

## Intersubjective ambiguities

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*This paper is a critique of the view that knowledge of others consists in grasping how they collectively represent the world to themselves. It explores the extent to which affinity and mutuality in human social life and ethnographic fieldwork are only incidentally outcomes of cognitive pre-understandings, ethical principles or cultural ideals; rather, such modes of intersubjective life (like animosity, misunderstanding and indifference) are born of experiences 'thoughtlessly' undergone together in shared situations over time. Theologies and theories of knowledge are like shadows rather than scripts, and they emerge mostly as retrospective abridgements and rationalisations of events that unfolded in the transitional spaces between us and lay largely outside our conceptual comprehension and control.*

*[intersubjectivity, Kuranko, Sierra Leone, méconnaissance, metanoia]*

*"We take almost all the decisive steps in our lives as a result of slight inner adjustments of which we are barely conscious."*

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (2001: 189).

In J.M. Coetzee's *Lives of the Animals*, the central character, Elizabeth Costello, delivers a lecture at an American university on the subject of animal rights. Her anxious son is in the audience, and as Elizabeth Costello reaches the end of her lecture he hopes she will decline to take questions from the floor. "She ought to know," he says to himself, "that public lectures draw kooks and crazies like flies to a corpse." Anyone who lectures for a living will recognise this experience. No matter how painstakingly one prepares a talk, it will draw comments that bear no relationship to what one thought one was saying, and attract questions that preclude any response. But lecture halls and classrooms aren't the only places where we pass each other like ships in the night, and if an anthropologist from Mars visited earth he or she would undoubtedly be struck by our extraordinary capacity for talking past each other, and "deriving different signification from the same symbols and rituals" (Ohnuki-Tierney 2004: 15-21). At the same time, our imaginary anthropologist would surely be baffled by the different meanings that attach to the same gestures in different cultures – a nod signalling negation in Greece but affirmation in England, direct eye contact conveying sincerity of interest

in America but antagonism in Polynesia and Africa, touching taken as an unwanted invasion of a person's private space in some societies but in others communicating empathy. And despite the similarity of facial musculature and expressions among all humans, subtle variations are liable to cause consternation. In Europe and the United States, raised eyebrows are usually interpreted as a question or a gesture of recognition, but for Polynesian New Zealanders it may communicate acknowledgement (the equivalent of the phrase "Yes, I understand" [Metge and Kinloch 1978: 11]), while in Japan such behavior between adults is considered very unseemly (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989: 453). As for suffering, I think of Sofie Danniskiold-Samsøe's research among Shi'a Iraqi refugees in Copenhagen whose stories of existential distress are often regarded by Danish doctors and welfare bureaucrats as diagnostically irrelevant, and whose lack of physical symptoms of specific illness or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder leads to suspicions of malingering (2006). Not only would our Martian anthropologist wonder at the mutual misunderstanding and downright misery that spring from the inherent ambiguity of everything human beings say and do in the presence of one another; he or she would also be astonished by the energy devoted to reducing this intersubjective ambiguity and dealing with the fallout from never knowing exactly what others are feeling, thinking or intending.

If our Martian strayed into a University he might be amazed at the industry generated by this passion for rational, systematic, unambiguous knowledge of others and of oneself, and he or she might wonder how human beings have managed to succeed in the Darwinian struggle for survival, given their Babel of mutually incomprehensible languages, dialectics and argots, not to mention their capacity for misreading one another's gestures and minds. But our visiting ethnographer might ask a more fundamental question: why well educated earthlings should set such store by the idea of knowing the other, or knowing themselves, when social existence is manifestly not predicated upon any theoretical understanding that can be readily put into words, any more than meaningful speech is predicated upon a formal knowledge of grammar. Indeed, theories, like prejudices, would seem to be one of the principal causes of misrecognition, since they tend to make the other an object whose only value is to confirm our suspicions or prove our point of view. As long as mutually congenial outcomes occur, our Martian anthropologist might argue, it does not matter whether one begins, or ends, with a clear understanding of what one is doing, an empathic understanding of the other, or even knowledge of oneself.

