Cultivating Knowledge: Development, Dissemblance, and Discursive Contradictions among the Diola of Guinea-Bissau

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Abstract

Development practitioners are eager to “learn from farmers” in their efforts to address Africa’s deteriorating agricultural output. But many agrarian groups, such as Diola wet rice cultivators of Guinea-Bissau, have well-established norms that regulate the circulation of knowledge—whether about agriculture, household economy, or day-to-day activities. By exploring how Diola manage information about the natural and supranatural world and exercise evasion and restraint in quotidian interaction, this article problematizes the assumptions that knowledge is an extractable resource; that more knowledge is better; and that democratized knowledge leads to progress. It considers how the Diola tendency to circumscribe information both challenges external development objectives and contours the ways Diola themselves confront their declining economic conditions.

[Agrarian change; cultural constructions of knowledge; development; Africa; secrecy; Green Revolution]
**Introduction**

If human sociation is conditioned by the capacity to speak, it is shaped by the capacity to be silent (Simmel 1950:349).

Recent efforts to transform Africa’s agricultural sector have emphasized the need to “learn from farmers.” Such an approach reflects a general shift in international development thinking and practice that engages would-be beneficiaries in collaborative endeavors to improve their conditions. In particular, it serves as a corrective to previous agricultural reform initiatives—notably the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America and Asia—that tended to denigrate or ignore traditional methods, tools, and seeds of indigenous farmers in favor of modern science and technology, often with disastrous results (see Lansing 1991).

In contrast, current leaders of the New Green Revolution for Africa insist:

There is also a lot to be learned from the farmer. You develop ideas about what you think the farmer should do to solve their problem, but maybe that is not the farmer's problem… So, for us agriculturists, we may be telling the farmers what chemical to use or how to control the storage pests or how we can develop a resistant variety, but the farmers know what they have been doing, and they may have abandoned a method that works… So if you
have an interaction between you and the farmer, you will come to
learn what the farmer really wants (Ininda 2009).

The impetus for learning from African farmers, who have been largely off the
international development agenda for over 20 years, comes from increasing concern over
declining food production across the African continent (Bage 2008; Cartridge and Leraand 2006;
Hazell and Diao 2005; Rockefeller Foundation 2006). Although there is a long history of food
insecurities across Africa, there is a growing consensus that the impact, intensity, and confluence
of the particular changes of the past few decades present especially dramatic challenges to
agrarian populations. The legacy of colonially-imposed cash-cropping schemes; the postcolonial
World Bank and IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies that shifted national attention away
from food security and towards efficiency, and mandated a dramatic reduction in government
support of agriculture; other economic liberalization regulatory mechanisms that put African
farmers in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis global tariffs, import and export policies, and
subsidy practices; the increasing environmental pressures that place agrarian populations across
Africa on the frontlines of global climate change; and many other factors have generated chronic
food insecurity and poverty, cyclical famine, and dependence on food aid among millions of
Africa’s rural residents. In the past three years, food prices have soared, food riots have
proliferated, and the “global food crisis” alarm is being rung around the world. As one
commentator summarized, “Despite progress in boosting democracy, ending wars, and economic
growth, Africa is the only region in the world becoming less and less able to feed itself”
(McLaughlin and Purefoy 2005).
Observations such as these have prompted a major set of international development initiatives directed squarely at rural Africa: the New Green Revolution for Africa. Since 2006, the Yara Foundation has hosted an annual African Green Revolution conference in Oslo, during which leaders from public and private sector institutions gather to discuss the policies and practices that will ignite Africa’s agricultural engine and “lift millions out of chronic poverty” (Anan 2007). Hundreds of millions of dollars have been funneled into seed science, new fertilizers, and other agricultural technologies. The majority of these funds are being channeled through the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), a Nairobi-based organization created through joint sponsorship of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and chaired by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. AGRA, the African face of this massive effort to transform agricultural production across the continent, outlines their animating problem as follows:

Africa has the singular and tragic distinction of being the only place in the world where overall food security and livelihoods are deteriorating. Over the last 15 years, the number of Africans living below the poverty line ($1/day) has increased by 50 percent, and it is estimated that one-third of the continent’s population suffers from hunger (AGRA 2009).

There is no doubt that rural Africans are, indeed, facing enormous pressures. In the region of West Africa that I am most familiar with—the predominantly Diola villages of the Upper Guinea coast—anxiety about the intensifying decline in rain and rice is palpable. Diola
farmers, who have been cultivating rice in this region for at least a thousand years, have long been renowned (by their neighbors and further flung observers) for their hard work and capacity to produce abundant rice in their tangled mangrove terrain (Almada 1594; Baum 1999; Coelho 1669; Lauer 1969; Linares 1970, 1981, 1992; Mark 1985; Pélissier 1966; Thomas 1959, 1963). But despite their continued arduous manual labor in the wet rice paddies for most of the year, the majority of households in this rural area of northwestern Guinea-Bissau are only able to produce enough rice to feed their families for three months (Davidson 2007). They rely on imported rice (generally from Vietnam and China) for the remainder of the year, many of them barely getting by on one or two meals a day.

In this sense, Diola farmers exemplify exactly the kind of people with exactly the kind of problem that AGRA officials want to revolutionize. Engaging rural Diola in this process would begin, according to AGRA’s stated approach, “in the fields alongside small-scale farmers, to learn from them and to understand their most pressing problems and the potential solutions” (AGRA 2009). But what would “learning from Diola farmers” really look like? Assuming for the moment that AGRA’s objective to derive insights about pressing problems and potential solutions from African farmers does indeed reflect their sincere intentions to incorporate indigenous knowledge and smallholders’ concerns into agricultural development projects (even though other dynamics of Green Revolution culture and practice militate against this), such a goal assumes that indigenous knowledge is ripe for the picking, readily available to whichever plant geneticist or grant portfolio manager might ask. Rural Diola, however, like many agrarian people, have deeply ingrained formal and informal communicative strategies that make access to agricultural knowledge—or really any relevant knowledge regarding farmers’ circumstances—extremely difficult.
Through an analysis of Diola approaches to knowledge and communication, this essay exposes some of the challenges that would likely confront and confound AGRA officials and other development practitioners eager to “learn from farmers.” I argue that Diola farmers’ commitment to a particular scheme of information flow—based largely on secrecy, evasion, and restraint—challenges even the most culturally sensitive development policies and practices that privilege local knowledge. In this sense, I build on scholarship that explores the relationship between various kinds of indigenous knowledge and the goals and ambitions of participatory development projects, particularly those committed to interaction among agents of development and their would-be beneficiaries (e.g. Ansell 2009; Bornstein 2005; Cook and Kolthari 2001; Elyachar 2005; Gupta 1998; Hendry and Watson 2001; Li 2007; Pigg 1995a, 1995b).

But Diola approaches to knowledge also open up questions that extend beyond the confines of agricultural (and other) development initiatives. I take “learning from farmers” as a metonym of a wider preoccupation, not only of learning any local knowledge seemingly pertinent to development purposes, but of embedded assumptions about the pursuit of knowledge, writ large. Development espouse many of the same assumptions that undergird scientific inquiry and progressive politics more broadly: that knowledge is an extractable resource; that more knowledge is better; and that democratized knowledge leads to progress (see Adams and Pigg 2005; Habermas 1972, 1979, 1989; Latour 1993).

