According to UN Women, thirty-five percent of women in Mali have experienced sexual violence. In addition to this high rate, Malian women are further violated by an unspoken cultural norm called sutura, a tradition that psychologically grooms women and girls to conceal, forgive and bear their sufferings. Sutura impacts how Malian society deals with sexual violence in multiple ways. For those with knowledge of an assault, empathy for the victims is expressed with silence and inaction. Victims themselves are required to protect their families from associated shame. And a victim’s anger towards her assailant is converted into empathy by fear of tarnishing his reputation. Survivors of abuse are, therefore, expected to sacrifice their individual autonomy and rationalize their traumas and taught to prioritize stature in their communities over their own safety, desires, and justice. In patriarchal societies such as Mali, men dominate nearly all realms of public life. In this context, sutura can be understood as a systemic tool that protects the patrilineal reputation. It forces women to first be adept in its practice then its enforcement; otherwise, they are ostracized, deemed illegitimate and unworthy.

Through the artworks of six Malian women artists, Musow Ka Touma Sera—written in Bambara and translated as “it is the era of women”—examines sutura and its subcultural mechanisms which enable the amplification of patriarchy and presents a message of empowerment to Malian women.

Musow Ka Touma Sera was selected through apexart’s Open Call. For more information and images visit apexart.org/bocoum.php.

Fatima Bocoum is an entrepreneur, activist, and curator from Mali. She earned an Associate of Science in Fine Arts from GSU as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Media and New Technologies from Fordham University. She is the Founder of OpenLetr, a feminist blog with the mission to break societal and cultural boundaries to empower women to speak out and make better daily choices all while taking on curatorial projects. The latest of which, entitled Transfiguration, was exhibited at Undercurrent Projects and featured seven women artists from six different countries. Bocoum’s work heavily revolves in the area of women’s rights and empowerment, and she was featured in Mounyou Ni Sabali? a documentary by Kaourou Magassa on sexual violence in Mali which premiered in March 2019 in Bamako during the Ciné Droit Libre Festival.

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