

ETIOLOGICAL LEGENDS BASED ON
FOLK ETYMOLOGIES OF
MANDING SURNAMES¹

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Folk etymology is one of the most popular and widespread forms of folklore to be found amongst the Bamana and Mandenka² peoples, who live in the Republic of Mali in West Africa. Folk etymologies are also very often coupled with another form of folklore, the etiological legend. Thus coupled, these genres come in a variety of forms. They may be non-narrative explanations of folk etymologies, or polished stories; they may occur by themselves and in prose; or they may be buried inside an epic being recited in poetic language. The subject matter dealt with by this pairing of genres includes such varied things as the explanation of the origin of the names of towns and villages,³ the names of streams, rivers, and lakes, the names of geographical areas, and--the major focus of this essay--the surnames of clan families.

The popularity of these coupled genres may be illustrated with an example, which may then be used to demonstrate several points. The origin of the surname Kulubali (or Kulubali), according to one variant legend, is said to be with the king of the realm of Karta, a Bamana kingdom which existed from the 16th through the 19th centuries. The raconteur may not have known the king's actual name, for he called him simply mansa, which means 'king/lord/master.' Mansa's younger brother was said to be the king of Segu--actually a rival Bamana kingdom, which existed at the same time as Karta. One day, as the story goes, Mansa expressed his wish to go visit his younger brother, but, because he was having a feud with the fishermen clans (called Sòmòò),⁴ he was refused the use of their boats to help him cross the Niger River. Mansa had abducted a Sòmòò woman without paying the customary brideprice for her. The refusal of the boats did not stop Mansa, and he sacrificed a black cock and two red kola nuts to the great catfish of the Niger. The catfish called up a hippopotamus, upon whose back Mansa crossed the river. The Sòmòò bards (called jeli in Bamana/Mandenka, but better known among foreigners by their French designation griot) sang praises to their enemy, who had greatly impressed them with his knowledge of the occult. They gave him three praise names:⁵ ji-tigi, 'master-/owner-of-the-waters,' mogo-tigi, 'master-of-people' (this praise name is commonly used with other men as well), and kurun-bali, '[the one-who-crossed-the-river-]without-a-boat.' Kurun-bali is thus said to be the original form of Kulubali and was taken for the new clan family's surname, while catfish and/or hippopotamus meat became their tabu food.

This combination of folk etymology and etiological legend is the

domain of the general public in Mali, whether actively carried on by being passed from person to person (as father to son, or whatever) or passively carried in people's memories. As we saw earlier, however, they are very often recited by professional bards as well-polished and (for the folklorist) "typeable" narratives. The actual explanation of the folk etymology in these well-polished narratives comes at the end of the story, as does the punch line in a jocular tale, as we saw in the Kulubali legend above.

Turning to form, the explanation of the various hypothetical particles in a surname is not restricted by either segmental, suprasegmental, or even grammatical rules for the spoken language. Moreover, the meanings of the various parts of a word being defined are fairly liberally explained. In essence, semantic extensions are highly permissible, much more so than in everyday speech.

Let us take the case of suprasegmentals first. There exists in Bamana/Mandenka the linguistic phenomenon of tone, and there are two tones and three off-glides. It is important to note that in both the historical development of this language and in its dialectical spread, the single most conservative element in its change is tone. In spite of this fact, the tone of a word never appears to restrict the explanation of a hypothetical particle in a folk etymology. In the example cited above, the tones in the surname Kulubali do not match those of the words for 'boat,' kurun, and 'without,' bali. Incidentally, the tone rules for proper names (and loan words) are specified sometimes by syllable, rather than by morpheme and combinations of morphemes, as in the regular grammar. The tones for Kulubali are low-high-low-low, while both kurun and bali are high tone words.

In the case of segmentals, phonemes are often changed between the form of the surname and its "folk explanation." Again using the surname Kulubali as our example, kurun, 'boat,' (with an /r/ and a nasalized vowel in final position) becomes kulu (with an /l/ and a non-nasalized vowel). On the other hand, these sound differences occur most often along predictable paths and final nasalization is frequently lost in the spoken language. Furthermore, /r/ and /l/ often alternate across dialect boundaries.

