



## The Social Production and Symbolism of Cloth and Clothing among the Dogon of Mali

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**Abstract.** – This article provides a detailed account of the material culture and techniques associated with the local manufacture of cloth and clothing among a Dogon community in the Sanga region of Mali in the early 1980s. It also provides an account of some of the key symbolic associations Dogon gave to cloth, male and female clothing styles, and the tasks associated with cloth manufacture over this same period. The article concludes with a discussion of the broader relevance of the study to understanding the nature and meaning of technology in preindustrial societies, and offers suggestions as to the significance of observations concerning the tasks of spinning and weaving among the Dogon made by Marcel Griaule and other members of his research team in the early decades of the 20th century. [*Mali, Dogon, technology, spinning, weaving, cloth symbolism, discard practices*]

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To be naked is to be speechless (Ogotemmêli in Griaule 1965 [1949]: 82).

To construct a technology is not merely to deploy materials and techniques; it is also to construct social and economic alliances, to invent new legal principles for social relations, and to provide powerful new vehicles for culturally-provided myths (Pfaffenberger 1988: 249).

### Introduction

Among the Dogon peoples of east-central Mali, cloth and clothing, as well as having practical utility, form an important focus of symbolic and sociological concerns. In the recent past, for example, several different styles of clothing existed, each with its distinct name, circumstances of use, and association with a particular age and gender grouping (G. Griaule 1951). The Dogon still observe a variety of dress codes, and the wearing of clothes, from everyday use to ceremonial attire, is governed by a clear, if more or less implicit, etiquette. Although some of the distinctions noted by anthropologists in the 1930s–1950s have become blurred during the course of the last fifty years, certain basic contrasts between different social categories continued to be signalled through styles of dress at the time of my fieldwork in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted at the

outset that since the colonial period Western clothing has taken on increasing importance, especially among young men, as symbols of “modernity” and social advancement (Dougnon 2003), which has resulted in a shift in both formal styles and their social and symbolic referents. Recent research by Douny (2007) has highlighted other aspects to the social symbolism of cloth and clothing among the Dogon in the 21st century. She notes in particular that whereas young men and women now commonly purchase a diverse range of imported clothing products from local markets and typically wear “the latest fashion” while out working in the fields, older people tend to wear the same clothes day in day out. For these older people, Douny argues, wearing the same clothes on a daily basis is symbolic of the accumulative nature of their labour and the passage of time, which are both revealed by the smell of sweat and the dust that adheres to their work clothes and the tiny rents in the fabric. By putting on their “better” clothes and changing their apparel for participation in other activities such as attending ceremonies or going to market, these individuals are able to “distance themselves corporally from daily routine” and exhibit a “renewal of the self in public” (Douny 2007: 244), and so signal their ability to overcome the rigours of daily life.

Spinning and weaving, the two crafts most closely associated with cloth production are similarly of more than utilitarian importance. Dogon funeral poetry and eulogies make frequent reference to these tasks and to their respective products. Some of the tools used for these crafts are even deposited at the edge of the cemeteries at the time of burial. Weaving skills, in particular, are highly regarded, and mythical accounts of the discovery of the technique are said to form a prominent part of Dogon cosmology (e.g., Griaule 1948, 1949, 1952; Griaule and Dieterlen 1965). Weaving is also likened metaphorically to speaking (Calame-Griaule 1965), and in several Dogon dialects the two words share the same root. On a more prosaic level, the spinning and weaving of locally grown cotton are important household activities, and the production of clothing and other textiles involves all segments of Dogon society.

The area the Dogon occupy also has a long history of textile use (and possibly production), and is the source of the largest collection of textiles recovered from archaeological contexts anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Bedaux et Bolland 1980; Bolland 1991). Numbering roughly five hundred pieces, these were recovered from a series of caves high up in the cliff-face of the Bandiagara escarp-

ment. The caves were used as ossuaries between the A.D. 11th and 18th centuries, and the textile remains come from various items of clothing and coverings which were deposited with the dead along with a range of other grave goods made from clay, wood, leather, and iron.<sup>1</sup> Similar caves are still used for the disposal of the dead by the Dogon communities who currently live along the line of the escarpment. More importantly, perhaps, the weaving techniques and the methods of making individual garments used in the distant past closely resemble those employed today, which could indicate that at least some of the archaeological textiles were locally made. Given that there is widespread linguistic, archaeological and skeletal evidence to suggest that there have been a number of significant cultural and biological changes among the populations living along the Bandiagara escarpment over the last one thousand years,<sup>2</sup> this continuity in textile technology is even more striking especially as the linguistic evidence suggests that the Dogon adopted their weaving techniques from the Peul, Soninké, and/or Manding (Boser-Sarivaxévanis 1991).

Most previous studies of different aspects of this technology have picked up on the importance of cloth, its producers, and uses in Dogon thought and society. By and large, however, these have tended to focus either on the claimed cosmological significance of the craft and its products,<sup>3</sup> or on the purely technical details of production.<sup>4</sup> More recent studies have begun to consider elements of the social and historical importance of cloth (Dougnon 2003; Gardi 2003). None of these studies, however, have sought to link these with the relations and organisation of production. Certain symbolic connotations of the crafts and the objects used in cloth production have also been over-

1 The finds were recovered from seven separate caves and comprised a mix of mostly complete pieces and fragments of cotton textiles, plus a handful made from either wool or a combination of wool and cotton. Tunics, caps, and blankets were by far the commonest types of textile, although other examples included pieces of trousers, chin straps, wrappers, bags, and girdles (Bolland 1991: 52 f.). In terms of their method of fabrication, most were in either plain or weft-faced plain weaves. A few examples of warp-faced plain weave, however, were also found. Dyed threads, particularly indigo blue but also brown, were widely used to make stripes of different colours with a variety of simple motifs.

2 See Bedaux 1988; Gallay et al. 1995; Mayor et al. 2005.

3 Griaule 1965: 69–74; N’Diaye 1971; Brett-Smith 1990–91; Boser-Sarivaxévanis 1972.

4 G. Griaule 1951; Bolland 1991, 1992; Boser-Sarivaxévanis 1991.

looked.<sup>5</sup> The aim of this article, therefore, is to provide a fuller and more rounded account of the social context and symbolism of cloth production and clothing styles alongside a detailed ethnographic account of the crafts and associated equipment of spinning and weaving.

### Dogon Social Organisation

The Dogon of the Sanga region are a patrilineal society divided according to principles of lineage segmentation into a number of agnatic descent groups. In cliff-line villages, where most of the research reported here was carried out,<sup>6</sup> by far the most important of these is the minor lineage or *ginna* (Paulme 1940; Tait 1950). Each minor lineage is composed of between three and four generations of agnatic kin and their affinal dependents. The head of this group is always the eldest living male agnate. Known as the *ginu baya*, he has his own compound (*ginu na*, or more simply, *ginna*), which he shares with his wife or wives. Marriage is polygynous, and a man may take up to three wives; most, however, restrict themselves to two. Each married man lives in a separate compound, and as part of the marriage contract he must provide each of his wives with her own house, and often her own granary for storing personal possessions and any secondary crops she produces. Although a man may have to build all or some of the structures in his compound, the space itself belongs to his lineage, and following a change in status that requires a change in residence, or his death, the compound can be allocated to another lineage member (Lane 1994).

Alongside lineage and clan (*binu*) affiliation, age and gender provide the main axes of social organisation. Men have ultimate control over most lineage resources, and are responsible for all

overt political decision-making. Women, however, have considerable practical control over their own households, and as they become more senior also over the labour of their sons' wives and children. Since lineages are exogamous and postmarital residence is patrilocal, adult women spend much of their life in their husband's village among affines. This can be a source of tension, and, by and large, married women never feel completely secure. Divorce, however, is relatively easy, and there is a constant pressure on married men to keep in favour with their wives.

Older members of society, of either sex, are treated with considerable respect; their decisions carry greatest weight and will be the ones that are generally accepted. As with gender relations, however, tensions exist between the generations, especially between younger men and lineage elders. The latter, because of their ultimate authority over the disposal of lineage resources, which in the patrilineal settlement includes dwelling space, are in a strong position to control the course of their dependents' lives, and especially the pace of their transition from adolescent to fully adult status.

Since at least the start of the colonial era, one strategy to get round this problem has been for young men to leave the area temporarily and to work as migrant labourers either in one of the large towns in Mali or further afield in Ghana (especially during the colonial era) and the Ivory Coast. The establishment of neolocal farms and settlements in the neighbouring Gondo-Séno Plain is a related strategy aimed at reducing intergenerational tensions and providing young adult males with some semblance of autonomy. It is particularly suited to individuals who, because they are not the senior son, have little prospect of becoming the lineage head (see Lane 1986, for details).

