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Mark Davidheiser

Joking for Peace Social Organization, Tradition, and Change in Gambian Conflict Management

This paper examines the role of joking ties in Gambian conflict management. These interpersonal and inter-group bonds—referred to as “joking kinships”, “joking relationships”, “special affinities”, “*cousinage*” and “*parenté à plaisanterie*”—are found in various parts of African continent (Radcliffe 1940; Stevens 1978; Wilson-Fall 2000). Similar social institutions also exist elsewhere¹. Many West Africans are interwoven in elaborate webs of such ties, which can include reciprocal obligations, behavioral conventions and taboos, and stereotyping by ethnicity, region of origin, and patrilineage. *Plaisanterie* has been enshrined in the classic Africanist anthropological literature as a social institution that reinforces inter-ethnic integration and mitigates inter-group conflict (Colson 1953). Since the late twentieth century, however, many scholars have adopted a more critical stance on “tradition” and have applied a conflict perspective to concepts such as special affinities and the maintenance of harmony. In the following discussion, we will explore the contemporary role of joking relations in conflict mitigation in rural southwestern Gambia.

The significance of joking alliances in conflict management became obvious during an extended study of societal patterning in dispute mediation. In the phase of the project that concerns us here, empirical data were collected during three years of research in The Gambia and Senegal². It

1. Humor plays a significant role in conflict management in a variety of settings, including the kava circles of Polynesia (OLSON 1997). As with the Senegambian social institution, Fijian joking enables populations that tend to avoid open confrontations to address and moderate disputes. There are other similarities between the two systems such as bantering between cross-cousins (ARNO 1990).
2. Field research was conducted in 1999, 2000-2002, 2003, and 2004, and was financially supported by United States Institute of Peace, the University of Florida's Center for African Studies, and Nova Southeastern University. In addition to participant observation, mediators were interviewed individually and in stratified panels, and narratives from observed mediation sessions (n=121) were also collected.

quickly became apparent that joking relations were a prominent part of Senegambian conflict management, and later phases of the fieldwork focused specifically on them. Although many of the patterns described here are applicable to a variety of regional ethnic groups, the analysis applies primarily to the Mandinka and secondarily the Jola of southwestern Gambia³.

Contemporary usage of joking alliances highlights on social processes such as dynamics of cultural continuity and change in the face of changing structural conditions associated with global expansion of the market economy. The paper touches on these topics, but it concentrates on issues related to the rapidly expanding field of conflict resolution.

The project findings reveal that Gambians tend to conceptualize conflict and peacemaking in a markedly different manner than most people in the North Atlantic region. Mandinka generally view mediation more as a matter of persuading disputants to end their conflict and reconcile than as a structured process of facilitated problem solving and negotiation. They rely heavily on social ties and persuasion and use local values and norms to legitimize their interventions in disputes and influence the parties.

Gambians invoke a variety of social links to bolster their conflict interventions. For reasons elucidated below, joking relationships are among the most effective social institutions that mediators can employ. Joking bonds are particularly intriguing because they have been instrumental in the transformation of long-standing conflicts that were resistant to prior intervention efforts. The role of joking kinship in Gambian mediations illuminates broad dissimilarities in Gambian and Western modalities of conflict resolution and indicates that dominant trends in North Atlantic mediation are culture-specific. These findings raise both problems and possibilities for the export and further development of conflict resolution theories and methodologies.

Study Location

The Gambia is a small but ethnically and religiously plural nation that is viewed as a haven of stability in West Africa (Roberts 2005). Some of this tranquility is attributable to historical and material conditions, such as a relatively peaceful colonial history and a lack of natural resources or mineral wealth of interest to external actors. Local social institutions, such as joking relations, that have helped integrate diverse populations have also played a significant and ongoing role in conflict mitigation.

Gambia was an exemplar of the model of indirect rule that characterized British colonialism. The post-colonial regimes of The Gambia have reproduced many aspects of the colonial model, including a minimal legal-rational

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3. Southwestern Gambia borders the northern Casamance region of Senegal, and many of the project findings are applicable there.

state apparatus. In rural areas, away from bureaucratic centers, folk systems of conflict management have maintained a strong continuing presence. Rural residents generally prefer to settle their problems without resorting to state authorities, including even “customary” figures like village headmen.

The southwestern coastal region of The Gambia is demographically diverse, with a number of villages dominated by relatively dissimilar ethnic groups, primarily Mandinka, Jola, and Manjago (listed from most to least numerous)⁴. Migrants also contribute to the population. The relatively high rainfall of coastal Gambia makes it a highly desirable location for cultivators. Abundant marine and forest resources are additional pull factors for migrants from upriver Gambia, Senegal, and other countries (Gamble 1988). The area is currently experiencing rapid population growth, and new tar roads linking the southwestern corner of the country with the urban areas to the north have contributed to a spike in land sales. Demographic pressure and marketization have increased competition for finite resources and heightened the possibility of resource disputes.

Indeed, despite the peaceful reputation of The Gambia, intra-societal and inter-communal friction is pervasive. Social institutions that act as mediums for processes of inclusion and differentiation play a complex role in managing tensions and determining whether or not they develop into manifest disputes. Although conflict is an ongoing feature of Gambian life, the venerable, but much criticized, notion of the calming effect of robust networks of cross-cutting ties remains valid in the contemporary southwest. These social institutions have historical roots of varying depth, but all of them are undergoing continual reworking as citizens apply and re-create them in perpetually changing circumstances. The following section examines a particularly notable component of such social relations—joking kinship.

Overview of Joking Relationships in The Gambia

Joking bonds are customary ties that link various groups and individuals. Joking relations can be found in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. In The Gambia, such associations can exist between the members of different ethnic groups and different patrilineages, between the people of specific villages, between kinsfolk such as cousins and grandparents and grandchildren, and between the peoples of various regions⁵. These relationships often signify a symbolic or fictive kinship, as exemplified below with the Jola and Serer.