My interest here is in what Pierre Bourdieu (2000), deferring to Pascal, calls scholastic fallacies. The first is the assumption that identity and knowledge are stable and intrinsic properties of persons and groups. It is this fallacy that produces the spurious phenomenological question: how can one *really* understand what another is thinking, feeling or intending?<sup>1</sup> The question is spurious because whatever the mindset or disposition of self or other, thoughts and feelings transpire in the intersubjective, transitive or potential space *between* us that go beyond the initial situation and cannot be explained by referring back to it (Arendt 1958; Jackson 1998; James 1976; Winnicott 1974). This is the meaning of Sartre's notion of *dépassement* and Hannah Arendt's notion of natality. Despite the ineradicable effects of past experiences – some

harrowing, some unremarkable – something irreducibly new is born of every human encounter, and it is the possibility of this newness that explains the perennial hope that inheres in every human relationship, countering the cynicism and despair that arise whenever we fail to get our message across, find that our meaning has been missed, or become frustrated at not being recognised for who we are. As in games of chance, so in life, the possibility of a change in fortune accompanies every new throw of the dice, every new deal of the cards, every new spin of the wheel. The second scholastic fallacy is to assume that human interactions are primarily motivated by the kinds of abstract ideas and rational calculations – cultural, economic or political – that are typically adduced retrospectively in accounting for what has transpired. In fact, every human encounter involves far more than meets the eye and, as with icebergs, what is visible is only a fraction of what lies beneath or on the periphery of consciousness. Of this extra-epistemological domain that we cannot pin down conceptually, Pierre Bourdieu speaks of a ‘logic of practice’ that lies at the limits of discursive reason and cannot easily be put into words (1990: 86).<sup>2</sup>

There is a long-standing humanist assumption in anthropology, first spelled out by Bronislaw Malinowski, that our goal is “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world” (1922: 25). Though we most certainly get closer to this goal by taking the time to live in the ‘native’s’ own community and communicate with her on her own terms than if never talked to her at all and relied solely on hearsay or other people’s accounts of her experience, few anthropologists these days would claim that is possible to see the world as another sees it, or achieve the kind of Archimedean view from afar that enables us to wholly grasp the concatenation of factors that might account for another person’s behaviour or her way of seeing the world. But despite being skeptical about the possibility of gaining a conceptual knowledge of the other, we would not want to say that this precludes the possibility of the kind of affinity and recognition that is the basis of all friendship and love. And so we arrive at an apparent paradox. Given the misrecognition, *méconnaissance*, discursive incommensurability and sheer incredulity that inform every intersubjective and intercultural encounter, how is it that mutuality is at all possible?

## Return to Kabala

When I finally returned to Sierra Leone in January 2001, after the ten years of civil war, everything lay in ruins. In Kabala, saplings and long grass had grown up through the shattered masonry of houses sacked and pillaged by the RUF in November 1994, and when I went looking for familiar landmarks I found only a ghost town. At the old Post Office, now boarded up, a watchman was dozing on a mat on the porch; he had no idea when postal services would resume, or whether he would ever be paid for his vigil. Further along the road I passed abandoned or derelict houses that had once been occupied by the Kabala hospital staff, and in Yogomaia I identified the gutted home of the Fula paramount chief, whose son completed a medical degree in Italy and postdoctoral studies in Germany on yellow fever before returning home to practice medicine.

Even in 1970, when he treated my wife and I for malaria, Dr Jallo complained about his lack of medical supplies, his inability to relieve the suffering around him. Where was he now? And Father Joseph, the principal of the Kabala Secondary School, presently the headquarters of the Bangladeshi UN contingent; what had become of his Herculean efforts to make a difference here? I retraced my steps to the market, mindful of the speeches, slogans ("One people, one country") and promises I had heard from politicians at the Kabala football field the day before – upgraded roads, a reliable electricity supply, interest-free loans for farmers, dispensaries, schools, bridges. Mostly I was struck by the seeming impossibility of any change for the better. All people could do was hope, beg, petition and endure. In a ramshackle building near the market, Abdulai Fofona showed me a letter from "the redundant workers of the Ministry of Works, Kabala" in which he and others begged the Minister of Works to compensate them for having had their employment terminated without pay on July 1 1993. Although some had received back pay, the rebel destruction of Kabala in 1994 prevented others from receiving theirs. Could I intercede on their behalf?

Another young man, whose name I cannot recall, told me he was going to set up an NGO as a way of attracting foreign investment to Kabala. "What would his NGO actually do?" I asked. He didn't know. He seemed to think that the acronym had some magical power to attract wealth, like the airstrips in the Melanesian bush laboriously cleared to attract European aircraft loaded with cargo.

Beset by the apparent hopelessness of these attempts to communicate with the powers-that-be, let alone extract some reparations or material assistance from them, I looked around for L.K. Kamara's bar, forgetting for a moment that L.K. was dead and his bar, together with the old market, long gone.

It was then that I remembered Mamina Yegbe and *his* petition, *his* struggle for recognition, and the misunderstandings that seemed to dog him wherever he went.

My wife and I had arrived in Kabala at the beginning of the dry season of 1969, and though the name of the town had nothing to do with the Hebrew *qabbalah* and its esoteric traditions of cosmic union and interpretation (it means, simply, 'Kabba's Place'), it had been like an augury for us and drawn us to it.