Paradoxically, although these strategies are designed to reduce conflicts, because they lead to a spatial separation of lineage members and allow for the establishment of semi-independent households, they can have the opposite effect of encouraging fission. In an effort to contain these and similar potentials, Dogon elders place frequent emphasis on the mutual interdependence of lineage members and on the importance of a complementary division of labour between the sexes. This ideology of lineage commensality finds expression in a range of different contexts and through a variety of media, which include ritual prayers, benedictions, and praise songs; folktales and proverbs; and material symbols of the lineage ideal.

A common feature of all of these is the stress they put on specific age and gender roles, which

5 Cotton (*Gossypium* sp.) has been grown and woven into cloth in West Africa for at least a thousand years. Many archaeological sites, especially in the Inland Niger Delta and the Middle Senegal River areas, contain spindle whorls, with the earliest known examples dated to the A.D. 10th–11th century (Chavane 1985; McIntosh and McIntosh 1988: 112). *Gossypium* pollen has also been recovered from at least one of these sites, and more recently cotton seeds have been found at Dia, mostly from Horizons III and IV, AMS-dated to cal. A.D. 1283–1397 and 1403–1469, respectively (Arazi 2005: 281 f.; Murray 2005: 390 f.). Even so, the finds from the Bandiagara escarpment remain by far the most dramatic archaeological evidence from West Africa for the use of cotton.

6 Fieldwork was conducted over two trips for a total of 16 months between 1980–83.



**Fig. 1:** Two Dogon co-wives spinning (Tasego, Séno-Gondo Plain, February 1983). The ginning stone and bar lies near the feet of the spinner on the right, and her ball of ash is in the small calabash just behind her leather-spinning mat. The woman on the left is holding her distaff in her left hand, and there is a pair of cards beside her on the right. The small *tadu* basket in the foreground contains unspun cotton waiting to be carded (Photo: P. Lane).

in turn have a powerful effect on the construction of individual social identities. In short, it is against these prescribed roles that individual achievements are gauged, and through which individuals attempt to negotiate their own sense of self-identity. Material culture, as a major vehicle for the expression and construction of identity, is not immune to these forces, and the lineage ideology has important consequences for a variety of spatial patterning, ranging from the organisation and maintenance of dwelling space to the form and content of household inventories (Lane 1986, 2005). The tools and products of spinning and weaving are similarly articulated with this ideological framework, and any attempt to understand the social organisation and dynamics of this technology must allow for this.

### Cotton, Spinning, and Weaving

Like most other crafts among the Dogon, textile production is organised along household lines, and is not the responsibility of a specialised craft caste as is the case in some other parts of West Africa, such the Tukolor and Fulani (Dillely 1987; Tamari 1991). However, unlike the other household crafts which are performed by either men (e.g., woodworking) or women (e.g., potting), both sexes participate in textile production. Members of the two craft castes (namely, blacksmiths and leatherworkers) also make important contributions to the technology. In many ways, therefore, the organisation of this technology can be seen as a microcosm of Dogon society, and their tools and

the products of their labour as potent symbols of these alliances and divisions.

As has already been noted, the area the Dogon occupy has a long history of textile production, and as far as one can tell from oral traditions, cotton and cloth were important products during the late precolonial era. Desplagnes, the first European to visit the Dogon in the early years of the 20th century, for instance, mentions that each “family” had its own loom (1907: 369), which would imply fairly widespread production. There was also a craft caste of specialist dyers and embroiderers called *yeroun*,<sup>7</sup> who had exclusive responsibility for the long-distance trade in indigo-dyed cloth (Brett-Smith 1990–91: 165). Under colonial rule cotton assumed additional importance after it was developed into a cash crop, and most lineages came to rely upon it for payment of the various taxes imposed by the French administration.<sup>8</sup> Cotton (*nàmu*) continues to be grown in the Dogon region today, although it is no longer a cash crop of any significance. Instead, most cotton is now grown for domestic (i.e., lineage) consumption, and is generally planted as a secondary crop in lineage-owned millet fields. Any surplus can be sold in one of the local markets.

<sup>7</sup> Or possibly *yéleū* – a caste of dyers found in the Gondoli region (Calame-Griaule 1968: 307).

<sup>8</sup> There are no published figures on the monetary value of different cotton products during this period. However, Paulme notes that raw cotton sold at the market in Sanga for 80 cowries per “petit tas” (1940: 311), whereas woven cloth sold for the same amount by “la coudée” [typically one half-metre] (1940: 312).



**Fig. 2:** Ginning cotton (Tasego, Séno-Gondo Plain, February 1983; Photo: P. Lane).



**Fig. 3:** Carding cotton (Tasego, Séno-Gondo Plain, February 1983; Photo: P. Lane).

Sowing typically takes place at the end of the rainy season (July–October), and the crop is normally ready for harvesting some 100 days later (i.e., around February–March), well after other crops have been gathered in (Paulme 1940: 177). After harvesting the bolls are stored until ready for ginning. Since women are responsible for all stages of preparing cotton thread, from ginning and carding to spinning, they normally keep the raw cotton in one of the rooms of their house, or else in their personal granary.<sup>9</sup> Typically, an old pot, such as a disused *toroi* or *buno*, is used for this purpose although a wide variety of other containers, including calabashes, baskets, and metal bowls may be employed.

The manufacture of cotton thread involves three main tasks – “ginning” so as to remove the seeds from the harvested bolls; “carding” so as to comb

out the tangled fibres; and finally “spinning.” All three tasks are typically carried out in one go, and the entire process is very much part and parcel of a woman’s daily routine during the months when there is minimal farming activity, and especially in the dry season. Spinning cotton is also a very sociable activity, and it is common for co-wives and/or close friends to sit an afternoon in the shade, and chat while preparing cotton thread (Fig. 1). During ginning, a small, flat stone<sup>10</sup> (*lege tibu*) is used (Fig. 2). Cotton bolls are placed on this, a few at a time, and an iron bar (*lege i*)<sup>11</sup> is rolled over them so as to squeeze out the seeds, which are retained for replanting. Before starting, women often tap the stone with their ginning iron,

<sup>9</sup> According to Paulme, in the 1930s a woman had to “put aside sufficient cotton to allow her husband to weave for himself a shirt or pair of breeches” before she could spin for herself (1940: 177, my translation).

<sup>10</sup> According to informants, it is women who look for suitable stones and if necessary may prepare them by grinding or limited dressing with a hammer prior to use.

<sup>11</sup> Some informants stated that male children who touch the ginning iron may become sterile, and care must be taken to prevent this from happening. Ogotemmêli stated that the ginning iron is “a symbol of the celestial granary” (Griaule 1965: 71).



**Fig. 4:** Transferring spun cotton to a larger spindle for storage (Tasego, Séno-Gondo Plain, February 1983; Photo: P. Lane).

while at the same time asking for success in their craft from one of the many Dogon spirits.<sup>12</sup> After ginning, the cotton fibres need to be untangled prior to spinning. Nowadays, a pair of imported wooden cards (*nāmu waḏyi*) with short wire teeth are used (Fig. 3). In the past, this was apparently done using a carding stick (Griaule 1965: 71).

Next, the carded cotton is wrapped onto a cane distaff (*keri kō*), and a thin strand is drawn from this onto the end of a wooden spindle (*gène gāla*). Holding the distaff in her left hand, the spinner twirls the spindle while simultaneously controlling the twist and drawing the cotton down with the fingers of her right hand to produce a z-spun thread. These can be of two thicknesses, which the Dogon categorise simply as either “thick” (*туру пāну*) or “thin” thread (*туру gedé*). During spinning the weighted end of the spindle rests

on a piece of leather (or piece of plastic with a similar texture), placed on the ground beside the spinner. Each spinner also places beside her a small calabash containing a ball of ash (*koru*). Made from carbonised bone mixed into a thick paste with water and then dried in the sun, this is rubbed onto the spinner’s fingers to prevent them from sticking to the thread. Once the spindle has been filled, the thread is transferred to longer and rather thicker canes (Fig. 4) for storage. These will be kept together in one of the rooms of the spinner’s house, or possibly her personal granary, until the cotton thread is needed for weaving.

