you. You eat poison.... (She) makes it in the food, your stomach will pain you. You think your stomach is paining you, but she made it in your food, you become sick and die.

One Mandinka woman, who all the time gave the impression that she had a very friendly relationship with the husband's first wife, said that when she went to the hospital to give birth, she sneaked out of the house, afraid that her co-wife would insist on following her to the hospital. It is believed that the co-wife may try to put some medicine in your wrapper (*fano*) to cause a difficult birth.

Co-wives are suspected of using the marabouts in different ways, including to make the husband prefer them, spend more time with them or be more generous to them.

One woman, whose husband spent most of the time with his co-wife living about 5 kilometres away, consulted a marabout (*moro*) to find out the reason why he rarely visited her. The marabout found that her co-wife had been to another marabout to do work on the husband for him to spend his time with her. This work made the husband unable to go to the wife in Bakau, even if he wished to do so. The marabout had offered to do counter work on the husband, but that would cost her 500 Dalasis. She had refused the offer. She told me that she could not spend 500 Dalasis on the marabout when she hardly had enough money to give her children food.

Few of the responses to questions about polygamy were critical of the institution as such, but more were critical towards concrete persons who were wicked or unfair. One exception was a Wolof man living in Sere Kunda. He said the condition for polygamy, according to the *Qur'an* was that the husband treated his wives justly. He knew that it would be impossible to create a situation where both the wives and their children would perceive the distribution of his time and resources as just. Even if the wives lived separately, there would be situations where children would be sent with messages to the father when he took turns in the other wife's house. Then the child would report to its mother how the other wife lived and talk about what she had. He thus found the whole premise for polygamy impossible.

The discussions about polygamy visualised some of the aspects that could be considered crucial to all kinds of marriages. Firstly much was focused on getting one's fair share of attention (the husband's time) as well as economic support. Secondly, fertility seemed to be at stake. It even seemed as though the relationship between co-wives became much more critical than the relationship with the husband. Wives living together could be very close and be like sisters, or be each other's worst enemies. Wives could give each other money, clothes or even children. They were also cooking for each other as well as for each

other's children. Co-wives who did not live together and had little interaction with each other were supposed to go on visits to each other on special occasions.

### **Chapter summary**

Above I have discussed three main aspects of marriages; the rituals, everyday married life and polygamy and its consequences. In discussion of the rituals I emphasised the content of transfer of the bride ritual with its aspect of rites of passage and a focus on the advisory speeches. Also the possible interpretations of the marital transactions were discussed. When a marriage was contracted, a series of relatively regulated transactions took place.

While most of the transactions could be classified as gifts, the bride wealth had aspects of payment. It is not clear, however, whether the bride wealth should be seen as compensation to the woman's family for her reproductive capacities. It might as well be interpreted as an investment in a relationship with the bride's family, with whom they would share rights and responsibilities towards future children from the marital union. In spite that juridical, children belong to the father, *de facto* – children also belong to the mother and her kin. As I show in the next chapter, principles of belonging was rather complex with juridical, ontological and emotional aspects.

In transfer of the bride rituals, a number of qualities and expectations towards the spouses were emphasised. For the bride, several of the qualities cultivated in the *nyaakaa* initiation ritual were also emphasised in the speeches of advice. These were qualities such as being respectful, able to endure and secretive/discrete. In the case of men, they were praised for being respectful and encouraged to take proper care of the bride and keep her on the right path. Brides were warned that marriages were not easy but rather implied hard work. They were encouraged to accept "anything" from the husband without belittling him. One could argue that there was lot of realism in the speeches of advice in the sense that spouses were warned about the difficulties of married life. Surprisingly little of the speeches referred directly to matters of fertility and having children. What seemed to go without saying was that it was expected that they would have children in the marriage.

The transfer of the bride ritual could be seen as a rite of passage, where the girl or woman became transferred into a wife. The transfer of the bride ritual contained elements that signified separation from her own family, liminality and reintegration into the husband's family. The liminal phase was the period after she had become purified through ritual

washing and dressing in white clothes and until she was (re)integrated into her husband's family.

In everyday lives, both wives and husbands were supposed to fulfil their marital obligations. In some of the observed cases, men failed to spend time equally with each wife and several men also failed to provide properly for their wives. In such cases women felt obliged to find ways of supporting themselves and their children. To my knowledge, none of their husbands actually complained that they worked hard to earn money, as was the case among the vegetable growers' husbands observed by Schroeder.

Further more polygamous unions made the relationships between husband and wives complex units, at times too complex to become decision making units. In some cases wives lived together, even in the same flat, in other cases the wives lived apart and hardly knew each other. As becomes clear in subsequent chapters, decision making units more often were individual men and woman than conjugal couples.

Women have ambivalent relationships to co-wives. While some were positive, others complained about their co-wives or how the husband treated his wives unfairly. The critique was however, rarely against the polygamous institution as such, but rather towards individuals who had failed to behave as they should (be it an unfair husband, wicked co-wife or a marabout that has done work on behalf of one of the wives).

The ritual and non-ritual representations of marriages were differing in the sense that the idealised married behaviour was difficult to live up to. For men it was difficult because they often were unable to provide for their wives as they should do, and for women, it became difficult to be endure and being secretive when they had to ask others for economic support.

In the next chapter we see how all these issues expands when care for children become highlighted. The social organisation of care for children intensifies interactions and expand and activate the networks already implied in kinship and the marital union.



## **Part II Social organisation of child care and the ontology of belonging**





Part One showed the process whereby girls were made into women and wives through cultivation of appropriate female qualities and marriage. This part deals with the different ways married women become mothers and their roles in social organisation of child care. As child fostering is widespread, there are several ways of becoming a mother. I explore the relative importance of relatedness based on substance/materiality (relations of blood, milk and birth) *versus* relations built on practical parenting through fostering. It could be assumed that as far as fostering makes motherhood possible, independent of individual fertility, infertility would have been less problematic than if infertility deprived women of motherhood. Still, with several foster children, infertile women continued to try to have their own birth child. Some possible explanations are suggested. Further more, focus on urban social organisation of residence and family units, fostering and women's position within these practices, challenges former, mainly rural studies of Gambian kinship. Recent approaches to the study of kinship, discussed in the introduction, ask for more focus on the production of kinship through practices that to varying degrees emphasises inherited and new substances (sharing food) and social practices, and also argue that kinship is one of several ways relatedness and belonging are produced. I find Howell's (2006) concept of "kinning" useful, and apply the concept broader than she suggests; also covering production and strengthening relations already defined as kinship. As I return to below, there are a number of possible combinations of different "kinning" principles, where some emphasise substance and others emphasise practical care.

Social organisation of families as child care units is likely to have implications for family planning and fertility management. The complex composition of child care units in situations with polygamy, child fostering, labour migration and extensive economic co-operation between individuals and kin groups requires a new look at the usefulness of concepts such as household and family. Rather than using households, I use the concept of residence units. The dependency between residence units is explored and illustrated through the extended cases. I suggest a dynamic view of families as ego-based units of "activated kin". This activation of kin or "kinning" implies that some relations are emphasised or de-emphasised over time.

Finally in this part, I show the dynamics of child fostering, including type of relations between birth parents and foster parents as well as reasons given for transfer. Child fostering is well integrated into the kinship system and the process of giving children to others contributes to the process of "kinning" not only between foster parents and the foster children, but between birth and fosterparents.



## Chapter 3 Kinship and social organisation of child care

<i>Kodo ning dingo</i>	Money and children
<i>mu nung kono tio leti</i>	Are hair inside the nose
<i>Ni a sabba na jio se bo</i>	When you pull it tears will come
	Advice given during transfer of a bride to her husband, Sere Kunda January 1995

The verse above is a reminder about the sensitivity and importance attached to matters of children and money. Both are valuables to be taken care of and safeguarded. But how does a child assume the status as “nose hair”, or more generally, how do Gambians become kin? In this chapter I discuss motherhood and the social organisation child care as this is supposed to have implications for the management of fertility. I start with a presentation of the various principles of making kin and move to the social organisation of child care. Through three extended cases I discuss the dynamics of such units and consequences for motherhood, kinship and possibilities for planning families through management of fertility.

### Processes of making kin

It has been argued that African kinship and social identity have been preoccupied with biological or corporal relations (Carsten, 1995). In a discussion about various forms of relatedness, Carsten (1995: 224) refers to Fox (1987: 174) who argues that there is a clear contrast between African and Austronesian ways of producing identities. Fox argues that in the Austronesian world social identity is not given at birth, while the classical monographs about Africa portray identity as defined at birth by a structural position within a lineage (Carsten, 1995: 224). Carsten emphasises Fox’s notion of fluidity of identities in Austronesia and argues that among the Langkawi (Malay), it is not only the newborn children’s identities that are considered as unfixed, but this fluidity of identity continues to a remarkable degree into adulthood.

In Langkwawi birth itself merely begins the process of becoming a person, a process that continues with feeding and living together in houses. Food creates both persons in a physical sense and the substance – blood – by which they are related to each other. Personhood, relatedness, and feeding are intimately connected. To unravel these connections it is necessary to understand the nature and mutability of substance and the way conception, birth, living in houses, and death are the theme of substance (Carsten, 1995: 224).

Carsten takes Fox (1987) and Schneider (1984) as her point of departure when she questions the assumption that social aspects of a relationship can be separated from, or added to a “biological substratum”. She argues that such a perspective is part of indigenous Western ideas as well as analysis in kinship. On the basis of the Langkwawi constructions of notions of relatedness, she argues that the separation of the social from the biological is culture specific. She goes beyond Schneider’s critique and proposes to redefine kinship in more flexible and open ways. She does not return to Fox’s distinction between African and Austronesian ways of constructing identities, but leaves open the question of the applicability of her new perspectives in an African setting. One question then, is whether African identities and kinship are so heavily based on structural positions through birth as Fox seem to suggest? Irvine’s (1978) description of the Wolof supports the view of African constructions of identities as heavily based on biological and inherited aspects:

A crucial point is a caste system’s philosophical emphasis on *biological* aspects of kinship as fully determinant of social aspects. In such a system there can be no distinction between genealogy and biological relationship once the latter is recognized. A person’s genealogical placement, for instance, cannot be transferred by adoption, nor can other practices exist that similarly distinguish genealogical from biological parentage. (Irvine, 1978: 654-55, italics original )

Irvine notes a high level of rigidity among the Wolof compared to the Nuer, Tiv and Luo. In these other societies practices such as adoption, alteration of genealogies and differentiation between pater and genitor exist while none of these practices, according to her, can be found among the rural Wolof.

Although temporary fosterage is common, the child’s genealogy is not altered when he is placed in a foster home; in fact adults frequently remind the child who his “real”

parents are, and these are always the persons considered genitor and genetrix. It is not possible to recognize someone as a child's biological parents and still distinguish him or her from the genealogical parent, because the Wolof caste system focuses on biological aspects of kinship as the source of a person's character and social status. (Irvine, 1978: 655).

She also argues that an individual's birth and genealogical background are "primary determinants of his character and future behaviour – genetic substance and moral nature are culturally viewed as the same thing" (Irvine, 1978: 653). Irvine is right when she claims that birth genealogy cannot be replaced by the genealogy of the foster parents, but it might be added to it, and the kin relations to foster parents and siblings may become more significant for the individual than birth relations.

Sommerfelt (1999) also disputes the rigidity of Wolof categorisation as described by Irvine and suggests That: "the roles of genealogy and 'birth' have been overemphasized, and that 'origin', 'begetting' or birth is only one aspect of local notions of relatedness" (Sommerfelt, 1999: 146). She argues that, for example, people's notions of foster children's attachment are overlooked. She also shows how Gambian Wolofs actually dispute and manipulate genealogies.

As Mandinka and Wolof have the same kind of kinship categorisation and the same kind of "caste system", the following discussion is relevant for both of them. My sources indicate that habits (*jikko*) not only are considered as inherited, but are highly affected by the behaviour of and the training (*kullu*) given by the child's main care takers. Although people tend to agree that "low rank, witchcraft and 'evil ways' are all hereditary" (Irvine, 1978: 653), there are several other influences that shape identity and behaviour. Discourses are characterised by "oscillating appeals" (Howell, 2001: 204) to arguments based on substantive links and social practice.

Schneider's argument that "there is nothing such as an idiom of kinship" (Schneider, 1984), and more recent arguments that there might be other forms of relatedness or belonging that are more significant than kinship, for example, through sharing a house or food (Carsten, 1995, Carsten, 1997, Carsten, 2000), makes it necessary to investigate the relative significance of kinship rather than taking it for granted. An open approach needs to take a number of aspects into account, such as understanding the ontologies of kinship, processes of "kinning" and kinship's position among other forms for relatedness. I suggest a more extensive use of Howell's "kinning" concept as useful, including "re-kinning" or "de-

kinning”. The same processes have also been referred to as “doing and undoing kinship” and as the “work” of sustaining and abandoning specific relations (Bodenhorn, 2000, Notermans, 2007). In order to investigate what forms of relationship there were between people cooperating about the social organisation of child care I carried out a compound survey, interviews and participant observations with this in mind. Although there were a number of situations where relationships with neighbours, friends, club members (*kafo molu*) etc. were significant, I found that the major principles for organising residential units and child care were through kin-based relationships. The interplay involved in the oscillations between different types of discourses is specifically looked into.

### ***Gambian kinship***

The three main mechanisms of producing kinship among Mandinka and Wolof comprises: (1) consubstantiality, (2) metaphorisation, and (3) practical interaction.

### **Substantial links**

As referred to above, there is strong emphasis on shared substances and shared birth parents within kinship discourses among Mandinka and Wolof. Pregnancy is considered to result from bodily fluids being mixed during sexual intercourse. These fluids are referred to as blood (*yello*), sperm (*maniyo*) or water (*jio*).<sup>96</sup> A child is considered to inherit blood from its birth mother and birth father and is related to both its birth mother and birth father’s relatives through blood. The child is also considered connected to the mother through breastfeeding. Those who have suckled at the same breast have become sisters and brothers and part of the same incest category. Characteristics such as, for example, caste identity and witchcraft are considered to be transferred from mother to child through breastfeeding.

The third link through substance is the birth relationship. Those who are born or begotten by the same mother and father are considered to be the closest relatives (*ba killing, fa killing*).<sup>97</sup> When explaining why someone has to respect one’s mother and do whatever one

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<sup>96</sup> The concepts are used interchangeably and the interviewed women made no distinction in the terms for male and female fluids.

<sup>97</sup> The terms for birth father and birth mother are literally “the father who has borne me” (M: *na wulufa*, W: *suma papa ku ma juur*) or “the mother who has borne me” (M: *na wuluba*, W: *suma yei ku ma juur*). These words for birth (*wulu, juur*) are used both about the act of giving birth and about breeding or reproducing as flowers and trees do (see Sommerfelt (1999) for a discussion).

can for her, the act of giving birth and in particular the pain involved are frequently referred to.

The consubstantiality between parents and children is expanded to sisters and brothers of the child's parents and to their children (see Appendix 8). The category of mother is extended to mother's sisters and mother mother's sister's daughter etc., while father extends to father's brother and father father's brother's son. Their offspring are considered sisters and brothers and sexual relations between them are also seen as incestuous.<sup>98</sup> The classification is extended for several generations and a mother's mother's sister's daughter's daughter may be classified as sister. Father's sister's and mother's brother's children are categorised as "cousins" and belong to the preferred marriage category.<sup>99</sup> There are joking relations between cross-cousins. As referred in the introduction, Mandinka and Wolof refer to mother's brother's children as their "owners" (*forro*) and the father's sister's children are their "slaves" (*jongo*), and when the owner has a ritual celebration, the "slave" is supposed to come and work for her master. There is no discrimination between the way of classifying relatives on the father's side and the mother's side, the discrimination is between parents' siblings of same and different gender and their descendants. The emphasis on consubstantiality through blood and milk relations to kin on both sides and the lack of discrimination between the considered closeness to relatives on mother's and father's sides make the "ontology of kinship" cognatic. If some relations are closer than others these are between siblings who have suckled at the same breast and have the same birth parents, and between those whose birth parents are same gender siblings with same mother and father.

The lineality as presented below should be understood as principles of social organisation that vary immensely between rural and urban areas, and although it might appear to derive from the substantial kinship ontology, it is not inherent to it.

The kinship classification principles have been described by a number of authors. According to Diop (1985):

The mode of filiation among the Wolofs have been given diverse, even opposing interpretations; according to the authors, it has been characterised as matrilinear,

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<sup>98</sup> Exceptions were a couple of parallel cousin marriages mentioned in chapter 2.

<sup>99</sup> In Mandinka *sanaw* is a common term for cross cousins on both sides, the terms in Wolof are *domi bajen* (the child of father's sister) and *domi nijie* (child of mother's brother).

patrilinear, bilateral, double unilinear and unilinear with variations in lineality according to caste.<sup>100</sup> (Diop 1985: 15, my translation)

The descriptions of Mandinka principles of social organisation are equally varied. Dey (1980) describes *kabilo* membership as patrilineal and Wittrup argues that the matrilineal element is strong in Mandinka society (Wittrup, 1992: 11). In Carney and Watts' description:

...access to land [is] through membership in a patrilineal extended family group which typically includes a senior male and his wife or wives; his sons; their wives and families; unmarried daughters; elderly widowed mothers as well as younger brothers and their families. (1990: 219)

While some of the descriptions are accurate, others fail to specify exactly what aspect they describe. Even in Weil's (1968) description, where he clarifies that a number of positions are inherited through different principles, he argues that the Mandinka classification is predominantly patrilineal.<sup>101</sup> He refers to Murdock's (1949) classification system and finds Mandinka kinship to fit with the Dakota system or "structure":

...predominantly patrilineal descent and inheritance, polygynous marriage as a significant form of marriage (20% or more of the marriages), the nonsororal form of polygyny, a family organisation of either the independent polygynous or the patrilocal extended type, patrilineal extension of incest taboos, Iroquois cousin terminology, and bifurcate merging terms for aunts and nieces.  
(Murdock, 1949, in Weil, 1968: 122)

According to Weil, individuals trace descent through the father and are given the surname held by the father and his patrilineal group. Weil also argues that the principle of patri-viri-

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<sup>100</sup> Matrilineal filiation (see R. Rousseau (Rousseau, 1929)(1929))(Rousseau, 1929), patrilinear (see Fayet (1939) This reference was not found in Diop's reference list); bilateral (see P. Marty (1917)(Marty, 1917)), double unilinear (see D. W. Ames (Ames, 1982)982)) and unilinear with variations in lineality according to caste (D. P. Gamble(Gamble, 1957) (1957)).

<sup>101</sup> He lists four leadership positions not inherited through the patriline: *Kabila-keba* (leader of the *kabilo*), *Jujutio* (an achieved status for an individual with mystical powers), *Ngangsingba* (ceremonial head of women, and "the ultimate protector of female fertility", inherited by the eldest resident daughter on the death of the *Ngangsingba*), *Falifa-keba* (head of an age set, ascribed membership of the *falifo* class) p. 82.



local residence and the patrilineal system makes childbearing into the husband's patriline the only option for social integration for adult women (Weil, 1976).<sup>102</sup>

One gets the impression that these are inherent aspects of Mandinka kinship, while most of what he describes are aspects of rural social organisation that do not appear in urban settings. The urban residence pattern is different and even if bearing children is still extremely important, there are a number of other means of social integration than bearing children into the husband's patriline. I return to this issue in chapter seven.

Another example of confusion is found in Schaffer and Cooper's description (1980). They quote a Mandinka proverb: "If you cut the beard, only dust falls off; but if you cut the breast, blood is spilled" (1980: 87) and argue that the proverb illustrates the Mandinka view that mothers are important in determining kinship. The problem is the continuation of his argument: "The maternal idiom is also reflected in the preferential system of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage (descent is patrilineal)" (1980: 88).

The preferences for cross-cousin marriages can hardly be seen to reflect a "maternal idiom". Seen from the point of view of the other marital partner, she marries her father's sister's son. If this could be seen as reflecting a paternal idiom, we would have a cognatic kinship idiom system. The "maternal principle" if any, would be that the mother's sister is classified as mother and her children are considered as ego's sisters and brothers and belong to an incest category. When mother's sister's children are among the closest kin, it is difficult to see this as patrilineal. Rather it must be based on cognatic principles.

There are three areas where the patrilineal principle seem to be dominant, namely in ascribing a patronym, belonging to a *xed* and, in a juridical sense, who are the formal owners of a child.

The question of *sifa* (W: *xed*) identity is however not simply a question about the father's *xed*, a lot of anxiety is related to procreation when parents belong to different *xed*. In the case of a freeborn (*forro*) and a descendant of slaves (*jongo*), it is feared that the offspring cannot be normal. Sommerfelt (1999) refers to interesting cases where *xed* identity is more or less successfully negotiated, both with reference to maternal *xed* and through blurring descent.

In spite of the bilateral ontology of belonging referred to above, it is argued that the child belongs to the father and his kin. Practically, it is not unusual that children remain with the mother and the mother's kin after divorce, but in times of conflict, the father and his kin

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<sup>102</sup> In the rural areas there is succession to important positions such as the village head (*alkalo*), through the patriline. The *alkalo* also distributes user right to land, but also in-married women and strangers are generally given user right to land.

may secure custody over the children through appeal to the court, or simply by referring to the possibility of bringing a court case. According to the Cadi at Bundung court for family matters, the children belong to the father.<sup>103</sup> Only when the child is below seven years of age, the Cadi insists that the child should stay with the mother. Even if the mother was more capable of sponsoring the child than the father, this would, according to the Cadi, not affect his decision. If the mother chooses to sponsor the child, it is considered as voluntary, only if the father admits that he is unable to sponsor the child, the formal custody will be given to the mother.

The idea that the child belonged to the father and his kin was expressed on different occasions in my fieldwork, including by women who took on the major responsibility for the children. In one case a Mandinka woman had suggested that her divorced daughter should bring the child's father to court to order him to pay maintenance for their one-year-old son. As it were, he paid nothing to support his son. According to the mother, the daughter did not want to take him to court, and I asked whether the daughter was afraid that he would claim custody of the child. This was not the reason, the woman replied, "If the father wants the child, what can she do anyway?"

Sommerfelt (1999) argues that among the Wolof of Farafenni, girls are considered to belong to the mother while boys belong to the father, and this is the case whether the parents are still married or divorced.

### **Metaphorical extension of substantive/substantial links**

Metaphorical extensions of the substantial links are frequently applied for conventional and pragmatic reasons. It is considered respectful to call elderly persons grandmother or grandfather, and the mother's brother's friend may be titled mother's brother as well. Age mates may be called sisters or brothers in order to indicate a friendly relationship, but also to indicate obligations to support one another. Sometimes boys or men call a woman sister, referring to a close and non-sexual relation, with the intent to establish contact and perhaps later develop the relationship into a love affair or marriage. A man may refer to both his brother's wife and his female cross-cousin as "our wife" (W: *sunu jabarr*).

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<sup>103</sup> Personal Communication, Principal Cadi Alhajie Tijan Kah, Cadi Alhajie Basirou Leigh, Cadi Alhajie Mustapha Sanneh, Registrar Ishaka Manneh, Bundung Islamic Court, 10 April 2007.

As classification of kin and affines include more people than in a Western context, it becomes difficult and sometimes essential to judge whether the classification is descriptive according to the ontology of kin relationships or metaphorical, and if metaphorical, whether based on conventions or being used pragmatically. If informants refer to a distant relative as “we are of the same blood” (W: *nyungi boka derret/nyun bena derret nanyou*), this is an argument based on consubstantiality, however “thin” or “as if” these relations actually are.<sup>104</sup>

## **Production of kinship through practice**

The production of kinship through social practices is important. A foster mother becomes a mother by taking care of a child as a mother, and all the children she is “mothering” become sisters and brothers. Grown-up foster children speak about how their foster mothers did everything for them, and some mentioned that the foster mother had loved them more than their birth mother. They visited and supported their foster parents because of all they had done for them.

Foster parents can, however, not take for granted that they will be rewarded with support from their foster children in old age. There are examples of children who support their birth parents rather than foster parents as they grow up. In the extended cases below and in the chapter about child fostering, I discuss the shifts in relative importance of birth relations *versus* socially-produced kin relations.

Produced kinship does not create incest categories, unless the children have suckled at the same breast. Marriages have been contracted between birth children and foster children who grew up with the same mother and father. A foster father even married his foster daughter in spite of the fact that he had practically “made himself her father” over the years. Although this probably is legally unproblematic, most people consider such relations as “too close”.

Muslim inheritance rights only apply to birth relations and birth sisters and brothers share property while the in-fostered sisters or brothers inherit property from their birth parents. The exception is when property is directly transferred to a foster child through will.

Practices that produce kinship are important also in strengthening relations when kinship already exists. The process of “kinning” takes places also when a birth mother takes

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<sup>104</sup> This actualises the problem of judging whether a sign is an icon, index or symbolic, according to Pierce’s terminology cross culturally. Consubstantiality is frequently indexical, while a Western person may fail to acknowledge this relationship and define the sign as an arbitrary symbol.

care/“mothers” her child and involves the child into her kin relationships. In the extended cases below, I show examples of “re-kinning” and “de-kinning”. In Appendix 7, I illustrate how “kinning” between mother and child can be made up by different combinations of care and substance. A birth mother’s kin relationship to her child at birth is mainly based on ideas about shared substance (blood, milk, birth), but will later be strengthened by the practical care for her child. If the child is fostered out, the relationship is first and foremost substance based. When a child is fostered to the birth mother’s friend, the mother-child “kinning” is made by practical care only. There are intermediate positions such as the relationship between the birth mother’s sister and the child when they live in the same compound and mother’s sister is participating in the care and upbringing of the child.

Above I have presented the main principles within Mandinka and Wolof “ontology of kinship”. In the following part, I will go into details about practices that are based on this ontology, but which also may alter the ontology discursively through practice.

### **From kin to families**

The Wolof concept of *mboka* and Mandinka *badijolu*, are broadly speaking used about kinship relations, family and relatedness. The Wolof concept *mboka* comes from the verb *boka* – meaning to share or be together, while *badijolu* literally means being children of the same mother<sup>105</sup>. The sharedness relates to blood, mother’s milk and birth parents. From this core of consubstantiality (Holy, 1996), kinship categories are expanded and loosened from its materiality through metaphorisation. This sharing is also about living together, sharing a house, food, maternal services and care and relatedness to wider kin groups. *Mboka* and *badijolu* have multiple material and immaterial references, oscillating between essence and idealism. *Jabot* (W) or *dimbaayaa* are the dependants of a man or woman, and form an ego-based immediate family.<sup>106</sup>

In a discussion of the differences between family and household, Yanagisako (1979) refers to Bender who argues that the concepts are “logically distinct” and “empirically different” (Bender, 1967). According to Bender, families must be defined strictly in terms of kinship relationship, while households are based on co-residence. According to him, this is

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<sup>105</sup> It is also used to create atmospheres of friendliness, such as when the audience is addressed as *mbokai* (W, pl.) and *badingolu* (M, pl.) in speeches and radio programmes.

<sup>106</sup> According to David Gamble, *dimbaa* means suckling mother (personal communication, letter dated 27 July 1998).

necessary in order to avoid functionalist definitions of families. In numerous societies families do not form households and households are not always composed of families. He further argues that many of the functions that have been construed as “family functions” may be fulfilled by co-residential groups that are not based on kinship relations and are in other instances carried out neither by families nor households (Yanagisako, 1979:163).

It is a problem assuming that kinship and family can be pure ideational categories free from functionalist aspects. Many of the descriptions of kinship in Sub-Saharan Africa are functionalist as they describe residence patterns, marriage relations, inheritance rights to properties and office and the like – in other words, the uses of relatedness.

If kinship is defined as ideational categories (often based on genealogies that again rest on assumptions of consubstantiality or corporal connections) and these are considered to structure social organisation in kin-based societies, what sense does it make if belonging to the kinship category is produced through social interaction? If a foster mother becomes a mother through living with the child and mothering her, the ideational categories are based on practice. Definitions of kinship and family thus must take into account that the two are aspects of the same and are constructed through a number of shifting principles as mentioned above. Households are, however, not a very useful concept, unless taken to mean residential units.

I define families as ego-based relationships with people that can be categorised as kin within the local discourses. Families have network structures and an urban Gambian woman’s family typically includes her husband, birth and foster children, some of her cognatic kin, some of her affines and it may or may not include co-wives. If a co-wife lives elsewhere and there is little contact, she may not be part of her family. Family is thus “activated kin”.<sup>107</sup> It does not matter whether the interaction is frequent or rare, as long as it is considered significant by the person in question. A family member may thus be a part of the residential unit, or a relative living far away and contacted only occasionally. My definition of families is similar to Holy’s (1996) concept of kindred.

## **Parenting and fostering**

All kinds of parenthood, whether birth or foster parenthood, are based on relationships where the parents are responsible for certain aspects of the child’s life. Different authors have

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<sup>107</sup> This is in the same line of thought as Edwards and Strathern’s argument, where one has to make claims on their relatives to activate the relations (p. 160).

classified these differently (see for example, W.H. Goodenough (1970b)), but in the West African context, the work of E.N. Goody (1973a, , 1982) has been considered authoritative. Later contributions have been complementary, as her functionalist perspective has been considered incomplete, still several of her concepts are useful.

Goody (1982: 8) argues that there are five tasks of parenthood that receive social recognition, as well as a patterned institutional response, in all societies. These aspects of parenthood are:

1. bearing and begetting
2. endowment with civil and kinship status
3. nurturance
4. training
5. sponsorship into adulthood.

With reference to W.H. Goodenough's (1970b) argument about transactions in parenthood, she argues that each of these aspects of parenthood can individually be split off from the rest and made the object of one of Goodenough's transactions – delegation, sharing, succession, pre-emption and transfer (Goody, 1982). Brady also discusses Goodenough:

Goodenough (1970a) suggests that adoption and fosterage might usefully be analysed as transactions in parenthood, primarily because adoption and fosterage entail a reallocation of parental rights and duties (as if they were property) to persons other than a child's natural parents". (1976: 4-5)

Bearing is carried out by the child's birth mother. Begetting are with few exceptions carried out by the birth mother (*na wuluba*) and the birth father (*na wulufa*). The only exceptions are pregnancies resulting from extramarital relations where the wife's husband is publicly known as the birth father whereas it is the birth mother's lover who actually begot the child. Only in known cases of infidelity are other men are recognised as birth fathers.

While begetting and bearing are basically related to the discursive construction of birth, substantial connections and belonging, the other aspects of parenthood may (at least potentially) be disconnected from these. According to Irvine's (Goodenough, 1970b, , 1978) discussion of the Wolof, the endowment with civil and kinship status would be seen as closely related to bearing and begetting, although it is disputed whether these connections are indivisible (See also Sommerfelt, 1999).

In contrast to adoption, endowment with civil and kinship status, remains unchanged in child fostering. In fostering, the child's position within the genealogy of its birth kin remains unchanged while child often also becomes part of its foster family's kin relationship. In cases where the child is breast fed by the foster mother, it gets two sets of kin that potentially belong to incest categories. The patronymic and *xed* (W) positions generally remain unaltered. Still *xed* (W) positions may be manipulated and the child may choose to insist on the *xed* positions of its foster parents (both when it comes to ethnicity and "caste") rather than of its birth parents.

The concepts *kullu* in Mandinka and *yarr* in Wolof refer to the whole process of upbringing, including Goody's (1982) components of social reproduction, nurturance (*topotooo*), training for an adult role (*kullu*) and sponsorship into the adult community (W: *dundal*).<sup>108</sup>

Nurturance (*topotooo*) as feeding and taking care of the child may be shared with a number of people living together with the child and is always transferred in cases of child fostering. This is to large extent a female task. The daily care and nurturing is taken care of by foster parents.

Training covers upbringing(*kullu*), formal and informal education (*madrassa*, Western education, *daara*, apprenticeship) as well as initiation rituals such as the *nyaakaa* for girls and *jujuwo* for boys.<sup>109</sup> Birth or foster parents as well as others living with the child, are responsible for training the child to perform daily tasks as well as good manners. There are several cases where education or training is the main purpose for the fostering, for example when boys go to stay with a Muslim scholar (*oustaz*) to learn the *Qur'an* or when a child becomes an apprentice and lives with his "master". In these cases the nurturance and training are taken care of by the teacher, while parents often partly sponsor the child by sending clothes and money.

Finally, sponsorship is the aspect of bringing up a child that is generally shared with most people. In situations of permanent fostering, the foster parents generally take full economic responsibility for the child, including school fees, initiation rituals and marriage transactions.

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<sup>108</sup> Sommerfelt argues that *yarr* denotes "to bring up", "rear" "raise" or "educate" and incorporates "economic support" (W: *dunda*) and "caretaking" (W: *topato*) (T. (Sommerfelt, 1999), 151).

<sup>109</sup> *Jujuwo* refers to the shed outside the village where the *nga singolu* used to stay during the ritual.

From the extended cases below, it is clear that several of these aspects are shared between numbers of people, even when a child is not fostered out. Often mothers are mainly responsible for nurturing and training while the father's major responsibility is to provide economically for the child. When the father's economic contributions are small, mothers spend much time, not only doing income generating work, but also by finding other sources for help. In Binta's case below, her brother, an uncle, a tourist friend, her husband's brother and the landlady, were among those who contributed economically to the maintenance of her children and herself.

## **Residence units**

Residential units constitute the arena for daily care for children. Still, there is no simple concurrence between residential units and families. As families have been defined as ego- and kinship based networks, a wife and a husband's families are not the same, although their common children in most cases belong to both.

Urban residence units consisted of people living together in flats and in compounds. As described in the introduction, a compound is a fenced yard with one or several houses and each house may contain one or several co-residential units. In my compound survey in 1995, the largest compound had 57 inhabitants and the smallest had six, with an average of 26 people per compound. Each compound consisted of one to 13 residence units, the largest unit had 29 people who were all related through kinship. The smallest units consisted of single men renting a room alone, or together with a brother or a friend.<sup>110</sup> In the national census, households were defined as units composed of those who ate from the same cooking pot (*singkiro*) and lived in the same compound.<sup>111</sup> In the national census, average household size in Kanifing, the administrative area in which Bakau is located, was estimated to be 6.3 in 2003 and 7.3 in 1993 (Gambia Bureau Statistics, 2003: Table 2.2a). In my compound survey, I did not ask about households, but estimated average size of co-residential units to be 5.6 persons. As discussed in relation to the extended cases below, it is problematic to reduce a household to mean a food consumption unit or simply a residence unit. What generally is associated with household units goes far beyond any of these two (Bender, 1967, Gullestad,

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<sup>110</sup> Some of them were married and had wives and children elsewhere.

<sup>111</sup> Single men who came from a different compound to eat, such as Omar's brother and his friend in Binta's case below, would thus not be counted as part of the household. Neither would they belong to any household in the compound where they lived since they did not eat from any of their cooking pots.



1984, Yanagisako, 1979). For several reasons I return to below, household seems to be a concept of little descriptive or analytical value in this context.

Among the 692 people living in the 26 compounds in my survey area, more than half (53% or 65 of 123) of the units were “nuclear like”. By “nuclear like” I refer to units based on a married couple and their children, in some cases the couple were divorced or one of the spouses was absent. Some of these were also polygamous units where only one of the wives lived in the compound. Forty-two of the units or 34% consisted of single men, living alone or sharing a room with one or two other men. Sixteen of the units could be defined as composite or extended. Eight of them consisted of two or more married brothers or sisters living together with their spouses and children in the same compound. The other eight were units consisting of three or four generations of people living together or a husband living with several wives and children. Among the polygamous units where two or more wives lived in one compound, six consisted of two wives, two consisted of three and one of four wives living together.

Of the women, 60% (107 of 179) were married and among them 27% of the married women (29 of 107) were in polygamous marriages. Most of the women in polygamous marriages (22 of 29) and one-fifth of all the married women lived with a co-wife in the compound.<sup>112</sup> From my interview data, 15 of the 27 presently married women were in polygamous unions and 13 lived in the same compound as one or several co-wives (sing; *sina*).

About half of the people within my compound survey area (350 of 692) were related to the compound owner through kinship.<sup>113</sup> The other half lived in neo-local residence units. Even among the compound owners, few of the units were large family units. The patri-viri-local residence pattern that was frequent in rural areas was rare in the urban areas. Some women moved to their husband’s compound but the majority lived in neo- local unities. This residence pattern has consequences for organising daily care of children. For most women there were no kin or co-wives to share cooking and child care tasks with. The easiest way to get help in taking care of a child was through child fostering arrangements.

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<sup>112</sup> Nine women lived in the same compound as their mother in law and 28 women lived with at least on brother or sister of their husband.

<sup>113</sup> The interview data showed that four of the 31 women lived in compounds belonging to their own kin while 19 rented rooms from non-relatives. In the survey, more married men than women lived in a compound owned by their parents or themselves. Two married Serahuli women lived in their own family compounds with their husbands. Two married Wollof women lived in their father’s compound, one of them had an absent husband and one of them was married to her father’s sister’s son. A third married Wollof woman lived in her mother’s compound, but also she was married to a cross cousin (MoBrSo) who had kin relationships within the same compound.

As mentioned in the introduction, the dynamics of management of fertility in large rural family units as discussed by Madhavan and Bledsoe (2001) is not likely to be as relevant in the smaller urban units. Still, as I argue below, one should be careful to conclude about family dynamics on the basis of residence units only. Often, inhabitants of nuclear-like residence units were part of extended networks of cooperation with other urban, rural or foreign based kin.

In the survey, more than one-third of the children (108 of 296) lived with their birth mother and father in core residential units. Two-thirds of the children lived in larger units with either at least one sister or brother of their birth parents in addition to one or both birth parents (55 or 19%); with grandparents or with other wives of the father. 42 (15%) of the children were fostered in and lived with their foster mother.

In the compound survey, 22 (15%) of the 149 girls and or 20 (14%) of 139 boys living in the area were fostered.<sup>114</sup> In my interview data, where each woman was asked about her own history of reproduction and child fostering, the proportion of children fostered in was 19% and children fostered out were 17%. According to a national survey in The Gambia, in 1983 14.3% of the children younger than 15 years lived in a different compound from their mothers, while 4.3% lived in the same compound as their mothers, but in a different household (Central Statistics Department 1987).<sup>115</sup> The definition of children not living with their birth mother, but with their birth father, as foster children, may of course be questioned. Still, in most of these cases the rights and responsibilities originally held by the birth mother were transferred to the new wife of the husband.

## **Dynamics of families and kinship**

The compound survey gives useful information about composition of residence units, frequencies of child fostering, polygamy and size of units, but gives no information about the processes behind the actual formation of units. The three extended cases I present below show the dynamics of child care arrangements, birth and foster parenthood, changes in composition in residential units due to deaths, labour migration, conflicts and economic matters. These frequent shifts also represent varying conditions in the women's ability of taking care of the

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114 In total, 44 of the 288 children under 15 were fostered, making the average rate 14.6%.

115 The table does not say anything about age of the children. Since the number of women who give birth before they are 15 is insignificant it is likely that by choosing mothers below 30 years of age their children are below 15. Women above 30 also have children below 15, the percentage may thus underestimate rates of child fostering.

children they already had as well as background for decisions about having another child or not.

All three cases below could be used to discuss a number of the issues at hand and will also be referred to in later chapters. Here I only highlight certain of the most central issues. Binta's case shows how women like her and her co-wives have very little formal influence and authority in crucial matters such as who they should be married to and where to live as long as the husband or his brother is there. As soon as they are left alone with the children, and even if the husband is there, they have a lot of responsibility for themselves and their children. In such situations they activate a wide network of kin to solve their practical problems. This social organisation of child care challenges both concepts of household and of family. The conjugal relationship is often weak and women act as individuals in a wide family setting.

