

# Bozo-Dogon Bantering: Policing Access to Djenne's Building Trade with Jests and Spells

TREVOR H.J. MARCHAND

Based on research with masons in Djenne, Mali, this article examines the use of interethnic bantering as a means to control access to the building trade. The possibility of becoming a mason is salient in Djenne, where control (traditionally in the hands of the Bozo) over the reproduction of *style-Soudanaise* architecture constitutes an important form of cultural capital. On the construction site, bantering was most prominently displayed between Bozo masons and their Dogon laborers. This article reviews the anthropological literature on the so-called "joking relationship" between these two groups, and then expands a contemporary understanding of this social institution that, importantly, includes issues of power, authority and resistance.

It was my first day on the job, but I immediately identified who the principal clown was on this construction project. Boucari was small and wiry with a mischievous grin, and he had a penchant for winding up his fellow laborers. Periodically, he would leave his station, where he was kneading the thick red mud-mortar with his feet and bare legs, and venture over to where I was working next to the two masons. At these times he badgered me with seemingly inappropriate questions and chided me for my "whiteness."

"All you white men are rich, aren't you!" he bellowed sardonically. "Your people always have medicine, and you're continually popping pills. Don't you have any for me?" He anchored himself firmly in front of me, facing me square on at an uncomfortably close distance, and persisted in an aggressive tone tinged with a cruel playfulness.

Eventually, I could no longer contain my irritation. I growled back at him with an economy of words. But at this point, he instantly retreated and changed tactics. Earnestly, he began explaining that he was only teasing me to demonstrate that he liked me. "You shouldn't get angry. My teasing is an expression of my affection."

*Trevor Marchand is a Lecturer in Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, England.*



**FIGURE 1. (LEFT)** View over the rooftops of the Yobu Kena Quarter toward the Djenné Mosque.

**FIGURE 2. (BELOW)** Typical street scene in Djenne and a “Moroccan-style” house facade.

Initially, I couldn't decipher whether he was being sincere or further mocking me. My defenses subsided a little, but not entirely, as I searched for a more appropriate way to respond to his behavior.

This man's ribbing was rather extreme, and its racial overtones seemed rooted in a deep hatred. But Boucari's contention that I should take no real offence to his insults also echoed the textbook formula of African joking relationships. The inventory of Radcliffe-Brown's “disjunctive” attributes that separated us was considerable; they included cultural, religious, racial, linguistic and economic differences, to name the most salient. But our shared work situation was forcing a “conjunction” that demanded cooperation, tolerance, and avoidance of any truly violent or physical conflict.

Indeed, as the day progressed, it did become apparent that Boucari was trying to establish some sort of “friendly” relation with me. But my nagging suspicions that he was a pest were also confirmed. After repeatedly abandoning his post to chitchat and distract the other team members, the masons finally reprimanded Boucari in a serious tone. And the following week he was removed from the site for his continuous shenanigans and sent to quarry stones some distance east in the direction of the Dogon Plateau.<sup>1</sup>

#### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Over the course of two winter seasons (2001 and 2002) I worked as a building laborer under the direction of various masons in Djenne, Mali, an important historic town situated in the heart of the Inland Niger Delta (FIGS.1,2). My main



research objectives were to study the local apprenticeship system and the transfer of expert knowledge among the famous mud masons of this region, and better understand how their expertise fused technical skills, social attitudes and dispositions, and occult practices into a cohesive professional frame-



FIGURE 3. Construction site of a new house along the Bani River.

work.<sup>2</sup> During the first season, I worked with a team building a new house outside of town along the banks of the Bani River (FIG. 3). During the second, I worked with another team on two houses being (re)constructed in the Djoboro and Yobu Kena quarters of town.

The linguistic and ethnic diversity of the team during my first season was quintessentially “Djenne” in character. Its eighteen members included representation from eight different ethnic groups from both Mali and Burkina Faso (FIG. 4). Five languages were regularly spoken, of which Bambara — and to some extent Djenne Chiini (a local dialect of Songhay) and French — were the *linguas francas*. All of the laborers, excluding the apprentice and a few others, were Qur’anic students. They had come to study with Djenne’s renowned *marabouts*, and used their pay to fund their lessons and lodging. During the second season my team was much smaller, consisting mainly of local Djenne residents (*Djenneboros*). In this case, two masons oversaw six semi-permanent laborers



FIGURE 4. Building laborers being transported in the back of a pickup truck to a building site outside Djenne.

(none of whom were Qur’anic students). However, our manpower was occasionally supplemented with the addition of one or two Qur’anic students, employed on a temporary basis.

During my two seasons of work I came to understand much about the social relations underlying production of the local *style-Soudanaise* architecture. In Djenne most masons trace their genealogical origins to legendary Bozo families. Many insist that only young men from the town’s building families should be admitted to an apprenticeship and be taught the necessary combination of technical skills and trade secrets. Yet, in practice, access to the profession now cuts across ethnic boundaries and social classes. Borders to the trade initially became porous during the drought of the 1970s and 1980s when many local masons went abroad as migrant laborers, and when the *barey ton* (a guild-like organization of masons that regulated practice) nearly dissolved.<sup>3</sup> As a result, there has been more recent representation from the Marka and Bambara, and some Hourso (historically a caste group in a position of servitude).

One important factor does continue to bar individuals of nonbuilding families from the trade. This is the nature of the mason-client relation. A mason is bound to every family in the town, making it difficult, if not impossible, for anyone without arranged or inherited patron connections to find work. Meanwhile, the possibility of usurping someone else’s clients is curbed by the dominant discourse on occult practices and knowledge. Master masons are believed to possess powers that can cause harm to those who compete with, or betray them, and that can even make others’ buildings fail. Furthermore, on a building site bantering relations are invoked to maintain a defined hierarchy between the masons and their labor team. The most highly developed and historical of these is between the Bozo and Dogon. But banter peppered with nationalist sentiments is also exchanged to a lesser extent between Malian builders and laborers from neighboring Burkina Faso.

Across Africa throughout the twentieth century anthropologists have reported the existence of joking relationships that serve to bind ethnic and socioeconomically differentiated groups, as well as kin by marriage.<sup>4</sup> More than occasional teasing, these relationships exhibit a highly formalized discourse that is regularly (and predictably) engaged in. However, the repertoire of jokes, often in the form of insults, is restricted, and limits of abuse are carefully observed.

Like other anthropologists, I was curious about the function and performance of such joking relationships as a form of (both cooperative and antagonistic) communication and entertainment. The questions I formulated in the context of my field studies were varied. What role did such bantering play in producing and reproducing the social relations between individual members of the Bozo and Dogon communities? When did exchanges occur, what form did they take, and what characterized their performance? What was the content of the banter, and what wider social significances and implications did it have? Who was legitimately entitled to participate in (and control) these exchanges? What were the guiding rules, and how

did novices acquire the necessary skills to pull off a successful bit of banter? And what were the possible limitations of the bantering relation between the Bozo and Dogon (i.e., in what circumstances did members of the two communities cease to regulate their interethnic relations with banter)?

In the end, the results of my study confirmed to a certain extent Radcliffe-Brown's universal conclusion that joking relationships serve to organize and stabilize a system of social behavior.<sup>5</sup> They also confirmed many (but not all) of Griaule's more relativistic observations about the Bozo-Dogon alliance.<sup>6</sup> But my findings also demonstrated specific and highly strategic employments of interethnic banter. And they detailed not only instances when banter worked, but also when it did not. These exceptions are important and demand further consideration in future studies on the topic. This article specifically considers how bantering relations are manipulated in Djenne to control access to the building trade, to maintain professional boundaries and hierarchies that reflect ethnic divisions, and, importantly, to create opportunities for individual resistance and accommodation.

During my fieldwork, the most prominent public displays of teasing and humorous insult I witnessed were between individual Bozos and Dogons, or between small parties of these groups. The Bozo, traditionally the fishermen of the Inland Niger Delta, were the most prominent group in Djenne's building trade at the time of my study. Indeed, they have monopolized membership in the *barey ton* for at least the last century (FIG. 5).<sup>7</sup> Thus, all eight of the masons I worked with were Bozos, as were two of their three apprentices. The Dogon, on the other hand, have historically inhabited the dry plateau, cliffs and plains of the Bandiagara escarpment (FIG. 6). Many of the Dogons in Djenne had only come there to acquire an Islamic training, which would both expand their religious knowledge and boost their social standing at home. The laborers I worked with were largely such Dogon Qur'anic students, and all were determined to leave Djenne when they had completed their education.<sup>8</sup>



FIGURE 5. A Bozo mason posing next to his family's fishing nets.



