



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

# A CASE STUDY OF BAMBARA CHILDREN, BUGULA, SOUTHERN MALI

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## *Introduction*

To set the stage, there are some basic indicators. Mali is a developing land-locked country in West Africa. In size, it is 1,246,000 square kilometers. The population of 9,000,000 is concentrated primarily in the central, southern, and western parts of the country. Ethnic, regional and economic diversity make Mali a land of many cultures. For example, the Sahara desert, which is located in the northern part, hosts diverse nomadic populations of Touaregs, Moors, and Arabs. As a consequence, intelligence and far-sighted policy making are required, at best, to bridge the gaps, which may result from such a complex social context.

Mali was colonized by France. Long before the French domination Arabs settled in the North and imported the Islamic religion. Today, Muslims constitute the majority of the population. However, there is a relatively peaceful coexistence between followers of the main religions. Recently the different religious leaders helped to bring to an end the conflict created by student

opposition to the government. Within Mali, there is also the concept of “cousinage”, which refers to the sharing of power. Confrontation is not the mode of operating; instead conflicts are mediated.

In terms of the economy, Mali is one of the poorest countries of the world. Cotton is a major crop, cattle raising is important, and the extent of gold deposits is being explored. Today, per capita income is \$310/year.

After independence in 1960, a socialist regime came into power. A nationalistic approach to development brought about changes in the social, economic and political sectors. In 1968 a military coup took place, and the military governed with a strong hand until 1991. A revolution, provoked by a popular uprising led by dissatisfied workers, students and political opponents ushered in an era of democratic changes. The present government is moving along these lines.

The social sector, which is characterized by a poor educational system, low health coverage, and growing poverty in the rural and urban areas, is undergoing important changes. Decentralization, access to education and health facilities, and mass awareness are part of the present-day political discourse and social expectations.

Girls' early education is of utmost importance in both modern and traditional African societies. The reason for this in sub-Saharan countries, for instance, is that women are considered to be a very industrious group, and they have extraordinary duties. At the same time they have very limited rights. They also have limited access to formal educational opportunities. The challenge is to bridge the gap between boys and girls by using culturally-based strategies relevant to the achievement of equity.

The Bambara society is very traditional. It views early childhood as an essential life stage. During the child's early years both men and women, with minute precision, socialize children according to customary roles. This study was an attempt to understand more about that process. The questions asked included: What is meant by gender? How do national communities view it? Do strategies aiming to increase girls' access to school stem from a genuinely felt need for gender equity, or follow the path of feminism à la mode? What are the strategies which may mobilize social forces in Mali? How do you help establish a dialogue which caters to men and women acting as complementary partners? Can early childhood be a good starting point? How can this dialogue be brought about? Why do male and female Bambara children do what they do at a given age? Have they always done so? What is being done differently? Who cares if things are or are not done the way they are usually done? When do siblings begin to be conscious of their status as girls or boys? How much pressure does the community exert on children to adopt gender-appropriate behavior? The data gleaned from this study will be used to facilitate and support learning activities for all Bambara children, girls and boys alike.

These questions were addressed by and with the community. The village chosen, Bugala, is in the District of Kolondieba, Southern Mali. In this district Save the Children USA (SCF) supports a multi-sectoral development programme.

The village chosen is a large community with a population of 1,436 people. Females outnumber males (53% to 47%); children under 13 make up nearly half the population. The main occupation is agriculture: millet, corn, and cotton farming.

Life within the village is organized by age groups. Those who are older take care of those who come after. At each level, people are expected to be the teachers for those who are young. They are responsible for teaching them “sense”. All basic knowledge is transmitted through this education system. Those who are older can also always ask young people to run errands and do things for them. The Imam (religious leader) provides religious education for the men only. Women in this community do not attend Koranic schools. But women are a powerful force. Some say that the wife of the Chief is the real Chief.

The basic social structure is the extended family, some of them have as many as 100 people. The Heads of families are all included among the Elders. Men are allowed to have four wives, but they are responsible for providing the wife with shelter, protection, good health, and food. The man also provides the wife with her own house.

One of the woman's responsibilities has to do with the provision of food. She is responsible for feeding her family. When food is abundant, all share the food. Senior men share with children; senior women share with young girls; women working together eat together. In times of scarcity, the woman is more protective of her food and feeds only her own family. All the wives, however, are responsible for feeding the husband. Thus even in times of scarcity, the husband does well.

