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CUISINE AND POWER IN THE SUNJATA EPIC AND IN WEST AFRICA

Abstract. This article discusses cuisine in Guinea-Conakry and its representation in the literary tradition of Sunjata. Many key events involving women in the epic of Sunjata center on their role as cooks and cuisine provides female protagonists with the resources they use to demonstrate their heroic abilities and competence. Heroic status in the epic requires both magical abilities and social recognition through elegiac praise sung by griots. This article shows how the relationship between heroes and heroines reveals the deeper Mande value of gender complementarity in society. Heroines do not fight on the open plains or track game in the bush, but rather the kitchen becomes their battlefield and they often play key roles in matters of national significance through their culinary activities.

Not only does cuisine take on heroic proportions in this Mande literary tradition, but it also continues to play an important social function in modern Guinea. Through the activity of cuisine, Mande diaspora women in Conakry demonstrate artistic ability that is both acknowledged and respected by men. Building on the idea of complementarity, Nelson considers the importance of cuisine as an element of feminine identity in modern-day Guinea. Adapted from Nelson's 2018 master's thesis at Dallas International University, this article explores the activity of cuisine both through library research involving comparisons of a variety of published versions of Sunjata, and through fieldwork in Guinea-Conakry where Nelson focused on values and perspectives regarding cuisine. During her fieldwork, Nelson studied cuisine and she analyzes it here using the "seven lens" approach to highlight its artistic elements and cultural significance.

Keywords: epic, Sunjata, cuisine, Guinea, gender, women's studies, griots, heroines, Mande studies, magic.

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Кухня и сила в эпосе «Сундьята» и в Западной Африке

Аннотация. В этой статье обсуждается кухня в Гвинее-Конакри и её представление в литературной традиции Сундьята. Многие ключевые события, в которых участвуют женщины в эпосе «Сундьята», посвящены их роли кулинаров, что дает героям-женщинам ресурсы, которые они используют, чтобы продемонстрировать свою силу и компетентность. Героический статус в эпосе требует как магических способностей, так и общественного признания благодаря элегической похвале, которую поют гриоты (сказители). В этой статье показано, как отношения между героями и героинями раскрывают более глубокое значение гендерной взаимодополняемости в обществе у Манде. Героини не сражаются на открытых равнинах и не ищут следы в чащах, а, скорее, кухня становится их полем битвы, и они часто играют ключевые роли в вопросах национального значения благодаря своей кулинарной деятельности.

В этой литературной традиции Манде кухня не только принимает героические пропорции, но и продолжает играть важную социальную функцию в современной Гвинее. Посредством кулинарного искусства женщины из диаспоры Манде в Конакри демонстрируют художественные способности, которые признаются и уважаются мужчинами. Опираясь на идею взаимодополняемости, автор рассматривает важность кухни как элемента женской самоидентичности в современной Гвинее. Адаптированная переработка магистерской диссертации Х. В. Нельсон, выполненная в Международном университете Далласа, рассматривает деятельность кухни как с помощью библиотечных исследований, включающих сравнение различных опубликованных версий Сундьята, так и с помощью полевых работ в Гвинее-Конакри, где автор сосредоточил внимание на ценностях и перспективах кухни. Во время полевой работы Нельсон изучила

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кухню и анализирует ее здесь, используя подход «семь линз», чтобы подчеркнуть ее художественные элементы и культурную значимость.

Ключевые слова: эпос, Сундьята, кухня, Гвинея, пол, женские исследования, гриоты (сказители), героини, изучение Манде, магия.

Introduction

Food plays an important role in human society. Not only does food provide the raw material for sustaining life, but it is the medium through which humans communicate an array of social messages. Flavors, colors, and textures connect to identity, and the consumption of food in community reinforces and validates social ties. The people responsible for preparing food contribute in powerful but subtle ways to this cycle of social communion. In this article, I explore the use of cuisine as a heroic activity among women in the epic of Sunjata, and I consider cuisine as an expression of artistry and an element of feminine identity in a modern Mande diaspora setting. Although food is not perhaps the most prominent element in the epic, cuisine plays a role in the enactment of heroism among female protagonists, representing a facet of Mande cultural identity and providing a medium for artistic expression among modern Mande women.

