

THE ART OF LIVELIHOOD

THE ART OF LIVELIHOOD

*Creating Expressive
Agri-Culture in Rural Mali*

Stephen Wooten

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS

Durham, North Carolina

Copyright © 2009
Stephen R. Wooten
All rights reserved.

All photographs reproduced in this work, including cover images,
were taken by the author.

Wooten, Stephen R.

The art of livelihood : creating expressive agri-culture in rural Mali / Stephen
R. Wooten.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59460-731-8 (alk. paper)

1. Mandingo (African people)--Mali--Agriculture. 2. Mandingo (African
people)--Mali--Kinship. 3. Mandingo (African people)--Mali--Ethnic identity.
4. Traditional farming--Mali. 5. Land use, Rural--Mali. 6. Mali--Rural con-
ditions. 7. Mali--Social conditions. I. Title.

DT551.45.M36 W66 2009
305.896'345--dc22

2009021586

Carolina Academic Press
700 Kent Street
Durham, North Carolina 27701
Telephone (919) 489-7486
Fax (919) 493-5668
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

For August George and Helena Wren

CONTENTS

List of Figures	xii
Preface	xiii
An Ethnographic Exploration of Life in the Mande World	xiv
Outline of the Study	xvii
Acknowledgments	xix
Prologue	1
Chapter One • Conceptualizing the Art of Livelihood	5
Practice Theory	5
Performance Studies	8
Improvisation and Creativity	10
Aesthetic Anthropology	12
Chapter Two • Seeing Through Mande Eyes: From Social Dynamics to Aesthetic Concepts	17
A Vernacular Perspective on Sociality	18
A Local Theory of Action	23
<i>Fadenya</i> and <i>Badenya</i> in Mande “Arts”	28
A Way of Seeing, Evaluating, and Acting	33
Chapter Three • Principles in Practice: Building <i>Badenya</i> and Managing <i>Fadenya</i>	35
Households and Villages: Building Blocks of the Social World	37
Settling Niamakoroni: Pioneering Acts of Social Creativity	42
From <i>Buguda</i> to <i>Dugu</i> : Creating <i>Badenya</i> Outside of the Kinship Realm	45
Daily Acts of <i>Badenya</i> : Living Together	47
Nene Jara’s <i>Du</i>	48
Dugukolo Jara’s <i>Du</i>	49
Mpe Jara’s <i>Du</i>	49

Bogoli Kulibali's <i>Du</i>	50
Doseke Jara's <i>Du</i>	50
Eating Together: The Alimentary Nature of <i>Badenya</i>	51
The Daily Round	52
Extending the <i>Badenya</i> of Consumption	56
Greeting Creates Community	57
Building Homes, Building Community	58
Connections to the Wider World: The Practical Boundaries of Effective <i>Badenya</i>	60
Chapter Four • The Art of Making a Living: Cultivating Continuity and Change	63
Making a Living on Mande Soil: Ancient Origins, Contemporary Practice	67
Farming for Life: A Multifaceted <i>Badenya</i> Affair	69
Household Men Producing the Grain	71
Household Women Producing the Sauce	77
Producing Early Crops	80
Securing <i>Ka Balo</i> Resources	81
Producing Food and Cultivating Community	85
Producing for Cash: The Rewards of <i>Fadenya</i>	88
The Development of Commercial Horticulture	88
Transforming Livelihood	95
Changing Patterns in the Generation of Wealth	96
Changing Work Rhythms	99
Changing Relations: Gender and Age	100
Changes in Patterns of Transmission	103
Tactical Innovative Action	104
<i>Badenya</i> and <i>Fadenya</i> as the Foundation of a Dynamic Livelihood	105
The Art of Creating a Viable and Meaningful Livelihood	106
Chapter Five • Our <i>Ciwaraw</i> Have Power: The Livelihood of Art	109
The <i>Ciwaraw</i> Complex	109
Celebrating a Day of Field Labor	116
A Powerful Performance	122
<i>Ciwaraw</i> Across the Generations	129
<i>Badenya</i> and <i>Fadenya</i> in the <i>Ciwaraw</i> Complex	136
Continuities and Changes in the Realm of Power	137
Agrarian Identity	140
Scales of Unity: Ethnicity or Locality?	143