Power among the Bambara comes from access to the land. Land is owned by the Head of the Family. He can grant women access to the land; this is done based on their ability to meet their obligations. A woman can even be given land by someone outside her family, if this is agreed upon by the Elders. People work on the land five days a week. Traditionally, Mondays and Fridays are days you do not cultivate. Fridays belong to the individual; he/she does not have to work for the Head of the family. A person can work on his or her land, or go to town, or simply sit and drink tea.

## *Gender Development*

The general question addressed here was: What do we know about our children? It was decided during assembly that the cycle of childhood should be discussed. What happens before birth and at birth? What are the childrearing practices between birth and one year of age, at the age of one year and beyond? How and when are groups of children formed?

### *What Happens Before a Child is Born?*

This question was asked of all the groups separately. The answers can be summed up as follows. Many persons, men and women, maintain that there are no special functions or rites to be performed in order to give birth to male children. Based on religious beliefs, all children are

valued. As stated, "A child is a gift; no one has to choose." "When a child comes, it must be accepted: male and female alike."

The Bambara of Bugula, as well as the others from the Kolondieba region, are animists. They consult the oracles to predict their future. By so doing, many a man tries to know whether he will have numerous male progeny. Men will question the oracle to know whether their pregnant woman will bear the child safely, and what it will be, male or female.

"Wise men" may know and reveal the information during a *consultation* in the shrine of the komo. The owner of the komo—the *komotigi* (a member of the *tontigi*—sacred society) owner of fetishes, unbeliever (in that he is not a Muslim)—tells the future in many ways: from his innermost *introspection* or from the *cowries* or other specific symbols, such as water. There are only a few *komotigi* in the village. They will "read" from various signs and suggest what the coming child will be: male or female. The *komotigi* generally does not allow himself to be interviewed. While there are no women who are *komotigis*, there are women healers.

Many youths stated that traditional medicines (herbs, roots) are used to facilitate the birth of a male child. There are many *domaa*: knowledgeable persons in the nearby villages who, it is believed, can intervene and facilitate the coming of a male child. The young women reported that bathing in the extract or infusion of certain vegetation is likely to help. Many other people resort to prayers.

Despite such practices, opinion varied as to whether or not there was a preference for a male or female child. Some people claimed to be indifferent, the reason being that males and females complete one another. "A child equals a child." There was also an expression of resignation. "What God sends us must be accepted."

In sum, opinion varies from person to person and from household to household as to whether or not males and females are preferred. In terms of what people say, it is not clear whether the villagers prefer male children to female ones. What is clear is that a family will not be satisfied with only male children, nor only with female ones; a mixture (boys and girls) is considered better. However, more boys is considered a special blessing.

### ***When a Child is Born***

While many people stated that they had no preference, or that girls were preferred, the actual activities that take place upon the birth of a boy or girl suggest that males are clearly the preferred child.

When a baby boy is born, the father may kill a fowl every day before the naming ceremony, which happens on the seventh day. Another practice is to reward the midwife when she brings the news. On the other hand, when a baby girl is born, the father may kill just one fowl, and perhaps, express dissatisfaction. "It's good; it would have been better if it were a boy." "A home may end without the birth of male children."

Men are not allowed to see the birth. It is not acceptable to be too excited about the birth. Theoretically, the man learns about the birth only when the baby is presented to the Head of the family. Men cater to women following the birth. They do not approach the mother for four months if the baby is a girl and for three months if the baby is a boy. (This is in line with the fact that the number 4 is the girl's number, and the number 3 is the boy's number.)

## *Child Care from 0B1 Year of Age*

Some of the questions asked in relation to child care were: What do we know about our toddlers? What do they do? What do we do with them? Similar questions had already been asked in a similar context in five villages further south.

The data generated in this study revealed that the Bambara pay attention to and watch their children's growth. They are interested in concrete stages, that is, observable signs of the child's growth. The following stages of a child's growth were identified by mothers, fathers and caregivers as typical:

- holding the head straight on the neck;
- smiling at people;
- being able to sit without any support;
- grasping things tightly.

According to the Bambara, these signs of growth appear at different times according to the health status and the gender of the child. It is generally believed that boys should sit at three months of age; girls should be able to sit by four months of age. The group consisting of family Heads stated that sitting is actually achieved at seven or eight months of age.

What is unique about the Bambara culture is that the Bambara believe it is important to be actively involved in promoting the development of children's physical skills. The development of motor skills is encouraged through a variety of activities, medicines, and talismans. For example, to help children develop the ability to sit, they may be placed in a large container—a calabash or basin that helps stabilize the child, or clothes can be made into a 'nest' to prevent the baby from falling. Another strategy is for an older child to sit and use his lap to hold the baby. The older child's arms are put around the baby to prevent it from toppling forward, and the child's body prevents the baby from falling backward.