Heroic cuisine

1. Heroes and heroines: The hunter and the cook

My analysis of heroines in the Sunjata epic does not center on the typical “hero’s journey,” but rather on the character traits that distinguish heroic behavior from the behavior of ordinary people. For the Mande hero, this means at least three things. Heroes must: 1) act in a way that makes them stand out from the general community [1, p. 13]; 2) control *nyama* [2, p. 9; 3, p. 105; 4, p. xxii]; and 3) receive elegiac praise [1, p. 21; 5].

In their article “The Mande Hero”, Bird and Kendall explain the concept of *badenya* and *fadenya* as two forces that act on society and on individuals. *Badenya* translates as “mother-childness”, and *fadenya*, “father-childness”. The former describes the influence of society on the individual and connects to the values of submission and cooperation within a community, and the latter refers to the drive for personal success, adventure, and glory. Bird and Kendall explain that the actions of a hero, “standing out in relief against the actions of others, point to a system of dynamic tensions holding between groups and individuals, between integrating and disruptive principles, between the ordinary and the extraordinary” [1, p. 13]. They note that although society operates largely on the *badenya* axis, heroes act on *fadenya*.

Regarding *fadenya*, McNaughton adds:

Fadenya, “father-childness”, by contrast identifies a very aggressive component of human character. It identifies the will to put oneself before the group, to act in defiance of it and to disrupt it if need be, in order to accomplish some personal goal. People whose characters are predominantly *Fadenya* do not fit well within the fabric of society. They live emotionally and very often physically out on the fringes of society, where they can feel free to move about without the encumbering structure of civilization constantly qualifying their actions. Most often their actions are dictated by the desire to achieve fame, to become renowned, ironically enough within the very society they shun [6, p. 55].

Therefore, the quality of *fadenya* in an individual is simultaneously necessary and dangerous. Such a person can perform great deeds of bravery, but this person’s character can also cause instability and social disruption if unrestrained. According to Bird and Kendall, the hero and his community have a symbiotic relationship because the hero needs his society in order to obtain praise, while society needs heroes at times to instigate necessary change.

In their efforts to achieve praise, however, Mande heroes must carefully master the use of *nyama*, which can be defined simply as a mystical force occurring in nature that special individuals can manipulate through supernatural means [1, 6, 7]. The use of *nyama* allows Sunjata and Fakoli to act heroically both as leaders and as hunters. The activity of hunting also requires *dalilu* (the ability to manipulate *nyama*), because hunting is associated with occult power [8]. According to Kouyaté, hunting was a major part of a freeborn Mande man’s daily activities at the time of Sunjata [9]. In modern Mande society, hunters occupy an ambiguous position, operating both within and outside of

normal social categories [6]. I cannot comment on the degree to which this was also representative of hunter-society relations in the past, but it may be that hunters felt the *badenya-fadenya* tension acutely. Although hunters operated frequently on the fringes of society and exercised *dalilu*, they also belonged to society as providers of food.

The last prerequisite for heroic status involves elegiac praise. Mande society remembers its heroes through the activities of traditional bards, *jeliw* (sing. *jeli*), more commonly referred to by their French label *griot*. Griots specialize in the singing of praises, epics, and many other forms of verbal art, including diplomacy [5]. Although not traditionally warriors or hunters themselves, griots also possess *nyama* because of the power contained in their words. Gentile notes:

“The concept of word-power is especially useful to understanding the position of the griot in Mali. Griots are members of a professional class of artists and artisans of endogamous lineages known as *nyamakalaw*, which also include potters, blacksmiths, and leatherworkers. The *nyamakalaw* hold an intensely ambivalent position in Mali society, for their specialized knowledge in their respective fields associates them with sorcery and the occult. They are both highly respected and feared” [10, p. 154].

