

school district's team was to offer trainings for local associations that had completed a cycle of adult Manding literacy classes. I rarely encountered people reading or writing in the language outside the confines of these subsidized trainings that were often coveted for their per diem stipends. As such, a year after my departure from Burkina, I was pleasantly surprised to discover people doing just that, even if it was in an alphabet that I had only recently been introduced to while taking classes as a Fulbright scholar in France.

N'ko was invented in 1949 by the Guinean “peasant intellectual” Sùlemáana Kántè (Feierman 1990).² A non-Latin-, non-Arabic-based writing system designed primarily for Manding, N'ko is written right to left and is a perfect phonological analysis of Kantè's native Manding variety, with a set of diacritics for marking tone (Vydrin 2001b, 128–29). Trained in the Quranic school of his father, Kantè used his script to write over 100 books spanning linguistics, history, traditional medicine, and Islam—including a translation of the Quran (Kántè n.d.)—that continue to be typeset, published, and taught by N'koïsants today.³

In 2012, I met the N'ko teacher Sáliya Tárawele in Burkina Faso's second city of Bobo-Dioulasso. Over the course of a few intermittent weeks, I participated in a number of his regular lessons that he led after sundown in a dusty classroom at private Catholic high school. One day—surely in response to my interest in his book collection—he provided me with a small piece of notebook paper, which was covered in his own handwritten words. The document came from a radio segment that he had prepared and it was mine to keep, he said. Scrawled across the paper was the following:⁴

[illegible]

You know that we say certain things with mistakes. We call these “public mistakes” [*fōroba fili*]. We’re not singling out one person; everyone speaks with some mistakes. . . . But this is how we understand things. If a language is written in its true form, then it is written with its rules. In the street though, one

2. Henceforth <Sulemaana Kantè>, ignoring tonal diacritics and using <è> in place of <e>, except in citations (e.g., Kantè 2008a) where I note his name using the Latin-based Manding transliteration system. I have opted to write Kantè's first name as *Sulemaana* given that it is written as such by Kantè himself in the majority of his works that I have in my personal archive (Vydrin 2012, 63)

3. For stylistic purposes, I refer to people involved in N'ko circles in a range of ways that are not mutually exclusive or necessarily distinct (e.g., *students, teachers, or activists*). Within N'ko circles anyone that (a) is studying or can read N'ko and (b) supports the script's promotion may be called an N'ko 'teacher' (*kàramɔ́* Ɔ́ɔ́ɔ́) or 'student' (*kàràndén* Ɔ́ɔ́ɔ́). One common hypernym in N'ko circles is that of *N'ko-mɔ́* (Ɔ́ɔ́ɔ́ 'N'ko person') (Fófana 2008, 2–5). In its place, I often use the French term *N'koisant*.

4. See Kantè's writings (2009, 26) on the issue of linguistic "public shortcomings" (ἰὺν βέλβη Ἱεῶντορ *Fòdoba tánbon' nù*).

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simply says that which makes mutual comprehension easier. It's not just N'ko, all languages are this way. Take French, it's like that. Take Arabic, it's like that too. We [therefore] are calling all people—schooled or unschooled—to come study it.

Latent within this seemingly banal position about orthographic standards are two intertwined sociological interventions. First, Sáliya uses the term *N'ko* to refer to not an alphabet but rather a “language” (*kán*). This usage—N'ko as language—stems from Sulemaana Kantè; he applied the same name to both his alphabet and the language-dialect continuum that Western-trained linguists today refer to as Manding. In embracing this referential pairing, Sáliya recognizes a language that subsumes that which his government and fellow citizens recognize as *Jula*. He does not, however, imply that “N'ko” or Manding is a single, uniform linguistic code; just like professional linguists, he acknowledges that it has various forms, which, for him, result from a desire to facilitate mutual intelligibility. His second intervention instead is to claim that the language has rules that must be dutifully used and applied when writing. This register of Manding—unnamed, but tacit in his radio remarks, and which he strives to write and teach—is known as *kángbe* ‘clear language’.

N'ko, therefore, is not simply another way of naming the Manding continuum, nor is *kángbe* just another variety under the Manding umbrella. Together, they are ideas behind a transnational grassroots standardization project that aims to establish a single (primarily, but not exclusively, written) linguistic norm and thereby alter common conceptions of Manding varieties as distinct entities into a single language spoken by tens of millions across the subregion (Vydrin 2011). While the majority of speakers have not yet followed suit, thousands of people across West Africa today recognize and embrace these practices of Sáliya and N'ko's founder Sulemaana Kantè. In doing so, they take part in a social movement that proposes models of personhood and ways of orienting to one's fellow speakers that together serve as a means of resisting the region's colonial past and reshaping its neocolonial present.

In what follows, I draw on approximately six months of transnational fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2017 to take us into the writings, classrooms, and bookshops of N'ko students to offer an account of the spread of this meta-linguistic framework, which, through the standard language register of *kángbe*, unites formerly disparate dialects under the banner of N'ko. First, I look at how both the script and register are linguistically compelling in the classroom for Manding speakers of diverse dialectal backgrounds. Second, I turn to the ways

in which teachers' talk about talk and wider discourse tie the learning and use of N'ko and its standard language register to their self-fashioning as "savvy, disciplined, and just citizens," as enshrined in the common N'ko slogan *kólon, báara, télen*. Connecting such discourse with wider complaints about African postcolonial governments and society, I argue that N'ko's *kángbɛ* register is compelling as a discursive means by which its students can shape themselves into the kinds of citizens that they believe their countries and continent currently lack but desperately need.

Conceptual Framework

From a linguistic perspective, Manding⁵ is a language-dialect continuum stretching across West Africa from Senegal to Burkina Faso (see fig. 1; Vydrine 1995–96). The word *Manding* is a Western adaptation of the word *Màndén*, the name of both a place and former West African polity, commonly referred to as the Mali Empire, that at its apogee encompassed much of modern-day Guinea and Mali, primarily between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries (Levtzion 1973; Kánté 2008; Simonis 2010, 41–54).⁶

On the ground, speakers primarily label their speech with a range of distinct proper names (e.g., Maninka in Guinea, Mandinka in the Gambia, Bamanan in Mali, and Jula in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso), which are variably glossed in Western languages (see fig. 2).⁷ Nonetheless, mutual intelligibility is widely noted, in particular, between Maninka, Bamanan, and Jula (Dumestre and Retord 1981, 3).⁸ Despite both this and linguists' clear acknowledgment of their connectedness and overlap (e.g., Dumestre 2003; Creissels 2009), national language policies and linguistic work typically treat Manding varieties largely as distinct, albeit related, varieties or even languages (Calvet 1987; see table 1).

In such a situation, it is hardly surprising that both Sulemaana Kantè and Western academic linguists developed a single hypernym to refer to a range of interconnected and most often mutually intelligible phono-lexical grammatical systems: *N'ko* for the former, and *Manding* for the latter. For linguists, Manding is a convenience meant to gesture toward lexical and grammatical congruence of

5. In American anthropological and historical circles, one often encounters the term *Mande* or *mandekan* in place of Manding (e.g., Bird 1981). The major issue with this usage is that it coincides with the European and disciplinary linguistics convention of using *Mande* to refer to a broader language family that is more than 5,000 years old (Vydrin 2009, 2016b).