In my first few weeks in Kabala I undoubtedly cut a ridiculous figure. Linguistically inept, socially disoriented, anomalous in appearance, and preoccupied by questions the point of which no one could grasp, it was perhaps inevitable that I would end up in the company of misfits.

Mamina Yegbe was at least seventy – small, spry, and always, it seemed to me, slightly bemused. Though my field-assistant Noah Marah pointed out that Mamina Yegbe had lost his marbles, and tried to dissuade me from setting too much store by what he told me, I felt at ease in the old man's company and often sought him out at the town chief's house near the Kabala market, buying him packets of tobacco in gratitude for his tolerance of my stilted Kuranko.

"The world began in Mande," Mamina Yegbe said. "But yesterday and today are not the same. Whatever sun shines, that is the sun in which you have to dry yourself." And forgetting that Sierra Leone had been an independent state since 1961, he added decisively, "We are now in the period of the whiteman's rule."

He could remember when this period began before the Cameroon War (World War 1), and recalled the names of Palmer and Captain Leigh who built the barracks at Gbankuma before the British moved to Falaba. He also described the first barracks at Kabala, built on the site of today's town market, and told me when the frontier was fixed, and when the Court Messenger Force and the Chiefdom Police were inaugurated. And he recounted how taxes were paid to District Commissioner Warren – or Warensi as he was known. Initially the hut tax was two shillings and sixpence, but later rose to five then to nine shillings, and finally to one pound five shillings, and one pound ten shillings per head.

"In those days, people were happy," Mamina Yegbe told me. "We were happy with our government. All the chiefs had their favorite music, and whenever the chiefs assembled, the jelibas would play. Chiefs Belikoro, Konkofa, Sinkerifa – I knew them all."

At the District Officer's office one morning, I was working through a stack of intelligence diaries and daybooks from the colonial period, hoping to corroborate Mamina Yegbe's recollections of local history. Around me the clerks were busy with their own bureaucratic chores, filing memoranda, moving dog-eared files from the 'out' tray of one desk to the 'in' tray of another, sharpening pencils, or fetching ice-cold Coca-Colas for the D.O.

Before being allowed to inspect the records, I had been obliged to submit five copies of my application, all typed, signed, sealed in official envelopes, stamped and countersigned. It did not take very long, however, before I was ruining the effort, and my eyes wandered – to the whitewashed wall where two wasps were adding yet another accretion of moist red clay to their nest, and beyond the barred windows of the office where the leaves of an enormous mango tree hung limply in the heat. I closed the daybook and made to go.

At that instant, two clerks deserted their desks and asked for a lift to the market.

As I switched on the ignition I caught sight of Mamina Yegbe sitting on a rock under the mango tree, smoking his Bavarian pipe with the hinged metal lid.

"Do you want a lift?" I called, and gestured in the direction of the market.

Mamina Yegbe clambered up into the front seat of the Land Rover, beside the clerks. As usual he was wearing an embroidered tunic and a blue silk cap with a tassel, and looked like a Mandarin. He sat bolt upright with an almost smug expression on his face, holding against his chest a large manila envelope marked in capital letters ON SIERRA LEONE GOVERNMENT SERVICE. The envelope was embellished with ornate signatures and sealed in several places with red wax. It resembled a Saul Steinberg drawing.

The clerks were clearly amused by the envelope.

"What's the joke?" I asked.

The first clerk winked at me, then nodded toward Mamina Yegbe who was gazing straight ahead. The other clerk dodged the question by suddenly recognizing two friends sauntering along the road.

"Mosquito!" he yelled. "Heh! Peacecorps!" And he hung his arm out the window of the Land Rover.

A thin, gangly youth who answered to the first description, and his companion, wearing faded jeans with frayed cuffs, lifted their arms to wave, but the dust in the wake of the vehicle enveloped them.

After dropping the clerks at the market, I sought to satisfy my curiosity about the envelope.

“What is it?” I asked.

The old man continued to gaze straight ahead, but raised a finger to his lips as if to enjoin silence. He then got down from the Land Rover and without a word disappeared into a crowd around the kola-nut traders.

That night I drove back into Kabala from One-Mile to buy some cold Fanta at Lansana Kamara’s bar. The bar was a shabby and poky corner room that opened onto a verandah and the marketplace. It was furnished with several warped and dusty shelves, a battered deep freeze, and five armchairs with polystyrene foam bulging out through rents in the red vinyl upholstery. The jangling strains of a hi-life hit issued from a dilapidated record player at one end of the bar. “I really love you, Fati Fatiii ... “

Lansana Kamara did not particularly like hi-life tunes, and whenever business was slack he would get out his records from Guinea and, with tears welling up in his eyes, listen to the stirring refrains of praise-songs from old Mali.