The same surname can be used to illustrate how the grammatical rules of the spoken language are relaxed in folk etymologies. Bali, 'without,' is a suffix normally added to verbs. In this case, it is being added to the noun kurun, 'boat.' The particle ntan with the same meaning, is the suffix added to nouns, and is what one would expect from the rules of the grammar. Kuluntan would be the proper form, but this discrepancy does not deter the apparent need in Mali to find "logical explanations" for the

origins of things, no matter how far the rules must be stretched in order to do so.

In other instances, explanations go even further afield. For example, the word Bamana itself is explained in one variant folk etymology as meaning 'those who refused/rejected the Lord'; i.e., 'pagan.' This folk etymology is described as being derived from the words ban, 'to reject/refuse'; man, with -sa added to make mansa, 'lord/king/master'; and na, a rather vague suffix, but which is explained as being a postposition. Ban-mansa-na is then said to contract to Bamana. In the same variant, Mandenka is said to mean 'the children of the Lord'; i.e., 'Moslems.' Here, the raconteur again added -sa to man to get mansa, 'lord/king/master,' and then added this to den, meaning 'child/offspring/fruit,' etc. The -ka is an actual grammatical suffix meaning 'person/citizen of,' and was so explained in the folk etymology as well. Mansa-den-ka, we are told, contracts to Mandenka. The word Bamana, incidentally, is sometimes used in parts of Mali to mean 'pagan' and, in this context, does not designate the ethnic group. The legend, then, states that the Bamana split off from the Mandenka and became a separate ethnic group when Islam came to Mali. In actual fact, there are both Moslem and non-Moslem Bamana in modern Mali, and the same is true for the Mandenka.

Finally, a variant explaining the origin of the surname Tarawere (or Tarawele) will illustrate the extent to which a raconteur will go with semantic extension. This variant states that the surname originated with Tira Nagan, the great general in Sun Jata's army. It was Sun Jata Keyita who established the Malian Empire of the 12th century. Tira Nagan is remembered in legend for conquering the Gambia for his master, thus doubling the size of the empire. The raconteur stated that Tira Nagan became involved in any quarrel within his hearing range, whether or not it concerned him. When asked why he "stuck his nose into other people's business," he would reply, "N' taara wele," "'I was summoned to come.'" The raconteur then went on to explain that this meant that the sound of a quarrel would summon him to come forth. N'taara wele, however, means something like 'I went to be summoned.' It may even be ungrammatical in Bamana and would probably be N' taara, k'a wele. Conversely, 'I was summoned to come' would probably be something like N' welela N' ka na.

To sum up about form, we might add that the grammatical and semantic extensions allowed in explaining these folk etymologies permit a host of variants to occur for the same surname. For instance, in another variant, the surname Tarawere is said to have originated with another ancestor, Adulayi (or Adulayi; abd-al-laahi in Arabic) Tarawere, who was the son of Fusani (Husayn), one of the Prophet Muhammad's twin grandsons. Adulayi

is said to have had two pairs of eyes, one in the front of his head and one in the back. Ta ra wa ra is claimed to be Arabic for 'he sees and sees.' Actually, this explanation is closer to meaning 'she sees and sees' in Classical Arabic, which would be tara wa tara. 'He sees and sees' would be yara wa yara.

A third variant explaining the origin of this surname goes as follows. There was once an orphan living in a village, and he decided to go into the bush one day. A cultivator, in the meantime, had set fire to that particular place in order to clear land for planting, and the bush burned down completely. The boy, however, emerged unharmed, and when the farmer saw him come forth, he said, "Mun y'i nyè wulen?", "'What made your eyes red?'" The boy replied, "Ta y'a lawulen!", "'The fire made them red!'" From the words for 'fire,' ta, and 'to be made red,' lawulen, then, the surname Tarawere is said to have been derived.

Turning to some of the many uses and functions of these paired genres, students of West African folklore will already know that some professional bards make their entire living by the recitation of folklore forms. In the past, caste griots were often attached to royal clan families who supported them fully, and it was the griots who kept the "family history" of these clans. Although these family histories are still kept, the present-day governing and economic systems of Mali have rendered this patron-protege system obsolete, and griots often depend upon other means of livelihood, such as farming, to augment their incomes. Moreover, they sometimes specialize in more than one family history, and those histories have often become "miniaturized" into the paired genres we are discussing here. To complicate matters, griots often accuse other griots of "inventing" etiological legends based on "false" etymologies merely in order to please their patrons so as to receive remuneration for their "fakelore."