6. Depending on language or discipline, one can encounter a range of toponyms such as Mande, Manden, Manding, or Mali in place of *Màndén* (Creissels, forthcoming, 2).

7. As is customary, I will refer to these different varieties by removing their shared second element *-kán*.

8. This stems primarily from their common classification as Eastern varieties (as distinguished from Western Manding by their seven instead of five vowel system).

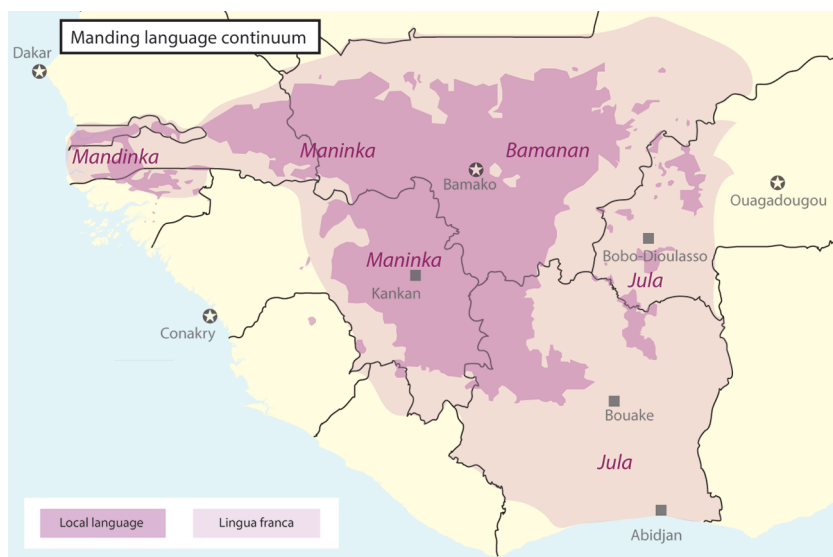


Figure 1. Manding language continuum (author's illustration, using data from Vydrin, Bergman, and Benjamin 2001).



Figure 2. Māhamūd Sánkare leads a lesson in N.Fa.Ya's *Wànkáran' Kàrantá* (photograph taken by the author).

Table 1. Major Manding Varieties by Local Name, Etymology, and Foreign-Language Designations

Local Name	Etymology	French Name	English Name	Alternative Spellings
<i>màndinkakán</i>	< 'Language of the people of Manden'	mandingue, malinké	Mandinka, Mandingo	
<i>màinkakán</i>	< 'Language of the people of Manden'	malinké	Maninka	
<i>bámanankan</i>	< 'Language of those that refuse (Islam)'	bambara	Bamanan	Bamana
<i>jùlakán</i>	< 'Trader's language'	dioula	Jula	Dyula, Diula, Dyoula

what they understand as freestanding varieties. The ambitions of N'ko's inventor were far greater.

N'ko

Beyond a script and language, *N'ko* more broadly denotes a transnational social movement based on Manding-medium literacy and education. Following its invention in 1949, the script has continually spread from its original base in the highlands of Guinea via the historical networks of Manding-speaking Muslim traders and Quranic schools (Oyler 1995, 2005). In recent decades there has been increasing efforts by N'koisants to move into the formal schooling sector (Wyrod 2003, 2008). Research and commerce related to traditional medicine has also been important vector of the movement's spread (d'Avignon 2012; Hellweg 2013).

Western scholars have additionally highlighted the movement's tendency to invoke the historical grandeur of the *Màndén* empire to promote Manding literacy in N'ko as part of a larger struggle to decolonize the francophone state and Arab-dominated Islam (e.g., Conrad 2001; Amselle 2003). None of the scholarship laid out above, however, ethnographically investigates one of the core features identified by Vydrin (2011), namely, the creation and dissemination of a standard language register that transcends dialectal variation.

Theoretical Framework

My research draws from a critical realist's approach to language (Cameron et al. 1992; Corson 1997) and linguistic anthropological understandings of "the total linguistic fact" (Silverstein 1985; Wortham 2008) as elucidated through the notions of reflexivity (Lucy 1993) and register (Agha 2007a).

While acknowledging that language, as we know it, is in fact a social phenomenon, “departmentalized linguistics” (Agha 2007b) approaches the study of language as a study of an abstract system (French *langue*) detached from its use in the real world (French *parole*). Linguistics then necessarily delineates and studies idealized, pure forms of language that do not in fact conform to the “ways of speaking” of actual people (Hymes 1974). While this is arguably a valid approach for scientists interested in the cognitive side of language structure or creating grammars, it is of little use to those seeking to study language as it is actually used (Cameron et al. 1992). For languages, without a history of top-down standardization, this is especially true; the speech practices and perceptions of Manding speakers, for instance, rarely correspond with the distinct varieties proposed by linguists (Canut 1996, 2001; Donaldson 2016). My approach to language is therefore undergirded by the philosophical paradigm of “critical realism” (Corson 1997)—which combines ontological realism with epistemological constructivism (Maxwell 2012)—in light of the fact that “language is only ever produced or interpreted in a social context” (Cameron et al. 1992, 12).

My study is thus guided by the concept of “the total linguistic fact” (Silverstein 1985; Wortham 2008) stemming from the Boasian linguistic tradition (Boas 1911; Agha 2007b)—which calls for attending to form, use, ideology, and domain when assessing the meaning of any utterance. *Form* in this sense denotes the lexemes and grammar of language. *Use* captures the way that forms are often used in unexpected ways to create emergent meaning that befuddles any rule-based account of grammar or pragmatics (e.g., Searle 1975). *Ideology* and *domain* account for the fact that no matter how well one dissects the interaction at hand, one cannot ascertain the meaning of an utterance without also appealing to larger circulating models that are known to certain *domains* or segments of people. These “models of linguistic signs and the people who characteristically use them” (Wortham 2008, 40) are *language ideologies* (Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998; Jaffe 1999; Kroskrity 2000).

While ideology conjures up the image of something existing in the head, I instead approach it through language’s fundamentally “reflexive” character (Lucy 1993; Agha 2007a), whereby people continually “remark on language, report utterances, index and describe aspects of the speech event, invoke conventional names, and guide listeners in the proper interpretation of their utterances” (Lucy 1993, 11). Language in this sense always has an inherently metalinguistic character. Whether overt or tacit, every interaction with language over a lifetime provides commentary that determines the stereotypical social values of forms and their uses. Language ideologies are therefore models mediating between the use

of language and the social world that are empirically traceable through explicit “habits of evaluation” (Agha 2007a, 17) and implicit patterns of use, which individuals read as metapragmatic commentary.