Weaving among the Dogon is a male activity and can be practiced by any man willing to learn. However, whereas spinning is a generalised female task and practiced by virtually all adult women, only a handful of men in any settlement are practicing weavers (sing. *sōy tiēnē*). Out of these, the greater majority produce only simple cotton strips in plain weave. A smaller number of men have a much more sophisticated knowledge of the techniques, and are especially skilled in the use of coloured wefts and shed sticks to create cotton strips with various weft-float designs. These are later sown together into blankets, the most culturally important of which is the type known as *bomo gama*, which is used by all lineages as a burial shroud. With the exception of the indigo-dyed wrappers (*soy dyibe*) worn by women, these various types of blankets are the only finished items that are regularly produced for local market sale. Both raw cotton and bolts of single strips of cloth, on the other hand, can regularly be seen for sale at local markets. Blankets and wrappers are also traded outside of the Dogon region, including in the markets of Bamako and other major towns, where the deep blue-black colour of these wrappers is highly valued by other ethnic groups (Brett-Smith 1990–91: 164, n. 3).

Most weaving is organised at a household level for domestic consumption, and the cloth reserved for making everyday clothing for members of the weaver’s minimal lineage (*ginna*). Occasionally, a nonweaver may have commissioned their work. In such cases, the person commissioning the work often supplies the weaver with the required amount of spun cotton from his own household. Payment for this type of work can either be in kind (i.e., a portion of the finished product), or in cash. In all cases, cloth is woven in strips approximately 20–24 cm wide, using a type of double-heddle,<sup>13</sup> hor-

<sup>12</sup> This is not just restricted to spinning, as both women and men will frequently ask for a blessing when beginning a craft such as pottng, weaving, ironworking, and basket-making.

<sup>13</sup> These consist of two horizontal sticks with a series of leashes (loops of thread) spanning between them. Each

izontal loom (*soi ti*). Although variations in loom dimensions, seating arrangements, angle of warp threads, and size of strip produced exist, the basic design is widespread throughout West Africa, and is often referred to as a narrow strip or belt loom (Picton and Mack 1989: 93–96). As Picton and Mack point out, the latter terms are somewhat misleading, since what links all of these versions is their reliance on a similar set of mechanical principles rather than their end products. Thus in “all of these looms the shedding device is a pair of heddles connected by way of a pulley suspended from above, the warp being mounted more or less horizontally, and attached below to a pair of pedals or treadles operated by the weaver’s feet. This leaves his hands free to manipulate the weft, in contrast to the single-heddle loom” (Picton and Mack 1989: 93).

Dogon looms consist of a fairly simple and lightweight framework built of roughly hewn branches, lashed together with strips of twine prepared from baobab bark, or some similar material (Fig. 5).<sup>14</sup> A simple roof made from bundles of millet straw may be added to this to provide shade. Weavers either build their own loom within their compound, or else make use of one that belongs to either a relative or close male friend. Aside from the distribution of weaving knowledge, the main constraint on the location of looms is the availability of sufficient level and unimpeded ground for stretching the warp threads. In the tightly packed and boulder-strewn villages built along the foot of the Bandiagara escarpment, such open spaces are limited, and in contrast to Desplagnes’s observation that at the turn of the 20th century each family had a loom, by the 1980s, very few compounds contained looms.

Before weaving can begin, the warp (*bumo*) must be laid. This can be several tens of metres long, and the most convenient place for doing this is in the village or ward “square” (*tai go*), a large open space mostly used for various masked dances and other collective ceremonies and so relatively free of obstructions. To lay the warp, the weaver takes one of the large storage spindles of cotton



Fig. 5: Dogon weaving shuttle in use (Banani Kokoro, 1981; Photo: P. Lane).

thread and attaches one end to a post or peg pushed into the ground. At the other end of the square are two further stakes, which serve as crossing posts. At various intervals between these, the weaver places half a dozen large stones. The yarn is then run back and forth between the two sets of pegs and round each of the large stones in turn, until the desired number of warp threads have been laid. Once this stage has been completed, the warp is carefully folded into a skein, and left to soak in water overnight and then left to dry. This is done so as to make the cotton threads supple and less prone to break when under tension.

To set up his loom, the weaver begins by placing a wooden dragstone sledge (*soi ti koro*) some metres from the loom. This sledge is used to carry the warp threads. Next, the weaver attaches the heddles (*lirullivu*), beater (or reed) (*kolu* or *bojono kolu*), and pulley<sup>15</sup> (*so: keru*) to a support

loop “interlinks with its opposite partner so that an eye is formed through which one or more warp elements may pass” (Picton and Mack 1989: 95). Bolland, however, calls these “shafts” and the type of loom a “double shaft loom,” so as to distinguish this device from a heddle, which strictly speaking consists of only a single rod attached to leashes (1991: 298 f.).

14 In Venice and Alastair Lamb’s classification, Dogon looms belong to their “General Sudanic” type of general frame loom (Lamb and Lamb 1980).

15 Most pulleys are either undecorated or are marked with incised lines to create simple hatched designs. Some, however, have more ornately carved designs similar to much Dogon wooden sculpture; for an interpretation of the iconol-



**Fig. 6:** Using a shed stick to create weft-float designs in black (Tasego, Séno-Gondo Plain, February 1983; Photo: P. Lane).

(*waguru*) set at right angles to the two main crossbars on the loom (see Fig. 5). The pedals (*tam-tam*) are then attached to the shafts. Next, the breast (or cloth) beam (*ine бага*) is attached to the two rear uprights. One end of the breast beam is perforated, so that a peg (*vi:lemo*) can be pushed through this so as to maintain the tension of the warp threads and to prevent the cloth from unrolling. Having attached these various moving elements of the loom, the warp threads can now be leashed through the shafts and beater. The heddles are threaded first, in such a way that alternating warp elements are passed through the eyes of one or other of the heddle shafts. Next, the individual warp elements are threaded through the vertical canes on the beater.<sup>16</sup> This end of the warp is then

attached to the breast beam by tying off the warp elements onto a heading rod, which in turn is tied onto the breast beam. The warp elements are then passed over the top of the warp beam (*waguru бага*) and placed on the sledge, to which they are tied and weighted down with a dragstone. Finally, a double pattern stick (*èdenu бага*)<sup>17</sup> is inserted between alternating warp elements between the heddles and the warp beam, and weaving can now commence.

To operate the loom, the weaver sits on a stone seat facing the beater and heddles, immediately behind the chest beam. He will normally place a small basket (typically of the *tomo* rather than the *tadu* variety) beside him, containing a dozen or more cane bobbins (*péme*) onto which cotton thread to be used as the weft has been wound. By changing the colour of this thread, different designs can be created, especially when shed sticks are used (Fig. 6). The heddles are operated by a pair of foot pedals, which the weaver clasps between his toes while resting his foot on a flat stone (*tibu tam-tam*). By depressing one foot, one heddle is pulled down and the other is raised, creating a space or shed between the two sets of warp elements. As the shed is created, the weaver casts his shuttle (*kolu* or *bojono kolu*)<sup>18</sup> between the two sets of warp threads, catching it in his other hand (Fig. 7). Immediately afterwards, he pulls the beater towards him so as to beat in the pick, and then repeats the process by depressing the other foot pedal so as to raise one set of warp elements and lower the other set, and then casting his shuttle from the opposite direction. Gradually, a narrow strip of cloth is formed immediately in front of the beater. Once this is long enough, it is wound onto the chest beam by giving the beam a single turn, which also has effect of dragging the sledge carrying the skein of warp elements towards the weaver. This process

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form a rectangular frame. Set within this frame there are a series of fine slats (made from cane or bamboo), through which the warp threads are passed. After each pass of the shuttle, the weaver pulls the beater towards him so as to beat in each successive pick of the weft.

17 This consists of two thin rods attached together at either end by a short length of twisted cord, and is placed horizontally between alternating warp elements, such that if an element goes over the top of one rod, it goes below the other, and vice versa.

18 This consists of a smooth, boat-shaped piece of wood, which has a free-spinning bobbin and an eyelet on one side through which the weft is threaded. N'Diaye (1971: 363) states that both shuttles and beaters are made, on order, by blacksmiths.

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ogy of these, based on Griaule and Dieterlen's exegesis of Dogon mythology, see N'Diaye 1971.

16 Dogon beaters resemble those found among other West African groups who use double shaft looms (see Picton and Mack 1989: 93–95) and essentially consist of two rounded blocks of wood attached to two thinner, vertical rods to





**Fig. 7:** Double-heddle loom (Bannani Kokoro, 1981): the breast beam, with its peg on the right hand side is in the foreground. Immediately in front of it are the beater and heddles, and beyond this is a double pattern stick (Photo: P. Lane).

continues until all of the warp has been used, or the weaver has sufficient cloth for household needs and commonly also for market trade.