On the walls of L.K.’s bar were several fly-specked calendars showing beaming Africans in open-necked shirts holding aloft bottles of Vimto, Fanta or Star beer. L.K. disdained such drinks.

With a lugubrious air he poured himself another large Martell brandy and a Guinness chaser.

I bought what I wanted and was about to go when I noticed Mamina Yegbe in the corner, surrounded by a dozen boisterous youths, among them the two clerks from the D.O.’s office. One of them made a remark that I could not catch, but it drew a burst of taunting laughter from the others, and the old man shrank back as if from a blow. I saw that Mamina Yegbe was still holding the big envelope, only now it had been ripped open, and bits of sealing wax littered the floor among the beer-bottle caps.

When the old man saw me he seemed to regain his composure, but before either of us could speak one of the clerks confronted me with bloodshot eyes and beery breath.

“He says it’s from Seku Touré and Siaka Stevens!” the clerk roared. “That envelope! He says they’ve given him a big country in Guinea and a million pounds cash! He says he’s coming to the D.O. tomorrow to collect it!”

Everyone broke into laughter. Then they looked at me, waiting for my reaction.

The clerk became angry. “He says he’s going to be appointed to a high position, in the government!” he shouted, as if I had failed to understand the situation. “It’s all in the letter!”

I glanced at Mamina Yegbe, who raised a finger to his lips and smiled ingenuously. I appealed to L.K. for a clue as to what was going on, but L.K. simply smoothed his knitted singlet over his enormous belly, lowered his eyes, and took another sip of brandy.

The clerk, exasperated by my stupidity, lurched over to the old man, wrenched the envelope from his grasp, and shook out its contents onto the bar. L.K. dolefully moved

his glass to one side as his customers pawed at the sheaf of papers, spreading them out so that I could see what they were.

I recognized several old G.C.E. examination papers, some official memoranda and letters, and a page from my own field notes. I could not think how it had come into the old man's possession.

Stabbing at the papers, the clerk drew my attention to a bundle of leaflets, all advertisements for Surf washing powder.

"This is the letter from the prime minister!" the clerk hooted. Can't you see what it is?"

I recalled a Volkswagen Kombi that had turned up outside the market a few days before. A large display packet of soap-powder had been fitted to the roof rack, and a loudspeaker blared out hi-life tunes. Four or five men in sunglasses and pale blue shirts had gone about distributing leaflets and occasionally giving away sample packets of Surf. In the afternoon the vehicle, still crackling with canned music, disappeared in a cloud of dust up the road toward Falaba.

"Yes, I can see what it is."

I knelt down and started picking up the papers that had fallen on the floor. They were already smudged with red dirt from the clerks' shoes.

The jokers appeared embarrassed by this crazy show of sympathy for the old man. They backed out onto the porch, making half-hearted gibes and clutching their bottles of beer. L.K. stared morosely at his glass of Guinness.

"Do you want a lift home?" I asked Mamina Yegbe.

"Awa."

I looked down the unlit street, thinking *the generator's gone again* and wanting to say this to Mamina Yegbe. I also wanted to ask the old man, now sitting in silence in the Land Rover beside me, if he still intended to present his letter to the D.O. and claim his fortune, but it might have seemed like another taunt. What simple faith we all place in the power of printed words, these fetishized markings on a page – the clerks, this benignly deluded old man, myself!

The headlights picked out the mosque and the grove of palms beyond it.

"I'm going back to Barawa on Friday," I said.

Mamina Yegbe made no response.

"I'll come and see you before I go."

In the darkness the town gave forth the sounds of its invisible life: a dog yelping, shouts, a radio badly tuned, an inconsolable child crying, a motor scooter spluttering down a potholed lane, the drubbing of an initiation drum.

I drew up outside the house with the broken veranda where Mamina Yegbe lived.

"*Ma sogoma yo*," I said, as the old man got down.

Mamina Yegbe stood on the roadside in the glare of the headlights.

"In the old days people were happy," he said. Then he turned and drifted into the darkness.

Almost all his life, Mamina Yegbe lived under a colonial regime. He had imagined it to be like chieftaincy – a source of order and benevolent power. If the great Belikoro