In Mariama's case, inheritance rights, fostering relationships and shift in focus from broad kin categories to essential "same mother, same father" categories are discussed. Also the importance of and instability of marital relations are discussed.

Omi's case is interesting because it shows the unity and cooperation of a sibling group with their spouses and children in a rare case of "pure" family compound. One may ask whether the monogamous and long lasting relationship between their parents were crucial to create this atmosphere of cooperation in spite of the different life situations, economic position, educational level etc. of the siblings. Also in Omi's case child fostering is important.

## **Binta**

In 1987, Binta was twenty-six years old, married and had two daughters. Her husband Kebba was abroad on labour migration and she lived in the same compound as her husband's brother Omar and his two wives and their children (See Appendix 9, chart Binta 1987). Binta's eldest daughter Haddy lived with her grandmother Awa and Kebba's brothers and their wives and children "upriver". She remained there when her birth parents had left for Bakau some years earlier. Also Binta's second daughter Janke had stayed with her grandmother for a while until she moved to her parents in Bakau. Binta shared one two-room flat with Tida, the female compound owner. Tida and her son used the inner room while Binta shared one room with a double bed with Janke and Awa, Omar's daughter. Binta's co-wife Aminata lived in her parents' compound in Bakau while her three children lived with Kebba's kin up-river.

Omar rented a two-room flat next to Binta and Tida. In the first room, his youngest wife Fatou and her two children shared a double bed. In the second room, there were two double beds, one for Omar's first wife Mama and their youngest daughter and one for their three sons. Omar took two-day "turns" (*singfahlo*) with each wife.

In the summer of 1987, Omar suddenly died. Although he had felt dizzy and unwell for a period, his death came totally unexpected. His wives and children spent the mourning period of four months and ten days with his family "up-river". Binta and her co-wife Aminata also stayed there for a while. After some time Binta returned to the urban area with Janke and Awa and the three of them lived with Binta's mother in a village outside Serekunda. She spent several weeks with her mother, her mother's brother and his wives and children.

About half a year after Omar's death, his widows became married to two of his brothers Kebba and Mommodou. Omar and Kebba's elder brother was the head of the rural family unit (together with his mother) and made major decisions on behalf of several kin members. The decision was that Kebba should marry Omar's eldest wife, Mama, and Momodou should marry the youngest wife, Fatou. During and shortly after the mourning period, there was a lot of speculation about what would happen to them. When I asked Mama directly about her preferences, she said she would leave the decision to her father. At that time she was at least thirty years old and had five children.

Kebba returned from abroad and gathered his three wives in a hired compound in Bakau. He took turns with each of the wives according to a schedule with two days each. Fatou became married to Momodou, a formerly unmarried brother of Omar and Kebba. He was living in Bakau and had been eating with Binta, Omar and his wives on a daily basis, before Omar died.

One year later, Mama gave birth to a boy. Before the boy was one year old, Kebba left for abroad and the residence unit was dissolved. When Kebba left, Binta rented a room with her two birth daughters in one of her colleagues' compound. Omar's daughter, who had partly been fostered by Binta, had returned to her birth mother Mama. Binta's eldest daughter, Haddy, came to live with Binta and attend secondary school. After a year, Binta moved to another compound. The reason was, according to Binta, that the landlady had harassed her daughter. According to rumours, Binta had been asked to leave because she owed house rent worth several hundred Dalasis. Binta moved into a compound owned by her friend's husband and lived there between 1992 and 1998 (See Appendix 9, Chart Binta 1992). Mama also rented a two- room flat in the same compound. Binta shared two rooms with her two birth daughters and a foster daughter. Also her brother's daughter was fostered by her. Mama

shared her two room-flat with her daughter and her youngest son. Two of Mama's sons and her youngest daughter lived "up-river" with relatives. The eldest son went to secondary school and lived with relatives in Basse, the second eldest son lived in Kebba and Omar's family compound and the youngest daughter lived with Mama's birth parents. Kebba's eldest wife Aminata lived elsewhere in Bakau with her eldest daughter, who at that time also had come to Bakau to attend secondary school.

In 1998 Naffie, Aminata's daughter had got married and travelled with her Gambian husband to Canada. Mama's eldest son had come to Bakau to stay with her, and Binta lived with her two daughters (See chart Binta 1998). Binta fostered her *toma*, her brother's daughter, and Matty, one of Fatou and Momodou's daughters lived with Binta for a while. Kebba remained abroad.

In 2007, both Binta's husband and her mother had died the year before. Both her birth daughters had got married and had children. Her eldest daughter Haddy and her son Kemo, who was five years, lived with Binta. Haddy's husband had gone to Europe, and the plan was that Haddy should go there to join him as soon as he had got his permit to stay. The other daughter, Janke, lived with her husband and his mother elsewhere in Bakau. Their three-year-old daughter and nine-month-old son spent a lot of time in Binta's house. Haddy looked after them during daytime when Janke and her husband were working. Haddy also had a foster daughter living with them. When I wrote down the names of Haddy and Janke's children, she insisted that she was Haddy's daughter and I had to write down her name too. According to Binta, she had been maltreated in the compound where she lived with her mother. She was the result of an extramarital affair and her mother's husband's family had been very rude to her. "Little Binta" was fifteen years old and attended 10th grade in primary school. Also Kaddie, Binta's brother's daughter, lived with them. Matty, who lived with Binta in 1998, had returned to her parents because Binta found her too difficult to handle. Binta's husband had married a fourth wife, only a year before he died. According to Binta, he had spent half a year in the countryside with his young bride (and his eldest wife also stayed there) before he came to Bakau where Binta and Mama lived. Binta's youngest brother, who had lived with their mother in Yundum, had married a woman from Germany and lived there with her. The other brother Sajo, who had lived in Yundum, close to their mother and her relatives, had moved to Bakau with his wives and children. He supported Binta economically when she had economic problems. Also the younger brother in Germany sent her money from time to time. Binta's sister Sira had lost her husband and got married again to another man with several wives. Sira and her children had remained in her deceased husband's compound.

Binta's co-wife Aminanta lived in Kebba's family compound. One of her sons, Momodou, had got married and also lived there with wife and child. Apart from a period in middle school in Bansang, Momodou had always lived in the family compound. His brother Kemo lived in Bakau and tried to live from guiding tourists. Naffie lived in Canada with her Gambian husband and had also got three children.

Mama lived in Bakau in the same compound as her daughter Awa. Awa had got married and had three children. Also her sister Sunu was married and had children. Fatou had lived in Bakau with her husband Momodou since she remarried after Omar died. She had ten children with Momodou in addition to the two she had with Omar. They all lived with them, apart from one boy who stayed with Momodou's mother and one that had died.

The number of people who shared rights and responsibilities towards Binta and her co-wives children were spread over a number of residential units of shifting size and composition. Both Binta's own kin, Kebba's kin and Mama's parents took care of several of the children over various periods.

Omar's death and Kebba's travels had a deep impact on the social organisation of their wives and children. Residence units shifted and their size and composition varied throughout the twenty-year period I observed them. Kebba's three wives had a good deal of autonomy, but also responsibility, both when Kebba was there and more so when he was absent.

Binta organised sponsorship for her children from a wide number of people (her brothers, Kebba's kin, tourists and others). Binta also related to colleagues, neighbours and friends. For a while, she lived with one of her fellow market women. She had a saving club with her colleagues, making it possible to raise a relatively large amount for specific occasions.

Aminata's son remained in the rural unit, and rather than him moving to Bakau to his mother, Aminata went to stay with him and his wife. In her older days she expected to be taken care of by him and his wife, although she had not taken care of him since he was very small. She had sponsored him by sending money (W: *dunda*) to her husband's kin, but she never took care of him (*topotoo*). Still it seemed as if the birth relationship (perhaps together with economic support) was sufficient to make him take care of her.

As we see from Mariama's case below, her son, who was fostered out when he was small, had his primary concert for Mariama. He knew that the foster parents would manage economically, while he was worried about Mariama and his younger sisters and brothers.

In 2007, Binta lived with one daughter and two foster daughters and her daughter's son and foster daughter. The other daughter, son-in-law and their children visited frequently. Several women at her age (50+) seemed to have their built family units with children and foster children, but with rather loosely attached husbands.

While women like Binta and Mama had a lot of responsibility, they formally seemed to be considered as legal minors. In Mama's case, she said she would ask for her father's decision about who she should marry when Omar died. She also said that it was impossible to remain unmarried, if she chose to do so, people would say that it was something wrong with her. This represents internalisation of a hegemonic discourse where remaining unmarried was considered incompatible with proper management of female identity.

## **Mariama**

In 1987, Mariama was thirty years old and had given birth to two sons and two daughters. She was married for the third time. Mariama was infertile in her first marriage. When she married her second husband it took several years before she got pregnant. Her second husband already had one son with a woman he had divorced and two sons with another wife, who was ill and could not take care of the boys. Mariama took care of them from when they were very young until they were grown up. After several years, Mariama got had children with her second husband. Before her second husband died he had called his cousin and asked him to take care of Mariama and the children. Tied by the promise he had given, he married Mariama, but spent most of the time with his first wife in a village about 5 kilometres from Bakau.

In 1987 Mariama lived in her second husband's compound with his two sons and her youngest son (See Appendix 9, chart Mariama 1987). Her eldest daughter was eight years old and lived with Mariama's eldest brother in their family compound "up river". A couple of years earlier she had taken two of her children to her husband and his first wife. It was a period of economic hardship and her husband rarely came to visit. She had told him that she brought the children since he did not know whether they had anything to eat or not. After a while he had come and asked her to come and collect her children. She insisted they should stay with him. Several years later, when her economic position had improved, I asked whether she wanted them back. She said she did not consider that as an option since she had given the

children to the other wife of her husband, but her eldest daughter moved back to Mariama when she got a sponsor for her school fees.<sup>116</sup>

After 1987, Mariama gave birth to four other children. One of them moved when he was six years old and lived close to his father and his first wife. Her eldest daughter returned from her brother. After secondary school, the eldest daughter attended computer classes at a private vocational school. She had difficulties getting a job when she had finished. The other children living with her attended schools on different levels. Mariama supported herself and the children from growing vegetables and selling them at the local markets in Bakau and in Serekunda.

In the early 1990s the two boys born by her co-wife stayed in Europe for some years. One of them had been working on a boat, but according to Mariama he had lost all his savings and had a mental problem. The other had studied and became an accountant. He got a well-paid job when he came back and married shortly after. They both stayed in the compound upon their return. Due to conflicts, the compound became divided twice between children of different mothers. The Cadi, a Muslim judge for family matters, was involved in sharing the compound.

The property of the eldest son was divided from the rest by a tall brick fence. After some years a new brick wall was erected, this time between the property of Mariama's birth children and the two boys she had brought up. Although it is not very clear what the origin of these conflicts actually was, their solutions were found in dividing the compound. When Alhajie returned after his studies, he got a well paid job and gave Mariama 500 Dalasis every month. When his brother returned, who was not well, Mariama's amount became reduced, since he had to support his brother as well. In spite of the reduced economic support, the relationship remained peaceful until Alhajie married. They arranged cooking in turns where Alhajie's wife cooked two days and Mariama and her eldest daughter cooked two days. Conflicts rose over cooking. According to Mariama, Alhajie's wife refused to eat the food Mariama's daughter cooked. When Alhajie's wife was cooking, Mariama's children hardly got any fish, meat or vegetables on their rice.

At the time Alhajie's wife gave birth to their second child, she moved out of the compound. Alhajie later erected a fence dividing his and his brother's (of the same mother)

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<sup>116</sup> She argues as if this is a case of child fostering, although they lived with their father. The children are considered as given to her co-wife. The other wife of Mariama's husband had only one son. Although I never discussed the matter with Mariama, it is likely that it would have been possible to get the children back, had the other wife had a larger number of children.



property from the property of Mariama's children. This was done against his brother's protest, but since he was not considered mentally well, his point of view had been ignored.

Later Alhajie divorced his first wife and married a woman who moved into the compound and had a friendly relationship with Mariama. When their first child was born, it was named after Alhajie's birth mother.

In 2007 there was a brick wall between Alhajie and Babucarr's part of the compound and Mariama's children's part. (See Appendix 9, chart Mariama 2007). Katchikally had got married, but became divorced after only a few months. She and her son lived with Mariama. The father came for visits from time to time, but did not provide any regular economic support. Mariama had suggested to go to the court in order to settle a monthly allowance, but Katchikally did not want to do that. She had a paid job some hours a week to support her child.

Also Bakary, Binta, Kebi and Mai Muna lived with Mariama. Bakary had been looking for a job since he finished high school last year, but had not yet succeeded in getting one. Binta attended tenth grade in middle school and Kebi went to form four. Mai Muna joined a *madrasa*, according to Mariama because she could not afford to pay school fees for her in public schools.

Mariama's husband Sambojang was not well and did not come to Bakau very often. Their daughter Tombong lived with him and his first wife in Yundum. Yusufa and Boto lived with Bakary in Yundum. Bakary and Sambojang's mother's mothers had been sisters. Boto was unemployed and wanted to go abroad to study. He had tried to get a job for a while without success. His younger brother Yusufa also lived with Bakary. Bakary sponsored the boys fully and Mariama said she never worried that they would be in need of anything. All the money she had was spent on the children living with her and the daughter who was living with the father since he was unable to secure their daughter's education. Mariama still had several vegetable gardens, some in the large common garden at Radio Gambia and some outside the big garden and in Katchikally. She, Binta and sometimes Bakary or Katchikally went to water the gardens almost every day. From time to time some paid garden workers were hired to water the gardens.

This case shows very clearly the oscillation between kinship based on social practice and on birth relations. Mariama became the mother of Alhajie and his brother through her acts of mothering, through all her work and caring for them. When Mariama and her children were harassed by the mother of their elder brother, Alhajie took Mariama's side. Mariama had done everything for them; the other woman had done nothing. When conflicts between Alhajies'

wife and Mariama became heated, however, Alhajie rejected Mariama. When the new fence was built, social kinship was subordinated to the substance-based unity of those who shared the same mother and the same father. One may only speculate as to whether the loyalty would have been different if Mariama had been his birth mother.

Inheritance rules support birth relations as it is only birth children who inherit. In this case, however, walls were erected between children who shared the same birth father.

After a while they became reconciled. Nevertheless, the child was named after Alhajie's birth mother and not Mariama. Name giving is generally a very important matter and it is seen as an honour and sign of respect. In this case he chose to give this honour and respect to the person who had given birth to him, but whom he had hardly seen since.

These multiple sources of kinship give a person a number of options to act and legitimate the choices. Reference to birth relations seems to be as valid as practical acts of kinship.

As I discuss further in the next chapter, there were times when the conditions for fostering arrangements were clearer than others. There were situations where foster parents were really confused and disappointed when birth parents came to take their children back or transfer the children to other foster parents.

## **Omi**

In 1987 Omi lived in her parents' compound with her two daughters, her parents and two brothers. Omi's parents were both Fulas and had come to The Gambia from Guinea fifty years earlier. In 1987 there were two houses in the compound, one where the parents lived with and one where the children and grand children lived. Only Momodou, Omi's sister's son, lived with his mother's mother. He had stayed with his grandmother since he was weaned. Omi had been divorced for some years and lived in one room with her five- and seven-year-old daughters. The eldest brother married and had a son in 1988. He lived in the same house as Omi. So did the youngest brother who worked as a civil servant for the government. He had started to build a new house in the compound. A third brother was working abroad.

In 1990 Omi's sister Isatou had left her husband and came to stay with her family. She was ill and had to be taken care of. Her children also came to live in the family compound.

The new house was finished in 1992. In addition to these three houses there were also a kitchen and a latrine. The new house had electricity and there was a water tap inside the compound. Omi's youngest brother moved into the new house with his wife and son. At this

time the third brother had returned from abroad, married and also had a son. He also moved into his brother's new house. Omi got her own room and so did her sister. Also Momodou and one of Omi's sister's daughters had another room.

Omi's eldest brother now used two rooms in the other house while three boys, who were sons of Omi's sisters, shared the room Omi used to have. One of Omi's daughters slept with her grandmother while the other shared a bed with Omi.

Omi's daughter stayed for a while with foster parents. The foster woman knew Omi's daughter and liked her a lot. She asked Omi to let the daughter stay with her. Omi's father knew the woman's family and approved. After some years the daughter returned to her mother. There had been conflicts both between the woman's mother and Omi's daughter as well as between Omi's daughter and a boy in the compound.

Omi's father suddenly died in March 1995. In 1997 Omi left to live abroad with a European man. Few months later she returned because her mother was ill. Her mother died in 1998. One week after her death, the eldest brother had a daughter whom they named after their deceased mother. Omi left for Europe after a period of mourning. Her brothers and their wives took care of her daughters until she had established herself in Europe. When she got a permit to stay she achieved family reunion with her youngest daughter. The eldest daughter went to the USA for studies.

In 2007 both Omi and her daughter and her daughter Awa, lived in Germany. Just at the start of the New Year both Omi and Awa had been in The Gambia to perform *chitale* (*jebale*), transfer of the bride, for Awa. The husband was in Switzerland and Awa would move to him as soon as she got her permanent staying permit in Germany. Isatou, the eldest daughter, was still studying in the USA. Omi's brother Hassan, who had built the large new house in the family compound, had moved to a new house at Bakoteh, a new "suburb" /building site outside the central urban area. He lived there with his wife and five sons. The children stayed occasionally in the family compound in Bakau, but none of them lived there permanently. Cherno had four children with Mama and had recently married another wife who was very young compared to him (she looked as if she was between 15 and 20; he himself was more than 60). Cherno had taken over the first main house where their parents used to live. According to him, this was a proof that he was still strong. Amadou had three children with Mama. They all lived in the big family house Hassan built. There lived also Fatoumatta, Omi's eldest sister. One of her daughters lived in England with her husband. Mariama, the second eldest of the three sisters, still lived at the countryside with her husband. Several of her children had been living in the family compound, for many years, one of them

already as soon as he was weaned, but others came to the urban area for schooling. One of her daughters had recently got married and stayed in the compound while she was waiting for her husband to come.

Omi's case was exceptional in two ways. First, it is rare to find a compound in that area of Bakau that is a pure family compound with no rooms to rent. In my compound survey, there were only two out of twenty-seven compounds that consisting of only relatives. Apart from one Serahuli compound there were no other compounds with so many grown up siblings living together. The second exception was Omi's persistence in remaining divorced and still living with her family. It was rather rare for women of her age to stay divorced for so long.

She narrated how she argued with her father when she had left her first husband when she was quite young. The father had ordered her to return to the husband, and she had said: "What are you going to do? Are you throwing me out to sleep in the streets?" Since then her father had let her do more or less as she wanted. She remained divorced until she met a European who invited her to come and live with him. When the woman came and asked to foster her daughter, she had made the decision to let her have the daughter after she had consulted her father who knew the woman's family.

Everybody in the compound was included in a large consumption unit. Omi's brothers' wives were cooking in turn five days each and the days their wives were cooking, husbands paid for the *ndewal*. When Omi had money she would accompany her brothers' wives to the market and pay for whatever they chose to cook.

Omi's brothers shared the collective costs of the compound. One paid for electricity, one for water and one for the latrine. Omi's father had a small shop inside the compound where he sold bread, sugar, tea, cigarettes, canned milk, etc.

Omi was very close to her parents. She had no job and depended on money from relatives, friends and others. Still she was generous any time she had money and she struggled to find money for medicine to her mother. On several occasions she took her mother to the hospital. Once she asked one of her brothers to help her with money for the mother's medicine. He refused, arguing that the father had money, and after all it was his wife.

Although Omi found life in Europe difficult, she argued that staying there made it possible for her to pay school fees for her daughters and help her brothers with their daily costs of living. She also became able to build a compound for her daughters in The Gambia.

## Chapter summary

The three cases discussed above, show the complex social organisation of child care. Several individuals and residence units cooperated about care for children. Household was a concept of little analytical value as several of the tasks associated with households were taken care of by people living far from the residence unit where the child was taken care of. One example was Omi, who left her daughters and the people in her family compound to go to Europe in order to be able to take better care of her daughters. Her departure from The Gambia may have looked as a detachment from the family or “de-kinning” of the relationship, but had the opposite intention and perhaps also effect.

When Binta lived with Omar and his two wives and with Kebba and her two co-wives after Omar’s death, Omar and Kebba were the heads of the residence units. Kebba spent most of the time abroad and during these periods, Binta had most of the responsibility for her daughters and herself. Over the years she “accumulated foster daughters” from friends and relatives (own brother and temporary from her husband’s brother). She also made the necessary connections with sponsors within her family (mainly her brothers) and with tourists, and succeeded in building her own compound.

Also in Mariama’s case, the husbands was only part-time member of the residence units, for long periods he did not contribute with his time or money to keeping up Mariama and the children who lived with her. Both in Binta and Mariama’s cases, there were combined strength and vulnerability, and shifts between being autonomous and dependant. At a time Mariama wanted divorce, her brother did not agree and promised to help her economically as long as she remained married. When Omar died, Omar and Kebba’s elder brother “up-river” made the decision about remarriage of Omar’s wives. Neither Omar’s nor Kebba’s wives were asked for their consent. At the age of 35, Mama, Omar’s eldest wife, left the decisions to her father. As Omar and Kebba’s mother was the sister of Mama’s father, it is likely that there were shared interest to keep the marital relations within the kin group. Protection and control seemed to be related, the autonomous periods came together with a lot of responsibility.

Omi got protection by staying in their family compound. Both she and her sister returned to their parental compound after divorce and illness, respectively and were taken care of. Since Omi had somewhere to stay and somebody to support her, it became possible for her to remain divorced for more than ten years. Several women would under similar

circumstances felt obliged to accept a marriage offer, not to be an economic burden to parents or siblings.<sup>117</sup>

Child care for Binta and her co-wives children were shared and temporarily transferred to foster parents “up-river”. When Binta and Aminata’s eldest daughters started secondary school, they came to stay with their mothers in Bakau. The fostering of children from friends seemed to be more permanent than grand parent fostering, but some children, such as Aminata’s two sons remained with grandparents until they grew up. The responsibility for these children seemed to be shared by a number of people.

In this chapter I have presented the ontology of kinship; the different sources of kinship and relatedness based on substances, practical parenting, classification and metaphorisation.

Irvine’s claim that biology is the only basis for kinship among the Wolof, is contested by the child fostering practices. Although genealogies never are replaced, they were expanded and foster-parents, -siblings and their relatives were included in their own kinship network. Mariama’s case, shows however how such relationships are produced, sustained and abandoned, depending on concrete situations. While Alhagie was Mariama’s son, both because he was her husband’s son and because she raised and fostered him as her own son, he abandoned Mariama when the conflicts between Mariama and his wife became too difficult.

In Binta’s case, she had close contact with co-wives and in-laws. As both her children and her co-wives’ children stayed with their husband’s kin for varying periods, the organisation of child care were primarily performed directly with the husband’s kin and not with her husband.

From the description about how people and money were constantly moving between individuals and residence units, it became clear that there was no bounded family unit that could be planned on a long term basis. If child fostering was an integrated part of the logic of child care, individual lack of money or capacity to care for a child, was obviously not a sufficient reason to avoid another child birth.

In the next chapter the phenomenon of child fostering is looked into in more detail with a particular focus on what is the reasons for fostering and what are the relations between givers and receivers of children and least but not last between foster parents and foster children. What does it imply to foster a child? What forms of belonging is there at the outset

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<sup>117</sup> Most women, like Binta and Mariama were major economic contributors, but in Omi’s case she had no paid work and only occasional sources of income.

and how is belonging produced through the process of practical parenting.





## Chapter 4 Child fostering – relations and situations

### *Prevalence of child fostering*

Child fostering is widespread in several parts of West Africa (See for example Alber, 2003a, Alber, 2003b, Alber, 2004, Bledsoe, 1990a, Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989, Bledsoe, 1995, Castle, 1995, Castle, 1996, Goody, 1973a, Goody, 1982, Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985, Isaac and Conrad, 1982, Schildkrout, 1973, Sommerfelt, 1999). Figures from the Pacific (fostering and adoption) seem even higher (See Baddeley, 1982, Betzig, 1988, Brady, 1976, Carroll, 1970, Mandeville, 1981). A 1983 census of the 56 households at Ifaluk, a Pacific Island, showed that just over 60% of the children of living Ifaluk men had adoptive parents (Betzig, 1988).<sup>118</sup>

As mentioned above and presented in Appendix 6 the prevalence of children fostered in were 15% for girls and 14% for boys in my compound survey. In the interviews 13 % or 8 of the 64 female children ever born to the interviewed women, were fostered out. For male children, 12 or 19% of the 73 boys were fostered out. 11 or 20% of totally 54 girls living with them were fostered in, and 10 or 16% of 61 boys presently staying with them were fostered in. Only nine of the 31 women had neither given or received any child for fosterage. Only two of the women had both received and given away a child.

Child fostering in The Gambia is frequent compared with adoption and fosterage in Western societies. Still, in a West African context, the figures for The Gambia seem quite modest. Alber reports that in certain areas of Benin, as many as 30% of the children were fostered out (Alber, 2003a). Child fostering numbers are counted in different ways and may be difficult to compare. As many of the fostering arrangements are temporary, the percentage of people that have been fostered at some time during their childhood may be higher than the frequency of children under 15 years fostered at any point of time. Alber (ibid.) found that in a Baatombu village 67% had been fostered out when they were children. In Ghana, E.N. Goody (1973) found that as 64% of Northern Gonja women and 53% of the men, had been under fosterage during childhood. 65% (20 of 31) of the interviewed Gambian women had been fostered for a period during their own childhood.

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<sup>118</sup> This may actually be the same frequency as in several parts of West Africa. As this counts adult men, it should be compared with frequencies for adults in West Africa.

In a Mende village in Sierra Leone, 39% of the children under 18 in the area were in-fosters and 34% were out-fosters at the time of the survey (Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989). Similar numbers from areas of Cameroon were 24.4 % (Page, 1989) and 9.0% in Northwest Nigeria (ibid.). Marris' (1966) data from Yorubas in Lagos shows that 29% of the children of household heads and 32% of children in all households were not living with their mothers.

### **Implications of fostering**

The implications of widespread fostering practices for understanding the management of fertility have been discussed by demographers, economists, anthropologists and others. (Castle, 1996) argues that child fostering presents conceptual problems for demographic theories of fertility decline that centre on an intensification of parental investment, and on changes in the direction of intergenerational wealth flows (Caldwell, 1977, Caldwell et al., 1992). In such cases of child fostering it is not the biological parents that spend the time and economic costs, and the model thus becomes misleading (Bledsoe, 1990b, Castle, 1996). Castle (1996: 193) also argues that child fostering poses interpretative problems for cultural anthropologists since it is generally assumed that kinship consists of socially recognised consanguinity and affinity (Cardoso, 1984). Castle argues that the social rather than biological construction of family size becomes difficult to accommodate in traditional kinship analysis of the domestic group.

Child fostering offers an opportunity to study parenthood separated from bodily relatedness (produced as biology in the West), which seems useful in attempts at understanding constructions of fertility. New reproductive technology, like in-vitro fertilisation and DNA tests challenging social parenthood may provide similar opportunities (See for example Carsten, 2000, Carsten, 2004, Strathern, 1992a, Strathern, 1992c).

Carsten and others have argued that one should look at other types of relatedness, not only kin relations. Still several of the socially produced kin relations are not created as new forms of relatedness – rather, they are cast in the kin idiom and expand to relations between people who were not originally related through kinship.

Child fostering may be considered as an extension of already broad kin categories, and represent a broad, socially constructed form of relatedness, in which conflicts and difficult situations may quickly bring about strong essentialist approaches. Suddenly the “same mother, same father” or “the mother or the father who bore me” become the only categories that count and all otherwise valid metaphorical extensions of sharedness become irrelevant.

While fostering practices show why own fertility does not seem all that important, the essentialism occurring on different occasions shows why it becomes important to be a birth parent anyway.

Child fostering arrangements come about to strengthen relations between birth and foster parents, to solve practical problems in child care, to get practical help, support for elderly people, and due to location in relation to schooling, economic problems and the like. This is discussed in detail in chapter five.

The frequency and taken for grantedness of child fostering should be evident from chapter three above. In this chapter, I focus on foster relations, show the dynamics in types of relations, situations and reasons given, and suggest some consequences of child fostering.

The most frequently given reasons were childlessness due to infertility or child death, parents' death or divorce, the mother got pregnant while breastfeeding or the child needed to move to attend school. Also assistance with care for children and support for aging grandparents were important reasons for fostering.

Although the material is limited, there are clear tendencies towards fostering to sisters of the birth parents rather than to brothers. I argue that the almost equal distribution of children to the birth mother's sister and to birth father's sister is an indication of bilateral/cognatic aspects of kinship rather than patrilinear principles. If patrilinear principles were dominant, one should have expected a larger proportion of children given to the birth father's side.

Another interesting feature of Gambian child fostering seem to be the individual aspects. Children are often given by individuals to individuals. In Cameroon (Notermans, 2007) and Kenya (Shell-Duncan, 1994), there are cases where women are encouraged to have children before marriage in order to make children for themselves, as children otherwise belong to the husband's patriline. With child fostering, a woman can receive a child from her sister or a friend that belongs mainly to her, and will remain with her in case of divorce.

Grandparent fostering is widespread and might be "motive" for involvement in married children's fertility. Large families and numbers of descendants may in itself be seen as beneficial, but grandparent fostering is a direct form of support in old age. Among the Baatombu in Benin (Alber, 2003a) where fostering relations were strictly regulated, the first child should stay with at person from the clan of the father, an aunt or an uncle, or a classificatory grandparent, The second child should go to the person who reared the birth mother, in most cases the social mother. The third should go to the family of the father and the fourth is the first child the parents are entitled to keep for themselves. In The Gambia

there are no such regulations, but grand parents who desired to foster a child would be likely to support high fertility to secure a child for themselves.

In addition to E.N. Goody's functional analysis of child fostering, there are also traditions following Lévi-Strauss and Mauss, arguing that child fostering may be seen as gift relationships between birth and foster parents and their kin groups (Lallemand, 1993). As I return to below, there are reasons to consider some of the child fostering as gift exchange while other cases must be interpreted differently. Some exchanges cannot be considered as gifts because of the temporary nature of the arrangements. In other cases, the receiver had asked or begged to have the child as a foster child in ways that are incompatible with gift exchanges.

Returning to Goody's (1982) classification, some of the foster arrangements could be classified in several categories at the same time. Kin fostering was often combined with educational fostering, crisis fostering etc.

### ***Relations of fostering***

There are four major categories of relationships where children are fostered. Firstly, children are fostered by siblings of both birth parents, secondly, children are fostered by grandparents, thirdly, by birth mother's co-wife, and finally by friends of the birth parents. In some cases, children are fostered by their own sisters or brothers or by a non-related fellow villager.

In kin fostering cases there seemed to be no need to explain why the child was fostered out (or in). Typical comments were: "We are all the same" (W: *nyun yep bena la*), "We are one blood" (W: *nyu boka derret*), or "We have same mother and/or father" (W: *nyungi boka yei ak bai*).

In the terms of W.H. Goodenough (1970), adoption and fosterage are analysed as transactions in parenthood because of its reallocation of parental rights and duties (as if they were property). In most of the kin fostering cases, the reallocation was only partial since these rights and duties were already shared. As described above, sisters and brothers of the parents are supposed to share rights and responsibilities towards children. Mother's sister is titled mother or "small mother" and father's brothers are called father or "small father". When a child is given to mother's sister, they have already shared rights and obligations towards the child, it is the main responsibility for the child and the right to make major decisions on her behalf that is transferred.

When a child was given to a friend of one of the parents, the child was often already his or her namesake (*toma*) and had received gifts or had been sponsored prior to the transfer. Few children thus were transferred to foster parents who were totally strange to them. Neither did the transfer imply any abrupt change in the child's kinship identity. Birth relations were always acknowledged and the child's genealogy was never changed. The children inherited property from birth parents and rarely from foster parents. Over time, kin relationships were produced between the child and the foster parents. A foster mother could become the most important mother, but the birth mother was always acknowledged and generally referred to with respect.

The central ideas of sharing in kinship and child fostering among Mandinka and Wolofs are of two different types. The first type of sharing is *boka* in Wolof, meaning having something in common and being related.<sup>119</sup> The other concept is *sedo* or *walla*, meaning to distribute.<sup>120</sup> While the first idea involves sharing and keeping what is shared, the other is to share in the sense of transferring what one has. When parents live with kin in extended units, it is possible to share rights and responsibilities towards the children without transferring them. When relatives or friends living elsewhere become foster parents, some of the responsibilities and rights over the child must be transferred temporarily or permanently.

My compound survey and interviews were designed for purposes other than establishing frequency of different child fostering relations. Thus my data cannot be used to establish any absolute frequency of fostering. Firstly, the compound survey was based on information from only one person in each compound. As this person did not have detailed information of kin relationships for the all residents, the out-fostering data was too arbitrary to be included. As other data indicate, fostering to rural grandparents was frequent and if out-fostering from urban areas were excluded, the frequency of grandparent fostering would be underestimated. The interviewed women were mostly between twenty and forty years of age, hence there were few grandchildren that could have been fostered in, so from this source also, grandparent fostering was underestimated. The frequency of grandparent fostering in this material is thus probably far lower than the frequency would have been in a national census and from interviewing women in a wider age range.

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<sup>119</sup> Such as sharing blood, parents, *xed*, class, neighbourhood etc.

<sup>120</sup> When people say "thank you" for a gift in Wolof, the reply is often "*sa walla*", meaning "your share" or "*you chi boka*" meaning that you were already a part of it.

The most striking aspect of the findings presented in the table above is the high rate of fostering to birth mother's sister. This represents an emphasis on cognatic kinship in an area of West Africa where patrilineality seems to be overemphasised. The low level of fostering to father's brother is similarly striking. Fostering to grand parents is likely to be underestimated in the survey data as many children with parents living in the urban area stay with their grandparents in the rural areas. Due to inaccurate information these data were excluded from the table. Another feature is fostering to mothers' co-wives. This practice is little documented, but has also been observed by others in The Gambia (Hough, 2006).

### **Fostering to birth parents' sisters and brothers**

Sisters of the birth parents are the most frequent receivers of children for fostering. Although there may be concrete reasons for the transfers, many of these fostering arrangements did not seem to need any further explanation. Sisters and brothers who have been raised together, are considered to be similar or "the same", in the sense that they have inherited the same substances and have the same habits (*jiko*). The way they were expected to bring up a child was thus likely to be similar.

These ideas were expressed in an interview with a Fula woman who had given several children for fostering. Her second eldest child (13) was given to her elder sister when he was three years old.

For her to take care of him only (W: *tier ko rek*), bring him up (W: *yarr*). You know, she and I, we have the same father, same mother. If I give him to her, she will bring him up, that's nothing.<sup>121</sup>

Two of her sons were given to her husband's elder sister in Guinea when they were four and seven years old. The reason she gave was:

They [her husband and his sister] have the same father and mother (W: *nyungi mboka ndei ak bai*).

She also emphasised that giving children was good for the relationship:

The more is given, the more mutual liking is it between you. (W: *bu la ko joche, mo genna bugante rek*)

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<sup>121</sup> *Tier ko* literally means to hold him.

Several of the women I talked to about fostering children to close kin felt the same way. The strengthening of such relationships through giving children was explicit in their response. Giving a child to somebody is a generous act and also a sign of trust. However, in order to show confidence in the foster parents and signify the intention of letting the child stay permanently with them, birth parents should not visit the child and its foster parents too frequently. If the child returns to its birth parents or complains about its foster parents, the birth parents should encourage the child to return to foster parents, if not it might look as if birth parents did not really want to give the child away (See also Notermans, 2007).

When children were fostered to birth parents' siblings, they often stayed with them until they grew up. Such a fostering situation was described by a Wolof woman who had given her eldest daughter to her elder sister when the girl was three. She used the expression that she shared (out) the daughter (W: *damma ko sedo*)<sup>122</sup>. She said she pitied her sister because she had no daughter. Now the sister was responsible for everything, the birth mother did not sponsor her and did not wish to involve herself in decisions about her, not even choice of marriage partner. Sommerfelt (1999) describes fostering situations where the bride wealth was given to the girl's foster parents rather than to the birth parents.

Some of these fostering arrangements can be likened to gift exchange. However, these gifts are rarely given in order to create new relationships, but rather to strengthen already existing bonds. In order to qualify Lallemand's (1993) suggestions that child fostering can replace exchange of women in strategic building of alliances, one would need more in-depth follow up of the content of the exchange relationships involved. When children are given to the father's sister, the receiver could possibly be the child's future in-law. I am however, not aware of fostering arrangements that are intended to become future marriage alliances, such as Lallemand describes, or as the *Doglientiri* relationship described from Ghana (Meier, 1999).

It is striking that children are given to women, to mother's and father's sisters, rather than to their brothers. One explanation is that small children mostly are taken care of by women, and if children are given to a parent's brother, it will be the brother's wife, who is not a kinsperson, that will take care of the child.

The frequency of giving children to mother's sister for fostering shows the strong cognatic aspects in the kinship "system". If the patrilineal principles were strong and the

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<sup>122</sup> *Seda* means to give a share of something, *sedale* means to share out.

children belonged totally to the father's patriline, as argued by Weil, one would expect objections against such practices.

### **Fostering to grand parents**

Grandparent fostering is widespread throughout Africa (Alber, 2003b, Alber, 2004, Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989, Ingstad, 2004, Whyte et al., 2004, Young et al., 2000).

Many of the inhabitants of Bakau are first-generation migrants, and their children were fostered to grandparents in the rural areas. Binta's case illustrates some of the dynamics involved. First the husband moved to Bakau, after a while both Binta and her co-wife moved there while their children remained with their father's mother. After some time Binta brought one of her daughters, and some years later her other daughter came to attend secondary school. For Binta's co-wife, all the three children remained with their grandmother. The co-wife's son went to Bansang to attend secondary school, but returned to his grandmother and their family compound when school was finished. As a grown up he married and settled in the compound while his younger brother moved to Bakau. After Omar died and Kebba went on labour migration, three of Mama's children went to stay with their grandparents; two of them lived with the paternal grandparents while one of them lived with her maternal grandparents.

When the children were small and their mothers were working, the benefit was that school fees were lower in rural areas and the children were looked after while their mothers went to work. This was not considered as a permanent fostering arrangement, however, but rather fostering as a solution to a specific problem. The birth mothers sent clothes, school materials and sometimes school fees for the children. In other cases, children stay with grandparents in order to look after them and keep them company.

In the urban area there were a lot of "semi-fostering" arrangements where children stay with grandparents during the day time and also frequently spend the night or the weekends there.

Among the Baatombu of Benin, Alber (2004) found that women had central roles and rights in child fostering, mainly as paternal aunts and grandmothers<sup>123</sup> Alber argues:

...women should not be understood only in the roles of mothers, wives, aunts and sisters, as Meier insists, but also grandmothers who can take on foster-children and, thus engage in the a "politics of fostering" ..., I think that the question of fosterage

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<sup>123</sup> P. (Feldmansavelsberg, 1995)



and foster-parent roles has to be taken more into account in the discussion about grandparents in Africa. (Alber 2004: 31)

With focus on implications for fertility, one should not underestimate how grandparent fostering may give parents an interest in the fertility of their children, since in the Gambian context, a certain number of children may be necessary in order to secure a child for the grand parents. Women may thus feel the need to involve themselves and have some agency in the fertility of daughters and daughters-in-law. Direct involvement may, however, be difficult as they may live far apart.