4. Although they are the third largest group in the region, there are no Fulbe villages (Central Statistics Department 1993).
5. Grandparent-grandchild *plaisanterie* is known as *mamariiyaa*. The exact configurations of these ties may vary according to a variety of attributes, including region of origin and ethnicity.

The majority of Gambian ethnic groups practice this type of joking. The Mandinka, Jola, Fulbe, Wolof, Serahule, Serer, and Bambara are linked through multiple cross-cutting ties, including joking kinship. The Aku and Manjago—two groups that migrated to The Gambia relatively recently—generally do not have widely recognized ties of this sort⁶. These relationships include mutual obligations and are most commonly manifested in semi-ritualized banter. Joking partners typically tease each other about their big bellies and love of eating, but the ribbing can be extended to other topics as well. Custom dictates that partners can interact in ways that would ordinarily be frowned upon or cause offense⁷. Joking kin are not supposed to become angry with each other and offending or harming joking partners is prohibited.

There are different types of joking relationships in The Gambia and they are associated with varying degrees of reciprocity and permissible banter.

In Mandinka, the trade language of the southwest, joking bonds are commonly known as *sanawuya* or *dangkuto*. *Sanawuya* can refer specifically to joking ties between cousins, but is also used as a general name for joking relationships. *Dangkuto* generally connotes a more serious bond and is usually used to refer to inter-group links such as those between patrilineal and ethnic groups. *Dangkuto* ties generally involve more mutual obligations than *sanawuya* and a greater threat of spiritual sanctions if one offends or injures one's joking partner⁸.

Joking bonds are typically associated with particular events in the past history of the partners. Residents explain these inter-group bonds with narratives that often have a legendary character. According to Diallo, oral histories in western Burkina Faso depict joking links as the product of a "blood pact" made after a conflict between "two legendary persons" (Diallo 2002: 2). Senegambian narratives often identify less agonistic interactions as the sources of special affinities.

For example, some respondents explained the *dangkuto* between Jola and Serer with an account of a time when their progenitors were traveling

6. The Manjago of southwestern Gambia are a somewhat marginalized population. Their exclusion from certain key local networks, including joking kinship, contributes to their generally lower standard of living and sometimes troubled relations with members of other ethnic groups.
7. *Cousinage* is one of several social institutions that allow for highly unconventional behavior. Gambians often mention how joking partners can do unusual things such as entering someone's house and eating all their food. This example evokes these relationships' adaptive potential for reducing vulnerability. Another social group that may act in an unorthodox manner is the *kanyeleng*, or women with fertility issues who undergo a special treatment. (GUYER 1996) has elucidated how cultural variability, innovation, and wide behavioral repertoires mitigate against disaster.
8. Grandparent-grandchild *plaisanterie* is known as *mamariiyaa*. The characteristics and configurations of special affinities fluctuate somewhat across populations and regions. For example, joking between maternal uncles and their nephews and nieces is common among some Jola groups.

in a boat and a storm caused the vessel to split. One passenger floated away with part of the boat and landed in a forest, thereby founding the Jola ethnic group. The other passenger drifted with the rest of the vessel toward a riverine delta and evolved into the Serer ethnic group.

The joking relations between the patronymics Fofanna and Jaiteh are said to have begun when their ancestors were traveling on a long journey without food. The student (*talibe*) Fofanna went into the bush, cut some meat from his leg, and roasted it so that his teacher (*karamu*) could eat. Jaiteh ate it without being aware of its source. They continued traveling, until Fofanna became weak from loss of blood. When Jaiteh realized his student was injured he healed the wound by laying his hands on it and praying. They then made an oath that their descendants must always support each other and never quarrel or suffer great misfortune⁹. The communalistic social organization of Gambians imbues joking bonds with an affective power valuable for potential mediators.

Modes of Production, Social Organization, and Dispute Settlement: The Conflict Resolution of Affection

The use of special affinities in West African peacemaking is illustrative of the marked variance in Gambian and Western worldviews and the corresponding types of social organization and conflict styles. The peacemaking modalities of groups that employ labor-intensive systems of production vary from those in industrialized societies. Western observers often consider conflict to be a natural part of social life that can potentially produce positive growth (Abu-Nimer 1996; Fisher & Ury 1991; Myers & Filner 1997). Legal anthropology has historically presented African societies as primarily oriented towards harmony and reconciliation (Elias 1956; Gibbs 1973; Gluckman 1967; Maquet 1972). This idea is associated with structural-functionalist social theory, but that paradigm has fallen out of favor as critical perspectives and conflict theory gained in prominence.

Recent literature has problematized concepts of “indigenous African dispute settlement” and the role of reconciliation therein¹⁰. One prominent strand of this work is the neo-Marxian view that focuses on issues of social control and domination. Such analyses typically perceive colonial influences at the heart of “customary law”. Since they privilege the power of the central state, they tend to deemphasize local social patterns.

9. Another informant recounted the same story in reference to the bond between the Touray and Camara patronymics, and a Fulbe informant referred to this story when explaining the origin of the tie between the Bah and Jallow patrilineages. A similar account is also used to explain the kinship between the Bozo and the Dogon of Mali (GALVAN 2003).

10. For a prominent challenge to the view of African peacemaking as harmonious, see NADER (1997).

For example, Chanock (1985) argues that African customary law is a colonial artifact that has been reproduced by social scientists with the cooperation of African lawyers and elites. He asserts that the literature has reinforced a one-dimensional conceptualization of African conflict resolution. Chanock's critique is well taken; Africans can be vigorous and enthusiastic in their disputing despite the presence of social mechanisms for conflict mitigation and societal norms that promote harmony. The application of African customary law can also result in settlements that favor particular parties and do not bring about reconciliation. However, recent studies, including this one, have confirmed that harmony and reconciliation remain prominent features in the dispute management of some Africans (Darboe 1982; Hoffman 2000; Mengisteab 2002). We should recognize intra-continental diversity and avoid over-simplifying by asserting that all African peacemaking is the same. However, we can acknowledge that there are modal differences between African and Western perceptions of conflict and that these play a role in conflict management.