could conjure thunderstorms at will and slay his enemies with lightning bolts, then surely the British Crown or the Presidents of Sierra Leone and Guinea could pay him his due, and make good what he was owed. The clerks in the D.O.'s office, who so mercilessly ridiculed him, were no less in thrall to wishful thinking. Indeed it was the maddeningly elusive nature of fortune in the postcolonial world that compelled them to perform their derision of Mamina Yegbe so publicly. And what of today? What had changed? People had now picked up the jargon of democracy and development, of human rights, post-traumatic stress disorder, truth and reconciliation. This was the lingo of the new colonisers, the language one needed to speak in order to find work with the various NGOs that were rebuilding the country. My friend Mats Utas describes an ex-combatant called Alvin who had formed an NGO with 235 other ex-RUF youth. Alvin was the director or, in his words, 'Commander' of this outfit with the catchy name and acronym. Others officials were listed on a stamp-embellished page as Chief Security Officer, Suicide Commander, and Friendly Force Commander, and all were interested, Alvin told Mats, in working on "trauma healing" and the three Rs – rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation. It is not my intention to scoff at these mimetic responses to the invasion of a new colonial culture whose "civilizing mission" is to end corruption and bring democracy to Africa. It is, rather, to highlight the paradox and plight of people who are socially and educationally excluded from the very world whose language and culture they struggle to master in order to improve their lot. And though many of the foreign NGOs in countries like Sierra Leone have even less conversancy with local culture than young Sierra Leoneans have of the West, their position of greater power prevents them from having to come to terms with their ignorance. But like the clerks who mocked Mamina Yegbe, their own indigent understanding is displaced onto others, while they remain blind to the absurdity of their own proliferating paperwork, their detailed reports and buzzwords like partnership, participation and empowerment, none of which were improving the lot of ordinary Sierra Leoneans or connected to the issues with which the villagers were concerned.

But perhaps this isn't the best way of framing the question of intercultural understanding, for though Mamina Yegbe was, in my eyes, not simply mistaken in his beliefs but a little mad, our marginality brought us together. While he, an old man, had outlived the historical period in which he had had a place, I was on the outer edge of another culture in which I was still to find my feet. In its naivety, its narrow horizons, its wild speculations and desperate hope, Mamina Yegbe's millenarian dreams bore comparison with the fugitive and child-like understanding I possessed at that time of the Kuranko world.

We are so used to construing understanding as a meeting of two minds, an intellectual empathy or compatibility between separate selves, that we often overlook the extent to which human affinities reflect forms of mutual recognition that are difficult to put into words or pin down. When Hans-Georg Gadamer writes that "Every finite situation has its limitation" and that our particular "vantage-points" delimit our range of vision and our "horizons" (1989: 302), this does not mean that the limits of *thought* are where we cease thinking; rather, they are thresholds where we have recourse to



modes of understanding that reach beyond language and reason, and it is upon these thresholds that our prejudices give way to alternative ways of seeing ourselves and the world – a place, as it were, where horizons fuse (388).<sup>1</sup> Even when an anthropologist cannot comprehend or morally accept what an informant takes to be true, he or she may nonetheless feel a profound sympathy or sense of identification with the other.

This was certainly true of my friendship with Saran Salia Sanoh, who I met through his classificatory nephew, Noah Marah, during the dry season of 1969-1970, though even before our visit to Firawa, Noah had told me about his uncle, who was a powerful medicine master (*besetigi*).

Though now elderly, unmarried and living alone, Saran Salia had been appointed Leader of the Young Men (*keminetigi*) by the Barawa chief Tala Sewa Marah, and he invariably had several uninitiated boys living under his roof, protecting them from the forces of witchcraft and sorcery to which children are particularly vulnerable. But despite his formidable reputation, he was frail, and he came to see me at Noah's brother's house one morning, complaining of sharp pains in his arm and shoulder. The reason was obvious; his right hand was swollen with septicaemia. Among the few medicines I had brought with me from Cambridge was a supply of penicillin. I gave the old man two tablets, and instructed him to swallow them with water, one now, and one in the evening. Then twice a day for the following week, I tracked him down and ensured that he took his pills. To my great relief the swelling subsided and his pain went away, leaving me to wonder whether he, for all his expertise in magical medicines, would see me now in a new light and agree to talk to me, with Noah's mediation, about his life as a medicine master.

Although Saran Salia recognised my interest, nine years would pass before he opened up to me. When I brought my wife Pauline and our nine-year old daughter Heidi to live in Firawa in early 1979, Saran Salia insisted that we occupy his house. And so, after resurfacing the walls with white clay, installing mat ceilings and some borrowed sticks of furniture, we moved in and Saran Salia moved out. But hardly a day passed that he did not come to our porch for cups of tea and idle talk, or simply to sit in our hammock and doze through the heat of the day.

I can see him now, standing in the compound and looking at me. His hair is grizzled, his few remaining teeth are kola-stained, and he is holding his stave across the back of his shoulders, his hands hanging loose at either end. With his shoulder blades drawn back, his head is forced forward so that when he peers at me it as if we share some secret. I can only guess his age, but when he speaks his face becomes animated as though the events and emotions he recalls in such detail have returned him to a previous incarnation.

Our first conversations were about his early life.