The one physical milestone that children are not taught deliberately is crawling. This is thought to be a skill which comes naturally without any physical or material assistance.

Several devices may be used to help the child walk. Babysitters usually help by "appealing, tempting, or motivating" the baby. To make the child walk, one usually attracts his attention and invites the baby to stand and move, or extends one's arms toward the baby, or offers the child an object he/she wants. Often, a four-wheel traditional cart is given to the child. Boys, or even carpenters, fashion them. The mother, older siblings and other relatives use these motivational devices until the child is tired.

Medicines and talismanic devices are used to protect the child from harm and to encourage what is perceived to be appropriate development. Natural elements are used as symbols of magical representations. Thorny vegetation, for instance, is used in baths to accelerate skills acquisition.

In addition, special baths are prepared from herbs and leaves as protection against various dangers and to heal wounds. A *tafo*, a cotton thread, is folded in three for boys and folded in four for girls and used as a protective device. Children are washed with herbs to keep them less fearful; fear is seen as an impediment to walking.

When expected development is late or does not come, the causes are sought through consultation and the remedy applied. Children are discouraged from doing things earlier than their age mates. Walking before the age of seven months is discouraged as is talking before one year of age. When children 'stand out' in some way, the phrase is, 'the goats are parted.'

All the groups agree that learning is spontaneous. According to the groups of women, "It is God's work if the child can learn." Learning occurs through imitation. The child imitates actions and language, word by word, expression after expression, and complete sentences are uttered.

Two principal supports play an essential role in the child's learning process: the mother and the babysitter: *denminena*. They are the language "monitors" who make sure that the child speaks at the right moment, not before and not later than expected.

When a child speaks earlier than expected, it is usually discouraged. "We do not accept such situations. We have the child absorb a traditional beverage called *kono nin nin*." Then, the child will wait till the normal time comes to talk."

Special treatments are reserved for children who do not talk when their age mates have done so. When a child is "behind" the period of talking, according to the group of senior women, "the nest of a bird called *n'ko* is rubbed on the child's mouth." *Nko* is a talking bird.

Attending the child is too demanding for one person, especially when the child starts walking. While the mother is occupied at different duties, an older child watches over the toddler.

Girls from age four to twelve care for younger children. They organize their games, play, and feed them. However, supervision is needed when the mother is away in the fields. Senior women usually help at these times.

Breastfeeding is generally practiced. According to the mothers, breastfeeding lasts from 10 to 30 months. The last born child is likely to be breastfed longer than his/her siblings. The actual length of time the child is breastfed is a function of the sex of the child and the rank of the children's family. But there are no hard and fast rules. In essence, the length of time a baby is breast fed seems to be left to every mother.

The heads of families complained that some children are weaned earlier than they should be. Many people, including opinion leaders, noted that boys are weaned earlier than girls. The former at 12 months and the latter at 30 months. The reason for this is that the late weaning is

believed to retard or diminish the intellectual capacity of a child. The fact that, according to the elders, boys should be weaned earlier than girls, suggests that there is more concern about the intellect of the boy than the girl.

There was no unanimity as to when solid food should be allowed. Again, this appears to vary from mother to mother. Families differ in the beliefs, eating habits, and taboos that they honor. An elderly person suggested that, "Every mother should know what to serve or not to serve to her child." Some elderly women declared: "I cannot think of any food that cannot be served to children." It should be noted that there is no differentiation between boys and girls as to the time of feeding or the kind of foods they are given.

Clothing a baby is not a preoccupation; "A child will wear what his mother finds." The *Senufo* who live in the southern part of Mali, and other Bambara communities, also are not concerned about the kind of clothing children wear before they are five. For this reason, girls and boys wear the same kinds of clothes. From age five, boys wear attire similar to that of their fathers, and girls wear the same kinds of clothes as their mothers.

One reason for the lack of differentiation in clothing for those under five is that traditionally, the Bambara do not clothe their children before they are five years old. Five is the age at which gender differentiation begins. Thus it is the starting point of gender differentiation in clothing. This pattern is similar in other Bambara villages as well.<sup>1</sup>

While most agreed that children put on what their mothers find or can afford, the younger generation did not share this opinion. They maintained that a boy's clothes differ from those of the girl. They could be right considering the articles of clothing coming in from outside which definitely differentiate boys and girls. Another challenge to the notion that there is a lack of differentiation between boys' and girls' clothing before age five is the fact that mothers give their children sex-related clothing to reward and calm them, boys or girls.