This variance is related to communalistic versus individualistic modes of social organization. Residents of the unpredictable Sahelian environment have developed dense social networks as a coping strategy to reduce their vulnerability to disaster. The climatic conditions of the Sahel region of West Africa have been characterized as disequilibria with frequent periods of drought, floods, and other extreme conditions (Behnke & Scones 1992; Ellis & Swift 1988). Groups and individuals whose crops fail and animals die can survive by calling upon others with whom they maintain relationships of reciprocity. In times of need, these relationships provide sources of shelter, food, seeds, animals, and so forth (Bassett, 1988; Guéye 1994¹¹). The valorization of harmonious relations can therefore be viewed as a "rational" socio-cultural adaptation to an unpredictable physical environment.

Interpersonal interaction is intensive in rural villages, economic interdependence is the norm, and individuals are embedded in multiplex networks. According to a common saying, "everyone in The Gambia is related to one another", and the complexity of social networks is very striking for the Western observer. Conflict can disrupt the webs of reciprocity and exchange that Gambians use to avail themselves of help in times of need.

Hyden's analysis of "the economy of affection" may be productively applied to the study of peace and conflict. Hyden elucidated how North Atlantic behavioral models cannot be applied to Africa where people operate according to different logical frameworks. Collectivist milieus that privilege interpersonal ties correlate with preferences for what we might term a conflict resolution of affection. Peacemaking events that occur in communalistic social systems tend to exhibit a greater focus on reconciliation and forgiveness than those in the West and less emphasis on bargaining and material issues. In other words, relationships, reciprocity, exchange, and

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11. See also note seven.

affective considerations are vital, and instrumental or utilitarian cost-benefit calculations cannot be separated from more relational concerns.

In fact, modes of production and variance in pathways to accumulation appear to impact dispute settlement styles in non-African contexts. Collier's (2002) study in Mexico found that communities in which access to labor was more significant than access to capital preferred reconciliation and restorative justice (or harmony models). Retributive justice was prominent in villages where capital was necessary for accumulating wealth and labor was of less importance. There does seem to be a material component to peacemaking preferences.

African harmony ideologies and their corresponding conflict resolution styles have developed through longitudinal social interaction with particular physical settings. Cultural diffusion and common technologies of production have reinforced these cooperative cosmologies. Africanist scholars have traced indigenous harmony models to a combination of specific environmental and technological conditions. Historically, land has been relatively bountiful in West Africa, and production relied on intensive labor inputs. Prestige and wealth were attained primarily through controlling people, rather than land, leading to the development of harmony ideologies (Bohannon 1968a, 1968b; Meillassoux 1981; Polanyi 1945). The strong attachment to social cohesion served to minimize out-migration and maintain the labor pool.

Southwestern Gambians are primarily engaged in labor-intensive small surplus production, with the Mandinka relying primarily on agro-pastoralism. In the local moral economy maintaining good relations with others is vital to the production and distribution of farm and other household products. For example, cooperative work-groups (*kafos*) assist farmers at key times when much labor is needed (e.g. plowing by hand and transplanting and harvesting crops). Such groups work for very little pay or for food and do not assist people on bad terms with their members or with the community at large.

The material incentives that underlie Mandinka peacemaking preferences are reinforced by local cosmologies. Gambians share beliefs about supernatural sanctions related to disputing. In interviews conducted by this researcher, members of all three targeted ethno-linguistic groups expressed strong views about the dangers of disputing. These include the misfortune associated with wronging a joking partner, and conflict is also potentially hazardous because disputants can go to *marabouts* and animist shrines, thereby endangering the well-being of their opponent(s). Mandinka often cite *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet Mohammed) on the need to be peaceful and avoid disputing with others, and all Gambian groups hold beliefs about divine rewards for peaceful people and temporal punishment for those who dispute with others¹².

12. Muslim mediators, for example, told disputants that they would not receive the normal blessings from undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca if they were in an ongoing interpersonal conflict when they went there.

The intention here is not to set up a strict dichotomy between Gambian and American conflict mediation. A range of practice exists in both contexts, and there can be similarities in certain cases. However, conflict attitudes and peacemaking modalities are markedly divergent. Gambians generally view disputing as negative and harmful. Interpersonal and communal harmony is highly valued in the cosmologies of rural Gambians. In such an ethnoscape, conflict management privileges reconciliation over problem-solving through negotiation and compromise.

The practice of law in the industrialized countries of the West is, in its ideal form, bureaucratized, based on abstract principles, and carried out in impersonal forums. This paradigm extends to alternative dispute resolution (ADR) and mediation. A multiplicity of mediation models and praxis exist in Western nations. However, certain pervasive trends that have long influenced the field can be identified.

Western mediation is based on neutral third-party mediators facilitating discussions to identify the essential underlying issues and the negotiation of a “win—win” outcome. Principled negotiation is one of the touchstones of this paradigm. Mediators are instructed to separate the people from the problem, uncover the vital interests of the parties, identify options for mutual gain, and use objective criteria to select the best option¹³. Other currents exist¹⁴, but the tenets of rational problem-solving have long dominated the field (Abu-Nimer 1996; Stempel 2002)¹⁵.

Gambian modalities are quite different. Local peacemaking, like most African customary law, approaches conflict from a relational perspective rather than being issue-driven. In this framework the focus is on reinforcing social solidarity, rather than identifying and addressing the specific situational needs of each party (Darboe 1982; Elias 1956). Maintaining and restoring good relations with others is central, and this can take precedence over negotiating agreements about substantive or concrete issues. One reason that mediation is popular and effective in The Gambia is that it is consistent with local cosmologies of conflict; mediation is integrated into the fabric of society and consistent with attendant beliefs and norms.