### Clothing Types and Cloth Products

Completed strips of cloth are used to make a variety of different garments for both men and women, and a rather narrower range of blankets. The methods of fabrication are in all cases fairly straightforward. A number of strips appropriate to the width of the finished item are cut to the required length, and then sewn together selvedge to selvedge. From this basic template, different garments can be created by folding, cutting, and stitching the cloth into different shapes (see G. Griaule 1951 for details). Blankets are made more simply by sewing together equal lengths of cloth, taking care that the weft-float patterns on each strip line up together.

The preferred colours are indigo and white, although a russet coloured cloth is also made.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the wrappers worn by women are always

dyed indigo, locally made Dogon clothing worn by men may be left undyed, or dyed indigo or russet brown. Younger men mostly wear undyed cloth, except during the *sigi* ceremony (which is held only every sixty years, the last one being in 1957) when they wear special indigo-dyed trousers, that are of the same type as those worn by masked dancers (Griaule 1938). Dogon elders, on the other hand, frequently wear indigo-dyed garments, including calf-length tunics (*argoy sulo*) and long, baggy breeches (*tubo*). Russet coloured cloth, on the other hand, tends to be associated with certain male occupations, particularly hunters, although in the 1980s it was common to find shirts in this colour being made for sale to tourists.

The indigo blue and russet colours are created by using natural dyes, and dyeing is normally carried out after the whole garment has been made. Indigo dyeing in the Sanga region and in Seno Mango is undertaken exclusively by the wives of leatherworkers (*jãũ*),<sup>20</sup> one of the two specialist craft castes found in Dogon society; this

<sup>19</sup> Detailed discussion of symbolism of different colours among the Dogon falls outside the scope of this article. The most extensive analysis of the meaning of different colours in different contexts, including on clothing and blankets is provided by Calame-Griaule (1965, especially pp. 516–523). This, and related accounts given by Griaule and his coworkers, as van Beek has argued, is likely to be a product of overdifferentiation on the part of both the researchers and their informants (1991: 154).

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that Griaule recorded a special song apparently used exclusively for the wives of leatherworkers, which includes the following lines: *dà larani pini goño lavatogu boy, ye gunno widyu tañan tunyo boy*. “Salut! Jeune femme du tisserand[.] Ton père a tissé les vêtements” Griaule 1938: 559 f.; “Salute! Young woman of weavers, your father has woven your garments” (English translation DeMott 1982: 174). This could imply that the leatherworkers were at one time also the only members of Dogon society responsible for weaving cotton; at the time of his fieldwork Griaule noted that “cordonniers sont souvent tisserands” (1938: 559, fn. 2).

is not the case in other parts of Dogon country (Gardi 2003: 180). Women collect wild indigo leaves (*Indigofera tinctoria*; Dogon: *gala*<sup>21</sup> *galala* [Dieterlen 1952: 147]), which are then pulverized, dried, mixed with commercial dye and fermented with potash for several days in large vats – typically one or other of the two types of pot (*dadema*, *dey*) normally used for brewing and fermenting millet beer. The resultant dye is then gently heated over a fire and cloth is dipped into this several times. A wider range of materials are used for dyeing cloth brown, including the seeds of *Lannea acida* and the leaves of the herb known in Dogon as *gegerela* (Fr. *Papilionacée* – Dieterlen 1952: 147). The same general processes used for making the dye and colouring the cloth as employed in indigo dyeing are involved, including the use of potash as a mordant.

Different white geometric patterns such as zigzags, V-shapes, and straight lines can be created by tie-dyeing or stitching. According to Brett-Smith (1990–91), these different designs have different names and symbolic meanings that often provide a commentary on social relations between married men and women and also between co-wives. She also says that only women of child-bearing age wear indigo wrappers cut with tie-dyed white motifs (1990–91: 171), whereas unmarried women and those who have passed menopause only wear wrappers in plain indigo. For at least forty years, and probably longer,<sup>22</sup> Dogon women have also taken to embroidering their indigo-dyed wrappers, using brightly coloured cotton thread or wool of industrial manufacture (Gardi 2003: 181).

In addition to finished pieces of clothing, the Dogon also produce cloth strips for sale in local and regional markets, and at a regional level, there is a long history of the use of cloth as a type of currency (Johnson 1980). From Desplagnes's account of his tour through Dogon country (1907), it is clear that bolts of cloth were being produced for market sale at the turn of the 20th century, and also during the colonial era (Paulme 1940). During my fieldwork in 1980–83, it was still common to see large “wheels” of undyed cloth for sale in Sanga market and in most of the others located along the foot of the Bandiagara escarpment, and this practice continues to this day (John Mack, pers. comm. Dec. 2005).

## Clothing and Identity

Aside from its utilitarian value, clothing is also an important vehicle of symbolic communication for the Dogon. This is exhibited at a very general level by the day-to-day observation of a variety of dress codes. Thus, for instance, a distinction can be made between the emphasis placed on acceptable styles of dress for visiting another village, going to market, or attending a ceremony, and the more casual attitudes adopted towards the type of clothing worn (or discarded) when engaged in farmwork or some similar activity. This etiquette is further reinforced through the use of stylistic variations in clothing to express an individual's age and gender positions within society.

During the first half of the 20th century, a great many different styles of clothing were worn by the Dogon. These included several types of tunics, breeches, and culottes that were worn by men, and indigo-dyed wrappers used by women and adolescent girls (G. Griaule 1951). An interesting feature of Dogon clothing styles at this time is that there were a number of distinct clothing styles for males, which correlated with the social age of the wearer (Table 1). The loincloths and overshirts worn by prepubescent boys were tight-fitting, as suggested by the name *ponnu numo toru* which means, literally, “breeches of one band (of cloth).” These, and the clothes of youths (*sagada:rau*) contrasted sharply with the long flowing tunics and generous breeches of older men, which required several metres of cloth to make. In other words, as individuals aged, more and more cloth was used for their clothes. Since cloth has long been a symbol of wealth, and even locally woven cloth remains comparatively expensive to buy, these clothing styles did not simply signify age differences but also, more referentially, an individual's increasing command over resources.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the system for marking age categories among females was far simpler. Young girls, up to the age of about 12 or 13 (i.e., up to the moment at which menstruation begins), wore a short, wrap-around indigo-dyed skirt, while adolescent and older women wore a similar garment that was longer and reached to their calves. Blouses or some other covering of their upper torso were not normally worn, although at festivals and other public occasions adult wom-

21 Or *gara*, and according to Gardi (2003: 179 f.) the technique may have been derived from the Soninké.

22 Personal field notes 1980–83, Banani Kokoro interviews.

23 This increasing command over resources experienced by males as they get older is exhibited in a number of other ways, including their abilities to modify dwelling space and control its allocation to others (Lane 1986, 1994).

en sometimes wore cotton shawls (*soy dali*), and some also wore narrow strips of cloth as headbands (*ku dommo*) (G. Griaule 1951: 162).<sup>24</sup>

**Table 1:** Age-Related Categories of Dogon Clothing in the Early 20th Century (after G. Griaule 1951).

Sex	Age	Clothing Style
Male	0 – 4	Nude
	4 – circumcision (c. 10–12)	Loincloth ( <i>gere</i> ), culottes or breeches ( <i>ponnu numo turu</i> ), sleeveless overshirt ( <i>argoy tete</i> )
	up to 40	Thigh length breeches ( <i>ponnu semu</i> ), small shirt ( <i>argoy</i> )
	40 plus	Baggy breeches ( <i>tubo</i> ), sleeved overshirt ( <i>argoy numo</i> )
	50 plus	Baggy breeches, calf-length tunic ( <i>argoy sulo</i> ), bonnet ( <i>góró</i> ), or coif ( <i>kelegu</i> )
Female	0 – 4	Nude
	4 – early adolescence (c. 12–13)	Short wrap-around skirt ( <i>numo turu</i> )
	adulthood	Long wrap-around skirt ( <i>soy dyibe</i> )

Nearly all of these styles are still produced and worn, and as recently as the 1980s the style of everyday dress for women was identical to that documented in the 1930s. However, the wardrobes of most Dogon men, women, and children are nowadays supplemented by other items of clothing made from machine-spun cloth, either in a traditional style or to a more Western design. Thus, for instance, shawls were far less in evidence, and in my own research area were mostly kept as prized possessions by elderly women, most of whom claimed that they had been given their shawl as part of the bridewealth paid by their husband's family (see also Brett-Smith 1990–91). Also, women wore blouses made from imported

machine-spun cloth when visiting markets, neighbouring villages or attending ceremonies. This does not seem to have been the tradition in the past, and even in the 1980s there were no social pressures on women to wear blouses while going about their daily chores. Moreover, despite adoption of Western-style clothing by some Dogon, the more fundamental differences between men and women and between different age cohorts could still be discerned and were most clearly expressed during ceremonial occasions, when Dogon seemed to prefer to wear indigenous styles rather than clothes of foreign design.