Agha's (2007a) notion of "register" inherently links form and use with the reflexive models (i.e., language ideologies) that give speech its social meaning and value. In folk terms and some traditional formulations, a dialect inherently points to the regional provenance of a person, while a register is understood as a situational deviance from a core of denotational forms (Halliday 1964, 1978; Biber and Finegan 1993). Agha's sense subsumes the two concepts under a single sociologically relevant conceptualization of patterned "fashions of speaking" (Whorf 1956). Registers are not simply different ways of saying the same thing. They are rather "cultural models of action" identifiable by a *repertoire* (i.e., linguistic features), *range* (enactable pragmatic values) and *domain* (a set of users; see Agha 2007a, 55). This article uses the concept of register to advance a social theory of language that aims to account for "how particular systems of speech valorization come into existence in the first place" (Agha 2007a, 15–16). As such, I focus on linguistic forms but primarily in service of investigating how social processes and linguistic grammar are mutually intertwined.

Kángbe Grammar

Given Manding's documented variation, how could Kantè's N'ko, as an orthography, be all of the language at once? Amselle (1996, 825) suggests that through their so-called cultural fundamentalism, N'ko students aggressively take only the Guinean variety known as Maninka to be correct in spelling and pronunciation. Indeed, the forms metadiscursively prescribed in N'ko documents show evidence of being primarily congruent with Maninka (and more precisely the so-called *máninkamóri* variety of Kankan; see Vydrin [1996, 2010]; Davydov [2008, 2012]). But Kantè did not clumsily claim that only Maninka was appropriate for writing Manding; he sought to call into being a register that, through his pedagogical language works, would act as a mediating standard between the dialects.

Acquiring N'ko-based literacy typically proceeds linearly.⁹ One of the most important subject matters is N'ko grammar, or what Kantè (2008b, 4–5) terms *kángbɛ*:

ሃገዱ ፣ ለብርቅኤ ሽልንዳሽ ዓዛት የቀለቡ ቢ ፡ ኋላ
ኝ እፃሽበው ሹ ፡ ዕድ እፃሽበው ሻሻ ሊቸ ቢ ፡ ዕድ ሻሻ

Because mastering a language in writing is very hard, experience has shown that every

9. In my fieldwork, most frequently (1) *Háte* (Kánte 2011); (2) *Bála' ní bálá'* (Jaane 1998); (3) *Kángbe' kúnfɔlɔ'* (Kánte 2008b).

ሆኖ ፡ ለኛ ፡ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ ዓፄ ሃይለሥላሴ ከ ሮኛ ልገጽ
 ለገ ከ ሮኛ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ ፡ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ ዓፄ ሃይለሥላሴ
 ሲጻጽ ዓፄ ከ ከ ሮኛ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ
 ሮኛ ሲጻጽ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ ሆኖ ሲጻጽ
 ለገኝ ነፃ

language has its rules. Grasping a language's rules facilitates knowing its writing. As such, they [experts?] created explanatory books. These books clarify the language properly, remove blemishes from it, and make knowing the language much easier! The name of the book of established rules of a language is "*kángbɛ*."

Here, Kantè is clearly developing a technical usage in which *kángbɛ* is best glossed as 'grammar (book)' in the prescriptive sense of the schoolmarm. More broadly, the term refers to the prescribed forms of language—that is, the register—found within Kantè's grammar books. Etymologically, *kángbɛ* is a tonally compact compound noun made up of the noun *kán* 'language' and the polysemous adjective *gbé*, which can variably be glossed as 'white', 'clean', 'clear' (Bailleul 2007). Through its contributing lexemes, therefore, *kángbɛ* is naturalized as something that serves to clarify and order language.

This perspective notwithstanding, for N'ko's founder, the Manding language could never be reduced to a single isolatable phono-lexical grammatical code that a linguist elicits from an informant. For while he relies heavily on the idea that a language has a true or correct form that should be promoted for writing, he also embraced Manding as inevitably composed of distinct registers as made clear in his works in dialectology, language history, and lexicography (Kántè 1992, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). Indeed, the term *kángbɛ* does not seem to have been chosen randomly; it figures prominently in the preeminent French colonial dictionary and grammar: "These more or less localized dialects aside, a sort of "common Manding" has formed that the indigenous have given the name *kangbe* (white language, clear language, easy language) and which is understood and spoken by the great majority of the population in addition to the special dialect of each region" (Delafosse 1929, 1:22).¹⁰

Kantè's selection then of the compound noun *kángbɛ* serves to tie his prescriptive grammar and its standard language register to an already circulating historically named lingua franca register. What counts then as *kángbɛ* in N'ko circles today may be largely congruent with a particular Manding dialect, but it is nowhere near a *mànkamóri* orthography. It is rather the basis for a written standard language register that Kantè sought to bring into being to hold together the named Manding varieties of Maninka, Bamanan, Jula, and Mandinka under a single baptismal hypernym: N'ko.

10. It also appears as a metapragmatic label, albeit with a slightly different value, in Sanogo's (2003, 373) account of the genesis of Jula as an ethnic category.

“We are going for the language, in its pure form”

The above interpretation of Kantè's oeuvre shines in the N'ko circles of today. In what follows, I explore how this formulation of N'ko as a single language united by *kángbe* circulates among students and activists. Focusing on salient metadiscourse, I investigate two distinct dynamics fueling the N'ko movement and its *kángbe* register. First, it can be attributed, in part, to the compelling sociohistorical linguistic analysis of Manding phonemes and lexemes that is at the heart of the prescriptive grammar register's teaching. What makes the metalinguistic framework of Sulemana Kantè compelling, however, are not simply facts of semantics or etymology. Second, I elucidate *kángbe*'s role as the discursive component of an ethos of discipline, logic, and savviness through which students believe they can hone themselves into the kinds of people that so many of them feel their society is desperately lacking.

Learning Letters, Learning *Kángbe*

In practice, it is often difficult to separate the learning of N'ko as a script from that of learning the proper way to write and potentially speak Manding writ large. In the N'ko classroom, adult students right off the bat are given tools of “metalinguistic awareness” (Cummins 1978; Nagy and Anderson 1995). Their education however is not one of being shown how to perform structural linguistic analysis on their own speech. Instead, N'ko lessons introduce them to a metalinguistic framework—diachronically informed—that socializes them into ways of interpreting Manding sounds, sequences, and patterns as dialectal, *kángbe*, or foreign.

In the summer of 2016 I sat in on a class led by Sékù Jàkité, which took place in the morning, twice a week, beneath a tin-roof hangar, seemingly airdropped amidst a flood of outdoor mechanics' workshops and vehicle carcasses. Poised in front of a long blackboard with a black Robin Hood-style hat, Sékù opened the lesson with the traditional penning of the date using the unique set of day and month names by which Kantè sought to replace the Arabic and French loanwords that one typically hears in Manding today. This, however, gave the students little pause. Instead, Sékù lectured at length about the various phonemes of Manding. According to him, all of the necessary Manding sound categories are captured in the letters of N'ko. This did not mean that speakers of Manding do not make or use other sounds. He picked out /v/ and /z/, two sounds stemming in large part from French loanwords. Vydrin (2016a, 11) analyzes them in Bamanan as follows:

z is a phoneme borrowed from French; French /ʒ/ > Bamanan /z/. *zùlùyé* ‘July’ [< *juillet*], *zańdármú* ‘police officer’ [< *gendarme*]. In addition, z optionally appears as a variant of *ns*: *zòn* ~ *nsòn* ‘thief’, *nsiirin* ~ *ziirin* ~ *nziirin* ‘tale’

v is an extremely marginal phoneme that only appears in non-adapted borrowings: *véri* ‘glass’ [< *verre*], *vítri* ‘pane’ [< *vitre*], etc.