Hair styles are the same for boys and girls until age five. The hair is cut short for everyone. A child is considered "dirty" when his hair is long. Personal hygiene is taught and required early for both boys and girls. A child is expected to wash two or three times a day. Babies are washed in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. Girls adopt this habit but boys have to be reminded and sometimes forced to wash when required. A child's mother, its care giver, or the woman supervisor (old lady) is responsible for the child's cleanliness.

## *Group Formation Among 1 to 6-Year-Olds*

Mixed groups are formed spontaneously by boys and girls until the children are five or six years old. Where children live seems to be the most important factor in the formation of play groups. Mothers seem to encourage the coming together of children as suggested by a young woman who said, "I tell my child, go play with someone, and then I run away to my errands."

Children's gregarious instinct works best between the ages of two and four. They imitate adults' various social behaviors: marriage, cooking, farming, entertainment. They learn to play different

roles. Gender differentiation does not prevent boys and girls from using the same play grounds where they play *gere tarida*. This game is played by mixed sex groups.

It was suggested that girls begin to be aware of gender differences earlier than boys are aware of such differences. As children become more aware of gender, they move to more segregated play and engage in different kinds of play. At age five there is an awareness of physical capacity. Boys play games which are physically highly demanding, games which are considered dangerous for girls. Examples of these activities are: running, football, jumping, and wrestling. Girls are engaged in activities like clapping hands, dancing, and hide-and-peek.

Beyond physical differences, children are socialized into different types of work at age five. The circumcision of boys and excision for girls at an early age achieves the process of differentiation.

Today these practices take place at age five to six. Traditionally circumcision was part of a long process which is today no more than a token gesture.

Socially, a boy must be circumcised before being called a man: *ce*. A woman should also be excised before being called "a woman": *muso*. Until then, they are called *bilakoro*. As soon as a boy is circumcised he becomes a full-fledged man. He enters the society of men. He is initiated while healing his wound. He learns about his role, an essential part of which is being different from women and superior to them. Newly circumcised boys are "manned," and "accepted" behavior is imposed on them. A boy who cries or is fearful, one who is not courageous and strong, is called a woman. He must show virility on all occasions.

The girls come of age later— between the ages eight and ten. During their seclusion following excision, they are taught what a woman is, how she should behave, where to go, how to meet people, etc. The sense of womanhood and belonging to the group of women is enforced.

Circumcision and excision achieve separation between girls and boys. Boys and girls must no more be seen together once they have been "initiated." After a boy is circumcised, his father will no more accept that the boy does chores reserved for women. Likewise, the mother will not allow her daughter to act like a boy or to be treated like one.

## *Activities that Foster Gender Identity*

Questions asked in this section referred to who should do what and why. From what was discussed a few categories were made.

### *Social Chores*

Young Bambara children participate actively in daily activities as children, without any gender implication. These activities are part of the training necessary for social integration. The activities help children develop a sense of responsibility, confidence, and authority.

Boys and girls, from three to six, must be able to help in various ways. They are involved in:

***Caring for the youngest:*** Boys and girls alike look after the youngest when there are no adults around. When adults are present, older boys and girls must help watch over the youngest. Adults do not interfere until the situation is considered too serious for the children to manage.

***Running errands:*** Obedience is tested at an early age. Fetching drinking water for adults and older children is the most common activity assigned by the Bambara society to children. Some children obey promptly. Others linger before obeying. Some refuse and run away. All community members observe and occasionally help punish or reward children.

### ***Household Chores***

All groups asserted that domestic tasks fall in the domain and obligations of girls. Boys must not be seen performing such tasks. Nonetheless, the women complain about how some men interfere and prevent the boys from helping. Their comments included, "Sometimes the fathers force the boys to refuse doing simple household chores." "In our household, no one dares assign a single forbidden task to a boy."

Where there is no girl, who does the chores? Relatives support one another. So, a woman without any daughter asks a relative to comfort her. One niece or cousin is designated to help with household chores. Those who come to help in the household are to be treated as a daughter.

In case there is no one, the mother is helped by the boys from time to time. As a result, she is confronted with uncomfortable questions and remarks.

Traditional leaders (village chief and counselors) held firm that work distribution by sex should be respected. "No boy should be feminized; tasks proscribed for boys must remain so." According to most men, the youths included, whatever can be done by a girl can be done by her mother rather than by a boy.

### ***Endnotes***

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<sup>1</sup> Dembele, N.U. (1982) Developing an Educational Framework from Traditional Modes of Thought and Education, a case study of a Senufo Poro variant, Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, U.K.7. The Senufo live in the southern part of Mali (north of the Ivory Coast).