FIGURE 6. A Dogon village on the Bandiagara Escarpment.

Unlike the blatantly hostile tone of Boucari's teasing, the rallies of insults between Bozos and Dogons on the building sites where I worked were predominantly jovial and aimed to inspire laughter (Boucari was neither ethnically Bozo nor Dogon). The remarks were often of an obscene nature, challenging the other's social status, masculinity, intelligence, or occasionally popular accounts of their group's origins.<sup>9</sup> In 1948 Marcel Griaule proposed the term "cathartic alliance" (*alliance cathartique*) to describe this relationship. His intent was to challenge A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's all-encompassing structural-functionalist theory of "joking relationships," and more accurately describe the specific type of insulting relationship he and Denise Paulme had recorded between Dogons and Bozos in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>10</sup> In particular, Griaule described Dogon stories that related how a portion of the vital force (*nyama*) of each group had passed into the other during events long ago; thus, according to the stories, every Dogon possessed a part of the Bozo, and vice versa, which resided in their livers. In brief, Griaule believed the alliance primarily served a need for mutual purification. He described how exchanges of insults were meant to act on that portion of the self in the other, ridding the livers of both parties of impurities, and restoring balance to the spiritual order. Separate, Bozo and Dogon were thus incomplete; but

face-to-face, acting on that part of themselves in the other, their vital energy became whole.<sup>11</sup>

Following an historic overview of some key anthropological approaches to “joking relations,” I will address several specific instances of the Bozo-Dogon insulting relation — or what I would prefer to call a “bantering relation” — on the building sites in Djenne.<sup>12</sup> During my fieldwork it became evident to me that this bantering relation was also colored by the authority of the Bozo masons and the subservience, as well as the resistance, of their Dogon laborers. I will therefore propose that it was used strategically to maintain and police the ethnic borders of the profession. In this sense, the so-called “joking,” or insults and banter, were not merely the product of an alliance between equal parties, but were in fact tinged with aggression, and communicated territorial claims to the trade by the masons. Importantly, it might be argued that the effects of bantering contributed to the exclusivity of the profession and protected the status of the masons. This ensured tighter, more privileged control over the reproduction of both local building practices and the characteristic features of the *style-Soudanaise* architecture (FIG. 7).



FIGURE 7. Detail of the roofline crenellations of the Djenne Mosque.

## JOKING RELATIONS AND ANTHROPOLOGY: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In his article on “La Parenté à Plaisanteries en Afrique Occidentale,” published in 1929, Henri Labouret noted how several authors had already observed the existence of “joking relationships” in West Africa, particularly among the Mandingo, Fulani and Toucouleurs populations.<sup>13</sup> His own study of the alliance between the Fulani and the Wolof (and between various Wolof clans), expressed through a reciprocal exchange of insults and joking, suggested that such relationships were based on a former political supremacy, whereby one group was “master” and the other “slave.” He also proposed that there was an economic basis to these alliance relations, which was characterized by “l’échange des services et des cadeaux obligatoires et dont l’existence est attestée partout.”<sup>14</sup> This, Labouret concluded, supported the notion that “les populations de l’Ouest-africain sont liées entre elles par une chaîne de réciprocités beaucoup plus étroite qu’on ne le soupçonne d’ordinaire.”<sup>15</sup>

The issue of highly developed reciprocities between West African alliance groups was further explored ten years later by Denise Paulme in her investigation of Dogon *mangou*. *Mangou*, she claimed, was instantiated when one group rendered a service to another, which might entail one group saving the other from serious danger or sparing the life of one of the other group’s members who had committed a grave offence against them.<sup>16</sup> According to Paulme, a typical theme in Dogon oral accounts involved a community either having lost, or being on the verge of losing, one of its members. Then, after the group has sadly resigned itself to the loss, the individual is fully restored through the generosity and care of the other group. As in the classic accounts of *parenté à plaisanteries* (joking relationships), Paulme noted that the existence of *mangou* was manifest through exchanges of (often obscene) insults and jokes between the allied parties and the prohibition of any form of anger, violent retaliation, or serious dispute. More precisely, such exchanges were characterized by an uninhibited familiarity between parties, the deliberate inversion of quotidian rules of polite conduct, and the use of coarse language. According to Paulme, such behavior was most prevalently enacted during mourning ceremonies (*dama*) held in honor of deceased high-ranking members of the Dogon community.<sup>17</sup>

As part of her work, Paulme recorded a popular story about the origins of the alliance between the cliff-dwelling Dogon and the riverine Bozo that recounted how the two ethnic groups came together cooperatively during a great famine. At this time, both groups were living along the banks of the Niger, and it was decided that while the Bozo journeyed along the river to fish, they would leave their children in the care of the Dogon. During their absence, one of the Bozo children came to the brink of starvation. But the Dogon chief revived the child by cutting a piece of flesh from

the calf of his own leg, roasting it, and feeding it to the young Bozo — thereby instantiating a lasting blood tie between the two peoples.<sup>18</sup>

Paulme believed that such a blood pact fulfilled a comparable role to a marriage.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, it created a new alliance and a framework of social relations tempered by a type of joking similar to that a Dogon man might enjoy with his wife's sisters and their daughters. Paulme related how the Dogon considered their alliance with the Bozo to be the most sacred of such relationships. Indeed, it was the model on which other inter-Dogon alliances were based. Additionally, because of the importance of this blood pact, Paulme pointed out that it precluded any intermarriage between the two ethnic groups, in the same way that marriage alliances among the Dogon also implied exogamous relations between succeeding generations.<sup>20</sup>

In response to a published note by F.J. Pedler (of the British Colonial Office) on "Joking Relationships in East Africa," A.R. Radcliffe-Brown then provided a general theoretical discussion of the nature of joking relationships.<sup>21</sup> He wrote that in any alliance between two different groups — be they families, clans or tribes — the issue of "social disjunction . . . implies divergence of interests and therefore the possibility of conflict and hostility, while conjunction requires the avoidance of strife." But how, he asked, could a relationship that combined the two ever be stable and ordered? He suggested two possible, and oppositional-related alternatives: either extreme mutual respect that required a partial or complete avoidance of personal contact, or a joking relationship. He described the latter as a relationship of licensed mutual disrespect that involved joking or teasing, which might be either verbal, or both verbal and performative, and which might include elements of obscenity.<sup>22</sup> "Any serious hostility is prevented by the playful antagonism of teasing, and this in its regular repetition is a constant expression or reminder of that social disjunction which is one of the essential components of the relation, while the social conjunction is maintained by the friendliness that takes no offence at insult."<sup>23</sup> By comparing case studies in Africa to case studies in other parts of the world, Radcliffe-Brown then determined that "the joking relationship which constitutes an alliance between clans or tribes, and that between relatives by marriage, are modes of organising a definite and stable system of social behaviour in which conjunctive and disjunctive components . . . are maintained and combined."<sup>24</sup> His theory further entrenched the term "joking relationship" in anthropological discourse, where it has been used to categorically describe the nature of certain alliances between kin, clans and tribes.

Marcel Griaule initiated his response to this classically structural-functionalist definition of a social function by challenging the category of *parenté à plaisanterie* as a superficial gloss, wrongfully employed to describe institutions and manifestations that were not of the same nature.<sup>25</sup> Retaining the "joking" qualifier as definitive of these relations, he argued,

risked forcing a connection between truly disparate phenomena. Using an analogy, he wrote: "Une cloche sonne le glas et les mariages. Il ne viendrait à l'idée de personne de prétendre que les funérailles et les noces se rencontrent dans une série dites 'cérémonies à cloches'."<sup>26</sup> Instead, Griaule proposed that more detailed studies were required to illuminate the social and cultural particularities underpinning the apparent manifestations of joking and insulting between parties.

Where Radcliffe-Brown had begun with the shared phenomenon of joking, teasing and insulting, as reported by various anthropologists from diverse field locations, and had attempted to find a unified explanation for this occurrence in the laws of social relations, Griaule chose to begin with the specific social and cultural institutions, values, and belief systems of the Dogon people. And from here he sought to render a culturally relative and (what he believed to be) more plausible, explanation for the banter between different Dogon groups — and especially between the Dogon and the Bozo.