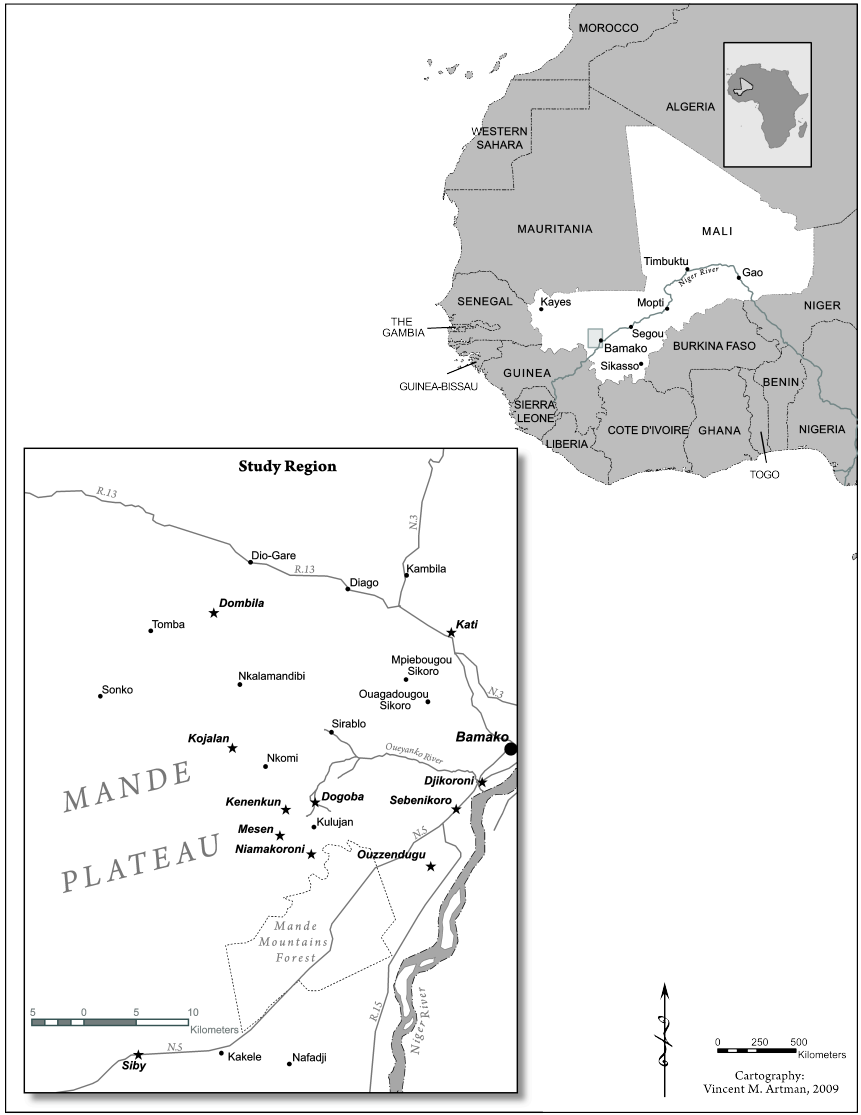
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ix

Generation and Gender: Realms of Continuity and Contestation	145
The Livelihood of “Art”	148
Chapter Six • Creating Expressive Agri-Culture	149
References Cited	155
Index	171