To be clear, there are no current development projects in northwestern Guinea-Bissau that seek, explicitly, to transform agricultural efforts. The New Green Revolution for Africa has not yet reached Diola-land. In fact, development agencies—whether local or international, governmental or NGO—play a relatively minor role in this remote area of West Africa. This essay is, thus, not an analysis of a development effort underway in this region. Rather, it brings
to bear ethnographic insights from a particular agrarian group to highlight the discursive contradictions between Diola cultivators and their would-be developers, and to ask broader questions about the production and circulation of knowledge in particular cultural contexts.

It is not my intent to set up AGRA and other development practitioners as straw men, easily knocked down by the weight of ethnographic complexity and detail. There are, of course, both strengths and limitations of different approaches to knowledge and communicative practice, particularly in the context of rapidly changing circumstances. Ultimately, the ways in which Diola control the flow of information and knowledge in both quotidian interaction and formal spheres not only challenges external agents of agricultural change. Collective and proactive responses from Diola themselves are inhibited by these communicative norms, a predicament that is currently exacerbating the pressures on Diola households to make ends meet.

**Controlling Knowledge: “Diola have lots of secrets”**

One of the most persistent and stereotypical characterizations of agrarian peoples is their communicative restraint, often glossed as secrecy (Bellman 1984; Piot 1993; Richards 1985). Diola are no exception, and might even represent an extreme. “Diola have lots of secrets,” people in Bissau, the capital city, would tell me just as frequently as they observed that “Diola work hard” (Davidson 2009). Even the scant ethnographic accounts from Portuguese colonial officials stated that Diola were probably the most closed and guarded of Guinean ethnic groups and that plumbing the depths of their world was no easy task (Lehmann de Almeida 1955; Taborda 1950a, 1950b). And, similar to their self-ascribed work ethic, such characterizations were voiced among Diola themselves; many residents in the Diola villages of northwestern Guinea-Bissau told me “We Diola have lots of secrets.”
Contemporary ethnographers of the Diola and neighboring groups have richly explored various aspects of secrecy in their studies. Baum (1999) considers secrecy in relation to Diola ideas about history and esoteric knowledge within their system of spirit shrines, and the ways in which knowledge of a supranatural and/or ritual nature is closely guarded by those who have rights to it. Schloss’s (1992) ethnography of the neighboring Ehing touches on secrecy in the realm of spirit shrines, and Mark’s (1992) study of Diola-Fogny male initiation covers many aspects of secrecy in male initiation (bukut) practices. As a complement to Mark’s focus on male initiation, van Tilburg’s (1998) more humanistic approach discusses the ways in which secrecy surrounds pregnancy and childbirth, not just from men but among women. Her own experience as a pregnant fieldworker in a Senegalese Diola village led her, in a complicated and ultimately tragic way, to understand the depth and layers of secrecy enveloping reproductive matters.

My own experience among Guinean Diola largely confirms these ethnographers’ discussions of circumscribed information in terms of history, specialized knowledge, and ritual. Even more, in the first flush of fieldwork, secrecy seemed to texture most aspects of Diola social life; there was, simply put, a pervading ethos of secrecy among Diola villagers with each other and with outsiders. I quickly ascertained the contours of gendered domains of knowledge and secrecy, as well as the basic rules governing access to—or silence around—esoteric and religious knowledge and practice. I learned that only certain people were privy to certain kinds of knowledge, and to know something not within one’s purview was a breach of moral conduct and potentially dangerous. But beyond gendered domains of secrecy and arenas of religious/esoteric knowledge, Diola were guarded (with outsiders and each other) about even the most seemingly mundane information. Secrecy regarding one’s movements, possessions, and opinions seemed to
be embedded in almost every instance of quotidian social interaction. There was often a
deliberate effort to shroud even the most seemingly pedestrian things. For Diola, the idiom of
secrecy was very much on the surface, was claimed daily by villagers, and was staked out—both
internally and externally—as a form of ethnic distinction. But, although secrecy seems to have
become a reified marker of Diola-ness, the performance of this disposition towards dissembling
for its own sake is not the primary driver of these dynamics. As I will discuss below, the reasons
for maintaining—and even reinforcing—such practices, from a Diola perspective, are less a
matter of protecting an aspect of their endangered cultural patrimony, and more about their
understanding of the leakages and links among the supranatural, social, and natural spheres.

Even more, what was continually glossed as secrecy—by Diola and their observers—
started to overflow this conceptual category. Secrecy as a term is neither big enough nor precise
enough to adequately contain all of the attitudes, behaviors, and examples generally lumped
under its rubric. Nor is it robust enough for discussing the consequences these different
approaches to knowledge and communication have within the current context of changing
internal conditions and the potential (or even hypothetical) arrival of external change-agents.
Thus, continuing the analytic shift from content (the secret itself) to form (the dynamics of
concealing and revealing information) this essay considers the processes of producing,
controlling, and transferring knowledge among Diola villagers in Guinea-Bissau.¹ This relates to
the kinds of knowledge development practitioners express an interest in “learning from farmers,”
as well as the communicative strategies—irrespective of content—that might thwart these
efforts. What follows, then, is an attempt to understand Diola communicative strategies as they
manifest in both formal and informal arenas. There are two kinds of knowledge that I want to
distinguish here: one is ritual knowledge and the ways in which information flow is wrapped up
in explicit cultural forms like funerals, initiations, and spirit shrine ceremonies. Ritual secrecy organizes access to religious and esoteric knowledge along gendered, generational, and lineage lines. The other category of knowledge, which I discuss first, I call *interactional*. We see this at play in everyday forms of social intercourse around consumption, possession, and action. Ultimately, however, the codes of the former leak into the latter, and quotidian communicative practices bear the mark of formal principles regarding religious knowledge (see Bellman 1984).

**Interactional Knowledge: Concealing Actions and Possessions**

“*Ukai beh?*”

During a certain phase of fieldwork, I found myself reluctant to go outside the confines of my own or my host family’s house, even on a short walk around the village. When I did venture out, I had to gear myself up for the inevitable barrage of seemingly innocuous questions that people would yell at me as I walked past their verandas. After the appropriate age-based greeting, my interlocutors would ask “*Ukai beh?*” (Where are you going?), followed quickly by “*Ubei bukayemih*?” (Where are you coming from?). Simple and apparently friendly questions, but by the time I had walked a hundred yards I had answered them many, many times and always felt poked and prodded and scrutinized a bit too closely for comfort. I usually provided a brief response, such as “*Inje mikai beh butat*” (I’m going to the forest) or “*Inje mikai beh huyungorahu*” (I’m going for a walk). Later, I found that it was more typical to provide even more obtuse responses. I observed my neighbors field the same questions with “*Mikai beubeh*” (I’m going over there), not indicating where, in particular, with any further words or gestures. Or, even more vague, “*Inje muh*” (Here I am). And after having found out nothing from their
initial inquiry people would rarely pry further. A question had been asked, it had been answered with no real information, and everyone seemed satisfied with the exchange.