In the Sanga region where Griaule conducted much of his work, intra-Dogon and Dogon-Bozo alliances were called *mangou*, a term that also referred to the parties involved. As Paulme had already described them, such alliances required the exchange of hospitality and services and a strict prohibition against intergroup sexual relations, the spilling of blood through violent contest, or murder. Transgressions produced negative consequences thought to be nearly impossible to rectify. Griaule recounted an exemplary legend in which a Bozo man, as a result of becoming intimately involved with a Dogon woman, was turned into a fish. But Griaule also wrote that the alliance between Bozo and Dogon was chiefly one of reciprocal purification. This was manifest most notably in the ritualized exchange of insults meant to purge bad, disruptive forces lurking both within the other and within the self.

According to Griaule, Dogon metaphysics described the two principal elements of a person as being a double soul and a vital force called *nyama*. The power of the insult acted upon the negative components of the *nyama*, and in effect purified, or brought spiritual order to it. In his article "L'Alliance Cathartique," he recorded a fascinating myth about the origin of the Dogon-Bozo alliance that, like the shorter, simpler myth recorded by Paulme, illustrated how the two groups came to share each other's vital force. I include my own translation of it from the French here, since it provides an important glimpse into the alleged thought system of the Dogon as explored in great detail by Griaule and his colleagues. More importantly for my discussion, it clearly demonstrates to what extent the Bozo are integral to Dogon conceptions of self.

At a given moment in the organization of the world, the first in a series of eight Dogon ancestors constructed an edifice in the sky with round foundations (representing the sun) and a square top (representing the sky). This granary-like building was divided into eight compartments that represented man's principal organs, and each contained one of the

eight essential grains. At the center of the granary was a spherical clay pot (the image of the sun and the womb) that contained ornamental stones. On the exterior, four staircases that started at the four sides of the flat roof reached out to connect to the constellations. On the south staircase were the domestic animals; on the eastern one were the birds; and on the western one were the wild animals, plants and insects. On the north staircase there were two Bozo men and three Bozo women. All of the Bozo (except for one of the women) carried a twin-fish attached to their navels by the gills. On the ten stairs of every staircase the beings were represented by categories (for example, the Gallinacés, the Ovins, the Caballins, etc.). Blacksmithing tools and a fragment of the sun stolen from the great original spirits were placed on the roof terrace.

The first ancestor, who would eventually be the blacksmith, let an arrow fly into the vault of the sky. This arrow was connected by a cord to another arrow anchored in the roof terrace, and the force launched the granary into space with the Dogon ancestor standing upright. Following various exciting events, the whole assembly crashed to the earth. On impact, the ancestor's limbs, which until then had been supple and without joints, were broken by the hammer and anvil he had been carrying. This is how he came to have articulated joints, the symbol of human work and creation. At the same time, the animals dispersed, and the five Bozos, carrying their fish, prepared to head to the Niger River where they would make their home.

Before leaving, however, the Bozos insisted on showing their gratitude to the Dogon ancestor. He had already set up his forge north of the primordial field where he had fallen to earth, and had laid out his tools and was ready to begin work. The Bozos came beside him, and in the presence of a group of Dogon who were nearby, they pronounced a solemn oath of alliance over the anvil on which the blacksmith was already pounding, proclaiming that the two peoples were reciprocally *mangou* because they had journeyed to earth together on the celestial vessel. (Griaule enumerated other Dogon myths to explain the significance of the anvil, and the manner in which the vibrations of the anvil carried the Bozo's oath deep into the earth and the cosmos.) The oath was uttered at the same time as the hammer reverberated against the anvil, whereby the ringing of the anvil and the words of the Bozo were harmonized together. Thus, when the Bozo uttered the oath, a part of their vital force (*nyama*) entered via their words, breath, and vapor into the ear of the smith, and by a complex circuit through his body, reached his liver. From that moment onward, it was as if a part of the Bozo had been implanted in the Dogon. And the process was also reversed so that a part of the Dogon was transmitted into his Bozo partner.<sup>27</sup>

Griaule also recorded two less complicated (and more popularly recited) versions of the myth explaining the origins of the Dogon-Bozo alliance, including the one chronicled earlier by Paulme. Both these emphasized an exchange of flesh

and blood between the two ethnic groups, and therefore the reciprocal exchange of *nyama*, as the foundation of the alliance. Quoting from interviews with a contingent of wise and elderly males from the Dogon community — notably his key informant Ogotemméli — Griaule wrote that the insults hurled back and forth between the *mangou* partners were not taken injuriously because it was understood that each was in fact addressing a part of themselves in the other. It was as if each wanted to reclaim himself. Indeed, Ogotemméli explained that “Lorsqu'un allié insulte son partenaire, c'est comme s'il voulait reprendre la part de lui-même qui est dans l'autre. C'est comme une bataille de paroles où chacun tente de reprendre son bien.”<sup>28</sup> But more than this, by penetrating to the liver, where good speech and bad speech resided, the insults, by their violent action, forced the latter to depart. Paraphrasing Griaule, the injurious words replaced the bad speech with a sort of “parody” of bad speech. Additionally, by launching an insult, one could liberate oneself of bad speech. Such a reciprocity of purifications led Griaule to term the relationship between Dogon and Bozo a “cathartic alliance.”<sup>29</sup>

Following the appearance of Griaule's article, Radcliffe-Brown published a further note in which he praised Griaule for making a valuable contribution to the understanding of a particular people. But he warned that such particularist explanations were “similar to those of the historian.” As a “science,” anthropology should aim to arrive at “general theoretical interpretations of social institutions.”<sup>30</sup>

For several decades Radcliffe-Brown's staunch position steered the successive research of many British anthropologists. However, other anthropologists dissented. For example, James Howe and Jay Sherzer's approach to understanding humor among the San Blas Kuna of Panama moved away from the macro-analysis of structure to a micro-sociology of action and creativity. They concluded that “humour is not just *about* something but is a way of *dealing with* something,” and therefore has a strategic use.<sup>31</sup>

The following section of this article will likewise seek to demonstrate how individual Bozo and Dogon builders in Djenne strategically employ banter to define, shore up, and reproduce not only the ethnic boundary between them, but also a division of labor.<sup>32</sup> This division of labor demarks access to full and professional participation in the building trade. The masons that guard this border effectively wield control over the production and reproduction of Djenne's traditional built environment.

My analysis of Bozo-Dogon bantering is cautious of Radcliffe-Brown's broad kin-based structural approach. But like the majority, as described by Heald, that follow this course of criticism, it nevertheless incorporates an “essential ambivalence” that Radcliffe-Brown emphasized about joking relationships — one that combines “both friendship and antagonism, goodwill and hostility.”<sup>33</sup>

## A CASE STUDY OF BOZO-DOGON BANTERING ON BUILDING SITES IN DJENNE

Griaule's entire argument hinged heavily on the concept of *nyama*, which seems to be a real and important idea in some Mande cultural groups.<sup>34</sup> But it should be noted that there are contemporary scholars who contest the notion that it is important, or that it even exists, among the Dogon.<sup>35</sup> For example, in a 1991 evaluation of Griaule's work based on his own extensive research with the Dogon population, Walter van Beek claimed "*nyama*, allegedly 'vital force', is irrelevant to Dogon religion." Specifically, he wrote that the etymologies for *nyama* given in "Dieu d'Eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmêli" and "Le Renard Pâle" are "not retraceable and seem highly idiosyncratic."<sup>36</sup> Van Beek noted that "morphologically, the word does not belong to the Dogon lexicon and may be Bambara in origin," and he reported that his informants did not recognize it "in the form given in the text."<sup>37</sup>

My own work with the Bozo masons and the Bozo and Dogon laborers yielded similar findings. Though the special status of their bantering relationship was clearly acknowledged, none of the men I worked with recognized the word *nyama*, nor could they relate any culturally equivalent concept to the explanations I provided for *nyama*'s supposed definition. The belief, however, in a spiritual order of things that could in some way be tainted, unbalanced or ruptured by behavioral or verbalized transgressions was universally accepted, as was the belief that such violations necessitated purificatory actions in the form of prayer, secret incantations, ritual procedures, the preparation of *gris gris* (amulets), or the ingestion of African medicines. *Bai bibi* (black or African knowledge) and *bai quaré* (white or Qur'anic knowledge) were regularly combined to shield against prospective negative causal forces in the world, or remedy the effects of existing evils.<sup>38</sup> But the concept of a vital force, and of such a thing being shared interethnically and residing in the livers of one another, did not exist.

