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**KURUKAN FUGA**

## THE KURUKAN FUGA CHARTER AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE FORMER MANDINGO SOCIETY: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S CONDITIONS TODAY

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### Résumé

Cette étude porte sur la Charte de Kurukan Fuga et le statut des femmes dans la société précoloniale mandingue ancrée dans une perspective postcoloniale pour améliorer les conditions des femmes aujourd'hui. Dans la société mandingue les femmes ont non seulement contribué à la stabilité et à l'épanouissement de leurs familles mais de leur société également. Cet article vise à expliquer leur statut et les inspirations à en tirer pour améliorer les conditions des femmes aujourd'hui. La théorie du postcolonialisme est utilisée pour analyser et interpréter les données. La méthode qualitative est employée pour rassembler les données. Leurs contributions furent immenses aux niveaux de l'éducation, de l'organisation, de l'hospitalité, de la solidarité, de l'économie et de la politique dans la famille et la société. Aujourd'hui un regard circonspect sur leur statut et leurs contributions peut aider à améliorer les conditions des femmes socialement, économiquement et politiquement.

**Mots clés:** contributions, développement, Charte de Kurukan Fuga, Mandingue, stabilité.

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### Abstract

This study deals with the Kurukan Fuga Charter and the status of women in the former Mandingo society: a postcolonial perspective to improve women's conditions today. In the Mandingo society women contributed not only to the stability and fulfillment of their families but also the society. This article seeks to explain their status and the inspirations to be drawn from it to improve women's conditions today. The theory of postcolonialism is used to analyse and interpret the data. The qualitative method is used to collect the data. Their contributions were tremendous at the levels of education, organization, hospitality, solidarity, economy and politics in the family and society. Today a careful look at their status and contributions can help improve women's conditions socially, economically and politically.

**Key words:** contributions, development, Kurukan Fuga Charter, Mandingo, stability.

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## Introduction

**I**n the Mandingo society<sup>1</sup> as well as in all the societies in the world, women and men have always collaborated and contributed to its development. The point of departure of that collaboration and contribution is the proliferation of human species by both in every society. Therefore, from that reality, we notice that women have contributed to the development of all the societies in the world although this reality seems to be underestimated and unknown by many people of today. We have also realized that African women are generally represented in western literatures, media and discourses as if they had never had any positive status in Africa before the encounter of Africa with Europe. In the same context, we have observed that the roles of individuals in any society vary from one individual to another, from one society to another and from one period to another. That is why, some responsibilities are entrusted with men and others to women. Even the children, boys and girls, have responsibilities too. Sometimes, some responsibilities are transverse or collective. The former Mandingo society, before and after the Kurukan Fuga Conference in 1236, was not an exception to those principles.

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<sup>1</sup> The term is used to refer to the former Empire of Mali.

Women in that ancient society contributed not only to the fulfillment of their own families but also to the stability and development of the society itself.

The data are collected through the reading of specific books and scholarly works. They are also analysed and interpreted in the theoretical context of postcolonialism. Methodologically, the paper is divided into three major parts. The first one accounts for the status of women in the family in the former Mandingo society. The second one deals with the status of women in the society in the same society. As to the third one, it provides the inspirations to be drawn in order to improve women's conditions today.

The primary objective of the study is to explicate the status of women in the former Mandingo society and the inspirations to be drawn from it to improve women's conditions today. To attain the aforementioned objective of the study, the following questions are raised: What was the status of women in the family in the former Mandingo society? What was their status in the society? What inspirations can be drawn from it to improve women's conditions today?

## **1. The Status of Women in the Family in the Former Mandingo Society**

The family is a group of individuals living together and having close relationships with one another. This living together implies clear responsibilities for each member to assure the happiness and survival of the family. In this sharing of responsibilities within the family, women had particular status in the former Mandingo society. Their roles were perceived as important as those of men. In reality, the roles of the members of the family were viewed as complementary, the ones depending on the others. The notion of superiority between sexes, as propounded by the West, did not actually exist in precolonial Mandingo families despite the differences in roles. The roles of women also varied whether she was a wife, a mother, a sister, an aunt, a niece, a cousin, a sister-in-law, or a grandmother.