The main exception to this was during the annual *bulu* (or *buru*), or sowing festival, normally held at the end of April or in early May. At the start of the festival, young men dress in their finest clothes and with their age-mates, they set out to visit their relatives in their own village and adjacent ones. Going from compound to compound, they greet the women of the household and the male lineage elders and offer them their respects. At each household they are offered millet beer and frequently also a meal of meat and rice. It is common for men who are currently engaged in wage labour outside the Dogon region in places such as Mopti, Bamako, and Abidjan to return to their natal village especially so as to participate in the *bulu* festival. Since at least the 1920s, these returning migrants have typically dressed in either European-style clothing<sup>25</sup> or, more recently, Africanised variants of these (Dougnon 2003; see also Lifszyc et Paulme 1936). In the colonial period, labour-migration, European clothing, and speaking English were all regarded as means for social advancement, and, as Kumasi and Accra were the preferred destinations at the time, returning young men came to be known as “Ghana boys.” A local saying “he who has not been to Kumasi will not go to paradise” even developed in the early part of the 20th century (Dougnon 2003: 56). As Dougnon remarks, European clothing was appreciated for two qualities – its colour and its fineness/finish – and because Europeans were not thought to possess the skills to make these textiles, but instead obtained them through a silent trade with the water spirits (*yinrin*), these imported clothes came to be known by the generic term *yinrin soy*, i.e., “clothes made by the water spirits” (2003: 56).

<sup>24</sup> According to Calame-Griaule, the short wraps were made from a single band of cotton, while the longer versions worn by adult women were made from four bands (G. Griaule 1951: 162). In the 1980s, most of the wrap-around skirts worn by adult women were made from seven strips of cloth, sewn together along their selvedge, while those worn by young girls averaged around four strips. It is possible that the width of strips being produced in the 1930s was greater than those made in the 1980s, although there is no strong evidence for this.

<sup>25</sup> One of Dougnon's elderly informants even said that young men went to Ghana specifically so as to be able to acquire clothes for the *bulu/buro* and the *dama* ceremonies (2003: 56).

Then, as now, returning migrants would make a point of conspicuously displaying their new found possessions as part of broader strategies for either acquiring a wife or maintaining good marital relations (see Lane 1986: chap. 7, for details).<sup>26</sup> However, according to Dougnon the participation of young men in labour migration was also regarded as a form of initiation, during which these “initiates” underwent the classic stages of separation, liminality, and reintegration into society. The returning migrants were regarded both symbolically and literally as “new men,” whose bodies were fortified and strengthened during their absence, and the fine new clothes they wore were held to represent the attainment of a level of perfection normally only achieved by bush or water spirits. This new status, however, was relatively short-lived, typically lasting no more than a couple of years when the next group of returning migrants would arrive (2003: 57 f.).

In summary, at least until the mid-1980s a basic distinction could be drawn between the traditional male and female styles, such that as men aged their changing social status was given outward, visible recognition through the clothes they wore. For women, on the other hand, even though their roles within the family, lineage, and village community also changed in line with their changing age and marital status, these changes in their social position were not signalled as overtly through clothing styles. A further consequence of this male:female distinction was that it served to emphasize the differences between men in public but suppresses those which existed between women.<sup>27</sup> A similar concern also seems to have been evident in the symbolism attached to cloth and the technology of cloth production during funeral ceremonies, at least for the period from c. 1930–1985.

## Death, Burial, and the Symbolism of Cloth

Cotton, cloth, and cloth production provide some of the most recurrent imagery associated with the burial rites. Reference to both the tasks and relevant artefacts are made in both the funeral poetry<sup>28</sup> and the acts of ritual. Most of these take place at the time of burial, and one important consequence of this specific symbolism is the formation of two specialised deposits of material culture, that are comprised of, respectively, spindles (plus a few other selected items) and weaving shuttles. Other ritual acts include the display of bolts of cotton at the funeral ceremonies held for men, and the display of blankets and other prized pieces of cloth during funerals held for women. In their discussion of some of these acts, Griaule and Dieterlen argue that to “wear a particular cloth, to possess a certain blanket, is . . . to display a symbol which, in practice, corresponds to the physical or moral condition of the wearer,” and hence “men are reluctant to display the family heritage of cloths, for this would reveal to the common gaze both the supreme expression of wealth and symbols of cosmic knowledge” (1954: 107). In contrast, I argue that the display of cloth and cotton blankets were an intricate component of Dogon burial and funeral rites in the 1980s and were closely linked to strategies aimed at creating both public and private personae.

When an adult Dogon dies, the corpse is washed and the head shaved. The hair is placed in a gourd, which is later taken with the body to the cemetery. According to my informants, adult males are dressed in a pair of dark blue trousers, a blue shirt, and sandals or shoes. Adult women are dressed in an indigo wrap-around skirt and blouse.<sup>29</sup> Once dressed, the body is wrapped first in the deceased’s sleeping blanket or blankets, and then in a blue and white checked blanket, decorated with weft-float designs. This style of blanket is known as a *bomo gama*. Each lineage owns one such blanket, and this is used as a kind of burial shroud for all lineage agnates. It is removed once the corpse has been placed within the cemetery. Only when the blanket

26 Cf. the comment made to Griaule by his research assistant Koguem that “young people . . . go off to the Gold Coast or Bamako or elsewhere . . . mainly for clothes [because these] . . . help them to get married. The more clothes a man has, the more elegant he is, and the more women go after him” (Griaule 1965: 82).

27 Gardi’s observation that since the 1960s (and probably beforehand) women have been embroidering their wrappers with brightly coloured wool and cotton (2003: 181) would appear to reinforce this assessment since the changes they introduce are subtle ones that reflect personal taste and aspirations, as opposed to the more obvious, and apparently socially-sanctioned, changes in style and amounts of cloth being used that were associated with the different age-related categories of male clothing.

28 As in the *tige* given here, and also in some *baga bundo* and *warsirgiri* recitations (see Griaule 1938), among others.

29 The only exceptions to this are women who die during pregnancy or in childbirth. Known as *ya:pilu*, they are buried in white rather than indigo clothing (see Dieterlen 1941: 199 f.; also Bedaux et Lane 2003). According to Calame-Griaule (1965), white is the colour of death and separation, but can also have more positive connotations, such as truth, cleanliness, and sincerity.

has become worn and literally quite threadbare will a lineage replace its *bomo gama*.

After these preparations have been completed, the body is placed on a wooden bier, made from roughly trimmed branches, and taken in a procession composed of members of the deceased's immediate family and other mourners to the cemetery.<sup>30</sup> Among the mourners there is one, often a sibling or child of the deceased, who carries the gourd containing the deceased's hair. If the deceased was female, then one of her close female kin carries her clay pot (*sa tonyo*) for keeping body oil. On arrival at the cemetery, village elders welcome the procession. The senior male present then begins a prayer of thanks (*tige*) addressed to the deceased, during which the latter's qualities as a representative of his or her gender are praised. As an example of this, part of the text of one such oration, known as *ya: yium tige*, for a woman who had lived in the Séno-Gondo Plain for over forty years, and given at her burial in December 1982 in Banani Kokoro can be cited:

Welcome, welcome from the road, men of Sorou,<sup>31</sup>  
 Welcome to all who have accompanied her.  
 Thank you for your respect,  
 Thank you for caring for her during life.  
 The Hogon has sent his greetings,  
 Atime has sent his greetings,  
 Babasema has sent his greetings,  
 The fourth oldest<sup>32</sup> has sent his greetings.  
 They gave her water, They gave her food,  
 They have cared for her up to this moment.  
 She has taken the rope so that she can ascend  
 For her the rope has become short.  
 Let God give you a long rope,  
 God give that to them.  
 All the people of Sanga,  
 The people of Bongo,  
 All the elder brothers,

30 Normally, a married woman is buried in the cemetery of her natal village, which, because of the rule of postmarital virilocal residence, may lie several kilometres away from the settlement where she died. Men are also buried at their natal/paternal village, but since the majority also reside here throughout their lives (or return there in the middle age after spending time elsewhere), their bodies are rarely carried any distance and there is less of a conceptual notion of their corpse being "brought back for burial."

31 Sorou is a village in the plains where the deceased had lived.

32 At the time of this ceremony, the Hogon for all four villages of Banani was an individual from Banani Kokoro. As such, he was also the eldest male in Banani Kokoro. The men named Atime and Babasema were, respectively, the second and third eldest male villagers, while the fourth eldest was the man giving reciting the *tige*, and so he did not name himself.



