

The Powers of Observation:
Ideologies and Practices of Paying Attention
among Rural Malian Muslims in Mande

by

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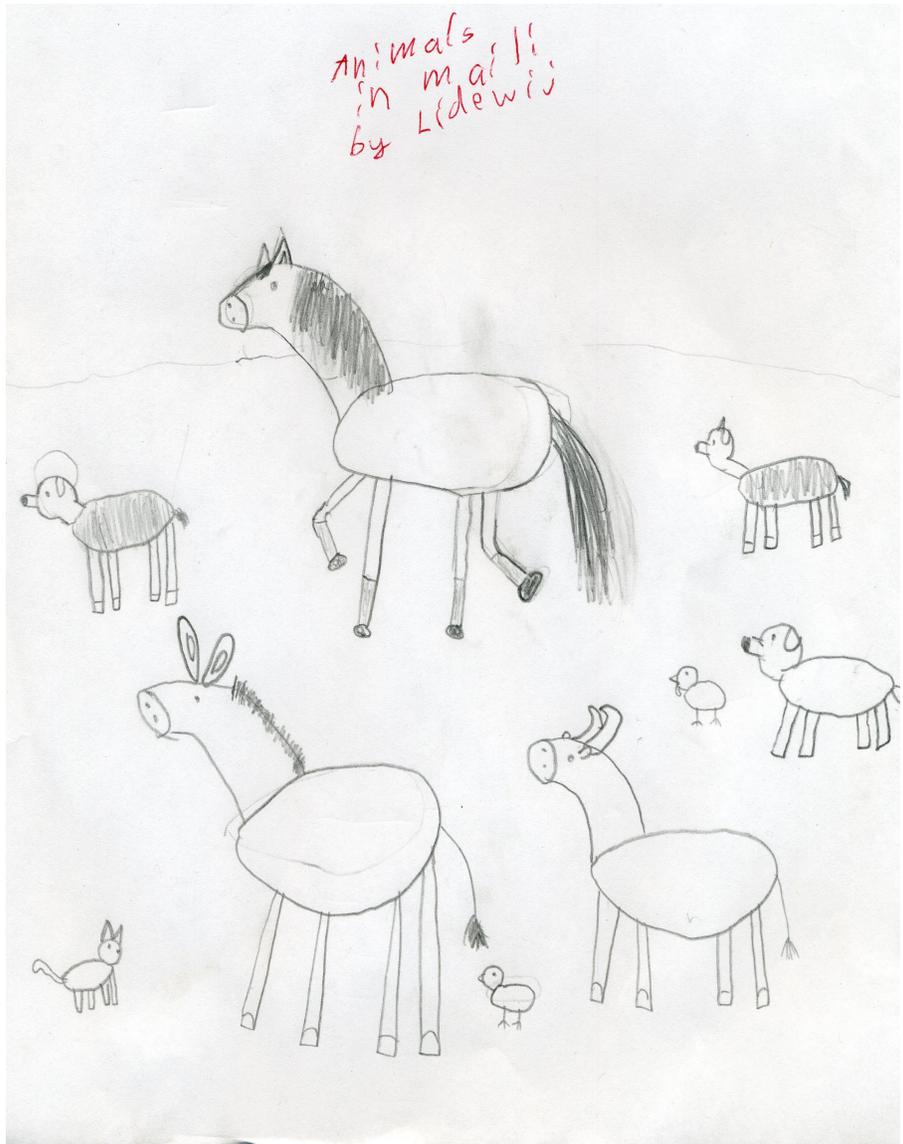
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Animals
in Mali
by Lidewij



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DEDICATION

To Nyagale and Kunandi,

Allah k'aw balo,

k'i ke Nyagale di, k'i ke Kunandi di!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dinye den folon ye numu di (“The world’s first child is the blacksmith”)

Aw Fakoli—Demenjan Koli, Koli Barama, Koli Barantan—aw ni ce, aw Sinaba, aw n ice, aw Sumaoro, aw Kante, aw ni ce, aw Coulibaly numuw, aw ni ce:
Mfa Lamini, ba Sitan, Adama, Ami, ba Mamina, Simbon, Batoma, Dambala *bee*, N’toma, Modibo, N’toma *fitini*, Sitan, Minata, *lumogow bee*, Yay, Bintu, Madu, M’fa, Bouba, Jenebu, Kouroutumi, Dramane, Nassu, Dra, Aminata, Mariba, Kanteba, Britté, Kiatou, *numunado bee*, Malobali, ba Sitan, ba Saran, Kumafin, Tamba, Adama, Wali, Mamadu, Ami, Salimata, Ntene, Mam, *numumusow bee*; Safi, Nan, Sitan, Karamogo, Saran, Sitan.

Aw Keita—Sogosogo Sinbon, ani Sinbon Salaba, Jakumawarala Sinbon—, aw ni ce; aw Camara, aw ni ce; aw Traore—aw Tiramakan, Danmasa Wulani ani Wulantanba—, aw ni ce; aw Diawara—Tununfo ni Samuya, Nogoro ni Kanaba—aw ni ce; aw Dabo, aw n ice; aw moriw si duuru, aw ni ce; aw fulaw si naani, aw ni ce: aw jeliw, aw ni ce:

Madou, Masaman, Saran, Bou, Kanteran, Broulei, Daouda, Abi, El Haji Tamba, Sokomori, Amidu, Maganjamba, Drissa, Jakani, Salimata, Rokia, Maiama, Mbali, Jeneba, Nassou, Fanta, Mariama, Minata, Maimouna, Bakari, Siriman, El Haji Lansine, Bakari, Bulu, Vieux, Houa, Karamogo, Mam, El Haji Lassina, Vieux, Ji sumale, Karim, Faraban, Kamba, Jeneba, Oumou, Farima, Aminata, Houa, Shaka, Amadu, Balla, Daouda, Sanugwe, Boubacar, Bwa, Sedu, Daouda, Mam, Issa.

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*Het duurt altijd langer dan je denkt,
ook als je denkt
het zal wel langer duren dan ik denk
dan duurt het toch nog langer
dan je denkt.*

(Judith Herzberg, *Liedje: Zoals*)

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GLOSSARY

This glossary lists the Maninke terms and expressions that occur more than once in the text. The spelling follows Bailleul's (1980) dictionary. Tones are not indicated.

(A) behind a word means that it is derived from Arabic, (F) that it is derived from French.

The plural of nouns is formed by adding *-w* to the word.

A

<i>Alamami</i> (A)	imam, also nickname for El-Haji Samori Toure
<i>A mènà</i>	it has lasted a long time; it was a long time ago

B

<i>Ba</i>	river
<i>Bamogow</i>	river people
<i>Bakò</i>	across the river; on the other side of the river
<i>Batigi</i>	owner of the river
<i>Ba</i>	mother
<i>Ba</i>	big
<i>Bamanan</i>	Bamanan
<i>Bamananka</i>	Bamana person
<i>Bamanankan</i>	Bamana language
<i>Ban</i>	end; refuse
<i>Baraka</i> (A)	grace
<i>Baro</i>	conversation
<i>Baro ke</i>	to have a chat

<i>Bataraden</i>	illegitimate child
<i>Benba</i>	annual festival in Dnk
<i>Bèrè</i>	gravel
<i>Korobèrè</i>	pebbles
<i>Bidan (A)</i>	invention
<i>Bimba</i>	ancestor
<i>Boli</i>	power object
<i>Bolo</i>	arm/hand
<i>Bolobilalaw</i>	those who pray with their arms/hands down
<i>Bolojigilaw</i>	those who pray with their arms/hands down
<i>Bolominelaw</i>	those who pray with their arms/hands held
<i>Bolon/Bulon</i>	entrance hut
<i>Bolonda</i>	entrance to the entrance hut
<i>Bonya</i>	to make big, hence to respect
<i>Buguda</i>	hamlet

C

<i>Campement (F)</i>	accommodations for tourists
<i>Canton (F)</i>	colonial administrative unit consisting of several villages
<i>Cercle (F)</i>	post-Independence, pre-decentralization administrative unit consisting of several villages (1960-1992)
<i>CFA</i>	C(ommunauté) F(inancière) A(fricaine), currency issued by the Central Bank of West Africa Nations
<i>Chef lieu (F)</i>	main village of a Commune
<i>Commune (F)</i>	decentralized administrative unit comprising several villages (since 1992)
<i>Conseiller rural (F)</i>	local elected government official

D

<i>Da</i>	hibiscus
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<i>Dan</i>	border
<i>Dantige</i>	to give an account [of one's business]
<i>Dantigeli</i>	the act of giving an account [of one's business]
<i>Dege</i>	paste made from millet and sugar offered as special food on a variety of rituals
<i>Den</i>	child
<i>Denaje</i>	burial
<i>Denkunli</i>	hair shaving ceremony
<i>Diman</i>	sweet
<i>Dogoya</i>	to diminish, make smaller, insult
<i>Dolo</i>	locally made beer, alcoholic beverage
<i>Dugu</i>	village, town
<i>Duguba</i>	large town, city
<i>Dugutigi</i>	village chief
<i>Dugukolo</i>	land, soil
<i>Dugu</i>	to hide
<i>Dundun</i>	type of drum
<i>Dusu</i>	heart
<i>Dusukun</i>	heart
<i>Duwawu (A)</i>	blessing
 F	
<i>Fa</i>	father, ancestor
<i>Faama</i>	rich and important person, one who holds power, also title of the ruler of the Bamana of Segou
<i>Fanka</i>	power
<i>Fato</i>	crazy person
<i>Fina</i>	category of griot
<i>Finamuso</i>	female griot
<i>Finaya</i>	griot-hood
<i>Finye mine</i>	to travel

<i>Fiqh</i> (A)	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Folon</i>	former
<i>Folonfolon</i>	in the past
<i>Foroba</i>	family field
<i>Furu</i>	marriage
<i>Balimafuru</i>	marriage to one's in-laws
<i>Nyogonfuru</i>	marriage with one another

G

<i>Ga</i>	low platform
<i>Garanke</i>	leatherworker
<i>Gese</i>	medicinal stick (used for speaking)
<i>Gidron</i> (F)	asphalt road
<i>Guérisseur</i> (F)	specialist in traditional medicine
<i>Gundo</i>	secret