The Mandingo wife within the family played a fundamental role. She was the leader as far as the organization of the family was concerned. In addition to this prominent position, she was the supervisor of the whole family. The management of food was her duty as well. The education of children, especially the girls was part and parcel of her responsibilities. Furthermore, welcoming foreigners was her task as well. She also played a fundamental role regarding income

generating activities. The profit she earned was used to satisfy either personal needs or the needs of the whole family. On top of all the aforementioned tasks, she performed her role of spouse and mother in the family. Taking into account all these functions for a single individual, we can simply state that the precolonial Mandingo woman as wife was indispensable to the prosperity, stability and survival of the family. Like the wife, all the other categories of women in the family play important roles.

In the former Mandingo society, the implementation of certain values in the family was the concern of women primarily. Women were at the center of the success of those practices in the family. The Kurukan Fuga Charter, regarded as the landmark of the Mandingo society, alludes to those values through the following articles:

- Article 9: The education of children behooves the entire society. The paternal authority therefore falls to everyone.
- Article 24: In Manden, never ill-treat the foreigners.
- Article 30: We should help those who are in need.

- Article 31: We should respect kinship, marriage and neighborhood<sup>2</sup>.

According to Article 9 the education of children in the family was the concern of everyone, men and women. Before that regulation, women were answerable for the education of children in the family. It simply shares this responsibility among all the members of the family although women have the greatest part. Articles 24 underlines the welcoming of foreigners in the family. Women were more dynamic regarding this aspect. In charge of the organization of the family, a foreigner feels at home when the wife takes care of him. If the opposite happens, the stay of a foreigner is made shorter than predicted. Article 30 calls for solidarity in the family. It was the duty for both men and women. Considering their great roles in the family, solidarity becomes a reality thanks to the involvement of women in its practice. Article 31 underscores the respect of relatives, neighbours and marriage relations by family members. Women play major roles regarding the respect of those categories of individuals by family members. Closely observed, women had more responsibilities than men in the enforcement of the few articles from the

Kurukan Fuga Charter quoted above in the family. They once more show how much women were important in the prosperity and stability of the family.

To sustain what has been explained above regarding solidarity, Patricia and Frederick (1994) confirm how solidarity operates during marriage celebrations in the following terms: "On her wedding day, the bride was pampered by older women in her family. They plaited her hair and oiled and perfumed her body" (p. 73). Here is an instance of the practice of solidarity in the family in Mandingo societies during marriage celebrations. The same happened in all the families and in all the situations. As the saying goes: "Charity begins at home". Solidarity was manifested between the members of the same family in any situation whenever it was necessary before the assistance of the other members of the community. No one was left unassisted in the family. As shown in the passage, during her marriage the bride was given all the attention of the members in her family. Anything she could not do was performed for her. Her satisfaction and her appreciation by others was the honor of the rest of the family. Women were more concerned with the enhancement of the honor of the family

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<sup>2</sup> These four articles are from the variant of the Kurukan Fuga Charter designed in Kankan in 1998. That variant is made up of 44 articles. There is as well the variant provided by Solomana Kante. The latter is

composed of 133 articles. There is very little difference between the two variants in content although they differ in their number of articles.

regarding the implementation of the values quoted above such as education, solidarity, hospitality, respect of kinship, marriage and neighborhood.

Regarding the education of children, Article 9 granted the privilege to everyone in the family to contribute to it. In that collective process, the mother played a fundamental role. She was the pillar in that education. Hampate Ba (1972) illustrates it as follows:

So for example, during the first seven years of his existence, where the individual in training requires the most possible care, the child will be intimately related to his mother on whom he depends for all the aspects of his life. From seven years to fourteen years, he is confronted with the external life which he receives the influences, but he still feels the need to refer to his mother, who remains his standard. From fourteen years to twenty-one years, he is at the school of his teachers, and progressively moves away from the influence of his mother<sup>3</sup>. (p.13).

As embedded in the above excerpt, the place of the mother is tremendous in the education of children, both boys and girls. Within the family she contributes to the education of the girls from birth to marriage. As far as the boys are concerned, she influences their education somehow from

birth up to twenty-one years old. Her amount of contribution in the education of children in the family is higher than that of any other member in the family. Considering that predominant role in education as well as in the other fields, the woman was granted the highest importance and respect in the family.