Gentile’s comments show the power attributed to griots, and this further suggests the importance of their activities to the concept of heroism: griots preserve the glory of heroes. The interconnectedness between the activities of the griots and the activities of heroes also explains the relationship between traditional nobility and the griot castes. Historically, noble families served as patrons for griot families and griots sang the praises of the nobles [5, 11].

Hoffman suggests that the idea of complementarity accounts for both the relationship between griots and nobles and that between men and women. She also argues against the idea that the apparent subordination of women in Mande culture reveals actual male dominance. In her article “Gender Ideology and Practice in Mande Societies”, Hoffman maintains that although on the surface women accept a subordinate role, the roles of men and women are actually complementary. She also draws a parallel between the roles of women and of griots, stating that:

“The structural similarities between the roles of griots and the roles of women would suggest that a similar principle holds for women in Mande society: their acceptance of and submission to a public ideology of subordination gives them the cultural space in which to cultivate substantial quantities of actual power and effective authority” [12, p. 16].

Building on Hoffman’s observation, therefore, I argue that the idea of complementarity also helps clarify the activities of the Mande heroine. If a hero excels in the manly arts through the use of *nyama* and obtains social recognition through the songs of the griots, a heroine likewise surpasses other women by excelling in the arts of womanhood through her use of *nyama* and she is likewise remembered in the words of the griots. Considering the typical Mande hero in the role of hunter and warrior, it further fits within the idea of complementarity that the counterpart to a hunter-hero would be a cook-heroine. In this sense, both the hero and the heroine operate on the *fadenya* axis. The concept of *fadenya* helps to showcase specific behaviors as heroic because it represents them as individualistic, glorious, and potentially disruptive.

2. Heroines in the kitchen

I will briefly consider two episodes in the Sunjata epic involving women, in order to demonstrate the important role cooking plays in the enactment of heroic behavior for female protagonists: the insulting of Keleya and the insulting of Sogolon Kolonkan. In both these episodes, an important female character receives an affront to her honor (and notably, in each case the affront concerns her culinary activities), leading to a retaliation with political ramifications.

In the epic, during the time of Sunjata’s exile a rift occurs between Sumaworo Kanté, the tyrannical usurper-king of Sunjata’s homeland, and Sumaworo’s nephew and general of his armies, Fakoli Kourouma. The rift occurs because, during the preparation of a feast, Sumaworo’s many wives insult Keleya, the only wife of Fakoli. Specifically, in Djanka Tasseý Condé’s¹ version, their comments suggest that Keleya is an inadequate cook [4, p. 161]. Taking offense, Keleya reacts by preparing an amount of food equal to theirs: Fakoli’s one wife cooking the same quantity as Sumaworo’s hundreds of wives.

¹ Conrad’s text [13] is a transcribed, edited, and translated version of Condé’s performance.

Considering the qualifications of heroes previously mentioned (operating on the *fadenya* axis, exercising *nyama*, and receiving elegiac praise), I argue that Keleya's actions in this episode are both heroic and feminine. Since the principles of *badenya* would prompt Keleya to behave in a self-effacing, unobtrusive, and submissive manner, her behavior in this episode appears to possess the *fadenya* quality [cf. 6, p. 55]. Furthermore, *fadenya* behavior tends toward disruption, if necessary, for the sake of glory. Keleya disregards the consequences of her actions and proudly states, "the jelilu will bear witness to this" [4, p. 161]. Thus, Keleya exercises *dalilu* over her cooking pot, demonstrating her authority and magical abilities. Both her use of *nyama* and the fact that her exploit receives recognition affirm her status as an epic heroine. Her actions conform to the *fadenya* axis, causing her to stand out as an example of exceptional femininity, and in heroic fashion she defends her honor, heedless of the potential results.