H

<i>Hadith</i> (A)	oral tradition about the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad
<i>Horon</i> (A)	free person, noble, non-artisan
<i>Horonya</i>	noble-hood

I

<i>Ilm</i> (A)	knowledge
<i>Isnad</i> (A)	chain of transmission

J

<i>Ja</i>	shadow, double
<i>Jahiliyah</i> (A)	ignorance
<i>Jamu</i>	last name
<i>Majamu</i>	to evoke the last name, to praise someone

<i>Jate mine</i>	to understand something, to ‘get’ something
<i>Jatigi</i>	host, patron
<i>Jatigike</i>	male host, male patron
<i>Jatigimuso</i>	female host, female patron
<i>Jègè</i>	fish
<i>Jeli</i>	category of griot
<i>Jeliya</i>	griot-hood
<i>Ji</i>	water
<i>Jitigi</i>	owner of the water
<i>Jigo</i>	character
<i>Jihad</i> (A)	holy war, including an individual’s striving for spiritual self-perfection
<i>Jina</i> (A)	jinn, spirit person
<i>Joliba</i>	Niger River
<i>Jon</i>	(captured) slave
<i>Jonkenin</i>	little slave boy
<i>Joona</i>	early
<i>Jugu</i>	bad, evil
 K	
<i>-ka</i> (suffix)	person from
<i>Kabila</i>	cluster of related compounds
<i>Kabilatigi</i>	leader of a cluster of related compounds
<i>Kafu</i>	cluster of villages
<i>Kalaman</i>	to be aware
<i>Iyere kalaman</i>	self-awareness, being aware of oneself
<i>Kalan</i>	learning
<i>Kan</i>	language
<i>Karan</i>	study
<i>Karamogo</i>	Islamic teacher

<i>Karata</i>	reed mat, often used to shield and close off the space before a hut or house
<i>Karinyan</i>	short tubular piece of metal used as instrument
<i>Kasi</i>	to cry
<i>Kaule</i>	repairer of gourds
<i>Kayn</i>	good
<i>Akayn</i>	it is good
<i>Kè</i>	to do
<i>Kilisi</i>	incantation
<i>Kin</i>	neighborhood
<i>Ko</i>	pond (for fishing)
<i>Ko</i>	thing, business
<i>Kunu ko</i>	yesterday's thing
<i>Kolosi</i>	to pay attention
<i>I yere kolosi</i>	paying attention to oneself, auto-surveillance
<i>I yere kalaman</i>	self-awareness, being aware of oneself
<i>kolosili ke</i>	engaging in the act of <i>kolosi</i>
<i>kolosilikela</i>	someone who repeatedly or professionally engages in the act of <i>kolosi</i>
<i>i y'a kolosi wa?</i>	have you paid attention?
<i>i m'a kolosi wa?</i>	have you not paid attention?
<i>Kono</i>	stomach
<i>Koro</i>	old, ancient, elder
<i>Koro</i>	under, underneath
<i>Koro</i>	meaning
<i>Kuma</i>	talk, speech
<i>Kuma ke</i>	to talk
<i>Kumatigi</i>	master of speech
<i>Kunu</i>	yesterday
<i>Kura</i>	new

L

<i>La-</i> (prefix)	to allow, to make
<i>Lasegin</i>	to allow or make return
<i>Lasigi</i>	to allow someone else to settle somewhere
<i>Latunu</i>	to allow or make somebody get lost somewhere
<i>Lè</i>	low-lying land periodically getting inundated by the river
<i>-li</i> (suffix)	changes a verb into a noun
<i>Lolan</i>	stranger, guest
<i>Lu</i>	compound
<i>Lutigi</i>	compound chief

M

<i>Malo</i>	rice
<i>Malobali</i>	to be shameless
<i>Malobaliya</i>	having no shame
<i>Maloya</i>	shame
<i>Mamamuso</i>	grandmother, female ancestor
<i>Maninkaka</i>	Maninka person, also term used by <i>nyamakalaw</i> to refer to non- <i>nyamakalaw</i>
<i>Maninkakan</i>	Maninka language
<i>Marigot</i> (F)	side-stream or tributary rivulet to the Niger river
<i>Matrone</i> (F)	auxiliary midwife based in a village
<i>Mayn</i>	bad
<i>Amayn</i>	it is bad
<i>Medersa/Madrassa</i> (A)	Qur'an school
<i>Miniminikolon</i>	ever-revolving well
<i>Moden</i>	grandchild
<i>Modentulonke</i>	grandchildren's skit
<i>Modenwari</i>	grandchildren's money
<i>Mogo</i>	person

<i>Mogofèmogo</i>	person at the side of a person, term used for slaves
<i>Mogo gansan</i>	ordinary person
<i>Mogo sobe</i>	real person
<i>Mogo te</i>	not a person
<i>Moke</i>	grandfather, ancestor
<i>Mori</i>	Islamic scholar
<i>Moto (F)</i>	motorcycle
<i>Mototigi</i>	owner of a motorcycle
<i>Muni</i>	millet porridge
<i>Munumunu</i>	to circle around, to roam
<i>Muso</i>	woman, female
<i>Musokuntigi</i>	leader of the women
N	
<i>Naji</i>	sauce
<i>Nako</i>	garden
<i>Naloma</i>	moron, often used as (playful) insult
<i>Ni</i>	life, breath, soul
<i>Ntoma</i>	namesake
<i>Numu</i>	blacksmith/potter
<i>Numumuso</i>	female blacksmith, potter
<i>Numuya</i>	blacksmith/potter-hood
<i>Nyagua</i>	secret women's association in Nrn
<i>Nyama</i>	mystical force inherent in all things
<i>Nyamakala</i>	artisan
<i>Nyamakalaya</i>	artisan-hood
<i>Nyamagoden</i>	bastard, illegitimate child
<i>Nyini</i>	to seek
<i>Nyinyinka</i>	to ask
<i>Nyuman</i>	good

P

Pirogue (F) canoe made of hollowed tree trunk

S

Salat (A) prayer

Saraka sacrifice, offering

Sadaqa (A) sacrifice, offering

Sarakati sacrifice, offering

Seli to pray

Seliba “big prayer”: Tabaski, Eid-al-Adha

Selincini “small prayer”: end of Ramadan, Eid-al-Fitr

Senankun joking partner

Senankunya joking relationship

Seri rice porridge

Si lineage; age

Sigi settle, sit down

Sigifenw those that settled alongside [another village]

Siginyogon neighbor

Sira road

Furusira marriage road

Kurusira road along the Manding Mountains

Mandesira main road through Mande

Siya kind, race, ethnic group, category of person, breed

So house

So horse

Sobe veritable

Sogo meat, animals

Somono fishing people

Son heart

Sotrama So(cieté de) Tra(nsport du) Ma(li); local transportation buses

<i>Subagu</i>	witch
T	
<i>Ta</i>	part, share
<i>An ta</i>	ours
<i>Tambanda</i>	firing place for pots
<i>Tana</i>	restriction
<i>Tèrè</i>	inherent character, destiny
<i>Tiga</i>	groundnuts
<i>Tige</i>	to cut
<i>-tigi</i> (suffix)	owner, chief, leader
<i>Tiyèn</i>	to ruin, destroy
<i>To</i>	millet paste; evening meal; midday meal
<i>Togo</i>	first name, individual reputation
<i>Matogo</i>	to invoke the first name, to praise someone
<i>Tomo</i>	ruins, previous site of a village
<i>Ton</i>	agricultural mutual labor group
<i>Tontigi</i>	bearer of arms, noble, non- <i>nyamakala</i> person
<i>Tontigiya</i>	noble-hood
<i>Tu</i>	spit
<i>Tubisimilaye</i> (A)	begin formula for incantations
<i>Tu</i>	bush
<i>Tu tige</i>	to clear the brush, constitutes founding of a village
<i>Turu</i>	to plant
U	
<i>U; olu</i>	they
W	
<i>Wari</i>	money
<i>Waritigi</i>	rich person

Woloso slave (born in the house)

Y

Yere self

Yerewolo legitimate child

Yereyere real, pure

Yiran to show

ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents an ethnography of the ways in which an ideology and practices of “paying attention” (*kolosi* in Bamana and Maninka) pervade modes of sociality, knowing, and being among contemporary rural Muslims living in the Mande region of Mali, between Bamako and the Mali-Guinea border. Among the Malians I worked with, the “lived world” was understood to be replete with signs—embodied in the minutest details of objects, people, and other beings, as well as social relationships and situations, forms and genres of speech, domestic spaces and geographic features—which might corroborate, modify, negate, or reposition each other in unexpected ways. I trace the contours of an ideology of *kolosi* in a variety of contexts—from the history embedded in the physical landscape of Mande, to the auto-surveillance entailed in paying attention to one self, and the practices of scrutiny at the basis of the establishment of new social relations, particularly through marriage—that mirror the range of topics that my interlocutors most insistently brought to my own attention. I describe practices and distinctions that variously situated people tried to position or had successfully positioned as no longer worthy of attention, and present case studies of conflicts that illustrate how the tensions and gaps inherent in local politics of knowledge and frames of interpretation open up productive spaces for people to reconsider, contest, and debate what is most worth paying attention to in specific cases. The key contribution of the dissertation is that it not only shows the culturally and historically specific ways of perception and attention that are relevant in people’s social lives, but also establishes that Mande people have constructed an original theory about these issues, in which fluidity, the possibility for mistakes, and the creative construction of new knowledge are central tenets. Secondly, my research also

shows that despite people's frequent comments about the radical shifts in social relations instituted by Islam (especially in its newer, reform-minded forms), both Islam and perceived "traditional" modes of being alike employ and enact an underlying ideal of *kolosi*.