LIST OF FIGURES

Map	xii
Aminata Koné; Ouzzendugu, June 1993	2
Shimbon Jara (foreground) and two fellow elders; Niamakoroni, May 2002	26
Nene Jara and his granddaughter, Jawele Jara; Niamakoroni, August 1993	38
Suluman Jara (left) and Bafin Jara, two of Mesen's <i>dutigiw</i> , August 1993	40
Contemporary Niamakoroni, May 2002	44
Raising a roof; Niamakoroni, May 2002	59
Planting — part of an ancient art; Mande Plateau, June 1993	68
Negeta Jara working in a field; Niamakoroni, May 2002	73
Laborers working in a Niamakoroni <i>soforo</i> , June 2008	81
Tongo Jara with a bowl of peanuts; Niamakoroni, June 2008	83
<i>Soforo</i> labor; Niamakoroni, June 2008	87
One of Niamakoroni's market gardens, October 1993	90
Harvested banana bunches; Niamakoroni, February 1994	93
The Kojalan headdresses, October 1993	121
The Kojalan female figurine, October 1993	122
The Mesen/Niamakoroni male headdress, April 1994	128
A woman <i>ciwara</i> performer in Mesen, April 1994	130
One of the Mesen women's <i>ciwarakunw</i> , April 1994	131
Shaymo Jara, <i>ciwaratigi</i> ; Niamakoroni, April 1994	133
The Niamakoroni <i>ciwara</i> performance, April 1994	134
Traditional handheld hoes (<i>dabaw</i>) used for farming; Mande Plateau, February 1994	142
The Kenenkun <i>ciwaraw</i> , May 2002	143
Mari Jara (left) and Shaymo Jara (center), <i>ciwaratigiw</i> , with Sekou Camara; Niamakoroni, June 2008	144



PREFACE

This book provides an integrated analysis of agrarian change and local systems of meaning and identity on the Mande Plateau in central Mali. Two main questions orient the project: how do people create a viable livelihood in a challenging rural African context, and how do these hardworking farmers make that living meaningful? In the pages that follow, I explore these questions and highlight dynamism and creativity in two domains that are frequently viewed as conservative or “traditional,” especially in the African context: agriculture and masquerade.

By revealing the creative nature local farming practice, I will show that farmers on the plateau continuously negotiate and manage the material foundation of life. I argue that the farming livelihood they create is a cultural product, a product of ongoing reflection, assessment, and action. The people of the Mande Plateau approach their farming activities with an eye toward past lessons and practices and an eye toward new opportunities and arrangements. Decisions about their agrarian activities are informed by an overarching set of principles and aesthetic concerns. Rather than building narrowly on the most economically beneficial or most ecologically sensitive system, they seek to build a system that meets a combination of needs and desires—material and ideological. They seek a system that offers a livelihood, but also one that makes good sense.

By tracing the shifting dimensions of and highlighting active negotiation within the realm of masquerade, I will underscore the importance of creativity within this domain as well. Instead of seeing masquerade as a conservative, timeless phenomenon that people approach in a mechanistic fashion, I see the actors whose behavior is depicted in subsequent chapters as creative performers, relating to known belief and practice, but forging ahead in a reflexive, evaluative fashion. Assessing the moment and all it offers in terms of alternate systems of meaning, they choose to act in the ways they see as most sensible. In some cases, they do much the same thing that their ancestors did; in other instances, they chart new directions. In both contexts, they move forward through a process of evaluation that hinges on key aesthetic notions.

My ultimate argument is that the process of constructing a viable and meaningful livelihood is a profoundly creative one—thus my title: *The Art of Liveli-*

hood. The people whose world I explore in the pages that follow make choices about their lives, choices stemming from an evaluative process that is ultimately and intimately tied to a well-developed local aesthetic framework that hinges on the paired vernacular concepts of *fadenya*¹ (father-childness) and *badenya* (mother-childness). In the constitution of their living and eating arrangements, in deciding what crops to grow to and with whom to grow them, they engage in ongoing reflection on and negotiation of this set of guiding principles. They engage in their masked agrarian rites in a similar fashion, selecting forms and performance settings according to patterns of preference and key aesthetic values.

The material and ideological sides are united in this analysis because they are united in people's experience. The sub-title phrase, *Creating Expressive Agri-Culture*, is meant to convey the importance of this integrated approach. In this work, the art of livelihood does not pertain solely or predominantly to the established terrain of "expressive culture," that is to say, to "art." Instead, it simultaneously involves two interrelated expressive forms and processes; farming and masquerade. The agricultural system I describe in the pages that follow is a work of art: a visible, material product of a creative and expressive process. Likewise, the complex masquerade phenomenon I analyze has concrete formal elements as well as processual aspects. In the pages that follow, I will argue that both are undertaken in artful ways, and that the result of these creative, aesthetic processes are works of art of expressive agri-culture.