## **2. The Status of the Precolonial Mandingo Women in Society**

The importance of women was not limited to the wellbeing of their families. Living within the society, they were concerned with its prosperity, stability and survival as well. The Mandingo society was regarded as a common property for both men and women, young and old. Everybody contributed to its preservation as a heritage up till now despite different roles and means. Although less tackled and taken into account, the place of women was substantial in the Mandingo society. They did not live on the margin as it is generally believed. They were as active as men. Men, in the Mandingo society, truly knew that they alone could not do everything. The Kurukan Fuga Charter which occupied a central place in the management of the Mandingo society did not let aside women at all. This Charter was

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<sup>3</sup> Ainsi par exemple, pendant les sept premières années de son existence, où la personne en formation requiert le plus de soin possible, l'enfant restera intimement relié à sa mère dont il dépend pour tous les aspects de sa vie. De sept ans à quatorze ans, il est confronté avec le milieu extérieur dont il reçoit les influences, mais il éprouve toujours le besoin de se

référer à sa mère, qui reste son critère. De quatorze ans à vingt et un ans, il est à l'école de la vie de ses maîtres, et s'éloigne progressivement de l'influence de sa mère. (p.13).

adopted in 1236 during a great conference called the Conference of Kurukan Fuga at Kaaba, current Kangaba. Even before that date, women were not forgotten in the management in the Mandingo society. This Charter devoted some of its articles not only to the involvement of women in the management of their society but also their respect, protection and freedom. Some of them are:

Article 9: The education of children behooves the entire society. The paternal authority therefore falls to everyone.

Article 11: When your wife or child runs away, stop running after them to the neighbor's house.

Article 14: Never offend women, our mothers.

Article 15: Never beat a married woman before her husband has tried to correct the problem.

Article 16: Women, apart from their everyday occupations, should be associated with all our managements.

Article 21: Do not follow up with your constant attentions the wives of the chief, of the neighbor, of the marabou, of the priest, of the friend and of the partner.

Article 28: The bride price is set at three cows: one for the bride and two for her father and mother.

Article 29: In Manden, divorce is tolerated for one of the following reasons:

- Sexual impotence of the husband;
- Madness of one of the spouses (husband or wife);
- Incapability of the husband to assume the obligations due to the marriage.

Divorce should occur out of the village.

Article 30: We should help those who are in need.

Article 31: We should respect kinship, marriage and neighborhood<sup>4</sup>.

Article 9 involves women as well as the other members of the community in the education of children in the whole society.

All the categories of women, from mother to niece, participated in the education of children in the whole Mandingo community.

This was a way to lessen the responsibility of mothers who were particularly answerable for children's education. Article 11 offers security to the wife with the

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<sup>4</sup> These articles are from Kankan's variant of the Kurukan Fuga Charter designed in Kakan in 1998.

neighbours. All the neighbours become the protectors and defenders of the wife in case of misunderstanding with her husband. Article 14 grants full and permanent respect to women. All the categories of women are regarded as our mothers, accordingly deserve the respect and consideration any individual has for his own mother. Article 15 offers protection and respect to the married woman. She is protected by her husband and the whole community at the same time. Article 16 deals with the participation of women in the management of the whole society. They become active politically and economically in the society in addition to their various family tasks. Article 21 gives protection and respect to the married woman. She is out of attempts which can spoil her reputation. This article prevents men from committing adultery in the society. Article 28 grants economic independence to women. The cow they are given in the bride price is the point of

departure of that economic independence after marriage. Article 29 gives women freedom to leave marriage if they are not happy in it. This is a way to avoid forced marriage in the society. Article 30 gives protection to women in case of necessity. The whole society is ready to assist any individual in case of need including women primarily of course. Article 31 gives respect and protection to women in the society with the respect of one's relatives, one's neighbours and the new links created through marriage imposed on any individual.

As underlined above, Cissoko (2019) points out the place of women in the education of children as follows:

This law lightens the burden of women who were responsible for the education of children, especially that of the small girl. Before, the Mandingo woman was confined at home and to farm works. Henceforth, that responsibility is shared by the whole community, therefore freeing partially "the wife" from an old-age burden. By his words, Soundiata confirms the fundamental place of women in the Mandingo society<sup>5</sup>. (p.184).