We know of one case, related by the official poet laureate of Mali, Jeli Ba Sumana Sisòkò, where a wealthy merchant from the city of Segu came to Bamakò, the present capital, on business. There, a griot approached him one evening and recited to him an etiological legend concerning the origin of the merchant's family. This greatly pleased the merchant and caused him--as one might expect--to be very generous with the griot. Upon returning to Segu, the merchant summoned what Ba Sumana referred to as "honest" griots and asked them to tell him more of his family history. These griots explained that he had merely been tricked for his money, and that he was actually the descendent of a slave, freed during the 19th century. While credence must be considered a characteristic of these coupled forms, credibility is often questioned by griot and non-griot alike.

The panegyric use of these coupled forms is augmented by a pejorative use as well. Griots are known to vent their anger on their enemies, or simply on anyone who has displeased them. They are one of the very few groups in Mali who have the social license to express verbal displeasure in public without employing euphemisms and without being considered ill-mannered, and even then they risk having revenge taken on them.

To cite an example of a pejorative legend, the Dabò surname in Mali is borne by a clan family, which is sometimes a blacksmith clan. When acting as blacksmiths, the Dabò's are casted in most parts of Mali. Buried in a variant of the Sun Jata epic, we found the following etiological legend, quoted here in its full, linear translation:

The great man (that is Sun Jata) rose up and went to the home of the ancestor of the Dabò blacksmith clan. He (the Dabò) was boiling [occult] medicine. The ancestor of the Dabò clan said: "O Wizard (again, Sun Jata), let us play a game of brave men for a little [while]." (which was wrestling). He caused the Wizard to kneel, [and rest] on his right arm. (Note that it is a great disgrace for a non-casted man to be thrown by a casted man. Note also that the griot reciting this variant does not permit the Dabò to completely throw Sun Jata, the greatest of all heroes.) The ancestor of the Tarawere clan, Tira Magan and Kanke-jan said: (This is a double praise name for Tira Magan.) "Let us stop following Sun Jata. The person who is thrown by a Dabò: If we do not stop following him, When we go to the Manden (Mali of old), Sumamuru will finish [all our] people!" (Sumamuru was Sun Jata's chief adversary.) As a result, Sun Jata became angry, And put his foot on the heel of the grandfather of the Dabò's, and pulled on him, And pulled off his head! They said: "A d'a bo!" ('He pulled it off!') That became the [praise] song of the Dabò clan family.

The phrase a di a bô, here contracted to a d'a bô, (in Mandenka), is explained as the basis of this folk etymology, and the surname Dabò is claimed to have been derived from it.

The above examples illustrate two uses of these paired genres, praising and cursing a clan, the former for economic gain (among other reasons) and the latter for a host of reasons, among them revenge. Another more subtle use may also be illustrated.

In our opinion, one of the major functions of folklore in general is to define group boundaries. The term etiology itself implies an important function, that of helping to explain the WHO AM I question, which has probably been with mankind since he emerged from his primitive stages, some now say as many as eight million years ago. Whereas the religious legend (or myth) of Adam and Eve (for the Moslems), and that of the descent of the Bula families on a chain from heaven (for many of the traditionalists) help to answer the question of the absolute origin of mankind for most Bamana/Mandenka peoples, as clan family groups, the paired genres under discussion help to answer the WHO AM I question for later generations.

To cite an example, the casted griot clan family Jabatè are said to be an off-branch of the Tarawere clan family, and we have collected from at least one Jabatè griot who used the traditional praise names of the Taraweres for his own. The identical origin and later splitting off is explained by another legend buried inside a variant of the epic of Sun Jata, summarized below:

Sun Jata's mother is said to have descended from a great sorceress from the ancient land of Do (or Du). Upon becoming angry with her nephew the king, this sorceress began to ravage the land and destroy the populace. The queen of Do was from the Manden (Mali of old), and she summoned her two brothers who were hunters to come forth and rid the land of this sorceress, who appeared in the form of a tornado and of a buffalo with golden horns, silver ears, and golden and silver hooves and tail. These Tarawere brothers came and overpowered the sorceress through occult means and with the sorceress's own help. Naturally, they also had the help of predestination. Eventually they chose the king's ugliest daughter as their reward--they had been directed to do so by a diviner, or by a grateful dog which they had fed (depending on the variant)--and this ugly woman, who became Sun Jata's mother, is traded to Sun Jata's father for another woman, who is sometimes said to be the mother of Tira Magan.