Other tactics involved avoiding the observing eyes and ears altogether. Early in my second year of fieldwork, one of the pregnant members of my women’s work association was approaching her due date. It was her eighth child and she had always experienced very difficult births. She was afraid that she would die in childbirth if she delivered in the village, and she asked me if I would take her to Ziguinchor, across the Senegalese border, so she could give birth in a hospital with better medical conditions than those available in Guinea-Bissau. I made arrangements with her to meet at my house at mid-morning, but when I woke at dawn on the morning we were to leave, I found her on my back veranda. She said she knew we were not leaving for several hours, but she had left her house early, before dawn, and come to hide out at my house and wait. If she left her house with a bag when people were already awake, they would ask her where she was going. “Ukai beh?” they would demand. “You see,” she explained to me, “people here are tiresome. They ask and ask and ask.”

As many ways as Diola have to “ask and ask and ask,” there are methods to counter or avoid such attempts. The examples above demonstrate the lengths villagers go in order to avoid the inevitable and predictable surveillance of their own neighbors. But why bother? Why not reveal where one is going or what one is doing in a straightforward manner? Why all the effort to evade, dissemble, and conceal?

First, these tactics provide a sense of insulation in the face of constant observability. To some extent, they can be understood as “simply a way to preserve a sense of autonomy or privacy in the close world of the village” (Gable 1997:217). Such interactional dynamics have been documented and accounted for in a similar way by others studying contexts in which one’s
every move can be seen by those in the immediate vicinity (Coser 1962, 1979; Pitt-Rivers 1971).
Providing evasive or empty responses about such matters as where one is going or what one is
doing can be partly understood, then, as a response to the intrusive aspects of living in a
fishbowl.

Beyond the drive to maintain some measure of privacy for its own sake, these
interactions encode a particular type of power relationship. Not a Weberian coercive power over
others, but a productive kind of power that has the effect of both maintaining a connection
between individuals while making manifest their very autonomy. In the seemingly fruitless
structure of greetings, what gets expressed is a kind of agency. It would not be appropriate to
follow an “Ukai beh” with silence; there is a script that one follows, even if it seems to lead
nowhere. “Ukai beh” becomes an invitation to assert one’s power to withhold, to conceal where
one is going and where one has been. It is precisely because Diola villagers are so enmeshed
with one another in the small and tightly woven world of village life that dissembling and
evasion become meaningful forms of social interaction. As Fabian contends, “Secrecy, far from
being non-communication, is a cultural practice of communication” (Fabian 1991:184). The
daily repeated performance of “Ukai beh” and “Inje muh” acknowledges that people have a kind
of power, not only to decide where they are going, but whether or not to reveal or conceal that
information.

Likewise, in higher stakes moments, concealing one’s actions and movements also
enables individuals to navigate around the more oppressive structures of surveillance,
particularly when their actions might be judged as non-normative or suspected as a breach of
conduct. Obtaining special medical care in the context of childbirth is not an outright violation
of Diola norms, but it is certainly grist for the gossip mill, and gossip, in turn, could lead to leveling disciplinary measures.

Beyond “Ukai beh,” which, as described above, does not actually lead to any further knowledge, Diola do not engage in direct questioning into people’s lives or about any specific body of knowledge. Regarding religious or ritual practice, Diola do not ask amangen-i (shrine priests) or others with ritual authority how and why certain practices are observed. When I asked such questions lay people not only did not know, but most had never thought to ask those who might. Beyond ritual and religious matters, Diola do not tend to acquire knowledge through direct questions, but through observation and first-hand experience. My own process of learning how to harvest rice and transplant rice seedlings came through quick demonstration and then practice, and I sensed my work associates’ irritability when I tried to ask questions about how best to cut the rice stalks or punch the delicate seedlings into the mud.

This points to an important distinction in epistemological assumptions. When we ask, we assume there is an answer, and that we have rights it. But for Diola, neither of these principles can be assumed. Not only are certain kinds of knowledge restricted in terms of who can and cannot access it, but Diola assume an essential unknowability to some things. Such a view is encoded in the Diola word for their supreme deity—Emitai—the root of which is a condensed form of “irit,” which means “that which cannot be known.” Beyond “ukai beh,” then, direct questions are not appropriate, whether regarding religious practice, basic household or agricultural tasks, or other people’s lives. This last realm is particularly concerned with not asking about—or displaying—material conditions.

*Out of Sight*
Paulo, the newly arrived Protestant evangelical missionary in the village, once made the mistake of walking on the main road from his house at one end of the village to the resurrected baking ovens at the other end of the village. He bought six loaves of bread for his family, but by the time he reached his home again, he had only half of one loaf left and he looked bewildered. He had carried the loaves in plain sight and everyone he passed along the way asked for a piece of bread. He quickly learned to carry his purchases concealed in a bag or backpack. People would still glare at it, trying to divine its contents, but—just as in their attempts to divine a passer-by’s destination—they would not pry further.

No one buys anything at the small shops in Diola villages without putting it in a bag, preferably a dark one. One of the most universally coveted objects among rural Diola is a black, opaque plastic bag, used in the central market in Bissau and much preferred over the more ubiquitous but transparent blue striped plastic bags. Once obtained, these flimsy bags are treated with great care, as they can be used to conceal any objects one might need to transport around the village. Even better than a bag, many people hide items in their shirt or other clothing. Many times, older men came to my house and sat on the back porch, seemingly carrying nothing. Then they would reach deep inside their long shorts and extract a liter of palm wine, or take off their hat and uncover a leaf of tobacco, or search in the recesses of their robe and pull out a papaya. Once, I gave one of the members of my women’s work association a t-shirt she had asked for. Hearing other people approach, she quickly folded it into a tight bundle and tucked it under her cloth wrap skirt.

Diola household organization also reflects similar concerns. Rice, for example, is stored in a separate room in one’s house, out of visitors’ view. Although I lived in a Diola village for two years and ate at my adoptive family’s house every day, I never saw the inside of the granary,
nor did I see anyone else in the household enter it besides Marijai, the mother of my host family. The only household objects on public view are those possessions that everyone has—straw baskets, worn out eating bowls, well-used aluminum pots, a *kandaabaku* (belt for climbing palm trees to tap wine), and a *budjandabu* (iron-tipped fulcrum shovel for tilling rice paddies) propped up in the rafters. Anything besides these common objects that members of a household might possess is kept out of sight.

Villagers regularly use the cover of darkness—even better than an opaque plastic bag—to achieve the closest thing to invisibility when transporting objects to and from their homes. Once, I went with Marijai on a midnight errand to the other end of the village to a relative’s house where we fetched a pig they were giving her to raise. It was pitch black outside and I had to navigate carefully not to trip over tree stumps and other obstacles on the path. But by that time I knew it would have been unheard of to fetch the pig during daylight hours, when everyone would see Marijai walking across the village with a new pig.

In a similar vein, when a neighbor once stayed for dinner at my host family’s house he commented that he never ate so well at his own home. Marijai responded that this was unusual fare for them too. We were, in fact, eating the same food as always: rice with *bagiche* (cooked hibiscus leaves). But Marijai took pains to express that we were eating lavishly that night. She said: “Ask Joanna. She eats here every night. She sees our poverty.” I nodded, playing my part as expected. Marijai was concerned, again, about her guest reporting to others that her household was better off than others, a clear example of “keeping behind the Joneses” (Gable 1997:215).