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<sup>5</sup> Cette loi vient alléger le fardeau des femmes qui avaient en charge l'éducation des enfants, surtout celle de la petite fille. Auparavant, la femme Mandenka était confinée au domicile familial et aux

travaux champêtres. Désormais cette responsabilité est partagée par toute la communauté, libérant ainsi partiellement « la femme au foyer » d'un fardeau millénaire. Par ses propos, Soundjata confirme la

The education of children was the concern of women not only in the family but also in the community. The adoption of the Kurukan Fuga Charter in 1236 lessened the responsibility of women through Article 9. The education of children became a common issue although the woman (wife/mother) remained the central actress.

Contrary to many western feminists' views, African women of the Manden land were given protection and socially respected as all the members of that society. This allowed them to play a tremendous role in the development of the Mandingo society known today as the Empire of Mali. Article 11 quoted above alludes to that protection and respect given to women. Besides, Kouyate (2021) reveals that protection and respect were not only granted to women but to all the family members:

In Article 11, the respect that exists between neighbors is almost made

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place essentielle des femmes dans la société Manding. (p.184).

<sup>6</sup> A l'article 11, le respect que se doivent les voisins est presque sacralisé. Quelle que soit la faute que commet un des membres de votre famille, une fois que ce dernier va se réfugier chez votre voisin, vous

sacred. No matter what the mistake a member of your family makes, once the latter takes refuge with your neighbor, you no longer have the right to punish him for that mistake. You are to give up and erase from your memory the offense you have been victim of<sup>6</sup>. (p.81).

This passage is of paramount importance. It underscores the spirit of respect, protection, forgiveness and above all tolerance of the Mandingo people. When women were granted these conditions, they became true participants in the development of their society. Concerning Article 15, Dembele (2019) explains its scope in like terms:

This article defines the type of relation that governs, on the one hand, the woman and her husband, and on the other hand, the relation of the woman with her neighborhood. The husband assures the protection of his wife and the neighborhood must respect the status of the "married woman" by always taking care to inform him before undertaking any action against his wife. This consideration, besides, is a message of hope and progress. It makes life pleasant and permits to avoid the daily worries knowing that in the life of the couple, there is a man on whom we can rely. This will prevent the confrontations between the members of the community<sup>7</sup>. (p. 162).

n'avez plus le droit de le punir pour cette faute. Vous devez abandonner et effacer de votre mémoire l'offense qui vous aura été faite.

<sup>7</sup> Cet article définit le type de rapport devant régir, d'une part, la femme et son époux et, d'autre part, la relation de la femme avec son entourage. Le mari assure la protection de sa femme et l'entourage doit

This excerpt shows the idea of complementarity between husband and wife. It swiftness away the idea of marginalization and loneliness stuck to precolonial African women propagated by some Eurocentrists and feminists. Instead of weaving a relation of opposition, the husband and the wife had a relation of complementarity, one unable to live pleasantly without the other in the former Mandingo society.

The articles quoted above were not just taken but implemented. Some of them survived until today and they are part of our daily practices. Keita (2019) explains below how precolonial African women were emancipated:

The woman's emancipation was already a reality. She was already associated to the decision-making and her participation in the public management was recognized. Moreover, it was strictly forbidden to make her undergo any act of violence. These dispositions were considered as a reward to the woman who played a determinant role in the founding victory of the empire in the Kirina Battle. We remind that history teaches us the defeat of Soumangourou, king of Sosso, is partly due to his wife who had

revealed his secret of invincibility to Soundjata<sup>8</sup>. (p. 101).