Nevertheless, as I stated previously, a special connection between the two populations was recognized, and on occasion my builder-hosts entertained me with extremely similar versions of the alliance myth recorded by Paulme. Ideas of blood brotherhood were implicitly stated therein, and exogamy was also adhered to, although it was more simply explained as a consequence of the blood-based alliance. In relation to maintaining exogamous relations in Djenne, it should be added that the female contingent of the town's Dogon population was extremely small, and the unaccompanied movement of Bozo women outside the home was restricted by the imposition of somewhat conservative Islamic-inspired rules of gender segregation and partial seclusion. These combined factors rendered the possibilities for intimate interethnic heterosexual relationships in the town very difficult. Meanwhile, the development of close friendships between Bozo and Dogon men was often imped-

ed by language barriers, as well as cultural differences marked by such straightforward issues as food preferences and occupational skills (i.e., fishing versus cultivation).

Though they worked exceedingly well together on the building sites, Dogon and Bozo laborers neither shared residence nor spent much social time together outside of working hours and Friday prayers at the mosque. All of the Dogon laborers that I built with were out-of-town Qur'anic-school students, and they congregated primarily with other members of their ethnic group, studying under the tutelage of Dogon *marabouts* and sharing cramped living quarters in their houses (FIG. 8). Likewise, the many Bozos that I knew tended to maintain their closest ties with other Bozos; and though they considered themselves *Djenneboro* ("true" residents of Djenne), they also regularly spun tales that enumerated critical differences between themselves and the *Djenneboro* "Other." These accounts typically highlighted their own generosity and easy-going approach to life, in contrast to the miserly, calculating ways of Djenne's other main ethnic contingents (mainly the Fulani, Marka and Bambara, who comprise a dominant proportion of the merchant class).

In response, other *Djenneboro* popularly perceived the Bozo as simple-minded. This was exemplified in the saying: "A Bozo who sees far [i.e., who makes plans for his future] is one who sees no further than the end of his nose!"

During his posting as a French colonial administrator, it seems that Charles Monteil adopted similarly slanderous, racist views. In a book on Djenne, he maliciously described the Bozo as "un timide qui ne connaît d'ordinaire que la pêche: partout ailleurs il paraît maladroit et sot. C'est aussi un paisible et un résigné: toutes les tyrannies, toutes les calamités semblent le laisser indifférent. La pêche, pense-t-il, suffisant à tout."<sup>39</sup> Such degrading views continue to circulate among the town's non-Bozo population. And their conde-



FIGURE 8. Portrait of a Dogon laborer who has come to Djenne to study the Qur'an.



scension is largely premised on the belief that, despite the Bozo's claims of autochthony and nobility (i.e., neither being a caste group nor former slaves), they have passively submitted to the domination of other groups who have come in successive waves to the Inland Niger Delta. This is seen as being particularly true in relation to the Fulani, who have maintained significant political hegemony in the town and surrounding region since the nineteenth-century *jihads*. Some individuals even chastise the urbanized Bozo for no longer speaking their own language and for adopting Djenne Chiini.

Many Dogons, however, offer another perspective on the Bozos' "simple" qualities. While sipping tea with a group of Dogon friends in the vestibule of the house where they studied, one complained to me about the tight-fisted attitude of the *Djenneboro* and their impenetrable social barriers. "The Bozo, by contrast, are very generous," he said with affection. "If a Bozo has money, they don't think of tomorrow. They enjoy what pleasure they can today, and will spend their money and eat well." The others nodded in agreement. Although the favorable nature of this remark contradicted the insulting, confrontational nature of the banter they exchange with one another, it in fact honored the special alliance they have with their partners, which is characterized by hospitality, assistance and tolerance.

Bantering is the most prominent public expression of the Bozo-Dogon alliance. The exchanges I was witness to in Djenne were predominantly conducted in Bambara, and occasionally in French, both of which served as *linguas francas* between the two communities.<sup>40</sup> On the construction sites, exchanges between builders were typically initiated when a member of one group fumbled with their tasks, causing an obvious disruption in the team's working rhythm, and thus inviting ridicule or reprimand (FIG. 9). Also, spectacles of bravado such as moving very heavy stones or carrying exceptionally large loads of building materials were read as a chal-

lenge to others, often resulting in amusing competitions involving feats of strength and verbal banter. The content of the bantering and the nature of the performances I witnessed were almost identical to that recorded by Griaule more than fifty years ago. And the insult themes included all three categories of obscenities described by Edmund Leach in his discussion of taboo: "dirty words — usually referring to sex and excretion; blasphemy and profanity; animal abuse — in which a human being is equated with an animal of another species."<sup>41</sup>

Griaule noted that following normal greetings, a barrage of obscenities was unleashed that usually identified the sexual organs of the other's parents: "The penis of your father!"; "The vagina of your mother!" — to which the other responded in turn with analogous statements. The rallies turned to mockeries, breaching the borders of the other's sacred beliefs and practices. Bozo ridiculed the principal foods of Dogon — namely, millet and crocodile meat — as being fodder for horses; and Dogon retorted that the Bozo was a fish that walked on land (alluding to the vulnerability of a species forced outside of its normal habitat). Bozo accused the other's spiritual chief of never washing and being licked by a snake (referring to the Lebé cult); Dogon cursed the Bozo as being that "dirty thing of the water" that has made the water *djinn* (spirits or genies) impure.<sup>42</sup>

One morning, while helping to haul stones by hand from a delivery pile to where the masons were laying new house foundations, Sulayman Guindo, a young, well-built Dogon, playfully challenged some of us to lift heavier and heavier stones (FIG. 10). Strength and muscle mass were regularly associated with consuming meat, and discussions about diet often emphasized eating the heads of animals — especially those of sheep, cows and fish — thought to be an ideal breakfast to fuel up for a hard day's work.

"Leave that big one [stone] for the Canadian to carry. He eats meat with every meal!" someone proclaimed, flattering



FIGURE 9. A coordinated arrangement of laborers who pass materials onto an apprentice setting brick courses for a new wall.



FIGURE 10. Portrait of a young Dogon laborer.

me for my vigor, while simultaneously underscoring a gaping disparity between our respective economic positions. When I protested that I didn't eat meat, and that I was a vegetarian, they doubted my claims. A second Burkinian laborer complained that his arms were so scrawny because, since arriving in Djenne, he had only eaten rice with a little sauce and some tiny, bony fish.

I shifted the focus back onto Sulayman, loudly praising his strength so that the masons could hear, and I provocatively suggested that he was the best worker on the site. Sulayman enjoyed this, but was a bit bashful.

"No, no!" objected Konamadou Djennepo, one of the younger Bozo masons, shaking his finger, "the Dogon are 'petit'. The Dogons are the sons of the Bozo!" (referring to their status, not their physical size, and thereby asserting a hierarchical ranking that necessitates kin-like respect, as a son pays to his parents).<sup>43</sup>

A great burst of laughter issued from those standing nearby listening. Sulayman, waving his finger back toward the mason and shaking his head, looked to me with a broad smile, protesting that this was a lie. "The Bozo are the sons of the Dogon!" he said.

But Konamadou continued, "The Dogon don't know how to achieve anything by themselves, and we Bozo must teach them everything."

There were more protests from Sulayman and from his Dogon colleagues, who were terribly outnumbered and out-ranked.

"Dogons didn't come from Allah," said Konamadou. "They fell directly from the sky like stones" (alluding to the celestial ark and the Dogon myth of origin).

A more vocal Dogon laborer, Youssuf, chimed in: "Yes, well, the Bozo were born from fish!"

Konamadou retorted, "When Dogons see a car coming on the road, they run and hide among the rocks. They might even stay there hidden for three or four weeks without emerging or even eating!" (The reference was to the geographical seclusion of the Dogon villages on the Bandiagara escarpment — which has historically provided shelter against outside intervention, including slave traders, Christianity, Islam, and globalizing market forces.)

Typically, the exchange then petered out and we all resumed our tasks.