“Separating the people from the problem”—a maxim of North American conflict resolution—is contrary to Gambian worldviews in which one’s social status is of great significance. The identities of the participants are of much concern to most Gambian mediators. Social identities is linked

13. See FISHER & URY (1991) for a highly influential presentation of this approach.

14. Despite the emergence of relational and post-structuralist approaches such as transformative and narrative mediation, Western training and practice remain overwhelming based on the problem-solving framework (STEMPEL 2002).

15. Scholars have used a variety of labels to refer to the prevailing paradigm in which conflict is considered to be the product of objective issues or and mediators are trained to facilitate discussions that enable the disputants to work out agreement that satisfy their substantive concerns. Principled or interest-based negotiation (FISHER & URY 1991) and the problem-solving model (BUSH & FOLGER 1994) are among the most common terms used to refer to that dominant approach.

to behavioral roles and norms, and as social actors, mediators operate very much within the framework of customary values. Gambians do not usually expect or desire impersonal and neutral third-party mediators; the status of the mediators and their relationships with the disputants are highly relevant¹⁶. Peacemakers tend to be more concerned with the relations between the parties than with the specific causes of the conflict. Negotiation over concrete, substantive issues is therefore not as prominent in Gambian mediations as it is in North America.

Forgiveness Rather than Principled Negotiation

Although mainstream Western conflict resolution rarely discusses forgiveness, Gambians often mentioned it. “Forgiving” often entails one or more of the disputants dropping their demands and agreeing to reconcile. Mediation outcomes may or may not result in agreements about compensation, changes in behavior, or other arrangements, and such agreements may be very specific or extremely general.

Gambian mediation participants often make statements such as “if you forgive now, then when you (or your kinsperson, associate, or animal) make a similar mistake, people will be willing to forgive you”. A belief in divine rewards for forbearance is also common to the region. “*Sabari*” is a concept that is mentioned in most of the 121 observed mediation events. This word is derived from the Arabic “*sabar*”, meaning patience. As with many Islamic tenets, the term “*sabar*” has been re-interpreted in the Gambian context, and connotes forbearance and forgiveness. Often, one of the first things that people say to disputants is “*sabari*”, and mediators commonly urge the disputants to forgive each other.

One mediator, a *marabout* from the family of a local Imam, was fond of quoting Arabic proverbs such as “*Inna Allah ma es-sabarriin*” (“God is with the patient/forgiving ones”), and “*Es-sabr miftahul farajj*” (“patience/forbearance is the key to success”). Mediators’ use of the *sabari* construct is related to the efficacy of joking kinship in conflict resolution. When forgiveness is privileged over negotiation there is a greater need for affective factors and social ties that can encourage the parties to buy into the reconciliation attempt.

North American mediators are often told to “trust the process”—the idea being that they should rely on their training in a staged model of facilitated negotiation. The model is designed to allow the disputants to explain their viewpoints, exchange ideas about their needs and desires, and generate options for a mutually beneficial settlement agreement. Gambian mediators

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16. In marital disputes, for example, wives often ask their husbands’ friends to mediate.

are more likely to use persuasion to reconcile disputants and may or may not work out agreements on specific concrete issues¹⁷.

In the latter approach, peacemakers rely on social norms to influence the disputants. Such leverage is often essential in getting disputants to reconcile, even in the absence of a negotiated settlement. Mediators often highlight interpersonal ties when they begin mediating and when they call for the disputants to reconcile and/or forgive their opponent(s).

Personalized Approaches Versus Neutral Third Parties

American models of mediation generally include a setting the stage phase when mediators create an environment conducive to effective problem-solving (Burton 1986; Moore 2003; Myers & Filner 1997). This usually entails explaining the nature of the process, going over the ground rules of the mediation (such as not interrupting the other disputant), and so forth. Setting the stage activities were quite common in Gambian mediations, but were more contextual and personalized than procedural in nature.

In creating an appropriate atmosphere most Gambian mediators discussed their connections with the disputants, going over the history of relations between their families and relatives and mentioning any other links that they might share. They cited friendships and other bonds between their ancestors or current members of their families. Mediators have a wealth of potential socially accepted relationships to choose from such as *karamo—talibe* (Islamic teacher—student) interactions, *talibeeyaa* or ties between individuals who study the Quran together, *seeynyoyaa* or neighborliness, *Muslimeiyaa* the common bond between Muslims, *hadameiyaa* fictive kinship based on the idea of common descent from Adam and Eve, or *baadiiyaa* another broad fictive kinship.

Gambians can be very creative in constructing and inventing kinship and collective identities. When establishing common identities, they can operate on a very general level, making statements such as, “we are all of the same village; we are all of the same ethnic group; and/or we are all Africans”. In the local political economy such relationships imply mutual responsibilities. When the mediators appeal to disputants to forgive and reconcile, they can greatly strengthen the force of their appeal by invoking such ties.

One of the most powerful bonds is that of joking kinship. These relationships provide a script for cooperative interaction with varying degrees of reciprocal obligation. When mediators employ joking kinship, they evoke an established history of relations and create an atmosphere in which the parties are expected to be flexible and forthcoming.

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17. Only 55% of 45 observed Mandinka cases included negotiation of substantive issues.

Custom and Adaptation

Joking relationships invoke religion as well as custom and tradition. In The Gambia, Islam has been intertwined with local practices and beliefs. Before Islam, the Mandinka practiced animism. Respect for elders and one's ancestors is still very strong, making the concept of ancestors swearing an oath binding their descendants very potent.