An Ethnographic Exploration of Life in the Mande World

I had several models in mind when I conceived of this book, contemporary ethnographies that inspired me, and which offer a sense of the kind of company I want this project to keep. The first was *Under the Kapok Tree* (1992), in which Alma Gottlieb uses clear and direct writing to present a rich ethnography that holds a productive yet concise dialogue with thought-provoking theory, old and new. Charles Piot's *Remotely Global* (1999) uses an illuminating ethnographic lens to theorize a "classic out-of-the-way place" (Togo) and

1. Mande languages, including Bamana, are tonal and there are numerous orthographic approaches for transcribing them. In this work I render Bamana words with simple diacritical markings where appropriate but avoid more specialized technical orthography. I made this decision in order to make the study more accessible to nonspecialist readers. In citations and quotes I have endeavored to maintain the author's usage.

achieves impressive results. Like Gottlieb, Piot does not overburden the reader with extended technical discussions or obtuse disciplinary or theory-driven jargon; instead, he is economical with his description and discussion. This approach lets the main thrust of his work carry through without distraction. The way in which Daniel Reed addresses the complexities of masquerade in his *Dan Ge Performance* (2003) was instructive for me as well. A folklorist and ethnomusicologist, he approaches his subject matter in an integrative fashion, bringing to bear the tools of interrelated academic fields. He grapples with sculpture, song, dance, and discourse in an elegant and efficient manner.

These three key works have in common that they are ethnographically rich, theoretically engaged, and stylistically concise. As a consumer of these texts and as both a scholar and instructor, I can attest to the fact that they are effective and memorable. They represent the kind of focused and illuminating ethnographic exploration I have endeavored to produce in this book.

This project emerges from more than 15 years of engagement with people who animate a corner of the Mande world. In a very general sense, this world is defined as the space inhabited by speakers of one of the many Mande languages. Linguists have classified a series of interrelated language groups, including Bamana, Mandinka, and Maninka, as part of the Mande branch of the Niger-Congo linguistic family (Vydrine and Bergman 2006). Speakers of Mande languages typically share important cultural and social values, as well as sense of common heritage, a link or connection to an ancient empire that helped create an important cultural diaspora across West Africa. In the 13th century AD, the Mali Empire arose on the borderlands of present-day Mali and Guinea, and the people associated with it were the Mande. The empire grew and spread across the region, dispersing its language and culture along the way. Today, the Mande world describes a vast territory stretching roughly from central Mali to northern Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, and from western Burkina Faso to The Gambia in the east. The people whose lives I describe in these pages are a Mande people; they live on the Mande Plateau, not far from the core homeland of the Mali Empire, and speak Bamana, a core Mande tongue. I spent the bulk of my time in a specific locale within the Mande world, but my perspective on the processes unfolding there and the significance of related changes has been informed by experiences and insights from encounters across the region.

This book is based on insights gained through ethnographic fieldwork that began in June–July 1992 with a predissertation study of agricultural change on the Mande Plateau. For 13 months between June 1993 and July 1994, I lived on the plateau full-time—that period of study yielded my doctoral dissertation and a series of related publications. I returned to the region in June 1998,

and again in April–May 2002, to expand my research explorations to include the domain of sculpture and masquerade performance. My most recent research trip to Mali in June–July 2008 provided me with the opportunity to bring my understanding of the dynamics and processes I explore in the pages that follow up-to-date.

I have always approached my ethnographic work in a manner that Geertz describes as a productive negotiation of “experience-near” and “experience-distant” dynamics (2000 [1983]:57). I have embraced the “immediacies” of my encounters with people and processes on the plateau, as well as the “vernacular” view of these experiences. I have also engaged in the “abstraction” process Geertz associates with the experience-distant nature of the scientific gaze. In the pages that follow, I tack back and forth between the two in a dialectical fashion, in an attempt to offer insights that are informed by local meaning, and which further a comparative understanding of issues and concerns of the social theoretical nature.

Likewise, I am informed by the radical empiricism and phenomenological approach to fieldwork commented on so richly and insightfully by Michael Jackson:

For anthropology, ethnography remains vital, not because ethnographic methods guarantee certain knowledge of others but because ethnographic fieldwork brings us into direct dialogue *with* others, affording us opportunities to explore knowledge not as something that grasps inherent and hidden truths but as an intersubjective process of sharing experience, comparing notes, exchanging ideas, and finding common ground. [1996:8]

The accounts, insights, and interpretations I offer are products of just such an “intersubjective process.” As Martha Kendall points out so well in her paper on the nature of fieldwork in the Mande world, ethnography is always a situated, contingent, and dynamic process (1982).