Such efforts were also evident in villagers’ responses to my questions about their household composition. My initial attempt to conduct a household survey by visiting people’s
homes in broad daylight was often an exercise in futility. Asking how many children or chickens or pigs one had when neighbors might stop by and hear the answers was too risky for most residents to participate. One respondent told me straightforwardly that these were not the sort of questions he was willing to answer in front of other people, especially his neighbors. He said it was not good for other people to know your secrets because then “they would talk about you to others and plot behind your back and slander you.”

Again, why all this effort to conceal? Just as Diola develop evasive responses and tactics to avoid the omnipresent surveillance of their neighbors, so too do they have imaginative ways to skirt the obligation to share. If you possess an item—especially food—in plain sight, it is quite appropriate for others to ask you for a piece, and it would be rude to deny them. Children are brought up to offer whatever they happen to have to those in their immediate vicinity. The only way around this imperative to share is to remove such objects from view by concealing them in a bag, a hat, or the recesses of a house.\textsuperscript{10} If you are foolish enough, like Paulo the missionary, to show too much there are consequences.

Such ingrained and ingenious tactics for hiding possessions are, of course, quite common in contexts where one is not only obliged to share whatever one has, but material wealth—and a loaf of bread or a t-shirt certainly count as material wealth in Diola villages—arouses enmity or suspicion among one’s neighbors. Not only do methods of concealment help protect the object from being consumed by others, they protect the possessor from jealousy-inspired actions by those who seek to undercut other’s wealth. And, in a related logic, they protect the possessor from accusations that they acquired the object in some ill-gotten way. Diola concern with concealing possessions, then, seems to fit within the general framework of “nightmare
egalitarianism” (Bohannan 1963; Bohannan 1964; Foster 1965). This seductive but problematic concept contends that in egalitarian societies,

People share equally in material poverty. Or, if some are richer than others, they hide their good fortune… Usually, the implication is that the ‘less prosperous’ are motivated by a fundamental belief that the equality of conditions (as opposed to the equality of opportunity) is a moral good. To be rich is to be morally reprehensible (Gable 1997:215).

Gable’s (1997) study of the Manjaco—an ethnic group just south of Diola-land in Guinea-Bissau—effectively pokes a hole in the logic of nightmare egalitarianism by demonstrating that it is not the fear of having something that motivates Manjaco secrecy, but the fear of being found to have nothing worth inciting jealousy. Gable’s essay—a parallel critique of nightmare egalitarianism and ethnographic authority—is worth exploring in some depth. Just as I assumed in the case of Diola behavior, Gable at first sees Manjaco secrecy around possessions conforming to conventional anthropological wisdom regarding egalitarian societies. That is, it is a dangerous prospect to reveal or be public about one’s possessions because of either inciting envy—and hence repercussions in the form of witchcraft—by others who have less, or by being accused of using witchcraft oneself to acquire such possessions. This, at least, is what Gable assumed was going on in the Manjaco village in which he observed his neighbors concealing their possessions. But it gradually dawned on him that this motive was actually a façade, and it was better for Manjaco to be assumed to have power and possessions—even if that might attract
envy—than for it to be revealed that one had nothing. Thus, older men seemingly concealing objects in their ever-present satchels actually have empty satchels; better, according to Gable, to seem to have something worth concealing that to be found to have nothing at all. As he explains,

For much of the time I operated under the assumption that the Manjaco were concerned with hiding the full sack, the full granary, the full bottle... It was not until late in my stay that I came to believe that ‘hiding’ or ‘secreting’ had as much to do with concealing an empty bottle as it did with hiding a full one. While it may be true that Manjaco inhabit a world of limited goods where one person’s gain must be paid by another’s loss, many of them... are nevertheless more afraid of appearing unworthy of envy than they are afraid of being accused of injuring others to further their own interests. It is the empty sack or granary, not the full sack or granary, that they wish most to conceal (Gable 1997:227).

Gable comes to understand that even in a supposedly egalitarian society, individuals often aspire to have the upper hand—to be the winner—even at others’ expense. His argument corrects long-standing anthropological representations of egalitarian societies that do not account for the “will-to-power” of their individual members. Gable’s understanding of the particular features of Manjaco secrecy challenges a depiction of “egalitarianism devoid of this image of the individual who admires—and strives to be or at least appear—like the one who has power and possessions rather than hiding this” (Gable 1997:228).11
In the Diola case, I would not go so far as Gable to assert that Diola are more concerned with hiding what they do not have than what they have. There are some aspects of Diola behavior and communicative practice that genuinely are caught up in a “keeping behind the Joneses” dynamic, and, at least as Diola experience them, their actions and interactions are very much oriented around concealing what they do, in fact, have and know. But the link between possession—whether of information or goods, and even if performed as an absence—and power in the context of a so-called egalitarian society is instructive in the Diola case.

The relationship between Diola work ethic and modes of concealing information and material goods is revealing here. Elsewhere, I demonstrate how Diola maintain a particular work regime and sanction those individuals who deviate from long-established wet rice cultivation practices (Davidson 2009). Diola work is public and visible, and can be maintained through sanctions and admonishments that are likewise public and visible. Concealment as a pervasive mode of social interaction provides a counterpoint to the conformity demanded by the work regime, and enables a measure of autonomy and differentiation. The Diola wet rice cultivation regime allows people to uphold the appearance that everyone does and has the same things. Carefully scripted modes of dissembling and concealing also protect the image and idiom of equality, but they simultaneously provide a sphere for individuals to store up a little extra and do or be something a little different. Concealment preserves the appearance of an egalitarian society, while at the same time providing an arena for individual variation. In a society generally emphasizing conformity, keeping one’s opinions and actions under wraps enables individuals to gain some measure of autonomy without openly disputing the smooth veneer of public consensus. It allows for differentiation—even, as we will see in the more formal domains of ritual, accumulation—without disrupting the outward display of equality.
Furthermore, like the evasive responses to “ukai beh,” concealing possessions affirms one’s power to keep a secret, and hence provides a modicum of agency and autonomy within the structures that generally require redistribution. It is worth emphasizing that all the effort to conceal—shrouding objects in dark bags and under dark skies, insisting on material poverty, and so forth—does not actually obscure the understanding that people buy things in shops and raise pigs and maybe even give birth across the border. This is neither about the content of what is being concealed, nor about maintaining the illusion that such “secrets” are in fact quite public. Rather, these dynamics indicate a complicity in and deference to a particular scheme of information flow. Extending Sally Falk Moore’s (1976) concept of ritual collusion, this is not a matter of belief, but a kind of interactional collusion.

The experience of Diola widows further elucidates this economy of information and sheds more light on the inadequacy of the concept of nightmare egalitarianism. Despite the large proportion of widows in Diola villages they remain a largely invisible and silent population. Because of Diola land tenure arrangements, widows have no direct access to either paddy or forest land, and even those with young children are in extremely vulnerable positions regarding their livelihood. Once a deceased husband’s rice paddies are re-absorbed into his lineage, his widow is reduced to borrowing her kin’s unused paddies, a fragile and tenuous arrangement at best. If she does not have grown sons or benevolent uncles who will hoe the paddy for her, she will wield the heavy fulcrum shovel herself and perform what is considered quintessentially male labor. If she cannot borrow paddy, she begs for rice. Sometimes her grown children provide her with a small quantity of rice, sometimes neighbors take pity on her and send over some rice. But, in the past several years, bad harvests make it extremely difficult for anyone to be generous.
When the average member of the population is anxious about having enough rice to feed themselves and their families, widows are left even more on the margins.