As I mentioned previously, although heroes can be agents of disruption, society also depends on them to instigate change, because heroes do not fear danger and will take risks [cf. 1, p. 15]. In this episode, Keleya's behavior occurs in reaction to a personal insult, and the immediate result is negative – Sumaworo forcibly removes her from her husband, Fakoli, and claims her as his own. The long-term result, however, is Sunjata's victory because Fakoli abandons his uncle after losing his wife. In this sense, then, Keleya's enactment of *fadenya* behavior has long-term positive results because she sets off the chain reaction that leads to the restoration of the rightful king. Thus, as Bird and Kendall explain, although heroes are fundamentally disruptive, society recognizes the need for heroes by glorifying and remembering their brave actions [1].

In the second episode that showcases feminine heroic behavior, Sunjata's sister, Sogolon Kolonkan, must choose between conflicting responsibilities. Her actions reveal her ability to conform to social norms (*badenya*), but also her willingness to take risks in order to safeguard the honor of her family (*fadenya*). During Sunjata's exile, when emissaries from Manden arrive hoping to bring Sunjata back, Sunjata and his brother are out hunting; their sister, Kolonkan, must prepare food to welcome the guests. However, Kolonkan does not have any meat to put in the sauce. She searches for meat in the house, but finding none, she transports herself away to the bush where she finds her brothers' game. She quickly removes the parts she needs for her sauce and flies back. When her brothers return to their prey to butcher it, they recognize their sister's work and the younger brother, Manden Bori, becomes very angry. Belcher notes how Manden Bori's anger suggests that Kolonkan's action violates the hunter's right to dispose of his prey [10, p. 103-104]. In Djanka Tasseý Condé's version, Manden Bori mutters about Kolonkan showing off her *dalilu* – "Does she have to prove her female powers to us?" [4, p. 129] – suggesting that she only intends to flaunt her magical power. Upon returning home, Manden Bori is so angry that he chases Kolonkan around and grabs her wrap-skirt, causing it fall off. Kolonkan then curses Manden Bori, and the curse is said to be in effect over his descendants to this day [13, p. 214]. Sunjata, however, understanding the importance of hospitality, defends Kolonkan, who points out to Manden Bori that she acted in defense of his honor as well [10, p. 103-104].

As in the Keleya episode, Kolonkan's action revolves around the fulfilment of a social responsibility (cuisine) through exceptional means. Kolonkan achieves lasting fame because of her willingness to act outside of conventional patterns, even in her ambition to do her duty. Instead of waiting for her brothers to return with their game, she exercises *dalilu* and obtains what she needs. Her actions, though they fulfil a social requirement, are also disruptive and result in both positive and negative outcomes – Sunjata is honored among the Mande emissaries, but clan relations between the descendants of Manden Bori and Sunjata remain tense [4].

In both heroines, we see that their behavior mirrors that of their male counterparts, and yet the medium for the expression of their heroism involves cuisine, a distinctly feminine activity. Coming back to Hoffman's (2002) point – that male/female relationships in Mande society center on the idea of complementarity – the actions of Mande heroes and heroines reveal a complementary distribution [12]. Both reflect the same basic features (*fadenya* quality, control of *nyama*, and receiving praise), but they operate in different spheres of action. Heroes act in the world of hunting, politics, and warfare. Heroines operate within the home and kitchen, although their actions have equal social significance. Both Keleya and Kolonkan are aware of the potential ramifications of their actions and both choose

to act boldly. Most importantly, both Keleya and Kolonkan instigate events that pave the way toward Sunjata's destiny, and they do so over their cooking-pots.