### **Fostering to co-wives**

There were several cases where children were given to co-wives. Cases of co-wife fostering are rarely reported in literature on fostering from elsewhere, but is confirmed in other parts of The Gambia (Hough, 2006).

In one case a man had four wives, three were infertile and the youngest wife had four children. She gave one child to each of her co-wives for fostering. They all lived in the same compound and each wife had a separate room she shared with her children. The foster mothers had taken on full responsibility for the children and their birth mother was not involved in their upbringing. When the youngest of the four boys died before he was a year old, the eldest brother approached his birth mother and said: “Mom, you can relax now because you have no more children!”

Luckily, it did not take her long before she gave birth to another child. For a period she was “childless”, partly as a result of her extraordinary generosity towards her co-wives. It is not clear whether it was her or her husband’s decision to give the children to her co-wives. Still, all her children lived in the same compound and they were all aware that she was their birth mother. The boy’s comment was recognition of the double source of motherhood and the ambivalence involved.

In another case, children were given to the co-wife for fostering during an acute crisis. A Mandinka woman was married to a man who spent most of the time with his first wife in a village five kilometres from Bakau. There was a time when he rarely came to visit her and the children and she had no money. Even the rice she had, she could not cook since she could not buy firewood. One day, she took two of the children and went to see her husband. She told him that since he never came to see his children and took no responsibility for them, she would leave them with him (and thus with his co-wife) for him (them) to take care of the

children. She went back to Bakau and after some time he came to ask her if she did not want the children back. She refused and they remained with the husband and the co-wife. Some years later when the conditions had changed and she was in a better position to support the children, I asked her if she would like to have them back. She replied that she could not do that as the children were given to her co-wife. One of her daughters was temporarily fostered by her brother during a period of economic problems and her mother could not pay her school fees. When her economic situation improved, she went to her brother to have her daughter back. This reclaiming of the daughter seemed to be unproblematic.

As described in the chapter about marriage, the relationships between co-wives were often very delicate. In such relationships with potentially high levels of tension, it seemed highly inappropriate to reclaim a child that was already given up for fostering. In other, and less tense, relationships it was easier to ask for the child's return.

### **Fostering to birth parents' friends**

Among children that are fostered by non-relatives, most of them are fostered by a friend of one of the parents. Almost every Gambian child is named after a relative or friend of the child's parents.<sup>124</sup> It is considered an honour to have a child named after oneself and already at the name-giving ritual, the baby's namesake (*toma*) is expected to give (generous) gifts. When a child is named after a friend, it may be the first step on the road to fostering. Some *tomas* give the child money or clothes on ritual occasions and some also sponsor the child's education, initiation rituals and the like, even if the child lives with its parents. For *tomas* who already sponsor a child, child fostering may be the endpoint of a process where rights and responsibilities have become gradually transferred. Fostering may have been planned for a long time or come suddenly as a solution to a problem or a crisis.

One of Binta's colleagues had named her daughter after Binta, and when her husband died the *toma* moved in with Binta. Binta took full responsibility for the child. According to Binta, some of the girl's father's family had wanted to take care of her, but the husband had made it clear before he died that he wanted the child to live with Binta.

In one case a woman named her daughter after another woman, as a tribute and an attempt to create harmony and remove tension that had occurred between them. She argued that she had named the girl after the woman for them all to be "one family" (W: *yep neka bena njobot*). When the child grew older her mother told the woman that she could come and

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<sup>124</sup> Some also name their child after a famous person, such as a politician, artist or religious leader.

get the child any time she wanted. In spite of the generous offer, the woman never went to collect her *toma* for fostering. The offer may have been a too generous gift for such a weak relationship.

## **Situations**

Above, I have discussed some of the aspects of the relationship between birth parents and the foster parents. In some of these relationships, such as between close kin and among friends, little explanation for fostering was needed. However, there were several situations where explicit reasons for transferring the child were given. The most frequently mentioned reason was infertility or childlessness. Secondly, children were given for fostering when parents divorced or died. Most men and women remarry after becoming widowed or divorced. If the child's mother dies, the children may be taken care of by the father and his wife/wives or be fostered by other relatives. When the father dies, the mother sometimes brings her children into her next marriage or they are given up for fostering. It was argued that not all husbands appreciated being given the responsibility for another man's children. The third reason given for fostering was *burodingo/nef*, which is described in chapters five and six. When a woman became pregnant during breastfeeding, the milk was often considered harmful to the baby and the baby was often weaned early. In such cases it was also frequently fostered by relatives. There are also other practical reasons for fostering, such as living near a secondary school, economic matters or working mothers' need for assistance in taking care of their children.

In the survey data, the most frequent reason for transfer of children was infertility and childlessness. Childless women or couples always received children from relatives, friends, co-wives or neighbours. All the childless women who were organised in the *Kanyaleng kafo*, had one or more children to foster. Fostering to infertile and childless women or couples in most cases represented permanent transfers. It was argued that infertile and childless people took very good care of the children, as they would have a strong desire for children and there was no risk that any birth children would be treated better than the foster children.

## **Infertility**

When foster parents were infertile, it was normally expected that the child was given permanently for fostering. People give children to infertile persons because they pity them, and it would be considered cruel to take the children back. When foster parents have no child on their own, people may feel more confident that the child is treated well. One Mandinka

man said he would never give a child to anybody but an infertile person. He believed that parents would always give priority their own children. In his words, if he had one coin to give one of his children for lunch, he would always give it to his birth children.

### **Remarrying after divorce or death of spouses**

After divorce or death of a spouse, most men and women remarry. According to Sommerfelt (1999), girls often stay with their mothers, boys with their fathers. The number of divorces I knew about was too low to come to any conclusions. There were cases where both girls and boys remained with their mothers and cases where girls and boys stayed with their father. When women remarried, they frequently left their children with kin or friends for fostering. The argument was that the new husband might not want to take responsibility for a child that was not his (or his kin). Practices of sororate and levirate marriage seemed to solve these kinds of problems as the child would already be classified as the child of his father's brother or mother's sister. When Omar died and his brothers married his wives, all the children were taken care of by men who were already classified as their fathers. Already, they also had had rights and obligations towards the children.

When Binta's *toma*'s father died, she got custody over the *toma* from the time when the mother remarried. In addition, Kaddie, whose fostering relations are described below, got to foster Njimma when her mother remarried.

### **Pregnancy during breastfeeding**

The situation of *burundingo* is discussed in detail in chapters five and six. Children often stay with grandparents during weaning and when a mother becomes pregnant during breastfeeding, the weaning often takes place earlier than it otherwise would. It is not unusual that weaned children remained with their grandparents also after weaning was accomplished. In some cases *burte* was given as the reason for transfer.

### **Economic and other practical reasons**

Children were also fostered out because of practical problems. Parents, sisters and brothers were most often fostering a child for a period under the assumption that the parents could take the child back if circumstances changed. Children who were sent to relatives for schooling

were not shared out permanently to those who fostered them, but stayed with them until the schooling was finished.

There were also economic reasons why children lived with grandparents. In towns, school expenses were higher and meals cost more than in the countryside. When children started secondary school they often moved from the village to a bigger town, either back to their parents, as was the case with Binta and Aminata's daughters, or from parents to other relatives in town, such as Omi's sister's children.

Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe (1989) argue that grandmothers may ask to take care of a grandchild to give themselves better grounds to ask for economic support from their children. Grandparents were also given children to help them in the house, run errands and to keep them company. From the child's parents' point of view this may be a way of fulfilling obligations towards their own parents, without investing too much time.

## Education

As mentioned above, education was one of the most frequent reasons for fostering. Young children were at times sent to grandparents or other relatives in the villages because the costs were lower in the urban areas. When children started secondary or middle school, they moved to the urban areas.

The *almudos* represented a special form of education and fostering arrangement. Boys were sent to live with and be educated by a Muslim scholar (*oustaz*). They were taught the *Qur'an* and it was not unusual that they also had to work for the teacher. These kinds of arrangements in the urban areas had a bad reputation because the *almudos* spent substantial amounts of time begging money and food for themselves and their teacher. Many of the boys were very badly dressed and hungry and actually got little training.

Two brothers had been sent to live with an *oustaz* to learn the *Qur'an* and later become *oustazes* themselves. One of them was five, the other six years old when they left their birth parents. Their mother, a Wolof woman, sent money and clothes for them when she saw somebody going to villages where the boys stayed. At the time of the interview, she had not seen them for two years. Since maltreatment of the *almudos* was a hot political issue at the time, I was wondering if she was worried about her sons. According to her, the boys did not go begging as the urban students did. Apart from fetching water for their own bath they did not work. There was a woman in the compound who cooked for them and when they had eaten, they sat down to learn. Although their father had decided to send the boys to the *oustaz*,

she supported his decision fully. They were supposed to stay there until they graduated at the age of 17 or 18.

### **Relationship between foster parents and foster children (*domi jitle du dom*)**

The relationship between foster parents and foster children varied. The ideology was, however, not that the relations necessarily should be easy. According to Bledsoe, among the Mende of Sierra Leone, a child who had experienced hardship during childhood was more likely to succeed later in life than a spoilt child. A similar idea seemed to prevail in The Gambia, although nobody wanted a child to be maltreated.

One Mandinka woman said: “It depends, my father’s second wife took good care of me, but his third wife beat me and gave me problems”. The father’s second wife had fostered her because the parents were divorced. A Fula woman, who had been living with her father’s two other wives after he divorced her mother, reported a similar experience. She said that one of the wives had been nice to her while the other had been nasty.

A couple of informants reported that foster parents had treated them badly. One woman, who stayed with her grandmother for a while, received her food only after the other children in the compound had finished eating. She became very skinny and when her parents came to visit, they took her back to stay with them.

One Mandinka man said his father’s wife treated him badly. When his father was travelling, she spent all the money his father sent for his school fees on her own children. As a result, he was dismissed from school.

Other women said they loved and knew their foster mother more than their own mother. One Wolof woman had been brought up by her mother’s younger sister since she was little. She had never really known her birth mother since she died when she was 6 years old. The only upbringing (W: *yarr*) she knew was that of her mother’s sister, and she was pleased with it.

There is a Gambian saying that if a person treated his/her own children better than his/her foster children, the foster child would have more success later in life. Informants interpreted this as an attempt to counteract the tendency to treat one’s own children better than others. One man, who was very nice to his foster daughter, was believed to do so because he was afraid that unless he was kind to her, his own children would never have any success.

Later, the man married his foster daughter and the interpretations of his kindness for her changed.

The emotional relationships between parents and children were to my knowledge rarely an issue for discussion. It is likely that frequent changes of main care giver may affect a person's ability to create bonds with other people. As there seem to be many kin and affines involved in social interaction and units of care for children frequently shifts, it seems adaptive to be able to make connections with a large number of people and not be too attached to one single person.

According to one informant, her foster mother, who was her mother's younger sister loved her too much to see her frequently. She knew that she had some difficulties with her husband it was too painful for the foster mother to see it.

## **Decisions about fostering**

More insight into the decision making surrounding child fostering would have been very useful for a fuller understanding of Gambian child fostering. Unfortunately, that was not in focus during data collection. However, several of the decisions and concerns surrounding child fostering seemed to be individualised. In the interviews, some of the decisions seemed to have been made by the women themselves, others by their husband. If a woman received a child from a relative, it did not seem to be an issue for a debate with the husband. Children were given to individuals, although the responsibility for the child could be shared with a number of others as was also the case with birth children.

Although several of my informants said that child fostering decisions were made jointly by the birth parents, there were cases where one parent was reluctant and even disagreed. One example was a man who had given his six-year-old girl to his sister because she needed help in the house. When he was absent, his wife went to take the child back. The wife had explained that she had come to take the girl to an initiation (*nyaakaa boyoo*), but she did not return the girl when the ritual was over. The woman who had been given the child, interpreted this as if the child's mother regretted giving the daughter to her. Collecting the child to take her to the initiation ritual was more an insult than an excuse, since it implied distrust in the intentions of the foster mother to take full responsibility for the child, including taking the girl for initiation.

One girl lived with her father's sister for six years in Bansang and went to school there. The girl's father wanted her to stay there, but her mother did not like it. There was a

compromise, no argument. After six years, she returned to her birth mother. Although the woman did not want to foster out her own daughter, she found the idea of child fostering principally beneficial.

Resistance against giving a child away was, however, rarely expressed openly. Doing so could be interpreted as lack of generosity and unwillingness to share. According to Perminow (1996), Tongan (Pacific) parents were allowed to cry and show their feeling of loss for approximately two weeks. If a woman cried for longer periods, she might be seen as somebody who did not want to share her children with others. In The Gambia it was considered inappropriate to cry over a child that was given away.

Some of the child fostering arrangements were considered as temporary by all parties involved, while in other cases the birth parents rearranged fostering arrangements, sometimes to the great surprise of the foster parents, such as in Kaddie's case below.

Kaddie's case below illustrate two main points. Firstly, one of the child fostering arrangements she was involved in was unexpectedly rearranged by the children's birth father. Secondly, most of the children she fostered were primarily her responsibility, rather than jointly with her husband, and most of the children belonged to her kin and acquaintances rather than to her husband's.

## **Kaddie**

Kaddie, a forty year old Mandinka woman, had several child fostering experiences, both as a child and as a foster mother for several children. When she was five, she moved from her birth parents "up-river" to Gunjur to stay with her mother's elder sister who had no children. When Kaddie was eight, her mother's sister died, and she returned to her birth mother. Two years later, her birth mother died and for five years, she stayed with her mother's younger brother and her grandmother in Bakau. The grandmother was the one who cared for her. The last few years before she got married at seventeen, she lived with relatives in Soma.

In her first marriage Kaddie first had a son who died before he was a week old, later she gave birth to two girls. When she got divorced, the two girls remained with her. In her second marriage she had a son and daughter. In 1992, her eldest daughters were sixteen and fourteen, the boy was twelve and the youngest daughter was nine. Her youngest daughter stayed with an elder sister (Kaddie's husband's daughter with his former wife). The elder sister needed her help looking after the small children after school.



Four years earlier one of Kaddie's brother's wives had died and left him with baby twins. The twins stayed with their mother's sister for some time, but when one of the twins was admitted to the hospital, Kaddie stayed there with her. When the child recovered, Kaddie's brother transferred the girls to Kaddie and her husband. She took care of everything for the girls, including taking them to the *nyaakaa* initiation ritual. Still, one day the brother came just like that and moved the girls to their mother's brother in Soma. Kaddie said she had been disappointed that he did that, after all she had done for them. He did not seem grateful for what she had done, and she interpreted the transfer as criticism of her way of caring for the girls. Taking care of baby twins was not an easy task, while anybody would like to have two young girls to help them with household tasks. In the three years that had passed from when the brother took the girls until I discussed the matter with Kaddie, she had seen them only twice. When she last saw them, their hair was not combed nor plaited, as if their new foster parents did not give them proper care.

At that time, Kaddie had another girl to foster, Njimma, who was Kaddie's husband's daughter's daughter. Njimma's mother came and stayed with Kaddie when she was still breastfeeding. When she weaned Njimma, she left her with Kaddie and went to her new husband. As the husband was not Njimma's birth father, she did not want to bring the girl into her new marriage. Njimma's mother died shortly after she had given birth to her second child. In 1992 Kaddie was also responsible for Momodou, the son of one of her other brothers. Since the brother left for Italy, Kaddie had been responsible for his wife and two of their children. She said, "Don't you see, I don't buy clothes for myself"; instead she had to buy clothes for all the children. Her brother sent money occasionally, both for Kaddie and his wife and children.

In 1998 Kaddie had got another foster daughter. The girl was four years old and had been abandoned by her mother. The little girl was very attached to Kaddie and followed her wherever she went. In 2007 Kaddie's *toma* also lived with her. "Small Kaddie" was one of her brother's daughters.

The children Kaddie took care of were given to her in the capacity of being the children's father's sister, grandmother and neighbour. She represented her brother and took care of her brother's wife as if she was her husband (according to Sommerfelt *W:njekke* means female *jekerr*, i.e. female husband). The children came to her due to parents' death, remarriage, labour migration and maltreatment (ignorance).

## **Discussion**

On one hand, Kaddie seemed to have a lot of agency in mothering and fostering in the sense that her two eldest daughters remained with her after she got divorced from their father, secondly she took on a lot of responsibility and “accumulated” foster children in spite of her difficult economic situation. Apart from Njimma, who was the husband’s grandchild, and her own daughter who was fostered by her husband’s daughter, all the children were Kaddie’s kin or otherwise “her people”. One could argue that Kaddie made children for herself and for her family, however, there were several similarities with the way Binta, Mariama and Omi took care of their own birth children. When these women turned to their brothers and got money because the husbands (in Omi’s case ex-husband) failed to provide sufficiently for their children, one could argue that they nurtured the children by and into their own kin group. Still, in juridical contexts, this would not have been a valid argument as, according to the Cadi of Bundung, women’s sponsoring of their children was voluntary. However, in cases of fosterage, the child did not belong to the father, but to the person the child was given to. In both ways the nurturing and caring were “risky” investments in the sense that the husband or the birth parents could claim the birth and the foster children respectively at any time. However, asking to have a fostered child back was considered highly inappropriate, and probably the reason why Kaddie was so angry about it. Kaddie had invested a lot of care and money in her brother’s twins and was disappointed and provoked because the brother all of a sudden came and took the girls and gave them to their mother’s brother.

In this chapter I have explored the logic of child fostering and suggested some implications for kinship and for management of fertility.

### **Chapter summary**

Child fostering is deeply incorporated into the social organisation and people are made kin through fostering practices. As illustrated by Kaddie’s and Mariama’s cases it is clear that foster relations are more vulnerable than birth relations. On the other hand, as they are achieved and thus “deserved” through an effort, there is an additional dimension to the relationship; it is not only inborn “sharedness.” Still, there is a tendency that foster relationships are easier abandoned than the birth relationships. In cases where a man marries his foster-daughter or -sister, the foster relation assumes a quasi-kinship character for the sake of marriagability.

The sisters of the birth parents are the most frequent receivers of children, in addition to grand parents. According to my material, fostering on the birth mother’s side is as frequent

as fostering on the birth father's side, indicating the bilateral aspects of kinship. When a woman fosters a child from her sister or for a friend, the child is "produced" for herself rather than for her husband's patriline. In the case of divorce these children would most likely remain with her, rather than with her husband.

Lallemand suggests that child exchange may assume the character of gift exchange in a Levi-Straussian way, where the child exchange contributes in alliance making. Gambian children are exchanged in the same relationships where spouse exchange takes place. This is the case where a child is given to the birth father's sister or to the mother's brother. But children are also exchanged in relations where no marital exchange would take place, mainly to mother's sister, but also to father's brother. Generally, child exchange may function the same way as gift exchange, as a comment from one of the interviewed women in relation to child fostering suggests: "the more that is given between you, the more liking/love (*bogante*) there is." Although exchange of children in many cases contributed to strengthening relationships between kin or friends, be it the purpose or not, there were also foster arrangements that more resembled help to solve child care problems. The temporality of some of the child fostering arrangements also seemed contrary to the gift logic.

As long as there is a demand for foster children, there is no reason to avoid having a baby because of limited capacity to take care of a child. As children and resources, and in some cases men, are moved (move) between residence units, there is no permanent bounded unit to be planned. Widespread child fostering practices thus seem contrary to the logic of family planning through the use of contraceptives. As discussed in the next two chapters, the need for use of contraceptives and spacing or avoiding births are rather based on concerns for the health and well being of the woman and her breast feeding baby, than on a need to plan families.

Similarly, the almost unstoppable attempts of some infertile and sub-fertile women to give birth to a child, must be found in their own desire to become pregnant and give birth, rather than becoming a mother. Most infertile women had got several children to foster, but it rarely seemed to compensate fully for the need to have their own birth child. The "struggles" of the infertile women are discussed in detail in chapter seven.



## **Part III Managing fertile and infertile bodies and relations**



This part of the thesis deals with the management of fertile and infertile bodies. The ontology of kinship, parenthood and the social organisation of childcare were presented in Part Two. People became parents through a number of different practices and there were numerous kinsmen and -women involved in the care for children. Accordingly, there were few stable entities, rather there were individual women and men with their family network of activated kin and affines. As there was no bounded family unit that could be planned and no family unit that made such plans, management of fertility had to be based on principles other than producing a family with a desired number of children. In chapter six I argue that the need to space or postpone births were based on concerns for the woman's health and reproductive capacity as discussed by (Bledsoe and Banja, 2002) and the health of the breastfed child. In order to understand the rationale for maternal and child's health care, one needs to know more about the local health discourses and the cosmologies/ontologies involved. Two major discourses about bodies, health and well being, conceptualised as Western people's medicine (*Toubabo boro*) and "black people's medicine" (*mo fing boro*), are presented in chapter five. As the latter principles seem to be better integrated in the dominant local discourses than Western medicine, one may ask what consequences this has for management of fertility. In chapter six I investigate knowledge and perceptions of Western and local contraceptives and motives for using them. To what extent should the compound, the spouses or the individual be seen as decision making entities and how does dominant discourse about appropriate levels of fertility and spacing of children contribute to processes of subjection discussed in the introduction? Should use of contraceptives without the husband's knowledge be considered as subversive or counter-hegemonic activities?

Problems with infertility, subfertility and frequent infant deaths were frequently addressed through prayers, mostly during visits to sacred places and participation in the *Kanyaleng kafo*. One of the reasons why Western medicine was rarely applied in infertility matters was that few services were available. Secondly, the matters were often attributed to Allah's will or plans, disturbances made by jinns or marabouts, all well integrated in black people's medicine. The identification of specific sources of the problems were at times decisive to the choice of cures, but there were also situations where a number of cures and solutions were sought, irrespective of the rationale behind them (biomedicine, Islam, rituals etc.). One could argue that providers of health services, cures and increased luck or well-being provide their services within relatively pure discursive contexts (either bio-medicine or a specific direction of "black people's medicine") while the users of these services frequently have a rather pragmatic and eclectic approach.

Although men may sponsor and support various efforts to enhance health, luck or fertility, it seems that seeking solutions to fertility problems basically is female task. Men may accompany women to sacred places or doctors, but participation in the *Kanyaleng* rituals is only for women. The Kanyaleng ritual had been interpreted as a “ritual of rebellion”, ritual of status reversal, and may be seen as a counter-hegemonic ritual. In chapter eight I discuss various attempts to cure and manage fertility problems, and in that context I also discuss to what extent it makes sense to see the Kanyaleng ritual as a counter-hegemonic ritual and also whether the ritual activities may serve as a form of re-subjection.



## Chapter 5 Reproductive health and child survival

This chapter presents the background for women's attempts to affect their fertility and reproductive capacity through a number of locally administered preventive and curing measures. As my informants considered several possible causes for reproductive problems, most of them took care of their health, wellbeing, fortune and prosperity by applying a mixture of measures belonging to different discourses and types of logics.<sup>125</sup> In general, lay people tended to make a clear distinction between "black people's medicine" (*mo fɪŋ boro*) and "Western people's medicine" (*toubabo boro*), but people's health seeking behaviour involved combining such measures in a number of ways. *Mo fɪŋ boro* rested mainly on Muslim theology, but also on pagan beliefs and practices, while *toubabo boro* was based on bio-medicine. Generally, *mo fɪŋ boro* was better integrated into Gambian "folk models" about bodies, health and well being than *toubabo boro*. The difference in integration into overall ontologies seemed to have consequences for the application of these services. When a contraceptive method from the Gambia Family Planning Association failed, there was little bio-medical knowledge to draw on to explain and rectify the failure, in contrast with the *alkunuto* from the marabouts, where the reasons for potential failure were relatively well-known.

Most of the providers of *mo fɪŋ boro* were individual marabouts, while *toubabo boro* was provided by public and private health institutions, NGOs (Gambia Family Planning Association) and private doctors and pharmacies. *Toubabo boro* was used as a common term for Western bio-medical approaches to health, represented by formal health care services, represented by private or public providers as well as NGOs.

When ethno-medicine was introduced to categorise local aetiology in what later became medical anthropology, the intention was to give more value to local explanations of illness and misfortune. Anthropologists interested in illness explanations and treatment of illness in Africa, have discussed how best to understand and classify non-western, non-biomedical ways of explaining and dealing with illness. It has also been discussed to what extent it is possible and useful to distinguish a separate domain of thoughts and actions that one could call "medical systems" or "explanatory models of illness" (Comaroff, 1981, Foster, 1976, Kleinman, 1978, Pool, 1994, Westerlund, 1989). All societies have explanations for

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<sup>125</sup> Some health professionals were very sceptical about some of the medicine given out by *moros* and some orthodox Muslim scholars distanced themselves first and foremost from some of the practices of *moros* who involved themselves with witches, devils and making harmful medicine with destructive effect to other humans.

illness that are more or less rooted in their overall cosmology. The apparent close relationship between these models or systems and cosmologies has led to suggestions that understanding explanations of illness and ways of dealing with it, may give access to a wider understanding of the society. As will be clear in this chapter, the “black people’s medicine” is more closely related to local cosmologies or dominant discourses than Western medicine is. This close relationship also makes it difficult to separate explanations of illness from more general religious beliefs, or what Gramsci calls dominant perceptions of life. I find it useful to consider Western Medicine or “black people’s medicine” as two (or more) different discourses, based on different set of assumptions.

Below I present some of the main assumptions involved in *mo fɪng boro* relevant to management of sexuality, fertility and reproductive health. I also describe the main actors (institutions and individuals) involved in service provision. At the end of the chapter I present the most relevant institutions providing health and family planning services based on a bio-medical model. The practical and eclectic application of these services is spelled out in chapter six and seven.

### **“Black people’s medicine”**

*Mo fɪng boro* involved a number of explanations for human conditions, varying from causes for ill health, luck or love to explanations of mental retardation or children’s death. Causes and cures varied a lot and some of the most relevant of these are discussed below. The ontological basis of *mo fɪng boro* is Islam and other local beliefs and it was performed by Muslim scholars and other healers. Conceptually, all kind of healers could be addressed with the common term *moro*, but the degree to which they adhered to “correct” Islam was constantly debated. Those who strictly followed the *Qur’an* were referred to as *moro-kitab* (lit. “*moro* of the book”) (Wittrup, 1992). The difference between various kinds of marabouts was not so much their ontological position, but rather their practices. They all shared a belief in Allah and most of them also recognised the existence of jinns, witches and also the extraordinary powers of some humans. Some marabouts claimed to be assisted by jinns, others offered clients to drive away the witches that were haunting them or to counteract magic spells induced by other marabouts, while others did not involve themselves in such services and claimed to stick to prayers to Allah and use of Koranic verses.

Below I present informants’ perceptions of reproductive health and well being as an interaction of bodily and spiritual phenomena, mostly within a context of *mo fɪng boro*.

## Procreation

Informants saw conception as a result of mixing substances through sexual intercourse. The mixed fluids would, however, only result in a baby if Allah consented (*ni Allah sonta*). The bodily fluids that became mixed during intercourse were interchangeably referred to as blood (*yello*), sperm (*manio*) or water (*jio*). No distinctions were made between the fluids from the woman and from the man. When the child was born it was considered to have gotten blood from its mother and father through the process of conception.

Women were not very sure about what happened during the period between conception and birth. The mixed liquids seemed to harden (W: *defa degerr*) and become like stone (W: *heer*) or ice (W: *ice*). Around the fourth or fifth month it started moving. Among the interviewed women, some said they had no idea about what the embryo looked like, others said it looked like a lizard (*basso*) or a small cat (W: *moose bu ndaw*). One woman argued that boys looked like lizards, and girls like frogs (*toto*). Some of these explanations were based on experiences with spontaneous abortions. One woman, who had assisted her brother's wife during a spontaneous abortion said it looked like the toy cat my son was playing with.<sup>126</sup>

When fertility failed, most of the efforts were therefore directed towards getting Allah's mercy (*balafaa*) so he would give a living baby.

## Allah's acceptance

Allah's consent was considered to be of major importance for reproduction and child survival. A person's fate was supposed to be written in Allah's book (*Allah le y'a saffe*). If a person or a couple could not have a child or many children died, it was often said to be Allah's plan. One of the elder members of the *Kanyaleng* group said that if Allah did not give you a child, it could be that he had prepared another luck (*harraje*) for you.<sup>127</sup> Still, most infertile women preferred the luck of getting their own child and would put a lot of effort into changing Allah's plans. Prayers, sacrifices, charity and use of charms, were considered potentially effective, and hopefully one day Allah might finally "open your luck" (*Allah m'a ila harraje firrina*).

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<sup>126</sup> The cat was standing on two legs, like a human (Tom, from the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon).

<sup>127</sup> In some contexts *harraje* may be translated to fate, but generally it has to do with luck.

Prayers related to reproduction were mostly *duwa* performed in various ritual contexts.<sup>128</sup> *Duwa* differs from *salo*, which were the five daily prayers. *Duwa* had a more open form and could directly address the issue at hand. It could also be said in different places such as mosques, sacred places and *Kanyaleng* rituals. Some of the intentionally “foolish” acts of the *Kanyalengs* were said to be prayers that Allah would pity them and give them a child. Some of these efforts are described in chapter seven.

In addition to Allah’s power, spirits (sing. *jinno*), witches (sing. *buwaa*) and the work of a marabout (*moro dokowo*) were attributed the power to affect pregnancy.

### **Influence of spirits**

Jinns (*jinno*) were known to interfere with people’s bodies and their lives in several ways. Jinns were mentioned in the *Qur’an*, and their existence is generally acknowledged among Gambians. People did not agree about what should be the proper attitude and relationship to jinns. According to several of my Mandinka informants there were different types of jinn. There were fair-coloured jinns (W: *jinne bo hes*), devil jinns (W: *jinne i Seitane*), Christian jinns and Muslim jinns. The fair-coloured jinn scared people, made their bodies hot and their hearths beat fast, but people did normally recover after seeing such jinns. It was also said that the jinns might beat people.<sup>129</sup> The fair-coloured jinns often appeared in fairy tales and children were told that if they stayed out late, they might meet up with a fair- coloured jinn with long hair. She might attract them to her and they would be unable to return to their parents.<sup>130</sup> The devil jinn was considered invisible, but able to kill. Marabouts were believed to be able to take preventive measures and make protecting charms against such evils.

Some marabouts were said to “move with” a jinn (W: *defa anda ak jinne*). The jinn assisted the marabout and gave advice during consultancies with clients. Such relationships resembled companionship more than possession as described from for example Sudan (Boddy, 1989). According to a formerly infertile woman, she had been helped by a female marabout who was assisted by a jinn. It was said that the female marabout had fallen ill after seeing the jinn, but after three months she had recovered and had been successful in her work

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<sup>128</sup> The four commonly accepted types of prayers were; 1) *salo*, the five daily prayers, 2) *duwa*, general prayers, 3) blessings and prayers for others in return for charity, and 4) *wirido*, saying the 99 names of Allah while using prayer beads.

<sup>129</sup> One man claimed that he had seen a barefoot jinn and he was terribly scared because the jinn might beat him. Others said that jinns were taller than a tree and terribly ugly.

<sup>130</sup> This is similar to Norwegian tales about “huldra”, but for “huldra” men were the main target group.

because the jinn assisted her. Her success had lasted for seven years. The case is discussed in relation to infertility in chapter seven.

Jinns were actually more frequently associated with causing infertility than solving the problem. Jinns were considered capable of causing abortions (*kono tinyaa* lit.: destroy womb), because they were jealous of humans. When a married woman had a love relationship with a jinn, the jinn would become jealous of her husband and most likely try to kill her human offspring. The indications that a jinn had caused an abortion, was that the woman had a dream about having sex, but later woke up bleeding.

Some believed that all women had a jinn husband and all men had a jinn wife, but the jinn would only cause abortion if he was very jealous. Other informants did not believe that jinns could cause any fertility problems. Jinns were also considered capable of exchanging human babies with their own offspring (*jinna dingo*). This was supposed to take place during pregnancy or shortly after birth. The jinn baby had an appearance of a human, and it could take months until parents would define the child as a jinn's child. The indications were that the child did not develop as expected. When the child's age mates could hold their head, sit or eat on their own, the jinn's child would not. Neither would a jinn's child learn how to speak or walk. The jinns child was not considered a human person and its behaviour was rather associated with an animal (beast) (W: *rab*). The jinn's child often died early. Sometimes marabouts would assist the exchange where the jinn's child could return to the other jinns.

In one case, the mother of a jinn's child had taken the child to a marabout. The marabout checked the child and said that the time for return to its jinn parents had not yet come. The marabout had offered to take care of the child while they were waiting for the right moment of the return, but the mother refused. Instead, she got some medicine and returned with her child. Within some days the child had died.

The extent of the practice of returning a jinn's child to its parents, is not known. Some mentally disabled children were not defined as jinn's children, and were rather referred to through other concepts.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Children with Down's syndrome, were occasionally referred to as *jinnno dingo*, but were also referred to as *bulo kosi toleo*, which can be translated to "hand-clapping-retarded". In a wedding ritual, one young man with Down's syndrome was well taken care of and encouraged to dance with the other youths, which he seemed to enjoy.

## Marabouts

As mentioned above, marabouts (*moro*) play crucial roles in “black people’s medicine” (*mo fing boro*) and are believed to be able to prevent, cure, bring luck and even cause harm. Most serious marabouts have been trained since childhood by other marabouts and Muslim teachers (*oustaz*), some of them in different West African countries, others had studied in the Middle East.

The efficacy of the work of a marabout (*moro dokuwo*), was considered to vary according to the knowledge and skills of the marabout and to the clients’ ability to make use of the advice and medicines from the marabout.<sup>132</sup> It was widely recognised that the effects of a medicine could be spoiled if it was not used properly and the prescribed procedures followed.

Advice was given about when to use the remedies (*boro*) and when not. *Saffo* were verses of the *Qur’an* and other writings on paper, often sown into leather and worn on the body, hung over the door, put under the mattress, in the wallet or inside a ring. *Saffo* could be preventive against illnesses, evils, bullets, knives and pregnancy (*alkunuto*), they could cure or bring luck. Women also used *saffo* during pregnancy and transferred it to the baby at birth against convulsions. A filled antelope horn (*mangkara bino*) was also used in the same way. *Nasso* were verses of the *Qur’an* written with ink on wooden slates and washed off in water. The liquid was bottled and applied to the body or drunk once or twice daily over a period. Also herbs or other items could be added to this liquid. In most cases drinking the concomitant was harmless, but there were cases where dangerous substances had been added and resulted in intoxication and even death.<sup>133</sup> *Nasso* were used for a number of purposes, among others for general prevention, to bring luck, or during weaning, for the child to forget the breast. It was also used to calm people after epileptic fits. *Taffoh* were knots made on a thread, while prayers and the name of the client are uttered and “spitted” into it. For general protection such medicine would be worn around the waist or neck, but for curative purposes it, could be tied to the part of the body where the problem resides. As an example based on

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<sup>132</sup> Some marabouts are considered to have inherited gifts such as second sight or spiritual powers that enable them to bring luck or fight evils, others have acquired their abilities through years of training. A few are believed to be powerful because they have a jinn assisting them, others, mainly some non-Muslim Jola healers, are believed to be powerful because of close connection with the devil or spirits, at a *jellango* (shrine). By the help of the devil, they could thus solve other people’s problems. It is not considered good for Muslims to go to healers who deal with devils. All the women I interviewed rejected the possibility of visiting a *jellango*.

<sup>133</sup> One medical doctor working at Royal Victoria Hospital gave such examples as one of the reasons why it was difficult for health professionals to cooperate with marabouts.

my own observations, a woman with a swollen and infected finger had about five such threads tied around her wrist, while a boy with toothache had one around his neck.

Marabouts had different means to diagnose their clients. Some made divinations by different means such as studying the palm, interpreting dreams or the positions of thrown cowrie shells, while others claimed to have a second sight (*djuberla*).<sup>134</sup> Some problems were identified to be caused by enemies who had paid another marabout to cause harm (*moro dokowou*). In such cases the marabout could offer to counteract the work for payment. Although marabouts frequently claimed that problems were caused by the work of other marabouts, few admitted having been involved in causing harm themselves.<sup>135</sup> Suspicions about how co-wives might have tied one's luck (*harraje sito*) and destroyed fertility, were discussed in relation to marriage in chapter three.

Marabouts may advise clients to "take out charity" (*saddah bondi*) of a specific kind. Charity could be cola nuts of specific colours, white candles, a white paper, a piece of clothing and even a whole sheep or cattle.

Some marabouts offered to do almost anything for their clients. However, others were quite modest or had clear limitations to what they were capable of and willing to do. Some argued that they could cure infertility, others not.<sup>136</sup>

## **Witches and wicked people with supernatural powers**

In addition to jinns and marabouts, witches (*buwaa*) and wicked people with supernatural powers (*sutangko*) could also harm people. Witches were considered to be humans who involuntarily had got involved with evil activities.<sup>137</sup>

Witches were people considered able to leave their bodies sleeping in the bed while they flew out to eat other people (See also Ames, 1959).<sup>138</sup> Witches were also believed to be

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<sup>134</sup> Some throw cowrie shells and analyse the client's situation and social relations based on the position of the shells. A marabout may also use dreams as a source of divination. He may put money or a piece of paper with writing under his pillow and lie down on a mat on the floor, hoping that he will be able to "see" the situation. He may also enter into seclusion (*halua*) for several days to work on a specific matter for a client. Such demanding tasks may be quite costly for the person he works for. According to a Mandinka marabout, the most expensive job he could do was to help a client to win a court case in Europe. Such tasks could cost the client about 10 000 Dalasis.

<sup>135</sup> M. (Jackson, 1977) described a similar praxis among the Kuranko of Guinea. Nobody admitted to have harmed others themselves, but one of his main informants said people had been killed by his preventive medicine. The protective medicine returned whatever came to its source. What was supposed to kill him returned and killed the sender.

<sup>136</sup> One Wolof marabout said that he was unable to cure infertility while a Mandinka marabout visiting Bakau said he could "guarantee" pregnancy for 300 Dalasis.

<sup>137</sup> This is in line with Evans-Pritchard's distinction between sorcery and witchcraft.

organised in groups, sharing and borrowing meat from each other. The reason why they would eat and kill other human beings was, according to informants, that they owed meat to other witches. Why they got involved in the first place seemed less clear, mostly it was argued that it was inherited from birth and/or had been transmitted through the mother's milk. There did not seem to be any distinct pattern in the relationship between the witch and his/her victim.<sup>139</sup> The indications that one was haunted by a witch were fever, loss of weight, fearful dreams and anxiety. The victim dreamt that she was chased by people or wolves, and while awake, she was easily scared by people approaching. In small children the indications of being eaten by a witch were similar to symptoms of malaria and diarrhoea. A child with high body temperature and weight loss, combined with a lot of crying, especially when strangers approached, was likely to be brought to a marabout for him to chase the witch who was believed to be eating her. In the urban area this was often combined by a visit to a health centre or a doctor (do you know of instances where marabouts and biomedical staff cooperate in any way? Or are the only links between them indirect, caused by patients combining their tradition by consulting both, using prescriptions and medicines from both?). In rural areas where access to formal health services was limited, a marabout could be the only person consulted.