But in my many discussions with widows, they stressed to me that they do not talk about their hardships and struggle to survive with others, even other widows. After getting to know several widows independently and becoming increasingly aware and concerned about their extreme conditions, I asked one widow with several young children in her household whether she spoke to other widows about their similar situation, and whether she thought about joining them together to collectively address their common problems. She looked at me blankly. I tried to explain that there were many women who were dealing with the same problems; women whose husbands had died, who had no access to land, who struggled to feed themselves and their children. I asked if they talked about such things, perhaps when visiting each other or when attending the same event, like a funeral. Her response was unequivocal: “We do not talk about such things… For us, it is a secret.” “Poverty is a secret?” I asked. “Yes,” she responded. “For you to tell someone, ‘Today I don’t have this or that,’” he’ll listen to you, but won’t give you anything. That’s why, in this sense, I stay alone with this poverty. That’s why I don’t tell anyone.”

What is revealing about the examples above and the predicament of widows is that, for Diola, concealing possessions is not about celebrating poverty, as nightmare egalitarianism would have it, but about performing a kind of equality in self-sustenance. By displaying only objects that everyone else also has, and secreting those that might distinguish one, Diola perform a lack of difference in the material world. The ideal is to be—or at least create the image that one is—in a middle zone of self-sustenance. If one rises above this level, there are diffuse leveling sanctions. Likewise, if—like widows—one falls below, there are consequences of
mockery and shame. Displaying or performing poverty is kept very much within the realms of expected and normative material conditions. But widows fall out of this norm. They are silent about their particular kind of poverty because this would expose the shameful fact that they are unable to sustain themselves. And they are invisible to their kin and neighbors because—as a consequence of their extreme conditions—they have become non-persons.  

What this all adds up to—whether regarding information about possessions or problems—is a mode of communication that tends to obscure what is really going on. To be sure, anyone working “in the fields alongside small-scale [Diola] farmers,” as AGRA program officers propose to do with agrarian groups across Africa, would learn a lot about the rigors of their wet rice cultivations scheme, the contours of their social organization of labor, and the ingenuity of their longstanding irrigation and other agricultural practices. But understanding their “most pressing problems and potential solutions”—or even some of the most basic aspects of their current circumstances—is, as demonstrated above, not a straightforward endeavor.

Simmel’s seminal essay on the sociological character of secrecy suggests that secrecy offers “the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world” (Simmel 1950:330). This insight has typically been applied to realms of magic, esoteric knowledge, and secret societies (see especially Bellman 1984; Lurhmann 1989; Murphy 1980; Zahan 1979), but it is equally apt in the domain of material possessions and quotidian acts of dissembling and concealing. In the manifest Diola world, everyone conforms and has the same possessions. In this second world, people have and know different things. This “secret” world of differentiated individuals exists in a complicated but ultimately convenient way alongside the manifest world of equality, conformity, and consensus. We see this even more clearly in the formal realms of gender-based knowledge and rites of initiation. And, as Simmel notes, “the latter is decisively influenced by
the former;” that is, the codes that govern the formal world of ritual knowledge leak into the
everyday world of concealment and silence (Simmel 1950:330).

**Ritual Knowledge**

*Gendered and Generational Spheres of Information and Influence*

In addition to the ways silence and dissembling around a range of quotidian interactions serve to
differentiate individuals while maintaining the appearance of conformity, more formalized
arenas of knowledge and secrecy differentiate Diola in terms of gender, generation, and various
statuses that ultimately preserve a very different kind of impression. The gendered division of
labor in Diola cultivation practices is carefully reproduced in the realm of cultural knowledge.

One of the first rules I learned among Guinean Diola pertained to the gender-specific
prohibitions around women’s and men’s spheres of knowledge. Simply put, men were not
supposed to know anything about women’s reproduction and women were not supposed to know
anything about male initiation. Uninitiated members of both genders are not supposed to know
anything about either.¹⁴

Beyond distinct men’s and women’s knowledge, information is strictly organized *within*
each gender. Van Tilburg’s (1998) reflexive essay on her fieldwork experience as a pregnant
ethnographer among Senegalese Diola is instructive here. Van Tilburg discusses how she
unwittingly learned the rules of secrecy and silence surrounding pregnancy and childbirth
through the constraints on her own access to information about these domains. She confesses: “I
hoped that my fieldwork while pregnant would initiate me into Diola womanhood and help me
acquire the knowledge of the Diamat Diola women of Youtou” (van Tilburg 1998:180). But
quite the opposite occurred. “I found that there were different lines, those that separate women
from men, those that separate women from various statuses, and those that separate Diola from all others” (van Tilburg 1998:185).

Access to different knowledge about reproduction organizes women into a hierarchy. Women gradually learn more and more “secret knowledge” based on their experience and success in childbirth. As van Tilburg explains,

As time went on, I started to learn the categories to which Diola women belonged according to their stage and success in reproduction. These categories formed a hierarchy. On the lowest rung were women pregnant for the first time; next in order were the women whose babies did not survive; then women who had given birth only to girls; mothers who had given birth to and raised both sexes; culminating in mothers who has passed menopause (van Tilburg 1998:183).

My research among Guinean Diola confirms and expands upon van Tilburg’s analysis of Senegalese Diola secrecy around pregnancy and reproduction. For Guinean Diola, giving birth marks a woman’s initiation into adult status. Interestingly, while male initiation is highly collectivized and rare (once every thirty years), female “initiation” in the form of childbirth is highly individualized and frequent. But both male initiation and childbirth are moments of complete gender-based seclusion, as well as realms of total secrecy within each gender.15

Each neighborhood has a maternity hut, enclosed with thick palm branches, thus distinguishing it from every other building in the village. Men are not allowed to go near the
building. Although many Diola women now give birth in the state clinic, they have preserved the secret and secluded aspects of childbirth. Some women continue to use the neighborhood maternity huts. Up until about ten or fifteen years ago, all women went into seclusion in the maternity hut when they were about to give birth. If it was their first time, they were supposedly ignorant of all proceedings until they unfolded, just as men were meant to be ignorant of circumcision until the moment they felt the knife. Older women assisted as traditional birth attendants in the maternity huts, some of whom continue to assist at births in the state clinic. After giving birth, a woman stays at the maternity hut for a few days and is then moved with the newborn to a nearby older woman’s house, usually a widow living alone. She cannot go home—and her husband cannot see her or the baby—until the umbilical cord falls off and the wound is healed. The reason given for this extended stay is that if the husband sees the umbilical cord wound, he will ask what it is, and that might lead to revealing information about the “secrets of birth.”

In a parallel fashion, women are not supposed to know anything about male initiation and circumcision. There is a great deal of secrecy surrounding what happens in the sacred forest, where initiates are secluded for three months. Women are not allowed to walk beyond a certain point in the direction of the sacred grove, and the food they prepare each day for the initiates and their male kin in the forest is carried by other men—usually the most recent initiates from the last village to have undergone the rites—into the bush. I was often told a cautionary tale about a man in the neighboring village of Elia who, having drunk too much palm wine, told his wife when the initiation proceedings would begin. As it is strictly forbidden to reveal such information to women, the man was severely disciplined; residents of the village raided his granary and took his rice, then tore the thatch off his house and broke down the mud walls. He
was expelled from the village and he now lives in the Gambia. What is important here is the emphasis with which Diola refer to the secrecy of male initiation, both in terms of the actual proceedings and the “secret knowledge” revealed to initiates by the elders in the forest.