Mande identity expressed through food

1. Cultural identity in the epic

Not only is cuisine a medium for the expression of heroic behavior on the part of female protagonists, but it also signifies cultural identity. The emissaries from Manden use ingredients (baobab leaves and seasonings) to find Sunjata. In his book *Food and foodways in African narratives: Community, culture, and heritage*, Highfield argues: "that they have chosen to find him by carrying foods from his homeland indicates that even in the thirteenth century it was clearly understood that foods from home signify identity" [14, p. 33]. Highfield also maintains the importance of Sogolon's last meal consisting of ingredients imported from her homeland – "in cooking and eating sauce made from the leaves she is distantly sharing a meal with the family and friends she left behind" [14, p. 34]. Furthermore, Highfield argues that Sunjata himself, by eating the food of Manden with the emissaries, is implicitly "accepting his role in the community as king" [14, p. 34].

Dembo Kanute's version of the epic highlights the connection between homeland and food. He notes:

You know yourself, Seni Darbo, that even if you are in Europe,
When you see something from your own country in the market,
This is the first thing you will buy [15, p. 283].

As a griot singing the most important epic of Manden, Dembo Kanute points out that foods from home have a power to attract the exiled individual. In the Sunjata story, Sogolon is overcome by a sudden desire to eat food from Manden and she sends Kolonkan to the market to look for something [4]. There Kolonkan meets the emissaries because they are selling ingredients unique to Mande cooking. The international performer Cheick Pénor also underscored the connection between food and identity in modern Mande culture, explaining that people often tease the Malinké (the Mande people of Guinea) by calling them "*bouffeurs de tô*" (meaning "eater of *tô*¹"). Of course, many cultures have similar food-related labels for people of other backgrounds,² but all this further underscores the deep connection between food and cultural identity.

The exchange of food in the epic also provides an illustration of the cultural values of generosity, hospitality, and social order. The Mande peoples place a high value on hospitality. Some of these values are represented in the epic and, in many instances, food lies at the root of a violation of a cultural value, or it occurs as the remedy. In Sisòkò's version, for example, the Buffalo-Woman begins her rampage in response to having been denied her fair share of a meal [2, p. 30-32]. The remedy to this insult rests in two hunters' willingness to humble themselves and share their food.

2. Food in the modern Mande world

Among the Conakry families with whom I interacted during my research, although the men did not hunt, cuisine remained primarily a feminine activity, just as it is in the epic. Historically, men bore the responsibility of providing meat, and women supplied vegetables [16, 9]. According to Kouyaté, the saying went that every Mandinka man was a hunter and each woman had her vegetable garden.³ Although today the roles of hunter and gardener have disappeared in the larger cities, the complementary relationship between husband and wife remains the same.

The term *tibilila*, meaning woman-cook, sheds some light on the importance of cooking to a modern Mande woman. During an interview, Cheick Pénor highlighted the value of the *tibilila* within both the home and the community: "*Tibilila* – the cook. She's the one who makes the family. If there's hunger in the family, you won't see anyone anymore. *Tibilila*, the cook. So sometimes we sing for them".⁴ His statement highlights both the role of the food which brings a family together and the woman who prepares the food, by her action gathering the family around the common dish. He also

¹ Millet paste similar to Nigerian fufu.

² For example, the French calling the English "roast-beef", the English calling the French "frogs", to list only a few.

³ Personal communication (2017).

⁴ Translation of: "*Tibilila* – la cuisinière. C'est elle qui fait la famille. Si y'a la faim dans la famille tu ne verras plus personne. *Tibilila*, la cuisinière. Donc des fois on les chante" (personal communication, July 2017).

emphasized the way in which a *tibilila* can impact her community by providing not only for her own, but also for the poor. He noted:

“Therefore, let us realize that there are more poor in the world than rich. If a woman understands this, after the evening meal, she invites the children of others and she gives them food, she is to be respected. Because those children, you’ll find in their families they don’t have money. Others don’t earn even one meal a day. But there are women, when there’s the common dish (because in the Manden we eat together) she brings in other children... Come eat! Come eat! She has pity. So these are women to respect and usually these are women who are well loved”.¹

Pénor’s comments show how essential the role of *tibilila* is within the family and community in a modern Mande setting. He even points out that a *tibilila* may receive elegiac praise. Just as the *jeliw* preserve the memory of Keleya’s culinary exploit, the role of a *tibilila* remains honored in the modern Mande world and represents an important component of feminine identity.