In terms of method, I have used a combination of techniques ranging from simple direct observation to focused interviews with set questions. These various approaches have all yielded useful information (e.g., from counts of people heading to market to subtle and subjective views of the changing nature of power), but I find that I gain the best insights and understandings from simple conversation with people engaged in activities in which we share an interest. In the years that have passed since I first visited the Mande Plateau, I have come to know and appreciate the thoughtfulness of scores of very helpful individuals, from the wise female elder Wilene Diallo to Jigi Jara, a charismatic

young man concerned with the ways of his fathers. In this book, I present and analyze material gathered in all of these “fieldworking” contexts.

Another dimension of my study of the art of livelihood involves research encounters well beyond the Mande Plateau. Since publishing an article on the role of the famous antelope-style headdress called *ciwara* (2000), I have been asked by museum professionals and art history colleagues to provide details about the *ciwara* complex and to share insights gained from my ethnographic field research; thus, I have served as a research consultant or guest curator on a number of museum projects. In addition to using these opportunities to deepen and enhance my understanding of in situ dynamics, I have used them as a way to learn about the reach of *ciwara* into worlds well beyond the Mande region. In the process, I have become more and more impressed by the significance of the complex, its power and its perception, abroad and at home in Mali. The insights I have gained in these “outside” world encounters have actually helped me understand the dynamics at work in the communities and fields on the plateau.

Outline of the Study

Following a short situating prologue, chapter 1 lays out the theoretical touchstones I use and to which I contribute in the project, most notably my focus on creativity and improvisation. Then, in chapter 2, I develop a synthetic portrait of aesthetics in the Mande region, emphasizing the significance of a pair of vernacular principles: *fadenya* and *badenya*. I employ this local interpretive lens in all of the subsequent chapters. In chapter 3, I explore how people draw on and negotiate these general aesthetic principles in building their social world. In contrast to normative accounts of social structure and social organization, I focus on the actions, practices, and beliefs that constitute family and community on the Mande Plateau. Chapter 4 shows how the principles inform people’s creation of a viable and meaningful livelihood. I examine the “for life” production system, the “for money” system, and the complex relationship between them. I treat the whole agrarian domain as a cultural product, the result of thoughtful and purposeful action. In chapter 5, I examine the realm of masquerade and reveal how the principles foster both continuity and change in the *ciwara* complex. Then, in chapter 6, I draw out the lessons learned through this study and use them to contribute to the development of our knowledge and understanding of the Mande world, as well as to our appreciation for the role creativity and improvisation can play in contemporary social theory.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Bamana have a saying: “One finger alone cannot pick up a stone.” This book would not have been possible without the agile movements of many deft and dexterous fingers and hands.

My primary debt of gratitude is to the people of the Mande Plateau, who have made my explorations of the art of livelihood possible. Since 1992, the people of Niamakoroni and Mesen have regularly and congenially welcomed me into their worlds. I thank the good people of these deeply true communities for the amazing hospitality they have shown me, and for answering my many questions with grace, insight, and good humor. Among the many friends and collaborators on the plateau to whom I am grateful, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Numori Jara and his family. Numori is the epitome of a Bamana *jatigi*, or host. With his keen sense of my quest, he has helped me see so many things—in the research realm as well as the interpersonal domain—and his wit has made the journey we have shared as we grow older together enjoyable. Thank you, my brother. Numori’s father, the late Nene Jara, was a key resource in my early studies; he was as a father figure to me as well. May his spirit be at peace, and may his wives and their descendants enjoy much happiness.

The Koné family of Ouzzendugu in suburban Bamako provided a foundation for my studies in Mali. In 1987, a Peace Corps trainee, Mori Belen Koné, and his wife Aminata welcomed me into their home and gave me my first lessons in Bamana culture. In the years since, the family has been a touchstone for me. Aminata became a sage advisor as my research developed, and in 1992, on her recommendation, I traveled to her natal village of Niamakoroni to see “real farmers, real Bamana people,” as she put it. Her son, Seydou Koné, served as my primary research assistant in 1992, and as an adept intermediary in the process of settling me into my first period of in-depth research in 1993. May Aminata’s soul and Seydou’s life be blessed.