CHAPTER ONE

“PAYING ATTENTION” IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY AND COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS

For nothing is more central to creating a flourishing society built upon learning, contentment, caring, morality, reflection, and spirit than attention. As humans, we are formed to pay attention. Without it, we simply would not survive. (Jackson 2008:22)

How can we understand someone else without sacrificing him [or her] to our logic or it to him [or her]? (Merleau-Ponty 1964:115, cited in Jackson 1996:1)

This dissertation is an ethnography of “paying attention” as it is theorized and practiced by contemporary rural Muslims living in the towns, villages, and hamlets of the Mande region of Mali, between Bamako and the Mali-Guinea border.¹ My central argument is that an ideology and practices of “paying attention,” or *kolosi*, pervade modes of sociality, knowing, and being among people living in Mande. Understood as a semiotic ideology, *kolosi* entails a view of the “lived world” as replete with signs—embodied in the minutest details of objects, people, and other beings, as well as social relationships and situations, forms and genres of speech, domestic spaces and geographic features—which might corroborate, modify, negate, or reposition each other in unexpected ways. As an integral part of notions of personhood and sociality, *kolosi* addresses the fundamental problem

of the basic unknowability of the mind of others, which people in Mande actively create through mundane practices of secrecy and deflection of attention.

I trace the contours of an ideology of *kolosi* in a variety of contexts—from the history embedded in the physical landscape of Mande, to the auto-surveillance entailed in paying attention to oneself, and the practices of scrutiny behind the establishment of new social relations, particularly through marriage. These mirror the range of topics that my interlocutors most insistently brought to my own attention. I also describe practices and distinctions that variously positioned people tried to position or had successfully positioned as *not* worthy of attention, as well as the tensions and gaps inherent in *kolosi*, which open up productive spaces for people to reconsider, contest, and debate what is most worth paying attention to in specific cases. The key contribution of the dissertation is that it not only shows the culturally and historically specific ways of perception and attention that are relevant in people’s social lives, but also establishes that Mande people have constructed an original *theory* about these issues, in which fluidity, the possibility for mistakes, and the creative construction of new knowledge are central tenets.

* * *

“Paying attention” is not only a physiological and cognitive process, but an inherently social and moral practice as well. As a physiological process, paying attention involves all of the senses and various regions of the brain in a complex interplay with numerous outside factors. Psychologists and philosophers have been interested in the phenomenon of attention since the work of William James, whose definition of “attention” in *Principles of Psychology* is credited with being the first scholarly definition of the term (Arvidson 2006; Maggie Jackson 2008; van der Heijden 2004):

Every one knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or train of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others. (James 1890/1950: 403-4, cited in Van der Heijden 2004:15)

Yet more than a century after James' confident assertion that "everyone knows what attention is," the subject remains elusive. A recent assessment of the field of attention research suggests that for all the progress made in the field through the application of formal, cognitive research-based methods, the time has come to re-insert some of the original insights of James and his introspective psychology (Van der Heijden 2004:9-28). Concurrent with the advances made by cognitive psychologists and other scientists in elucidating many of the mechanical aspects of how paying attention works, "attention" itself has become a pronounced theme in discourses about modernity. At the same time, discourses and practices of "paying attention" have come into the scholarly purview of disciplines besides psychology, cognitive science, and philosophy and have begun to be studied in a more focused manner also by anthropologists, historians, and art historians.

Psychologists and cognitive scientists in the field of "attention research" routinely distinguish between two kinds of attention—already proposed by James—which they characterize as "directed" (or "voluntary") on the one hand and "stimulus-driven" (or "involuntary") on the other (Kaplan and Berman 2010). The former involves directing one's mind more or less forcefully towards a particular thing, such as one does while reading, driving, or paying attention to a schoolteacher. The latter describes the kind of attention that attaches itself swiftly and involuntarily to whatever presents itself as somehow fascinating, for example a sudden flashing red light or a loud noise, or the mesmerizing patterns of tree branches one can see outside through a window. According to psychologists, both kinds of attention—actively directing one's attention in a particular direction, as well as being open to objects of fascination as they arise—are inextricably entangled in any instance of "paying attention" and have their respective roles in psychological functioning.

Periodic concerns about the place of attention in contemporary life suggest that paying attention is an integral aspect of morality as well as an issue of considerable social debate. Popular media accounts of the pitfalls of multi-tasking, the dangers of distracted driving, or the exponential growth of electronic media share a moral orientation in that they routinely involve an evaluation of the ob-

jects of our attention.² Newspaper articles and popular books regularly posit a lack of “genuine” attention and increased distraction as fundamental symptoms of a technology-saturated modernity, or suggest a pressing need to reacquire the crucial skills entailed in paying attention. These assessments presuppose an inherent moral aspect of paying attention, such as in the value-laden distinctions that are made between what merits our attention (for example, creativity and deep thought, work and family life) and what does not. Two recent books, written by US-based journalists, illustrate both the moral overtones in the discussion of attention as well as the inextricable relation of attention to its supposed counterpoint, lack of attention or distraction. Thus, the ominously titled “Distraction: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age” (Maggie Jackson 2008) presents a moralizing picture of the perils entailed in modern people’s presumed inability to pay attention and distinguish between worthwhile objects of attention and less worthy distractions. Approaching the issue from the other side, a recent overview of new research in psychology entitled “Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life” promises that “the skillful management of attention is the *sine qua non* of the good life and the key to improving virtually every aspect of your experience” (Gallagher 2009:2). These books and the larger social debate they engage presume quite clearly that distinctions between what is worthy of attention versus “mere distractions” entails moral choices, and conversely, that the capacity for paying attention is a characteristic of a moral person. In the same vein, the US government campaign against distracted driving insists on the “personal responsibility”—an implicitly moral stance—of “each and every person to . . . pay attention to the road” (www.distracted.gov n.d.).

If debates such as these reveal the regimes of value at play in our own particular social and cultural moment, they do not question the historical specificity of the notion of “paying attention” itself. Yet the injunction to “pay attention” is by no means natural, as research by historians and art historians reminds us. Jonathan Crary, for example, convincingly argues that the demand “that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for ‘paying attention’ [is] the product of a dense and powerful remaking of human subjectivity in the West

over the last 150 years” (Crary 2001:1). Crary traces “attention” as it emerges in the late 19th century in a range of social domains, including—and linking—those of labor organization and production, mass consumption, and aesthetics, the latter being of particular concern for Crary, the art historian. Writing about an earlier period, the historian Dena Goodman similarly notes a particular concern with “paying attention” displayed by the female hosts of literary and philosophical salons in late 18th-century France (Goodman 1994:73-89). I come back to Crary’s and Goodman’s accounts below to sketch the contours and conditions of the rise of “paying attention” in the European context. For the moment, I merely note the important, yet easily forgotten, point that the attention paid to “paying attention” is historically variable and shaped by particular social, cultural, economic, political, intellectual, and aesthetic concerns.

At first blush, it might seem that anthropologists have been less explicitly concerned with attention and the social practices and relations in which variously positioned people enact historically and culturally situated modes of paying attention and in which they have developed indigenous theories about the process of paying attention. Yet the lack of explicit consideration of “attention” does not mean anthropologists have not appreciated the significance of the kinds of questions this dissertation explores in terms of local ideologies and practices of paying attention. One strand of the anthropological literature that bears directly on these issues is the long-standing, albeit intermittent, anthropological interest in perception and the senses (Geurts 2002; Porcello et al. 2010). Another strand is represented by the anthropological accounts inspired by phenomenology (Csordas 1994; 1993; Michael Jackson 1996). Further relevant literature, for the purposes of this dissertation, includes the semiotic tradition inspired by William James’ friend and colleague Charles Peirce, as well as a diversity of studies concerned with material culture, the political economy of language, personhood, kinship and relatedness. These studies demonstrate how everyday material practices—including speech acts and the sharing of material substances—as well as the semiotic ideologies embedded in them become not only meaningful but also socially and politically pronounced. Before turning to these bodies of literature, let

me briefly introduce the key topic of this dissertation: *kolosi*, or the Mande ideologies and practices of “paying attention.”

PAYING ATTENTION THE MANDE WAY: *KOLOSI*

“Have you paid attention?” (*Iy’a kolosi wa?*) I was asked this question frequently over the course of my fieldwork in the Mande Plateau region of Mali. Had I paid attention to the big tree close to the mosque? Had I noticed it was dead? Had I paid attention to the cowry shells lying at the crossroad? Had I paid attention to the dress Maimuna was wearing? To the snails on that tree? To the fact that Nyagale was sweeping the courtyard, or that Batoma was picking a fight with her brother again? To that hut whose door never gets opened? Had I paid attention? (“*Iy’a kolosi wa?*”) Had I not paid attention? (“*I m’a kolosi wa?*”) Even if I had not noticed right away just how common this simple question was—*Iy’a kolosi wa?*—as soon as I started to, in fact, pay attention to it, I realized just how often people would quiz me—and each other—as to how well we were paying attention and whether or not we noticed certain things.

The choice of “paying attention” as the topic and organizing principle for the dissertation, then, stems directly from my experiences of and reflections on carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in this particular part of the world.³ In many ways, the dissertation reflects the fact that a lot of things I was paying attention to in the field were those seemingly “small things” that nevertheless are considered highly meaningful—but not in all contexts, nor by everyone. Indeed, I describe the workings of *kolosi* as fraught with tension, inherently open to debate, creativity, and alternative interpretations, and caught up in larger networks of power and systems of inequality. Such conflicts or insecurities about which “things,” in the broadest sense, are significant and just what their significance is, as well how and why things might lose or already have lost their significance—or conversely, might be immune from this process—exemplify the irreducible social situatedness of *kolosi*.

What is particularly salient about my work is that it shows not only the culturally and historically specific ways of perception and attention that are rele-

vant in people's social lives, but also establishes that Mande people have constructed an original theory about these issues. That is, the notion of *kolosi* provides a language to talk about how and why people need to pay attention, what is worth paying attention to, the relations between perception, experience, and knowledge, and what the moral implications are of (not) paying attention. It provides a meta-level account of a range of issues—including kinship relations, modes of historical imagination, and pedagogy—whose importance is regularly stressed in everyday practice. In the discourse of “ethno-methodology,” “ethno-science,” and many other “ethno” varieties of supposedly universal, Western-derived domains of knowledge—so popular in the anthropological scholarship of the 1970s and 80s—the notion of *kolosi* can be understood as an “ethno-phenomenology.”