In addition, joking kinships have been incorporated into Islamic practice. One informant, an Islamic praise-singer (or *finoo*), related the bond between his patronym of Camara Kunda and that of Ceesay Kunda to Islam by saying that their ancestors lived in Mecca and then moved to Mali and from there to Gambia. Other informants asserted that *mamariiyaa*, or joking between grandparents and grandchildren, originated with the Prophet Mohammed. They explained that the Prophet's grandchildren would disturb him by playfully pulling on his shirt and pushing him while he was praying. Eventually the angel Gabriel appeared to Mohammed and told him to better train his grandchildren. Mohammed then began "beating them gently" with a stick when they disturbed him, thereby teaching the grandchildren about respect. These examples of Mandinka intertwining joking relations and Islam demonstrate the malleability of this institution, a feature that will be discussed further in a later section of this paper.

Mandinka social organization has historically been highly hierarchical with numerous behavioral constraints on its members. In the pre-colonial era, the caste system provided a social category that facilitated conflict mediation. The *nyamaaloolu*, or members of the artisan caste (griots, leatherworkers, and blacksmiths), were allowed greater behavioral latitude than nobles and peasants (Janson 2002). The mediation of disputes was a part of the conventional activities of the *nyamaaloolu*. They were highly effective mediators due to their ability to speak relatively freely, to criticize even powerful people without fear of retribution, and to browbeat people into reconciliation (Hoffman 2000). Islamicization and Western influences have diminished the significance of the caste system in contemporary Gambia. The behavioral restrictions found in Mandinka society are still extensive, however.

Mediators' use of *plaisanterie* can open up liminal space in which the transcendence of ordinary boundaries and scripts becomes possible. Employing joking relations creates an extraordinary, ritualized social space and heightens possibilities for attitudinal shifts and conflict transformation. This phenomenon of mediators using a social institution associated with particular behavioral scripts and with spiritual sanctions to resolve disputes is reminiscent of the role of the *nyamaaloolu* in pre-colonial society. The aforementioned unconventional behaviors of the artisan class strikingly parallel those associated with special affinities. The institution of joking kinships may therefore provide some continuity in a social function previously performed by the *nyamaaloolu*. In the Mandinka states of the past, peasants

and rulers were supposed to heed the advice of the *nyamaaloolu*; contemporary Gambians are expected to accede to the wishes of their joking partners.

The social capital of special affinities is used quite deliberately by Gambians. A joking relationship is the reason that a migrant from Kaabu, Fa Mamodou, joined the *sate keybaalu* (council of elders) of one village in the region. The other village elders are heads of the seven main clans or wards of the village. Fa Mamodou was included because of his link as a descendant of the Kaabu Empire with the residents of the region of Kombo¹⁸. The *dangkuto* relationship established when the Kaabu Mandinka sent military help to their brethren in present-day coastal Gambia is still respected. Fa Mamodou's special affinity with the Kombonka made him an especially effective mediator there and he intervened in disputes all over the region. He claimed a very high success rate and groomed his son to take over his position, which he has done since the recent demise of his father.

Continuity and Change

Many elders expressed a fear that young people are moving away from their historical heritage and may not respect customary institutions such as joking relations. Of course, as with many gerontocratic African societies, there is considerable inter-generational tension in The Gambia, and elders are fond of complaining about youths in regard to any number of topics. For their part, young people articulated a strong respect for joking kinship. Youths referred to elders as the source of knowledge about customary institutions; however, young respondents uniformly asserted that joking bonds are legitimate and significant. Overall, youths appeared to be less likely to engage in the ritualized interaction common to these relationships, but that follows a general trend in which Mandinka become increasingly attached to what are seen as customary social patterns as they age.

Plaisanterie appears to be alive and well in southwestern Gambia. As late as 2005, a song mocking other ethnic groups was popular among Mandinka children¹⁹. The value of *plaisanterie* to socialization may help explain their endurance. These ties promote both differentiation and integration; they help delineate normal and abnormal behavior, and reinforce identification with one's own corporate group(s) and views of the Others. Although such

18. This relationship is commonly practiced between Mandinka with patronyms associated with the pre-colonial polities of Kombo and Kaabu; however, it can be extended to encompass all contemporary residents of those regions.

19. Although such songs poke fun at other ethnic communities and stereotype their members, they also institutionalize a largely peaceful co-existence marked by economic interdependence.

views may be quite negative (particularly in the inter-ethnic domain), *plaisanterie* sets a precedent and expectation of co-existence and conflict avoidance. Follow-up research is needed to clarify when, how, and with what frequency Mandinka will maintain their use of joking relations as their life worlds continue responding to dramatic local, regional, and global changes.

Relational Mediation and Intractable Conflict

Joking relationships can be so effective in peacemaking that they have been instrumental in settling cases resistant to most resolution efforts. Scholars have identified types of disputes that are particularly difficult to manage. These have been termed “intractable conflicts” and include disputes over identity, values, and ideology (Burton 1990; Lederach 1995; Kriesberg *et al.* 1989). In such cases conventional negotiation and mediation techniques are less likely to be successful since ideological differences are difficult to resolve using bargaining techniques and problem-solving to negotiate win-win outcomes. Forgiveness and tolerance can be essential for mitigating intractable conflicts. Informal institutions with significant legitimacy and mobilizational potential offer great promise for addressing challenging disputes. Several examples from The Gambia may help to illustrate how the influence of a mediator with a special affinity with the parties can enable resolution in difficult cases.

One interviewee explained that his joking relationship with a husband from another patriclan allowed him to intervene in a marital dispute. A man wanted to send away his wife, and, because he was a feared *marabout*, people were unwilling to intercede in the usual manner. The respondent explained that he was able to approach the husband only because of the *dangkuto* between them, and that it enabled him to prevent the divorce. When he brought up their *dangkuto* it reduced the *marabout* to tears, and he willingly took back his wife. Their reconciliation was a lasting one as they remained together for years thereafter²⁰.