In a *Kanyaleng* context, Wittrup (1984) and Hough (2006) argue that infertile women were accused of being witches eating their own children. Few of the women I interviewed believed that witches could cause infertility. Rather formulations were: "What Allah does, nobody can spoil" and "If you don't involve with them (i.e. the witches), they will not disturb you". There is a possibility that the *Kanyaleng* women accused each other of being witches as a part of the ritual performance, in order to "make people laugh", even if it was not generally believed.

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<sup>138</sup> Witches are believed to be able to actually fly, while their sleeping bodies are left behind in bed. One man claimed that he had become sick because he had come into the wind created by a witch who passed by.

<sup>139</sup> This differs from witchcraft accusations described from other parts of Africa, where accusations follow certain relation types, for example, mother's brother bewitching sister's son, or men systematically accusing their wives (Nadel, 1954). In The Gambia a person accused of being a witch may be a stranger or a close relative of the victim. There seem to be no specific criteria such as age, gender or social position for persons who could be a witch. However, I have never heard about children being witches.



It was quite common to use preventive medicine against witches, either as *saffo* or medicine put under the skin.<sup>140</sup> When sickness or lack of well being was believed to be caused by a witch or a jinn, people would rather contact a marabout.

### **Some other perspectives on the body and humanness**

Above I have focused on particular perceptions about the relationship between the bodily and the spiritual. Below I present some other perceptions about the body of relevance to the further discussion.

As should be clear from the presentation above, personhood was not limited to the individual body. It was considered possible for a witch to leave the body and operate elsewhere, and there were also other persons that were believed to have second sight (*kungfano*); some of them could not only see witches, but also fight them spiritually from a distance. Other people needed assistance from a marabout to affect or control other people's behaviour (as discussed in relation to co-wives in chapter two).

In Wolof the way of speaking about one self, *suma boppa* (W) literally means "my head" and could be taken as an indication that the self is situated in the head.<sup>141</sup> The head is used to describe several behavioural traits; a strong-headed person (*degerr boppa*) is stubborn, a "dry-headed" person (*boppa am defa wou*) is a bit weird, "nuts" – it is considered necessary to have some "water" or humidity in the head to be able to reason well.<sup>142</sup> Still, there no clear body/mind distinction seems to exist like in the West (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987a). In Mandinka, there is a concept *sondomo*, which, according to a dictionary for the American Peace Corps, means "mind". A person with a "big" *sondomo* (*warrata*) is very mindful. *Sondomo* is, however, a wider concept than mind. During an interview with a Mandinka woman, we discussed the concept of *sondomo*, and she held that the *sondomo* was situated in the breast. *Sondomo* is different from intellect or reason, which is referred to as *hakilo* (W:

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<sup>140</sup> Such medicine is injected into small openings in the skin, made by a small knife and leaving scars as if a fork with three sticks had been used.

<sup>141</sup> R. M. (1985) however warns us against over-interpretation of conventional metaphors, and the fact that this connection is not made in Mandika should encourage cautiousness.

<sup>142</sup> A person who is *kung fano* (W: *ya boppa*) is literally wide-headed and has second sight. *Boppa bu meti* means literally headache but also refers to having a problem.

*hell*). A bright person is talked about as “having intellect (W: *am hell*) or that the intellect is sweet or good (*hakilo diata*).<sup>143</sup> *Hakilo* resembles what Boddy (1988) calls *aql* (Ar.), reason, intellect etc. which is one part of a Muslim conceptual pair; *nafs* (Ar.) and *aql* (Ar.) in Sudan. To my knowledge, there is no Gambian counterpart to what Boddy calls *nafs*, an “animal life force, lust, emotion”. One of Boddy’s points is that Hofriyati men believe that women have more *nafs* and less developed *aql* than men, and thus have to be controlled. Although there is no parallel to *nafs* either in Mandinka or Wolof, some Gambians (men only?) believe that women are more emotional than men. This was given as the reason why women never attend burials at the graveyard. These concepts may be related to what Weil refers to as gender specific ideas about coldness and warmth below.

Informants represent their perceptions of the body (*balo*) and bodily with varying detail and interest. According to a Mandinka-speaking German nurse who was working at the Royal Victoria Hospital, patients rarely made distinctions about processes inside the body. Patients generally identified their problems to be situated either to chest, back, womb, head or limbs. Although there are specific names for different body parts, both Mandinka and Wolof people mostly refer to everything inside their stomach or womb with a general term, *kono* (W: *biir*), literally meaning “inside”.<sup>144</sup> The uterus (*wulunyang*o, W: *juurkai*) is however, often referred to specifically.<sup>145</sup> Being pregnant is expressed as “being womb” (W: *defa biir*, M: *konomaa*).

### **Veins, muscles, nerves and tendons (M: *fasso*, W: *siddit*)**

*Fasso* and *siddit* in Mandinka and Wolof respectively have a wide number of meanings depending on context. The words may refer to muscles, tendons, nerves, arteries and veins, depending on context and the speaker’s verbal skills and nuanced vocabulary.<sup>146</sup> Veins are also named *yello sillo* (lit. blood roads) in Mandinka and *siddit* in Wolof. Tendons in Wolof are labelled *chaas*, and in Mandinka there are specific names for some of the tendons like

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<sup>143</sup> A stupid person is a person with “short” or little intellect (*hakilo dojata*). To be ambivalent is the same expression as in English, having two minds (W: *nyarri hell*).

<sup>144</sup> This is the same as in Norwegian. Whether pain is localised in the ovaries, the appendix or in the stomach, it is generally referred to as “vondt i magen” (lit. pain in the belly).

<sup>145</sup> There are different terms for stomach (*nyabato*, W: *mbaxa*), uterus (*wulunyang*o, W: *juurkai*), intestines (*nuwo*, W: *buttit*) and underbelly (*kenmokotto*, W: *nacha*) and abdomen (*kono*, W: *biir*), although only *biir* and *kono* are part of everyday language.

<sup>146</sup> One Wolof man I discussed this with, said there is no word in Wolof for nerves. He said nerves is a kind of illness that young men get when they want to so much to go to Europe or the US. When they get “the nerves” they hardly think about anything else, they may lose appetite and the ability to concentrate. The only cure is a ticket to Europe.

*tonkolong fasso* (tendon in heel) or *kang fasso* (in the neck). Muscles in Wolof are called *dangngaar*, while in Mandinka there is no general word for muscles. Sometimes *suboo* is used, meaning flesh (and meat in relation to animals). In Mandinka there is a concept called “*fasso kuntuta*”, meaning that a muscle or tendon is cut. Children who ate lime under the sunlight risked that a tendon/muscle was lost and. According to Bledsoe and Banja (2002), women were said to lose muscles every time they gave birth or had experienced reproductive mishaps. They argue that the idea of muscle loss is consequential for understanding how women manage their reproductive resources and implies a totally different perspective on fertility than in the Western context. The Western view is based on an idea of gradually declining fertility towards menopause, where it suddenly stops. This is based on a linear concept of aging, independent of reproductive events. I return to their argument in the next chapter.

Not all of my Mandinka informants were aware of the idea of “muscle loss” of *fasso kuntuta*. My male Mandinka teacher had never heard of the concept, which indicates that the distributions of such knowledge may be gender-specific or vary between regions. He said that it was generally acknowledged that women who had experienced several child births were weaker (*a sembo ka doja*) than their age mates with fewer births. Several child births would make the uterus deeper (*muso na meta wulula, a wulunyango ka dinka le*) and in turn make subsequent births more difficult. He considered births, breastfeeding and age in itself to contribute to making woman weaker. The idea that aging and depletion are based on a combination of linear aging and stressful events is common also in a Norwegian context, but it is generally believed that fertility stops at menopause in most women’s life cycles, independently of other events.

### **Being cold (*sumiata*) and warm (*candita*) in Mandinka**

(Weil, 1988) discusses Mandinka ideas about coldness (*sumiata*) and warmth (*candita*) in people. He argues that women are considered hot and men are cold. Because women are hot they are considered emotionally unstable and thus cannot have leading positions. However, when they get older they become gradually colder (*sumiata*) and can start praying at the mosque and can, when they have ended their menses, they can be put in positions of public authority and trust.

According to Weil:

Men are ideally categorized as stable, trustworthy, socially responsible, predictable and having common sense. These characteristics are conceived symbolically in terms of men being like the ground or the earth and being cool (sumiata). In contrast, women are, in cultural categorizations, unstable, unpredictable, lacking common sense, disruptive of society, and socially irresponsible and representative of an ever-present danger to society. These characteristics are conceived symbolically in terms of wind, fire and being hot (candita). (Weil, 1988:156 original underlined)

Weil argues further that “Women are perceived as innately creative and energetic, while men are perceived as innately not. Children of both genders are perceived as having the characteristics by which adult women are ideally stereotyped(sic).” (Weil, 1988:156) He also argues that children are trained to become more like men, but females are perceived as having internal limits to how much they can be trained. Women’s continuous threat to society is, according to Weil, “...symbolized by their menstrual blood, the red colour of which is itself a symbol for all idealized female characteristics”.

Intrigued by Weil’s findings, I asked Mandinka informants about gender differences in relation to perceptions of coldness and warmth during my first fieldwork periods. A female Mandinka informant, 29 years old, said, “Yes, women are hotter because they get warm when they cook. When they take [a cold] bath, they become cold again”. A Mandinka man, 25 years old, said that coldness and warmth was associated with activity and passivity. According to him, men were considered warmer because they were more active than women. After childbirth, women became colder (he did not mention the idea of “muscle loss” *fasso kuntuta*, but this could have been related). Since activity was valued, there was, according to him, little privilege related to “becoming colder”. In a different context several years later, one Mandinka woman said young girls and prostitutes had “hot blood”, which was related to desire for men.

Some of the differences between Weil’s findings and mine, may be related to my informants being generally younger and most of them being women. In a footnote Weil acknowledges that:

...there is individual variations in the degree of acceptance of these stereotypes, men holding positions of higher authority and women culturally defined as being beyond the age of reproduction (i.e., about 45 years of age or older) tend to verbally articulate their strong beliefs in them most and to behaviorally act upon them.

Some of Weil's findings may also have been inspired by Lévi-Strauss' dichotomies between the female and the male, the raw and the cooked, and nature/culture, discussed and criticised by Strathern and MacCormack (1980). I found very little support for Weil's claims in the expressions of my informants. This is also true for his exegesis of colour symbolism. He argues that red is symbolic of the "heat" and uncontrolled energy of the natural world, i.e. of the bush. White, cold things like sour milk and chicken eggs are considered to be symbolically linked to female fecundity. "The "cool" qualities of both the milk and the egg inhere in the liquid, the water-like qualities associated with them. The egg's liquid quality is associated with the yoke and egg sac is contained" (Weil, 1988: 177). Eggs were never involved in *Kanyaleng* rituals intended to enhance the fertility of participants. This may be related to the absence of eggs in theories about human procreation. Although everybody knew that birds were laying eggs, none of the interviewed women were concerned about eggs or ovulation, and few saw fertility as changing through the menstrual cycle.<sup>147</sup> However *satto*, a white porridge, was occasionally applied on women's bodies during the *Kanyaleng* rituals. *Satto* was both white and liquid and could signify the liquids that were mixed during sexual intercourse. According to one of the infertile women, it was considered beneficial to have sex with the husband with the *satto* covering the woman's body. The porridge is smeared all over the infertile woman's body by the *Kanyalengs*. This may support Weil's claim that the liquid aspect is considered to contribute to fertility, although it has dried up at the moment of sexual intercourse.

### ***Agents and institutions***

Below, I briefly list the health service providers, healers and sacred places visited by informants.

### ***Dealing with mo fing boro***

The most important providers of black people's medicine were marabouts, known as marabouts. They were found everywhere throughout the country, but some marabouts were more trusted and had a better reputation and better records than others. To my knowledge, they all worked independently and were not authorised, registered or taxed by the

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<sup>147</sup> One woman used this as an active way of controlling fertility, but she did not explain the interconnection.

government. In addition to the marabouts there were connected to a lot of sacred places where people went to pray. In relation to fertility and infertility matters, the two most famous places were the sacred ponds at Folonko and Katchikally. Here too, there were variations in reputation and trust. People from Bakau travelled all the way to Folonko, while people from elsewhere came to Katchikally in Bakau.

### **Katchikally and Folonko**

Katchikally in Bakau and Folonko in Kartong were two sacred ponds where anybody could come to pray to have their problems solved, but they were most famous for the effect on fertility problems. Infertile women who came to the pond were ritually washed and prayed for. In chapter eight, there is a detailed account of a visit to Folonko. The procedures at Katchikally are the same.

### **Kenye- Kenye Jammango and other mosques**

Mosques are the main places for *salo*, the five daily prayers, but also a place for *duwa*, individual and collective prayers directed to solve concrete issues. Most of my female informants performed the five daily prayers at home, but did also occasionally go to pray at the mosques. The “mosque” at Kenye-Kenye Jammango close to Gunjur had a reputation as a good place to pray in cases of infertility. One of the formerly infertile women had been advised by a marabout to go there to pray. The mosque, and the area around was regarded as sacred because Sheikh Umar Taal, leader of the Tijanniyya Sect in West Africa, stayed there during his Islamisation Mission of West Africa during the 19th century.

### **Brufut Sanneh Mentereng**

Sanneh Mentereng is a sacred grove at Brufut. The grove is mainly of Baobab trees . It has. At the bottom of the cliff is a well where those who come for prayers are ritually bathed.

### ***Health facilities based on Western Medicine***

Below I briefly present the health facilities most frequently visited by my informants.

#### **Bakau Health Centre**

Bakau Health Centre is a part of the primary health care system and is situated in Bakau, only five to ten minutes walking distance from where my informants lived. The majority of the

women interviewed reported to have visited Bakau Health Center at least once during pregnancy, mostly the first time when they were six to seven months pregnant. Some of them had also given birth there. All of them went to Bakau Health Centre with their babies for regular check ups, weighing and vaccinations after delivery. Some women visited the health centre regularly to have injections of Depo-provera or receive other kinds of contraceptives.

### **Royal Victoria Hospital (since 2002 Royal Victoria Training hospital)**

Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) is the country's major referral hospital and nationally one of two hospitals that provide comprehensive emergency obstetric care. (Hoestermann, 1996).<sup>148</sup> Risk pregnancies are referred to RVH, but several people living in Bakau gave birth at RVH, even when their pregnancy was not defined as a risk pregnancy. Some of the infertile and sub-fertile women had been there to have a dilatation and curettage (D&C). It was also known that abortions were performed at RVH, in spite the fact that in The Gambia abortions were illegal unless the woman's health was at risk. One case, where the woman was five months pregnant and died during the abortive surgery, received a lot of publicity and the doctor was prosecuted and convicted. This case confirmed the rumours that abortion was performed at RVH. Several informants had been to the polyclinic with their children or they or their relatives had been admitted there with various symptoms or diagnoses.

### **Westfield Clinic**

Westfield Clinic is a private clinic in Sere Kunda (3 km from Bakau). The gynaecologists there were well reputed and some informants, who experienced problems during pregnancies, went there in spite of the costs being higher than at public health centres.

### **Medical Research Centre**

The Medical Research Centre (MRC) is a British-owned research hospital at Fajara with a focus on child health and nutrition research, 2 km from the centre of Bakau. MRC was frequently visited when children were seriously ill. One of the informants, who had experienced bleeding before she gave birth, was admitted for some days before she gave birth.

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<sup>148</sup> A new hospital, Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) Hospital was opened in Farafenni in 2003.

## **Ndeban hospital**

Ndeban is a small private hospital in Bakau, often referred to as Jack Fall's hospital. Jack Fall was also well reputed for his skills with reproductive health problems. Some informants had visited Ndeban hospital in spite of relatively unaffordable prices.

## **Gambia Family Planning Association (GFPA)**

The Gambia Family Planning Association (GFPA) is an NGO and a member of the International Planned Parenthood federation. GFPA was established in The Gambia in 1968. The Kanifing office is the headquarters co-ordinating national activities, but also has a clinic where contraception is provided. Some of my informants had been to the GFPA office to get contraceptives.

Some informants preferred to visit the GFPA office in Banjul because it was less likely that they would meet somebody they knew in the office, or on their way. The premises of the Kanifing office was isolated and the only reason to visit was to get contraceptives. The Banjul office was situated close to the Royal Victoria Hospital and curious neighbours could not know their errand.

GFPA also had Community Based Distributors (CBD) of contraceptives in Bakau. The CBDs had got a stock of pills and condoms for distribution and it was possible to access the contraceptives with a high degree of privacy.

## **Bakau pharmacies**

In addition to provision of medicine and contraceptives like condoms and pills, the pharmacy in Bakau also offered advice to people who had not had the opportunity to see a doctor. Generally, more medicines were obtainable without prescriptions than was the practice in Norway, and the role of the pharmacist more extensive. The pharmacist was, however, cautious and refused to offer medicines for conditions he thought should have been dealt with by a general practitioner.

## **Dispensaries**

There were also several small privately-owned dispensaries in Bakau, providing a limited selection of medicines and advice. Dispensers could provide simple health care in addition to selling medicine.

There are a number of other health service providers in the area, such as the Sere Kunda Health Center, Lam Toro Clinic and a number of private doctors in Bakau, Banjul and



Sere Kunda. Private clinics, such as Lam Toro, were considered good but unaffordable by most of my informants.

Above I have described the most important suppliers of services my informants had been seeing. Several women had seen a number of practitioners to have their problems solved, others had seen only one. Some were chosen based on conviction; others had been seen because they were close, affordable or recommended by somebody with positive experiences. Although the rationale for providing certain services were based on specific discourses, such as bio-medicine or the local ontologies around “black people’s medicine”, the users of these services often combined different solutions. This pragmatic “syncretism” of lay people frequently involved successively seeking help and advices of several types of practitioners for the same complaint.

To my knowledge, providers were more “orthodox” than their patients/clients. Contrary to what has been reported from elsewhere, Gambian health professionals seemed reluctant to bring “black people’s medicine” into the formal health services. Outside the formal settings, one could find that Community Based Distributors of contraceptives and Traditional Birth Attendants provided contraceptive pills to cure infertility.

In a study conducted in 1993, among informal workers in the greater Banjul urban area (which would be the category most of my informants would fit into), the average cost per consultation to a traditional healer was 62.0 Dalasis and 101.6 Dalasis to medical doctors (Wadda and Craig, 1993: 42-43). Of medical consultations in the last two weeks, 2% had been to traditional healers, 41% to health workers in general, 11% to midwife/nurses and 41% to doctors (Wadda and Craig, 1993: 40) The mean per capita household expenditure on health (*sic*) in the Kombo St Mary Division was 16.3 Dalasis for the month preceding the survey (Wadda and Craig, 1993: 41).

## **Chapter summary**

Above I discussed the generally shared cosmology of health and well being. The main categories of local health perceptions could be classified as “black people’s medicine” and “Western people’s medicine”. “Black people’s medicine” was well integrated into a general cosmology including Islam and other believes and practices. Humans were in continuous interaction with Allah and potentially threatened by jinns, witches and other evil forces. This cosmology was substance-based or material as well as spiritual. Qur’an verses were visually displayed, uttered, heard, worn on the body as text verses or rubbed on the skin or orally

incorporated in liquid forms. Other kinds of medicine and prayers also had various forms and appearances. While infertility in some cases were attributed to Allah's will, or a "frog-like" animal blocking the entrance to the uterus hindering male fluids to enter or a jealous jinn killing human offspring with humans, similarly reproductive depletion could be referred to as tendons cut during reproductive events or deeper uteruses resulting from several pregnancies, while this could also be referred to in less detailed ways. Different ages, gender and contexts of interviews may explain the wide variations in statements by informants (mine as well as Weil, Bledsoe and Banja's). I found similar variation in explanations of reasons for female genital cutting (Skramstad 1990). My interpretation is that although certain explanations, mainly some of those from Islam and "black people's medicine", belong to dominant discourses, they do not permeate all parts of society as they would have done under totally hegemonic conditions. Rather than being one dominant discourse with some counter-hegemonic discourses, a number of alternative explanations existed side by side. Through the number of infertility explanations and reasons given for maternal depletion, we find several contributions to multiple constructions of fertility.

## **Chapter 6 Controlling fertility with contraceptives**

In the last chapter I presented the two main Gambian discourses related to bodies, health and wellbeing, namely Western people's medicine and "black people's medicine". In this chapter I discuss how women manage their bodies, health and fertility, given their own goals and desires, their perceptions and their knowledge related to their life situation. Control over fertility and birth imply an agency of women to make their own choices in order to adjust fertility towards their own goals and needs. As discussed in the introduction assessing women's real needs and interests is difficult at best if one assumes that they are affected by discourses that favour high fertility levels. The process of subjection may have embedded a strong desire to have many children. An overall concern for women is, however, to balance their own, their husband's, in-laws' and their own kin's desire for many children, against their own need to take care of their own reproductive capacities and the survival of infants and children (Bledsoe and Banja, 2002).

Different aspects of the question about agency have been discussed above. One aspect is how individual desires for children are shaped through childhood and adolescence but also later in life. Another aspect is how decisions are made based on negotiation or without discussions. Finally, how do women go about to reach their desired fertility state?

### **Agents and agencies**

If we put aside our doubts about whether women's fertility desires actually are in her own interests at all stages of their reproductive life cycle, we have other problems in assessing who makes the decisions? As discussed in previous chapters, the conjugal unit is rarely the decision making unit, rather individuals make their decisions based on consultations with a number of neighbours, friends and kin, but also under pressure from a number of other people. As long as the wide networks of kin and affines cooperates about child care, sponsorship and fostering, it is likely that the same people have some interests in the woman's fertility. How then do all the agents with potential interests in the woman fertility actually seek to affect the choice?

Below I briefly mention some potential agents with interests in the woman's fertility; the state, the local community, the compound or the residence unit, the couple or the individual.

## **The Gambian state**

The Gambian state seemed to have little agency in reproductive health matters, compared to other countries (See for example Ali, 2002a, Greenhalgh, 1994) I suggest that one of the reasons for this apparent lack of involvement in women's fertility, was the reduced capacity of the Gambian state due to conditionality imposed by IMF and the World Bank Economic Recovery Programmes (Sanyang, 1997). Another reason might have been the fact that The Gambia is a secular state, while more than 90% of the population are Muslims. As discussed in the introduction, the international engagement in population issues, culminating in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 also led to some engagement about fertility in The Gambia. Although, I argue that the Gambian state never intended to control fertility, there was an increasing focus on population matters. A Gambian Contraceptive Prevalence and Fertility Determinants Survey was carried out (Republic of The Gambia, 1993) and a National Population Policy was passed by the Parliament (Republic of The Gambia, 1992). Seminars on Population Family Life Education (POP/FLE) were held and the subjects were introduced into the school curriculum. A National Population Secretariat was established under The President's Office and several national committees were set up. Still, much of the implementation was left to NGOs. According to International Planned Parenthood Federation (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2007):

GFPA is being increasingly called on by the government to supplement its national family planning programme in disseminating information and providing family planning services. This is shown by the leading role accorded to the Association in the formulation, consolidation and implementation of the National Population Policy framework.

The government was, however, reluctant to set population targets, such as by recommending smaller families or suggesting a desirable number of children. The focus on population control never moved much beyond advice on spacing pregnancies and taking care of women's reproductive health. These efforts hardly trickled eventually down to local communities and affected the lives of my informants.

This was in contrast with findings in Egypt, where family planning was a part of a modernising project of the Egyptian state (Ali, 1996, Ali, 2002b). thereby contrast there occurred few conflicts between the state and Islamic groups, even though the secular Gambian state has close links to Muslim leaders. The social changes and developments that

took place in the 1990s could not meaningfully be defined in terms of modernisation. The Gambian economy is still dominated by subsistence farming, re-export (mainly West African trade) and export of cash crops, fish and by tourism. There has been very little industrialisation and since according to Giddens industrialisation is the backbone of modernisation (Giddens, 1991: 15)<sup>149</sup>, this analysis fails to capture Gambian processes of social change. Furthermore, demographic transition theory builds on modernisation theory and, according to Greenhalgh (1995), fails for the same reasons.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the reasons for and effects of the role of the state, but here I only allude to the locally based “body politics” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987b) that permeated the way of reasoning in fertility and reproductive health. Body politics were embodied in upbringing, through the *nyaakaa*, *daara*, *madrasas* and public schools, the latter the only important state agency, through the curriculum and partly through other extracurricular activities.<sup>150</sup> One of these was the policy of expelling pregnant girls because it was argued that they have a bad influence on “pure” girls. In chapter one and two I discussed how the local community influenced female fertility through discourses about appropriate femaleness. Looking at these processes as a part of the agency of local communities, one may ask, if local communities exercise agency in affecting the fertility choices of women.

Madhavan and Bledsoe (2001) have suggested that the compound could be the best locus for studies of the management of fertility. They argue that in the context of polygamous households a woman’s success in spacing her childbearing, using contraception depends not only on her own fertility status, but also on that of other co-resident women. What is to be considered is not only competition between co-wives, but also animosity with the husband’s brothers’ wives and other women of child bearing age in a given compound.

In such a model, members pursue high fertility strategies when desired or necessary, but they also transfer conjugal responsibilities among wives through a sequence of fertility control mechanisms, of which longer child spacing efforts are the most common. (2001: 452)

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<sup>149</sup> According to Giddens, “modernity” can be understood as roughly equivalent to “the industrialised world”, so long as it is recognised that industrialisation is not the only institutional dimension (A. (Giddens, 1991: 15) Giddens also emphasises other traits such as capitalism with commodification of labour power, surveillance in a Foucaultian sense of “visible” supervision or use of information to coordinate social activities.

<sup>150</sup> For the same reasons a number of rural parents were afraid to send their children to public schools, since these were believed to influence the children to lose their faith and morality.

The same authors also argue that choice of strategy often depends on a woman's status, implying her control of resources or prestige. Status within the compound results, accordingly in considerable control over reproductive decision-making. This may even enable them to "...capitalize not only their on their own fertility potential, but that of other women". (ibid.:452) Further, the authors argue that decisions about "the timing, pacing and termination of childbearing are not simply functions of one woman's fertility, but are affected by the reproductive capacities of other women who reside with her in their compound "(ibid.: 452)

Among the women within my survey area and those interviewed, few lived with their in-laws, but several lived in the same compound as co-wives (13 of the 27 presently married interviewed women, and 22 of the 107 married women in the survey area). Some of the cases were interesting. Two of the interviewed women were married to the same man. While one was infertile, as their other co-wives, the youngest woman had given birth to four children. The three eldest of the children were distributed to each of her co-wives for fostering. It could be argued that these women made up a childrearing collective based on one of the women's reproductive capacities. Although the infertile women had also received at least one other child from a sister or brother, the compound was a locus for managing fertility. In some of the other cases women lived with at least one co-wife, and the co-wife(s) had children the same age. It was not clear if a conscious planning of having children of the same age had happened. Some of the men seemed to prefer having children with several young wives at the same time rather than having consecutive children with different wives. The question is if husbands are interested in or able to plan and distribute reproductive tasks to various wives over time. Firstly, men and women seem to have separate desires and needs in child bearing, and secondly it seems as if spouses rarely take joint decisions in such matters. There also appear to be urban-rural variations in how fertility decisions are arrived at. While large family compounds and women's houses (*muso bungo*) mainly in rural areas give many people insight, interests and abilities to take influence, in urban situations people in almost half of residence units were not related to the other inhabitants and could thus not be monitored by kin or affines on a daily basis.

### **Different interests and lack of communications between the spouses**

My findings indicate that decisions about fertility are first and foremost taken by individuals, but opinions and contributions of a number of significant others can influence individual decision- making.. Some of the contraceptive methods, such as sexual abstinence and use of condoms, obviously need a husband's consent and cooperation.

According to another study from The Gambia, men's marital and reproductive strategies and patterns differ sharply from those of women (Ratcliffe et al., 2000). This study found that although couples have been seen as the logical unit for the study of fertility, the separate experiences of men and women need to be understood. In a rural area of The Gambia, total fertility rates for men were 12.0 while they were 6.8 for women, during the period 1993–97. Of the married men interviewed, 40% were in polygamous marriages. When asked about fertility preferences, men wanted 15.2 children for themselves and 7.3 with each wife. This implies that men generally had preferences for many children and for at least two wives to fulfil this desire. Ratcliffe and co-authors comment that the preference for each wife is quite similar to actual fertility rates for women in the same area (6.9).<sup>151</sup> In this polygamous population, the means available for attaining reproductive goals were different for men and women, depending on the separate lives and different interests of men and women. For men fertility began later, reached higher levels and continued into older ages than for women. Through serial and polygamous marriages, men were able to extend their reproduction beyond what would be possible with one woman.

The lack of communication between spouses about the desired numbers of children and methods to reach that number is well documented in the Gambian Contraceptive Prevalence and Fertility Determinants Survey (GCPFDS) (Republic of The Gambia, 1993) and was also apparent in my interviews. In the GCPFD survey, 74.3% of the interviewed women said they had never discussed use of contraceptives with their husbands. While 78.5% of the women were positive towards using a method, only 36.8% believed that their husbands shared their views. However, it turned out that 69.9% of the men, when asked, stated that they would use a contraceptive method.

Informants rarely commented that their parents or in-laws were involved in the child bearing decisions, rather the issue was how a husband would react if he learnt that his wife was using contraceptives without his consent. Few of my informants (16%), and none of the Mandinka women, had discussed contraceptive use or number of children with their husbands. One woman had been forced to discuss the issue when the husband accidentally discovered that she was using contraceptives.

One of the former users of contraceptives had used injections secretly without her husband knowing. Since she could not read herself, she had not paid attention to the

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<sup>151</sup> Unfortunately, it is not mentioned how many children the women preferred.

receipt from GFPA and left it on the cupboard. When the husband found the paper, he was furious and asked whether she wanted to have the same problem as his mother, having only one son. Her husband had felt the burden of being the only son, and he did not want this for his son. After an argument with the husband, she had agreed to leave the injections.

Husbands, of course, also had other reasons for disliking contraceptives – either they wanted more children, knew about health risks involved or had religious objections. One husband was concerned about potential side effects. When he found out that the wife was using contraception he told her not to come to him and complain in case she would fall ill. He said: “You have done this all by yourself”.

One Mandinka and one Fula woman knew that their husbands were positive towards the use of contraceptives while they themselves were against it. One Wolof woman, who had never discussed any desired number of children with her husband, said it was up to Allah how many she would have until it was over. At the time of the interview she had given birth to five children, but only one of them stayed with her, one had died and three were fostered out.

It seemed that most of the women preferred not to discuss use of contraceptives with their husbands. A general perception among women was that husbands often were suspicious about lovers if the wives used or wanted to use contraceptives. Most of the present or former users of contraceptives, had taken the decision without asking their husbands and it seemed that women were granted a level of autonomy in contraceptive use as long as they made their own choices and kept them secret. When the issue was not debated, they did not know their husband’s position for sure and were thus not disobedient. Rather they took care of their own health and if they were breast feeding, also the baby’s health.

### ***Use and non-use of contraceptives***

The interviews gave insight into various attitudes to and use of contraceptives. The interviewees’ ages spanned those at the start of their reproductive career and post-menopausal women who were already grandmothers. Some of the women were infertile; others had had as many as ten children. Half of them had lost one or several children; three had lost three children each. Six of the women had fertility problems, while some of them had never given birth; others had had three or four children, but could not have another child.

Although the sample is very small, the interviewed women seemed to be similar to the rest of the urban population when it came to the use of contraceptives. While eight of the 28



(29%) women interviewed who were aged below 50 were current users of contraceptives, the rate among the urban population of married women in general was 26.2% in 1990 (Republic of The Gambia, 1993).<sup>152</sup> Twelve (43%) of the 28 interviewed women below 50 years of age had ever used a method of contraception, the same as the national percentage as in the GCPFDS (Republic of The Gambia, 1993). While I met some of the women in the sample only during the interview, I had known others for a long time. The long term perspective made it possible to observe situational and contextual changes in perceptions about contraceptives.

The methods used by the eight women currently using contraceptives were Intra-uterine Device (IUD) (3), Depo-Provera injections (2), contraceptive pills (2) and periodic abstinence (1).

Among the 21 women who were not using a contraceptive method at the time of the interview, six had problems with infertility and sub-fertility, four were pregnant and five were breastfeeding. Only five of the 28 women were actually “at risk” of getting pregnant. Three of them hoped to get pregnant. Only two of the twenty-eight women (7%) were at any considerable risk of getting pregnant against their will, and could thus be seen as having an “unmet need” for contraception. At the moment the interviews were conducted, the largest unmet need was to be assisted to become pregnant. Two of the pregnant women would probably have preferred to use contraceptives rather than being pregnant at the time. One of them got pregnant while her husband was abroad and refused to talk about the pregnancy. The other woman had been using contraceptive pills, but stopped because she had been bleeding between her periods. She had been advised to avoid the pills and find another contraceptive method, but before she had the opportunity to return to the family planning clinic she fell pregnant.

Attitudes towards and need for contraception also change over time. Situations change as husbands come and go (see chapter 1) and having one or several co-wives also affects the situation. The exposure to the “risk” of getting pregnant was considerably reduced when the husband “took turns” (*singfahlo*) with other wives. Four of the interviewed women had been using a contraceptive method earlier but were not presently using any method. Some of the present users had also used other contraceptives earlier on, mostly in order to space births.

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<sup>152</sup> The national average contraceptive prevalence rate was 11.8% in 1990

## ***Knowledge and choices of contraceptives***

Below I present my findings from the interview and relate them to findings from the urban area in the GCPFDS study and the Farafenni study (Bledsoe et al., 1994).

### **Depo-Provera**

Depo-Provera (*pengo*) is a hormonal injectable contraceptive that lasts for three months. In my interviews, two of the eight users (25%) were using injections of Depo-Provera. Among the urban users in the GCPFDS survey 12.6 % used Depo-Provera (Republic of The Gambia, 1993) and in the Farafenni study 31% of the users of contraceptives used Depo-Provera (Bledsoe et al., 1994).

Most of the interviewed women knew about injections (*pengo*) and some considered them to be a “heavy” (W: *diis*) form for contraception. Both the present users had given birth to more than eight children each and neither of them wanted another child. One of them had three abortions over the last few years. According to Bledsoe and co-authors (1994), younger married women in their study area preferred abstinence or contraceptives that were considered “light”, such as pills (*bori kesso*) and *alkunuto* from the marabout, while women who had many children often chose contraceptives that were considered more “powerful” such as injections of Depo-Provera (Bledsoe et al., 1994, Bledsoe and Banja, 2002). The study also established that women used “strong” contraceptives after reproductive mishaps such as spontaneous abortions, stillbirths etc. (Bledsoe et al., 1998).

### **Intra-uterine Device (IUD)**

Intra-uterine Devices (IUDs) (*poose*) are inserted at hospitals, health centres, clinics and GFPA clinics. Three (or 38%) of the current users in my sample used an IUD. Among urban current users in the GCPFDS survey, 14.5% used an IUD (Republic of The Gambia, 1993) and in the Farafenni study only one of the interviewed women used an IUD (Bledsoe et al., 1994). The difference in use of IUD between urban areas and the Farafenni rural area can be explained by the need to have medical personnel to insert it. Bakau, Banjul and Sere Kunda have relatively easy access to health services.

One of the women had given birth to six children who were all alive. Three of them had been fostered out. Her youngest child was a four year old boy, and she would consider whether to have another child when the boy got older. One of the other users of IUD was divorced and had two children. She did not intend to have another child. The third user of IUD was recently remarried and had two children, nine and ten years old. She wanted to have

baby boy in two years time, but not at the moment. Her husband was aware that she used an IUD.

### **Contraceptive pills**

Contraceptive pills (*bori kesso*) were used by two ( 25%) of the current users among the interviewed women. The contraceptive pills are relatively widely distributed by hospitals, health centres, clinics, GFPA clinics and fieldworkers, pharmacies and Community Based Distributors. In the GCPFDS study, 30.2% of current urban users used contraceptive pills (Republic of The Gambia, 1993) and in the Farafenni study 25% of the users of contraceptives used contraceptive pills (Bledsoe et al., 1994).

The two women who used contraceptive pills, reported using them in very different situations. One of them narrated how she had started using pills a long time ago. She had been without sex for a very long time, since her husband was abroad, and she had fallen ill and fainted. When she explained the situation and her symptoms to the doctor, he had prescribed contraceptive pills and a lover. He apparently considered abstinence as dangerous to her health.. It was not clear if the women actually used the pills for contraception, but as I was told about her case for the first time in 1987, she must have been used these pills for more than six years.

The other woman who used contraceptive pills was breastfeeding a two-months old child. She had not wanted to use any family planning method, but her husband had convinced her, since he already had three other children with his former wife. She would have preferred to have one more child, in addition to the three she already had. This woman fits into the “soft user” category (Bledsoe et al., 1994) as she wanted to have another child later, provided that she could convince her husband.

Contraceptive pills were also used by women with fertility problems. One of my informants had been given pills by a Community Based Distributor in Bakau on behalf of a young woman with fertility problems. A Traditional Birth Attendant we interviewed in relation to Sundby’s study of infertility in The Gambia (Sundby, 1997, Sundby and Mboge, 1995), perscribed contraceptive pills to infertile women. The idea was that if one might get pregnant by forgetting to take the pills every day, women who wanted to get pregnant could intentionally use the pills irregularly. Another method was to use a full three-months cycle of pills and hope to get pregnant as soon as one stopped taking the pills. Similar uses of contraceptive pills were reported by the Farafenni study (Bledsoe et al., 1994).

## Abstinence

One of the interviewed women was practising periodic abstinence (12.5% of the current users of a contraceptive method). In the GCPFDS study, 20.2% of the urban current users of a method practised abstinence (Republic of The Gambia, 1993) and in the Farafenni study 21% of those who used a contraceptive method practised abstinence or timing of intercourse (Bledsoe et al., 1994). In Ratcliffe's study, as many as 46% of the women reported that they had not had sex for the last 30 days (2000). Among these only 15% (of all the interviewed women) reported that the reason was breastfeeding and 4% did not want to fall pregnant. The others said that the husband was travelling, one of the spouses were sick and "other reasons".

Among the women I interviewed, the only person who practised periodic abstinence said her grandmother told her not to have sex the two first weeks after she had seen her period. She was not aware of why this was the case since she considered conception to result from mixing sperm and blood and a question of luck whether it resulted in a pregnancy. She was satisfied with the method, but said she had quite a few discussions with her husband who disliked the abstinence periods. The husband, who had only one younger sibling, also wanted more children than her.

As mentioned in the introduction most women do not relate conception to fertilisation of eggs, but the mixing of fluids will result in a baby, depending on Allah's will or "luck" (*harraje*). During the interviews it became clear that my questions about what time during the menstrual cycle one was most likely to become pregnant, was translated to a question about the time with the best chance /luck (*harraje*) to fall pregnant. By consequence, all questions and answers were cases of talking past one another.

A similar observation was reported in the GCPFDS study (Republic of The Gambia, 1993). Few of the women could correctly identify the most fertile period of the menstrual cycle. Just over half (56%) of all the women in the sample and 71% of women who have ever used periodic abstinence believed that a women (sic) is most fertile right after her period has ended. Only 6% of all women and 7% of all users of periodic abstinence correctly identified the middle of the cycle as the most fertile period (Republic of The Gambia, 1993: 78).

The GCPFDS report argued that the answers should be interpreted with caution as lack of precision may have been the cause of the rates above. I suggest that if the ontology of childbirth among my informants is prevailing in larger parts of The Gambia it makes absolutely no sense to speak of fertile or safe periods as long as it is believed that it is up to Allah to decide whether an act of sexual intercourse should result in a pregnancy or not.