Kolosi and paying attention: a preliminary sketch

This section addresses the linguistic usages and connotations of *kolosi* and related terms in Bamana/Maninka as compared to “paying attention” and some other notions in non-technical English.⁴ Rather than presenting a full catalogue of all the nuances and contexts of use encapsulated in the term *kolosi*, as subsequent chapters address, my primary goal is to explain my choice of translating *kolosi* as “paying attention.” A second goal is to briefly introduce the kinds of perception, attention, and experience associated with *kolosi*, in order to make possible a comparison with European and Islamic parallels in a subsequent section.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the existing dictionaries (Bamana-French or Maninka-French) are not very helpful in conveying the full meaning of *kolosi* and its derived forms⁵ or in delineating the contours of the ideologies and practices associated with it. What they do show quite clearly, however, is the considerable range of European-language terms invoked as possible translations of the term itself. In Bazin's 1906 dictionary, *kolosi* is translated by six different terms in French, as illustrated in the following sentences: “let's *watch* the children carefully,” “God *has preserved me* from death,” “*watch out for* the horse,” “did you not *pay attention* to the road?” “what did you *observe* en route?” and “I did not

notice it.”⁶ Bazin, moreover, groups the varied uses of *kolosi* in three overarching categories, which he identifies with a) watching/watching over (of children); b) protecting; and c) observing, noticing, taking care. He also notes the alternative form *kolosili ke* (“engaging in the act of *kolosi*,” and hence *kolosikela* “someone who repeatedly or professionally engages in the act of *kolosi*”), particularly for the first two contexts of use.⁷

In this dissertation I translate *kolosi* as “paying attention,” but a more precise translation would be “paying attention in order to notice anything that might be important—and to discern between what is, in fact, significant and what is not.” Other translations, such as “observing,” “noticing,” or even “discerning,” thus would have been possible as well, and might even sound more natural in some contexts of use. For example, the question “*i y’a kolosi wa?*” whose ubiquity I discussed in the opening of this section, could equally well be translated as “Have you noticed?” or the casual, “did you see (that)?”—particularly when what one notices is not very important. However, I have translated *kolosi* as “paying attention” throughout the dissertation for reasons of consistency and to signal the fact that the same concept is being translated throughout. Moreover, the more awkward formulation “have you paid attention” in the opening section (instead of, for example “did you see”) signals that one’s observations might potentially be highly important. Finally, the slightly idiosyncratic use of “paid attention” serves to keep the reader alert to the fact that the contours of “paying attention” are shaped differently in Bamana/ Maninka than in English.

A useful shorthand, “paying attention” does the best job of all the English-language alternatives of conveying a number of crucial aspects of the notion of *kolosi*: 1) a particular state of mind/being, characterized by 2) a particular attentiveness to minute, seemingly insignificant details, and 3) a fundamental openness to the results of one’s attention (i.e., whether or not what one observes turns out to be significant). These characteristics, among others, are central to a Mande understanding of *kolosi*; they are also in line with the connotations of “paying attention” in English.

Beyond these commonalities, the meanings of *kolosi* and “paying attention” diverge. This is most obvious in thinking about what the opposite of *kolosi*/paying attention would be in each case. In English, if someone is not paying attention, he or she is most likely to be *distracted*, as seen in the popular media concerns with “paying attention” mentioned above. For people in Mande, someone who fails to pay attention is not so much distracted as *oblivious*. A failure to pay attention, in an English-language context, will most likely hinge on a failure to pay attention to the “right thing” in any given moment (i.e., the road, not a text message, in the case of “distracted driving”). In the Mande case, the problem faced by someone who fails to live up to the moral injunction to *kolosi* is that he or she misses the clues that are “out there” and should be heeded in some way. He or she is someone who looks without seeing, listens without hearing, and in general is not a fully realized human being, as I explain in Chapter 4.

Another noticeable characteristic of *kolosi* that might not be as evident in the English translation but is nevertheless crucial, is that *kolosi* fundamentally refers to sensual experience. *Kolosi* involves hearing, seeing, smelling, or whatever sense presents itself as relevant in a particular case. In contrast, the connotations of paying attention in English highlight the activity of the mind, somewhat to the detriment of sensual processes and practices. In English, as all schoolchildren know, paying attention also often comes close to “keeping one’s mind on things,” forcing it to “stick with it” because the mind is ever in danger of “wandering”—particularly in the face of boring and monotonous tasks. This connotation might not be surprising either, in light of the historical trajectory of “paying attention” as a growing concern in late 19th/early 20th-century Europe undergoing rapid socio-cultural change in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, which is discussed below.

As a sensual experience, however, *kolosi* refers to a habitus of keeping one’s eyes and ears (and indeed *all* of one’s senses) open, “just in case.” Again, *kolosi* and its English translation would seem to diverge in this respect; where *kolosi* is fundamentally about remaining attuned to all possibilities for significance, the English usage of “paying attention” seems to involve a progressive, se-

lective narrowing of focus. In English, paying attention frequently means forcing the mind to hone in on one or at most a few external inputs, as opposed to others that are seen as mere distractions.⁸ The ideal and practice of *kolosi*, in contrast, prize being attentive enough to notice “things” (objects, smells, movements) whenever and wherever they might be relevant, and to whichever sense they present themselves. This attentiveness crucially includes the observation of small, seemingly insignificant things, because even (or particularly) these little things hold the potential of being highly significant in a universe that is considered eminently meaningful, as in the Mande case. Discernment—a form of “narrowing”—is still an integral part of *kolosi*, insofar as one need be capable of discerning what is relevant and what is not in the final analysis; yet it is only of secondary importance. Indeed, questions of what to pay attention *to*—whether or not one is “right” in assigning significance to something, or what is worthy or unworthy as an object of attention—are often open to debate and are precisely the value-laden moments from which the moral core of paying attention emerges.

In sum, for now, *kolosi* involves a spectrum of sensual practices and experiences that produce an active, vigilant state, where one is open and alert to external influences or clues; in this state of attentiveness, one is able to notice various things, discern their potential significance and eventually come to an interpretation of what they might mean. In the rest of the dissertation, I explain the moral, epistemological, and political issues at stake in being the kind of person who is attentive, able to grasp things perceptively, and capable of making convincing inferences—all of which are at the heart of *kolosi* as the art of paying attention to oneself, to others, and to all of one’s surroundings.

ATTENTION, PERCEPTION, INTERPELLATION:

THEORETICAL APPROACHES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

William James proposed his definition of “attention”—or the “taking possession by the mind . . . of one out of [many] possible objects or trains of thought”—as part of his larger philosophy of mind (Scheffler 1974). A major concern here was to demonstrate the untenability of the idea that sensations form the basis of human

consciousness (as first proposed by Locke) and instead to argue for an *active* element as part of all thought. This active element James refers to as attention, which is inherently discriminating and selective:

No one ever had a simple sensation by itself. Consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree. (James 1890:224, quoted in Scheffer 1974:130)

The selective process involved in attention, as expressed in this quote, was important to James because experience itself is continuous, always flowing, and potentially chaotic. Attention involves “abstracting from the stream of experience, isolating portions of it, and stopping the action,” which results in such abstractions as sensations and concepts (Mullin 2007:9).

Yet for James attention was not just an inevitable characteristic of consciousness; it also played a key role in his understanding of free will. In his *Principles of Psychology*, James gives an account of the subjective experience of free will, even if he tables the question about the objective freedom of the will (Mullin 2007:24). Some things, James observes, have a very strong hold on our attention, whereas others—“highly abstract concepts, unaccustomed reasons, and motives foreign to the instinctive history of the race”—do not (James 1880:536, quoted in Mullin 2007:23). Thus, paying attention to some things, as opposed to others, takes effort; and when it does, it qualifies as an act of free will. James concludes from this, “The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most ‘voluntary,’ is to *attend* to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind” (James 1880:561, quoted in Mullin 2007:23, *emphasis James*).

Like the psychologist and philosopher James, the philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce was a founding figure of American pragmatism. In fact, while James popularized both the term and the philosophy, the term was first used by Peirce (in a 1872 paper read to the Metaphysical Club of which he and James were part) (Scheffer 1974:76). One of the central elements of pragmatism, as later observers have described it, was its concern with mediating between various oppositions, such as religion and science, practice and theory. For Peirce and James alike, the attempt to overcome the classical mind-matter dichotomy that

had become entrenched in Western philosophical thought from Descartes onwards was of particular concern. In conjunction with their rejection of Cartesian thought, they stressed the continuity of mind and nature as well as the interconnectedness of thought and action (Scheffer 1974:1-9; Mullin 2007:3-5).

Compared to James, Peirce was not as directly concerned with the problem of attention per se, although in his epistemology and philosophy of mind he shares James' concern with the active role of the thinking and knowing self. Nevertheless, the problem of attention and how it intersects with the process of thought is revealed in some of his discussions of signs. Peirce crucially holds that there is no thought without signs (in fact, this is one of our "four incapacities"). In Peirce's view, a sign refers to anything that conveys meaning to anything else, and signs can be classified according to different typologies based on the sign itself, on the relation between the sign and its object and finally on the relation of the interpretant *vis à vis* the sign-object relation. Peirce's semiosis differs from other influential theories of signs, such as De Saussure's conception of semiotics, which rests upon a fundamental distinction between meaning and vehicle, *langue* and *parole*. As I discuss below, Peirce's refusal to make an a priori distinction between the bearers of meaning and the meaning they carry made his work attractive to later scholars who sought to circumvent binaries such as between "language" and the "real world" or between "mind" and "matter."

Attention, in this case the capacity for drawing attention to itself, is a defining feature of Peirce's category of secondness and the notion of the index (which is the category of secondness as it applies to the sign itself). Among Peirce's definitions of the index—a sign standing for its object by way of a factual connection—he singles out the quality of its "grabbing the attention" of the interpretant. The role of attention—compelling the interpretant in some way but stopping short of defining the interpretation of the thing—comes out particularly clearly in Peirce's 1885 definition of the index:

The index asserts nothing; it only says 'There!' It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops. Demonstrative and relative pronouns are nearly pure indices, because they denote things without describing them; so are the letters on a

geometrical diagram, and the subscript numbers, which in algebra distinguish one value from another without saying what those values are. (Peirce 1993:163)

Secondness, too is characterized by its capacity to forcefully make itself known to something else; as Peirce explains, secondness is actuality, brute action, the feeling of “the sheriff’s hand on my shoulder” (Peirce 1931:24). Attention is important for the index and secondness because it is what establishes a relation between two things, yet without the interference of the third element of law or habit, which would determine the relationship between the two things in a particular way.