"From my birth, I was in the hands of my elders. Year after year, we made our farms, until I donned the clothes of manhood. My parents favored me. I was eating sweetly [I was well looked after]. And when my parents died, my elder brother Malfore Sano looked after me, and I was eating sweetly there as well. After he died, I chased after Kome [a powerful djinn]. I drew the Kome rope for twenty-eight years, until my brother's son, the Alhaji, told me, 'Leave it!' And so my hand left it. Then

Chief Sena Lai of Bandakarafaia made me his messenger (*worli*). I was sweet there, and when he died, his younger brother Damba Lai made me his messenger. I lived sweetly there until he died. Then this child of mine, the Alhaji, called me to Firawa. He said, 'You can live sweetly here'. So he made a farm for me, cooked rice for me, and up until today there has been no hardship on my head. Even when my wives died, the Alhaji and his brother Lahai built this house for me and said, 'Father, live here; you don't have to farm any more; you're unable to work, so live here and rest. Let us feed you; you are old; live sweet.' So things are good. And as for you [meaning me], you like me, and I like you. You like my children, and my children like you. If you have come to ask me to tell you all I know from my childhood up to now, that is what I will do."

Though Saran Salia voiced no complaints about his childhood, the deaths of his parents not long after his initiation marked a tragic turning point in his life, leaving him fearful and uncertain. One morning, our conversation turned to his childhood fears – of the djinn, of witches, of the masters of the korte medicines, and of the dead. Saran Salia told me that initiation involved of mastering such fears and, by extension, mastering one's emotions – a matter of acquiring fortitude (*yuse gbele*, lit. 'a hard heart'), bravery (*kerenteye*), self-confidence (*kalai nyerela*, lit. 'belief self in') and new understanding (*hankili kura*). But becoming master of the Kome cult involved more than self-control; it meant becoming an object of fear oneself. As a boy, Saran Salia had been fascinated by Kome. He both feared it and felt it was "something out of the ordinary." During his initiation, he was impressed by the gifts the Kometigi (Kome master) received and the power he commanded. "When I first saw it I wanted to be it," he said. "As Kometigi, everyone fears you, but you fear no one because you have been immunized against all the harmful medicines."

Saran Salia's decision to become Kometigi was precipitated by the breakup of his first marriage.

"The time I decided was when they took a certain woman away from me by force [i.e. another man ran away with his first wife with the connivance of her father]. That man taunted me. 'Show me that your iron can cut my iron!' he said to me. 'If you are a man, then do what you will!' I said, 'Me?' There and then I took up the Kome rope. You understand? Whoever sees Kome, dies!"

Shortly after, Saran Salia's errant wife, her lover, and her father died. Though I pressed him on the matter, Saran Salia would neither admit nor deny that he had deliberately used his power as Kometigi or his knowledge of magical medicines to kill them. But he did use a cryptic phrase that I would return to time and time again in the years that followed, "There are many ways that birds fly in the sky."

Over the next few days, Saran Salia spoke to me at length about his three-year apprenticeship in Guinea, in the course of which he acquired a comprehensive knowledge of curative, prophylactic and lethal medicines. He explained why he had forsworn the use of such lethal medicines as korte and refused to place his knowledge at the disposal of clients wishing to avenge slights or redress injustices through sorcery. Not only could I understand the logic of Kuranko medicine; I admired Saran Salia's decision to use his skills to cure and protect, not to kill.

We were talking one morning about the power one possessed as Kometigi when Saran Salia confided that he was no longer free to practice medicine. Much to his chagrin, his classificatory sons had invoked Islamic law, and obliged him to renounce his old practices as a precondition for them talking care of him in his old age. "But even now," he said, "when the xylophones and flutes play the music of the Kome and sing its songs, I long to dance." And Saran Salia began chanting, in a quavering voice: *Sembe, sembe, sembe le, Kome la, eh Kome wo; n'de min i le nyonto ken yen ...* (Kome has great power; its equal has never been seen).

Sensing that now the time had finally come, I broached the question I had wanted to ask Saran Salia ten years ago, when I first came to Firawa. "What is Kome?"

Saran Salia's voice became a hoarse whisper. "Kome does not come from the bush. I am Kome.<sup>4</sup> I dress myself up. It is me they dress up. If our eyes met when I was like that you would fall to the ground in fear. But I am old now. I cannot do it any more."

Saran Salia went on to explain how he acquired these special powers during his apprenticeship with a medicine master called Yamisa from the town of Sigiri in Mali.

"If you are to draw the Kome rope you must first wash yourself thoroughly. You go downstream, and your teacher (*karamorgo*) goes upstream. He changes himself into a snake. It comes toward you through the water [With his forearm and bent wrist, Saran Salia showed me how it swam with its head above the surface]. It wraps around you. After it has wrapped around you, your teacher comes and tells you to leave it. He then takes some leaves and the head of a person who has been dead for seven days. He places the leaves and the head in a fire he has lit in a hole in the ground. You sit in the smoke. The smoke fumigates [lit. 'steams'] you. It immunizes you [lit. 'you imbibe the "steam"'] against all harmful medicines. If anyone tries to fight you, he will die."