Culinary artistry among modern Mande women

1. Analysis

1.1. Seven lens analysis

During my stay in Conakry, I studied cuisine in the home of the family of Moussa Diabaté (my drum teacher in Dallas, Texas). I also interviewed several professional griots on the representation of cuisine as a medium for the expression of heroic behavior among Mande epic characters. During that time, I observed the preparation of approximately ten meals, and I made video recordings and took photos of the process and the results.

In his article “How Artists Create Enduring Traditions”, Schrag defines an artistic act as “one in which one or more creators draw on their personal competencies and their community’s symbolic systems to produce an event containing tangible artistry that has not existed previously in its exact form” [17, p. 419]. Applying Schrag’s assertion to my research, I argue that every act of cooking is a novel performance and produces a dish, drawing on the competencies of the cook and the community’s symbolic system surrounding the preparation and consumption of food. Rather than analyzing meals as individual events, however, I focused on the culinary process in general as a daily activity for women and families. The following analysis describes the process I observed and participated in with Marie-Hélène Camara-Bangora in Conakry, Guinea, in July 2017.

Using the metaphor of a lens, Schrag explains: “a lens is a piece of glass that has been polished or otherwise changed in a way that alters any light coming through it. Depending on its maker’s goal, someone who looks through a lens at an object may see that object as closer, farther, or perhaps with one color intensified” [18, p. 70]. Schrag proposes seven lenses by which to analyze an artistic event: Space, Materials, Participant Organization, Shape of the Event through Time, Performance Features, Content, and Underlying Symbolic Systems. He states that “each of these lenses may interact very closely with others, describing the same thing from a different perspective” [18, p. 70]. In this article, I focus only on those lenses which were the most revealing and productive for my research. The seven-lens analysis highlighted two main themes: the aesthetics of the genre (most evident in Performance features and Shape through time), and the social context of the genre (most evident in Space and Participant organization).

The Performance Features lens focuses on the behavior of the participants during the process. In the context of music or dance, for example, this would be the steps, facial expressions, or other noteworthy mannerisms that distinguish the performance. In the context of cuisine, this involves the behavior of the cook, including how she interacts with others and what she focuses on particularly during the culinary event. Mado² paid special attention to texture and flavor. She tasted the sauces at various points during the cooking process and made me do likewise. She also frequently asked if the sauce was “sweet” (a point I will return to later). Presentation was also important. Once the food was

¹ Translation of: “Donc considérons qu’il y plus de pauvres dans le monde que de riches. Si une femme se met dans ce cadre-là, après le repas du soir, elle fait venir les enfants d’autrui et elle leur sert à manger elle est à respecter. Parce que les enfants-là, tu trouveras que dans leurs familles ils n’ont pas de moyens. D’autres ne gagnent pas un seul repas par jour. Mais il y a des femmes, quand il y a le plat commun (parce que dans le Mandeng on mange ensemble) dans le même plat, elle fait venir les enfants d’autrui... Venez manger! Venez manger! Elle a pitié. Donc c’est des femmes à respecter et le plus souvent c’est des femmes beaucoup aimées” (personal communication, July 2017).

² The nickname of my teacher, Marie-Helene Camara-Bangora, and the name by which I refer to her in my research.

ready, Mado would arrange dishes around her little stool and carefully portion it out. She served the rice in carefully rounded mounds, smoothed out by a spoon dipped in water.

The Shape through Time lens focuses on the manner in which an artistic product or act evolves throughout the creative process. For a culinary event, this lens takes into account the process, from marketplace to dinner table, focusing mainly on the ingredients. In Conakry, the complete meal-making process took on average three to four hours from market to meal. All ingredients were purchased raw and fresh and were cooked thoroughly before being consumed. Most of the dishes were one-pot sauces served over rice. Vegetables were added to the sauce according to cooking time, and every sauce included a chili-pepper blend prepared in the mortar and added near the end of the process. The last ingredient of all was often a liter or so of oil. Once this was added, the sauce was left to simmer until all the water boiled away and the texture became rich and velvety. Additionally, if the sauce did not contain okra, we usually added grated okra onto the rice near the end of the cooking process, to make the rice softer and stickier.