James’ insight into the capacity for paying attention as a defining element of humans’ free will, and Peirce’s recognition of the forcefulness with which certain aspects of the outside world present themselves to our attention are complementary and together provide a useful angle from which to frame the topic of paying attention. Several important questions arise from this juxtaposition: What makes one object interesting enough to hold our attention over another? Does the interest come from the object or from us? What are the effects on the individual of his or her attention forcefully being drawn by external entities? These questions lead in a number of directions. First, as I will discuss, they establish a rationale for approaching “paying attention” by drawing from the interrelated fields of studies of material culture, kinship and relatedness, and personhood. Secondly, questions about the source from which attention emanates, resonate with certain strands in the literature on the construction of subjectivity through power.

The impetus for theorizing how relations of power constitute people as subjects was Althusser’s notion of interpellation, which he saw as a necessary by-product or function of ideology. In this perspective, the ideological state apparatuses, such as church and school, call individuals into being on a fundamental level, by establishing them in certain ideologically determined ways, which come to seem entirely obvious and natural. According to Althusser, ideology, interpellation, and subjecthood are in fact part of each other, so that

Ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are always-already subjects. (Althusser 1994:132)

What is interesting from our perspective is that the examples Althusser gives of this process by which subjects are created—which he alternately refers to as interpellation or “hailing”—all involve ways in which an individual’s attention is drawn to him- or herself by others. It is in recognizing oneself as the *obvious* subject of interpellation that one is constituted as a subject and simultaneously is made to understand this process as natural. The policeman calling out “hey you” constitutes the person turning around as a subject, by virtue of his or her response by being hailed in such a manner (Althusser 1994:131). Similarly, for Althusser, the yet-to-be-born child is always-already constituted as a subject through the expectations preceding its birth, not least of which is the understanding that it will carry its father’s name (1994:133). While Althusser’s account has been criticized for not considering “the range of *disobedience* that such an interpellating law might produce” (e.g., Butler 1993:122), I want to compare his concept of the importance of being made by others to pay attention to oneself to the injunction to pay attention to oneself in relation to others in a Mande ideology of *kolosi*.

Anthropological approaches to perception, and ethnographies of the senses

Related to the topic of attention is perception, and by extension the senses. The genealogy of anthropological concern with perception is more easily traceable than that of attention per se, yet in this section I focus only on a few aspects that are most pertinent to the discussion of *kolosi*, such as my contention that the “discomfort with language” is unwarranted. I also take up the insight that rather than studying them in isolation from each other, the senses are more productively understood in relation to each other.

As a recent overview of anthropological work on the senses indicates, the central premise of such work is a cultural constructedness of the senses and their constitutive role in social life, including the historical and political linkages between sensory and social orders (Porcello et al. 2010:53). Identifying three sources of inspiration for the renewed appreciation of the senses since the late 1980s—media technology (in the work of Howes, Classen, and Synott), phenomenology (in the work of Jackson), and materiality (in the work of Serema-

takis)—Porcello et al. note that each of these perspectives was concerned with reinstating the relevance of the everyday, including the lived and emergent qualities of sensory experience, against a previously dominant textual model of culture (Porcello et al. 2010:53). Yet the authors rightly observe that the pronounced discomfort with language, speech, and discourse in many—but not all—sensory ethnographies is unwarranted and risks “foreclosing potentially productive connections between language and the senses,” particularly in the context of aesthetic practices (Porcello et al. 2010:52). Moreover, the antagonistic posture against language, discourse, and/or semiotics, seems based on a limited understanding of the physical, economic, and political qualities of speech (Irvine 1989).

Contrary to the neglect of language in some anthropological work on the senses as well as in the wider field of material culture studies, I insist on the materiality of speech practices and their inextricable relation with other material practices. Ironically, one of the first anthropological accounts to deal with the cultural character of perception—in this case, the sense of hearing—was based precisely on the example of speech. In his 1898 piece on “Alternating Sounds,” Franz Boas effectively argues against the notion that in some languages certain sounds were “alternately sounded out” as, say, *r* and *q*, or *m* and *v*; rather, this is a matter of “alternate perception,” whereby the hearer is strongly influenced by the received repertoire of sounds in his or her own language and perceives them accordingly. From a variety of experiments and ethnographic examples, Boas concludes:

A new sensation is apperceived by means of similar sensations that form part of our knowledge [by which] I do not mean to say that such sensations are not recognized in their individuality, but [that] they are classified according to their similarity, and [that] the classification is made according to known sensations. (Boas 1889:50)

Boas’ recognition of the senses as inextricably bound up with an individual’s cultural and historical context admirably captures what has become “the fundamental premise underlying an anthropology of the senses” nearly a century later, i.e. “that sensory perception is a cultural, as well as physical, act” (Classen 1997:401).

After Boas, the link between language and perception becomes of central concern to linguistic anthropologists such as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, and to others working in the Boasian tradition. A. Irving Hallowell is particularly

important in this regard, for his concern with the cultural bases of perception (as Boas established) and his appreciation of the formative role of language in the process (as suggested by Sapir and Whorf). In line with his interest in psychological anthropology, Hallowell recognized that perception is one of the key themes of interest to psychologists and anthropologists alike, because “it is not a simple function of an individual’s organic make-up alone but . . . related to his [or her] group membership and thus involve[s] differential cultural factors (Hallowell 1951:164-5). Moreover, Hallowell singled out the human capacity for representation—as evidenced in both language and art—as a critical factor in the cultural construction of perception as part of a larger patterning of culture in Sapir’s terms. Speaking of this capacity for representation, Hallowell notes:

We are faced with the empirical fact that the representation of various classes of objects, events, relations, and qualities become functionally integrated with the aspects of the world that we meet in direct perceptual experience. Through the creation, development, and transmission of highly elaborate systems of extrinsic symbolization—hundreds of different languages, a great variety of forms of the plastic and graphic arts, oral and written narratives, etc.—human beings have not only been able to give articulate form to quite differently structuralized cultural worlds; their perceptual responses to the world in which they live and act become mediated, in part, through the kind of concrete symbolic means provided by the cultural tradition of their society. (Hallowell 1951:169-70)

In short, Hallowell explicitly singles out language as a crucial constituent factor in the “structuralization” and functioning of human perception because of language’s unique role in humans’ capacity for self-objectification. Referring to Sapir’s insight about perception being at the mercy of “the social patterns called words,” Hallowell notes that attention—“all our attentive scrutiny of things”—is also inevitably informed by speech, which he further demonstrates with two examples from his time with Northern Ojibwas to illustrate how language is integrally related to perceptual experience (Hallowell 1951:170).

While the topic of *perception* is evidently closely related to the senses, there is a clear divergence in the development of scholarly interests around the respective terms. Perception has remained a key interdisciplinary concern and has continued to engage psychological and linguistic anthropologists alongside psychologists, linguists, and neuroscientists (cf. (Lucy and Shweder 1979; Gellatly

1995; Shore 1996; Bruner and Goodman 1947). However, this line of inquiry, based on experimental measurements and concerned with matters of cognition—a line which has also become increasingly technical (Gellatly 1995:206)—is rather different from the predominant approaches dealing with the senses. In the ethnographic study of the senses, questions of history, power, and the body have taken on greater prominence (Howes 2004; Classen 1997; 1993; Seremetakis 1994; Stoller 1997; 1989; Erlman 2004; Taussig 1993; Kalekin-Fishman and K. Low 2010). Thus, Seremetakis' primary concern is with the historicity of the senses and the sensory dimension of history (1994:3), while Taussig connects his argument about the primacy of sensory experience to colonialism, or rather “the colonial trade in wildness that the history of the senses involves” (Taussig 1993:44). Concurrent with these socio-historic and political-economic approaches, studies of embodiment, illness, healing, and child socialization have also addressed the importance of sensory practice (Desjarlais 1992; Csordas 1994; Stoller 1997; Geurts 2002; Stoller 1989).

One of the consistent outcomes of research on the senses is that the significance attached to individual senses is highly variable across time and space, as is the particular configuration of individual senses that are recognized (Classen 1997; Howes 2004; Geurts 2002; 2003; Erlman 2004). This insight is alternately deployed to characterize different historical periods or social contexts in terms of a dominant sense, or, more productively, as an injunction to study the various senses in conjunction with one another. As will become clear in later chapters, *kolosi* too extends to all senses, with the majority of my examples concerning hearing, seeing, and smelling.

More importantly, one such study, in which the cultural preference for the integration of sensory processes is highlighted, provides an excellent parallel for the contours of an ideology and practices of “paying attention” in Mande. In her discussion of the Anlo-Ewe sensorium and the multi-sensory concept of “feeling in the body” (*seselame*), Geurts simultaneously describes an Anlo-Ewe ideology of paying attention to these various bodily sensations, which comes close to the way people in Mande described the concept of *kolosi*. Geurts recognized as much

in her conclusion, where she notes that what is at stake in her discussion of the Anlo-Ewe sensorium is “How we think about what we perceive” instead of actual differences between how Anlo-Ewe and other people perceive (Geurts 2003:196). Geurts’ interlocutors also talk about what Geurts calls the “generic shape of the meaning system that governs sensory experiences in Anlo-Ewe worlds” in terms that resonate well with people’s descriptions of *kolosi* in Mande:

When you have a sensation—some source of *seselame* [“feeling in the body”]—you must analyze and understand what that thing can create in you or within the other inmates of the house. It is a message, and you have to analyze it properly. (Geurts 2003:196)

In analyzing this statement of her interlocutor Geurts explicitly recognizes that the importance of *seselame* and the locally felt necessity of its interpretation makes it “a way of attending to and processing such ‘messages’—which include sensations, perceptions, intuitions, emotions, and even imaginations” (2003: 196).