The African woman's full participation in the development of her society began centuries ago before the Kurukan Fuga Conference. The victory of Soundjata Keita over Soumahoro can be regarded as a feminine achievement. Soundjata's sister who was Soumangourou's or Soumahoro's last wife was at the origin of that victory. Soundjata Keita and his brave allied warriors did not say she was a woman to keep her away from the solutions against Soumahoro. They knew well what women could do in any sector of development. They also believed in the saying "What woman wants, God wants". So, the defeat of Soumahoro was achieved thanks to a woman's will and intelligence. The victory of Soundjata was facilitated with the collaboration of women in the affairs of the society. As they were important in the society, the fundamental law of the society could not be devised by letting women aside. That is why, they were

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respecter le statut de la «femme mariée» en prenant toujours soin de l'informer avant d'entreprendre une action quelconque contre sa femme. Cette considération, par ailleurs, est un message d'espoir et de transcendance. Elle rend la vie agréable et permet d'éviter les soucis quotidiens en sachant que dans la vie de couple, il y a un homme sur lequel l'on peut compter. Cela évitera les confrontations entre les membres de la communauté. (p. 162).

<sup>8</sup> L'émancipation de la femme était déjà une réalité. Elle était déjà associée à la prise de décision et sa participation à la gouvernance publique était

reconnue. De plus, il était formellement interdit d'exercer une quelconque violence sur elle. Ces dispositions étaient considérées comme une récompense à l'endroit de la femme qui a joué un rôle déterminant dans la victoire fondatrice de l'empire lors de la bataille de Kirina. L'on se rappelle que l'histoire nous enseigne que la défaite de Soumangourou, roi du Sosso, est en partie due à sa femme qui avait révélé son invulnérabilité à Soundjata. (p. 101).



officially alluded to in some of the charter's articles.

Generally, it is believed that the African woman is not emancipated or considered in the society. Considering the Kurukan Charter and what happened in the Mali Empire and even before, that judgment is simply Eurocentric. Individuals' place or consideration in the society is culturally oriented. One way of treating the individual can be positive in one society, but negative in another one. Cultural universalism is not possible. In the same way, universal Europeanization is not possible or a reality. Even women's staying at home and taking care of the family is not a lack of consideration towards them according to some cultures. Wearing indecent clothing and putting one's body at the mercy of everyone is not even valuing women according to some people including women themselves. Inviting people to eat is perceived as a good attitude for those who do it instead of giving a newspaper to them to read. Keeping one's parents in old-age pensions is regarded by some as civilization, but as animalization and ungratefulness by

those who take care of their parents till their death as the Mandingo people used to do.

As far as the importance of women is concerned in the building of the nation, Dembele (2019) provides a vivid comment on the involvement of women as advocated in Article 16 of the Kurukan Fuga Charter through the following words:

Article 16 grants women a part of respect and freedom guaranteed by the practice of power. That involvement of women in the leadership clearly demonstrates that the question of gender has been tackled in West African societies since 1236. And in reality, the question of gender is not at all a new order in those societies despite the propositions of a category of ethnologists<sup>9</sup>. (p. 163).

In the Mandingo society, women were active everywhere: in the social, economic and political fields. In the political field, they were truly present. For instance, there were four sorts of meetings as revealed in the Kurukan Fuga Charter. Article 131 of Solomana Kante's variant<sup>10</sup> of the Charter tackles it. Women took part in all of them except the last one. They were: minor meeting, major meeting, assembly and congress.

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<sup>9</sup> Article 16 accorde une part de respect aux femmes et de liberté garantie par la pratique du pouvoir. Cette implication des femmes dans la gouvernance démontre clairement que la question du genre était abordée dans les sociétés ouest-africaines, dès 1235. Et qu'en effet, la question du genre n'est pas une donne tout à fait nouvelle dans lesdites sociétés, en dépit des propositions d'une catégorie d'ethnologues. (p. 163).

<sup>10</sup> Two major written variants of the Kurukan Fuga Charter are available today: the one designed in Kankan in 1998 composed of 44 articles, and the one designed by Solomana Kante in 1970 in Nko, and later translated in French in 2009. It is made up of 133 articles. The two variants are different in their number of articles, but similar in content.

Minor meetings were organized in the whole Mandingo society. They were the most important ones. They happened in the different families. They could be between two people such as a man and his wife, two brothers, two wives, two fathers, two in-laws, the chief and all the members of his family to regularly solve issues concerning them in the families. They also happened between the chief of the district and all the chiefs of the families to solve certain problems regarding their district. Those meetings were regular and could happen every day in the different families of the community. Women were actively concerned with them.