Diola men also emphasize the instructional aspects of male initiation. Just as women in the maternity hut gain knowledge previously inaccessible to them, men in the sacred forest are instructed in oral history, songs, and norms by elders (see Mark 1992). Referring to the decision of several Catholic families to desist from attending the last male initiation, one informant told me, “The initiation forest is our library. Those that did not go will never really know the true meanings.” And “those who did not go” are regularly reminded of their ignorance of and exclusion from these realms of Diola cultural knowledge. One young man whose family kept him from attending told me that his friends who did attend no longer want to spend time with him. “They think they know more than me,” he explained. “They say they learned many secrets in the initiation forest. And they say are not allowed to talk about many things in my presence because I am uninitiated.”

I once attended an NGO-sponsored training for Diola traditional birth attendants. A Portuguese NGO that had recently become involved in the region organized the training, in which each Diola village selected two or three women—most of them recognized for their experience in attending births—to participate. The training was conducted by three non-Diola nurse-midwives from other cities in Guinea-Bissau who spoke to the participants in Crioulo (the *lingua franca* of Guinea-Bissau). Some of the older women needed translation, so a young Diola man who was helping the Portuguese NGO with various tasks around the region was called in to translate. Since the topics on the first day pertained to general health and hygiene, this was not a problem. But at the end of the day the women decided that no men were to be allowed in the
room for the rest of the training, since they would be discussing female reproductive matters, so
the translator was sent home and the more competent Crioulo speakers among the women took
on the task of translation, although this often resulted in much confusion.17

At another point in the same training, also in the absence of the male translator, the nurse-
midwives asked the Diola women what they knew about methods for preventing pregnancy, and
several of the younger women mentioned birth control methods they had heard about (although
very few had access to) such as Depo Provera injections, IUDs, and the Pill. The nurse-
midwives pressed them to discuss what kinds of methods they used before such modern means,
or what other options they knew about from “traditional medicine” to prevent or abort a
pregnancy. They were met with blank stares and shrugs. “Come on,” one of the nurse-midwives
pushed, “You must know ways to do these things. Every ethnic group has these methods.”
When asked again what plants would help a woman avoid conception, the Diola women
demurred; several of the participants around the room insisted, “Diola don’t do such things.”

It is impossible to know whether the women actually did not know such methods or they
were unwilling to divulge such “secrets” to the younger women and non-Diola attendees. But
several other episodes during the course of my fieldwork made me suspect the latter. There is a
rather stringent pro-natalist ethic among Diola that some women confessed to finding oppressive.
In fact, once I had become closer to several women in the village, I was often asked to fulfill a
somewhat clandestine role pertaining to birth control or other aspects of childbirth. On several
occasions, I shuttled women across the Senegalese border to Ziguinchor, where they could
receive both birth control and childbirth assistance not only unavailable to them in rural Guinea-
Bissau but far from the watchful eyes of their neighbors.
One woman’s case is particularly illustrative. Maribel had six children, and several of
her pregnancies after her last child had ended in miscarriage. She had become quite weak and
anemic, and suffered from regular abdominal cramping. She often told me that she would “like
to take a break” from pregnancy and childbirth. I asked Maribel whether there were any ways
of preventing pregnancy that other women in the village knew. She said that there were, that the
erlder women knew ways and that her ancestors had long used “traditional medicine” to prevent
pregnancies and perhaps induce abortions. I asked why she did not try one of these methods, and
she said that the women who knew would not be willing to tell her. “This knowledge is secret,”
she shrugged.

It is not clear how elder women eventually come by such knowledge, but Maribel (and
others) insisted that they would not readily part with it, even to women who had given birth
many times. She reinforced this point when I asked her whether such prohibitions applied even
to women like her, who had given birth to six healthy children—boys and girls—and who were
clearly sick and might compromise their health further with another pregnancy. Maribel
shrugged again. It did not matter, she said, whether she had “six or ten or twenty children. You
are still expected to give birth, just keep giving birth. They tell you it’s better to die giving birth
than to avoid getting pregnant.”

Interestingly, gendered domains of secrecy tend to institute power relations and hierarchy
within the same gender rather than between genders. The parallel secrecy between genders
regarding reproduction and male initiation both minimizes and emphasizes difference between
genders. It establishes a structural difference between men and women, without that difference
necessarily leading to a position of domination and subordination between men and women. In
fact, such measure-for-measure practices around gendered domains of secrecy could be seen as
maintaining some sense of equality between men and women: we know some things, you know others. But secrecy about such matters within the same gender tends to lead to status distinctions laden with power and control between elders (the initiated) and juniors (the un- or less-initiated). Elder women, in the case above, maintain control over a realm of knowledge that helps give them power over their juniors. Until recently, women in labor depended entirely on their elders for assistance in the maternity hut during their most vulnerable moments. Such differentiated knowledge and modes of secrecy gives elder women power not only over the fate of particular women, but over maintaining and enforcing norms regarding high parity. Likewise, uninitiated men are entirely at the mercy of their elders when they enter the sacred forest, and their status as full Diola men who “know the true meanings” can only be attained through submission to elders’ authority, both in the act of circumcision and in the acquisition of cultural knowledge.\(^\text{19}\)

What is perhaps most interesting about the insistence on gender-based secrecy and knowledge is just how much effort goes in to preserving these exclusive domains of knowledge. The process of generating, concealing, and eventually transferring cultural knowledge sometimes seems as laborious as do Diola efforts in the rice paddies. Maintaining separate spheres of knowledge and secrecy differentiates women from men, which is important enough that such a state of gender- and status-specific knowledge and ignorance is elaborately preserved. It is both an instance of ritual collusion and a manifestation of how cultural energy is expended to reproduce social forms that cannot be taken for granted (see Arens and Karp 1989). In the case of gendered domains of secrecy, such regulation of knowledge serves as a mask to separate, in a structuralist sense, along the lines of sex and status; an artificial distinction that enables differentiation based on access to particular kinds of knowledge and practice.\(^\text{20}\)
Spirit Shrines and Esoteric Knowledge

Another institutional domain structured around a strictly regulated flow of information is the realm of spirit shrines (*ukinau*) and the religious knowledge involved in attending to the spirit world. What bears emphasizing is the way in which knowledge regarding religious practice is maintained and transferred within a very small, exclusive segment of the population. Knowledge about rituals and shrine ceremonies is not just restricted from nosy foreigners; most lay Diola do not know much about spirit shrines beyond who officiates at each one and what animals can be sacrificed there. Esoteric knowledge is strictly forbidden to those who do not have rights to it—either through birthright or selection as a shrine priest. It is deemed dangerous to know something beyond one’s purview.