Sékù was more blunt regarding the two phonemes, though he spoke in terms of letters: “Our language doesn’t need them” (*Án ná kán’ màkó’ té ù lá*). Nonetheless, given that “we” might occasionally want them for writing other languages, he introduced the N’ko convention of adding superposed dots to consonants and vowels to represent the sounds or letters of other languages (e.g., *Ṽṽṽṽ véri*).

While /v/ and /z/ are clearly marginal phonemes emerging from French, Sékù also addressed the case of a nascent Bamanan phoneme, /ʃ/ that likely emerges not from a foreign source but rather from an in-progress phonemic split. Today, one can identify a number of minimal pairs between /s/ and /ʃ/ in Bamanan, but there are also cases of [ʃ] that are contextual realizations of /s/ (Vydrin 2016a, 11). Sékù provided clear instructions regarding the emergent sound: “This isn’t in N’ko” (*Nìn té N’ko lá*). While seemingly harsh, such a statement usefully demonstrates how the very learning of N’ko is a first step both in introducing students to etymology and sound change and in opening the door to a disciplining of their written language into *kángbè*. To be clear, Sékù’s statement did not focus on rooting out the pronunciation but instead on introducing the written standard. Neither he nor other N’ko students, for instance, reject the Bamanan forms in example 1. Instead, they recognize them as dialectal deviations (1a, 1b) or loanwords (1c) that one should not attempt to represent directly in writing:

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|----|----------------------|-----------|
| (1) | a. | ʃṽ | < sṽsṽ | ‘beans’ |
| | b. | ʃḗ | < sṽṣḗ | ‘chicken’ |
| | c. | ʃù | < French <i>chou</i> | ‘cabbage’ |

Note that in the Bamanan examples, the etymologies are not blind folk accounts. Instead, they are viable linguistic reconstructions. The Bamanan forms of 1a and 1b, therefore, are not rejected simply because they are Bamanan but rather because they are transparently grasped as instances of linguistic change from forms that still predominate in Maninka and Jula today.

In this instance, it is clear that the very act of learning the (accepted) grapheme-phoneme pairings of N’ko is itself a step toward learning *kángbè*. From the perspective of his own native variety of Maninka, Kantè’s alphabet

is regarded as a perfect phonological analysis (Vydrin 2001a). Kantè, however, like any good sociolinguist, recognized his language as replete with various “sub-codes” (Gumperz 1962). As such, even at the level of letters, Kantè engaged with etymology and variation across the sprawling Manding speech community. For instance, in a letter to French linguist and Manding specialist Maurice Houis he wrote, “It must be noted that the letter <g> no longer exists in Manding [*mandé*], it is only used by races—assimilated at the height of the Manding empire [*empire mandé*—that can no longer pronounce the typically Manding [*mandén*] group <gb> and that they replace by <j> or <g>, for example: *jèman* ‘white’, *gon* ‘gorilla’ which in Manding [*mandé*] are *gbèman* and *gbon*” (Vydrin 2001a, 138). Not only did Kantè see phonemes (“letters” in his usage here) as historically constituted, but he also delved into accounting for the sociohistorical process that gave rise to such a divergence (i.e., the conquering of later assimilated races [i.e., ethnic groups] during the spread of the Manding/Mali empire).

As such, today, students of N'ko typically embrace and use Kantè's grapheme ∇ <gb> in writing, even when in their own native variety one finds /g/, /j/, or /w/ in its place.¹¹ A few examples using Bamanan illustrate this dynamic in table 2.

Such examples, as well as Sékù Jàkité's introductory lesson about letters and sounds, demonstrate how learning N'ko is inseparable from learning Manding (i.e., a standard register of it). Of course, no speaker of a Manding variety needs to learn to speak Manding per se. The N'ko classroom's function in this sense is not to teach people how to speak Manding varieties but rather how to speak a specific register: *kángbè*. Critically, this, in turn, introduces students to a meta-linguistic framework that allows them to explicitly understand their own variety of Bamanan, Jula, or Maninka as but component varieties of one single language—N'ko.

In addition to the proto-phonemic ∇ <gb>, Kantè also developed at least one logographic convention that serves as another means for his orthography to transcend the sociological limitations of a purely phonemic orthography.¹²

11. See Creissels (2004) for a discussion of the voiced velar (g), labiovelar stops and related Manding sounds today (i.e., w, gw, kw, gb, kp).

12. Not all of Manding phonological variation can be conveniently or easily captured within theorized proto-phonemes or “diaphonemes” (Weinreich [1954]; see Galtier [1980] for attempt). The question of whether /gb/ is in fact a phoneme of proto-Manding is still an open one. My point is to suggest that the ∇ is understood proto-phonemically by some users. /gb/ is a full-fledged phoneme in certain Manding varieties such as Guinean Maninka and vehicular Jula of Côte d'Ivoire.

Table 2. Application of *kángbɛ* at the Phonemic Level to Bamanan Lexemes

Bamanan Example	N'ko <i>kángbɛ</i> Form	Transliteration	Gloss
jé	̂ɲ	<i>gbé</i>	'white'
gèlɛn	̂ɲ̃ɲ̃ɲ̃	<i>gbèlɛn</i>	'hard'
wòlò	ɲ̃ɲ̃ɲ̃	<i>gbòlò</i>	'skin'

This convention revolves around the notation of intervocalic velars. As Vydrin (2016a, 11) notes regarding Bamanan, “in the intervocalic position, velar phonemes are not contrastive: [-g-], [-k-], [-ɣ-], [-x-] and even a zero consonant, -ø-, are allophones of a single phoneme.” To represent this, Latin-based orthographies vary widely in their preferred grapheme. One may often choose freely between <g>, <k>, or simply dropping the intervocalic velar (e.g., *tága*, *táka* versus *táa* ‘go’). In N’ko, however, Kantè (2011, 15) calls for the use of a single graphemic representation that allows for multiple dialectal realizations to be grouped logographically under one convention. This phenomenon is outlined in table 3.

While this sort of convention may not seem to be very distinct from the *de facto* and proposed orthographic standard of always marking intervocalic velars with *g* in Malian Bamanan (see most recently Vydrin and Konta 2014, 24), it circulates as an important feature of N’ko’s pan-Manding iconicity. Take, for instance, this excerpt from an N’ko website that echoes similar comments that I often encountered (N’ko Institute of America 2013):

When Mandens from different sub-groups talk to each other, it is common practice for them to switch, consciously or sub-consciously, from one’s own dialect to a conventional dialect known as N’ko or Kangbe (the clear language). This is even true, sometimes, during conversations between the Bamanans of Mali, the Maninka-Moris of Guinea, and the Maninkos of Gambia or Senegal although pronunciations are practically the same. As an example, the word “Name” in Bamanan is “Toko” and in Maninka it is “Toh.” In written communications each will write it as Tò (̂ɲ) in N’Ko, and yet read and pronounce it differently.