Major meetings were organized between the different chiefs of district and the chief of the village primarily. They happened any time the chief of the district had anything to be known by the chief of the village concerning the management of their districts or the chief of the village had something to tell them concerning the members of their district. Those meetings could be enlarged to age groups' leaders, men's and women's associations' leaders and hunters' associations' leaders. The objective of those meetings was not only to solve ongoing issues but also to inform and prevent later problems in the village. Women were represented in those meetings through their leaders.

Less common than minor and major meetings, assemblies were also organized to solve certain issues. They occurred between the chiefs of the villages and the king mainly. Here, more important issues impossible to be solved within the authority of the chief of the village were brought to the knowledge of the king to be discussed at the assembly. The assembly is often convened by the king to inquire about the leadership and management of the different villages of the kingdom, and to inform the village authorities about the new recommendations to be applied in their villages. In addition to the village heads, particular individuals including men and women, could take part in those meetings depending on the issues.

At last, congress was organized once a year in the capital city Niani. It happened between the different kings and the great emperor. It was an opportunity for the emperor to know about the state of the different kingdoms, the issues affecting them and their expectations. The congress permitted the emperor and the different kings to discuss the issues the empire is facing and the new orientations to decide later in the different kingdoms. The congress was of paramount importance because the good leadership and management of the empire was checked and decided during it. Women did not participate in the congress.

In such meetings, women were represented although they were not physically present.

Even today the members of parliament in the different countries represent the whole nation. Most of the time, children and many women are not among them. However, the issues concerning children and women are taken into account. In the families, the children are not invited in the meeting concerning the issues of the family. Those issues are not within their reach even if they concern them. No one in this world was invited in the meeting about the issue of his school attendance. Do we complain after knowing the importance of education? In most of the developed countries and teachers of democracy and equality between men and women, like France and the USA, some political positions, like the presidency of the republic, have never been occupied by women. Do you think the male presidents in those countries have never tackled issues regarding women?

However, it is axiomatic to recall that in the Mandingo society, women were politically involved beside to their cardinal roles in the family. The foregoing thought is actually underlined by Cissoko (2019) in the like terms:

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<sup>11</sup> Au-delà des activités primaires (tâches ménagères et éducation des enfants), elles doivent désormais être présentes aux assemblées. Les femmes obtiennent ainsi le droit de participer à la vie sociale et politique

Beyond preliminary activities (household chores and education of children), they must henceforth be present in assemblies. So, women obtained the right to participate in social and economic life of their community, hence the question of their representativeness in political instances. Centuries after, what have become those prescriptions?<sup>11</sup> (p. 185).

So, the idea of women's marginalization stuck to the image of precolonial African societies needs to be given careful attention. Regarding the place of women in the development and survival of mankind, they could in no way be marginalized in the Mandingo society as coalesced in the above excerpt. For the people of the Mandingo society, marginalizing women was marginalizing the whole society. For them, mainly men, women deserve more consideration than men themselves. Even if the role of women was limited to childbirth, that was the greatest achievement an individual could undertake in this world. Stating today that: "The woman is the mother or source of humanity", has its roots in the African philosophy, mainly that of the Mandingo people. Men in the ancient Mali Empire were not "mencentrist" as it is generally spread in the Eurocentric discourse. Their deep consideration towards women is shown in the perpetuation and reinforcement of the respect and protection

de leur communauté, d'où la question de leur représentativité aux instances politiques. Des siècles après, que sont devenues ces prescriptions? (p. 185).

they granted to them before the Kurukan Fuga Conference in 1236. That value has survived today and we are all proud of it because the people of the Mandingo society created conditions for its survival. They placed woman at the center of their existence at any level. For them, a woman was not just your wife, but your mother, your aunt, your sister, your daughter, your partner, your friend and your advisor. That aspect is also explained below as stipulated in Article 14 of the Kurukan Fuga Charter:

It is a major injunction (a formal order, a warning) for the preservation and protection of the feminine identity. The notion of mother refers to motherhood and the founder of community. And the presence of the negation and the adverb “never” is a mark of insistence. The woman whether she is mother, aunt or sister is therefore made sacred<sup>12</sup>. (Cissoko, 2019, p.185).