A great deal of teasing was also exchanged between the Malian and Burkinian workers, who accused one another of having "une tête noire" or "une pensée africaine."<sup>44</sup> Such racially loaded allegations suggested "thickness" or "slowness" in thinking and actions, and implied that the other was stifled by pre-Islamic black-African traditions. Builders who wore what was deemed to be an excess of *gris gris*, or protective amulets, took the brunt of this sort of teasing, which overtly challenged the faith they had in Allah to do the protecting, and thus played an effective role in coercing a narrow vision of religious conformity.<sup>45</sup>

Laborers launched similar jocular attacks on the Bozo masons as being "black" (the Bozo are regarded as the darkest-skinned people of the region) and dim-witted. But Bamoi Kouroumanse, one of the masons, occasionally pulled rank by reminding them with a stern look that he was the mason and they were just "petit." However, moments later, his face would soften, and the playful exchange of insults would resume.

In such banter it was always clear, however, that limits were to be observed, as both parties steered clear of making truly offensive remarks. Remarks that did go overboard fell flat, and at these times the chorus of laughter would fade to a few nervous giggles — or, worse yet, complete silence. In this sense, the rules of conduct and the limits for bantering were unofficially negotiated between the various parties by the online responses they issued and received. As members of the audience, and by occasionally coming forth to participate directly in the banter, younger men learned what was appropriate and tolerable, what successfully provoked the best laughter, and how best to time their interjections.

Ibrahim Sao, popularly known as "Tonton" (which translates to "uncle" and is a term of respect), was the most senior in age of the masons that I worked with during the first year. He had begun a new wall one morning and was steadily building up the courses of brickwork with the assistance of Boubacar, a burly young Bozo apprentice on loan from the famous master mason, Mama Kourani. A young Dogon laborer, Sekou, was positioned nearby and was passing materials on to them as they required. But as Tonton spread a thick layer of mud plaster along the top of the wall with his trowel, Sekou paused for a rest and leaned heavily with his elbow on a recently laid section of brickwork, causing individual bricks to slide out of place and the fresh mortar to ooze from between the joints. Tonton turned toward Sekou, visibly annoyed, and the boy moved back. But the mason's reproach quickly cooled from a serious tone to one tinged with playfulness, and he theatrically exaggerated the damage by transforming the resetting of a few bricks into an amusing performance for all.

Later, while spreading more mortar, he plucked a small hard, round ball of earth out of the smooth mixture with the point of his trowel, audibly proclaiming that it was "le caca de Dogon." "Non, non," cried Sekou, "C'est la tête de Bozo!"<sup>46</sup>

As the day progressed, the *harmattan* winds picked up, blowing up great quantities of dust from the north and east in a way that reduced visibility and hampered breathing. Tonton was standing on top of a wall, looking out across the Bani River with his face to the wind: "C'est encore le caca des Dogons!" Bending forward and lifting his backside into the air, he gestured a fart with his hand. This provoked a good deal of laughter.

Boubacar joined in immediately, exclaiming "If Dogons drink *gars* [a millet-based drink consumed throughout the workday], their stomachs bloat and they fart." And, like that of Tonton, his insult was accompanied by full gesturing. His

attempt, however, failed miserably. Tonton glanced blankly at him and turned back to his bricks and mortar, and the other laborers continued with their work.

It was not entirely clear to me why his joke was such a flop, but I suspected it may have had to do with his youth and inexperience. His attempt, as a mere apprentice, to engage in banter on a par with his more senior colleague may have been deemed inappropriate (the majority of the Dogon laborers were also senior to him in age). Additionally, the comment eclipsed the enjoyment of Tonton's jest and was therefore neither well timed nor an original contribution to the banter. Essentially, the joke had already been done.

Insults and provocative comments issued by one group about the other were not always made in each other's presence, nor were they always of a bantering, or ultimately gentle, nature. One hot afternoon while digging shallow trenches for new wall foundations, Sulayman Guindo let loose some of his pent-up frustration on the soil. Both the Dogon and Bambara people are noted for their agricultural expertise, and the masons conveniently relegated most of the backbreaking tasks to them, such as digging foundations, smoothing out lumps in the piles of soil, and mixing the mud mortar. Sulayman was weary of the masons' relentless demands, and his patience was further strained by the heat and blowing dust. He turned to me from his hunched position and said fiendishly "Ça c'est la tête d'un Bozo." He then proceeded to claw powerfully into the earth with the iron blade of his hoe.

Another Dogon laborer nearby laughed with appreciation. If there was any "cathartic" experience in all of this it wasn't acting on bad *nyama* in the other. Rather, it was directly associated with venting anger semi-privately to a sympathetic audience. This "hidden transcript" that expressed resistance to the figures of authority was not intended for the masons' ears, nor for those of the other Bozo on site.<sup>47</sup> If it had been public, this violent enactment, even though carried out on a metaphorical substitute, would have dangerously risked transgressing the tolerable limits of the alliance, which stipulated nonaggression and no spilling of blood. More directly, Sulayman might have also jeopardized his job. There were no Dogon masons in Djenne to whom he could appeal, and the transience of the Dogon Qur'anic students meant that their individual labor was easily replaceable.

There were, however, other ways in which their transient status worked in their favor. For example, the student-laborers regularly manipulated their status as scholars and supposedly versed Muslims to differentiate themselves from the Bozo (of whom many were illiterate and had attained only rudimentary religious education).<sup>48</sup> It was also important that they harbored no long-term objectives to remain within the trade. In fact, they considered the building profession to be beneath their dignity as up-and-coming religious scholars. They maintained that they bore the physical hardships for a short while so that they could earn a little money to pay their *marabout*-teachers.

Abdulahi Guindo, whom I encountered during my second season, was an extreme example. One morning while passing by the building site, he made his way to the rooftop where we were working and stood for a long time watching and making small talk in his limited Bambara. No one knew who he was; nor was it immediately apparent what he wanted. Predictably, no one questioned him directly, and the issue was left to unfold in its own due course. After half an hour or so, he removed his freshly pressed, buttoned shirt and, on his own accord, positioned himself at the end of the chain of laborers that conveyed materials to the masons.

Abdulahi was a wiry and energetic man in his mid-thirties, and like many other Dogon Qur'anic students he sought only short-term employment. But he was eager to demonstrate his strength and willingness to work. And his mildly over-rambunctious performance had to be quelled from time to time with subtle cues from the masons and the apprentice. More conspicuous was his nearly incessant rhythmic recitation of Qur'anic *suras* and the manner in which he punctuated his remarks and responses with religious expressions. Nearly every utterance began with "*b'ism Allah*" (in the name of God), and ended with "*in sha'Allah*" (God willing), or "*alhamdulillah*" (praise be to God). When the midday call to prayer was broadcast over the rooftops from the mosque, Abdulahi would immediately rub the excess mud from his hands and feet, perform ablutions with water from the supply kept in an old oil drum, and disappear below into one of the rooms of the house to pray. Not only did this behavior differentiate him from the masons and his fellow workers (most of whom, on this particular team, were permanent residents of Djenne and not Qur'anic students), but it also rendered him immune to the Bozo-Dogon bantering. He neither participated in, nor was subject to, the typical exchange of insults.

Abdulahi exercised the religious component of his identity to effectively transcend his ethnic Dogon-ness (and, by association, its myths of origin and traditional "African" cultural practices) and be recognized primarily as a member of the Islamic community. This was the community to which all members of the building team supposedly belonged, and one that was grounded (at least ideologically) in a conception of brotherly unity that exceeded ethnic, racial, national and economic boundaries. It would have been highly controversial for any of the men to challenge Abdulahi's carefully constructed presentation, and coerce his identity into the "traditional" Dogon mold by taunting him about Dogon non-Islamic practices and beliefs. Confronting exemplary Islamic conduct with such teasing would have been viewed as ignorant and uncharitable, and may have brought the builders' own affinity to the Faith into question. Abdulahi's case, therefore, presented the classic interethnic banter, and its function to simultaneously differentiate and unify, with an interesting obstacle. With the progressive Islamicization of the two populations, and their incorporation into a broader (global) community, this obstacle may become more perva-

sive and eventually erode the underlying ethnic premise of the Bozo-Dogon bantering relation.