The government of Mali has allowed me to carry out my studies since 1992, and I am grateful for the opportunity it has provided to learn from its people. Without the support of the government, none of what I have come to understand would have been possible. My continuing research affiliation with the

Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako has proved most beneficial. In particular, I am grateful for the support and guidance provided by its director, Dr. Kléna Sanogo.

A number of institutions and agencies have supported my work, and I appreciatively acknowledge them here. The National Science Foundation provided funds to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois that allowed me to conduct pre-dissertation research in June and July 1992. The J. William Fulbright Commission awarded me a fellowship that facilitated my doctoral studies during 1993–94. During that time, the U.S. Embassy in Mali provided much-needed institutional support. In June 1998, the James S. Coleman African Studies Center at UCLA provided a travel grant that allowed me to expand my exploration of expressive culture on the plateau. With support from the University of Oregon (UO), I was able to return to Mali in April–May 2002. A travel grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education allowed me to conduct supplementary research for this book on the plateau in June–July 2008. Funds from and release time granted by the Department of International Studies, the Department of Anthropology, and the College of Arts & Sciences at UO helped support the completion of this project. These entities and colleagues within them have invested a great deal in my work, and this book and my professional development in general owe a great deal to them.

In getting to this point in my career, I have been blessed by a host of knowledgeable and generous mentors. The members of my doctoral committee at the University of Illinois helped shape my vision of meaningful anthropological research. I thank Clark Cunningham, Norman Whitten, and Thomas Bassett for their contributions. Alma Gottlieb served as my dissertation chair and advisor, and did so with flair and aplomb. In the days since, she has always been a phone call away, and has given me terrific advice, intellectual and personal, on a moment's notice. Thank you for being there for me, Alma. As I was preparing for my dissertation fieldwork, Larry Becker graciously stepped in to help with the design details of my project, and he has continued to offer keen insights on my work.

I was lucky to have found the amazing community of scholars known as the Mande Studies Association (MANSA) early on in my career, and I have learned so much from so many of its members in the years since. In particular, longtime MANSA president David Conrad has been a constant source of inspiration, and has become a dear friend. The group's current leader, Kassim Koné, has also been a model for me. Kassim's sensitive and perceptive insights into his native cultural world have enriched my understanding of Mande life in profound ways. If Pascal James Imperato's work on Mande expressive culture is the bedrock for my studies, Patrick McNaughton's is the soil. Both of

these impressive scholars have given their time and knowledge to help move my endeavors along in productive directions. Jan Jansen has been a prolific and keen observer of worlds much like those depicted here, and has been a steadfast fellow traveler. As members of the same academic cohort and sharing complementary research agendas, Rosa De Jorio, Julianne Short Freeman, and Daniel Reed have helped me take productive steps toward a more nuanced and mature understanding of the cultural world we have all embraced.

Before reaching its current state, various iterations of this book benefited from a series of careful and insightful readings. My colleague, Dennis Galvan, gave several complete drafts much time and consideration. His insightful comments have improved this endeavor in meaningful ways, and I can say with certainty that without his confident and supportive guidance, this project would not have seen the light of day. You are deeply appreciated my friend—for this and so much more. Patrick McNaughton also provided a rigorous and stimulating review of an earlier draft. His comments pushed me to reach higher in my analysis, and to tell my story personally and directly. The reviewers of the manuscript I ultimately submitted to Carolina Academic Press offered useful and constructive feedback as well.

Without the interventions of a series of astute professionals and talented laypeople, this publication would not read as well or appear as polished; these people made the most out of my production. Laura Meehan provided an amazingly useful edit of the first full draft, and adroitly finalized the current version. Julien Harrison brought a keen eye and a determined energy to the task of helping me sort out a maze of references. Carolyn Weaver produced a thorough and effective index. Vincent Artman drew the wonderful maps. Kirsten Haugen designed a terrific cover. The kind and dedicated people at Carolina Academic Press treated my manuscript with respect, and handled its transition to the page admirably and with much-appreciated professionalism throughout. I offer my profound thanks to all the aforementioned people. I hope you see where your contributions have improved my project. Any remaining shortcomings are surely my own.