Phenomenological approaches in anthropology

To the extent that people’s perception and experience of their world are key concerns of phenomenology, the topic of paying attention, or the way people attend to their surrounding worlds, is also closely aligned with the phenomenological project. Merleau-Ponty, whose main work is called *Phenomenology of Perception*, has been an overarching inspiration for scholars working in this tradition and others inspired by it more indirectly. Geurts, for example, refers to her work on the senses as “*cultural* phenomenology” (2002:15 and 2003:181) and other anthropologists, too, have turned to phenomenological approaches to ground their work on the senses and perception, among other topics. My dissertation shares many of the basic premises of a phenomenologically inspired anthropology, in particular in its “refus[al] to invoke cultural privilege as a foundation for evaluating worldviews” and the suggestion that “when we make cross-cultural comparisons between “systems of thought,” we would do well to construe these not as worldviews but as lifeworlds” (Jackson 1996:2 and 6). In effect, the import of phenomenological approaches to my work is dual, extending to both its methodology and its subject matter. Insofar as I am interested in *kolosi* as a culturally

and historically specific mode of “paying attention,” my account could be characterized in Geurts’s terms as a cultural phenomenology; yet beyond this, I am also concerned with how the importance and workings of *kolosi* are understood in local terms and by variously situated actors, which, I argue, amounts to an ethnophenomenology.

At least one proponent of a phenomenological anthropology, Thomas Csordas (1993) has argued explicitly for the centrality of “attention” in such an endeavor. In a 1993 article, Csordas proposed the concept of somatic modes of attention—“culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others”—as an analytical tool particularly suited to studying processes of embodiment (Csordas 1993:138). In outlining this concept, he builds on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the primacy of perception as constitutive of the objects it perceives, proposing greater sensitivity to the historical and cultural specificity of this process—something Merleau-Ponty himself alluded to but did not pursue in his own work (Csordas 1993:137). Besides Merleau-Ponty’s well-known ideas about perception and experience, however, Csordas also takes up his definition of “paying attention”:

To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as figures. They are performed only as horizons, they constitute in reality new regions in the total world. . . . Thus attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon. (Merleau-Ponty 1962:30, cited in Csordas 1993:138)

A vocal proponent of phenomenological approaches in anthropology has been Michael Jackson. Interestingly, Michael Jackson also took on the ideas of William James in his 1986 account of Kuranko lifeworlds; in his later work (on Kuranko and other ethnographic data), Jackson takes his inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, but not without noting the similarities between James’ radical empiricism and the Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach. Indeed, radical empiricism (or pragmatism) and phenomenology have much in common, partly emerging from the same philosophical tradition and arguing against similar problems with classic Western philosophical thought, i.e., the prominence of science,

or the mind-matter divide. Both phenomenology and pragmatism seek to revalidate the “plurality of all experience, regardless of how they are conceived and classified” and the “lifeworld” of concretely experienced social life (Michael Jackson 1996:7). Jackson defines the critical concept of lifeworld (introduced by Husserl), which I also employ throughout the dissertation, as follows:

What phenomenologists call the lifeworld (is) that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend. (Jackson 1996:7-8)

This description of lifeworld, as Jackson himself notes, resonates with the practice of ethnography, which similarly entails the sharing of social life and the intersubjective process of knowledge creation and refuses to give priority to one particular cultural standpoint.⁹

Yet for all their resonance with the project of anthropology (as I see it), phenomenological approaches are not without problems. Let me address some of these problems—articulated by anthropologists whose own work has at least partly been inspired by phenomenology—as they relate to the present study. One of the more frequent criticisms has been the supposed neglect in phenomenological approaches of the workings of power, as phenomenologists such as Jackson and Tilley themselves acknowledge. This is particularly the case for the more insidious forms of power that constrain and constitute subjectals at the same time. My formulation here purposefully evokes the claim of Althusser that people are always-already subjects, which indeed is in direct opposition to the phenomenological insistence on the “pre-objective character of being in the world” (Csordas 1994:7). By way of response, both Geurts (2002) and Jackson (1996) emphasize the reductionism of accounts that are solely concerned with power. Tilley, on the other hand, notes that an analysis of power should be included in a phenomenological account, and moreover, that a concern with power follows naturally from the phenomenological insight of the situatedness of all knowledge. In writing

about the way individuals and groups relate to their surrounding landscape, Tilley remarks:

The experience of these places is unlikely to be equally shared and experienced by all, and the understanding and use of them can be controlled and exploited in systems of domination—a consideration strikingly absent in virtually all phenomenological theory and one that constitutes a major theoretical void. (Tilley 1994:26)

Another critique that can be leveled against phenomenology is that it does not in fact succeed in overcoming the mind-matter and cognition-reality dichotomies (among others) that it was designed to escape. This point is recognized by one of the main proponents of the phenomenological “paradigm of embodiment,” Csordas, who reasons that the further elaboration of the embodiment paradigm would not necessarily circumvent some form of the mind-matter divide, yet it would serve as a much needed counterpoint to the more fully developed paradigm of textuality (1994:12). Ingold, whose insistence on seeing humans as agents-in-an-environment rather than the self-contained individual is clearly indebted to phenomenology, goes even further. In an essay on the study of perception in anthropology, he concludes that the phenomenology-inspired move towards embodiment merely reassigns the body to the domain of culture, whereas it was previously confined to that of nature and biology. Instead of merely shifting the place of the body around from one to the other side of the equation, Ingold challenges us to understand the process of “embodiment” as simultaneously being one of “enmindment”—or one and the same process of the development of an organism in its environment:

Body and mind, after all, are not two separate things but two ways of describing the same thing—or better, the same process—namely the environmentally situated activity of the human organism-person. Mind as Gregory Bateson always insisted is not ‘in the head’ rather than ‘out there’ in the world, but immanent in the active, perceptual engagement of organism and environment (Bateson 1973). Indeed the distance between a Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology of the body and what Bateson christened the ‘ecology of mind’ is not as great as might at first appear. (Ingold 2000: 171, *citation in original*)

MATERIALITY, SEMIOTICS, MORALITY

So far, I have been concerned with establishing an anthropological genealogy of research on the topic of “paying attention,” and the related, and better charted, domains of studies of “perception” and “the senses,” which often stem at least partly from phenomenological concerns. In other words, I have outlined some of the salient points in anthropological theorizing regarding the topic of the dissertation, paying attention—in James’ definition, “taking possessing by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of [many] possible objects or trains of thought”—as a necessary complement to the process of perception/sensory experience.

Three tasks now remain. In the present section I situate the reader in the anthropological literature in terms of the approach from which I analyze my topic.

Next, it will be helpful to discuss how scholars from other disciplines, particularly the fields of art/history and religious studies, have analyzed “paying attention” in different historical or cultural/religious contexts; finally, I address the methodology and fieldwork on which this study was based.

The theoretical currents that shape my analysis of *kolosi* can be identified with more or less distinct bodies of anthropological literature—on material culture and semiotics, language ideology and the materiality of speech, personhood and embodiment, kinship and relatedness—yet they all share a concern with the materiality of social life. Some of these approaches, such as the notion of embodiment and the valorization of the everyday, are influenced by the philosophical tradition of phenomenology as discussed above. Others derive from other sources, which have also been briefly touched on above. Specifically, the writings on signs of James’ fellow pragmatist Peirce form the basis of anthropological approaches to “signs in society” (Parmentier 1994), which aims to redress the removal of language from its social embedded-ness, while the Marxist tradition, which Althusser also represents, critically informs the understanding of the political economy in which material goods and (speech) practices operate. In line with the central insights of these bodies of literature, I start from the dual premise that material practices are at the core of people’s lifeworlds and that they change over time, which induces us to ask how people make sense of, debate, or resist such changes. My

dissertation shows that one such material practice—even if rarely commented on as such in the literature—is that of “paying attention,” which is crucial in Mande experiences of moral personhood and sociality.

Much of the literature on material culture focuses on how people use (consume, produce, exchange) objects, and in the process create, or negate, social relations and identities (Miller 1987; 2005; Tilley et al. 2006; Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Munn 1992; Weiner 1980; Weiss 1996; 2003; Thomas 1991; Renne 1995; Hansen 2000; Küchler 1988; Taussig 1993; Küchler 1987; Spyer 1998; Myers 2001; Taussig 1980). By looking at the social embeddedness of objects, these studies offer up a detailed picture of the complex interrelations between persons and objects and the social spheres through which objects move in the course of their “lives”. Thus, ethnographies focusing on concrete objects or substances show the fruitfulness of “object-centered” accounts in capturing both the fleeting quality of social relations in the everyday world of lived experience (de Certeau 1988; Renne 1995; Hoskins 1998; Weiner and J. Schneider 1991; Renne 2009; Morphy 1992; Burke 1996; Gow 1999; Munn 1992; Carsten 1997; Marchand 2009) as well as a sense of the larger processes of political economy (Ortiz 1995; Mintz 1986; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Hansen 2000; Weiss 2003; Starrett 1995; Weiner and J. Schneider 1991; Steiner 1996; Straight 2002). Most importantly, it has become clear from these accounts that objects cannot be divorced from the practices in which they are implicated.

A central insight from the literature on material culture is that “subjects” and “objects” mutually constitute each other. Because people, things, and practices derive meaning from their interrelationships (Mauss 1979), the analysis of material culture and personhood cannot be separated from each other and the practices surrounding them. Two further conclusions follow from this premise. First, it implies that understandings of personhood, or who and what can be considered to be (fully) human, are culturally and historically specific, as first articulated by Marcel Mauss at the beginning of the early 20th century (Mauss 1985; 1979). Second, it also implies that conceptions of materiality—what constitutes an object—are equally culturally and historically specific. Taken together, these

points speak to the salient intersections of the literatures I address in this dissertation—on the semiotic understanding of material culture, the materiality of speech, personhood, and kinship—namely, their shared recognition of the materiality of quotidian practices and objects as constitutive of social relations and selves.