Table 3. Intervocalic Velar Representation in N’ko Orthography

N’ko Graphic Representation	Latin Transliteration	Possible Realizations
̂ɲ	<i>táa</i>	<i>táa</i> , <i>táka</i> , <i>tága</i> , <i>táxa</i> , <i>táyá</i>

Here we see that one of the central appeals of Kantè's convention is how it allows for the N'ko orthography to ostensibly embrace cross-dialectal variation without neutralizing it or overtly regarding certain dialects as non-standard.¹³ Phonemic orthography is seemingly transcended in a way that allows for pan-Manding unity all while retaining the ability to locate yourself geographically through dialectal realization.

Finally, learning the N'ko script is a lesson in Manding phonology. This stems in part from the fact that it is, in many ways, a more "shallow" (Klima 1972) orthography than any of the official Latin-based ones. In table 4, I outline four different linguistic phenomena of Manding, which are typically marked by <n> in Latin-based orthographies.

In the case of N'ko, it is more "shallow" because each one of these phenomena is represented by a distinct grapheme or diacritic, which reduces *orthographic depth* (Frost and Katz 1992) as measured by how many features a single convention represents. N'ko is thus semiotically iconic as an alphabet because it appears to be a diagram of Manding itself through its more transparent mapping of the language's sound system. This interpretation is critically solidified by Kantè's system of diacritics for marking the linguistic phenomena of vowel length, nasalization and most critically tone (Donaldson 2017, chap. 5). Coupling these markings with his unique and (seemingly proto-)phonemic (and logographic) alphabet, Kantè laid the groundwork for a perfect iconic link; N'ko is not just a diagram of Manding, it *is* Manding.

In sum, studying N'ko as script is itself a first step in learning N'ko as a proper name synonymous with Manding. By learning the letters and diacritics of N'ko, students take their first step toward not only developing synchronic metalinguistic awareness, but also, in the case of ▽ /gb/, a diachronic phonemic lens for understanding the interrelations and history between Manding varieties. This combined with Kantè's logographic convention for marking non-contrastive intervocalic velars allows for the orthography to be powerfully perceived as capable of inclusively housing—without necessarily standardizing—distinct varieties of Manding. As a cross-dialectal photograph of Manding phonology, the study of N'ko is simply the study of the clear form of the Manding language itself: *kángbɛ*—a standard language register meant to serve and unite Manding speakers regardless of their own native variety.

Being socialized into the *kángbɛ* register, of course, also operates at the higher linguistic level of words. N'ko teachers today make compelling appeals to no-

13. The reality is of course more complex, see the earlier passage regarding Sékù's position on /f/.

Table 4. Phenomena Represented by <n> in Latin-Based Manding Orthography versus N’ko

Phenomenon	Latin	N’ko	Example	IPA	Gloss
Syllabic nasal phoneme	n	𞤎	<i>n</i>	[ŋ]	‘I’
Vowel nasalization	n	.	<i>bon</i>	[bõ]	‘house’
Allophonic variation					
• /l/ following a nasal	n	𞤎	<i>bon na</i>	[bõ na]	‘in the house’
• /y/ following a nasal	ny	𞤎	<i>bonya</i>	[bõɲa]	‘respect’
Palatal nasal phoneme	ny/ɲ	𞤎	<i>nyi/ni</i>	[ɲi]	‘good’

Note.—In general, the official orthographies promote the use of <n> for the palatal nasal consonant but notable authors, such as Dumestre (2011), eschew this convention in favor of the digraph <ny>.

tions of “verbal hygiene” (Cameron 1995), which serve to both harness and solidify a positive metapragmatic stereotype for the *kángbɛ* register. Today, this most often proceeds through the tacit or overt idiom of “logic.”¹⁴ Let us explore this point by heading back to Bamako.

On a Tuesday in July 2016, I headed to a regularly scheduled one-hour adult language class offered by the N.Fa.Ya¹⁵ association in an outdoor classroom space. Inside, there were four rows of rickety bench-desk combos that students typically occupied according to their progress with the first three primer books. Students slowly filled in as I sat at my desk working on a translation of one of Kantè’s texts. “Áw ní jó’l,”¹⁶ the instructor, Màhamúud Sánkare, greeted us. A prolific N’ko author and the head of N.Fa.Ya, he generally proceeds row by row or student by student, as need be, depending on their progress. Today, the front row was occupied by three men working on parts of speech (*kúmaden’ sùuya*) of Manding as elaborated in Kantè’s first book of N’ko grammar (2008b). Their lesson focused in particular on “*tóɲɔ̀dɔ̀bɪla*,” which Màhamúud readily glossed in French as ‘(personal) pronouns’.

Drawing on their grammar book, the teacher presented pronouns as being sortable by singularity/plurality (*kèlenyá* ‘singular’ and *jàmayá* ‘plural’) and by person (*kúmala* ‘first person’, *kúmaɲɔ̀n* ‘second person’ and *gbéde* ‘third person’). He did not hesitate to partially explain the terms using French for meta-

14. The source of this is traceable to the original writings of Kantè. In his dialectology treatise, “The Language’s Rules: or the Rules of N’ko” (Sùlemáana Kántè 2009, 26), he dedicates a series of pages to what he calls “public shortcomings”; in a table of 51 common expressions he lays out what he labels as “improper speech” (*fəkojuu*) alongside what he prescribes as their “proper speech” (*fəkoɲiman*) equivalent, which he hold as more appropriate for this “age of writing.”

15. *N’kó ní Fàsokán nù Yiriwa* (The strengthening of N’ko and fatherland languages).

16. Literally ‘You and peace’, this phrase is a Manding-ized version of “*ʔs’ yé í má*,” a calque of the traditional Arabic *al-salām* ‘alaykum. Both are widely used as in-group greetings in N’ko circles.

linguistic glosses. Following the book, Māhamúud then introduced the different paradigms of Manding pronouns that exist for Maninka, Jula, and Bamanan (the dominant variety of Bamako and Mali as a whole) as distinct dialects. None of them, however, was selected or upheld as “correct” (*núman*); rather, they were all explained as “broken” (*tɛnɛnɛn*) forms of *kángbɛ*. The students remained attentive. To make his case, Māhamúud appealed to the plural marker <lu> (lù),¹⁷ a suffix that, he argued, one should simply be able to “attach” (*nórcɔ*) to singular nouns. “That’s coherent” (*Àlɛ tɛlɛnnɛn*) or “logical” (*sàriyama*), he posited.

This argument relied not only on the students’ familiarity with the Maninka form (*lu* PL) but also their implicit recognition of it as a “fuller” (as it were) and thereby older form from which Bamanan had deviated. In the moment, no students spoke up in this regard, but Māhamúud addressed the point directly nonetheless. Specifically, he drew on the example of pluralizing the word *cě* ‘man’. Today the Bamanan plural marker is the clitic /-ù/ (though it is represented orthographically as a suffix-like word final -w):

- [2] <cě-w> ‘men’
/cě-ù/
man-PL

Logically however, “if you respected the rules” (*n’í táara ní sàriyá’ yé*) one would use the form *lù*:

- [3] cě lù ‘men’
man PL

Today, this proposed etymology seems evident in Bamanan’s emphatic form of the third person plural *ólú*, as well as in Jula’s variability between *ánw* and *ánnù*, the emphatic form of the third person plural. Regardless, the “fuller” form circulates as common knowledge thanks to Manding speakers from Maninka areas as well as popular songs and oratorical registers that I regularly encountered in Bamako. One student, a *tantie* (auntie)-like figure, for instance, spoke up at the end of the lesson and stated that *cěw* was simply a faster version of *cě lù*. Māhamúud thus did not need to explain the etymological process that has led to *lù* being the Maninka equivalent of Bamanan -w today; he simply meta-pragmatically commented on one form as being in line with logic or the “rules” (*sàriyá*).