The Space and Participant Organization lenses both involve organizational strategies, which in turn highlight the social context. With both lenses, I observed that women worked in close proximity and that they talked and assisted each other during the process. Adult men were not involved, but young boys and girls participated in a variety of ways, from peeling the vegetables to fanning the coals. Although adult men did not participate in the cooking process, most were very appreciative and complimentary about the result (another point to which I will return).

The Underlying Symbolic Systems lens describes the “grammatical” structure of the art in question. Schrag explains, “This is their cognitive and emotive environment, the hidden set of knowledge that participants share which allows composition and interpretation” [18, p. 86]. Although the home cooking of Conakry does not involve any representational content, there is an underlying structure. Every sauce contains a core set of ingredients, invariably including two types of chili peppers, salt, Maggi seasoning, dried shrimp, green onions, parsley, and smoked fish.

Describing the cuisine of Ghana, Osseo-Asare states:

“I think of Ghanain cuisine as a kind of culinary jazz. The pepper, tomatoes, and onions, and possibly the oil, form the rhythm section. The stew is one musical form, like blues, the soup and one-pot dishes are others. Like a successful improvisation, the additional ingredients – vegetables, seeds and nuts, meat and fish – harmonize and combine into vibrant, mellow creations” [19, p. 56].

Like the cuisine of Ghana, Mado’s Guinean cooking involved both predictable elements (the “rhythm section” would consist of the core ingredients listed above), and a certain amount of permissible variation. For example, while Mado’s cuisine involved the consistent pairing of sauce over starch, the types of sauce and starch could vary depending on personal interest. Mado’s favorite sauce was the leafy sauce thickened with peanut butter, and her sons’ favorite was fish-ball soup. Mado explained that the fish-ball soup (*bantui*) is a favorite among children. The starch could also vary, depending on interest. Her husband preferred rice above all others, but she enjoyed a variety of starches.

Mado also explained that many dishes carry ethnic connotations. The *lafidi* dish, for example, conveys symbolic meaning signaling the ethnicity of the cook (or how widely traveled she is). The Soussou people serve it as a sauce over rice, and the Malinké prepare it as a one-pot meal with the rice and seasonings all cooked together. Likewise, *tô*, although appreciated in Conakry, represents Malinké cooking specifically.

1.2. Stable/malleable

In Schrag’s study of dance associations in Cameroon he focuses on the infrastructures of artistic events, which he defines as “any social construct that enables and influences the transmission and reception of a message” [17, p. 423]. He considers the messages conveyed by dance associations, analyzing different types of infrastructures and how stable and malleable elements interact to generate “tangible effects on creative production” [17, p. 425-438]. Schrag explains:

“A stable infrastructure is one that is temporally and locationally regular – and thus predictable – and exhibits tight, well-defined organization. More malleable infrastructures, on the other hand, are temporally and locationally irregular, unpredictable, and are more loosely organized. Communicators creating through one type of infrastructure rely on other communicators in the exchange to respond through its paired infrastructure” [17, p. 425].

In light of the brief amount of research time I had, I focus here only on dish composition. Every dish involved minimally one sauce served alongside one starch. The types of sauces and starches could vary from one day to the next and from family to family. The okra sauce common to the Malinké and Soussou, for example, contained the seasoning *soumbala* (Malinké), called *kenda* in Soussou. The first time Mado prepared this sauce, she served it with fufu, which is more commonly associated with Nigerian food. In Guinea, this sauce would more typically be served over rice (among the Soussou) or with *tô* (among the Malinké, inland). Urbanization also affects culinary style, making certain starches available that might not be as accessible in rural communities.