Even when participating in ritual activities, lay Diola have very little idea of the reasons for ceremonies and religious practices and, unlike me, would never ask for such explication. When I would inquire about the significance of religious or symbolic acts my questions were met with shrugs. Often my interlocutors would tell me, “It is not for us to know such things. Only the *amangen-i* [shrine priests] can know.” Whether or not they did, in fact, know and could not (or would not) reveal this knowledge to me is irrelevant. What became clear in these interactions is that they were not *supposed* to know, and it would have been a serious breach if they admitted to such knowledge.

Gaining the rights to such knowledge—even if one inherits the role of a shrine priest— involves a long and often expensive process of initiation and ceremonial inductions. Interestingly, not everyone who has rights to a ritual office is eager to exercise them, and some go to great lengths to avoid them. In many instances, shrine priests have to physically catch a would-be adept and force him or her (although usually him) through an ordination process. The
father of my host family, who was in line to inherit an important initiation shrine, regularly escaped the clutches of his ritual elders by running away to the capital city at certain moments in the ritual cycle during which he could be forcibly inducted. Thus, the active refusal to become a member of an exclusive class of ritual officers who control valuable knowledge about the natural and supranatural world demonstrates that, for Diola, the pursuit of knowledge is not always an unqualified benefit.

Alongside the manifest world of material constraints and poverty, then, Diola inhabit another world rich in ideas and information. It is a world free from the limits of natural resources, intricately managed in its production and reproduction, and potent with the capacity to differentiate and cohere. Knowledge, as we know, is a kind of currency. You can possess it, it flows among people, and it has hidden power. In the Diola case, the production and circulation of both informal information about oneself (where one is going, what one might have in a bag) and more formal knowledge about the natural, social, and supranatural world are inflected with subtle configurations of power, autonomy, and differentiation. In more stark terms, information as a kind currency one can generate, amass, and withhold provides a contrast to the experience of material poverty in the manifest world.

Efforts to manage knowledge, conceal information, and maintain control over who can know what and when is, for Diola, a kind of work. But unlike the wet rice cultivation work regime that tends to level Diola villagers in socioeconomic and practical domains (Davidson 2009), the work involved in producing, delimiting, and circulating knowledge differentiates people along various axes, including gender, generation, lineage, and other kinds of status distinctions. Furthermore, unlike the natural world with its inherent limits of land and water,
there are no natural limits to what one can do with information. This is an enormously productive realm of Diola social life. Amidst material poverty, the abundance of cultural information in both quotidian and ritual realms makes some Diola villagers—perhaps all Diola villagers, to some extent—rich.

We can take this one step further when we see that, from a Diola perspective, the power that resides in certain knowledge does not just pertain to the world of ideas, but coalesces in the “interaction between natural, social, and supernatural realms” (Arens and Karp 1989:xviii). It is precisely because Diola recognize their precarious circumstances, and in a more general sense, have always acknowledged the fragility of the natural and social world, that they invest so heavily in maintaining control over the forces—often mediated through particular forms of knowledge—that order both of these realms. Diola adherence to these modes of knowledge production and circulation proscribes, in powerful ways, what they can and cannot do in their daily lives. For Diola the world of circumscribed cultural knowledge ultimately shapes—or, more importantly, Diola hope it will shape—the manifest, material world. As the constraints and limits inherent in the natural world are more keenly felt, similar to their adherence to a particular work regime Diola are perhaps accentuating the ways in which controls over and enactments of various forms of knowledge might be even more important.

**Conclusions**

Diola encode the insight offered in this essay’s epigram in their very conception of what it means to be human. The Diola word for human is *anau*, the root of which—*N*—means “to speak.” But
the words for each particular type of person—a man, a woman, girls and boys at different levels of maturation, and so forth—add to this root N a range of conditions and constraints. A human being, then, is one who speaks, but becoming a person involves understanding when and how and with whom to be silent. Learning how to manage information—who can know what, when knowledge can be revealed, how to dissemble in everyday forms of social interaction—is all part of Diola socialization processes. The capacity—or sometimes the imperative—to be silent refracts across Diola social organization along many dimensions, such as gender, generation, lineage, ritual roles, and life-course. The interplay of speaking and silence, concealing and revealing textures Diola social life, organizing axes of difference and shaping human sociation in powerful ways.

At one level, we can see Diola communicative practices as a “great achievement” in terms of the elaborate structures of knowledge into which people sort themselves (Simmel 1950:330). Information flow is partly organized in formal domains of social structure—widely understood categories of gendered, generational, and status based access to knowledge—and partly in individual choice and agency. This is a sophisticated and elaborate system of producing and transferring knowledge that is highly complex and differentiated.

Gaining a better understanding of how Diola manage information and strategize around concealing and revealing knowledge enables a more appropriate engagement with the now seemingly simplistic intention to “learn from farmers.” The Diola tendency to circumscribe the flow of information contrasts with such development practitioners’ assumptions about knowledge. In a general sense, the objective to “learn from farmers” in order to collaboratively engage in projects to improve agrarian people’s circumstances views such open communication as beneficial on both individual and social planes. Open communication and the free pursuit of
knowledge are assumed to be essential for progress, broadly construed, and hallmarks of a healthy, democratic society.\textsuperscript{21}

In Diola approaches to the production and circulation of information, knowledge is often conceived of as dangerous and is sometimes actively avoided. Given this orientation, secrecy and silence are seen as protective strategies. The efforts to conceal possessions, opinions, and actions; the habits of social interaction that emphasize reserve, restraint, and evasion; and the seclusion of the initiation forest and the maternity hut all stand quite a long way from the “free spaces” of a Habermasian public sphere (Evans and Boyte 1992; Habermas 1999). Among other implications, this presents thorny challenges to even the most culturally-sensitive, Freirian-inspired development policies and practices. Diola modes of knowledge production and circulation both expose and complicate the assumption that the pursuit of knowledge is an unequivocal right, and that societies gain when intellectual property is democratized.

Furthermore, within the Diola framework, patience becomes more than just a virtue: it is a dominant cultural feature. Diola individuals spend a lot of their lives not knowing things, secure in the understanding that waiting until they reach the appropriate age or status will yield knowledge at the appropriate time and place. The prolonged initiation cycle means that some men wait over 30 years to acquire what is deemed to be the bulk of valuable cultural knowledge. Beyond that, it takes a great deal of time and effort to acquire the knowledge that comes with a particular ritual office. And beyond even that, there is an entirely ineffable realm—that of Emitai, the supreme deity whose ways are, as the root of the word indicates, “unknowable.” Although the lived experience of patience can be an anxious state, it comes with a general confidence that things get resolved with time, according to their own norms, not according to an outsider’s sense of urgency. This can be extremely frustrating to observe, and it can look like no
one is doing anything, even when many residents in this region—like other agrarian groups across Africa—are acutely aware that they are living in a moment of crisis.

Such approaches to knowledge and the communicative strategies that surround them contrast in important ways with the AGRA program officer’s—and, more broadly, scientific and progressive political—epistemological orientations: that it is good to ask, to learn as much as possible from as many people as possible. That the way to address a given problem is to learn about it rapidly and act even faster. And that, in a high-modernist version of science, everything is ultimately knowable.