Limiting the frame of the relation of man and woman to the relation of husband and wife is too much simplistic and Eurocentric. For that reason, you may even hear some Europeanized African women who have problems with their husbands say that “the man is the enemy to fight against”, as if their father did not play any role in their conception. In the former Mandingo society women were made sacred people as propounded in the above passage. That

sacredness brought them respect and protection from the whole community because being a woman was a privilege and entailed a divine and sacred mission of founding nations and ensuring the survival of humanity. The quotation thus implies that without women, there is no Mandingo society and without them, there is neither development nor stability. This divine status of the precolonial African women made them special in the eyes of the Mandingo society.

Regarding the special status of the African woman, the Mandingo men even today continue to pay tribute to her not only one day or per year, but every time, everywhere and in everything they do or say. For them, any achievement a man carries out is not due to his strength, but his mother. The honor of your success, of your good deed comes from your mother or all your mothers. The “nba” or “anba” the men say as answer to “i ni ce” in Mandingo people’s greetings confirms it. “nba” means “my mother” and “anba” means “our mother”, “i ni ce” means “good work”. We say it when someone does something useful for the society or humanity.

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<sup>12</sup> C’est une injonction capitale (un ordre formel, une mise en garde) pour la préservation et la protection de l’identité féminine. La notion de mère fait référence à la maternité et à la fondatrice de la communauté. Et la présence de la négation “ne”

associée à l’adverbe “jamais est une marque d’insistance. La femme qu’elle soit mère, tante ou sœur est ainsi sacralisée. (p.185).

When women are greeted, they answer “nse”, “se” meaning “power or suffering”. It means that women assume the responsibilities and the importance that the society has given them. In other words, it means that women have the power to do everything or women undergo suffering in this world in order to allow mankind to survive. This suffering is a natural one, but not imposed on them by men. The nine months of pregnancy, the delivery, the taking care of children before they grow up are those moments of suffering. If the women refuse that natural suffering, they can put an end to the existence of the baby at any time and there will be no mankind. African men were aware of this and decided to pay them tribute and put them at the center of their attention everywhere and every time. This is a great philosophy of the Mandingo people we need to understand and grant it more value today instead of copying the dictates of those always downgrading us. This level of consideration granted to women by Mandingo men in the past is unheard in the existence of humanity.

Another social value that permitted women to have a good position and participate fully in the development of the Mandingo society was justice. The Kurukan Charter adopted in 1236 alludes to it. This

Charter was a sort of revolution for women regarding the importance they were officially granted. As the charter was implemented, the status of women in the Mandingo society was far above the one of women in many other societies often viewed as civilized and respectful to women. The Mandingo society or in other terms, the Mali Empire was far above many societies in terms of equity and complementarity between the two sexes. Even the image of women in the great religions in the world was negative compared to what it was granted in the Mandingo society:

According to the anthropologist and sociologist of religions, Michel Sirois, beyond the specificities that Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism carry, the woman is described by expressions of negative resonance : a being less sure (Coran); devilish (Christendom); curious, talkative, witchcraft-oriented (Talmud); a simple object of desire which has “nothing pure” (Buddhism). Compared to these texts, Kurukan Fuga is a veritable revolution. Already in 1236, Soundiata king of Manding affirmed the liberation of women. Centuries later, the kingdom of France, said civilized still advocated the confinement of the Christian to the domestic functions. In 1586 again, the jurist Jean Bodin (*Six Livres de la République*) expresses himself on the status on the woman: “As to the order of the condition of women; I don’t want to be concerned with it. I simply think that they must be put aside from any magistracy, position of commandment, court, councils and public assemblies, so that they grant all their attention to their household chores”<sup>13</sup>. (Cissoko, 2019, p. 191).

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<sup>13</sup> Selon l’anthropologue et sociologue des religions, Michèle Sirois, au-delà des spécificités que charrient,

l’Islam, le Christianisme, le Judaïsme, et le Bouddhisme, la femme est décrite par des expressions

Women enjoyed freedom and justice in the Mandingo society due to the implementation of the charter which endowed them with more freedom and rights in the society in 1236. At the same time, European women were facing all sorts of injustice. It is sometimes hard to believe that women at a given time in their existence suffered in Europe. Shown as creators, owners and teachers of civilization and good values to the rest of the world through their Eurocentric ideologies, Europeans hide the injustice and exclusion women were generally facing in their society. Diop (1959) therefore unveils this absence of emancipation of the European woman in the following way: “The European woman will never be emancipated by the Napoleon Code, as it has been underlined by Engels: you will have to wait the end of the last war to see the French woman vote”<sup>14</sup> (p. 81).