## ***Alkunuto/saffo***

In the previous chapter I described *saffo* as a form of “black people’s medicine”. *Alkunuto* was the form of *saffo* that is intended to avoid pregnancy and is supposed to contain certain verses from the *Qur’an*. These verses or prayers should never be said loudly in case a woman would hear it and become infertile. None of the women interviewed were presently using *alkunuto*, but some of them had used it to space earlier pregnancies. In the GCPFDS report, 6.5% of the current urban users reported having used an *alkunuto* (or *ju ju*). In the Farafenni study 21% reported to use a traditional method (not included abstinence) (Bledsoe et al., 1994).

There were other forms for *saffo* that were made to avoid penetration of the body surface. Often these were intended as general protection against bullets and knives, but an effect was also that vaginal penetration, injections and surgical operations became impossible. There were several reports/anecdotes about people who wore such *saffos* and had problems when they had accidents and were brought to the hospital. Unless they first removed the *saffo*, surgery was impossible. Such *saffo* was at times given to girls in order to protect their virginity, sometimes without their awareness. It should be needless to say that unless one really wanted to abstain, this was not appropriate protection for married women.

*Alkunuto* was considered to be of varying quality. While good *saffos* were considered safe, bad or false ones were considered useless. Even good *saffos* could be spoilt if they were used in wrong ways. If somebody passed behind the back of a bearer of a *saffo* with fire, the medicine would get spoilt. According to my Mandinka teacher, that was the reason why people who carried fire often warned people that they were passing so the bearer had the chance to turn around. The *saffo* was also easily taken off and could be forgotten.

## **Condoms**

Only one of the interviewed women admitted to having used condoms. Condom use was frequently associated with promiscuity. Other women interviewed said they had seen them in the gutter or had heard stories about condoms that had broken during sexual intercourse. 2% of the users in the Farafenni study were using condoms (Bledsoe et al., 1994) and 4% of the urban users in the the GCPFDS survey used condoms (Republic of The Gambia, 1993).

## Withdrawal

Withdrawal (*coitus interruptus*) was known only to a few of the women and some started laughing when the method was explained. Only one of the women reported to have experience with withdrawal. In the Farafenni study withdrawal was disliked and seldom reported (Bledsoe et al., 1994). Among the married women interviewed in the GCPFDS survey, none reported practising withdrawal (Republic of The Gambia, 1993). At the dissemination seminar for the GCPFDS survey, it was explained that withdrawal was included in the questionnaire and classified as a traditional method for comparative reasons.

## Female and male sterilisation

Female and male sterilisation was performed at the Royal Victoria Teaching hospital in Banjul and some private hospitals and clinics. None of my informants had been sterilised but 5.3% of the current urban female users of a contraceptive method in the GCPFDS survey had been sterilised. No male sterilisation was reported (Republic of The Gambia, 1993).

Many of the interviewed women knew about female sterilisation, but few had heard about male sterilisation. Female sterilisation was often referred to as covering (W: *deppa*) or turning the womb (W: *olbate biir bi*). As the local theory of conception does not include eggs and sperm, but rather mixed fluids, cutting the fallopian tubes to hinder eggs reaching the uterus makes little sense.

## Induced abortion

Abortion was not considered as a contraceptive method, but was clearly a way of regulating fertility. Induced abortion was illegal in The Gambia, but health personnel were involved in performing abortions. Informants knew about doctors who could do abortions.

None of the interviewed women reported having had induced abortions, but few were totally against performing abortions. Some argued that it was unsafe and one could risk death. In Islam abortion was forbidden, but there was a processual perception of human life, that gradually it came into being from coagulation of fluids that had been mixed during sexual intercourse and later developed into a baby. There was no single moment where humanity and personhood began.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> According to local perceptions of personhood, the child does not become a proper person until he or she has been through a (*nyambo*) one week after birth. Others argue that the child does not become a real person before he/she starts smiling.

Several of the women knew various methods for inducing abortion. The most frequently mentioned method was drinking a concoction of boiled leaves from the eucalyptus tree (*nimm*). Also a white akasia tree (*yirrindangkunang*) was used. It was believed that daily consumption of this mixture would spoil the pregnancy (W: *yahoo biir*) and the woman would start bleeding. Other concoctions were also mentioned, such as drinking *bulo* (bleaching powder for clothes) mixed with water. Eating too much honey was also considered to cause abortion.

Although these matters were shrouded by secrecy, there were rumours that mothers would go to the doctors to get abortion pills for their unmarried daughters if they fell pregnant. Some schools expelled pregnant girls and pregnancy was often seen as incompatible with completion of an education. In one case a man said that his girlfriend had got abortion pills from the doctor. He had insisted that she had an abortion since they were not married and he would not know whether he was the father of the child.

The knowledge women in my sample appeared to have about contraceptives was often superficial and anecdotic. Some women could spontaneously mention a number of methods and most women recognised several of them when they were presented to them. Still, even some of the women who used contraceptives knew little about how and why it worked and they were not always informed about potential side effects.

Few of the 20 women below 50 years who did not use any method, were in need of one. Although some of those who were pregnant or breastfeeding would have preferred a break, there were only two who were in need of contraceptives but had not got any.

### ***Overall concerns in decision making***

As discussed above, one may define three different stages in female reproductive careers; firstly the start of sexual relations (before or in marriage) and child bearing, secondly spacing births, and thirdly the termination of child bearing.

### **Conceiving the first child**

Most Gambian women started their sexual career at marriage in the 1990s. When a Gambian couple married, it was expected that they would try to have a child as soon as possible. Few married women used contraceptives before they had their first child. The exception were very early marriages where the bride was left to mature for some years before she started to have a sexual relationship with her husband (Bledsoe et al., 1994). Such marriages were rare in the urban areas and I did not come across any such cases. Among the interviewed women, one

said she was married very young, she had sex with her husband from the start and that she got her breasts during her first pregnancy (W: *biir mo push ween bi*).

According to Sonko (2007) most births in The Gambia, over 90%, occur within marriages. The mean age at first marriage among women increased from 18.2 years in 1983 to 19.6 and 22.0 years in 1993 and 2003 respectively. Among men (data are not available for 1983), the mean age at first marriage increased from 29.2 years in 1993 to 30.9 years in 2003. In spite of clear moral notions against pre-marital sex, already in 1986-87, more than one-quarter of never-married urban young women had sexual experience (Kane et al., 1993). The percentage for men was 73%. Unplanned premarital pregnancies were said to be common, although the frequencies are not stated (ibid. 55). As my own research focuses on presently and formerly married women, I have little systematic knowledge to contribute to the large gaps of knowledge about sexual and contraceptive practices of unmarried youths.

## **Spacing**

As argued in chapter three, the number of stakeholders involved in childcare are many. Spouses have overlapping but separate family networks that are activated in the social organisation of child care. As described above, wife and husband rarely discuss how many children they want or whether to use contraceptives or not. Consequently there is no “planning unit” and there is no bounded family unit to be planned. Spacing of children is thus rarely a part of a strategy to achieve a family unit consisting of a desired number of children. Rather spacing is motivated by a concern for the mother’s well being and reproductive capacity and the infant’s health and survival.

This space has mainly been maintained by in-fecundity due to breastfeeding (lactational amenorrhea), sexual abstinence and use of contraceptives, including *alkunuto* from the marabout. Sexual abstinence for six weeks or forty days after birth was universal and supported both by Islam and Western health practices. Longer periods of abstinence have been common and in some areas women used to spent long periods with their own kin after birth. Abstinence was surveilled by the mother-in-law. In polygamous rural Mandinka marriages, women visited their husband in turn, otherwise they slept in a women’s house (*muso bungo*) with their mother-in-law, co- wives and children. In the urban area, wives have each their own room while the husband often is the one who has to move round, taking turns with his wives. In such cases, spouses may have to sleep in the same bed even if they practise sexual abstinence.



The average sexual abstinence period for the interviewed women was five to six months after childbirth. Behind this average were two distinct practices; to resume sexual relations after six to eight weeks or after weaning. More than half of those who responded to this question (14 of 25) said they were waiting for two months or less, most of them 40 days as prescribed by the *Qur'an*. This norm was so well established that my interpreter insisted that I should change the answer of one informant from two months to 40 days. She said: "Put 40 days, it is more correct". Three women insisted that they should wait to have sex until the child could walk.<sup>154</sup> The longest abstinence period was reported by a Mandinka woman, who said she did not resume having sex with her husband until after the three-years breastfeeding period was over.<sup>155</sup> These results are quite similar to those from the Farafenni study (Bledsoe et al., 1994). They found that the post-partum abstinence period was between five and seven months. According to Bledsoe, Muslim norms seem to replace local norms that used to require substantially longer abstinence.

It was considered necessary for women to get some rest (*W: nopale ko*) between the pregnancies. The idea was that the reproductive capacity had to be restored after births and other reproductive events. The loss of strength was referred to as *fasso kuntuta*, which may be translated as muscle loss (Bledsoe and Banja, 2002).<sup>156</sup> According to Bledsoe and Banja, Gambians have an idea about a total reproductive capacity that becomes depleted as a function of specific reproductive events. Traumatic pregnancies, stillbirths and abortions may cause extraordinary depletion of this limited resource (Bledsoe and Banja, 2002: 3). According to Bledsoe, this idea is in contrast with the Western idea that a woman's fertility is present until she runs out of time and ends her reproductive capacity at menopause. While the Gambian idea is related to reproductive events, Western ideas rest on linear time, independent of the management of reproductive resources. Bledsoe has shown that women apply Western contraceptives after reproductive mishaps in order to restore their reproductive capacity (Bledsoe et al., 1998).

The other concern was about the well being and survival of the newborn child. The mother should avoid getting pregnant while she was breastfeeding. If she fell pregnant, the

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<sup>154</sup> The age when a child starts walking was estimated as 12 months for the two women who gave non- numerical answers. One woman specified the child's age when it started walking to be 18 months.

<sup>155</sup> The space between her children reveals that she must have resumed sex earlier, since the spaces were approximately three years.

<sup>156</sup> Literally *fasso* means muscle, tendon and vein.

milk was considered to be bad for the breastfed child and cause diarrhoea. Such a child was called *burodingo* and was said to be “fooled by” its mother. Both these principles contribute to birth spacing through various means.

### **Breastfeeding and postpartum amenorrhea**

For a period after birth, during breastfeeding, most women are infecund as they are not ovulating. The length of this period depends on how long the child is fully breastfed, on the woman’s nutritional status and individual variations. In interviews, most of the women responded that they saw their period as soon as they stopped breastfeeding. Six of the women reported to have seen their period substantially earlier, some as early as three to six months after birth. On average, the interviewed women breastfed for 20 months and saw their period after 14 months. In the Farafenni study, women breastfed for 23 months and found a return to fecundity some time between 12 and 15 months after birth (Bledsoe et al., 1994: 95). The periods of exclusive breastfeeding were however clearly shorter among my informants than in the Farafenni study. In my interviews, the average period of exclusive breastfeeding was 3.3 months while it was 5.9 months in the Farafenni study. In my interviews, 17 of 22 said they gave the child other food before it was three months old. Only two waited until after the fourth month with other types of food. The babies were mostly given a thin soup made of steamed millet, sorghum or rice. Only a couple bought Ceralac, a canned nutrition from the store. This difference may be due to campaigns for exclusive breastfeeding in certain areas

### ***Burodingo***

As discussed above, it was considered shameful and bad to fall pregnant while breastfeeding, especially before the child could walk. The expression was that the mother was “fooling” or “spoiling” (W: *yaha*) the child who was breastfeed (*a dingo mburte*). The child that was treated like this was referred to as *burodingo*, i.e. a child that has been exposed to “*burte*”. The idea was that when the mother falls pregnant, the milk changed and got bad qualities causing diarrhoea. (you said this before under child spacing, I think) According to Bledsoe and co-authors (1994), the suckling child would even suck the blood of its mother and unborn sibling.

As a result, the first child will contract life-threatening stomach ailments, the second will be born small and fragile, and the mother will become anemic. (ibid. 89)

Riesman describes similar beliefs among Fulanis of Burkina Faso (Riesman and Szanton, 1992).

Bledsoe and co-authors (1994) also argue that the mother "...may be labelled either as a 'jealous woman', trying to monopolize her husband's attention and resources, or as lacking the wifely skills to control his sexuality". Under such circumstances most women weaned the child as soon as possible. This was often done by leaving the child with grandparents and in some cases the child was fostered out to grandparents. Still, some women continued to breastfeed their babies. One woman said that staff at the Bakau health centre had advised her to continue breastfeeding. The nurse had told her that although she was pregnant, it was better for her child if she continued breastfeeding.

Because it was potentially stigmatising to *burte* a child, it was likely that some of the women under-communicated the overlap between the breastfeeding period and the pregnancy. Some women reported to have seen their period shortly after weaning at 18 months and still had only two-year spaces between the births. Either they had been pregnant before weaning or they did not pay much attention to calculating the months of breastfeeding and the date of the subsequent pregnancy compared to the age of their children.

Some found *burte* so shameful that they went to the extreme of killing their newborn babies. In March 1998 a Gambian newspaper (*Daily Observer*, 20-22 March 1998) published an article about three babies that were dumped (killed) by their mothers in Brikama, an urban area about 30 kilometres from Bakau. According to the newspaper, two of the women were married and had other children, but dumped their newborn babies into the pit latrine because of "certain traditional beliefs that women who are breastfeeding are not supposed to get pregnant". Discussing this case with one of my informants, I asked if she thought that could happen to her fellow women in Bakau. She did not believe that. Although women could be mocked if they fell pregnant while breastfeeding, she did not think any of them would go to the extent of killing their young baby.

Only a *Kanyaleng* woman who had been desperate to have children bragged about her *burodingo*. In a name-giving ceremony, her song bore witness of her successful visit to the sacred pond of Kachikally to improve her fertility:

*m fututa kedoya aye nbula*  
*a ko nte wulula*  
*na ta Katchikally*

I married one husband, he left me  
he said, I did not give birth,  
I went to Katchikally

It is unlikely that any other woman than a *Kanyaleng* would be proud of being so fertile that she even got a *burodingo*.

### **Ceasing giving birth**

The time when a woman stopped bearing children was rarely marked by a sharp moment of time. Some women just stopped bearing children, without any apparent reason, as was the case with some of the sub-fertile women. Others used contraceptives and insisted that there would be no more childbirths, as one woman who used to have Depo-provera injections expressed it: “The way of childbearing is finished” (*Silla ndingo fata le*). Among the interviewed women, five said they wanted no more children. Others among the contraceptive users said they would perhaps have another child later.

### **Contraceptives: Prices and access**

As described in the previous chapter, Bakau women had easy access to a number of places providing contraceptives such as Bakau Health Centre or the GFPA clinic in Kanifing. For reasons of secrecy, they might choose more distantly situated clinics. GFPA also had Community Based Distributors (CBD) of contraceptives in Bakau where one could obtain pills and condoms privately. Pharmacies also sell condoms and pills.

One of the women who used Depo-Provera got injections at the Bakau Health Centre every three months. The registration fee was 25 Dalasis, later she paid 10 Dalasis each time (1993).

The price for contraceptive pills at the Gambia Family Planning Association was 10 Dalasis for the consultancy, including pills for three months.

*Saffo/Alkunuto* was obtained from marabouts. A woman could contact a marabout herself to have a *saffos*, or she could ask people she trusted to find one for her. There was no fixed price for *saffos*.

A study of household expenditure in The Gambia in 1992 (Wadda and Craig, 1993) established that of the national average of health expenditure per consultation, the largest amount per consultation was spent on traditional healers (68.2 Dalasis) followed by

66.2 Dalasis spent on medical doctors. In this context, the fees paid for contraceptives, including health services seem quite inexpensive.

### **Next child preference**

Among the 31 women interviewed, six experienced dramatically lower fertility than they had hoped. One woman had never given birth, while two had given birth to one child each over 23 and 18 years, respectively. Three women had given birth to four and five children each, but none of them had given birth for the last nine years although they lived together with their husbands. Two of them had co-wives, but none complained that their husbands did not have sex with them. The questions of fertility problems are dealt with in detail in the next chapter.

As described in chapter one, informants considered pregnancy to come about as a result of mixing liquids during sexual intercourse and the will of Allah. If pregnancy was up to God, it was by consequence his responsibility to decide upon numbers. Still, this does not necessarily reflect a fatalistic attitude, some prayed to have more children, others used contraceptives. When asked whether they wanted another child, most of them had explicit preferences. Only two women referred to Allah's will in these answers. Some said maybe later or in the future.

Wittrup (1992) argues that there is a preference for boys in Gambian society. Among those who stated a gender preference during interviews, there were twice as many who wanted their next child to be boys as girls (eight *versus* four). Others said it was up to Allah or they were indifferent. Traditionally men were supposed to be economically responsible for their families. However, several of my informants were aware that women often actually were the main breadwinners of the family and that daughters could potentially give them as much economic support in their old age as boys could (see discussion of contributions from husband and wife in chapter four). In interviews women's answers seemed clearly rooted in their present family situation. Gender preference was often dependent on the gender of the previous children and on whether the woman was remarried. In cases where a woman already has many children, she may wish to give the new husband one boy, only. Women who have many boys tend to desire a girl next time, but there are also cases where a woman has only one girl and would prefer her next child also to be a girl.

Table 1 Gender preference of the next child seen in relation to the gender of the children the woman already has. M = male, F= female , X= informant did not give up gender, ( )= dead

Had given birth to:	Desire to have another child and preferred gender of next child
MFMMF	no more
7M 5F	Postmenopausal
FM(M)MF	M
MFFF	No more
FM	M
FMF(M)	More
FMMMFM	Whatever
FF	maybe later
MFF	maybe later
F	fertility problem
F	M
F(F)FFM	M
M(M)MMM	No more
MMF	If Allah gives
F(F)F	M
(M)(M)M(M)FMF	No more
0 (infertile)	0 (infertile)
FM(F)MMMM (3abortions) In the future	In the future
F	M
(M)(M)MF(F)FFMMM	Don't see period
0 (no sex)	
(M)M(X)FM	F - If Allah gives
MMMM	F
FMFF	M - when husband is back
MMMM	F – Later
F	F
F(M)FF	Any
(X)FM	F
(M)FFMF	Any

FF(M)(M)(M)	M
FMFMMF	No more
(M)(F)MMFFMM	Too old

Very few of the interviewed women gave general numerical answers to questions about how many children they wanted. Rather answers depended on the concrete life situations of the women; relationship with the husband, how many children she already had, whether the children were of the same sex or not etc.

Preferences change over time, depending on the present situation. When one woman came to the health centre for a check-up on her fifth child, the nurse had suggested that when she had another child, they could discuss use of “family planning”. The woman said to me, you know that I am a *Kanyaleng* (implying that she could not start using contraceptives). A couple of years later, when she was about to wean her sixth child, she had changed her mind – she wanted a rest and was looking for contraceptives.

### **Fertility effects of child fostering**

Fourteen, or almost half, of the 30 women who had ever given birth, had fostered out one or more children to others for upbringing. Some of the women interviewed had given as many as three children to others and this raises the question whether this might cause the women to replace the children by giving birth to new babies.

In cases where children were given to others permanently, they were not expected to return, and parents would not know if the child would support them or the foster parents in old ages. If securing their old age was a motive for high fertility preferences, one should expect that parents who have given away many children would try to compensate with increasing number of children. The women who had given out several children for fostering did not seem to be more eager to have more children than the others.

The number of boys and girls given away in child fostering arrangements is close to equal. One implication is that it appears to be of equal value both to receive and give boys and girls. In the child fostering chapter it will be discussed whether boys and girls are given systematically to others belonging to a certain category (for example, whether girls are always given to grandmothers while boys are given to men’s friends)

As discussed in chapter four, children were shared and not thought of as individual property. The rationale behind child births was not to accumulate birth children for oneself.

## Chapter summary

In chapter two I argued that the social organisation of child care and of families in general, implied that there was no bounded family unit that easily could be planned. The reasons for spacing or avoiding births were rather the need to take care of women and babies' health, rather than dimensioning families or residence units. Women expressed that they were tired and needed to rest, or they wanted to "wait" to avoid falling pregnant while breastfeeding. The need to preserve women's reproductive capacities and avoid aging was elaborated by Bledsoe and Banja (2002). Most of the interviewed women had never discussed use of contraceptives with their husbands, but rather made their own decisions. These decisions were mostly based on advice from other women and health personnel. For women in Bakau, all forms of contraceptives were available. There were thus no "unmet needs" for contraceptives in a strict sense, but many women lacked information and they did not know what to do in case of side effects. Among the interviewed women, only one of the women "at risk" of getting pregnant did not want to become pregnant. Rather there were several "unmet needs" for health services for infertile and subfertile women. Six of the interviewed women had fewer children than they preferred.

Based on the distinction between "black people's medicine" and "Western people's medicine" and the stronger integration of "black people's medicine" into the overall cosmology, one should have expected that more women would have used *alkunuto* than Western contraceptives. The women had, however, a rather pragmatic approach to health seeking behaviour and sought the solution that had proved most promising. While service providers could be "purists" in the sense that they kept strictly to the specific discursive logics of health services, the users combined solutions from various types of providers in an eclectic manner. In the last chapter that deals with infertility it is clear that many infertile or sub-fertile women try almost anything to have an own child.



## Chapter 7 Dealing with infertility

Being childless was an enormous strain on both men and women, even if they had children fostered-in. Still, in a comparative perspective, with reports about infertile women being excluded from social settings (Gerrits, 1997), going through extremely painful and at times dangerous treatments (Balen and Inhorn, 2002, Inhorn and Buss, 1994), getting divorced and being unable to remarry, the consequences seemed less harsh for infertile Gambian women. Although several infertile women were divorced in their first marriage, most of them remarried and stayed married even if they remained infertile. All the members of the *Kanyaleng* organisation were married, and all the infertile members had at least one child to foster. One may speculate about whether the practice of polygamy and the *Kanyaleng* rituals both had important effects in easing the burden of the infertile women. Firstly, men can have children (unless there was male factor infertility) even if they keep their infertile wives. Secondly, *Kanyaleng* rituals and organisations to provide a way of handling infertility that make it a collective rather than only an individual problem.

Primary infertility rates in The Gambia seem relatively low, between 2 and 5%, while secondary infertility rates are estimated to be between 6 and 19% (Billewicz and McGregor, 1981, Republic of The Gambia, 1993, Sundby et al., 1998).<sup>157</sup> Women who had given birth to one or two children only often considered their low fertility as a problem. Furthermore, infant and child mortality was still high, and some of the women with as many as five or six live births had only two to three living children. It did not help much to become pregnant easily when one child after the other died.

There are no studies from The Gambia that state the actual causes of infertility, and few individuals or couples were diagnosed by biomedical practitioners. Rather, the most emphasised explanations for fertility problems among informants involve Allah's will or "closed luck" (*harraje sito*). Lack of compatibility between husband and wife was also considered a possible reason, expressed as "she was not his wife" (*a manke a la muso ti*) or "he was not her husband" (*a manke a la kewo ti*). Spirits (*jinno*) were occasionally blamed for miscarriages when these occurred after the woman has had a sexual dream. If a jealous spirit has a love affair with a woman, he may kill all her potential offspring with her human husband. Spirits were also considered able to exchange a human child within the womb or

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<sup>157</sup> Ericksen and Brunette (1996) have ranked The Gambian infertility level among the lower middle of sub-Saharan African countries.



shortly after birth. These children were considered to be children of the spirit (*jinno dingo*) and not human babies. Some informants also believed that witches (*buwaa*) can kill the child within the womb, and the work of marabout was also considered potentially harmful to fertility. Jealous co-wives were often suspected of consulting a healer (marabout) and paying him to make “medicine” (*boro*) to cause co-wives’ infertility (See also Feldman-Savelsberg, 1994).

Since children were believed to be created by mixing bodily fluids infertility was not explained in medical terms terms of ovulatory problems or blocked tubes. However, some informants attribute infertility to diseases transmitted through sexual intercourse or worms (*kalli*) blocking the entrance to the uterus (*wulunyango*).

### ***Strategies to solve fertility problems***

Strategies to solve fertility problems were to: (1) consult a healer (marabout); (2) see a doctor for a dilatation and curettage (D&C) at the hospital (referred to as “cleaning the womb” (*kono ku*)); (3) use of contraceptive pills irregularly or for some months only; (4) visit sacred places or mosques to pray and give alms; (5) infertile and childless Mandinka women may become members of the *Kanyaleng kafo* and participate in their rituals; or (6) foster a child.

This chapter deals with various solutions to infertility problems, although the ritual solutions such as a visit to Folonko and *Kanyaleng* ritual performances are most elaborated. Child fostering practices are dealt with in chapters three and four. Women who experienced fertility problems or problems with child death often sought a series of solutions if the first choice did not solve their problem.

Musu Keba was married for five years to her first husband without falling pregnant. She was divorced and married again. After a couple of years in her second marriage, she started an active search to become pregnant. Together with an infertile neighbour woman she travelled into the countryside to see a well reputed female marabout. Because of the female marabout's popularity they had to wait for a whole week after arrival before they could see her. When they finally met her, she looked into their hands and told them to go to a sacred pond, Folonko, South West in the Gambia. She also advised them to go to a mosque, Aljammado in Nyoumi, and bring charity in the form of seven white candles, seven white cola nuts and seven Dalasis.

They returned to Bakau and followed her advice. Some months later they had both fallen pregnant. Both became members of the *Kanyaleng* group and were still members after 16 years. One of them has only one child and hopes to have more, the other has seven children and was satisfied with the number.s.

According to a survey conducted by Sundby and Mboge (1995), 40% of the women classified as infertile had sought formal health care (health centres, hospitals or private doctors). In the same survey, 36% of the infertile women had visited a sacred place, 57% a marabout, and 53% a traditional healer.<sup>158</sup> Of the infertile Mandinka women, 37% said they were *Kanyalengs*. According to interviews with nurses and midwives at health centres, most of the women seeking assistance at health centres had seen one or more marabouts before they came to the see a nurse or a doctor.<sup>159</sup>

No survey has been undertaken dealing with similar strategies to solve problems of illness in children, but from my experience Bakau women take their children both to health centres and to marabouts, depending on the type of illness they believe the child has contracted.<sup>160</sup>

Only two of the interviewed women said they did not believe that a marabout could help. A Serer woman with fertility problems, said only Allah could help. Although she had lived with this problem for years, she had never consulted a marabout. The other woman was a Wolof woman who said only a doctor could help.

## **Marabouts and infertility**

Marabouts had different approaches to fertility problems. According to a Bambara marabout working in Bakau, infertility could be due to four different sources: stomach pain (*konodiming*), abortion (*kono tinyaa*), children dying at birth or the work of an enemy (through a marabout). He argued that stomach pains could best be handled by doctors, but if an abortion seemed to have been caused by a jealous jinn lover, a marabout might be able to

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<sup>158</sup> The difference between a marabout and a traditional healer in the survey is not clear. In daily speech they would both be termed *moro* or *serign* (W).

<sup>159</sup> Interviews performed by Johanne Sundby and Heidi Skramstad as a part of Sundby et al.'s study of infertility in The Gambia Essau, Mansakonko, Farafenni, November 1994.

<sup>160</sup> According to Greenwood et al. (1987), the most frequent causes of child mortality after 1st month of life in a rural area of the Gambia were malaria, respiratory tract infections and chronic diarrhea.

solve the problem. If an enemy had paid a marabout to “do work” (W: *ligeiy*) on somebody to spoil her fertility, it would also be only marabouts who could diagnose and solve the problem. Although most marabouts reject the accusation that they do evil, it was a widespread impression that infertility could be caused by the evil work of a marabout, on commission from and paid by a jealous co-wife.

While the Bambara marabout had a differentiated perspective of infertility, a Mandinka marabout visiting Bakau was more general and optimistic about what he could solve. He required 300 Dalasis to solve infertility problems and claimed that he could guarantee the positive results of his treatment.<sup>161</sup> If clients were short of money they could pay half the amount at the start and the other half later. One Wolof marabout in a small village near Kaur said he was unable to help people with infertility problems. His own daughter had never given birth, and if he had been able to solve such problems, he said, he would have helped her a long time ago.

As mentioned above, Musu Keba and her friend saw a female marabout to solve their infertility problems. Both fell pregnant after following her advice and visiting Folonko and the mosque at Aljammadou. Still, there were a lot of women who remained infertile and were not helped by seeing a marabout. It was a general perception that some marabouts knew their work while others were only cheating people. A couple of women said one should be cautious about using marabouts to solve fertility problems. It was as if one was forcing Allah to give you a child. He could decide to fulfil your wish, but you could also die in the process.

## **Biomedical health services**

The biomedical health services represented by pharmacies, doctors, health centres and hospitals seemed to play a minor role in dealing with infertility. One of the reasons was probably the relatively limited repertoire of services that could be offered to infertile clients. Many of the women in Bakau with infertility problems had been to Royal Victoria Hospital to “wash the womb” (*kono ku*), which was the popular expression for dilation and curettage. According to Sundby, dilatation and curettage can be useful as a diagnostic tool, but without any follow up it may well do more harm than good (Sundby 1995).

Contraceptive pills were occasionally used to improve fertility. One informant had helped a neighbour woman to get three strips of contraceptive pills from a Community Based Distributor (CBD). Her neighbour had only an eight-year old boy and wanted another child.

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<sup>161</sup> The price of 300D was about half a month’s salary for a low paid wage labourer at the time.

The plan was to use the pills for three months and then stop. A similar way of thinking was referred to by the TBA referred to above.

### **Praying at sacred places or mosques**

While it was a widespread view the fertility problems as the will of God, few people would accept such a fate without taking any further action. Although Allah might have “written it” (W: *Yallah mo ko binda*), his will could hopefully be changed through prayers. Direct prayers or Koranic verses written on paper or on a slate and washed off into water, were used. The idea was to make Allah have mercy with the person and “open her luck” (*harraje firringta* lit.: untie the luck). Charity may also be prescribed to solve such problems. Certain places were considered more powerful than others in effecting prayers or charity. These were the sacred ponds in Katchikally in Bakau or Folonko in Kartong, a place in the bush like Brefet Sanneh Mentereng, the graves of important marabouts or Islamic teachers (like the grave of Sheik Omar Futi in Gunjur), or big trees. Alms seem to have at least two important effects. Firstly, they bring blessings (*barako*) to those who give and secondly, those who receive charity always pray for the giver. Charity and visits to mosques, sacred places and participation in *Kanyaleng* rituals always involve collective prayers. According to a verse in a song performed the night before girls were taken to initiation, prayers said by many were always heard (*duwa jamma - jabita*). When an issue was dealt with in common prayers, it was no longer an individual problem, but a collective concern for a group of people.

### **Visit to the mosque**

Every Friday collective prayers for infertile women were said at the mosque at Aljammadou in Niomy. The infertile women used to bring seven white candles, seven white cola nuts and seven Dalasis each as charity. The charity was brought to the Imam, and prayers were said.

### **Visiting sacred places - going to Folonko**

As mentioned above, Folonko at Kartong had a reputation as a sacred place where prayers for improved fertility were frequently heard. Women visited the pond and were ritually washed and prayed for. The woman with the fertility problem wears a new piece of cloth (*fano*) as she is washed in water from the pond inside a little secluded fenced area. The water may also be drunk. The piece of cloth, some cola nuts, candles, salt and money are given to the owner of the pond as charity and are distributed among the women who are gathered there and who

pray for her fertility. If the woman falls pregnant after a visit to the pond, the child should be named after the pond. Prayers at Folonko are said collectively on Fridays. A part of a name-giving ceremony may also be held at the pond; particularly if several of the woman's other children have died shortly after birth. Below is a description of a visit to the pond.

In the beginning of May 1995 Musu Keba was contacted by Sunu, a relative from Baddibou.<sup>162</sup> Sunu had got a boy when she was fifteen years old, and married shortly after. Her son was now eight years old and had still not got younger siblings. Two pregnancies had ended with spontaneous abortions. Her mother's sister had given her a three-year old daughter to foster, but still Sunu hoped to give birth to another child. Sunu had hopes of a visit to Folonko since both Musu Keba and a neighbour of hers had got babies after being there.

On a Friday morning, just after nine, we found a car to Gunjur at the Serekunda garage. Waiting for the car to fill up with people, Musu Keba bought a packet of white candles and white cola nuts to bring to Folonko as well as a packet of biscuits for her two-year old son, who accompanied us. When the car reached Gunjur after a couple of hours, we each bought our basket of salt.<sup>163</sup> Another car took us from Gunjur to Kartong. On the way to Kartong a woman with a small boy entered the car. She also brought a basket of salt, cola nuts and white candles and was obviously on her way to Folonko. Her son was crying most of the way to Kartong. Musu Keba told us about her second time to come to Folonko, when her eldest daughter, Folonko, was about to become circumcised. Her smallest child at that time was one year old and carried on her back. She and Folonko had travelled on foot all the way from Gunjur to Kartong because they had come too late for the only departure that day.

When we arrived at Kartong we first found Jabang's compound. Araf Yusuf Jabang had been Musu Keba's former husband's friend. Musu Keba greeted him and talked to him about her visit with her husband more than 15 years ago. Several of the women in the compound had already gone to the pond and he asked his daughters to accompany us. They carried our baskets of salt on their heads. One of the women we met came from the pond and asked us to wait until after the Friday prayer since,

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<sup>162</sup> Sunu was Musu Keba's deceased husband's brother's wife.

<sup>163</sup> The charity was approximately ten white candles, a packet cost 4 Dalasis. The salt was approximately 5 kilogrammes, costing 10 Dalasis. Payment for the washing is the *malan* and 3 Dalasis.

according to her, everybody would soon leave the pond to come and pray. Since it was only a quarter to twelve and we wanted to return to Bakau in time, we continued. The pond was situated at the outskirts of the village, surrounded by trees, in a depression in the landscape. A fence surrounded the area close to the pond and the wall of the pond was supported by bricks at the sides. As many as twenty women were sitting in a half circle facing the pond.

We took off our shoes at the entrance and placed the baskets of salt just inside the fence. The packets of candles were placed on the top of the salt baskets, together with the cola nuts. Musu Keba opened the packet of cola nuts. We were each squatting behind our basket of salt, the others were praying with palms turned upward. After praying over these items, we placed them in the middle of the half circle with the other women. They asked us to sit down on the ground in front of the half circle. We were sitting with legs stretched out in front facing the pond. Musu Keba explained to the other women that Sunu wanted a baby and that I wanted success in my “learning” (*karango*). She told the others how she had been there to have a baby about fifteen years back and she had returned when the girl was about to go become initiated (*nyakato*). Beyond that, she said, she had been busy having a new baby every year and thus had been unable to come. The women prayed *Al fatiah* three times and another prayer was said three times. Afterwards an old lady followed Sunu to the washing area with a bucket of water from the pond. Sunu sat on a little brick inside the corrugated shed that was put up. The old woman partly poured, partly smeared the water over Sunu’s body. Afterwards the woman washed cola nuts with water from the pond and divided them into four. She gave us each our part and instructed us to chew it completely and not to lose any part of it. I was told to wash my hands and face with the water at the side of the pond and the old woman bathed Musu Keba’s son and gave Musu Keba water to wash her head.

We all sat down again and they prayed for us once more. I was told not to cross my legs and Sunu was told to stretch hers while we (they) were praying. After praying the women shared the charity (*saddah*) between them. All of them received some salt, candles and cola nuts.

Everybody, including three other women who had also been washed and prayed for already, went back to the village together. The old woman drew a full bucket of water, brought it to the village and filled the water into plastic bottles for us to take home. Musu Keba said that water could be useful, for example before an exam.



We went back to Jabang's compound. Some men who were sitting there said the pond probably had been there for five hundred years. The fence and a brick wall around the pond had been made fifteen years ago through communal work (*tesito*). For a long time, perhaps the last hundred years, people had experienced that prayers said at the pond had been answered. Visitors to the pond frequently returned to inform others that their prayers had been answered.

For the effect of the visit to be best, one should not have another bath the same day, but wait until next morning. One should not visit a lover, only the husband. The old woman who had washed Sunu had explained these things to her. People who come from Kartong had to sleep somewhere else the night after they have visited the pond.

When I asked why salt was good for charity, Yussufa's daughter said, it was good because everybody needs salt and it was tasty (W: *saff*). Musu Keba added that everybody needs salt for cooking. She also said that here and at the mosque in Aljammadou, there was only white charity. To the mosque, one should bring seven white candles, seven white cola nuts and seven Dalasis.

We were served food twice. Musu Keba prayed (*saló*) and we went to find a car. We returned to Serekunda around six o'clock.

There are four important aspects of this ritual. Firstly, it was an all female ritual. Secondly, the prayers were Muslim prayers. Thirdly, the prayers were collective. Fourthly, the sacred water and the white charity were important.

The whole ritual performed at Folonko on Fridays was entirely for women. Women went there to have their and their husband's fertility problems solved. At the pond, women, including performers of the ritual, participants in the prayers and those who wanted their problem to be solved, addressed the problem. At the end of this chapter, after the presentation of the *Kanyaleng* rituals, I discuss why female prayers seem to be so prominent in dealing with fertility problems and children's deaths.

The second aspect here was the use of ordinary Muslim prayers, such as *Al fatiah* (Ar.). The conduct of the women during the ritual would, in opposition to the performance of *Kanyaleng* rituals, be described as respectful and appropriate for Muslim women. The collective saying of prayers was considered very powerful. The problem was no longer an individual problem of the woman or the couple, but something that was dealt with by a wider collective.

Charity was important in the sense that receivers of charity were obliged to pray for the giver. Charity was a special form of gift giving involving three human actors and God. Firstly, there was the person who suggested that charity should be taken out and the form and amount of charity. Secondly, there was the giver and thirdly there was the receiver of charity who passes on the message to God. The charity to be taken out at Folonko was standardised and visitors had been told what to bring by those with experience. Most of the charity was white, apart from some red cola nuts and the new *fano* for the woman in charge of the ritual.

Candles and cola nuts were frequently used forms of charity while salt was rarely used. In this context salt was considered good because it was useful, tasty and white. Salt is used for cooking and if there is anything women bring into marriage, it is children and cooking. Other societies use the cooking pot as metaphor for the uterus and for fertility (Ajetuni, 1996). A part of the *Kanyaleng* activities discussed below is stealing the cooking pots from other women, which may indicate that Mandinkas make similar connections. As discussed in chapter five, Weil argues that white, cold things like sour milk and chicken eggs were considered symbolically linked to female fecundity. Although the items above are white and might be considered cool, none of them have the liquid qualities emphasised by Weil. Neither did informants mention any fecundity aspects of the charity items in themselves, beyond their function as charity.

The washing of the woman within the secluded shed resembled the ritual washing of the brides at *maaño bitoo*. Also the *nga singolu* are ritually washed. The purifications of the *manyo bitoo* and the *nga singolu* may be seen as signifying rebirth and starting anew in a new social position as wives and initiated respectively. The renewal through purification at Folonko can signify a return as a newly fertile wife.

While the prayers were immaterial and abstract, washing/bathing in and drinking sacred water and as well as eating cola nuts that had been blessed and washed, were ways of embodying the blessings, prayers and sacredness. We were told to make sure that we ate every piece of our quarter of the cola nut.<sup>164</sup>

Several of the Mandinka women who had ever visited Folonko or Katchilkally, had also become members of the *Kanyaleng* organisation and participated in their social gatherings and rituals.