17. Strictly speaking, the plural suffix *lu* does not carry its own lexical tone. Since the absence of a tonal diacritic in N’ko carries meaning, I represent it as lù <lù> since that is its most typical realization.

Màhamúud nonetheless conceded that in Bamako people often do not understand things unless they are Bamanan. Putting himself in that category, he acknowledged that “we” deem certain forms as “*màinka gírin*” (‘heavy Maninka’). Ultimately, however, the language (*kán*) they all speak is “*màinkakán*.” Switching to French, he elaborated, “C’est la langue mandingue” (It’s the Manding language) before adding that the language came from “there” (i.e., Màndén) to “here” (i.e., Bamako). In Bamako today, he carried on, people all come with their language. For some it is influenced by “Soninke” (*Màrakakán*), the language of another major ethnic group in Mali. For others it is influenced by something else. “À bé tîlen cogo di?” he asked—how can this be correct or, more literally, straight? Màhamúud supported his implicit argument for written standards with international examples. Other languages are not spoken and written in the same way; take, for instance, the French of Paris and that of Marseille. Moreover, he continued, even the historic Bamanan high form emanating from the precolonial kingdom and modern-day town of Ségou is not one thing.

His takeaway for the students therefore was that they are going “after the language’s true logic” (*kán yèrè logique nǒfè*).¹⁸ Applying this reasoning to the various dialectal forms of plural pronouns that Kantè listed, as well as to his own knowledge of Bamanan, Màhamúud came to the conclusion that the class’s own third person plural (*òlú*) and the second person plural emphatic (*áw*) were not sound. The presumed reasoning behind these points, outlined in table 5, is that neither form was a straightforward derivation from the base singular pronouns (*í*, *í*, and *à*), as seen above.

Sánkare’s lesson was far from the only time that myself or others in N’ko circles engaged in a discussion of pronouns. Also in 2016, I interviewed author and bookshop owner Ūsman Kùlúbàli (UK in the transcripts that follow), who is known for his fiery rhetoric and books about the history of anti-black racism and slavery (2008, n.d.). One of the striking features of his writings is the use of a particular pronoun form, *ĩṣṣĩṣ* (*ĩnelu* ‘we’), which I had never seen in print or encountered orally before reading one of his books. When I asked him about the usage, he told me that it is *Màndenkó* and said that he came to embrace it after having studied Kantè’s first grammar book where he lays out the pronouns systems of the major Manding varieties (2008b, 9). Missing from Kantè’s

18. In the case of transparent French loanwords or nonce borrowings that are not significantly phonologically assimilated into Manding such as *mais*, *direction*, and so on, I preserve their French orthography. This diverges from common transcription practice (e.g., Derive 1978; Giray 1996), but it increases readability and mirrors orthographic practice used for loanwords in languages such as English, French, and so on.

Table 5. Māhamúúd Sánkare's Analysis of Bamanan Pronouns

		Bamanan Form	Kángbe Form	Analysis of Divergence
1	Third person plural emphatic; 'they'	òlú	àlú	ò diverges from the 3 _{SG} base form à
2	First person plural emphatic; 'we'	ánw	ánnù	w is the truncated form of the pluralizer lù/nù

(2008a) analysis however are the Mandinka or “Mandenko” forms, which he simply does not discuss. For Kùlùbáli, they were key:

1349	UK	n'í kó í b'á à à m'íri tígitiyá bólo' mà	if you think about it logically
1350		í bèn'à yé k'à fò mǎndenkó' ká	you will see that the Mandenko's
1351		tógónróbila'	pronoun [system]
1352		ò cé' ká nì	is better looking
1353		ò bennen dòn tǔpá' mà kà tème	it agrees with truth more than those of
		bámanan' ní mǎninká' [tá] kǎn	the Bamanan and Maninka
1354		cógo' jùmen?	How so?

He methodically laid out the emphatic and plural pronoun paradigms of Maninka, Bamanan, and Jula before moving on to another variety:

1394	UK	Mais mǎndenkó' kó	But Mandenko say
1395		kó nê	nê
1396		íle	íle
1397		àle	àle
1398		ñnelu	ñnelu
1399		ílù	ílù
1400		àlu	àlu

Seizing on the role of *lù* as the pluralizer (*jàmayalán*), he concluded as follows about the “Mandenko” system and his decision to adopt the form *nelu*:

1429	UK	ò bennen dòn	That is more proper
1430		né bólo	in my mind
1431		ká tème mǎninká' tá kǎn	than that of the Maninka
1432		kà tème í yère, bámanan tógó tá	than the form[s] of my own Bamanan,
		féne kǎn, báwò	because
1433		báwò án bé kǎnbolon' dè nǎfě, ^a	we are[n't] going for dialects, we are
		án bé kǎn' dè nǎfě, à píyópiyó'	going for the language, in its pure form
1434		án té kǎnbolon' nǎfě	We aren't going for dialects
1435	CD	á mais	But
1436		ò lá ònhon	so, yeah
1437	UK	í y'à fàamu?	You understand?
1438	CD	ón mais, mais kà fénke	Yeah, but whatchamacallit
1439	UK	ò dè kósòn, né ká kǎn' ná	For that reason, in my speech

seeking in life—happiness [*méndiya*], proper nourishment, clothes, and treatment of ailments—none of them can be had without hard work.[¹] Since long ago, Mǎndén's foundational slogan [*siikán' báju*] are the following three words: know-how, work, justice [*kà kóln, kà báara, kà télen*]. Indeed! If someone is not savvy and capable, how will they accomplish the kind of work that is beneficial? If someone isn't just, how will civility [*mòzyá*] spread to them? If someone cannot be reached by the affairs of human decency [*mòzyá' kó*], what is the point of them living? Well! The answer to all of these questions show that we all must necessarily strive to obtain know-how, to work hard and proficiently, and to be tried and true in all matters. As such, we have outlawed languishment and require dedication [*kiseyá*] and work from all. We mustn't whither. (Màle n.d., 37)

During my fieldwork, I encountered the N'ko hendiatis regularly. In the summer of 2016, the phrase figured prominently on a commissioned truck used to transport a delegation of Bamakois²⁰ to the town of Banamba for a multiday conference and celebration dedicated to N'ko (see fig. 3). In this case, the aim of the slogan was seemingly clearer because it was preceded with an introductory clause:

Jàmaná' pétáa, kó' sàba lè, kà kólón, kà báara, kà télen

In this article, I will leave aside the intriguing question of which actual or envisioned “country” this use of *jàmaná* refers to and instead focus on how the line transparently frames N’ko’s hendiatis as one designed to work in service of developing, advancing or moving forward a society or polity.

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Figure 3. Truck emblazoned with *kà kólɔn*, *kà báara*, *kà télen* in Banamba (photograph taken by the author).