Another elder described a case in which he traveled upriver to a village where there were two brothers who had been disputing for approximately ten years before his arrival. Many people had tried to mediate between them, but all their efforts were unsuccessful. The elder was able to reconcile them using his *dangkuto* relationship with them to make a strong appeal for their reconciliation, an appeal that they felt compelled to heed.

20. How to determine whether a mediation was a success is a complex subject. There are divergent definitions of “success” in the literature (BERCOVITCH 1996; BUSH & FOLGER 1994), underlining the subjectivity of that concept. This study employed an emic operationalization of success, in other words success was defined according to the informants’ perspective. Measurement was based on confidential disputant evaluations of outcomes, and follow-up investigations were conducted to establish whether mediated agreements remained intact.

Due to the aforementioned demographic pressures, land disputes are among the most fractious conflicts in the region. For such conflicts, residents are more likely than normal to resort to court adjudication. However, informants cited multiple cases of land disputes that were resolved through mediation by joking kin. In one notable case, mediators' use of joking ties defused tensions in a very heated land dispute involving three villages in the area.

In many African nations, presidential elections are correlated with increases in the mobilization of collective identities and inter-group conflict. It is therefore not surprising that corporate ties were fore-grounded during the Gambian election season of 2001, as various interest groups mobilized and jockeyed for power. However, informants asserted that joking relationships were instrumental in containing parochial communalistic feelings during this time of heightened tension.

Incumbent Al-Hajji Yahya Jammeh, a Jola, was strongly supported by the members of his own group and other minority ethnicities such as the Manjago. The candidate and many leaders of the main opposition party were Mandinka, and public opinion identified the party with that ethnic group. During the campaign and afterwards, people insulted each other using joking scripts, thereby dissipating some of the tension. No historical joking relations exist between the Mandinka and the Jola; however, some Gambians adeptly employed the elastic structure of *plaisanterie* to reframe inter-communal stress. Respondents explained that drawing upon this widely-known social institution was useful in promoting cooperative concatenation and minimizing violence. The ritual space created through joking relations and their social capital make them effective even in cases resistant to other mediation attempts.

Constructing Joking Ties

Social scientists know that custom, tradition, and identities are contested, dynamic, and elastic²¹. The plasticity of joking relationships is heightened by the fact that they vary by region, they are not codified and they are extendable. This raises the possibility that joking relationships could be adapted for use in a range of conflict situations.

Gambians are adept at manipulating and reframing their identities. According to many informants, during the Jawara era, when the Jola had a lower social status²². Some members of the historically disadvantaged Jola minority group of The Gambia attempted to re-invent themselves as Mandinka. In the wake of the coup of 1994, which brought Jola president

21. See ANDERSON (1991) and HOBBSBAWM & RANGER (1992) for seminal investigations of the construction and re-invention of identities and custom (NAGEL 1994).

22. People speaking Jola in public vehicles were subjected to derogatory comments, for instance.

Jammeh to power, most of these individuals have rediscovered their Jola roots and have reclaimed that ethno-linguistic identity.

This researcher has personally observed how Gambians can manipulate their identities. For example, certain individuals that habitually identified themselves as Mandinka invoked family and other ties to claim other ethnic identities in specific situations. Their motives ranged from purely instrumental—e.g. winning a girl's favors or gaining an important ally—to more sentimental, as when a Gambian Mandinka visited the Casamance and having approved of many things that he saw there, began to reevaluate the significance of the Jola elements in his family tree. Local identities are multi-faceted and dynamic. Depending on the situation and the interactional context at hand, Gambians emphasize and de-emphasize various components of their identities—such as region of origin, caste, religion, clan affiliation, and the identities of relatives²³. “Pure invention” was infrequent, but the manipulation of sometimes tenuous links was fairly common, and such claims were rarely openly challenged by others.

As mentioned previously, Gambian peacemakers relied on social ties to get disputants to end their disputes, and Gambians exhibited remarkable creativity in creating social bonds. In addition to joking kinship, Gambians constructed ties by drawing upon myriad potential factors such as sharing the same name, friendships between relatives, inhabiting the same compound or area, mentor relationships, and many other linkages. These common identities can be very broad, as with camaraderie based on a common ethnicity, religious identity, and even kinship based on descent from Adam and Eve (*hadameiya* in Mandika). Fictive kinship abounds in local relations, and Gambians were quite dexterous in linking themselves to others in a way that made it possible for almost anyone to claim some sort of joking relation.

To take a rather frivolous example, I became associated with a local patrilineage during my stay in The Gambia. That fictive kinship allowed me to draw on the elaborate network of social relations associated with that patronymic, which included joking ties. I was therefore able to engage in the type of identity manipulation described here, which conferred a variety of benefits, such as avoiding being overcharged in markets²⁴.

Diallo (2002) and Wilson-Fall (2000) have illustrated the elasticity of joking kinships in their discussions of how Fulbe migrants use them to integrate themselves into the social and economic fabric of new areas. As

23. All human beings manipulate their identities to some degree. However, due to the greater complexity of their social networks, Gambians have more opportunities to do so than do North Americans. Incentives for engaging in identity reframing are also heightened in relational, collectivist social milieus that place great significance on a person's status and their location in the social structure. Note that most of the comparisons made in this paper are a matter of degree rather than absolute dichotomies.

24. How much force “imagined” joking ties can have is an open question. There is no easy answer, as the acceptance of these bonds—irregardless of how robust they may be—is entirely contextual, depending on the actors and stakes involved.

mentioned previously, a common type of joking kinship is that between particular lineages. Patronymics may shift according to geographical area, a phenomenon described by Wilson as the “lateral correspondence of patronyms” (Wilson-Fall 2000: 56). Regional family names have corresponding counterparts in other locations and migrants can assume these when traveling.