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<sup>164</sup> This resembles the incorporation in the Holy Communion, although what is incorporated is not Jesus' flesh and blood, but rather a share of the sacred pond and the collective blessings and prayers, carried physically and metaphorically by the cola nuts.

## The *Kanyaleng* organisation

According to Weil (1976), the *Kanyaleng kafo* is a rather recent organisation among Mandinkas. It spread from similar Jola organisations called *anyallana*, *dimba* (Niang, 1995) or *kanyaleen* (Fassin and Badji, 1986).<sup>165</sup>

The *Kanyaleng kafo* I focus on was one of three *Kanyaleng* groups in Bakau and had 17 members. The *Kanyaleng* group was a subgroup of the wider women's organisation (*kafo*) that included almost 200 women in the neighbourhood. In this *Kanyaleng* group, the women's ages varied between 20 and 50 years, and there were wide variations in numbers of children. Membership is permanent and women who succeed in having living children remain within the organisation.

The majority of the women were more than 30 years old, which may indicate either that young people in an urban area do not see *Kanyaleng* membership as a solution to their problems, or that all kind of other solutions were sought first and *Kanyaleng* becomes a kind of final resort after some years had passed. Some of my informants and *Kanyaleng* members indicated that they entered *Kanyaleng* about the same time as they sought other solutions to their problems, but these processes all started after they had been married for several years.

According to a survey on a national level, 32% of infertile Mandinka women had been a *Kanyaleng* (Sundby, 1997). This implies that a majority of the infertile Mandinka women never become *Kanyaleng*. One of the reasons may be that not everybody thinks it helps to become a *Kanyaleng*. Another reason may be that participation in the "playful" *Kanyaleng* rituals does not suit everybody. It was said about an elderly infertile Mandinka woman, that she had not entered the *Kanyaleng* group, although other women in the compound were members, because she was not brave (*ala nya mang bambang*, lit: her eyes are not strong). She did not dare to be a *Kanyaleng*. Another woman who had been forcefully initiated by the *Kanyaleng* had felt so ashamed/shy (W: *ruus*) that she cried. They had undressed her and smeared porridge all over her body in order to increase her fertility. Being shameless (W: *ruusul darra*) is normally considered bad, but seems a necessary attribute for *Kanyaleng* women in ritual contexts. This will be explained further in the analysis of *Kanyaleng* rituals.

Among the members, four had never given birth to a living child. Two women had only given birth to one child and two had given birth to two. Four women had lost several children; one of them had lost five. One woman had been infertile for eight years, but had

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<sup>165</sup> Jola is the fourth largest ethnic category in The Gambia.

later had seven children. Three were not members on their own behalf, but were there because of others. One was there to assist her co-wife who had only one child, another to assist her friend who had no child, and the third was there because she had received her sister's only child when the sister died. These women had seven, five and four living children respectively. Most of the childless *Kanyaleng* women also had foster children from siblings or co-wives under their care.

The group had no permanent leader. According to two of the members this was due to problems in selecting among three elders. The rest of the members were not ready to stand behind one of the candidates against the others. The group had a "mother" (*ba*), who was not a *Kanyaleng* herself, but was their patron. If they wanted to arrange a ritual gathering they discussed it with her and she helped them organise it. If they wanted to make similar cloths (W: *assobi*) for an occasion, she used to go and buy material for them. She was not rich, but was in a position that she would be trusted to borrow a roll of cloth from a shopkeeper and pay for it later (her late husband had been a business man). The elder (*koto*) and leader for the big neighbourhood *kafo* was also occasionally involved in decision making about the *Kanyaleng* activities.

### ***Kanyaleng* parents**

When a child is born to a *Kanyaleng* woman, the child gets a *Kanyaleng* name, and it also gets *Kanyaleng* parents. *Kanyaleng* parents were considered responsible for the child, but children of *Kanyaleng* women in Bakau were rarely actually transferred to their *Kanyaleng* parents. *Kanyaleng* parents could, like *tomas*, give money on special occasions and sometimes also bring food.

Much of the interpretation of *Kanyaleng* rituals here is based on the interpretation of *Kanyaleng kuŋ-lio s*, which were rituals for newly-born children of women whose fertility or ability to bear children who survive is fragile. While the explicit purpose of participation is to pray that Allah will give a woman a child or to pray that a child may have a long life, the rich and varied symbolism apparent in these rituals leads to ready interpretation. In this chapter, I suggest that, beyond their constant hopes that their prayers may be heard, participants involve themselves in *Kanyaleng* rituals in order to reorganise conventional meanings surrounding such important matters as gender relations, the importance of children, the importance of food to survival, and "moral" issues such as greediness and theft, which transgress norms in this Muslim community. Ultimately, through joking and "nonsense" (*kuntaya*), the *Kanyaleng* participants invert the importance of such issues effectively, "turning them on their head". In

so doing, they also reconceptualise their own fertility problems, lessening some of the tension inherent in troubled fertility histories. As such, the *Kanyaleng* serves as a very effective means of coping with infertility among Mandinka women, even in the absence of other effective solutions to this problem.

### **Interpretation of rituals: an overview**

*Kanyaleng* organisations and rituals, as they appear in The Gambia and neighbouring countries, seem to be rather unique in their exclusive focus on problems with fertility and child death, and their performance by members of a permanent women's organisation. When fertility problems were dealt with in collective rituals elsewhere, they often constitute only one aspect of the ritual activity. In Zar, Bori and other African possession cults, fertility problems constitute one of several problems that precede spirit possession diagnoses (Boddy, 1988, Boddy, 1989, Lewis, 1990, Lewis et al., 1991). Similarly, in women's secret societies, dealing with infertility is one of several concerns, in addition to childbirth, female circumcision, and the like (e.g. Sande in Liberia (Bledsoe, 1980a, Bledsoe, 1984) and Sierra Leone (MacCormac, 1982) and Komo in Mali (Bakke, 1993)). Human fertility is also dealt with in wider communal rituals in relation to the fertility of animals and the land and is often seen in connection to the condition of those in power (Blystad, 1992, Blystad, 2000, Feldman-Savelsberg, 1994, Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999, Gluckman, 1963, Meier, 1999, Rigby, 1968).

The most widespread rituals related to infertility or children's death were probably rituals performed by healing specialists or those in charge of sacred places (Ebin, 1982, Elden, 1995, Inhorn, 1994a, Inhorn, 1994b, Neff, 1994). Such rituals may have a larger audience, but the client-healer relationship is usually the focus rather than a group of participants, as is the case in *Kanyaleng* rituals.

Former studies of the *Kanyalengs*, or *Dimba* as they are called in some parts of Southern Senegal, have focused on their social organisation and on interpretations of their rituals.<sup>166</sup> Weil (1976) emphasises the integrative aspect of participation in the *Kanyaleng* organisation (*kafo*). His argument is based on a rural situation where women move to live with their husbands' extended families and were integrated by giving birth to new members of the husband's patriline. For infertile women, the *Kanyaleng kafo* is, according to Weil, one of the rare alternative sources of social integration for women.

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<sup>166</sup> In Mandinka *dimbaa* means suckling mother.

Niang (1995) sees the *Dimba* as a support group for women, who also help each other with farming as well as with social and financial problems. Fassin and Badji (1986) discuss the *Kanyaleng* rituals among Jola (Diola) in another area of southern Senegal, where the ritual involves adoption of the infertile woman into another village. She is given a new name and her host family and village were responsible for the well-being of her and her child for three to five years.

In the urban context, on the other hand, *Kanyaleng* membership does not constitute a unique opportunity for social integration of childless women. In contrast with the situations described by Weil (1976), where no other organisations for women existed, and Fassin and Badji (1986) who found no other collective female rituals, the urban area of Bakau has several women's organisations and rituals. Members of the *Kanyaleng* organisation were also members of a wider organisation (*kafo*), recruiting all Mandinka women within the neighbourhood. In addition, there were saving clubs (*oususo*) and religious clubs. There were also other collective women's rituals, such as those surrounding female circumcision, and women were in charge of important parts of other rituals, such as ordinary name-giving rituals (*kuñlios*) and transfer of the bride rituals (*maañoo bitoo*). Since membership in the *Kanyaleng* organisation is permanent and several of its members have made *Kanyaleng* an important aspect of their identity, the social aspects of membership were nonetheless clearly important.

Studies of Gambian *Kanyaleng* rituals per se have tended to focus on the use of male costumes and male behaviour during the rituals (Weil, 1976; Wittrup, 1984). Both Weil and Wittrup have discussed this aspect of *Kanyaleng* rituals in relation to Gluckman's concept of "rituals of rebellion" (Gluckman, 1963; Weil, 1976; Wittrup, 1984) and Turner's "rituals of status reversion" (Turner, 1967; Weil, 1976; Wittrup, 1984). They have also discussed Rigby's (1968) idea of "reversal of states" in relation to *Kanyaleng* rituals. Wittrup also suggests that *Kanyaleng* rituals can be seen as women's alternative ways of expressing their own experiences and points of view, since their other modes of expression have become muted through the processes described by Ardener (1972). Although costumes and role-playing were important in *Kanyaleng* rituals, and male clothes were frequently worn, the one-sided focus on gender relations in the above interpretations seems too narrow to cover the diversity of outfits and role-play among the *Kanyalengs* I observed. Informants contend that they wear costumes and play roles to make people laugh, and they may wear empty rice bags, Christmas tree decorations or pilgrims' (*Ajaratou*) head ties as well as men's clothes. Instead of focusing on a set of oppositions and inversions, I will focus on the variety of ritual forms apparent in praying, joking, and doing "nonsense" (*kuntuya*), which may include not only

wearing costumes, but also stealing, playing with food, exposing genitals and buttocks, and behaving like dogs.

Karp (1987) describes the use of laughter in marriage rituals as subversive activities that undermine the authority of the ritual. In *Kanyaleng* rituals, laughter and joking were required, since sadness and anger were emotions that cannot legitimately be expressed. “Making people laugh” is often emphasised as the role of *Kanyalengs*. According to an elderly infertile *Kanyaleng* member, *Kanyaleng* women should never show anger or sadness (*jusso bo*); clearly, these were emotions that might be expected in the face of ongoing infertility or death of children.

When participants and others were asked why they do as they do, they often answer that they do it to pray for women’s fertility or that a child will have a long life. Kratz (1994) phrases the question of ritual efficacy as, “Just how do people accomplish what they say they do through such ceremonies?” Or, in this context, “How do *Kanyaleng* women make good prayers to overcome infertility and ensure child survival?” Since it is generally acknowledged that Allah is in charge of life and death, a continued situation of infertility or child death may thus be seen as a result of Allah’s will rather than as the result of unsuccessful prayer.

However, ritual efficacy must be discussed in a broader context than the informants’ explicit intentions. Rituals do much more than participants were able to account for. My suggestion is that *Kanyaleng* rituals create certain changes in the participants’ experience and perceptions of self and of others – changes that ultimately help them to cope with the profound sadness, anger, and frustration of infertility and child death.

### ***Kanyaleng* rituals**

As mentioned above, *Kanyaleng* members were active participants in most of the rituals that took place in their neighbourhood and among their friends and kin. However, the most elaborated performances took place when *Kanyalengs* organised rituals themselves. The formal pattern of *Kanyaleng* rituals consisted of singing and dancing, followed by praying and eating, and was often concluded by a final prayer. There were three major occasions for such rituals: (1) to pray for the fertility of members or guests; (2) to pray for a newly born child to have a long life; or (3) to show hospitality (*bunya*) in honour of a special guest. Often the three were combined, as was the case in Tombong’s *kuy-lio*, which I describe below.

*Kuy-lio* s are rituals performed for all Gambian Muslim children when they are one week old. The *kuy-lio* ritual is both a name-giving and an initiation into the Muslim

community (Ar.: *umma*). Men contribute money, sheep and cola nuts, women provide money, food and their own labour. The first part of the ritual (*kung lio*), which includes a symbolic haircutting of the infant, is dominated by men, with only a few women present. One woman holds the baby while the child's mother sits next to her. A male Muslim scholar, often the Imam, performs the ritual. He applies soap and water on the child's forehead, cuts off some hair with a razor blade at three different places, prays, recites verses from the *Qur'an*, blows into the child's ear, and whispers the name of the child into its ear. At the same moment as the child's name is whispered, a sheep, goat, or cock is killed and all the participants pray *Al fatiah* (Ar.). Doughnuts (W: *pankeks*), drinks and cola nuts are distributed. Most of the men leave when this part of the ritual is over.

After the barbering ritual, porridge (*chakre*) with sour milk and sugar is served to the remaining guests. Women cook lunch, and guests come and go throughout the rest of the day. All guests give money (*ngenso*) to those who have the *kun-lio*. After the five o'clock prayer, women gather to sing and dance.

### ***Kanyaleng kun-lio s***

*Kanyaleng kun-lio s* can be divided into three different forms of performance: namely, "selling the child at the market", placing the child on the ground as if it was "thrown away," and, finally, parodying ordinary *kun-lio s*.

#### **"Selling" the child at the market.**

New babies born to *Kanyaleng* members are occasionally taken to the market to be "sold" there. The occasion often takes place on the day of the ordinary *kun-lio*, after the barbering ritual has been performed. The child is put inside a tub, and the *Kanyalengs* go to the market to ritually "sell" the child. As payment, they receive vegetables, peanut butter, meat, etc. which is used to cook food for the guests.

This is obviously a special "sales transaction", since both the sold object (the child) and its payment remains with the seller afterwards. The ritual "quasi-sale" is one of many metaphorical "as if" actions performed by *Kanyalengs*. Ritually "selling a child at the market" may be interpreted as signifying the ambiguity of *Kanyaleng* children's value. The child's actual value to its mother may be doubtful if all her other children have died. Selling the child implies a willingness to part with the child, while other people's willingness to pay is an indication that the child actually has value. Pretending that a mother is willing to sell her child may also be seen as concealing her eagerness to become a mother. Since the *Kanyaleng* group



as a collective is “selling” the child, it may also signify that the child’s mother should trust and leave her fate to the other *Kanyaleng* members.

Another aspect of “selling a child at the market” and exchanging it for foodstuffs involves depersonalising the child. If children can be exchanged, personal and relational aspects of the child become irrelevant. Child fostering implies that any child will make the woman a mother. However, in non-ritual contexts, personal relations do matter, and obtaining a foster child is rarely sufficient, which is why most infertile women keep on trying to bear children.

### **Throwing the child on the ground.**

On the day of the ordinary *kuŋ-lio* s, the *Kanyaleng*s may also take the baby and place it on an empty rice bag at the side of the road, pretending to leave it there. Burama Sagnia, a Gambian social anthropologist, argues that this is done in order to make the mother’s spirit (*jinn*) believe that the child has no value and is thus not worth killing (Mannerfelt, 1992). The idea that putting the child on the ground is done to “fool” (W: *nah*) the jinn, was never confirmed by my own informants. Rather, they said it was done to pray that the child should have a long life.

Again, this ritual seems to deal with the ambivalence related to the value of children that were likely to die. When a woman has lost one or more children already, she may be careful not to be too optimistic about other children. However, it may also refer to the need to hide her eagerness at becoming a mother.

### **Parody of ordinary *kuŋ-lio* s.**

Certain *Kanyaleng* rituals make a parody of ordinary *kuŋ-lio* s. The following analysis uses a particular *Kanyaleng kuŋ-lio* for a three-month-old girl called Tombong as its point of departure. Tombong’s mother had given birth to two babies who had died within the first week after birth. Tombong was the first child her mother gave birth to after her husband’s death and her remarriage to his brother in Bakau. Her present husband’s first wife was infertile and had been a member of the *Kanyaleng* group for years.

Tombong’s *kuŋ-lio* started several hours later than ordinary *kuŋ-lio* s. Before the barbering ritual, some of the women prepared rice cakes for charity (*saddah*) and lunch. Two papayas were used as sheep and “killed” with dramatic gestures before they were peeled and sliced. Some of the pieces were distributed as charity among

guests; others were put in a plastic bowl with water to be applied to the child's forehead. They replaced the cola nuts, millet and rice used in ordinary *kun-lio* s. The man who came to shave Tombong's hair was the only man present during this part of the ritual. One *Kanyaleng* woman held Tombong on her lap, while Tombong's mother sat beside her, both facing Mecca. They were seated on a plastic bag rather than straw mats normally used. The head cover (*bitirango*) of the woman who held Tombong was made of transparent plastic rather than the beautiful piece of cloth (*darifano*) usually worn. The man shaved the whole of Tombong's head, rather than performing the three symbolic hair trimmings.

Men normally observe this part of the ritual in solemnity, and not much is said apart from prayers. In this ritual instead, the *Kanyaleng* women gathered in front of where they shaved the baby and started dancing and singing. One of the women began drumming with a stick on an empty plastic barrel. While the baby's hair was shaved, one woman was singing and dancing close to where the shaving took place:

*Juma le Tombong kungo li*      Who shaves Tombong's head  
*Wo ye na nying dong fanang li*      That one should come and shave this one (pubic hair) too

She sang this as she danced and exposed her buttocks, thereafter her genitals. The explanation was that a *Kanyaleng* woman who shaves the hair of her child herself, will risk that the other *Kanyalengs* will come and beat her and go to the child's father and show him their pubic hair. Pubic hair was also the topic of the following song:

*Tombong ba juo ti be je, ti*      Tombong's mother's buttocks hair are there, long  
*jamba*      hair

I asked whether these words were not embarrassing for Tombong's mother, but was told that Tombong's mother in this song referred to her *Kanyaleng* mother who is her father's first wife.

*Kanyaleng* women occasionally expose private parts or dance naked during their gatherings, when men were rarely present. Outside the ritual context, only mad (W: *dof*) people, who have lost all sense of shame (*malu*), would expose genitals or buttocks in public. However,

genitals and buttocks also signify sexuality, and in this context, sexuality “out of place.” Sexual relations were supposed to take place in private and within marriage; if women engage in pre- or extramarital sexual relations, they were careful to keep it a secret. However, proper management of female sexuality also depends on how culturally perceived signs of sexuality were managed, and not only what takes place in private. As discussed elsewhere (Skramstad, 1990b), such signs involve proper dressing, which for married Mandinka women in most contexts means covering their legs but not wearing trousers; not walking with men (apart from fathers, brothers and husbands); not walking about in the street without an errand; and not smoking or drinking alcohol. In ritual contexts, exposing genitals and buttocks during dancing thus goes far beyond improper management of sexuality and enters the realm of madness. However, willingness to expose genitals in public may also indicate a willingness to transgress other rules of sexual behaviour. In another *kuy-lío*, a *Kanyaleng* woman sang that she would go home to one of the other women’s husbands and have sex with him. Everybody laughed, because it was expressed by a *Kanyaleng* in a ritual context. Outside the ritual context, however, having sex with another woman’s husband would arouse nothing but anger.

Exposing genitals and verbally expressing intentions to be adulterous during a quasi-Muslim ritual may be interpreted as blasphemous behaviour. Implicitly, such behaviours serve to question whether orthodox ways of worshipping Allah were worthwhile when he lets children die and women remain infertile. It may also be interpreted as signifying that the actor “could not care less” about acting mad, since she does not have a child.

Returning to Tombong’s *kuy-lío*, up to this point, Tombong’s *kuy-lío* had been a parody of ordinary *kuy-lío*s. Papayas became sheep, cola nuts, rice and millet given in charity. The plastic bowl replaced the ordinarily used calabash. A plastic bag replaced the prayer mat and another transparent plastic bag became a head cover. Women drumming, dancing, singing and baring their genitals replaced the silent male audience. One explanation of why an ordinary Muslim *kuy-lío* becomes a source of parody and joking is that the *Kanyaleng* women want to subvert the male authority involved. Namely, after a woman has done the main job of bearing and giving birth to the child, men in the Muslim *kuy-lío*, suddenly “take over” and were the ones who initiate the child into the Muslim community through their ritual. The day of the *kuy-lío* is the first day the child appears in public, and this event thus becomes dominated by a male presence.

At Tombong’s *kuy-lío*, when the man had finished barbering Tombong, he left and the *Kanyaleng* women kept on singing and dancing. Although the occasion for the

ritual was a *Kanyaleng kuj-lio* to pray for Tombong's survival, it was also a ritual for enhancing the fertility of all guests and members. Two childless women, one of them a friend of one of the infertile *Kanyaleng* women, came to be prayed for. During lunch, they became "oiled" with food, meaning that food was smeared all over their bodies. They wore no clothes apart from the cloth around their waist. According to informants, "oiling with food" is good for fertility, and Wittrup (1984) also argues that the effect is considered best if she has sex with her husband before washing the food off. Women danced around the "oiled" women while this was happening. Sand was also poured into the women's food. The explanation of this was that "sand is sugar for the *Kanyalengs*". At this time, one infertile *Kanyaleng* woman sang:

*Aio mbe dingnyinno la*  
*Eh sampa laibo*

I am looking for a child  
 Make one of wood, woodcarver

In Tombong's *kuj-lio* as in all other *Kanyaleng* rituals, food played a dominant role. Food was cooked, eaten, grabbed, blessed, stolen, rubbed on the body. Although *Kanyalengs* grab food from the cooking pots and basins before it is served, all *Kanyaleng* meals start with prayer. In addition to common prayer, one of the elders among the *Kanyalengs* prays over a handful of rice and gives it to a woman who wants to have a child. She repeats this for other women who want to become pregnant.

Food was also the topic of several songs. In one of the songs, food was contrasted with prayers. It stated that while prayers were useful, so is the cook and the eater. While discussing another song, which literally underlines the importance of Tombong's survival, the interpreters focused on breastfeeding practices. The song was:

*Tombong dimbaya*  
*Funtu fefeo*  
*Dankaye balunye*

Give breast milk to Tombong  
 I will find rags (to wear)  
 if (she) stays alive

Informants said Tombong's mother's children died early because she failed to give them water in addition to her breast milk, which, according to them, was necessary for survival. Since Tombong's mother was not a young girl anymore, nobody thought of advising her about breastfeeding practices. The role of women in nurturing their children was also in focus in a praise of their *Kanyaleng* "mother" who was likened to an elephant, carrying her

*Kanyaleng* children (members of the group) on her back and giving them milk from her breast.

Feeding is also a part of role-play, when *Kanyaleng* women were made to eat like a dog. In Tombong's *kuŋ-lío*, this was only referred to in songs:

<i>Kurikurio ali na wulu mondo</i>	Give my dog a handful
<i>Wuludimbo e ka</i>	Dog who has a puppy
<i>munne domo jang</i>	What is it eating here?
<i>Jambanduro nying futu</i>	leaves with peanut sauce and millet

According to informants, this was an old song, referring to one occasion when the *Kanyalengs* “made a woman a dog” and served her food from a wooden tray. *Kuri kurio* is an expression used for calling the dog. They gave the woman handfuls of food, and they also gave her water to drink from their hands. They served both the dog and the woman who wanted a child.

Wittrup (1984) argues that dogs were important in *Kanyaleng* rituals because they were considered to be very fertile. I have been unable to confirm this interpretation; *Kanyaleng* members I interviewed had only one interpretation, which was “she does it because she is a *Kanyaleng*”. However, acting like a dog involves submissiveness and willingness to be helpless and controlled by other people, behaviour that is symbolically related to women's willingness to do anything to have a baby within the *Kanyaleng* organization.

Several songs in Tombong's ritual also referred to occasions when *Kanyaleng* members had stolen food, clothes and furniture both in rituals and other contexts. Such stealing is considered acceptable behaviour for *Kanyaleng* women, even though it is otherwise sanctioned negatively. According to one *Kanyaleng* woman, who used to steal shoes during rituals, nobody turned angry, but on the contrary seemed amused by the thief. Some say *Kanyalengs* steal just for fun; others say that stealing is done so Allah will pity them and give them a child.

Ritual stealing may be considered part of a discourse about norms for appropriate social behaviour. When cooked food is stolen, it also relates to women's work and the gendered division of labour. A *Kanyaleng* woman, who had remained infertile over many years, had stolen a cooking-pot with recently cooked lunch from her neighbour, and placed it on the floor inside her room. She explained: “A *Kanyaleng* takes something, takes it with her, she is playing with people, and she will take something, run and keep it, just as if nobody had

done anything”. She had gone to the market, bought fish and started to prepare her own lunch immediately after the stealing. This implies that she never intended to eat the stolen food. Neither did she hide it properly. She left it in her house as if she was ready to get caught red-handed.

Kettles, gourds and water pots are metaphors for pregnant wombs in a number of societies in Africa (Ajetuni, 1996, Boddy, 1989, Feldmansavelsberg, 1994). However, in The Gambia, I am not aware of such interpretations. I would rather suggest that the cooking pot signifies one of the most important female tasks, to provide food and nourish the family. The relationship between women, food and reproduction is clearly important, although it cannot be treated fully here. Not only were children nurtured by married women, but also their husbands, in-laws and parents. In marriage, a woman’s duty to cook for her husband is considered as important as having sex with him. It is more shameful for a married man to be forced to go outside the house to find food than it is to leave the house to have sex with a woman other than his wife.

Infertile women miss the ability to nourish children. Stealing the product of another women’s work, and especially the food cooked for husband and children, may imply “stealing” her marital relationship and thus her ability to produce children. But, in this context, as with other *Kanyaleng* rituals, such behaviour was considered a joke, only to be laughed about.

### **Summary – Kanyaleng rituals**

The explicit intentions of the *Kanyaleng* rituals were to pray that women would give birth to a living child and that newborn children would have a long life. It was, however, generally acknowledged that Allah might have other plans, which even good prayers could not change. When women remained infertile after years of participation in *Kanyaleng* rituals, it would thus not be interpreted as a failure of the ritual, but rather because, as expressed by one of them, “Allah might have planned another luck for you”.

Learning to accept Allah’s will, and leaving the ultimate control to him, seemed to be an implicit part of ritual participation in *Kanyaleng kuŋ-lio* s. The emphasis on laughter and joking, and on not showing anger or sadness, seems to signify an acceptance of Allah’s plans. The ritual also seems to require a willingness of participants to give up control to others involved in the ritual. Letting them “oil you” with food and feed you as if you were a child or a dog were such examples. Letting them “sell the child” in the market can be seen as an

exercise in trusting that others can do what you cannot do, and in not being overly eager to have that particular child.

The parody of a proper Muslim *kun-lio* could be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic response to male dominance and men taking control over babies after women have invested so much effort and pain in having them. A *kun-lio* is a celebration of fertility, an integration of the child into the Muslim community, and a time for name giving. The *Kanyaleng* parody undermines the authority of the male dominated *kun-lio* by making humour about all the elements involved. *Kanyalengs* also reject ordinary names and give *Kanyaleng* names to the child. The first name is a “nonsense” name and the surname is from the child’s *Kanyaleng* parents, rather than from the child’s father, thereby subverting patrilineality.

The “nonsense” aspect of the *Kanyaleng* rituals and the references to madness has not been emphasised sufficiently in former studies. While baring genitals obviously can be seen as inappropriate management of female sexuality, it is also a sign of madness. Grabbing food may well be seen as an inversion of generosity, but food is also handled in many different ways just to make the audience laugh. Informants have suggested that the behaviour of *Kanyaleng* members may make Allah pity them. By putting themselves in conditions that were inappropriate for humans, Allah must interfere and make things better. They have not only failed to become mothers, but they have also failed to behave like proper persons, and thus withdraw themselves from normal criteria for the evaluation of human behaviour.

Whatever interpretations motivate Mandinka women to participate in *Kanyaleng* rituals, the hours spent with their fellow *Kanyalengs* were hours of joking and laughter. Those who grieve over lack of fertility or lost children were forced to think about something else and were encouraged to be creative and even “nonsensical” in order to make others laugh. Revealing a new and carefully composed costume is like presenting a gift that the other *Kanyaleng* women can enjoy. *Kanyaleng* rituals do not make everybody mothers, but they definitely provoke thought, laughter, and a special camaraderie with other women as they too cope with infertility and childlessness.

## **Chapter summary**

Infertility and subfertility were considered as serious problems and many women were willing to go through a lot of efforts in order to give birth to a living child. All infertile women got children to foster, but the ability to mother somebody else’s child did not seem to be sufficient. One or two birth children were often considered too few and solutions for having

more children were sought. The formal health services or “Western people’s medicine” in The Gambia offered few services for infertile women or couples. Although some informants had dilatation and curettage performed at the Royal Victoria hospital, most cures were sought through “black people’s medicine.” Most of the solutions to fertility problems were based on prayers to Allah, and visits to sacred places were motivated by reputations that prayers there were rewarded. Sanneh Mentereng, Aljammado, Katchikally and Folonko were all known to be good prayer places for infertile women. Also Kanyaleng rituals were based on prayers, although some of the forms for prayers involved were rather controversial outside the ritual context. Kanyaleng rituals have been interpreted as rituals of inversion or status reversal, where ritual cross dressing has been interpreted as ritual protest of male dominance or hegemony. In my interpretation of the ritual I found that it is not only the male/female relationship that is at stake, but also a numbers of other values. Religious rituals are inverted and humanity (*versus* animal life as dogs), discipline, honesty and greediness are played with. While the *nyaakaa* and transfer of the bride rituals, constructed female subjects by training girls and women to express appropriate female behaviour, the Kanyaleng ritual may be seen as re-subjection, where some of the former training becomes ritually un-done. In relation to the marital contracts, the unsaid part of the contract seemed to be that women would endure, be secretive, respectful and submissive towards their husbands as long as they did what they could to support, be attentive and give them birth children. If the husbands did not support them as good as they could (and there were no children in the marriage), women seemed less willing to be subordinate and do anything for the husband, as they actually got little in return. In some rare cases women take on a full Kanyaleng identity and dress and behave like Kanyalengs also outside the ritual context.



## 8. Conclusion

The main research interest throughout the work with this thesis has been to understand the logic behind Gambian fertility behaviour. It was evident that their ideas about regulating fertility was based on a different logic than the Western idea that birth parents should only have as many children as they can take care of and sustain. The main approach to understanding Gambian practices related to fertility has been to situate fertility in relation to femaleness and motherhood and investigate in what contexts and through which social practices fertility was discursively produced. Another main issue has been to explore how the married women in question positioned themselves within these discourses. What were their desires and options and how did they manoeuvre in order to adjust their fertility according to their own desires? In the course of the thesis, fertility has been discussed through empirical and theoretical approaches to the following main research questions:

### **How are fertility and motherhood socially constructed?**

- (a) what are the ideas about ideal fertility, how are these (re)produced and adopted by girls and women?
- (b) how is fertility linked to motherhood, i.e. what does it mean to be a birth mother rather than a foster mother, and how does the significance of this potential difference affect fertility behaviour?

### **How do women manage their fertility within concrete life situations?**

- (a) To what extent could women be said to have agency in fertility matters?
- (b) To what extent do women have agency in kinship matters?

## **Femaleness, marriages and fertility**

In the first chapter I discussed how girls were trained during upbringing, through the *nyaakaa* ritual and in everyday lives. Rather than addressing fertility directly in the ritual, it was addressed through the focus on appropriate female conduct including respectability and signification of lack of sexual accessibility. One could argue that the process of subjection, which implies subject formation while at the same time becoming subordinated by power, was more obvious in this context than in others. Elders displayed authority and power while conveying the explicit and implicit messages of the rituals. One of these implicit messages

was making girls aware of their subordinate position. A similar process of subjection also took place in everyday upbringing. Girls were trained to do female tasks, obey parents and elders and behave appropriately. The subjection process emphasised pure categories, in addition to genital cutting, “pure femaleness” was achieved through training. In addition to practical training and experience, girls were verbally instructed and sanctioned. Stigmas of being *gor-jiggen* (lit. man-woman) and *chaggaya* (prostitutelike) were used to indicate unclear and inappropriate female gender behaviour as a contrast to desired female behaviour. The need to meet the expectations for appropriate female behaviour was followed up in the marriage rituals and in everyday married lives, discussed in chapter two. Schroeder’s informants alluded to bigamy, through metaphors of “second husbands” when women spent too much time as bread winners and too little time as wives, thus blurring their gender status.

Several of the qualities that were discussed in relation to the *nyaakaa* ritual were also emphasised in the speeches of advice during the transfer of the bride rituals. The obedience and subordination the girls were trained to show elders and later parents during the *nyaakaa* ritual was supposed to be transferred to husband and in-laws later on. The verbal and non-verbal utterances (including covering, purification and crossing thresholds) during the transfer of the bride rituals contributed to the discursive production of the bride and wife. For young girls who married and left their parents for the first time, this rite of passage marked a dramatic event. Just transferred to their husband and in some cases also to in-laws, brides were vulnerable and failure to adapt could be embarrassing for them, their in-laws and their parents. Elder women, who had been married for a while, could still be vulnerable, but had generally more autonomy and influence, and several women made decisions and took actions in fertility as well as in economic matters.

The married relationships required that spouses were able to balance the ideal norms for marriages and the practical options available. The ideal that the husband should be the major breadwinner and the woman should serve him and his family, while at the same time bearing and rearing children, could not easily be realised by the informants. Low salaries and unemployment made it impossible for most husbands to fully support wives and children, let alone larger extended families. Fertility problems could also undermine the possibilities to fulfil the ideal marital contract.

Another aspect of marital unions was all the people involved. Not only did marriages involve kin and affines, but for half of the married Gambian women, one or two co-wives were involved. In some cases co-wives lived together in the same flat or in the same compound and cooperated about the organisation of daily tasks. In other cases women rarely

met their co-wife (wives). Women express varied feelings towards their co-wives. Those who expressed critical views attributed the problem to the personality or behaviour of the co-wife or the husband, but were rarely critical towards polygamy as such.

Polygamous unions represent a challenge for family planning. Conjugal decision making and planning became difficult not only because many people were involved but also because co-wives would wish to keep their desires and plans secret from each other. Also husbands kept secrets and men could take another wife, only informing his other wives in the last minute. Combined with the practices of child fostering and extended economic cooperation, polygamy made families hard to plan and there was no obvious way to answer who should plan them.

If husbands were compound owners or otherwise had a lot of property, women in polygamous marriages could best secure their future by having many children who could inherit a larger part of the property and hopefully take care of them in old age. Most of the urban husbands did, however, not own a lot of property, and many of them also had little income, implying that there were no resources to compete for. Although high fertility could be rewarding as women proved to fulfil some of the expectations towards their husbands and in laws, this also made them vulnerable as they had to struggle hard to feed the children. In several cases they risked to work most of the time and had little time to serve their husbands.

### **Fertile bodies – substance, relations and divine powers**

The fertile bodies were made up by substance, influence from Allah, jinns and other humans. Although babies were made by mixing of substances during sexual intercourse, this was not believed to happen unless Allah consented. Jealous co-wives were in some cases believed to be willing and able to destroy fertility through the work of a marabout. Further more, *Jinns* were important for fertility as they could cause abortions or exchange children. Also ideas about how women's reproductive capacities could be used and sustained rather than depleted were central in producing fertility as a phenomenon. Use of contraceptives was a part of the effort to take care of women's reproductive capacity and was part of the fertility constructions. It was also occasionally used with the purpose of increasing fertility.

Western medicine and "black people's medicine" represent different discourses about bodies, health and well being. "Black people's medicine" was believed to affect fertility first and foremost through prayers or Qur'an verses, but marabouts could also add other powerful items to the medicine. Also cures for infertility, through visits to sacred places and through the Kanyaleng ritual was believed to work basically through prayers. As described in chapter

eight, women seemed to be main responsible for various forms of prayers that could lead to Allah's consent to having a baby. This contrasted the idea that women were dependent on their husbands' prayers in order to get to heaven. Here, men seemed to depend on female prayers for their fertility.

In addition to the above mentioned need to bring correspondence between female bodies and female behaviour, there seemed to be a need to refine the morphology of female bodies through genital cutting.<sup>167</sup> Through genital cutting, the body was brought to become more pure/clean (*senneyata*) as female. Some said that there was a chance that clitoris would grow and become like a penis and obstruct child birth if it was not cut. Most other reasons given were related to tradition and the need to respect the great grand mothers.

It has been argued from elsewhere that the initiation rituals produced legitimate fertility, but it is not clear whether this was the case in The Gambia. Women seemed to have a certain extent of autonomy in fertility matters, as they both tried to solve infertility problems and also in some cases found contraceptives to regulate fertility. The de facto female autonomy was not granted by the dominant discourses. Rather this autonomy depended on some degree of secrecy and semi-subversive behaviour in situations where it was feared that husbands were against use of contraceptives. Also Allah, jinns and jealous co-wives were considered to be able to affect fertility against women's interests. In addition, as I return to below, kin and affines may have different interest in women's fertility.

### **Sources of motherhood – potential consequences for fertility.**

One of the questions posed in the introduction was how fertility is linked to motherhood. Put differently, what does it mean to be a birth mother as compared to being a foster mother, and how does the significance of this potential difference affect fertility behaviour?

As discussed in chapter three and four, motherhood, and kinship relations in general, were produced through birth, consubstantiality and social practice. Consubstantiality extended kinship categories to a number of people, including classification of mother's sister as a mother. The maternal rights and obligations towards the child could be shared between the sisters or transferred in the case of child fostering. As foster mothers, mothers' sisters were mothers both with reference to consubstantiality and practical mothering. When the foster mother was the friend or neighbour of the birth mother, the motherhood was based purely on

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<sup>167</sup> I use morphology rather than sex as it should be evident from the discussions in chapter one that sex is discursively produced as well as gender. This will be discussed in more detail below.

social practice (unless she had breastfed the child). While substance- or birth- based motherhood was an example of immediate “kinning”, social practice based “kinning” took time. Once produced a mother and child relationship could always be used or activated. Alhagie’s acts of abandoning Mariama and naming his daughter after his birth mother whom he had not seen for years, was an act of de-kinning the relationship to Mariama and re-kinning the relationship to his birth mother. Still, none of these acts were irreversible. His birth mother would always be his mother, but could be neglected and made insignificant while Mariama’s acts of fostering, caring for and supporting him, could again be emphasised, and legitimise new contact and support.

As fostering was frequent, one could argue that maternity was independent of individual fertility. Still women seemed to strongly desire maternity by birth. Firstly, as pregnancy and birth had privileged positions in constructions of female identities, it seemed to be a strong emotional urge to have a birth child. Second, foster relations were generally less stable than birth relationships, and it might be felt that foster parenthood was insufficient to secure support in elder days. For mothers, birth parenthood was not sustained by law, since children belonged to the birth father, according to the Muslim family law. Inheritance rights were based on birth relations to both father and mother. Third, birth children gave a woman opportunity to give up children for fostering and thus strengthen (mostly kin) relationships and her position as a giver.

In the *Kanyaleng* rituals, maternal valuing of children was played with and inverted. Children were thrown on the ground as if they are valueless and ritually sold on the market as commodities, stripped of personal attachment or emotional value. The mother pretended that the child was irrelevant to her rather than desperately desired. Furthermore, new born babies of *Kanyaleng* members got a *Kanyaleng* mother and father, and in the *Kanyaleng kuŋ-lio* described above, it was the *Kanyaleng* mother that was in focus, not the birth mother. Trusting others with children was usual in child fostering. In the *Kanyaleng* rituals this was taken further as they “sold” and threw away the child as well as gave her to *Kanyaleng* parents.

The theme of the *Kanyaleng* ritual may also be interpreted as statement about children as common property as a child do not only belong to the individual, but the rights and duties or claims in the child are shared by the collective of kin and affines, and in some cases to a whole *Kanyaleng kafo*. In this light, fostering may be seen as having a dual functioning; in one sense women cannot produce children only for themselves, as the child may be fostered

out. On the other hand, women who receive foster children may to some extent accumulate children for themselves or for their own kin rather than producing them for their in-laws.