The subtext behind this slogan is that N'ko activists regularly question the efficacy and work of those that currently staff and lead West African postcolonial states. Such discourse is of course common, but N'ko activists actively view themselves as offering an alternative work ethic. During the summer of 2013, for example, I visited a small Quranic school that operated in N'ko. After the lesson, during which students recited classical Arabic verses of the Quran transliterated into the N'ko script, we were visited by another N'ko activist whom I had been introduced to a few days prior, Yáyà Jáabí. Ethnically Soninke, he had spent eight years working in Angola. His good fortune during this time was manifested by the immaculate and air-conditioned vehicle that we eventually climbed into in order to run a few errands around town. Driving between his brother's business compound and our next destination, I commented on the

poor state of roads as we were jostled about. In response, he insisted that “the government doesn’t work” (*té báara’ kè*) and that the parliamentary representatives don’t do their jobs. From the back of the car, the Quranic school teacher chimed in that N’ko, “*òle yé síra kura’ yé*”—that’s the new path.

In other cases, though N’ko activists question the work ethic of not only their government but also their fellow compatriots both nationally and continentally. For instance, in an extended 2015 interview I conducted with Bàbá Màmádi Jàané (BMJ), arguably Sulemaana Kanté’s primary intellectual heir, he recounted the following:

- | | | | |
|----|-----|---|---|
| 1 | BMJ | N’í táara Afrique, í yé só’ dǎ kónǎ | You go to Africa and you are in some city |
| 2 | | í b’ à màfèlè, í té- só sí té, japonais | You can’t find a town without a Japanese |
| | | bólofen té yǎrǎ’ mén’ | product |
| 3 | | í té só sí yé, fó í y’ à sǎrǎ japonais | There is no town where you won’t find a |
| | | bólofen’ dǎ bǎ yàn | Japanese product |
| 4 | | ou bien chinois bólofen’ dǎ bǎ yàn. | or there is a Chinese product |
| 5 | | Hámante français bólofen dǎ bǎ | or there is French product |
| | | yàn. | |
| 6 | | Ou bien américain bólofen’ dǎ bǎ | or there’s an American product. |
| | | yàn. | |
| 7 | | í té Laguinée bólofen yé. | You don’t see any product of Guinea |
| 8 | CD | í t’ à yé. | You don’t see it. |
| 9 | BMJ | í té Málí bólofen yé, k’ à sǎrǎ í yé | You don’t see any product of Mali even |
| | | Laguinée àní Málí lè kónǎ. | though you are in Guinea and Mali! |
| 10 | | í té fǎyí-fǎyí yé! Múnna? | You don’t see anything at all? Why? |
| 11 | CD | í t’ à yé | You don’t see it. |
| 12 | BMJ | Kà mǎsǎdǎn | Because |
| 13 | CD | Á! | Ah! |
| 14 | BMJ | ǎn? | Mm? |
| 15 | | Ça fait àlè yèrè lè lájafoya’ lè | It’s languishment of the self. |
| 16 | | k’ àlú yère láfagoya | It’s languor. |

In lines 1–9, Bàbá paints the picture of the African continent devoid of its own products or consumer goods. His critique of this in lines 10–16, however, is not one of government or international trade policy; instead, he sees it as a problem of self-imposed African “languor.” Thus the problem with African postcolonial society lies not only in the hands of politicians and bureaucrats, but in those of the general populace as well.

A few minutes later in the interview, Bàbá applied this same logic to language practices.

- | | | | |
|----|-----|---|-------------------------------------|
| 42 | BMJ | í kǎnǎ tǎ í yèrè mà. | Don’t rest on your laurels. |
| 43 | CD | ǎnhǎn | Yeah |
| 44 | BMJ | Mais n’ àn tǎra kélen mà, à kǎrǎ’ lè k’ à fǎ kǎ | If we rest on them, that means that |
| 45 | | Àn bǎ àn yère paralyser | we paralyze ourselves |
| 46 | | À kǎnin, àn mǎǎ’ ménnu bǎ | Our people that |

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47	wálikan' nù kàn	do foreign languages
48	sèbeyá' bólo' mà, comme à ká kán pá' mén' kàn	seriously in the way that it must be done
49	n'í bé français fò, français fò ká pà	If you speak French, speak it well.
50	ní í bé anglais fò, anglais fò kà pà	If you speak English, speak it well.
51	Wà í d'à fêlɛ, án ná kán' sísàn	But look at it, our language now
52	à kéra uh	it's become
53	uh	uh
54	tùbabukán' dialecte lè dí	a dialect of French

In line 42 Bàbá uses an imperative, “Don’t rest on your laurels”, which presupposes an interlocutor who deserves such an admonishment. Given the earlier remarks about African society, it is clear that this refers to the kinds of lazy citizens who have become so numerous that Africa does not even produce its own goods for its own markets. In lines 46–54, we get some information on who these kinds of people might be; they are people, presumably Manding speakers, who wield languages willy-nilly. They do not speak French correctly (line 49). They do not speak English correctly (line 50). In fact, they speak Manding with such little care that they essentially have made it “a dialect of French” (line 54). The converse to this kind of practice, of course, would be the use of *kángbɛ*, even if not made explicit here.

Thus far, Bàbá has painted a picture of two potentially distinct situations and groups of people: discursive misfits that mix French, English and Manding, and Africans that carelessly do not contribute to their society. A bit later, however, he made the link between them more explicit:

71	BMJ	Í y'à lón, à mán kán!	You know, that's not right!
72		N'í bé français-kan fò	If you speak French
73		Í y'à pénéma' lè fòla	Speak it well
74		N'í bé anglais-kan fò, í b'à pénéma' fò	If you speak English, speak it well
75		Kónɔ, à yé cógo' mén' ná	But as things are now
76		í bé ké, è té français dí	You aren't French
77		è té fàrafín dí	You aren't African
78		Ò cè ká pì?	Is that good?
79	CD	<Laughs>	<Laughs>
80	BMJ	On?	Hmm
81	CD	Á! À kòni, í má	Ah! Well, you know
82	BMJ	Ò kósòn, án bé jáfoya- án békà jáfoya lè.	For this reason, we are languishing
83		Mùn kósòn? Án yèrɛ bé ké, án bé dòní' tùbabú' yèrɛ kàn.	Why? We, we've become a burden for the White man
84	CD	Mm	Mm
85	BMJ	K'án ké dòní' dí tùbabú' yèrɛ [kàn], est-ce qu'ò ká dí tùbabú' né?	To be a burden for the White man, does he like that?

[...]			
94	CD	<Laughs>	<Laughs>
95		Á! À kòní mògò sí té dònì fẹ́ dé!	Ah! Nobody wants an extra load [dòní]
96	BMJ	Ó bon! Tùbábú' té dònì fẹ́, ò kòsòn fó án yé án jǐjà	Ah OK! So the White man doesn't want a charge. For this reason, we need to make an effort
97		án yé tùbábú' fána kǔn' dǫféeya	Let's take a load off the White man
98	CD	Mmm	Mmm
99	BMJ	Tùbábú' lè bé báara' ké, mún kòsòn è té báara ké?	The White man does all the work, why don't you work?