A second temporary Dogon laborer who worked with this team cultivated a very different relation with his Bozo superiors. Belco was pompous, boisterous, and very strong. He was also a Qur'anic student in Djenne, but had acquired previous experience in the building trades as a migrant laborer in the Ivory Coast. He was quite exceptional among both the students and laborers for having not only one, but three wives and six children. By necessity, his wages were funding more than his studies. Belco regularly chided the other laborers for being single and living together in rooming arrangements, and he bragged constantly about his virile potency and the fact that he had a wife here in Djenne to cook his meals.

There was nothing remotely charitable about this demeanor, and the men soon began addressing him as "*kado*," an ethnically derogatory term for the Dogon taken from Fulfulde, the Fulani language.<sup>49</sup> This ambiguous term, which could be read as either an insult or a jocular term of endearment, was suitably employed by the other builders to express their dislike for Belco without being entirely candid about it.

The little familiarity he had with construction work sometimes made Belco cocky with the senior builders. At one stage, while one of the masons, Bamoi Sao, and an apprentice were plastering the interior walls of the house, Belco picked up the mason's trowel from where it had been set down and applied a splotch of plaster onto the wall. If this bold act had been executed by any other laborer, Bamoi would not have taken too much notice, but he was plainly irritated by Belco's lack of reverence for his tools (FIG. 11). A mason's tools were almost sacred, and new tools were presented to apprentices when they succeeded in various stages of his training. Bamoi cursed him firmly: "If you handle the masons' tools again without permission, your genitals will swell enormously!" At the same time Bamoi gestured with both hands at his crotch. I initially thought this might be a sought-after curse. Indeed, if larger genitals were an undesirable attribute, here perhaps I



FIGURE 11. Portrait of Bamoi Sao, a Bozo mason.

had stumbled upon some fascinating cross-cultural difference in male perceptions of their bodies. I soon understood, however, that the mason meant Belco would be struck with elephantiasis, a truly debilitating and potentially fatal disease. Clearly, this was not just banter; the mason was clearly threatening to exercise his power to punish.

As I have discussed elsewhere, Djenne's masons are alleged to possess the power of speech associated with *bai bibi* and *bai quaré* (traditional black African knowledge and white Islamic-based knowledge, respectively).<sup>50</sup> Their daily incantations, usually performed privately or at nearly inaudible levels on site, protected the building team from accidents and injuries, and guaranteed structural stability as well as prosperity and protection for those who would live there. Blessed grains and other artifacts including animal bones, stones, and amulets were buried at the base of foundations to ensure the integrity of the edifices they erected.

However, a mason's words could also be used destructively. Thus, powerful masons could put curses on those who interfered with their established patronage, "stole" commissions, or illicitly engaged in the trade. These curses might cause such debilitating injuries as cutting oneself on a shard of glass while hand-plastering a surface. Or they might trigger a structure to collapse. It was believed that even the simple greetings issued by the older, master masons as they passed one's work site concealed the possibility to bring down a wall. Consequently, small gifts of money ("*le prix de thé*") or kola nuts were frequently offered to them by junior masons in order to appease and counteract the power of their words.<sup>51</sup>

Though he was not a master mason, Bamoi Sao was regarded as a potent healer, and his capacity to mend was presumably equaled by that to contaminate. It was with this possibility that he threatened Belco. Unlike Abdulahi, whose future was unquestionably committed to a religious vocation, Belco posed a threat. He bullied the laborers, competed for attention with the apprentices, and took liberties with the masons' tools, and so he needed to be put in his place. By forbidding him to touch the tools, the narrow limits to which he was permitted to participate in this profession were fixed, and this boundary line was defended by a curse.

#### ETHNIC RELATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF THE *STYLE-SOUDANAISE*

By way of ethnographic examples, I have tried to demonstrate that the bantering relationship between Bozo and Dogon (considered a "joking relationship" by Radcliffe-Brown, and a "cathartic alliance" by Griaule), still thrives on the building construction sites in Djenne, where the majority of masons are Bozo and the labor corps comprises a diverse ethnic mix, including representation from both groups. More importantly, I have tried to confirm that this relationship is not simply about a reciprocal exchange of cathartic

services; nor is it in a structural relation of oppositions, with avoidance relationships, or underpinned by a deep-rooted hostility between these two ethnic groups. Though there are arguably real social and cultural “disjunctions” between Bozo and Dogon, it would be difficult to construct a convincing contemporary argument that they are in serious competition with one another for material or political resources — especially given their extreme geographical separation and their very different modes of life. Therefore, the idea that an alliance or friendship was formed that imposed a “conjunction” and necessitated tolerance is ill-conceived in this case.

It is true, however, that the Bozo and Dogon do recognize a special bond, that is illustrated in their myths, and that obligates them to exogamous relations and peaceful accord. From a more practical and functional standpoint, this alliance may be seen to have emerged not from a need to diffuse a latent hostility, but from common interests. As briefly described in this text, the histories of both groups have been riddled with invasions: by other West African populations, by the French, and by all the religions, ideas and technologies that have accompanied them. It may not be far-fetched to suggest that an alliance of “friendship” has offered a united protection against outside incursions, even if only in the form of an emotional and psychological defense that has shielded them against the erosion of their respective identities. This special relationship is publicly “performed,” not only so that it will be recognized by others, but in order to exclude the “Other” from it.

Additionally, it became apparent to me that the insult and banter introduce a playfully competitive element that effectively serves to individuate Bozo from Dogon, and vice versa, while the two are simultaneously engaged in an activity that unites them. Rules of exogamy merely reinforce this. It seems that, ultimately, Bozo-Dogon bantering may be a way of communicating a message that makes a combined claim to territory and identity: something along the lines of “We, the Bozo and the Dogon, belong here in the Niger Delta and along the Bandiagara Escarpment, but you, the ‘Other’, came after us.”

In relation to my field site examples, I have illustrated that the content of the insults and banter was neither rigid nor static, and the style of the exchange was not of a single genre. Rather, contextual factors on site (including professional hierarchy), as well as individual aspirations and emotions, shaped the form and content of the dialogue. As noted by Brennies in his study of “Language and Disputing”: “Language is not an epiphenomenal reflex of other relations; indeed it often creates and shapes those relations.”<sup>32</sup> The exchange of insults and banter must therefore be understood, at least partially, as a means of “dealing with something,” as well as manipulating outcomes, relations and identities.

In terms of content, the banter contained some themes from the time of Paulme and Griaule’s studies: for example, imputing hierarchy and claims over the “other” with the

employment of kinship metaphors; the use of obscenities, blasphemies, and animal categories; and attacks on myths of origin and other sacred institutions. However, on the building sites, attacks on salient issues such as intelligence, adeptness and masculinity were integrated in the jocular exchanges, as well as comments as to degrees of “blackness,” implications of adhering to “backward” traditions, and the questioning of one’s Islamic commitment and faith. In addition, the content of the banter, and the style of its delivery, clearly reflected, acted upon, and disseminated newly emerging ideas within Malian society. Such exchanges, Parkin suggested, “present opportunities to those who are creative enough to articulate such meanings into new combinations, and so, through what is culturally interpreted as licensed abuse, to defy the existing restraints.”<sup>33</sup> However, players must carefully navigate from a position as spectator to one of participant. The individual’s creativity is honed through practice, and the limits of abuse are negotiated online in response, and responding to, audience reception.

Bantering on construction sites could also bring underlying tensions to the surface. As illustrated by the examples, the bantering was not uniquely a competition of Bozo and Dogon identities, but encoded a stark hierarchical division of labor that was closely entwined with ethnic politics. Dogon builders could not move beyond the lowly status of laborers, and ambitions to do so were curtailed primarily with jests and ultimately with the threat of spells, all woven into the bantering discourse. Dogon laborers vented their frustrations with the (at times) oppressive work conditions, and they expressed resistance against the authority of the Bozo masons and apprentices through “backstage” commentaries made to non-Bozo audiences. Dogon (as well as other) Qur’anic students also capitalized on their religious training and literacy to mark a separation from (the majority of) their Bozo employers and to communicate disinterest in any long-term commitment to the profession. In an extreme case, one student’s fervent performance of his religious identity effectively omitted him from the traditional Bozo-Dogon relationship.