**Fig. 8:** Burial-related ritual deposits consisting of weaving shuttles (upper level) and *sa*-oil pots, spindles, and calabash ladles (lower level) deposited at the foot of the Bandiagara cliff, close to Banani Kokoro cemetery (1981; Photo: P. Lane).

All the younger brothers,  
 All the elder sisters,  
 The younger sisters of Banani.  
 Let God place a long rope  
 Between them and the woman who is dead.

...

You left the village of your father and  
 You have returned to your father's village.  
 That is the heritage of the world;  
 It is not just you, you are not the first,  
 You are not the last,  
 Death is a Dogon custom.  
 She took some cotton,  
 One day she spun thick thread,  
 One day she spun thin thread.  
 The spindle danced in her hand.

...

She cultivated well,  
 Thank you for your meals,  
 Thank you for your water,  
 Thank you for all your kind words.



**Fig. 9a:** Detail of items of “female” material culture deposited close to the Banani Kokoro cemetery (1981; Photo: P. Lane).



**Fig. 9b:** Detail of items of “male” material culture deposited close to the Banani Kokoro cemetery (1981; Photo: P. Lane).

At the end of this particular oration, the senior men present formed a group around the corpse, and holding in their right hands, at shoulder height, a clump of cotton bolls they shouted *sabe, sabe, sabe*, which in translation approximates as “thank you,” shook their walking staffs at the body and then threw the cotton on the ground. A small portion of this cotton was left with the oil pot, spindle, and gourd containing the deceased’s hair. The same sequence was observed a few weeks later at another woman’s funeral.

Once these benedictions and prayers have been completed, the corpse of the deceased, still wrapped

in blankets, is hauled up to the burial cave in the cliff face, where it is placed in an extended position. The wooden bier meanwhile is thrown down on top of a pile of older ones, and the gourd containing the hair of the deceased is placed with others at the foot of the cliff. Depending on the sex of the deceased a number of other items can be deposited (Fig. 8). If female, the *sa tonyo* is put close to the gourds, by one of the deceased’s sisters, normally with a hole punched through the base of the pot. Sometimes the small calabash-ladle used for extracting the oil from this pot is also left there. As a rule, a spindle, complete with spindle whorl

and a small length of spun thread, which belonged to the deceased, is carried there usually by the deceased's youngest daughter<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 9a). According to Griaule, the *sa tonyo* pot represents the foetus (1965: 39), and its deposition and puncturing could represent, metaphorically, the loss of the reproductive capacity of the deceased. While the placing of the deceased's oil pot, spindle, and calabash ladle is always a feature of female burials, this is not the case for males. Only if they happened to have been weavers, are artefacts, namely weaving shuttles with a short length of thread, deposited at the edge of the cemetery, slightly apart from the female associated pieces (Fig. 9b). As these objects are being put in place by various individuals, the *bomo gama*<sup>34</sup> blanket is taken off the corpse, and returned to the lineage head of the deceased to be put back in his granary, where it will be kept until needed again when another member of the lineage dies. Once these rites have been completed, the mourners disperse.

## Discussion

Cotton, cloth, and cloth production provide the dominant or at least the most recurrent imagery during burial ceremonies for Dogon women. Reference to both the tasks and relevant material culture are made in both the funeral poetry and the acts of ritual. In the former, the following motif is used:

*Bai turu pana,  
Bai turu geda,  
Gene gala ejugereleru.*

One day she spun thick thread,  
One day she spun thin thread,  
The spindle danced in her hand.

It is a metaphor for the roles assumed by the deceased during her life. Although the ginning and spinning of cotton are generalised female activities, they are most closely associated with older women, who have fewer work commitments than their younger counterparts and often spend many hours simply sitting alone or with an age-mate, spinning and talking. The reference, in the oration, to both thick and thin threads (the only categories distinguished by the Dogon), simply implies quali-

ties of prowess. The epithet "the spindle danced in her hand" has a similar connotation. Taken together the phrases indicate an evaluation of the deceased fulfilling a particular role, during her life, with a degree of aptitude. In short, they are "statements of praise," as befits their use in a *tige* or praise song.

Explanations of the use of cotton in other burial rites that were given to me by my informants all emphasised the historical importance of cotton, which prior to and during the colonial period was grown more widely than it was in the early 1980s. Even so, it remained a sign of wealth and bolts of cloth were commonly displayed during the funeral ceremonies of prominent men. According to my informants, the act of holding bolls of cotton aloft when the corpse is greeted on arrival at the cemetery with the repetition of the word *sabe*, was similarly performed as a mark of respect and held to signify the prosperity of the deceased. However, an important point about these latter acts, as with the motifs employed in the burial oration, is that they were highly standardised and formalised procedures. Thus, while the age of the deceased might vary from burial to burial, the actual method of evaluating the deceased remained the same, irrespective of her/his personal biography. The *tige* given at another woman's burial a few weeks later was almost identical to the one cited above, and the example quoted by de Ganay in her study of Dogon praise songs (1941: 71 f.) is strikingly similar to both of these.

The same process of standardisation is at work with the deposition of spindles and the other associated items at the foot of the cliff when the corpse is being interred. As the metaphorical references to spinning in the funeral poetry suggest, at one level these acts of deposition can be read as a sign of respect to the deceased and symbolising the achievements of the deceased. Also, according to Griaule (1965: 73, 78–83), when linked with weaving, spindles and looms can be seen as symbols of love and of reproduction. But, as in the funeral poetry, the individual's identity in these highly standardised orations is simultaneously obscured in the process of praising her, and her achievements become those of womankind in general rather than those of her own life. This may relate to a more general loss of individuality associated with the category change to ancestorhood, although it should be noted that lineage genealogies typically preserve the names of female ancestors going back at least two to three generations. Beyond that, details of the female members of the agnatic group tend not to be recalled.

33 While her mother's body is being prepared for burial, it is the latter who spins the thread to be left on the spindle, using her left hand instead of her right as is normal practice.

34 Or *bòno káma* (Calame-Griaule 1968: 40).

Superficially, the burial rites for Dogon men also point to a suppression of individual identity in favour of gender roles and lineage affiliation. As noted above, if a deceased male was a weaver during his lifetime, then his shuttle is deposited at the edge of the cemetery, often close to where the spindles, ladles, and oil pots that belonged to women are deposited. The placing of a shuttle is thus both a mark of respect toward the deceased and a symbolic recognition of his prowess in the craft. At this level, the two sets of depositional acts, one for women and the other for men, appear to have similar meanings and to simply reflect the sexual division of labour within the cloth production process. However, unlike spinning, weaving is a specialised rather than a generalised activity. Although theoretically open to all men, only a minority of the adult male population are actual practitioners. In this regard then, the recognition of the deceased's special abilities amounts to more than gender stereotyping. It is, instead, an overt acknowledgement of his individuality. It is significant that other male specialists, such as herdsmen, hunters, and soldiers, all have their own distinct funeral rites<sup>35</sup> (see Griaule 1938) whereas the burial rites for women are always the same. Similarly, although references are made to cotton and textile production in various songs at male burial funeral rites – such as the *bago bundo* and *warsi'giri*<sup>36</sup> – these typically stress the use of cotton as a trade item and convey an image of men as being simultaneously the main providers for their families and the intermediaries between the domestic sphere and the world beyond. This is shown in the following examples provided by Griaule:

He has put cotton in a sack and returned to the village  
 He gave it to the women and young girls  
 The young girls rapidly turned the cotton threads  
 The bands have been woven  
 They gave them to the man  
 The man went in great haste to carry them to market  
 (*bago bundo* oration, Griaule 1938: 317 f.; English translation DeMott 1982: 161)

and,

On the cultivator of cotton  
 The woman took the cotton in her hand  
 The woman spun on the spindle  
 The woman gave (the thread) to her husband  
 The man wove the cloth  
 He took the road and went to market  
 Being in the market, he earned cowries in (the sale)  
 (Recitation for the deceased on *warsirgiri*, Griaule 1938: 370; English translation DeMott 1982: 166)

It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that it is large bolts, or “wheels”, of cotton cloth that are displayed in public at male burial ceremonies, especially since these were a widely recognised medium of exchange and form of money throughout the region, up to the early 20th century (see e.g., Johnson 1980). In other words, although there are opportunities for women to become especially skilled potters, brewers of millet beer, or market traders, unlike men, individual achievements such as these are not given formal recognition at burials and funerals in the way comparable achievements by men are publicly acknowledged.