But it is impossible to ignore the fact that the norm of narrowly distributing information is part of the reason that it is so difficult for Diola to deal with their current predicament of declining food production as a collective problem. Faced with the dilemma of increasing and intensifying food insecurity and generally deteriorating economic conditions across Diola-land, one might assume that Diola villagers discuss these problems and potential solutions amongst themselves. But, as demonstrated in the extreme case of widows and the general situation of Diola villagers more widely, norms that regulate the circulation of knowledge, and the habits of concealing information about oneself and the conditions of one’s household, texture the ways in which Diola confront such changes in their ecological and economic landscape. A structural consequence of the ways in which Diola control knowledge, combined with the tendency to wait and not to ask, is that these dynamics maintain the status quo. This is not the same as saying such cultural processes cause Diola inaction and increasing poverty. Rather, these dynamics have the unintended consequence of simultaneously buttressing continuity and being poorly suited to responsive changes in a changed set of circumstances.
Following Simmel (1950), anthropologists’ focus on form over content has spawned a great deal of literature that examines the dynamics of concealing and revealing information in various contexts (Barth 1975; Lurhmann 1989; Ottenberg 1989) as well as analyses that stress secrecy as a social form imbricated in sets of power relationships (Bellman 1984; Murphy 1981, 1998; Taussig 1999).

“Ukai beh” is an abbreviated form of the complete question: “Kama mukai ubeh.”

See Goody 1978 for more on these dynamics. Also, linguistic anthropologists have extensively studied such speech acts and communicative practices, although my focus here is on the social organization of knowledge, rather than the sociolinguistics of knowledge, per se.

This aspect of religious knowledge residing within a priest class, and being largely inaccessible to and unquestioned by lay people, made for an initial comfortable (or at least familiar) fit between Diola religion and Catholicism (see Baum 1990: 338).

Baum (1999) also discusses Diola techniques for acquiring knowledge in his study of Diola religious history. The two methods Diola employ to learn history, according to Baum, are from stories told by elders and through use of special powers, such as dreams and visions (Baum 1999: 16). Moreover, van Tilburg (1998) explains that girls and women are not instructed in matters of reproduction—such as menarche and childbirth—until they are actually experiencing them. And it would be considered entirely inappropriate for anyone to ask about such matters.

As my own sensibilities regarding appropriate decorum meshed with those of my Diola friends and neighbors, I felt ever-more awkward and self-conscious about asking pointed questions. Like many ethnographers, I had framed my objectives for residing in Diola-land as search for
knowledge. I repeated to my interlocutors that I was there to learn—about language, culture, history, daily reality, current conditions, and so forth. But learning among Diola is not a process of asking questions. My approach to learning about these and other arenas of Diola social life by asking questions felt increasingly at variance with my acculturation into Diola customary behavior.

7 All personal names have been changed.

8 Early in my stay, I was instructed on basic norms of privacy, such as yelling out “kon kon kon” when approaching someone’s house, to let them know well in advance that someone was coming. Or, when approaching anyone talking in the dark, always saying “Inje muh” (Here I am) to warn the talking people that someone is nearby and within earshot and if they are saying something private, they should stop. Likewise, in the forest, when approaching someone’s grove where men sit and drink and talk under the sheltering fronds of oil palm trees, one always announces oneself, in the same way as above, from a reasonable distance. Such norms indicate both a respect for privacy, and reveal the complicity involved in acts of secreting objects or information from intruding eyes and ears by announcing one’s imminent arrival. I saw people in Diola villages exhibit these behaviors regularly, but of course I also saw them being violated.

9 See Linares (1970: 28) for similar observations among Senegalese Diola.

10 Some Diola found this imperative to share so oppressive that they removed themselves entirely from the context of such norms. I once met a young Diola man from Caton—an outlying Diola village—who was making a living as a fisherman in another part of the country. When I asked him why he left the fish-abundant waters of Diola-land, he said he could never get anywhere if he fished in his natal land. “Every time I would return from a day of fishing, I would walk though the village and my fish would disappear. I’d have to give some to this person and that
person and this person, and soon enough I had no fish to sell or even eat. No, I had to get away. We Diola, we make it so difficult.” (See Peterson 1993 for a discussion of these dynamics among foragers.)

11 One of the more prevalent—but as yet unconnected—themes that emerges from recent ethnographic literature on secrecy is the way in which various practices of secrecy disrupt our conventional understanding of egalitarianism and challenge typical models of the relationship between egalitarian and hierarchical forms of social and political organization (see Gable 1997; Kratz 1990; Lurhmann 1989; Petersen 1993; Piot 1993).

12 In some Diola villages, 30% of households are headed by widows (Davidson 2007). In other Diola villages, the number of widows is not so high, primarily because the levirate system is still practiced, although it is starting to decline in these villages too.

13 Diola have no word for widow. Women whose husbands have died, and men whose wives have died, are referred to in the same way as other women and men of their age, relative to who is addressing them. Sometimes widows and widowers are described as apagnorol akem, meaning “his/her husband died,” but this is not used as a title or designation so much as a description.

14 There is a rich ethnographic literature on gendered domains of knowledge and secrecy—especially in reference to the body and bodily processes—that I draw on here, especially Sally Falk Moore’s (1976) analysis of why Chagga preserve the fiction that men’s anuses are stitched closed during initiation, and Janis Irvine’s (1976) study of Buu women’s jural authority in matters of reproduction.

15 When Catholic missionaries set up the first school in Diola-land in the 1950s and started forcibly matriculating students, one of the most frequent parental and community-wide
objections to schooling was the possibility that children would learn about the “secrets of reproduction.” The first Diola word for school was *kadjanayaku*, which is derived from the Diola word for “ear” and “to hear.” The implication was that school was the site of hearing things that would “poison the ears” of their children. School is now referred to by either the Portuguese word “escola” or the French-based neologism “elekolai.”

16 Women are prohibited from giving birth at home, and if they do the house becomes polluted and must either be ritually cleansed or torn down.

17 All of the Diola women in attendance had given birth to multiple children of both genders, and the information discussed, with the exception of the attempted conversation about birth control methods that follows, remained within the purview of appropriate knowledge transmission among women of a certain reproductive status.

18 My discussions with Maribel on this topic were extraordinarily open, probably due to both the unusual intimacy of our friendship and, more importantly, her recognition that my outsider status—not to mention resources—would be of service to her.

19 Such dynamics resonate with scholarship on the technologies of control over the flow of information, particularly in the realms of religious and other esoteric knowledge (Keen 1994; La Fontaine 1985; Murphy 1980, 1981, 1990, 1998). Murphy (1980, 1990), for example, asserts that the performance of secrecy is always part of a larger play for power.

20 See Nooter (1993) for an interesting discussion on secrecy and masking traditions in late 19th and 20th century African art.

21 Many scholars have focused on the presumed antithetical dynamic between secrecy/concealment and democracy, discussing how state secrets and “public secrets” challenge or undermine the relationship between citizens and state actors, or generally subvert supposed
democratic values (see Bok 1979, 1982; Masco 2006; Shils 1956; Taussig 1999; Tefft 1980). A counterpoint to this theme is developed by those who study the use of secrecy—particularly in the form of ambiguity and deception—as a “weapon of the weak” (Jackson, 1982; Petersen 1993; Scott 1985).

22 This analysis resonates with Fabian’s (1990) questions regarding power and performance: how Africans in diverse contexts use concealment as a strategic resource for the management of sociopolitical reality, and perhaps most importantly, how these strategies yield unintended consequences.

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