I later discovered that it is actually the gown that is fumigated and thereby acquires the power to retaliate against an assailant. But the wearer of the gown is always in control. "If flies settle on me, they die," Saran Salia explained. "If a person slaps me, he will die. But if I go like this [Saran Salia slapped his thigh, signifying that he, and not the gown, was retaliating], the gown will cool and the assailant will not die."

I was bewildered. I found it hard to picture the events that Saran Salia had described, and was not sure I would want to witness them even if invited to. But Saran Salia's willingness to share this knowledge with me created a covenant between us and bound us in a kind of conspiracy, for this was far from common knowledge. Perhaps he did not expect me to understand. After all, Kuranko were as aware of *tubabu* skepticism as they were of Muslim dogmatism. This is why I think that Saran Salia opened up to me out of respect and affection, not because he thought I would accept or approve what he had to say. It was something given in exchange for the regard I had shown him, on a par with his allowing my family to live in his house. But this liking was also born, I think, of the fact that I recognized him as the person he was in his own eyes. Badgered by his classificatory sons into giving up his lifelong roles as *besetigi* and Kometigi, he nonetheless could, in my company, find at least the semblance of respect that his own kinsmen had withheld from him, despite their attention to his physical needs.

That there were limits to our capacity for comprehending each other's worldviews was made very clear the following day in a conversation that began with Noah asking his uncle to fumigate a gown for him.

"You will provide the cloth?" Saran Salia asked.

"Yes, I will bring it to you today."

Then Saran Salia looked at me. "If you want it, I will also do it for you and you can take it with you when you go back to your own country."

"But could I become a Kometigi and use the korte medicines?" I asked half-jokingly.

"That is impossible. You could not take the medicines to your own country. Besides, you are not used to the Kome. If you saw it, you would shit your pants in fright!"

"If you have that fear deep down," Noah explained, "korte will act. But if you don't believe it, it won't act on you. If you have the fear in you, Oh they're going to shoot me with this korte, you will die then. But you must have that fear of it."

And so the line was drawn. This was not my *habitus*. I could not enter it through an act of intellectual effort alone. Just as Noah had said, certain things are possible only when you are a part of a community that shares the same belief in their possibility, just as many actions are efficacious only when supported by faith in their efficacy. This faith is not something one can acquire or feign; it comes from being raised in a particular culture, an outcome not of formal instruction but of mimetic learning and osmosis.

We encounter other cultures as we encounter other persons, both in terms of the ideas with which we conventionally frame our understanding of reality and in terms of experiences that confound, contradict or cannot easily be contained within the frame. This helps explain why one can be drawn to, and even feel a deep affinity for, someone whose political or religious opinions one does not share, and why friendship universally transgresses the boundaries of gender, age, ethnicity and belief. This is also why the assumption that we may arrive at mutual understanding through intercultural or intellectual *dialogue* is deeply flawed, since worldviews tend to support particular standpoints even when pretending to embrace universal principles. Fortunately, the grounds of our common humanity lie beyond belief, transcending the *doxa* whose reified forms entrap us in a sense of being uniquely right or righteous. These grounds include human capacities for communication, recognition and fellowship that do not depend on speech and conceptual thought. Moreover, what is striking about human interaction is that while it is seemingly dyadic, it invariably involves a third party, a shared goal, a common cause, whose presence is often shadowy or unspoken. Empathy or fellow-feeling is greatest, then, not when two people mirror each other but when both are bound together in relation to something shared – parents joined in raising their children, villagers engaged in cooperative labor, neighbors sitting together in amicable silence and solidarity. Kuranko speak of sociality as a matter of moving together, moving as one. And perhaps the most powerful expression of this capacity for transcending age, gender, ethnic and ideological differences is the capacity for love and friendship, which, in Kuranko, is covered by the word, *dienye*, the same word Saran Salia used in describing his liking for me. Not only are love and friendship

(*dien'morgoye* or *kentiye*) free of the *social* duties and obligations that characterize kinship and affinity; such relationships reflect *natural* dispositions, fortuitous meetings and free choices. As such, friendships cross class and category lines, and even transcend culture.