^a I have skipped lines 86–93 for clarity's sake since they were entirely metasemantic regarding my misunderstanding of the expression *dōnf* 'charge, burden'.

In line 82, Bàbá directly links together the two situations that he has presented: “for this reason, we are languishing”. Those that are careless in speech are equally so in life in general. Finally, in line 99, he makes it clear that his critique of his fellow West Africans is similar to that which other N’ko activists made of their government leaders above; they don’t work (*kà báara’ ké*). In this interview segment therefore Bàbá implicitly elucidates how the *kángbɛ* register, beyond compelling etymology, functions as a potential discursive index of a different kind of West African citizen.

Curious how in practice the promotion of a special register instead one's so-called natural way of speaking functioned, I often asked N'ko teachers why people should write *kángbɛ* and not their own dialect. One shopkeeper (SK in the transcript that follows) replied with a metaphor while also drawing in my notebook that I handed him (see fig. 4).

Making a case similar to those of historical and genetic linguists, he stated that he envisions language as being like a tree in the ways that it starts as a single entity and then develops individual diverging branches as it moves forward through time. His argument for writing in *the* language—that is, Manding (or N’ko as Sulemaana Kantè would put it)—was one that went beyond etymology. Gesturing toward his sketched tree, he explained,

2088	SK	Ní í yé yírísun' bíla kà táa bólon mìne, n'ò fàrala [í lá]- í yé	If you abandon the trunk and you grab the branch, if it breaks
2089		í màkò' sàra	you've put yourself at a disadvantage
2090		Kánko' lá.	in affairs of languages.
2091		Í y'à fàamuya?	You understand?
2092		Donc	So
2093		N'í bé fén barikaman' fè	If you want something powerful
2094		fén fangamán' fè, í bé nín nè mìne	something strong, you grab this
2095		ní í yé nín mìne	If you grab this <points to branch>
2096		ní	

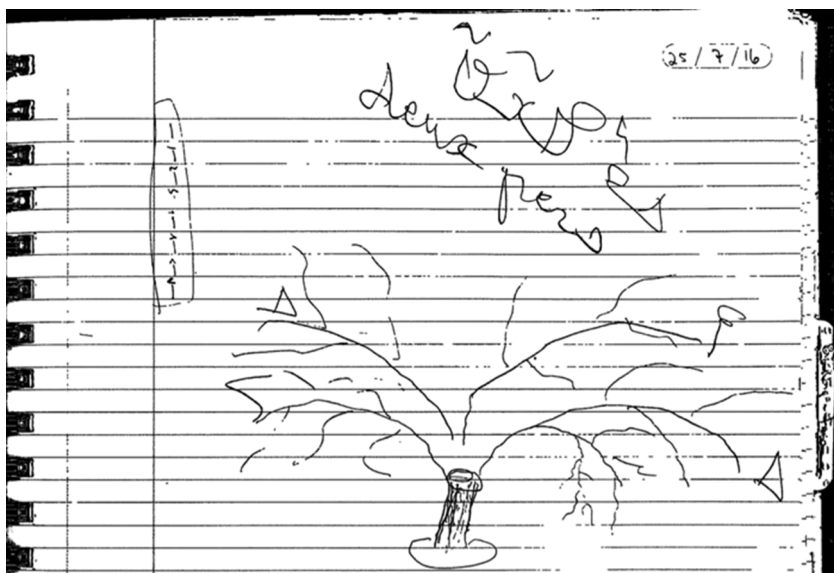


Figure 4. Shopkeeper's drawing of the Manding language tree in the author's notebook

2097	nìn békà táa síra' mín' fè, nìn békà táa síra' mín' fè, nìn békà táa síra' mín' fè, nìn békà táa síra' mín' fè	the direction this one goes, the direction this one goes, the direction this one goes, the direction this one goes <drawing branches rapidly>
2098	ní í y'ù ká síra dá nǎgǎn mà, ní mín' sáníyara, í b'ò tà!	if you compare them with one another, that which is cleanest, you take that one!
2099	ní í y'ò tà, í b'í bólo ké ò lá, í bé kán jénama' sǎrǎ. Jénama!	If you take it, you put your arm upon it, you get proper language! Proper [language]!
2100	Mògo té sé kà mín' sǎsǎ, kán' mín' té sé kà dése kó' lá	Language which can't be contested, lan- guage which can't fail in endeavors
2101	Í yère b'à dǎn, anglais bé dése	You yourself know, English can fail
2102	CD français bé dése	French can fail
2103	SK uh chinois bé dése	Uh Chinese can fail
2104	mais N'ko té dése!	But, N'ko does not fail!

In these lines, he paints a picture of the true forms of a language being the strongest. Language is comparable to a material good that is available in different grades of quality. While he does not specify the activities for which it is ideal to have the highest one, his publications, books and N'ko activism in general suggest that this form is particularly important when it comes to writing. In other situations, N'ko activists emphasize the *kángbɛ* register as a means of unifying Manding speakers across state and dialectal boundaries. Here though, SK paints

a picture of it as serving in a different capacity. The study of the N'ko orthography and its body of knowledge allows one to pursue a more pure form of the Manding language that if wielded correctly cannot be “contested” or “fail” (lines 2099–2100). In the lines that follow, SK outlines other major world languages like French and Chinese and suggests that, while they may fail, N'ko (Manding) does not. This “narrated event” (Wortham and Reyes 2015) is interesting because it powerfully shows the stakes of reading and writing in *kángbɛ*—it is the linguistic means by which West Africans can put themselves on equal footing and work to match the accomplishments (and development levels) of other major countries or even civilizations of the world. From this perspective, N'ko and *kángbɛ* together become a tool to discipline the various earthly forms of Manding that have—like all dialects—deviated from the proper and powerful form that one cultivates in a continual pursuit of *kángbɛ*.

Conclusion

For both N'ko's founder and many students today, N'ko often refers first and foremost to the Manding language in its entirety. Today, this conceptualization of Manding as one single language (under the name N'ko)—united by the primarily written register of *kángbɛ*—continues to spread across areas where people have postcolonially understood themselves as speakers of distinct, albeit related, varieties such as Bamanan, Maninka or Jula. This can be attributed to at least two factors. First, the *kángbɛ* register—in part, codified into the N'ko orthography itself—is a linguistically compelling analysis of Manding phonology and etymology, as demonstrated by the current words of N'ko teachers and students. Second, the *kángbɛ* register—independent of linguistic facts—is upheld and embraced as a component of a larger N'ko ethos of know-how, work and discipline (*kólon*, *báara*, *télen*). Cultivating themselves to be able to read, write and potentially speak the clear form of Manding is the means by which students and activists can hone themselves discursively into the opposite of people they see as responsible for the disorganized and poorly developed state of the countries and region in which they reside. Unsurprisingly then, even *kángbɛ* is not a fixed entity or permanent set of linguistic features. It too is subject to scrutiny, improvements and repair. As one N'ko teacher commented following a heated disagreement about some of the conventions of written N'ko or *kángbɛ*: “*fén bée bé dílan*”—all things can be fixed. Indeed, in the eyes of N'ko activists in post-colonial West Africa, they must be.

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