The opposite happened in the Mandingo society since 1236. According to Djibril Tamsir Niane, the place of women in the political and social life of Mandé was great.

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à résonance négative : un être peu sûr (Coran) ; diabolique (chrétienté) ; curieuse, bavarde, portée sur la sorcellerie (Talmud) ; un simple objet de désir qui n’a « rien de pur » (Bouddhisme). Comparé à ces textes, Kurukan Fugan est une véritable révolution. Déjà en 1236, Soundiata roi du Manding affirmait la libération de la femme. Des siècles plus tard, le royaume de France, dit civilisé prônait encore le confinement de la femme chrétienne aux fonctions domestiques. En 1586 encore, le juriste Jean Bodin (*Six Livres de la République*) s’exprime sur le statut de la femme : « Quant à l’ordre et à la condition des femmes ; je ne veux pas m’en mêler. Je pense

There was equality between the sexes. Stating that women did not vote one day in Europe and America is unbelievable to many people. That hard and sad reality was the condition of women in those continents. But in the Mandingo society, complementarity, interdependence, protection and mutual respect were the principles of life between all the sexes.

### **3. Precolonial Mandingo Women’s Status as Source of Inspirations for Africa today**

A retrospective look and careful analysis of women’s conditions in the past can help improve women’s conditions both in the family and in the society today. Certain problems women are facing are due to the misunderstanding of the way they were treated in the past and the enforcement of foreign values far from our social realities. The involvement of women in the development of their society has always been a reality in the Mandingo society. A particular impetus was given to that involvement after the Kurukan Conference

simplement qu’elles doivent être tenues à l’écart de toute magistrature, poste de commandement, tribunal, assemblées publiques et conseils, de sorte qu’elles puissent accorder toute leur attention à leurs tâches domestiques. (p. 191).

<sup>14</sup> La femme européenne ne sera même émancipée par le Code Napoléon, comme l’a souligné Engels : il faudra attendre la fin de la dernière guerre pour voir voter la Française (p. 81).

in 1236. The Charter that was adopted to manage the whole society did not marginalize women at all in the development of their family and society as shown above through some articles.

The re-adaptation of the dispositions related to education, solidarity, hospitality and participation can be not only the remedies to many difficulties women are facing but also contribute to the stability and prosperity of the family and the whole society. The articles related to justice, respect and protection preserve women's dignity. Even today, if women are granted justice, respect and protection, they would largely partake in the stability and development of both the family and society. This signifies that women are indispensable in our existence nowadays. No family and society can thrive without them. To make their existence more enjoyable and make it beneficial to the society, equity and complementarity are required as conveyed through the Kurukan Fuga Charter. Besides, the fundamentals of equity and complementarity are respect and protection.

Respecting and protecting women today is more useful than providing them with materials only. They will get materials as the result of respect and protection. In addition, the respect children may have for their parents would allow them to do anything good for them. The protection of parents by

children is regarded as a necessity since the parents are their first protectors before they become adults. All the categories of women whether wife, mother, aunt, sister, cousin, niece, grandmother, sister-in law or mother-in law, just deserve respect and protection as it was done in the past in order to make them more beneficial to the family and society.

### **Conclusion**

The future is built with the combination of the lessons learnt from the past and the present. Anyone who ignores everything from the past is doomed to an uncertain future. The former Mandingo society has something to offer to the current societies regarding the place of women in the society. The Kurukan Fuga Charter adopted in 1236 granted a major place to women both in the family and society. The official recognition of women's place in the family and society through specific articles contributed largely to the development of the Mandingo society. A rereading and readjustment of many dispositions of this Charter granting protection and respect to women can help improve their conditions at all the levels nowadays. Once this is achieved, they would participate fully in the fulfillment of their family and in the development of the society.

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