Bozo masons integrated the bantering as part of their own expert discourse. To an outsider it might have appeared that a certain degree of equality (as described by Griaule) was expressed in the bantering exchanges that set these occasions apart from the normal hierarchical relations on site. In fact, the senior Bozo builders reserved the last word for themselves, and regularly used their authority to draw things to a close. When trade-status boundaries were threatened, obscenities and blasphemies changed to curses. The Bozo’s hospitably offered employment to the Dogon, which enabled them to make a living and finance their studies and activities while resident in Djenne. But the Bozo also had a vested interest in keeping them off the higher rungs of their time-honored profession. Control over the reproduction of the town’s famous *style-Soudanaise* architecture constitutes an important form of cultural capital. And this issue has

become more poignant since UNESCO added Djenne to its prestigious roster of World Heritage Sites in 1988.

Containment of the profession within a fairly homogeneous socio-linguistic and ethnic community has arguably contributed to a degree of stability in the professional hierarchy, the format of the apprenticeship training, the execution of trade practices, and the reproduction of built forms over the last century.<sup>34</sup> The distinctive architectural expression of Djenne's monumental houses is evident in the earliest photographs taken of the town by Rousseau in 1893. It is clear from his documentation that many houses were of an already considerable age. Two of his photographs depict building activities that evoke comparisons with my own experiences on site in terms of the paucity of tools and the division of manual labor.<sup>35</sup>

The later adoption of Djenne's architectural style by colonial administrators resulted in its proliferation throughout the French Sudan. Likewise, the *style-Soudanaise* has become a salient issue in Mali's post-Independence discourse on national identity.

Bantering and other border-preserving strategies employed by the masons have enabled the Bozo to monopolize public associations between this cultural heritage and themselves as its principal agents of production. As mentioned earlier, however, the borders were brutally tested during the periods of drought and severe economic hardship in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time the *barey ton* (builders association) nearly disintegrated, while other ethnic groups not traditionally associated with the building trade worked their way in. Today the recurrence of such destabilizing conditions seems likely, and the ethnicity-based demographics of the trade may once again change.

The more pressing question is whether the guild-like structure of the trade organization, the status and prestige of its members, and the apprenticeship system (as the primary means for the transmission of specialized knowledge) will survive. Reports of drought and meager crops throughout the Sahel in early 2003, compounded by a massive return of Malian migrant laborers fleeing the political strife in the Ivory Coast, are exasperating an already weak economy. Economic uncertainty translates into diminished commissions for new

building works and repairs. Ultimately, repeated and lengthy periods of such conditions may threaten the maintenance and (re-) production of Djenne's *style-Soudanaise* mud architecture and put the political unity of the *barey ton* to the test.

Defending professional trade borders will arguably also remain crucial to the maintenance of group identities in this region, since vocational specialization has historically been an integral component of ethnic identity.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, bantering fulfils the dual, and seemingly contradictory function of wedging two groups apart while keeping them together. Thus, jocular expressions of competition and aggression have produced and reproduced the dividing lines between Bozo and Dogon, while the special status of the bantering relationship has defined a unity that excludes all others. Bantering, therefore, is not a straightforward "border-making language" in the sense of performatively bringing into being places (and identities) where commonality abruptly ends.<sup>37</sup> Bozo-Dogon bantering draws, and is enacted upon, ethnic and professional borders, while simultaneously creating spaces along those borders that accommodate communion between members of the two groups moderated by hospitality and tolerance (FIG. 12).



FIGURE 12. Masons and laborers perform ablutions at the edge of the Bani River before praying together at midday.

## NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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1. In her discussion of Djenne-Djeno's ancient trade history, Susan Keech McIntosh included stone as an imported commodity. See McIntosh, *Excavations at Jenné-Jeno, Hambarketelo, and Kaniana (Inland Niger Delta, Mali), the 1981 Season* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.391.

Stone for contemporary construction (used primarily for foundation footings) was imported mainly from quarry sites located in the direction of Dogon Country.

2. T. Marchand, *The Masons of Djenne* (forthcoming monograph).

3. During my last visit to Djenne in January

2003, it appeared that West Africa's Sahel region was being seriously affected by a new drought cycle. Following more than a decade of sufficient rains, 2002 recorded scant precipitation. Crop yields were low, and there was little to be fished from the Bani and Niger Rivers. People in Djenne complained of food scarcities, and the Dogon region appeared to be especially hard hit. It can be safely predicted that Mali's poor economic prospects will be further exacerbated by the return of the migrant labor population from the Ivory Coast, which was plunged into political turmoil at the end of 2002. The masons I spoke with reported a drop in Djenne's building activity this season, primarily blaming the dismal harvest for the equally dismal cash flow within the local economy. The continuation of this situation over the next few years could once again pose a serious threat to the existence of the masons organization and the conservation of Djenne's architectural heritage.

4. For example, in chronological order: H. Labouret, "La Parenté à Plaisanteries en Afrique Occidentale," *Africa*, Vol.2 No.3 (1929), pp.244–54; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, "Zande Blood-brotherhood," *Africa*, Vol.6 (1933), pp.369–401; D. Paulme, "Parenté à Plaisanteries et Alliance par le Sang en Afrique Occidentale," *Africa*, Vol.12 No.4 (1939), pp.433–44; F.J. Pedler, "Joking Relationship in East Africa," *Africa*, Vol.13 No.2 (1940), pp.170–73; A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, "On Joking Relationships," *Africa*, Vol.13 No.3 (1940), pp.195–210; M. Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique," *Africa*, Vol.18 (1948), pp.242–58; A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, "A Further Note on Joking Relationships," *Africa*, Vol.19 (1949) pp.133–40; J. Irvine, "Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting," in R. Bauman and J. Sherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp.167–89; J. Freedman, "Joking, Affinity and the Exchange of Ritual Services among the Kiga of Northern Rwanda: An Essay on Joking Relationship Theory," *Man*, Vol.12 No.1 (1977), pp.154–65; P. Stevens, "Bachama Joking Categories: Toward New Perspectives in the Study of Joking Relationships," *The Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol.34 (1978), pp.47–71; S. Drucker-Brown, "Joking

at Death: The Mamprusi Grandparent-Grandchild Joking Relationship," *Man*, Vol.17 No.4 (1982), pp.714–27; and S. Heald, "Joking and Avoidance, Hostility and Incest: An Essay on Gisu Moral Categories," *Man* (N.S.) Vol.25 No.3 (1990), pp.377–92.

5. See Radcliffe-Brown, "On Joking Relationships."  
6. See Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique."  
7. Because the Bozo have historically been nomadic fisherman, following shoals along the banks of the Bani and Niger Rivers in the Inland Niger Delta region, it is improbable that they would have been the original ethnic group engaged in, and controlling the masons trade. It would seem more likely that they progressively adopted this trade from another, sedentarized group which moved into the region. The building season does correspond with the winter months, when rains have ceased and low river levels expose the banks for the quarrying of mud and the production of bricks. It thus provides the Bozo with suitable employment outside the fishing season, when fish stocks move northward toward Lac Debo.

8. Phillips Stevens's investigation of Bachama joking categories in northeastern Nigeria also considers relations of "privileged familiarity" between ecologically determined groups, including those who reside along the riverbanks (*Ji-zane*) and those who reside inland (*Ji-bawe*). See Stevens, "Bachama Joking Categories."

9. I take note of Mary Douglas's differentiation between an obscenity and a joke in "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man* (N.S.), Vol.3 (1968), pp.371–72. Though I agree that labeling a gesture, action or remark "obscene" implies that it is "offensive," and that this may be cross-culturally problematic, I would nevertheless maintain that the nature of the insults exchanged between Bozo and Dogon are meant to shock and offend, and therefore "obscene" is an apt description. It is arguably this effect that continually, and productively, puts their nonviolent alliance to the test, and thereby reproduces and strengthens it.

10. See Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique"; and Paulme, "Parenté à Plaisanteries," pp.441–44.

11. Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique,"

pp.242–58.

12. In his study of the Bachama, Phillips Stevens makes a distinction between insult (*dasoto*) and banter (*ozoto*), whereby the nature and content of behavior and language in banter-type exchanges is not personally abusive. I would contend that the exchange between Bozo and Dogon contains both insults and banter, but, as the latter is a more pervasive trademark in the exchanges than the former, I am more inclined to qualify the relationship as "bantering" (whereby banter is defined as good-humored teasing). See Stevens, "Bachama Joking Categories."