The notion of the cultural and historical construction of personhood, and by extension kinship and relatedness, has remained a fruitful starting point for anthropological scholarship in these areas. The literature on personhood, moreover, has been strongly influenced by phenomenology and the “embodiment” paradigm discussed above—resulting in a dialectical approach, “focusing on the embodiment of persons and the personification of bodies,” as Lambek and Strathern put it (1998:6) (cf. (Lambek 1990; Read 1955; Michael Jackson and Karp 1990; Battaglia 1983; Lienhardt 1985; Riesman 1975; Carsten 1995). Meanwhile, kinship scholarship since the 1970s has revealed the parochialism of the assumption of a biological basis of kinship (or gender), which is then culturally “elaborated” (D. Schneider 1984; Haraway 1991; Carsten 2000a; 2004; Franklin and McKinnon 2001). Instead of taking categories such as “nature,” “biological” or “social” for granted, authors committed to rethinking kinship in the broader context of relatedness seek to analyze “what each of these terms might mean, where the division between them might lie, and their relative permeability or boundedness” in particular cultural settings (Carsten 2000a:27). Yet in eschewing the ethnocentrism of a biologically based understanding of kinship, these authors are careful not to presume an anti-biological construction of kinship either. Thus, they are particularly attentive to the historical transformations of “what counts as substantial-codings of kinship” (Franklin and McKinnon 2001:11), which includes but is not limited to biological sources. Various scholars have addressed the role of substances, e.g., food, blood, breast milk, and semen, in the creation (or negation) of kinship (Delaney 1986; 1987; Carsten 2000b; 2004; 1997; 1995; Franklin and McKinnon 2001). Indeed, the emphasis on material objects and everyday practices such as feeding and living together in the house in the study of kinship/relatedness makes this literature highly relevant to scholarship on material culture, linguistic ideology, and personhood.

If subjects and objects mutually constitute each other, it stands to reason that materiality, like personhood and relatedness, is culturally particular and changes over time. This has indeed been borne out by anthropological research on the question of how people conceive of what the material world consists of, and how this resonates with larger socio-cultural and political-economic processes. In an account of Indigenous Australian paintings and designs entering the Western art-market, Myers argues that different conceptions of materiality are at play here, and that it is crucial to understand these if we want to make sense of the conflicts and debates surrounding the production and circulation of Aboriginal fine art. He argues that “what is of relevance [are] local understandings of objectification, or object-ness and human action, as embedded in object-ideologies” (Myers 2004:5) and also points out that such object ideologies—the varied and often conflicting formulations of “materiality”—are often most evident in cases of conflict or debate.

Other anthropologists interested in materiality have found that situations of conflict, debate, and change tend to bring these object-ideologies into greater relief. One such encounter that has received particular attention in the literature is that of religious change following from the twin forces of colonialism and missionization. From the early encounters between Christians and coastal Africans holding very different belief systems, the notion of the “material” constituted an intercultural conundrum, giving rise to the important category of the “fetish” (Pietz 1985; 1987; 1988). Other scholars have discussed the tensions surrounding “spirit” and “matter” in instances of religious conversion, the practices aimed at dividing or bridging these domains, as well as the problem materiality poses for Christianity (particularly in its Protestant varieties) (Meyer 1997; Coleman 1996; Keane 1998; 2007; Engelke 2007). As I illustrate in the course of the dissertation, particularly in Chapter 6, similar issues are relevant with regards to Islam. Debates among contemporary Malian Muslims indicate that differences in religious understanding, within the larger framework of Islam, are closely associated with conflicting views about the nature of the material world. Thus, the discussions about the proper form of Islamic ritual practice also reveal fundamental anxieties

about proper (and improper) demarcations between “words” and “things” and the possibilities or limits of mixing them.

The question of what constitutes the material world, moreover, has a special relevance in the ethnographic case with which this dissertation is concerned. In Mande, speech is seen in material terms, as a physical object that affects not only the minds, but also the bodies of speakers and listeners (Zahan 1963; Calame-Griaule 1965; Buggenhagen 2006). A Bamana proverb highlighting the importance of speech—“a man doesn’t have a tail nor a crest; but the point at which you can get a hold of him, is the word from his mouth” (*ku te ma la, jagi te ma la; ma mine yoro ye i da la kuma ye*, cited in Zahan 1963:9, *my translation*) shows the conception of speech in an almost physical sense, like a body part or an organ. While the work of Zahan and other scholars of the “Griaule school” has been criticized for presenting an idealized view of these societies as primarily concerned with myth and cosmology (cf. Chapter 4), the central role accorded to speech remains a characteristic feature of social life throughout much of West Africa (Kone 1997; Irvine 1989; Yankah 1995). In the next chapter, I discuss how individuals of a particular hereditary category are thought to be uniquely able to harness the dangerous power of words and how they construct this capability by availing themselves of an ideology and practices of “paying attention.” For now, I want to note that the very categorization of these “word smiths” as on a par with other artisans is yet another indication that in this cultural context, “speech” is considered a material substance, much like leather, iron, or clay. As other Mande scholars have argued, the transformative actions performed by “word smiths” are not qualitatively different from those carried out by leatherworkers, blacksmiths, and potters (McNaughton 1988; Jansen 2000a).

In hindsight, it seems not surprising that the ethnographic elucidation of the concept of language ideology—culturally specific ideas about language and its speakers—should have been formulated early on from the study of language and social life in the Western Sudan. Irvine’s work among rural Wolof speakers in Senegal showed that they draw linkages between the particularities of language use associated with particular categories of persons, such as griots, and people’s

moral and physical characteristics as well as their status in society (Irvine 1974; Gal and Irvine 1985; Irvine and Gal 2000; Irvine 1989; 1998). Linguistic differences are thus linked to social differences, so much so that the social groups involved are thought to be inherently different kinds of people (through a process called “iconization”) (Irvine and Gal 2000). In fact, the creating of linkages between language and social structure—in this case, between social identity and verbal conduct—is now recognized as a defining aspect of language ideologies. In a recent formulation, for example, the mediating role of language ideologies is understood as “bridging [language users’] socio-cultural experience and their linguistic and discursive resources, by constituting those linguistic and discursive forms as indexically tied to features of their socio-cultural experience” (Kroskrity 2004: 507). Key tenets of a Wolof language ideology outlined by Irvine—particularly, the hierarchical distinction between “griot” and “noble” speech that are taken to express the fundamental qualities of particular kinds of persons—are equally applicable in the Mande case.

The concept of “language ideology” has been very productive in linguistic anthropology (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000; 2004; Gal and Irvine 1985; Gal 2005; Swigart 2000; Inoue 2002). The choice of the term “ideology” speaks to both the systematic nature of the ideas involved as well as the estimation that while part of these ideas might be conscious and could be made explicit by the people entertaining them, part of them also remain below the level of awareness (cf. Silverstein 1976). Various definitions as “representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world” (Woolard 1998:3) or “ideas, cultural conceptions, processes of meaning construction, implicit evaluations, and explicit comments about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Spitulnik 1998:164), among other definitions, the concept of language ideologies has been particularly useful to integrate analytically the micro-level of situated communicative interactions with the macro-level domain of political economy.

As has by now become obvious, “language ideologies” are never just about language, but equally about personhood, social relations and differentiation, among other aspects (Woolard 1998; Hill 1998; Kulick 1998; Kroskrity 1998; 2000; Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal and Irvine 1985; Inoue 2002; Sharkey 2007; Swigart 2000). Conversely, ideas that might at first seem to be not about language at all (but about religion, politics, science, etc.) often are better understood as “implicit entailments of language ideologies,” as Gal and Woolard claim (cited in Gal 2005:35). A case in point is my analysis of the changing social position of *finaw* (a particular kind of griots) amidst wider changes in marriage preferences, which I discuss in Chapter 5. Although expressed in discourses of substantial difference and marriagability, the continued exclusion of *finaw* from new marriage networks neatly reworks an earlier distinction between artisans and non-artisans that, like its Wolof parallel, owes much to ideas about language.

The crystallization of the concept of language ideology engendered a number of other concepts of ideology amid a renewed interest in the general notion of ideology. A key insight from the literature on language ideologies that carries over into these other domains is that it trains attention on the mediation that goes on between various spheres of social and personal life and areas of scholarly attention, instead of taking these relations to be direct, obvious, or value-free. I have already mentioned the “object ideologies” proposed by Myers (2004); indeed, Myers uses this term precisely to bring out the importance of (conflicting) ideological frameworks in constituting different materialities that link up (in this ethnographic case) Indigenous Australian epistemology and aesthetics with the Western art-culture system and ideas about (cultural) property. Just as language ideologies are not solely about language, neither are “object-ideologies” (and semiotic ideologies, which I discuss momentarily) simply ideas about things (or how things are taken as signs), but also “about” agency and creativity, the politicization of identity, and the variegated trajectories of “culture.” Besides pointing out the historically and culturally specific understandings that mediate between the social structures and material objects (or between social life and the particular forms, practices, or differences seen as signs), object/ semiotic

ideologies are inflected by power differentials on various levels, political-economic inequalities and moral considerations.

Of particular relevance for the dissertation is the notion of “semiotic ideology”—that is, a set of historically and culturally specific assumptions, encompassing both ideology and practice, about what signs are and how they function in society—as advanced by Webb Keane (Keane 2005; 2007). Keane’s understanding of semiotic ideologies is informed by the notion of language ideology and builds upon the concept of *semiosis* as defined by Charles Peirce. Peirce’s critique of the Cartesian divide between mind and matter was noted above; this stance extended into his analysis of signs (which are anything that stand for something else in some respects and with respect to an interpretant). Peirce’s ideas on *semiosis* have been a fruitful starting point for scholars in semiotic and linguistic anthropology alike, who sought to overcome the inherent duality of *langue* versus *parole* that is at the core of the view of *semiology* proposed by the French linguist Saussure and who were instead attracted to Peirce’s “keen attention to (. . .) the contextual rootedness of semiosis” (Parmentier 2005:2). Whereas the influence of Peirce, then, has been rather limited in the phenomenological approaches to anthropology discussed above (with the notable exception of Munn 1992), his ideas figure quite prominently in other corners of the discipline, most obviously semiotic anthropology (Daniel 1984; Munn 1992; Parmentier 1994; Parmentier 2005; Keane 1997; 2003; 2005; 2007).