"To be in a relationship with someone," writes Robert Orsi, "is not necessarily to understand him or her; but the relationship, which arises always on a particular social field and is invariably inflected by needs, desires, and feelings, conscious and not, that draw on both parties' histories and experiences, becomes the context for understanding" (2005: 6). But how could one possibly unravel and reveal all the biographical and cultural experiences, all the inflected needs and emotions, that defined the "context for understanding" my relationships with Saran Salia and Mamina Yegbe? And is it not the impossibility of comprehending this complicated background that inclines us to speak of love and friendship as mysterious, inexplicable, and even miraculous? This is, I think, what Merleau-Ponty meant when he wrote, echoing Husserl's notion of the 'natural knowledge that begins with experience (*Erfahrung*)' (Husserl 1931: 45), that "we must learn to find communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world" (1962: 353).

In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception (ibid: 353).

But what precisely was this 'world' that belonged neither to me nor to Saran Salia alone? Partly it consisted in a sense of having undergone similar travails, the sort of experience that Sue Monk Kidd is alluding to when she writes, in *The Secret Life of Bees*, of "the wounded places down inside people that sought each other out, that bred a kind of love between them" (2002: 184). Partly, too, it was a conspiratorial sense of being privy to experiences that were not universally shared and, in the case of Saran Salia's classificatory sons, actively censured. Perhaps every intimate relationship participates in this tacit agreement that what transpires within the relationship belongs to it, and should not be made public. That Kuranko regard adultery as 'darkening' or 'spoiling' relationships in the public sphere is a reflection of the way adultery transgresses this unspoken line between what belongs within the house and what belongs to the village – between what should be 'concealed' (*duguro*) and what should be 'open' (*kenema*). Like divulging the secrets of the men's or women's cults, adultery betrays the covenant that sets "private" relationships apart from the more inclusive public sphere.

But living together itself creates a form of understanding, irrespective of what is said or unsaid, what is done or not done, or even whether there is affection or not. This is the meaning of *metanoia*, the transformation that occurs within and the newness that is born of every intersubjective encounter, constituting the perennial possibility of mutual recognition and human coexistence. Often, I just sat and whiled away the time with Saran Salia. He would grate kola on a tobacco tin lid that he had pierced with a

nail. I would boil water and make tea. But that was all. For I had learned that sociality may be consummated in silence and can do without words, just as every writer learns that it is sometimes more effective to show than to tell.

Among my dog-eared fieldnotes from the dry season of 1979, I found this paragraph, written the day after my family's departure from Firawa. It speaks for itself.

On Thursday we made ready to go. We distributed our possessions among friends and neighbors: Musu, Alhaji Hassan, Saran Salia ... Saran Salia hung back, his face long, his chest heaving with deep sighs. It pained me to see him so disturbed by our going. Our friendship had been strange and profound, crossing so many barriers in a mutual sympathy and liking that is rare. I told him I had no regrets in going, that I had not been disappointed in anything, and added the usual platitudes about departures meaning reunions in future. But I guess he knew that we would probably not meet again. He was old, and keenly aware of his growing infirmity. Despite my words, a somberness remained about him, and my heart went out to him, that death might prevent us ever seeing each other again. Then he seemed to gather himself together and, taking a machete from the porch, he walked to the end of the backyard and cut a bunch of bananas from the bedraggled palm and brought it back and gave to us as a gift against our journey. I could read the meaning of this gesture in the light of the Kuranko metaphor for kinship. The bananas on a single stalk are all one, but those on a single hand are especially one" (*Barana n'dama na keli, ma koni katara min bi birindi kela ma.*

## Notes

Michael Jackson has carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Sierra Leone (1969-70, 1972, 1979, 1983, 2002, 2003) and Aboriginal Australia (1990, 1991, 1994, 1997). The author of numerous books of anthropology, including the prize-winning *Paths Toward a Clearing* and *At Home in the World*, his ongoing fieldwork focuses on Sierra Leonean expatriates in London. He is currently Distinguished Professor in World Religions at the Harvard Divinity School. E-mail: [mjackson@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:mjackson@hds.harvard.edu)

- 1 As Kuranko observe, "*Morgo te do ka ban.*" A person can never be fully understood. "*N'de ma konto lon.*" I don't know the inside story. "*N'de sa bu'ro.*" I don't know what's in the belly.
- 2 Although Bourdieu speaks of the ethnographic interview as informed by "a sort of *intellectual love*" and being "a sort of *spiritual exercise*, aiming to obtain, through *forgetfulness of self*, a true *transformation of the view* we take of others in the ordinary circumstances of life" (1996: 24), his commitment remains to a way of knowing the other via "the social conditions of which she is the product" (21).
- 3 I am indebted to Francis Clooney for pointing out to me the relevance of Gadamer's notion of horizon to my argument, and for his edifying work on the fusion of horizons in Vedic texts (2004).
- 4 The force of this simple declaration should not be underestimated. Uninitiated people and women believe that Kome is a "bush thing" (*fira ro fan*) like animals and djinn, certainly not a person.

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