## **Motherhood and kinship**

Women's maternal roles should also be understood in a wider kinship context. Women's kinship positions seem to be more prominent than formerly suggested in studies of Mandinka and Wolof kinship. In most of these studies from rural areas, kin based social organisations seemed to be given more weight in than the ontology of kinship. Rural residence patterns were often patri-viri-local and succession to important offices such as head of the *kabilo* or the village was patrilinear, the general kinship system was thus frequently referred to as patrilinear. In urban areas where residence patterns were varied, and fewer positions were inherited, the ontology of kinship appeared to be based on cognatic and bilateral principles in addition to social practice.

Furthermore, my survey and interviews showed that birth mother's sister received more children than the birth father's sister. By fostering children from sisters or friends, women could produce children for themselves and their kin, rather than for their husband and his kin. In case of divorce, the husband would have no legitimate claims to these children. A systematic study of distribution of children after divorce would have shed more light on the relationship between formal and de facto belonging and claims of rights in children, but such a study was not part of this thesis.

In chapter four, reasons for fostering were discussed. Beyond some general ideas about collective responsibilities for children, trust, cooperation and generosity, there were several singular logics behind the fostering. While the gift exchange logic suggested by Lallemand, could be applied to fostering to sisters or brothers of the birth parents or between friends, there were several other arrangements that were temporary and initiated to solve practical problems. Fostering to infertile women were transformative as receiving a child made the woman a mother.

While the compound survey showed that half of the residence units were neolocal, the extended cases showed that residence units were not self dependent units. Rather children and money were moved between units and these units were merged and split up, depending on the needs and opportunities in the situation. Although several people were involved in co-operation about care for children, women often seemed to administer these processes. Major decisions, such as who should marry Omar's wives after his death, were made by his elder brother who was the head of the rural residence unit. Kebba gathered all his wives in one

compound, but when he went abroad, wives split up and ran their own residence units in Bakau. They utilised their family network consisting on kin and affines, but also colleagues, friends and tourists were important in making their units viable. In 2007, Binta's residence unit consisted of birth and foster daughters as well as grand children. She was about to finish building her own house with economic support from several people. Through practical action many mothers such as Binta and Mariama, became heads of family units similar to matri-focal units.

Polygamy, extended families and child fostering produced a radically different way of planning than in a western context. De facto family planning took place by moving people and resources between units rather than trying to control family size through use of contraceptives. Contraceptives were rather used to take care of the woman's reproductive capacity, her health in general and of breastfed child.

In spite that families cannot be planned by regulating individual fertility, and there are unclear links between genealogies and actual social organisation, the idioms of kinship are vividly alive and have far reaching implications for social identities and social organisation. Although research approaches should include the study of other principles of relatedness and belonging, it is obvious that a lot is missed if kinship is ignored. There are a number of aspects of social relations that produces kinship, by implication; the ontology of kinship, emotional belonging, principles of inheritance, succession, jural rights in children and to land etc. must all be accounted for. Kinning seem to be a useful concept for the active process of creating or strengthening already existing kin relations. Also re-kinning denoting activating or de-kinning about existing relations seem useful.

### ***Women's management of fertility and family – agency.***

The second main question in the introduction deals with female agency and women's management of fertility. There were several structural and juridical frameworks that put women in subordinate positions. The juridical autonomy of women, which was granted in the statutory law, was not acknowledged in many informal settings. Men arranged marriages on behalf of sons and daughters, but different from men, women depended on consent from their fathers and brothers if they wanted divorce. Furthermore, there were various hierarchical positions depending on age, gender, caste, economy etc. where women systematically are ranked below men. As women, according to Muslim law, inherited only half as much as men, they were systematically put in economic inferior positions. Also educational biases gave boys and men better job market opportunities.

In addition to the structural and juridical aspects referred above, hegemonic and ideological representations were incorporated through the elaborated processes of subjection and contributed to women's subordination. As argued in the introduction, several of these processes and power relations contributed to mute the female perspectives. From this epistemological position, it was not possible to access women's authentic experiences and interests. Rather one would have to collect women's representations and interpret them in the light of the power relations inherent in the ideologies, hegemony or dominant discourses. As discussed above, girls are well aware of what is expected from them, and most girls behave accordingly.

## **Resistance**

Still, various forms for individual or collective resistance or lack of compliance were evident. Some chose to conceal their actions and smoke, drink or have an affair secretly. Others broke the norms for appropriate femaleness publicly and risked to be gossiped about or be stigmatised. Furthermore, married women did not always obey and please their husbands. There were several references to situations where women had lost their patience and had rejected demands from their husbands. In some of the cases the husbands retaliated and beat their wives.

Women also made their own decisions. In the case of use of contraceptives, they did not know always know whether the husband was against it or not, as several of the women had never discussed the matter with their husband.

While individual women showed resistance in different ways, the only collective resistance was the *Kanyaleng* ritual. The *Kanyaleng* ritual opposed and inverted several of the values transmitted in the *nyaakaa* ritual. The *nyaakaa* values were in line with dominant ideologies, in spite that it was an all female ritual; it could be seen to support men's interests as girls were trained to be obedient and serve her future husband. The reasons for taking part in the *Kanyaleng* ritual, to give birth to a living child, were in line with the dominant ideology, valuing high fertility. The contents of ritual performance could, however, be seen as counter hegemonic. A lot of important issues were played with and inverted; women stole instead of being honest, bared their genitals rather than being respectful and secretive, were greedy rather than being generous etc. Tombong's *kun-lio* was a parody of a male dominated Muslim *kun-lio*, where their mockery may have been directed towards the male dominance in ritual performance in *kun-lio*, after all, it was women who had struggled so hard to give birth to the child. Being fed as a dog implied a willingness to defer to other people's control and



give up all personal intentions, but also on the contrast between human versus animal behaviour.

It seems clear that the *Kanyaleng* ritual potentially could empower women. It is likely that an experience of catharsis, and relief of tension, as suggested by Weil, Gluckman and others, may result from the ability to mock and play with all the social norms and expectation that put them in a miserable position. Irrespectively of the fertility outcome, she may have felt empowered by the fact that the problem of infertility or childlessness was not a personal problem, but a collective problem with collective solutions. *Kanyalengs* have organised political demonstrations to take care of various problems and have increasingly been invited to be mediators for NGOs and public authorities, arranging workshops and meetings on various women's issues. Apart from these cases, it is not clear whether aspects of the *Kanyaleng* identity can be transferred to empowerment outside the ritual context.

If a childless woman got lucky and had a child after ritual participation, she would be additionally empowered by the fact that she successfully have handled and solved the problem on behalf of herself and the husband.

Counter hegemonic rituals as the *Kanyaleng* rituals seemed to have a limited potential for change. Individual women seemed to be strengthened and thus empowered by participating, but it is not clear to what extent this affected power relations outside the ritual context. The *Kanyalengs* were chosen to contribute in various campaigns because they were brave and not afraid of speaking about controversial issues. If *Kanyaleng* members also became empowered in relation to their husbands, it might have created important changes. Still one could argue that it was the prostitute-like or manly women who were the entrepreneurs in process of social change. Still, in spite of the subversive and to some extent autonomous positions both *Kanyalengs* and prostitute-like women create for themselves, their influence and power in other social arenas, are restricted. The most powerful women were, in most cases women with money. High fertility may, in the long run be an investment in "wealth in people" (Bledsoe, 1980a). Children who got good education and get a well paid jobs in The Gambia or abroad, contributed substantially to their parents well being and position. Some parents got the opportunity to go on pilgrimage to Mekka and get the respected title Aji (female) or Alhagie (male ).

### **Female control of fertility**

When women decided to used contraceptives, they controlled their own fertility as far as the contraceptives worked. Only one of the interviewed women uses contraceptives because the

husband insisted. Women in Bakau had relatively easy access to contraceptives and the prices were affordable. One obstacle was insecurity about the husband's attitude to use of contraceptives. Another problem was that Western contraceptives were based on "alien" health perceptions that were not integrated in the overall cosmology as "black people's medicine" was. Friends, colleagues and neighbours often advised each other in such matters, but would not always know what to do if contraceptives failed or the side effects were severe.

Although infertility problems could be addressed through seeing a number of people or places, but bio-medical services for infertile individuals or couples were not much developed. No effective solutions were provided by the public health system, and to my knowledge no private clinics had specialised in fertility matters. The unmet needs in fertility management was clearly health services for infertile individuals and couples.

### **Some recent trends and suggestions for future research issues**

After finishing the work with the thesis, I hope to have demonstrated that the logic behind managing and making fertility in specific local contexts could be better understood through such broad approaches. It even seemed necessary to explore the issues broader and deeper. One obvious concern is to get to know how these issues look from men's perspective and explore the logic of their management of fertility. Another need is to investigate the dynamics between husbands and wives. Other issues to take a closer look at are the impact of education and work on fertility. As referred to in chapter five, Sonko (2007) attributes much of the fertility decline during the last decade to increased educational levels and correspondingly higher ages at first marriage. This seems to have more dramatic effects than campaigns that may lead to some higher contraceptive prevalence among already married women. Generally, the increased value attached to education combined with high school fees may create changes in the way people think about child bearing and rearing. Parents may become more restrictive when they give up children for fostering, and only give children to foster parents who are likely to educate their children.

Increased international migration where also women goes abroad, may have led to increased fostering. Children often remained with grand parents until parents had settled in Europe.

The increased age at first marriage is likely to affect contraceptive use patterns and also increase the number of children born out of wedlock as it is unlikely that most women remain virgins until they marry in their mid twenties.

Further more, it is interesting to note that national levels of female genital cutting have remained stable from 1985 to 2005. Increased formal education seem to have little effect on this prevalence. The initiation practices have, however, changed as girls are increasingly genitally cut without any ritual. As apparently oppressive rituals may disappear, women's positions vis a vis their husbands may have changed. On the other hand, these values may remain emphasised in training of girls at home. The discourses around the genital cutting will necessarily have to change. It will be interesting to see whether arguments will be more essentialist, as the moral training argument will disappear, or if the moral significance of the cutting itself will be given more emphasis.

Finally, the significance of increased bio-medical services for infertile couples is an issue of great interest. On the 10<sup>th</sup> March 2008, BBC World announced plans for new offers of In vitro fertilisation (IVF) in Sub Saharan Africa. The approach to infertility (and fertility) is likely to change if a number of efficient interventions become available for Gambian men and women. Until now, infertility problems have not been considered a priority in Sub Saharan Africa where the West has defined high fertility as the main issue. The day the fruit sellers on the Gambian beaches convince their Norwegian "mother and father" to sponsor another IVF cycle, some substantial changes have taken place.



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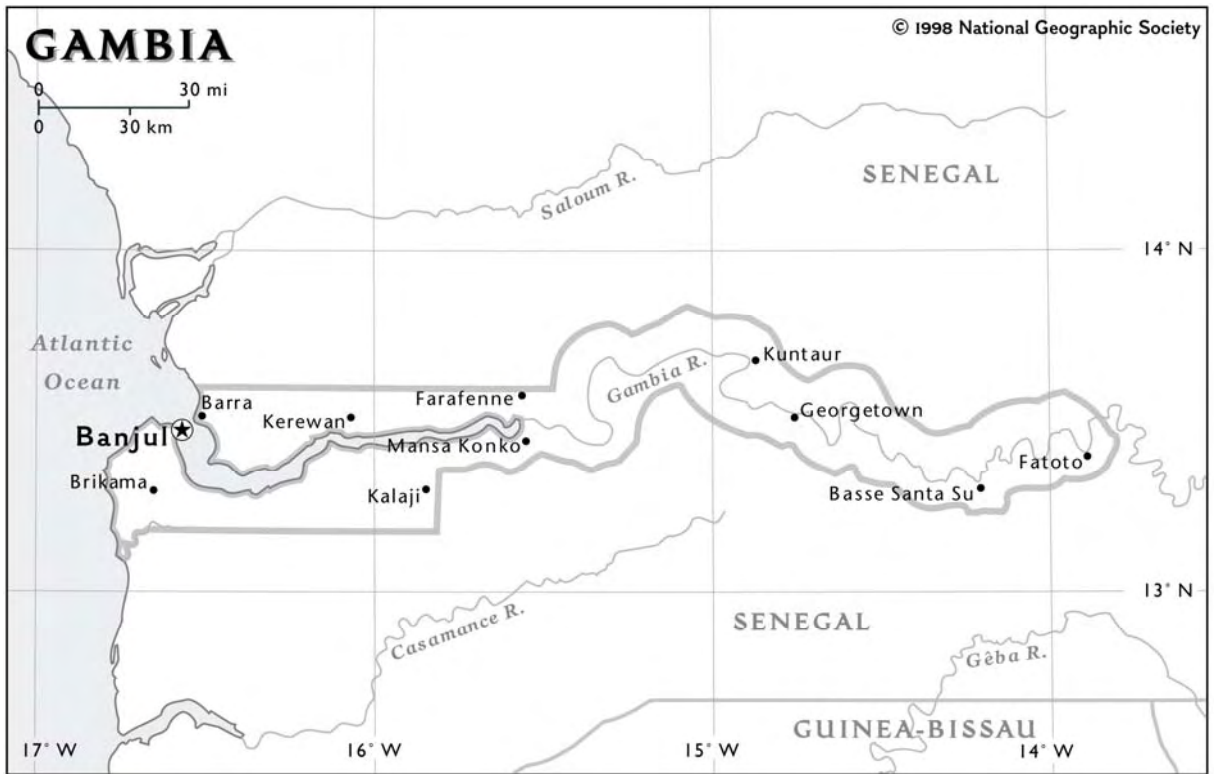
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# Appendix 1 Map



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## Appendix 2 List over vocabulary

Mandinka	Wolof	English
a la harraje firringta	obil warsack am	open one's luck
a manke a la kewo ti		he is not her husband, i.e. not compatible with regards to fertility
a manke a la muso ti		he is not her husband, i.e. not compatible with regards to fertility
aba	aba	borrow
ado	ada	tradition /custom
ala nya mang bambang		here eyes are not strong she is not brave
alkunuto	ju ju	written Qur'an verses used to avoid pregnancy
Allah le y'a saffe		Allah has written it, i.e. it is in Allah's plan
Allah m'a ila harraje firrina		May Allah open your luck (i.e. prayer)
ba	yei	mohter
ba killing	boka yei	same mother
badingolu		mother's children, i.e. sisters and brothers
badomoro		part of marriage transactions - " for the mother to eat/consume
balafaa	yerrem	mercy
balo	yarram	body
banko	suf	ground, earth
banko bungo	nek i suf	mud house
banna salo	Tabaski	Muslim festival
barako	barke	blessing
basso	sindach	lizard
bitang	goro	in-laws

bitoo	muur	cover
bolongkono		up-river
bori kesso	pill	tablets
boro	garrap	medicine
buka malo	ruusul darra	never ashamed
bulo	lahox	hand
bulo siti	taka lahox am	tie somebody's hands
buloku		ritual handwash during initiation
bungkono kuruwo		marital colanuts (initial)
bungo	nek	house
bunya	taranga	tribute, generosity
burte	nef	fool the child by getting pregnant while breastfeeding
burundingo		a breastfed child, whose mother got pregnant
buwaa	doma	witch
candita	tanga	hot
darifano		special wrapper
dendiko	buba	blouse
dia dorong		sweet, pleasant
diatio		host
dimbaa		suckling mother
dimbaayaa	mboka	family
diming		paining
dingo	haley	child
diroo	meie	to give
djitango		water drum
djuberla	setkat	fortune teller
dokowo	ligei	work
donto	aba	borrow
duwa	nyan	prayer

duwa jamma - jabita		several prayers are returned
Daara	Daara	Koran school
fa	bai	father
fa killing	boka bai	same father
fadomoro		money for the bride's fathers
fandingolu	bai bu ndaw	small father, fathers younger brother
fang bondi	fang bondi	masked figure of red bark
fano	malan	wrapper
fanting	fanting	a type of colorful, inexpensive material popular among my Mandinka informants in the first half of the nineties
faro	faro	swamp
fasso	siddit	vein, tendon
fasso kuntuta		cut tendon (muscle loss)
forro	geer	freeborn
futuunaafuloo		bride wealth
futuunaafuloo	halis i juur (birth money)	bride wealth
futuusitoo	taka	tying the marriage
ginno	ginna	mortar
hakilo	hell	intellect, reason
hakilo diata	neh na hell	good intellect
hakilo dojata	gata hell	little intellect, stupid
harraje	warsack	luck (pregnancy)
harraje firringta	obil warsack am	opent one's luck
harraje sitoo	tejal warsack am	close one's luck
horomo	kersa	respect/honor
ice	ice	ice
jabba jibongo		"watered onion"
jali	gewels	bard
jiko	jiko	habit
jinno	jinne	jinn

jinno dingo	domi jinne	mentally retarded child
jio	ndoch	water
jitango		water drum
jongo	jaam	slave
jube	set	see
juberlaa	setkat	fortune teller
jujuwo		initiation area shed
jusso bo		show anger (lit. take out hearth /liver
kabila longdang kuruwo		cola nuts to inform the kabilo about the marriage
kabilo		ward
kafo	kompin	club
kafo molu		club members
Kanyaleng		ritual organisation
Kanyaleng kafo		Organisation for infertile women and women who have lost several children
karamba		elderly person training nga singolu
karango	janga	teaching/learning
kintam		young person assisting in training nga singolu
kolleyata dorong	naharri	difficult
kono	biir	womb/inside
kono killiata	biir am defa fiir	jealous womb
kono tinyaa	yaha biir	(cause) abortion
konodiming	biir bu meti	pain in the womb
konoku	rahass biir bi	clean the womb/dilatation and curettage
konomaa	defa biir	be pregnant
korda	keer	compound / home

koto	mak	elder
kullu	yarr	train
kungchengo		the fat of the head
kungchengo	yurr	brain
kungfano	yaaboppa	second sighted
kungo	boppa	head
kuntaya		nonsense
kuᅇ-lio	ngente	head shaving ritual/name giving
kuringo/buloku		small wash
kuruwo	guru	cola-nuts
lafi kuruwo		marital colanuts (initial)
larang lo		make the bed stand
lenjango		rythm
mafi songo		vegetables
makoi	dimmale	help
malu	ruus	ashamed
mama	mama	masked figure
mangkaro bino	beijen	antelope horn
mansa dibong		hammerkop, big black bird
manyo		sperm
mbaring	nijie	uncle
mo fing boro	garrapi nit ku nyul	black people's medicine
moro	serign	marabout
moro dokowo	ligei serign	marabout's work
moro-kitab		
muso bungo		women's house
musu koto salo		old women's prayers/new years eve
musuba		rythm
maanoo		bride
maanoo bitoo	jebale	transferring the bride
maanoo bitoo	chitale	transferring the bride
na wuluba	suma yei ku ma juur	my birth mother

na wulufa	suma papa ku ma juur	my birth father
naseo	saffara	liquid koran verses
naseo, nasso	saffara	Ink from Koran verses and symbols written on a wooden slate and washed off into water
nga mano		circumcisor (female)
nga singo (lu)		initiand
nga singolu bondi	gena lell	coming out ritual for girls or boys who have been initiated
ngansingbaa		spiritual village head
ngasingolu bondi		
ngenso	ndoli	contribution to costs
ni allah sonta		if Allah consents
yirrindangkunang	nimm	eucalyptus tree
nininkari kuruwo		asking colanuts
nongkola kodo		money given during marriage process
nongkongla kuruwo		cola nuts given during marriage
nyamalo	nenyo	low castes
nyambo		minimal version of head shaving /name giving ritual
nyankumoo	moos	cat
nyassikinno		rice meal
nyingkari kuruwo		marital colanuts (initial)
nyaakaa boyoo	lell	female initiation
paneo		bucket
pengo		injection
sabarro		drum
sabati	muny	patience
saddah bondi	gena sarrah	take out charity
saffeo, saffo	terre	Koran verses and symbols written on piece of

		paper for prevention, cure or luck
salo		prayer (five daily prayers in Islam)
sango		
satto		porridge made of pounded rice and water
seitano	seitane	devil
sering patto		girl assisting the bride at transfer to her husband
sifa	xed	caste
sifa	xed	ethnicity
sifa	fassong	kind
silla		afraid
sillanyatonko		messenger (marital cases)
sillanyatonko		messenger (marital cases)
sina	woja	co wife
singfahlo	aie	take turns in poygamous marriage
singkiro	chin	cooking pot
solima		unitiated person
sonta	nango	agree
suboo	yapa	meat
sumiata	seda	cold
sungkoto	jangha	young girl/virgin
sunkaro	werri korr	Ramadan
sunkutu larango lo		making the young girl's bed stand
suo	kerr	compound /home
sutangkoo	nit ku ai	wicked people
sutangkoo	niti gudi	wicked people
suturo	sutura	discretion
taffoh	pass	medicine knots
tesito		collective work

tiko	mussor	head tie
tiofuto		pounded and mixed peanut, cos and sugar
toto	mbota	frog
toubabo boro	garrapi toubab	white people's medicine
tubabo	toubab	white people
tyeddo		
warrata	yah	wide
woimballa		
wuleokono	allarba	bush/wilderness
wulu	juur	beget
wulu	juur	to give birth
wuluba	suma yei ku ma juur	birth moter
wulufa	suma papa ku ma juur	birth father
wulunyanggo	juurkai	
wuluu	woisin	to give birth
yello	derret	blood
yello silla		
	assobi	similar clothes, the practice to show unity or sameness on ritual occasions by making clothes from the same material
	ataya	green tea
	bagasj	equipment/luggaga
	benachin	rice dish prepared in one kettle (with sauce of oil and vegetables, meat or fish, (the name, literally means one kettle in Wolof)
	cadi	muslim judge
	chagga	prostitute
	chaggaya	prostitutelike
	chura gerte	porridge made of pounded rice and peanuts cooked with salt and water



	degerr	strong
	faida	aimful
	gor jiggen	man-woman, transgendered, homo sexual
	jom	
	lell	male initiation
	mei bu njekka	give first (part of marital transactions)
	rab	beast
	sow	sour milk
	taka i gor	tying the marriage (minimal ritual)
	tanta	father's sister
	tega	smith
	uhde	leather worker
	waatch tai	transfer of the bride
	xammadi	rude, misbehaving
	yaha	destroy



### **Appendix 3 List of people interviewed**

Ami Joof Coole, Journalist, Radio Gambia

Ann Killen, Director of Social Welfare

Veronica Wright, Ministry of Justice, 24.05.95

Fatou Waggeh, Head of BAFROW

Momodou Yasseh, GFPA

Isha Camara, UNFPA, 13.04.98

Yankuba Dibba, GFPA 13.04.98

Dr Reuben Mboge, Assistant Director, Family Health (1998) (several encounters, interview 07.04.98)

Alhagie Ismaila Njie, Chief Nursing officer (1998) Several encounters, interview 07.04.98

Anti Menneh, Nga Mano (female circumciser) Bakau

Alhagie Baba Leigh, Imam

Dr Gijs Val Raven, MRC Fajara, 15.04.98

Kathy Paine, MRC Fajara, 15.04.98

Fatou Banja, MRC Farafenneh, july 1993

Principal Cadi Alhagie Tijan Kah, Cadi Alhagie Mustapha Sanneh, Registrar Ishaka Manneh Bundung Islamic Court 10.04.07



## **Appendix 4 Female Genital Cutting – prevalence and forms for operation**

### **Prevalence**

In the case of girls, the overall prevalence rate seems to have been constant for the last 20 years. In a study by Women's Bureau in 1985 (Singateh 1985) where 620 women were interviewed, 79% of the women reported that they had gone through some form of circumcision.<sup>168</sup> The prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) reported in a survey from 2005/06 is 78.3% (The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS), 2007) has not changed at all over the last twenty years. This stable frequency indicates that this is a diehard practice that survives in spite of all the activities and work that has been going on in order to reduce female genital cutting. In a study of long term health consequences of female genital cutting in a rural area of Farafenni (Gifford 1994:333 in Morison et al., 2001), 58% of the 1157 women who had consented to gynaecological examination and thus became a part of the study, showed signs of genital cutting. The lower overall prevalence can be explained by Wolofs constituting 30% of the sample, while they constituted only 17% in Singateh's study. Wolofs rarely circumcise girls and their prevalence rate was 2% and 4% in Singateh's and Morison et al.'s studies respectively.

Among Mandinkas the prevalence rates were 100% and 98% respectively and for Fulas the rates were 93% and 32%.<sup>169</sup> The discrepancy in the frequency among the Fulas in two different studies may be explained by the demographic composition in the Farafenni area compared to the national study. In certain areas and subgroups of Fula, the practice is more widespread than in others.

### **Forms for operation and terminology**

The expression Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) was first used among activists against the practice in order to show the severity of the lay operation. The concept has later become incorporated in the language of the World Health Organisation and covers all different encroachments into the female genitals. The World Health Organization (WHO) divides the different procedures into four different main types:

- Type I - excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris;

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<sup>168</sup> Circumcision is the word used in the report. When I refer to other sources, I use the concepts applied in the work.

<sup>169</sup> 100% of the interviewed Serahules had been circumcised and 66% of the Jolas in Singateh's study.

- Type II - excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora;
- Type III - excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation);
- Type IV - pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue; scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice (*angurya* cuts) or cutting of the vagina (*gishiri* cuts); introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purpose of tightening or narrowing it; and any other procedure that falls under the definition given above.<sup>170</sup>

(World Health Organization, 2007)

In the study made by the Women's Bureau in 1985, the terminology was slightly different (Singateh, 1985). What is called mild Suna<sup>171</sup> seems to be closest to type I in the WHO terminology and was performed on 14% of the circumcised women. The 21% who had been through Suna (see below) and the 44% who had been through excision (Singateh, 1985), corresponds type II in WHO's terminology and make up 65%. A smaller proportion (6.5%) had been through infibulation, which corresponds to type III. Singateh (1985) describes the following forms as follows:

- Mild Suna is the removal of the upper part of the clitoris, leaving the gland and the body of the clitoris intact. This type is used especially by the Serahules and performed on the girls when they are babies.
- Suna proper (cliteridectomy) is removal of all the clitoris This is done by Fula and Mandinka.
- Excision is removal of clitoris and labia minora. This is done on Fula, Mandinka and others and is the main type of circumcision performed.

<sup>170</sup> The WHO terminology has been slightly changed in March 2008, I refer to the former version as that is the one applied by Morrison et.al.

<sup>171</sup> The use of the word Suna in this context is controversial. In Islam, the Arabic word *sunnah* has come to denote the way the Prophet Muhammad (saas), the Messenger of Allah, lived his life. The Sunnah is the second source of Islamic jurisprudence, the first being the Koran. While some Muslims argue that female genital cutting is recommended in the Koran or the Sunnah, others argue that that it is part of neither. According to Imam Baba Leigh, it is neither in the Koran nor in the Sunnah, but may perhaps be reflected in one of the weaker *hadiths*. A *hadith* is a narration about the life of the Prophet (saas) or what he approved, as opposed to his life itself, which is the Sunnah as already mentioned. Still Suna is frequently used locally about milder forms of circumcision (see also(Boddy, 1989), Johansen forthcoming).

- Infibulation (pharaonic circumcision): “This involves the complete removal of clitoris and the labia minora. Whereas during excision the child sits feet astride until the wound is healed up, this type requires the child to sit with both feet closely tied together. Also the blood which accumulates within the area is allowed to dry up enforcing to block the entrance of the vagina. No stitching is applied in this operation, nor is the child cleaned up for several days. The method is meant to protect the girl’s virginity until such time when she is betrothed.”

(Singateh 1985:48-49, directly quoted)

Morison, Scherf et al. (2001) use the WHO typologies and found that 98% of the women who had been genitally cut had been through type II, defined as clitoridectomy and removal of parts of the labia minora, 56% of the women who had been genitally cut had been through full clitoridectomy and complete excision of labia minora, 42% of the women had been through less severe combinations of excision and clitoridectomy. Less than 1 % (10 women) were infibulated.

WHO’s classification	Total prevalence	Type of operation			
		WHO Type I	WHO Type II		WHO type III
Classification in Singateh’s report		Mild Suna	Suna	Cliteridectomy	Infibulation
National 2005/06, The Gambia Bureau of Statistics	78.3%	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated
Farafenni area Morison, Scherf et al. (2001)	58%		42% <sup>172</sup>	56% <sup>173</sup>	<1%
Singateh (1985)	78%	14%	21%	44%	6,5%

<sup>172</sup> 42% of the women had been through less severe combinations of excision and clitoridectomy

<sup>173</sup> 56% of the women who had been genitally cut had been through full clitoridectomy and complete excision of labia minora



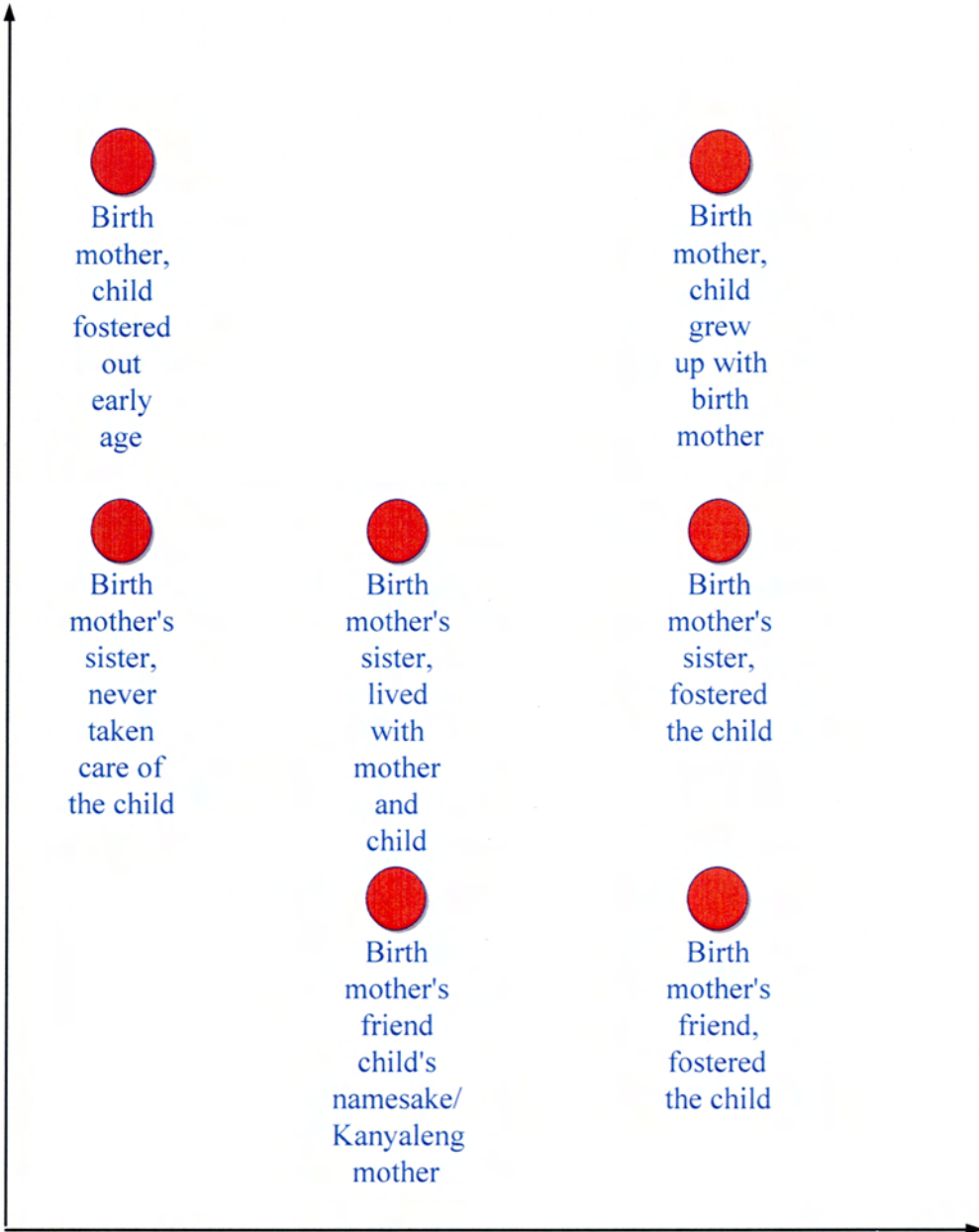


Foster parents:	Birth mother's sister	Birth mother's parents	Birth mother's brother	Birth mother's friend	Birth father's sister	Birth father's parents	Birth father's brother	Birth father's friend	Birth father's wife	Other kin
Girls fostered in Survey	6	3	1	3	5	2	0	0	1	1
Boys fostered in Survey	3	3	1	0	1	4	1	2	3	2
Girls fostered in Interviews	4	2	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Boys fostered in Interviews	1	2	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
Girls fostered out Interviews	0	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
Boys fostered out Interviews	1	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>

Compound Number	Women	Men	Female Children< 15	Male Children< 15	Total	Girls<15 fostered in	Boys<15 fostered in	Number of sleep units	Kinship relation to comp. owner	No kinship with comp. owner	Estimated Number of hhold	Peopke per/hh estimated	Single Men units
1	1	4	5	0	10	0	0	5	0	10	4	2,5	3
2	10	8	10	11	39	2	2	7	8	31	6	6,5	0
3	4	16	6	4	30	0	0	13	1	29	13	2,3	9
4	6	9	7	7	29	1	1	8	26	3	1	29,0	0
5	10	9	7	9	35	1	1	9	22	13	4	8,8	1
6	7	14	4	7	32	0	1	13	16	16	7	4,6	4
7	5	4	4	8	21	0	0	5	16	5	3	7,0	1
9	4	2	1	2	9	0	0	2	2	7	2	4,5	0
10	17	21	7	11	56	2	0	13	20	36	12	4,7	3
11	10	9	6	13	38	0	2	7	27	11	2	19,0	0
12	8	8	6	5	27	3	2	5	17	10	2	13,5	0
13	6	9	4	6	25	0	2	9	14	11	4	6,3	1
14	19	17	12	9	57	0	0	13	41	16	10	5,7	2
15	3	4	1	0	8	1	0	4	2	6	4	2,0	2
16	7	7	5	7	26	2	4	9	16	10	3	8,7	0
17	10	16	10	13	49	2	1	13	10	39	9	5,4	3
18	8	8	6	5	27	3	1	8	10	17	6	4,5	2
19	6	3	7	4	20	0	0	5	20	0	1	20,0	0
20	3	3	0	0	6	0	0	3	6	0	1	6,0	0
21	5	7	3	3	18	0	0	6	9	9	5	3,6	2
22	9	11	15	6	41	3	2	12	27	14	3	13,7	1
23	4	6	5	3	18	0	0	5	0	18	4	4,5	2
24	2	6	4	1	13	0	0	4	7	6	2	6,5	0
25	4	3	2	1	10	1	1	3	5	5	3	3,3	1
26	1	6	3	1	11	1	0	3	2	9	3	3,7	2
27	10	15	9	3	37	0	0	13	26	11	9	4,1	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>692</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>5,6</b>	<b>42</b>

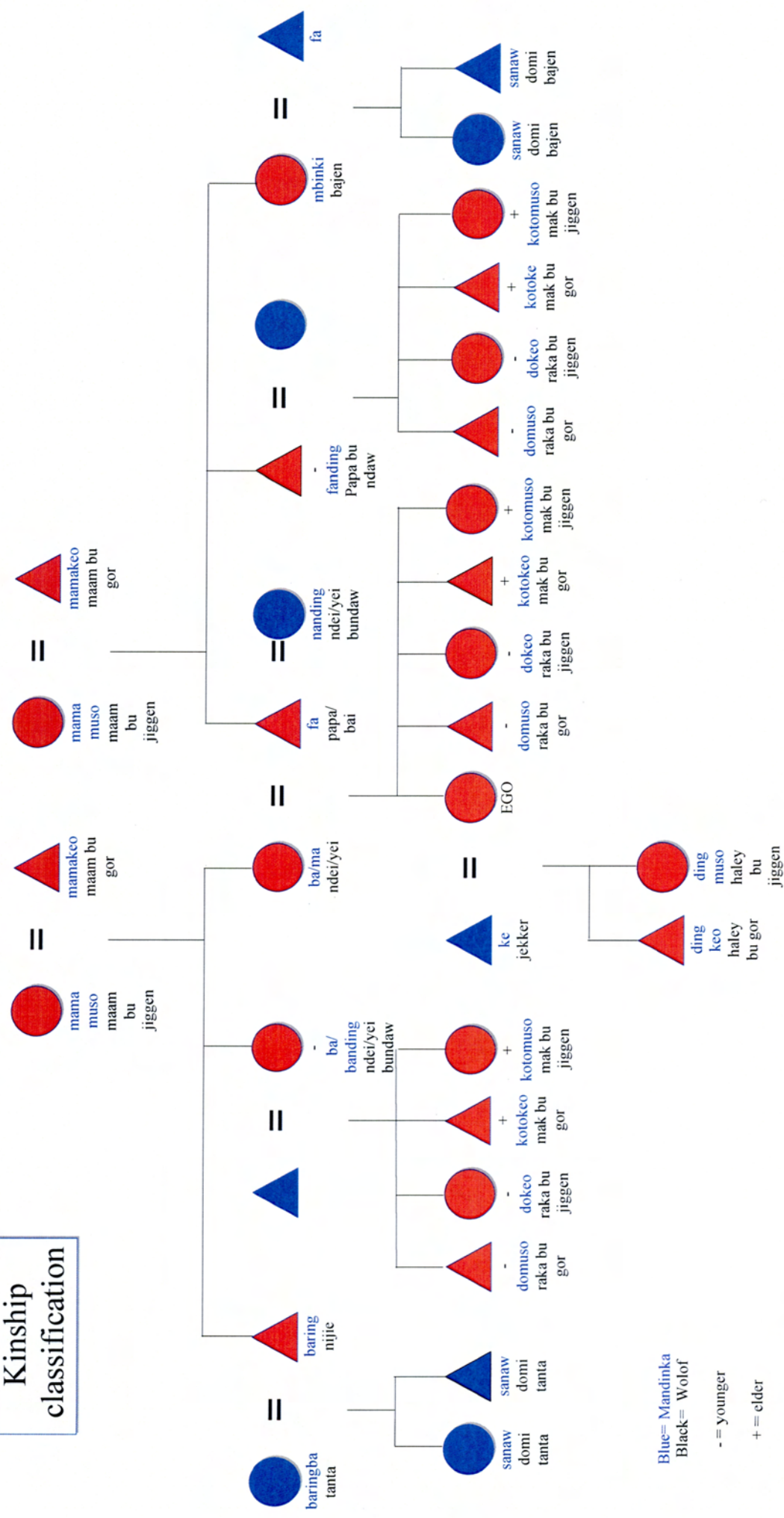
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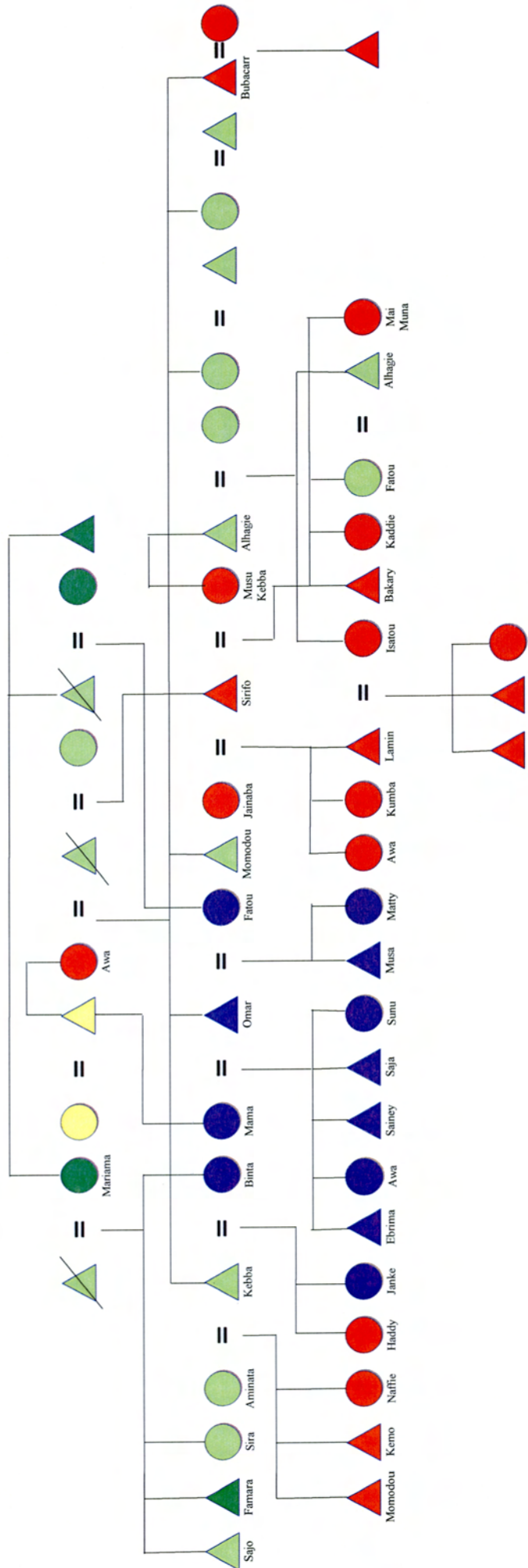
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# Kinship classification