The repetitive use of a particular style of blanket for members of the same lineage, irrespective of their sex, also requires comment. These blankets have a series of fairly standardised weft-float motifs in white set against a blue ground, formed by the use of indigo-dyed strips. Only a few particularly skilled weavers know how to produce these patterns. Griaule describes these blankets as being made up of 80 squares (40 white and 40 “black,” i.e., indigo) created by sowing together parallel strips of chequered cloth. He also claimed the checked pattern symbolised the layout of Dogon fields<sup>37</sup> and was “a symbol of life and resurrection” (Griaule 1965: 73, 79) that served as a mnemonic for Dogon origin myths. In addition, Calame-Griaule (1986: 643) states that of all the different types of blanket the burial shroud was the one which carried greatest bad speech (*nō:nu*, i.e., unhappiness). Gardi (2003: 176), on the other hand, is adamant that the type of blanket described by Griaule has never existed, and that in any case the dimensions he gave for this blanket do not

<sup>35</sup> But, note, they do not have their own burial rites.

<sup>36</sup> These are, respectively, the expulsion rites performed by the Awa, or society of masks, on the second day after burial, and rites associated with the day of the first entry of masked dancers at the start of the *dama*. The latter serve the dual purpose of establishing the temporary authority of the supernatural bush spirits over the village, and to mark the departure of the deceased's spirit from the village (Griaule 1938; DeMott 1982: 81).

<sup>37</sup> Checkerboard imagery features in many of the descriptions and interpretations of Dogon arts and crafts discussed by Griaule and his coworkers, and in their rendition of Dogon mythology the chequered layout of burial shrouds, Dogon fields, the facades of *ginu na* houses, and the painted designs on the *binu ginu* shrines, among others, represent an intermeshing of the two creative, cosmic processes – one vertical and tripartite, the other horizontal and four-directional – articulated in Dogon mythology (see e.g., Griaule and Dieterlen 1954, 1965; Dieterlen 1999; for further summaries see DeMott 1982: 34–36).



compute given the standard width of cloth strips woven on a Dogon loom. Instead, Gardi found that the Dogon typically use as burial shrouds a type of blanket composed of nine (not eight) strips that are made in three villages, of which Pinia is the largest, in the western part of Dogon territory, although other types are also used. As well as being made of nine strips, these blankets are decorated with nine recurrent motifs that are identical to those found on the 11th-century Tellem textiles from the Bandiagara escarpment. Even more significantly, in Pinia all of the motifs are woven using three supplementary shafts, and because of the sequence in which these are operated, if a weaver makes a mistake, these get repeated further up the strip. Exactly the same mistakes as seen on blankets woven in Pinia can be observed on some of the Tellem blankets. For Gardi, this suggests that the use of supplementary shafts is very probably an indigenous Dogon invention (2003: 178 f.).

Irrespective of its origin, the use of the *bomo gama* type of blanket as a covering for a corpse is particularly pertinent in terms of the more general symbolic and social significance of cloth and weaving reviewed here, since it draws together the other themes relating to cloth production. Specifically, the division of tasks between the sexes for the production of cloth is held to epitomise the mutual interdependence of men and women, and the crafts of spinning and weaving (which separately symbolise the roles of women and men respectively), when viewed collectively serve as a microcosm for Dogon society. This is reinforced by the fact that not only are both the sexes involved in the production process, but so also are members of the two craft castes within Dogon society. Specifically, spindles are made exclusively by the wives of blacksmiths who represent one of the castes, while indigo-dyeing is the responsibility of the wives of leatherworkers, who make up the other caste. The blanket-cum-shroud as the end product of several stages of cooperation, therefore, is a logical choice to symbolise notions concerning unity through diversity and complementarity, which are two of the most recurrent themes of lineage ideology among the Dogon (for other examples, see Lane 1994).

The use of this blanket in burial rites is further motivated by a desire to suppress individuality. The identity of the deceased which is being emphasised publicly by this item is that of lineage membership, since the body is cocooned in an item of lineage property which has a long use-life, and is safeguarded by the lineage head. Only when such blankets are literally threadbare, will they

be replaced. In other words, an object that can only be produced by the mutual cooperation of the sexes is used to represent the ideal consequences of marriage ties, since the life of a lineage member can only come into being through the mutual cooperation between wife-takers (male) and wife-givers (female). Similarly, the possession and guardianship by the lineage head of an ancient object expresses metaphorically his responsibilities to preserve and prolong the life of other individuals. Here, as in other contexts, the senior male of the lineage is portrayed as the catalyst for life, and his personal strategies legitimated under the guise of lineage prosperity and perpetuity.

### Conclusion – Making Sense of Ogotemmêli?

Spinning, weaving, looms, and other tools associated with the production of clothing, such as the ginning iron and spindle, feature widely in accounts of Dogon cosmology and their mythology associated with the creation of the world (e.g., Griaule 1965: 41 f., 69–74, 78–80; Calame-Griaule 1965: 82 f., 516–523). In particular, both speech and the craft of weaving, it is claimed, were invented on the “third day of Creation.” The words for “cloth” or “clothing” (*sóy*), and “to speak” or “word” (*sò:*) are also lexically similar (Calame-Griaule 1968: 254 f.), at least in the *toro so* dialect of the Sanga area.<sup>38</sup> Because the Dogon, like many other societies, create symbolic correspondences between different elements of their natural and social worlds, weaving and speaking as well as being likened to one another metaphorically are also said to be likened to other crafts such as basketry, and to musical expression, both in terms of their overall creative outcomes and the formal resemblances between the different components of the human mouth, horizontal loom and the harp-lute (Griaule and Dieterlen 1954; Calame-Griaule 1965: 516 f.). As explained by Calame-Griaule, if “speech is weaving” in the sense that different parts of the mouth “weave” the sound emitted from the larynx, giving it colour and form, so “weaving is speech,” because it is created by human activity, and more narrowly “the threads intertwine like elements of language, animated by the regular creaking of the pulley and the sound of the tensors and shuttle” (Calame-Griaule 1986: 642). In this sense, Dogon consider speech to be “inside the cloth.” It is also argued that in Dogon numerology cloth is associ-

38 According to Calame-Griaule, Dogon interpret the word for cloth, *sóy* as *sò:-í:*, meaning “this is speech” (1968: 254 f.).

ated with the number seven, and carries many of the same symbolic and mythological connotations linked with this number, and in particular the notion of unity through the opposition of the sexes.<sup>39</sup>

According to Griaule and Dieterlen, in Dogon mythology weaving is also “held to be one of the original crafts, and innumerable symbolic images are associated with it. It is said that ‘cloth is the centre of the world,’ that it expresses everything, since the originating signs of all things were traced in it.” As discussed above, they also state that to “wear a particular cloth, to possess a certain blanket, is . . . to display a symbol which, in practice, corresponds to the physical or moral condition of the wearer” (Griaule and Dieterlen 1954: 106 f.). However, they also claim that to “exhibit cloths at a funerary ceremony is evidence that death has ‘gathered up’ the whole universe under the form of the symbols which also constitute wealth” (107). Elsewhere, Griaule argued that for the Dogon, the “co-operation of man and woman, in storing the seeds, sowing and growing the cotton, has the same meaning [as symbols of love] as spinning and weaving,” and that the Dogon consider the latter tasks to be “exactly the same as a man and a woman entering the house to sleep together and produce children” (1965: 73). Griaule also argued that the loom could be likened to a house, with its four upright poles simultaneously representing the bedroom *and* the four male mythical Dogon ancestors, while the four horizontal crossbars stood for the roof and the four female ancestors (72). Continuing in this vein, his informant, Ogotemmêli, reportedly told Griaule that the “weaver, representing a dead man, is also the male who opens and closes the womb of the woman, represented by the heddle. The stretched threads represent the act of procreation. The cotton threads of the weavers and the numerous men in the world are all one. The making of the cloth symbolizes the multiplication of mankind” (73).

Thus, according to these accounts, as well as apparently having multiple symbolic referents, several of the tools associated with the manufacture of cloth and the product itself can stand as material metaphors for central aspects of Dogon cultural norms and society. In the case of the loom, this can represent either the human mouth and hence the creative power of speech in social reproduction, or the bedroom within a woman’s

house and the creative power of love in biological reproduction. A loom’s constituent parts are also said to be analogous to the harp-lute, both in terms of their relative position to each other and their symbolic referents.