Some narrative and analytical elements I present in this book have appeared in different forms in previously published articles or chapters. I thank the Society for Applied Anthropology for permission to rework material from my Human Organization article (Wooten 2003a), Ashgate Publishing Group for allowing me to expand on material from my chapter in *African Environment and Development* (Wooten 2004), and the journal *African Arts* for publishing my initial examination of the ciwara complex (Wooten 2000).

In a way, this book would not have come into being or become as meaningful without family. Being born into a truly amazing family has been a real bless-

ing. As I told my Fulbright interviewers back in 1992, I grew up in a happy little “tribe.” Through their enduring love, my father, George Francis Wooten, and my mother, Helen Patricia (Shea) Wooten, created the kind of family my Bamana friends and collaborators admire: a big one, characterized by lots of love and good humor. For this, I am grateful to my parents in ways that I can never fully express. Thank you for bringing me into this world, and for instilling in me the kind of love and faith in the world’s goodness that makes me who I am. I have four older brothers and four older sisters who have always been supportive of my ongoing quest for knowledge, understanding, and empathy—in our family, in my life, and abroad. Although we are different, we share so much. For that and for you all, I am deeply grateful.

When I met Tracy Lomax, I knew I had found a treasure: a beautiful being with such depth of character and such a profoundly heart-centered way. Tracy and I have joined hands on a journey of amazing richness. In loving me and sharing the twists and turns of our common road, she has brought joy and wonder to my life. I have truly been reborn in her embrace. Our love has created two soulful and luminous beings: our son, August George Lomax Wooten, and our daughter, Helena Wren Lomax Wooten. These two kind spirits have changed my world in the most profound and amazing ways; they are my teachers and my future. I love you dearly, Tracy, for being my blue-eyed angel. I love you dearly, August and Wren, for being my shining stars. Over the last several years, Tracy has been a constant supporter as I have gestated and labored over the delivery of this book, our third “baby.” In a way, it is hers and mine—ours.

In good Bamana fashion, my relationship with Tracy has opened up into a new set of enriching family relations. Pam and Phillip Krumm are kind and generous souls. They have knitted me into the fabric of their family life, and have opened their home to me on several occasions for key writing retreats. I am very grateful for all their acts of friendship and hospitality. Tracy’s sisters, Jennifer and Molly, have become like sisters to me, and for that I am grateful. Molly’s keen insights helped finalize the cover design. Gary and Cheryl Lomax have welcomed me graciously into their lives, and have provided me with a growing number of great family memories. I sincerely appreciate their presence in my life.

In my research, I have been sagely aided by a series of bright and keen people. As I mentioned above, Seydou Koné provided foundational support as my studies began on the plateau. Numori Jara has been an exceptional guide ever since we met in 1992. Since we first collaborated on translations back in 2002, Sekou Camara has offered nuanced insights into my work and has be-

come a good friend. Sekou Berte and I have shared a curiosity and wonder about the Mande world since our paths crossed in Mali, over a decade ago. In the intervening years, Berte and I have traded roles as teacher and student many times, and in the process have developed a unique sibling-collaborator relationship. I respect him tremendously, and I am continually amazed by his zeal and work ethic. A profound “*Aw ni ce!*” to all of these men.

A final word of thanks is due to all those whose names have not been mentioned here. To all my friends, companions, and fellow travelers in this world and those beyond: thank you for your role in making this endeavor possible.

PROLOGUE

The first person to suggest that I conduct research on the Mande Plateau was Aminata Koné, a resident of one of the capital city of Bamako's suburbs. Upon learning that I was interested in studying how rural people organize their farming activities, Aminata encouraged me to consider conducting my studies in her natal village on the plateau, a site where she felt I could learn a great deal about farming. Indeed, she indicated that the Bamana of the Mande hills were known throughout the greater Bamako area for their farming prowess, as well as for their observance of many traditional religious and ritual practices. She stressed that plateau residents were real farmers, and that their settlements were "true farming villages."

In our preliminary conversations, Aminata referred to the farmers of the Mande Plateau as *ciwaraw* (farming animals). When I asked her what she meant, she explained that the word carried the additional meaning of "champion farmers," and that the people of the region work very hard and never seem to tire—and examination of their agricultural activities certainly upholds this notion.