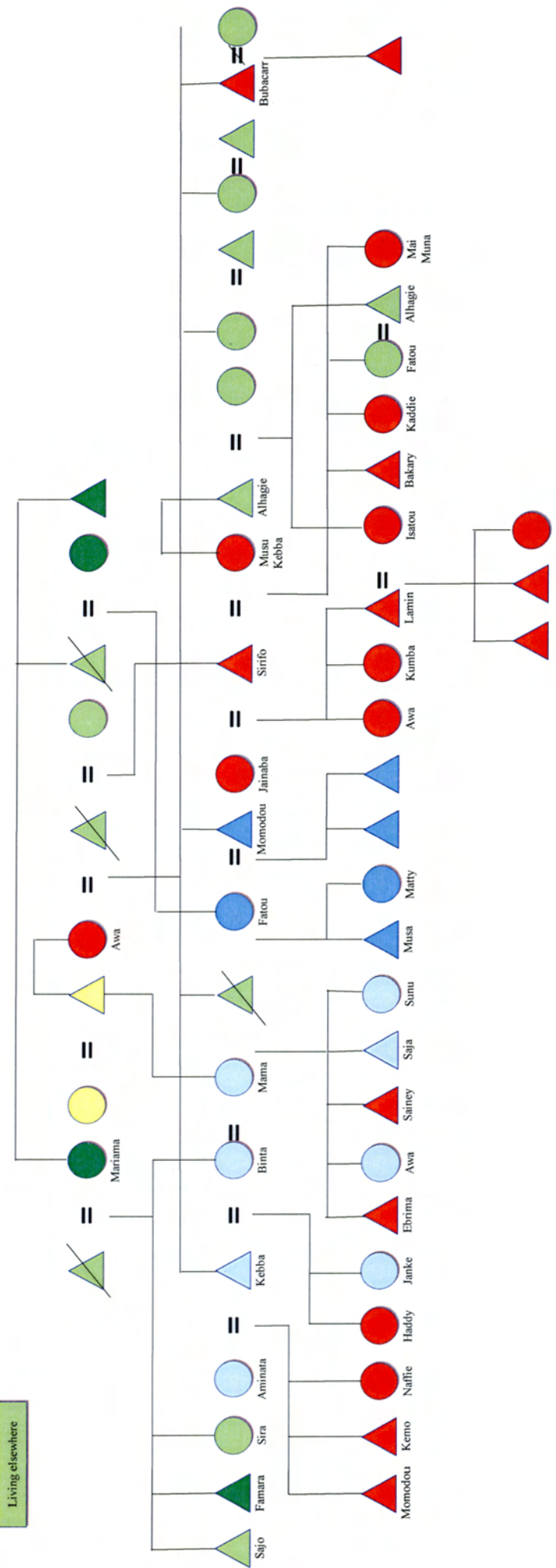
# Binta 1987

- Binta and Glibery: Bubarr (Blue)
- Binta's mother: Sukinta (Green)
- Kebba's mother: rural unit (Red)
- Mama's parents: rural unit (Yellow)
- Living elsewhere (Light Green)



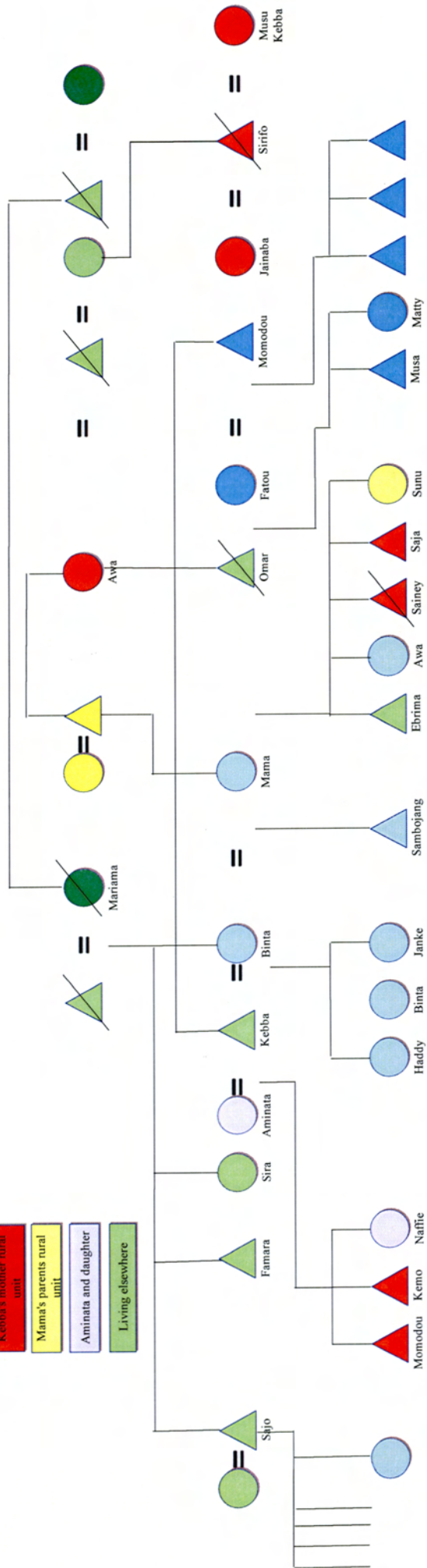
# Binta 1990

Binta, Kebba &co Baka
Fatou with husband and children Baka
Kebba's mother rural unit
Mama's parents rural unit
Living elsewhere



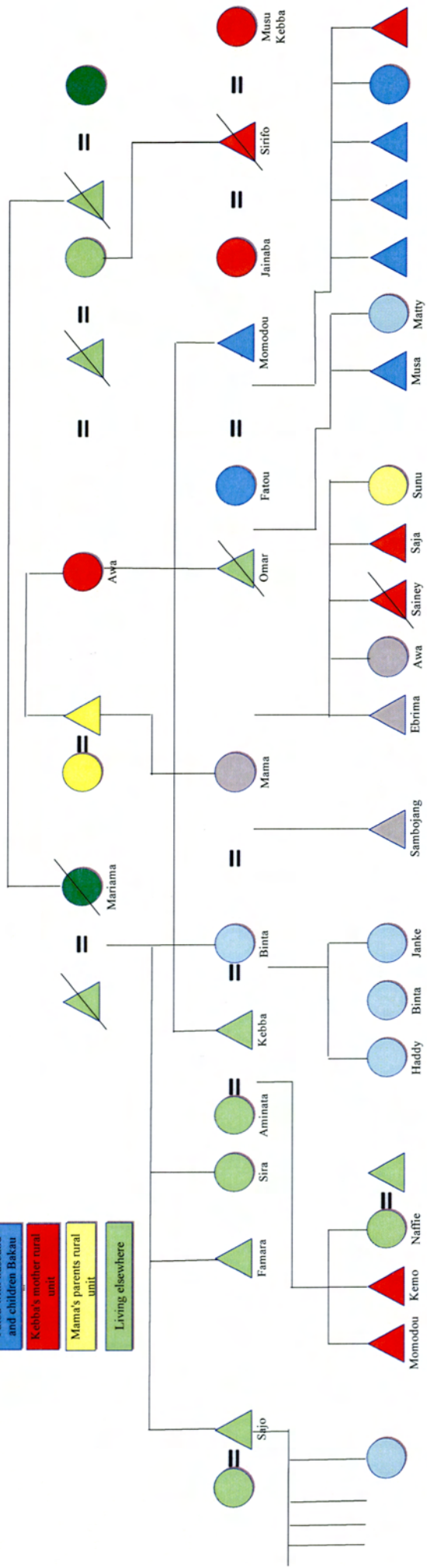
Binta 1992

- Binta, Mama, children Bakau
- Fatou with husband and children Bakau
- Kebba's mother rural unit
- Mama's parents rural unit
- Aminata and daughter
- Living elsewhere



Binta 1998

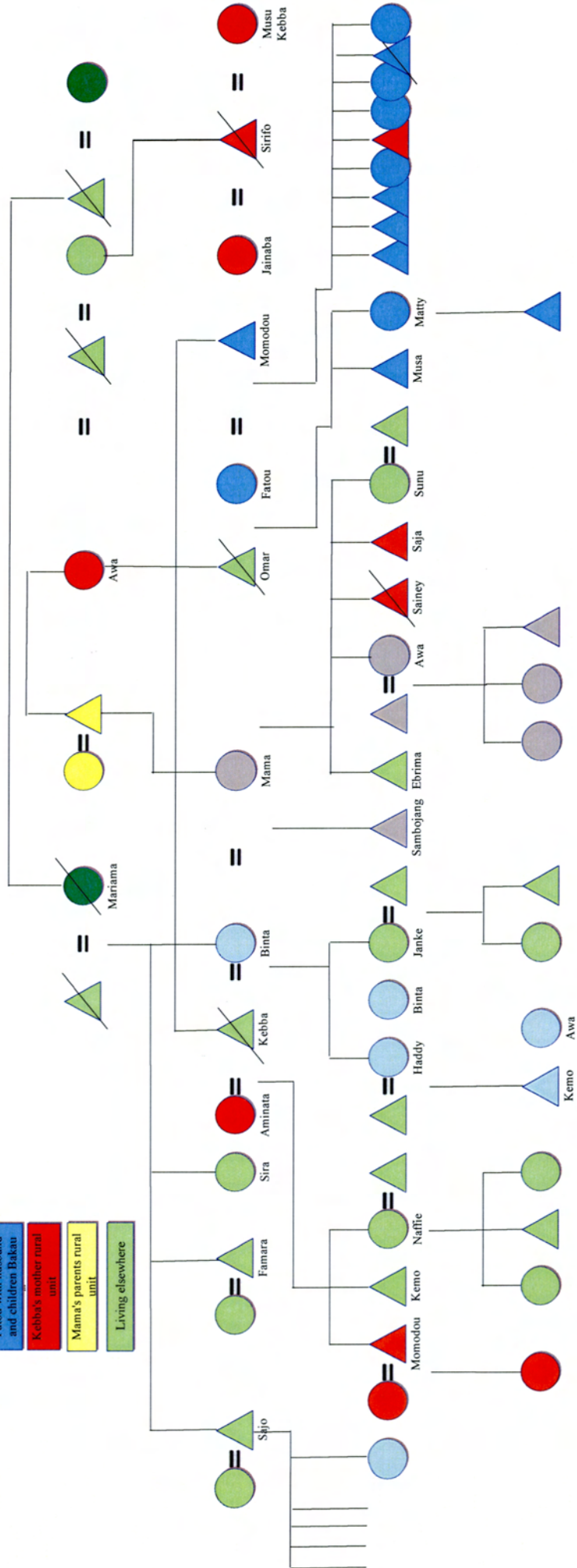
- Binta with children Bakau
- Mama with children Bakau
- Fatou with husband and children Bakau
- Kebba's mother rural unit
- Mama's parents rural unit
- Living elsewhere

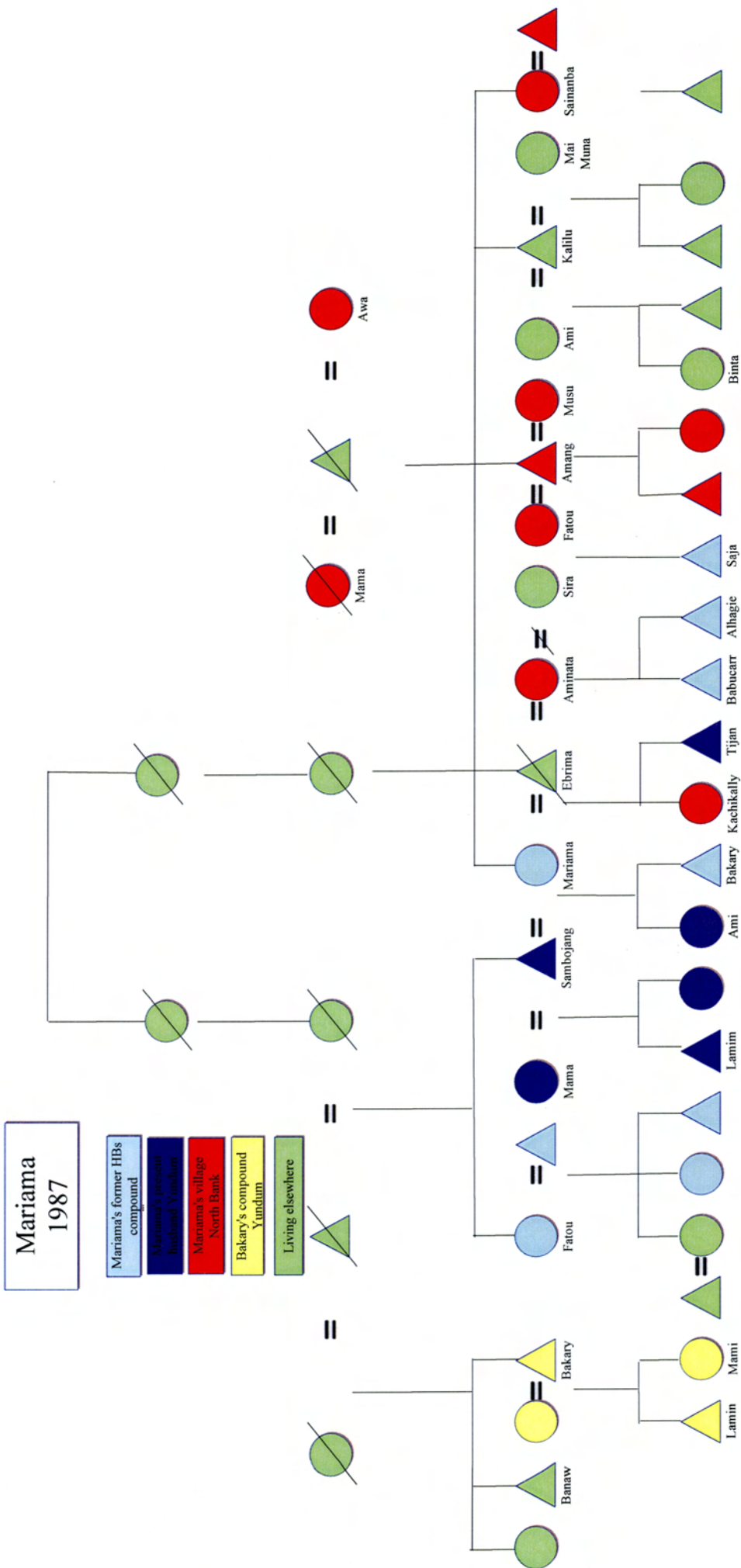




Binta 2007

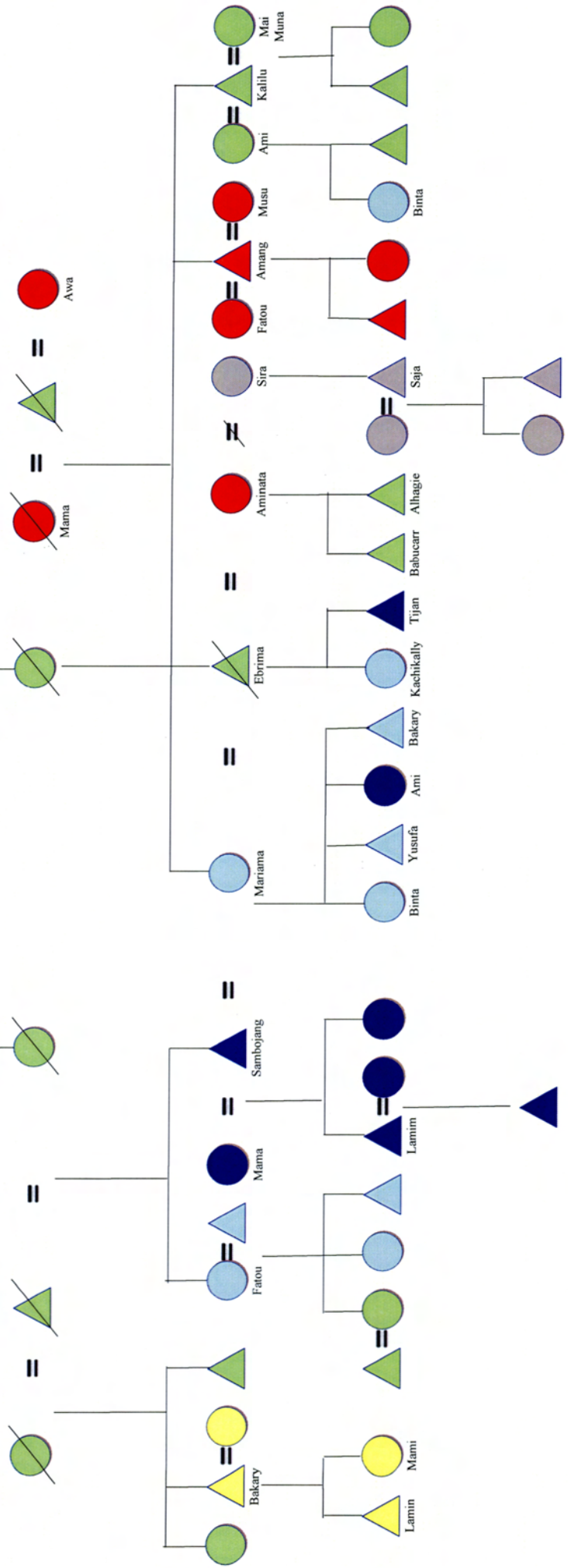
- Binta with children Bakau
- Mama with children Bakau
- Fatou with husband and children Bakau
- Kebba's mother rural unit
- Mama's parents rural unit
- Living elsewhere



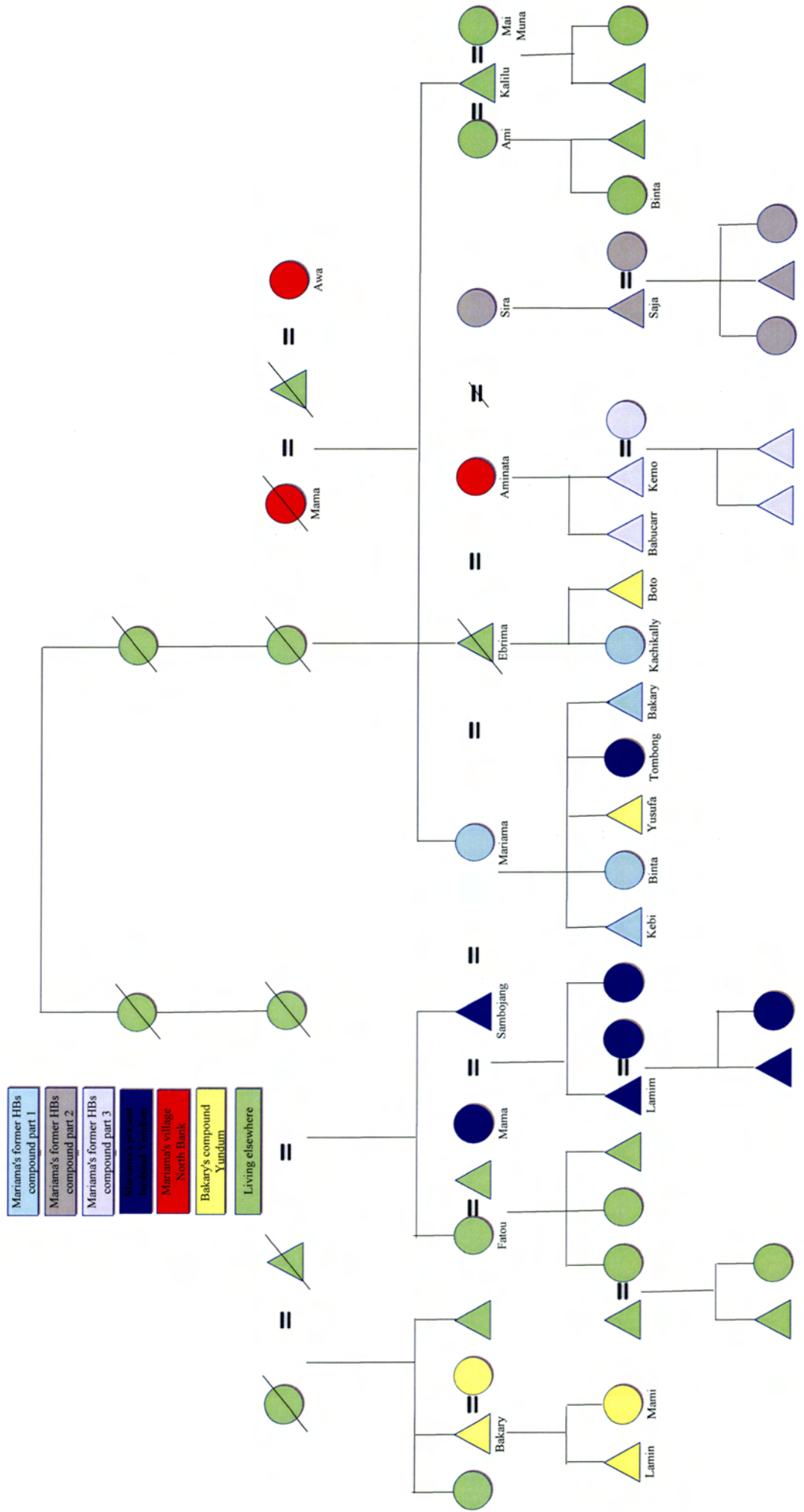


# Mariama 1992

- Mariama's former HBs compound part 1
- Mariama's former HBs compound part 2
- Mariama's present husband's compound
- Mariama's village North Bank
- Bakary's compound Yundum
- Living elsewhere

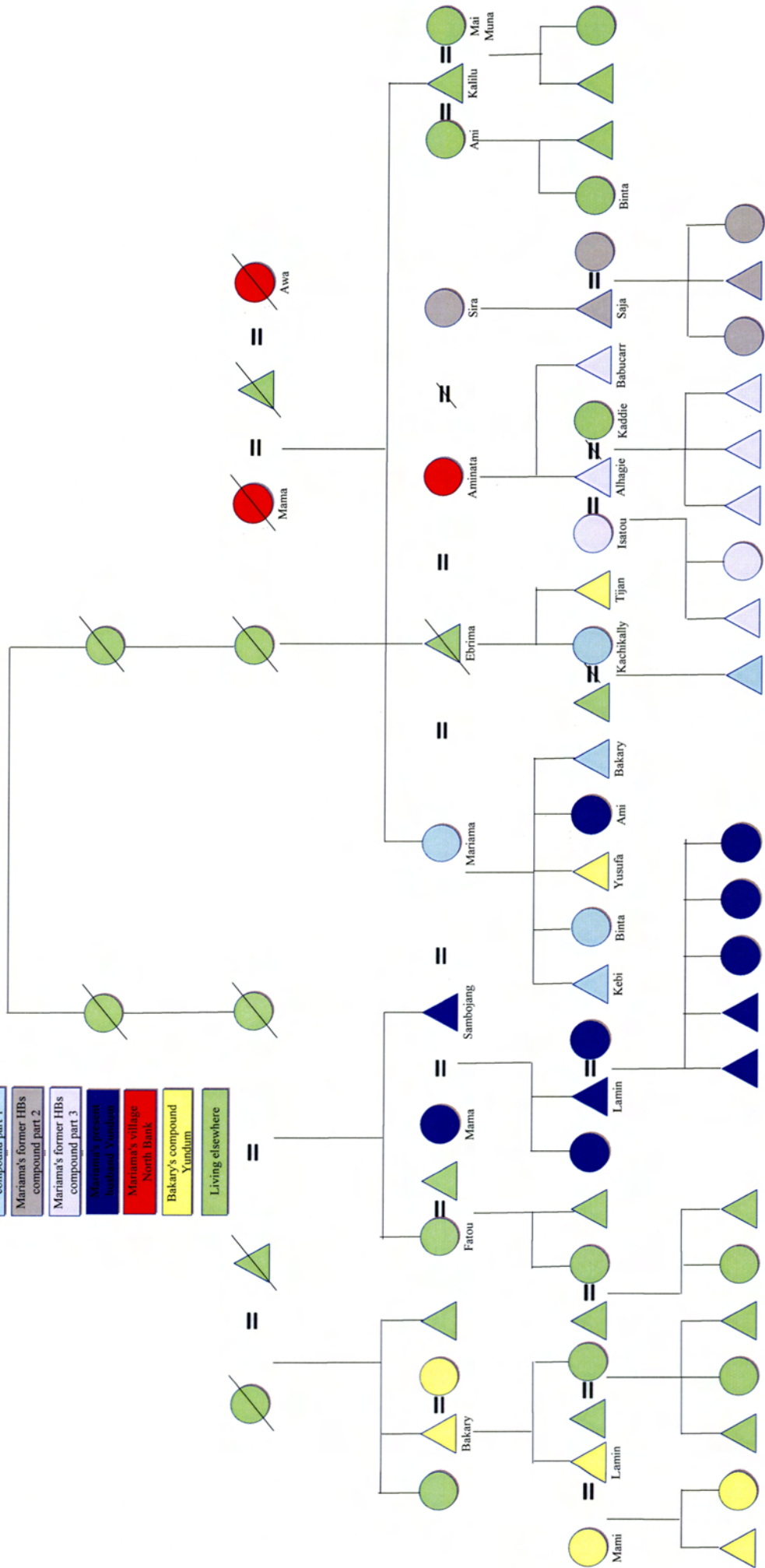


Mariama  
1998



# Mariama 2007

- Mariama's former HBs compound part 1
- Mariama's former HBs compound part 2
- Mariama's former HBs compound part 3
- Mariama's present husband Yundum
- Mariama's village North Bank
- Bakary's compound Yundum
- Living elsewhere



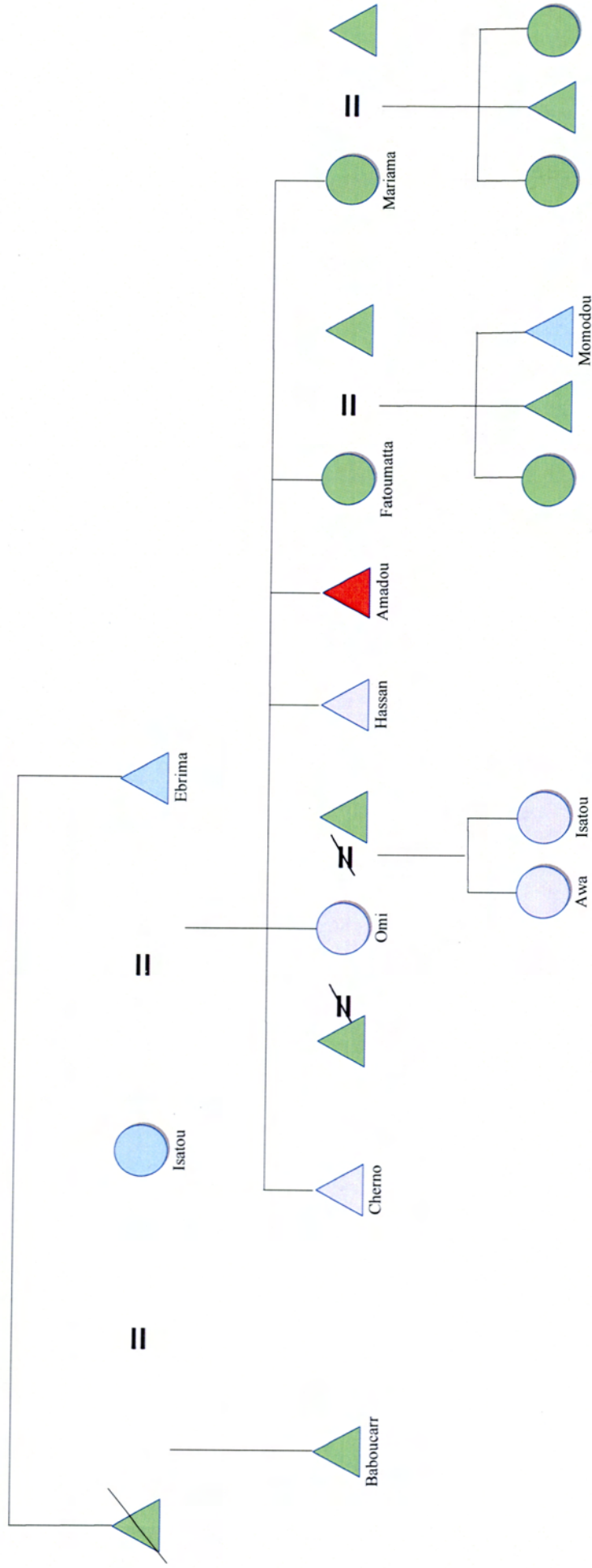
Omi 1987

House 1 Bakau

House 2 Bakau

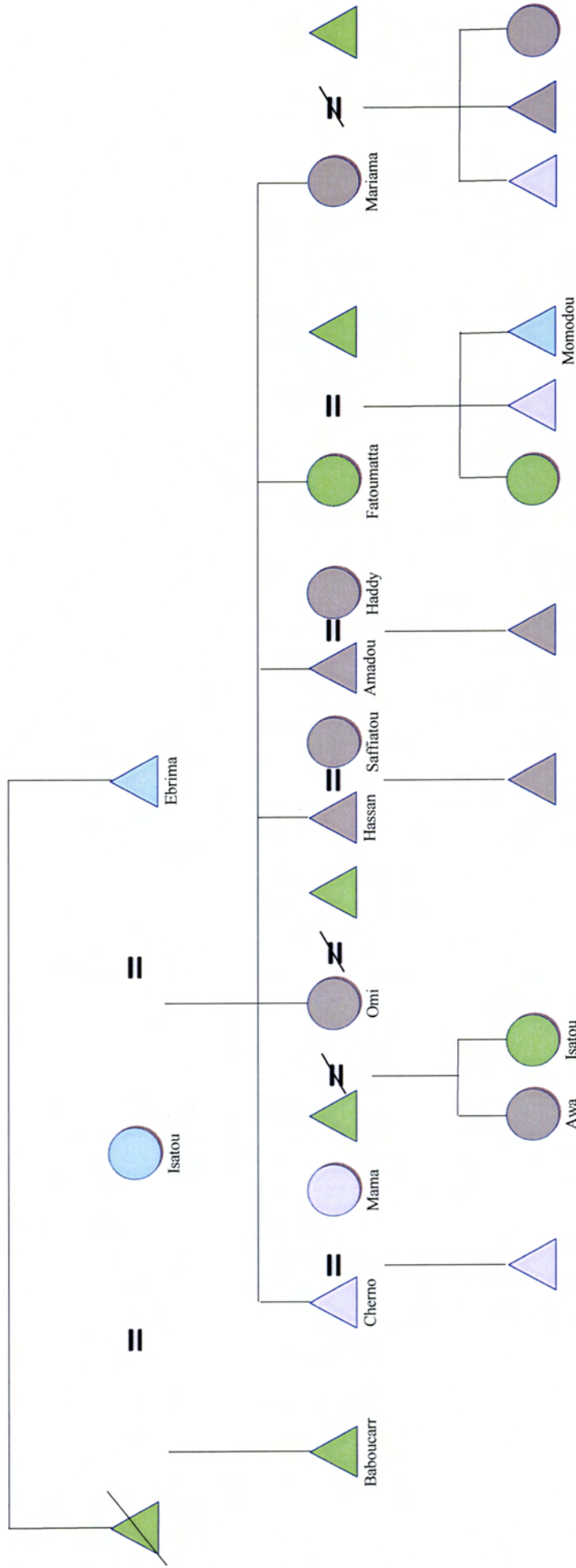
House 3 Bakau

Abroad

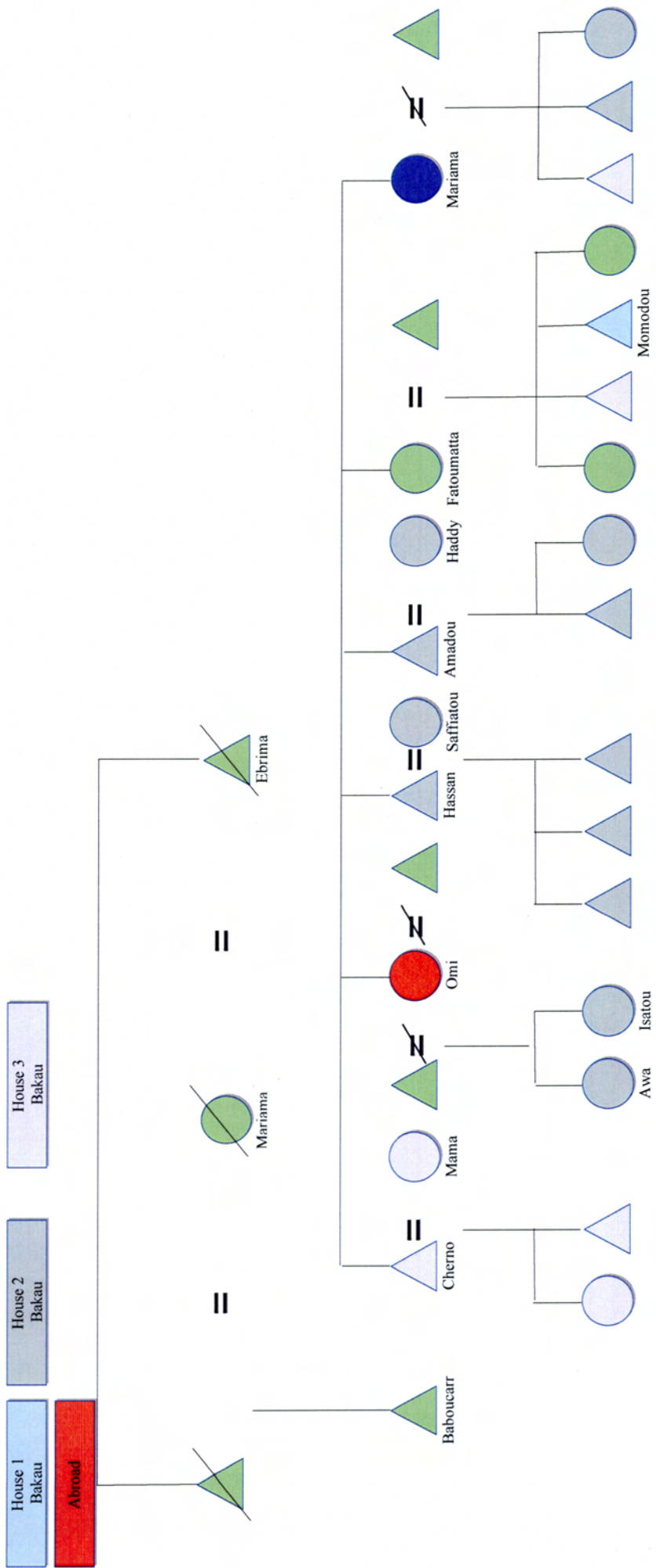


Omi 1993

- House 1 Bakau
- House 2 Bakau
- House 3 Bakau



# Omi 1998





Omi 2007

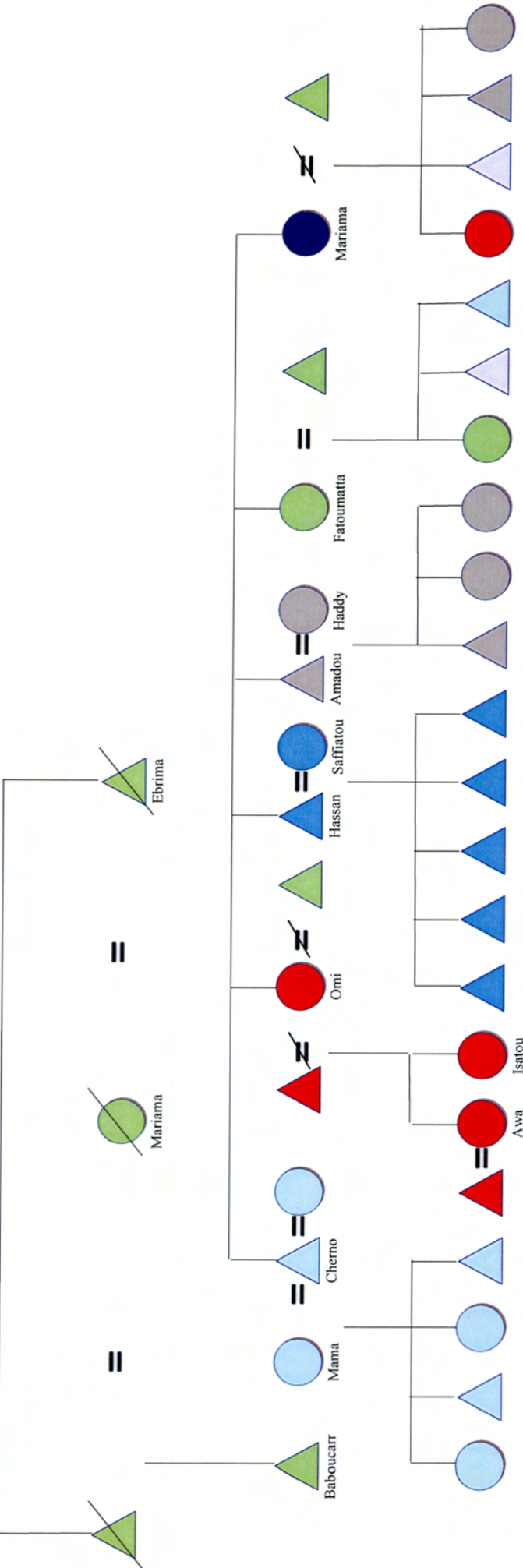
House 1 Bakau

House 2 Bakau

House 3 Bakau

House 4 Bakoteh

Abroad





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