Cuisine, therefore, represents an art in which meals follow specific infrastructures allowing for the transmission and reception of messages rooted in the shared values of respect, hospitality, and generosity. The choice of starch and the seasoning of the sauce involve stable and malleable elements which interact to produce flavorful food, the consumption of which strengthens communal ties and reinforces shared values. The Materials and Performance features lenses discussed above pertain to the composition of specific dishes. The chart below offers an analysis of the stable and malleable elements within the cuisine of Conakry that I observed while working with Mado.

Table 1.

Stable and malleable elements of dish-composition infrastructures

Dish composition	Infrastructure	Contributions to Dynamic Interplay	Tangible Effects on Creative Production
Malleable	Type of starch	Cook modifies texture in response to particular consumers at a meal	Pleasurable experience which strengthens family identity and reinforces values of sharing, respect, hospitality, and generosity
Stable	Starch + Sauce created from a core set of ingredients (see <i>Materials</i> above)	Uniquely Malinké flavor remains the same	

The last column in this chart reveals how the culinary process fuels a cycle allowing for variation and creativity within the genre, and also for stability and continuity.

2. Artist and connoisseur

Although I do not speak Malinké, I noticed during my stay an unusual use of the French term “doux”, which I traced to the Malinké term *adouman*. The term was applied to any good-tasting food, and instead of being translated into French as “bon” (the more commonly used word in France), it was translated as “doux” (meaning “soft” or “sweet”). I asked a number of people about the use of this term and found that it is normally used to describe any pleasurable experience, including enjoyable music, dance, or food. I transcribed one song in which the term was applied to children because of the joy they bring to their families, so the term is not restricted exclusively to artistic experiences. The use of the word, however, implies a commonality between the effects of music and cuisine upon experiencers.

During an interview with Siriman Kouyaté, I also learned the term *ini gba*, which Kouyaté translated “you and the kitchen”. The term is used to compliment a woman after a tasty meal. This brings me to another point regarding artistry: that it requires not only practitioners but also connoisseurs. Although men in the Mande world do not normally cook, they are connoisseurs of the art of cuisine. Most men whom I interviewed knew what ingredients should be used for particular sauces and they were sensitive to texture and flavor. Regarding artistry in cooking, Pénor added: “Yes, because they create. Someone who creates, you can call an artist. It’s an invention. There are women here who make sauces no one has ever known. So, based on her creation, we can call her an artist”.¹ He added that griots and griottes can sing for a *tibilila*, and he even suggested praise-lyrics for such a woman: “Oh, you have a wife, you have a very good wife, you have a woman of honor, you have an intelligent wife, you have

¹ Translation of: “Oui parce qu’ils créent. Quelqu’un qui crée, on peut l’appeler artiste. C’est une invention. Y’a, y’a des femmes ici qui créent des sauces qu’on a jamais connues. Donc à partir de sa création on peut l’appeler artiste”.

a generous wife”. He further added: “So you see, it’s in order to encourage the man to take interest in his wife, because she gathers people and unites them”.¹ This final comment highlights the idea that cooking remains the subject of honor for women in a modern setting even as it was historically.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although cooking is a discreet and humble art, with its practitioners appearing subordinate in the public eye [20], cuisine represents the means of expression for female protagonists in the Sunjata epic – and this points to its social importance, both historically and today. The relationship between the cook and the hunter further highlights the notion of complementarity prevalent in other areas of Mande cultural ideology. Furthermore, cuisine is connected to cultural identity both in the epic and in the modern Mande world. The activity of cuisine to this day represents a key component of feminine identity and remains a means of artistic expression practiced mainly by women and appreciated by all.

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¹ Translation of: “Ah tu as une femme, tu as une femme très brave, tu as une femme d’honneur, tu as une femme intelligente, tu as une femme généreuse. Voilà, pour mieux encourager l’homme à s’intéresser de sa femme. Parce qu’elle rassemble et unit les gens.”.