Now, the younger Tarawere brother was the brave one, while the elder was a gentle man. The younger overpowered and killed the buffalo-woman, and the elder, who had fled up a tree, sang a long praise poem to his younger brother when the deed was finished. The younger brother then replied to the elder:

"Aa, N' kòrò,

E mana kè jeli ye, jè-baga tè sòr'i la."

"Ah, my elder,

If you became a griot, one who would refuse you

[gifts] could not be found."

Jè-baga tè is said to be the basis of the surname Jabagatè (in Mandenka) and Jabaatè (in Bamana), and the two brothers become the fathers of two great men: the younger of Tira Magan, and the elder of Kala-jan Sangoyi Jabaatè, the griot who is reported in this tradition to have originated the epic of Sun Jata. The recitation of this legend, then, ties the Jabaatè and the Tara-were clan families together socially by expressing the belief in their common origins. Legend after legend in Mali, and not all of them based on folk etymologies, function in this way. Indeed, other types of social relationships which exist in Mali today are often "explained" by legend.

While other uses and functions yet unexplored must exist for these paired genres, these examples will give some idea of their occurrence in Mali.

In conclusion, it might be said that the coupling of these two genres (and tripling, as in the case of their occurrence inside an epic poem) is very common in Mali. Folk etymologies with etiological legends play a vital role (or roles) in the lives of the Bamana and Mandenka peoples in Mali and are but one example of the many forms of folklore which are alive and well in this fascinating and very old culture in West Africa.

NOTES

1. This essay was delivered as a paper at the 1975 American Folklore Society annual convention in New Orleans. Research was carried out in the Republic of Mali from October 1973 through February 1975, and was sponsored as a Foreign Area Fellowship by the Social Science Research Council. I should like to express my gratitude to the S.S.R.C. and also to M. Mamadu Sarr and the entire staff of the Institut des Sciences Humaines du Mali, which gave me much assistance in my work. The content of this essay is my own responsibility, however, and any error occurring in it is mine alone.
2. Tone marks used in this essay follow the system employed in the language materials used for teaching Bamana at Indiana University. Except for some surnames and loanwords in Bamana which may vary from syllable to syllable (for example, the surname Kulubali), the tone of a word in Bamana/Mandenka is usually uniform for the entire word. Certain grammatical rules will alter tone, particularly in the final syllable, but a detailed description of tone rules is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say here that high-tone words are left unmarked, while low-tone words are marked by underlining only the first vowel in the word (for example,

sigilan, 'chair'). For a complete explanation of the official, national transcription, which is used throughout this essay, see the government publication Lexique Bambara à l'usage des centres d'alphabétisation (Bamako, Ministère de l'Education Nationale: Education de Base, 1968) pp. 33.

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3. See, for example, Dominique [Koulouba] Traore's two articles on the origin of the name and site of the present capital of Mali, Bamako: "Sur l'origine de la ville de Bamako," Notes Africaines 35 (Dakar: Institut Francais de l'Afrique Noire, 1947): 26-27; and "Une seconde légend relative a l'origin de la ville de Bamako," Notes Africaines 40(1948):7-8.
4. For a short explanation of the term Sòmòò, which is a clan grouping and not a surname, see: Bokar N'Diaye, "Les Bozo et les Somono" in his Les Castes au Mali (Bamako: Editions Populaires, 1970) pp. 59-65.
5. Pattern numbers are used often and consistently in Bamana/Mandenka folklore. One griot used only three-patterns for men and masculine affairs, and four-patterns for women and feminine affairs. After questioning several Malians acquainted with their own folklore, I was told that this number patterning is very common.
6. A postposition in Bamana/Mandenka is essentially the same as a preposition in English, except for its syntactic placement. It comes after, rather than before, its object.