The intricacies of Dogon mythology and correlations between different symbols and their multiple meanings, as rendered by Griaule, Dieterlen, and Calame-Griaule, however, can often appear baffling and potentially contradictory. Several scholars have commented on this in the past. Mary Douglas, for example, in noting a number of contradictions within and between different accounts, expressed a more general concern regarding the failure by Griaule and his associates “to relate informants’ statements to practice” (1968: 23) attributing this largely to differences between French and Anglo-Saxon academic traditions.<sup>40</sup> By far the most comprehensive reappraisal of Griaule’s work, however, is that by van Beek (1991), as it is based on the results of a restudy of the Dogon that was aimed at assessing aspects of the earlier anthropological accounts. Commenting on this experience, van Beek states that the “ideas with which Griaule and his informants worked surfaced only as allusions, fragments of ritual expression” (1991: 144). Of more specific relevance to this article, van Beek states that during his research he found no evidence to suggest that the Dogon in the Sanga region have a “proper creation myth” (1991: 148), and certainly not one that resembled the versions provided by Griaule following his conversations with Ogotemmêli, or that elaborated subsequently in “Le renard pâle” (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965) – which, incidentally, differs significantly from that outlined in “Dieu d’eau” (Griaule 1948 – English translation 1965). He also found Dogon symbolism to be “restricted and fragmented” rather than coherent and cross-referencing as implied by the Griaule and Dieterlen studies, and that these symbolic notions are “carried by ideas and objects sometimes quite different from the ones mentioned in Griaule’s writings” (van Beek 1991: 148). Thus, for instance, he found no evidence that looms carried the type of symbolic load described above, although he does note in passing but without elaboration that some symbolic value adheres to cotton and clothing, especially men’s trousers (van Beek 1991: 151). In attempting to explain these discrepancies between his own research results and those reported by Griaule and his associates, van Beek argued that much of Griaule’s post-WW II writings

<sup>39</sup> In Dogon numerology, and more generally in the region, three and four are said to symbolise respectively, among other things, male and female, hence as  $3+4=7$ , the number seven represents unity of the sexes (Griaule 1949).

<sup>40</sup> See also Douglas 1967; for other assessments see, e.g., Balandier 1960; Šarevskaja 1964; Clifford 1983.

on the Dogon “cannot be taken at face value . . . [as they were] the product of a complex interaction” between researchers and informants, the specific colonial situation of their interaction, indigenous cultural emphases on courtesy and respect, and external influences on local tradition and belief (1991: 157). In short, the myths and the interpretative texts in which these are embedded are the consequence of a particular process of “bricolage.”

Reactions to van Beek’s restudy have been varied, ranging from general acceptance of his assessments, through more moderated critiques (e.g., Apter 2005) to outward criticism (e.g., Calame-Griaule 1991; de Heusch 1991). Having conducted fieldwork in the Sanga region around the time van Beek was working on his restudy, albeit with research interests in the social, temporal, spatial, and symbolic dimensions of Dogon material culture and architecture rather than in their mythology, I certainly found “the Dogon” as described by van Beek more recognisable than that presented by Griaule and Dieterlen in their post-WW II writings (Lane 1991). Like van Beek, I found much in Dogon cultural activity even in the early 1980s that resembled their way of life, material culture, and principles of social, political, and economic organisation described in the earlier, pre-WW II ethnographies produced by Griaule and his associates.

In his original concluding remarks, van Beek described Griaule’s later texts as works of “intercultural fiction” (1991: 158), later describing them in response to some of his own critics as “science fiction” or “intercultural art” (van Beek 1992: 216). Most recently, in a retrospective commentary on his own work among the Dogon and academic reactions to his critique, he describes Griaule’s texts as works, not of ethnography but as “ethnofiction, a fitting tribute to the joint creativity of anthropologist and informants” (2004: 65). In applying such labels, it must be stressed, he has always been at pains to point out that this does not mean that either he or the rest of the academic community should dismiss them – and in fact, van Beek clearly regards Griaule’s later texts as something to be celebrated – merely that they need to be read differently from the earlier ethnographies.

Without wishing to challenge this view, I want to suggest that another reading of some of the data Griaule and colleagues presented, and particularly in this context that relating to cloth, clothing, and cloth production is possible. Firstly, in their attempts to explain Dogon society and belief to him, Griaule’s informants seem to have been using elements of their material world, including cloth,

weaving, and other associated elements of this craft, as key metaphors. Metaphors, as is widely recognised, arise because of “inherent problems in the precise relationship between a world of words and a world of things, events and actions” (Tilley 1999: 6). They are, in other words, an essential rather than merely a contingent feature of language and the way in which people interpret their world. Moreover, as demonstrated here, textile production more than any of the other Dogon crafts is eminently suited to serve as a key metaphor precisely because it encompasses all (with the notable exception of children) constituent parts of Dogon society – men, women, and members of the two craft castes. Male clothing styles, at least during the Colonial era, emphasised the importance placed on age in this gerontocratic society and by employing greater and greater quantities of cloth in the manufacture of clothing associated with successive age groups helped create and recreate an association between age, wealth, and increasing control over the use of resources. Although at the level of practice women, even in the 1980s, clearly gained greater control over resources and the labour of their juniors as they aged, this was not given such overt expression through the styles of clothing they wore. Similarly, the deposition of spindles and other possessions belonging to deceased women as part of their burial rites, and the praise songs and poetry recited during these ceremonies, at one level honour the deceased for their accomplishments during life. However, these roles are highly idealised and are sufficiently identical for all adult women that they suppress any overt recognition of individual achievements – such as a woman’s skill as a potter, producer of millet beer, or market trader, all of which can be topics of debate among both men and women in everyday discourse. To a certain extent, male roles are also idealised in these contexts. However, unlike the rites and oratory associated with women, a degree of rhetorical space is allowed for the expression and emphasis of the specialised achievements and skills of individual males – hunter, weaver, warrior, and so forth.

More generally, it is conceivable that Griaule and his associates in listening to Ogotemmêli and their other informants, not only mistook the use of metaphors for the type of literal exegesis of Dogon symbolism and mythology that they were interested in recording, but also held a completely different ontological view of the relationship between humans and the material world. Specifically, as products of an industrialised Western society Griaule’s team may well have regarded the man-

ufacture of artefacts as the self-evident outcome of neutral actions that are separate from the social context in which they occur – a position Pfaffenberger (1988) has described as “technological somnambulism.”<sup>41</sup> In contrast, it would appear that Dogon, like many other non-Western (or perhaps, more strictly speaking preindustrial) societies, conceive technology of any kind as “a *total* social phenomenon in the sense used by Mauss” and as “a form of humanised nature, that unifies virtually every aspect of human endeavour” (Pfaffenberger 1988: 249, emphasis in the original). In this regard, it is also worth recalling Ingold’s observation that the English “word ‘loom’ comes from Middle English *lome*, which originally referred to a tool or utensil of any kind,” and that this origin may well imply that among a preindustrial European society, just as among various contemporary non-Western societies, weaving somehow epitomises “technical processes in general” (2000: 346). Elaborating on this point, Ingold cites the example of ideas about basketry (which involves rather similar bodily skills as weaving, as the Dogon also recognise) held by the Yekuana of Venezuela, for whom a master of this craft is not simply someone skilled in the particular techniques of basketry but also someone who, possessing exceptional wisdom, weaves “the world” in everything he (sic) does (Guss 1989: 170, cited in Ingold 2000: 347). Basketry, and for that matter all other techniques of manufacturing artefacts, for the Yakuana, in other words, is nothing less than a matter of “making culture.” Such a view also resonates with the notion of technology as articulated within theories of practice and particularly with the idea that at “the level of actual practice, technologies are always organized through (and as) techniques of the body; and so the ‘form,’ ‘use’ and ‘function’ of a technology cannot be separated from the practices with which it is bundled” (Sterne 2003: 385). One might add that these ideas seem to be embedded, also, in the French term for a loom, “*métier*,” which can also mean more broadly any “craft,” “trade,” “calling,” or “profession” and as used in colloquial English similarly implies a field or calling in which someone has special ability or skill.

41 Pfaffenberger opposes this with an equally common notion in Western thought, that of “technical determinism”; however, there is little evidence that either Griaule or any of his associates ascribed to such ideas with respect to the Dogon. For fuller discussions of concepts of technology associated with Western industrial society and by implication also within anthropology for much of its history as a formal discipline, see, e.g., Rapp 1981; Pfaffenberger 1988, 1992; Ingold 1990, 2000: 323–338.

Viewed from this perspective then, Ogotem-mêli’s comments that weaving – the crafting of cloth – was like the act of sexual reproduction and that in its structure the Dogon loom resembles the human mouth, could certainly be taken as implying an understanding of technology as something that is socially embedded and an embodied part of lived practice. Little wonder then, given the social and symbolic connotations of cloth and cloth production among the Dogon discussed above, that he also remarked that “To be naked is to be speechless”!

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