In the Gambia these types of linkages can be both intra-and-inter-ethnic. For example, the Fulbe Bah are said to be “the same as” the Jola Badjie, meaning that they can theoretically avail themselves of each other’s social networks²⁵. People from different parts of The Gambia also cite variations in joking ties. In some areas, for instance, Badjies joke with Sonkos, while those from other regions are linked with the Jarjue patronym. The two latter patrilineages include both Mandinkas and Jolas, which further illustrate the cross-cutting nature of cathartic alliances.

The variation of joking partners by region makes possible instrumental manipulation of this institution by mediators or other actors. There is no definitive or written list of these relationships, so they can be invoked in many different situations and are difficult to challenge. For example, a census worker pretended to have joking kinship with the inhabitants of a certain part of The Gambia where he sometimes had problems getting respondents for his survey. This imaginary joking relation enabled him to strike up friendly relationships after taunting the initially recalcitrant locals in the typical manner.

Gambians often appeared eager to establish ties with others and could be quite open to claims of special relations. During roughly three years field research, villagers were observed privately questioning the strength of a social link declared by others, but this was rare and did not occur in relation to *sanawuya* or *dangkuto*. Most mediators agreed that it is possible to build a joking relationship with disputants without having a firm historical basis for doing so. They explained that one can, for instance, form a connection with a given individual and develop a connection similar to the joking one.

In addition, a local saying asserts that Islam permits lying when it is for a good cause²⁶, thereby providing religious justification for the manipulation of *cousinage*. Some mediators stated that they might employ *dangkuto* or *sanawuya* even if they were unsure of whether they actually had such a relationship with the disputants. For example, one mediator explained that he might start bantering with disputants, regardless of the presence

25. This exemplifies what could be termed double-*plaisanterie*; as Fulbe, the Bah have a link with the Jola, which is further intensified in this case by their tie with the Badjie patrilineage.

26. Gambians describe this saying as a *hadith* or saying of the Prophet Mohammed. According to Saudi Arabian scholars, the *hadith* refers only to exceptional situations, particularly cases of war when a leader is killed or disabled (Aida Bamia personal communication May 12, 2003).

or absence of established joking ties. If the disputant(s) responded favorably, he would use that bond to encourage them to settle. If the disputant(s) challenged it, he would say something like, "Well, you are acting like one of my joking kin", and attempt to defuse the situation and relax the disputants through humor.

In a heated cross-ethnic land dispute between two villages, an insider mediator²⁷ was able to construct a fictive joking relationship that proved vital to transforming the conflict. A meeting between the parties had become very tense and seemed destined to result in an increase rather than a decrease in grievances when a nominally Mandinka mediator invoked a joking relationship common to the Jola ethnic group. Maternal uncles have a strong joking relationship with their nephews and nieces, and the Mandinka's mother was a Jola. On that basis, he claimed a joking relationship with the members of the Jola village. The villagers responded positively to this, and the resultant bantering had an obvious calming effect. At that point, the tone of the meeting began to shift from quarreling to discussing possible agreements, and the meeting was ultimately a success.

Although relationships such as joking kinship can be highly effective institutions for mediators to draw upon, there are limits to the efficacy of such ties. The creativity of Gambian mediators in constructing social ties was certainly impressive. In an observed marital mediation, the conciliator used his status as a respected elder and invoked multiple shared identities but failed to reconcile the spouses. He constructed several common bonds, including saying that he had looked after the husband's father when he was undergoing circumcision and that they were both soldiers. None of these strategies worked, however, and in a later interview, the elder asserted that his intervention would likely have succeeded if he had been able to draw upon a more robust joking relationship.

The dexterity of Gambian mediators in constructing social ties did not always translate into successful outcomes. Widely accepted ties with strong historical roots are generally more effective than constructed relationships with a more tenuous foundation. Ultimately, however, how much force can be attributed to joking links is an open question. There is no easy answer, as the acceptance of these bonds—regardless of how robust or imaginary they may be—is entirely contextual, depending on the environment, actors, and stakes.

Joking kinship illustrates the limitations of both structure and agency. Their peacemaking efficacy is due to a variety of factors; they are socially

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27. Cross-cultural studies (e.g. LEDERACH & WEHR 1991) have identified two disparate mediator roles. The formal, Western field of conflict resolution employs outsider/neutral mediators that do not know the disputants. Many societies typically use insider/partial peacemakers that are connected to the parties. In the Gambian case described here, elders from the various factions acted as peacemakers.

sanctioned²⁸ and historically rooted; they are associated with both Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs, and they include an implicit threat that encourages compliance. Beliefs and norms undergo continual processes of modification, adaptation, and re-negotiation; no tradition is absolute and actors are not inextricably bound by custom. Contextual factors can prevent disputants from agreeing even when their joking partners plead with them to do so. In other cases, people actually enter into disputes with their joking partners²⁹. Additionally, as mentioned above, joking bonds are also subject to the limits of invention; actors can refuse to acknowledge tenuous, or even widely accepted, ties. There is no simple answer to the question of how much force is attached to joking links. The acceptance of these relationships—irregardless of how robust they may be—depends on the situational context and the actors and stakes involved. It should be clear that utilizing joking kinship does not guarantee conflict cessation, although it greatly heightens that possibility³⁰.

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One of the goals of this paper is to highlight the richness of local knowledge and conflict management practices. Shared norms and values are central to peacemaking. Social dynamics are thrown into relief during such dispute settlement as participants discuss rules and expectations. Conflict management is a crucible for the explicit renegotiation of relationships and shared conventions and codes.