13. Labouret, "La Parenté à Plaisanteries en Afrique Occidentale," p.244.

14. *Ibid.*, pp.252–53. Translation from the French: "the exchange of services and obligatory gifts, hence the existence is universally certified."

15. *Ibid.*, p.253. Translation from the French: "West African populations are bound to each other by a much stricter chain of reciprocities than we had customarily suspected."

16. Paulme, "Parenté à Plaisanteries et Alliance par le Sang en Afrique Occidentale," p.434.

17. *Ibid.*, pp.435–36.

18. *Ibid.*, p.441. See also D. Paulme, *Organisation Sociale des Dogons* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1940, 1988), pp.22–23.

During my field studies with the masons in Djenne, several Bozos told me nearly identical versions of this story, but with the roles of the ethnic groups reversed, so that a Bozo chief saved a Dogon child. Griaule also noted that the Bozo-Dogon identities may be reversed depending on the identity of the storyteller. See Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique," p.252.

19. Note that Evans-Pritchard's (1933) study of the Zande also demonstrated the coexistence of a blood-brotherhood form of alliance and a joking relationship. See Evans-Pritchard, "Zande Blood-brotherhood," pp.369–401. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown suggested "four modes of alliance or consociation, (1) through intermarriage, (2) by exchange of goods or services, (3) by blood-brotherhood or exchange of names or sacra, and (4) by the joking relationship," which he wrote "may exist separately or combined in several different ways." See Radcliffe-

Brown, "On Joking Relationships," p.208.

20. Paulme, "Parenté à Plaisanteries," pp.441–44.

21. See Pedler, "Joking Relationship in East Africa"; and Radcliffe-Brown, "On Joking Relationships."

22. Radcliffe-Brown, "On Joking Relationships," pp.195,197.

23. *Ibid.*, pp.197–98.

24. *Ibid.*, p.200.

25. Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique."

26. *Ibid.*, p.242. Translation from the French: "A bell rings for the salvo of guns at a funeral and for weddings. Yet it does not occur to anyone to claim that funerals and weddings are connected in a series [of rituals] called 'bell ceremonies'."

27. My translation from the French of various passages contained in Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique," pp.249–52.

28. *Ibid.*, p.253. Translation from the French: "When an ally insults his partner, it is as if he wants to reclaim that part of himself that is in the other. It is like a battle of words in which each attempts to reclaim his own."

29. *Ibid.*, p.254.

30. Radcliffe-Brown, "A Further Note on Joking Relationships," pp.138–139.

31. J. Howe and J. Sherzer, "Friend Hairyfish and Friend Rattlesnake or Keeping Anthropologists in their Place," *Man* (N.S.), Vol. 21 No.4 (1986), p.691.

32. See Stevens, "Bachama Joking Categories."

33. Heald, "Joking and Avoidance, Hostility and Incest," p.384.

34. For example, see discussions about *nyama* in Mande societies in S.C. Brett-Smith, *The Making of Bamana Sculpture: Creativity and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); P.J. Imperato, "Bamana and Maninka Twin Figures," *African Arts*, Vol.8 No.4 (1975), pp.52–60; R.J. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger: the Island of Gold* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp.27–28; P. McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmith: Knowledge, Power and Art in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and C. Monteil, *Une Cité Soudanaise, Djénné: Métropole du Delta Central du Niger* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1932, 1971), pp.29–30.

35. For example, Jan Jansen, noted that several contemporary (European) scholars

working in the Mande region have critically questioned the importance of *nyama* that has been perpetrated (by mainly American scholars). See Jansen, *Les Secrets du Manding* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2002), p.30, fn.40.

36. W.E.A. van Beek, "Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule," *Current Anthropology*, Vol.32 No.2 (1991), p.148. "Dieu d'Eau: entretiens avec Ogotemméli" is from Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique"; "Le Renard Pâle" is from M. Griaule and G. Dieterlin, 1965.

37. Van Beek, "Dogon Restudied," p.151. A few pages later (p.153) van Beek suggested that Griaule's concept of *nyama* as being some sort of vital force was part of his French anthropological baggage, influenced heavily by Mauss's discussions of *mana*.

38. Note that Arabs, associated with the coming of Islam to West Africa, are considered "white," and Caucasian Westerners, or *toubabs*, are perceived as "red."

39. C. Monteil, *Une Cité Soudanaise, Djénné*, p.125. Translation from the French: "a timid people who typically only know about fishing: in everything else they appear to be clumsy and stupid. They are also pacifists and have a resigned nature: all tyrannies, all calamities seem to leave the Bozo indifferent. Fishing, they think, suffices for everything."

40. French is the official language of Mali, and Bambara is the *lingua franca* of business and administration in the country. Griaule noted that Fulfulde (the Fulani language) was used as the *lingua franca* between Dogon and Bozo where he conducted fieldwork. See Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique," p.246. It remains an important language for interethnic communication throughout the Inland Niger Delta region.

41. E. Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," in P. Maranda, ed., *Mythology: Selected Readings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p.42.

42. Griaule, "L'Alliance Cathartique," pp.246–47. Also note the similarity in the content of the insults expressed here with those exchanged between by the Bachama *Ji-zane* (people of the river banks) and *Ji-bawe* (people of the bush) studied by Stevens, "Bachama Joking Categories," p.63.

43. This is similar to the kin-like hierarchy

echoed in the joking relationship between the Diop and Ndiaye families described by Judith Irvine, whereby the Diops are supposedly the mothers of the Ndiayes. Wolof informants claim, however, that what is really going on in the exchange of insults is that each person is claiming "It is I who own him"; or "I am the master and the other is my slave." See Irvine, "Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting," p.181.

44. Translation from the French: "a blackman's mind," and "an African mentality," respectively.

45. Historically, Islam and so-called traditional African knowledge have been tightly interwoven, but, as in the rest of the country (and throughout West Africa more generally), this symbiotic relation has coexisted with a vocal current of religious conservatism and imagined orthodoxy within the religious discourse. Many *marabouts* continue to be prominent suppliers of protective amulets and incantations that blend Islam and animism, while other religious leaders and Muslim spokespersons denounce such practices as pagan.

46. Translation from the French: "Dogon faces," and "It's a Bozo's head," respectively.

47. J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

48. There were notable exceptions to this rule, and some Bozo masons closely integrated Qur'anic verses into the oral incantations and written amulets that they produced to protect their building works.

49. It is said that long ago a group of Fulani came across a group of Dogon. The Dogon could not make themselves understood, nor did they understand Fulfulde (which is widely spoken across West Africa because of the enormous geographic spread of the pastoral Fulani). The Fulani became frustrated with these stubborn people and proclaimed that "Les Dogons sont méchants comme le potasse" (The Dogon are nasty like potash). The Fulfulde word for potash is "*kad*," which was transformed into "*kado*" to refer to the Dogon. The reason that potash might be considered "nasty" is that it is very acidic and bitter to the tongue. It is interesting that the Dogon add potash to their staple dish, *Tō* (considered to be a notoriously bad-tasting meal by other ethnic groups).



50. T. Marchand, "Process Over Product: Inverting the Emphasis in Sustainable Conservation with Reference to Case Studies of Traditional Building Practices in Djenne, Mali, and San'a', Yemen," in *Managing Change: Sustainable Approaches to the Conservation of the Built Environment* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, forthcoming); and "Transforming Sweat Into Status: Becoming a Master Mason in Djenne," in R. Bedaux, P. Maas, and B. Diaby, eds., volume *Djenne* (forthcoming).
51. The Mande tradition of "splashing" the *griot* (or *jeli*) with money while they praise one's lineage in song has analogous effects.
52. D. Brennies, "Language and Disputing," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 17 (1988), p.229.
53. D. Parkin, "The Creativity of Abuse," *Man* (N.S.), Vol.15 No.1 (1980) p.57.
54. See G. Mommersteeg and P. Maas, "La Ville de Djenné autour de 1900," in B. Gardi, P. Maas, and G. Mommersteeg, eds., *Djenné, il y a cent ans* (Eindhoven: Lecturis, 1995), pp.36–37.
55. See "L'album d'Albert Rousseau," in Gardi, Maas, and Mommersteeg, eds., *Djenné, il y a cent ans*, pp.49–94. See especially photos 5 and 10 depicting building activity.
56. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger*, p.105.
57. B. Urciuoli, "Language and Borders," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), pp.525–46.

All photos are by the author.