Aminata's use of the term *ciwara* reminded me immediately of the famous antelope sculptures so often associated with the Bamana. The graceful lines of the Bamana's antelope headdresses are well known in global art circles and in the canon of African art history, so I was familiar with the sculptural form and its performance context. I was also aware that the *ciwara* tradition was intimately linked to the agrarian way of life.

Interestingly enough, during those early discussions, Aminata said that from time to time in some plateau villages, performers did in fact dance with *ciwarakunw* ("farming animal heads," or antelope headdresses), to celebrate and encourage the success of their agricultural endeavors. She added that, unlike similar headdresses in other areas of Mali, those in the hills were associated with special ritual power (*nyama*) and objects (*boliw*)—things Mali's urbanites and practicing Muslims often view as backward or traditional. She noted that the people of the hills also participate in other "old" things, such as *jow* (initiation societies or associations; see Zahan 1974 or McNaughton 1979 for a concise description).

In discussing such traditions, Aminata referred to the people of the plateau as "Bamana *yèrè yèrè*" (true Bamana): people who continue to work the land



Aminata Koné; Ouzzendugu, June 1993

as many previous generations have before them, and who uphold some of the traditional Bamana religious and cultural practices. In Aminata's eyes, her plateau relatives were traditionalists, rural people living just as their ancestors had, keeping faith with the ancient ways. Her comments compelled me to watch closely for evidence of the *ciwara* performance tradition during my ensuing fieldwork, and to ponder her representation of her kin as "true Bamana."

In the intervening years, I have witnessed a series of *ciwara* performances firsthand, interviewed numerous individuals involved with this cultural tradition, and discussed the phenomenon widely with a variety of people on the Mande Plateau. Similarly, I have studied the area's agrarian way of life, ob-

servicing production activities across the seasons and in different realms. In the process, I have learned a great deal about the “true Bamana” of the region. My perspective on and deep appreciation for the creativity embedded in the experiences and actions of these farming people has developed in the course of many months in the field and over many years of considered examination from afar, but the seed for my interpretive framework was planted during one particular encounter on the plateau.

One day, during the annual grain harvest in 1993, while on the break for the midday meal, I had an epiphany—a moment of clarity that changed the way I understand the art of livelihood in the region. As we ate from a common bowl of grain and sauce, I told my companions that I was deeply impressed with the communal spirit of their collective grain harvest—over 200 men and women had come to a remote bush field to help a family bring in its crop. I could easily imagine their ancestors in bygone days, working together in similar fashion to cut and store their grain. I had visions of ancient unity and longstanding patterns of egalitarian *communitas*.

However, the men gathered around the bowl looked surprised. After they exchanged glances, finally one of them spoke. “This way of doing things is new. We’ve only been doing it like this for a few years.” I was taken aback. The men went on to tell me that the people of the neighboring communities had only recently decided to all work together as a way to expedite the harvest, thereby allowing individuals to get on with their income-generating garden work. My grand assumptions of primal agrarian *communitas* had run straight up against the stark reality of novelty and improvisation. Their collective harvest was not an age-old cultural tradition, but an innovation designed by astute and creative actors to help them meet new demands and desires.

In this vignette, we can begin to see the art of livelihood on the plateau as an improvisational process that addresses contemporary needs, and one which does so through engagement with a dynamic process of assessment. In the pages that follow, I explore how people create expressive agri-culture in an ongoing fashion, examining how people actively craft the production systems that sustain them, while interpreting, performing, and reworking the beliefs that bring meaning to their lives. I focus on the aesthetic principles and material processes that give rise to family and community, a viable farming system, and an affective masquerade complex. As I expand on the foundations of contemporary scholarship in anthropology, art history, and performance studies, my ultimate goal is to provide a perspective on “true Bamana” life that runs counter to Aminata’s vision of a timeless or traditional society.

The “true Bamana” of the plateau are not a people out of time; rather, they are a people in constant motion. They are continuously moving forward to

forge viable livelihoods, and they are always moving ahead in their efforts to make their lives meaningful. Far from being isolated traditionalists, the people of the plateau are forward-looking individuals, individuals who actively negotiate their circumstances, improvising solutions to new challenges by drawing on established social, cultural, and economic patterns and adapting or transforming them when desirable or necessary.