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28. In one case, for example, the mediator—who had *dangkuto* with the parties—was told that he would have “had bad things happen to him” if he had not intervened in the dispute. In another example of the widespread social acceptance of this institution, a policeman insisted upon mediating between his joking partners instead of taking up formal legal proceedings. *Plaisanterie* may thus remain of paramount importance even to officials in the state legal-rational bureaucratic system.
  29. Disputes between joking partners appear to be relatively infrequent as most Gambians attempt to avoid such situations and act quickly to resolve them when they occur. For example, a youth who participated in this study exhibited great concern when his joking partner became upset with him, and he went to great lengths to ensure that there would be no hard feelings between them.
  30. In fact, the mere existence of joking relationships may somewhat dampen conflict. In separate conversations, several acquaintances mentioned that they do not immediately react when they are troubled by persons unknown to them, as they do not know whether they share a special affinity with the strangers. There is an interesting parallel to North American aggression replacement training in that one of its central tenets is that one should take time to think rather than immediately reacting when feeling bothered. The presence of a social institution that dampens conflict and makes people pause before responding to insults and challenges may therefore exert a systemic influence that reduces the likelihood of quarrelling.

In my cross-cultural study of the structuring of the mediation process, the only stages or activities that appeared to be universal were setting the stage and ritualization (Davidheiser 2005). These activities are essential in the creation of liminal space, which, my research suggests, is a vital aspect of effective peacemaking. The significance of cultural perspectives in human affairs is partly due to our desire for meaning and order and our need for a sense of stability and continuity. Rituals can help to facilitate change; they can help to moderate the conservative impulse by integrating potential societal shifts into existing frames of reference. In other words, there is a human tendency to favor the familiar. One way of coping with novel phenomena is ritualization, using accepted social institutions to make social changes more comprehensible and palatable by incorporating them into shared cognitive frameworks. The efficacy of much third party peacemaking or mediation is linked to the creation of a special social space in which the conventions and scripts of everyday life are loosened, enabling personal and social transformation. A survey of the ethnographic literature in a variety of societies illuminates the value of liminality in conflict mitigation³¹. Senegambians' use of *plaisanterie* in peacemaking underscores the significance of ritualized and customary aspects of this social process.

Analyzing joking relationships illuminates both universal sociological processes of interest to social scientists and societal disparities in modes of dispute settlement. Examining divergent cultural patterns could greatly enhance international governance and legal reform projects as such efforts could be made more efficient by adapting them to the needs and practices of target populations. Non-western methodologies also offer valuable insights into the complexities of peacebuilding and may provide techniques that can be incorporated into the conflict resolution repertoire. For example, could the Gambian approach of forgiveness and reconciliation be adapted for use in Western cases not amenable to principled negotiation?

There have been many studies of the relationship between formal institutional conditions and conflict situations. Peacebuilding must move beyond the macro arena and a state-centered focus to explore related issues at the grassroots and cognitive levels. Non-Western peacemaking techniques should be analyzed both for their intrinsic ethnographic value and for what they may reveal about conflict resolution in general. Senegambians' use of joking relationships offers fresh insights into the dynamics of social conflict, integration, and cooperation. Those interested in enhancing conflict resolution theory and practice would do well to consider alternative approaches to "alternative dispute resolution".

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31. Selected examples of the numerous societies in which ritualization is prominent in peacemaking include the Semai (ROBARCHEK 1997), North Americans, Arusha, and Ndenduli (GULLIVER 1979), Native Hawaiians (SHOOK 1986), and Lebanese (WITTY 1980). See SCHIRCH (2005) for a good overview of the role of ritual in conflict resolution.

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ABSTRACT

The anthropological literature of the 20th century portrays joking kinship as promoting social cohesion and conflict mitigation. Social science has largely repudiated

structural-functionalism, however, and given the rapid pace of globalization and contemporary knowledge about the elastic nature of tradition, an investigation the contemporary significance of these relationships in peacemaking is warranted. This paper examines the contemporary role of joking ties in Gambian conflict management. Special affinities such as joking kinship played a prominent role in mitigating conflicts, indicating that rural Gambians confronting changing conditions continue to draw upon familiar societal patterns.

That finding has implications for conflict resolution in the West and elsewhere. Top-down mediation efforts have failed to resolve many prominent conflicts and the mixed results of Western-led peacebuilding efforts have produced a growing interest in peacemaking at the local level. Analyzing how groups and individuals mediate in different societal contexts, and identifying universal and particular aspects of the mediation process can shed new light on the age-old challenge of peacemaking. Gambians' use of special affinities in moderating disputing offers a variety of lessons for those interested in refining conflict resolution praxis.

RÉSUMÉ

Plaisanteries pour la paix : organisation sociale, tradition et changement dans la gestion des conflits en Gambie. — La littérature anthropologique du xx^e siècle présente la parenté à plaisanterie comme favorisant la cohésion sociale et l'apaisement des conflits. Toutefois, les sciences sociales ont largement répudié le fonctionnalisme structurel, et compte tenu de la mondialisation et de ce qu'on sait aujourd'hui de la nature élastique de la tradition, une étude sur le rôle des relations à plaisanterie dans la conciliation est nécessaire. Cet article examine le rôle actuel des relations à plaisanterie dans la gestion des conflits en Gambie. Certaines affinités particulières comme la parenté à plaisanterie ont en effet joué un rôle déterminant dans l'apaisement des conflits, ce qui montre que les Gambiens ruraux confrontés à un changement de situation continuent de se reposer sur des pratiques sociétales familiales. Cette observation a des implications pour la résolution des conflits en Occident et ailleurs. Les efforts de médiation menés du haut vers le bas n'ont pas réussi à résoudre de nombreux conflits importants et les résultats mitigés des efforts occidentaux ont suscité un intérêt croissant pour la conciliation au niveau local. Analyser comment ces groupes et individus servent d'intermédiaires dans des différents contextes sociaux et identifier des aspects universels et particuliers du processus de médiation peut jeter un nouvel éclairage sur l'éternel défi de la conciliation. Chez les Gambiens, l'utilisation d'affinités particulières pour modérer les disputes offre un ensemble de leçons pour ceux qui souhaitent améliorer la praxis de la résolution de conflits.

Keywords/Mots-clés: *Gambia, cousinage, conflict resolution, joking relationships/Gambia, cousinage, résolution de conflit, relations à plaisanterie.*