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The theoretical currents discussed above intersect in many ways, some of which have already been noted (the centrality of substances and material practices, for example). Another important link among the literatures on material culture, linguistic and semiotic ideologies, personhood and kinship/relatedness, is the recognition of the fundamental openness of all of these processes and an interest in their failures or limitations. Thus, kinship studies now routinely emphasize how social relatedness is both made and unmade, that is, transformed, forgotten and recreated through material objects and everyday practices. This emphasis is par-

ticularly relevant for a case in which inequality, in the form of a system of “castes,” is an important aspect of social life, as in the Mande situation. Furthermore, all of the approaches just discussed emphatically maintain that larger political-economic processes and global discourses cannot be separated from localized understandings of what constitutes the material world and the people that are a part of this world. Studies of the local appropriation of “global” commodities and discourses (Hansen 2000; Straight 2002; Thomas 1991; Weiss 1996; 2003) or Hutchinson’s work on the incorporation of guns and paper in Nuer understandings of relatedness and personhood (Hutchinson 1996; 2000) make abundantly clear that there is a critical interplay between global and local processes.

Like the kinship idiom of contemporary Nuer, I conceive of the field of analysis of this dissertation—the ideology and practices of paying attention—as “inherently unbounded, unfinished, and riddled with uncertainties” (Hutchinson 2000:157). The unfinished business and inherent uncertainties in making sense of signs are in fact crucial aspects of how people in Mande theorize *kolosi*, while the extensive linkages between the Mande region and various other areas throughout West Africa and beyond have been amply demonstrated in the regional literature. Two global factors that are most immediately relevant for this dissertation are Islam and the constraining realities of intense poverty associated with global inequalities. As Islam has long been felt as an integral part of Mande lifeworlds, the varied and changing interpretations of Islam figure prominently in these pages, and especially in Chapter 6. Just as prominent as Islam, for most people I knew, was an acute sense of poverty and being disadvantaged compared to others in a global economy. The twin ideals of “development” and “modernity” were often imagined as hopeful, if seemingly unattainable, antidotes for current harsh economic and environmental conditions. While I don’t dwell on the difficult circumstances of the people I lived with, their struggles to make a living for themselves and their families and to achieve their other goals for themselves and their communities form the concrete context that helped shape the discussions and debates that I analyze in the dissertation.

COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS FOR *KOLOSI*:

PAYING ATTENTION IN EUROPE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCERNMENT IN ISLAM

The injunction to “pay attention” is hardly unique to the Mande region of West Africa. For example, a concern with paying attention also became very prominent in Western European countries in the wake of massive industrialization (Goodman 1994; Crary 2001; Arata 2004). Marx was concerned with the problem of paying attention and the inattentiveness of industrial workers in *Das Kapital* (written in 1867), while Simmel addressed the issue of sensory overload and the difficulty of paying attention in modern life in his 1903 article on “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (cited in Arata 2004). In this dissertation I seek to carve out a space for the study of *kolosi* as both a specifically Mande concept, derived from my deep engagement with people in this region as well as an analytical construct with broader relevance in a comparative project that asks about the conditions and contours of a concern with “paying attention” in many different times, places, and contexts. In order to do so, this section briefly outlines two comparative contexts from which to approach the study of paying attention comparatively. These cases draw on art historical and historical accounts of the growing concern with attention in 19th-century Europe and scholarship in Religious Studies about the importance of *ilm* (knowledge) in the Islamic tradition.

(Art)historical accounts of 18th and 19th century Europe

In his wide-ranging, loosely Foucauldian study, the art historian Jonathan Crary regards the emergence of “paying attention” as a central scientific, social, and aesthetic issue in the late nineteenth century, connecting it to the new technological forms of spectacle, display, projection, attraction, and recording that became prominent at this time. He also credits its emergence to new insights into the behavior and psychological makeup of humans, which in turn coincided with social and economic shifts (Crary 2001). The result of these new technologies, knowledge, and socio-economic structures was a sustained epistemological crisis, in which the formerly stable idea of perception came to be questioned. The disintegration of the classical model of consciousness in favor of the idea of subjective

vision in psychology was mirrored by a rejection of permanent or unconditional guarantees of mental unity or synthesis in philosophy (Crary 2001:20). All of these interconnected discoveries and processes came together in creating “the problem of attention [as] essentially a modern problem,” as the experimental psychologist Titchener noted in 1890 (cited in Crary 2001:21).

Indeed, the emergence of a particular regime of attention as an artifact of modernity—and associated with the capitalist mode of production—is one of Crary’s major claims. This claim is in line with Arata’s (2004) assessment that the emergence of “paying attention” as a major concern in 19th century Western Europe is related to the Industrial Revolution. During this time, long hours in factories, monotonous and relentlessly driven by the rhythm of production, made it crucial—but also hard—for workers to keep paying attention to what they were doing at all times. Indeed, if you did not “pay attention” you might quite literally “lose yourself,” i.e., have a hand severed by the machine.

An insight important both for Crary’s own argument and as a comparative point is his insistence that the emergence of “problem of attention” in the 19th century is a double-edged sword. One way of saying this is to note that attention and distraction exist on a dynamic continuum, and that paying attention to some things inevitably entails not paying attention to other things. However, the extremes of attention and distraction are not value-neutral, nor are questions of who, what, when, and where immune from relations of power. At the same time that subjectivity is constructed in terms of the injunction to pay attention, it thus brings about its own counterpart, in the obvious failure of people/subjects/workers to pay attention (at least some of the time, and to certain things). Crary’s assessment here is born out by the conflicted assessment of contemporary thinkers and indeed the continued problem of attention, lack of attention, and distraction Crary describes. On one hand, the model of the attentive subject is part and parcel of the capitalist organization of labor, as Marx clearly realized. On the other, capitalism creates its own conditions of inattentiveness (through the monotony of production) and in fact is characterized by an insistence on continuous shifts in attention as the natural order of things. In this respect, I find it interesting that in Crary’s

account, the logical counterpart of attentiveness is distraction—long pinpointed as the modern condition *par excellence*—whereas, as noted earlier, in Mande the negation of *kolosi* is more likely to be considered obliviousness.

A second key point to take from Crary's account is that European or Euro-American conceptions of paying attention are neither monolithic nor unchanging. Indeed, a useful counterpoint to Crary's analysis of the 19th-century European "regime of attention" is the discussion of the feminist historian Dena Goodman, whose account of 18th-century French "salon culture" extensively deals with the ideology of "paying attention" as well. Specifically, Goodman notes the crucial gendered aspects of practices of paying attention at this time. Focusing on the crucial role of women in the *salons* that functioned as meeting places for 18th-century (Enlightenment) philosophers, Goodman describes the *salonnières* organizing these *salons* in their homes as "practical people who worked at tasks they considered productive and useful. They took themselves, their salons, and their guests very seriously." For the *salonnières* described by Goodman, this seriousness took the form of constant reminders to themselves of the need to "pay attention," as recorded in their journals. Regarding one of these women, Suzanne Necker, Goodman notes:

The word *attention* dominates the five volumes of her journals published after her death by her husband. One must pay attention, she reminded herself repeatedly, not get distracted. Her purpose in life was not to distract men from their serious business but rather discipline herself and her guests to that that business might be carried out. Her concern was to concentrate her own attention and to focus that of the *philosophes* (her guests); her intent was to be a serious contributor to the social and intellectual project of Enlightenment through the shaping of its discourse in her salon.
(Goodman 1994:79-80, *italics in original*)

Like Crary, Goodman relates the injunction to pay attention to the particularities of time and place—in this case, the elite culture of the French upperclass (both aristocratic and bourgeois), where women did not have formal access to classical education. This analysis, then, clearly brings out the gender and class implications of a particular ideology and practices of paying attention.

It is clear from Crary's, Arata's and Goodman's accounts that there is no such thing as *the* Western, or European, mode of paying attention, but rather sev-

eral different ones (which are, moreover, internally varied). According to these authors, in the 18th and again in the 19th century, a distinct notion of “paying attention” emerged, which can be accounted for by the realities of class and gender differences or emerging changes in the material world of labor organization, respectively. Just as there is no one Western mode of paying attention to be juxtaposed to a non-Western mode, so too is there no single, unchanging (West) African or even Mande-specific mode of *kolosi*. Indeed, paying attention as theorized and practiced by the people I have come to know in Mali is equally historic and varied. Though an analysis of the historical trajectory of *kolosi* in Mande falls outside of the scope of this dissertation, this is not to imply that the ideology and practices of paying attention I describe here have remained unchanged or are without their own history.

Ilm and the anthropology of Islam

Scholarship on Islam presents another comparative context for *kolosi*. As an ideology and set of practices of “paying attention,” *kolosi* is closely aligned with some of the main tenets of Islam, particularly the importance of knowledge, or *ilm*. Rosenthal’s classic work on Muslim theology amply demonstrates the equation of religious faith with knowledge both in the Qur’an and later theological accounts (Rosenthal 1970). Muslim scholars stress the fact that *ilm* is of central concern in the Islamic tradition and that its conception differs from the concept of knowledge in the classical philosophical traditions developed in the West. Islamic theology does not make the distinction between knowledge of the Divine Being and other forms of knowledge; instead Muslim philosophers maintain that the ultimate knowledge (of the Divine) “springs from knowledge of the self and includes knowledge of the phenomenal world” (Akhtar 1997).

The etymology of *ilm* as detailed by Rosenthal, is particularly suggestive in the context of this dissertation. The Arabic root-form form ‘-l-m scarcely has parallels in other Semitic languages, which leads Rosenthal to conclude that “it is therefore not unjustified to suggest that the meaning of ‘to know’ is an extension,

peculiar to Arabic, of an original concrete term, namely ‘way sign’.” The language of (way) signs also proves fruitful to approach the Mande notion of *kolosi*.

In other respects, too, the central Qur’anic notion of *ilm* and *kolosi* offer suggestive parallels. Qur’anic verses describing human knowledge and its acquisition are said to “highlight the importance of observation and experimentation in arriving at certain conclusions” (Akhtar 1997). This resonates with the understanding of *kolosi* developed in the course of the dissertation, which similarly focuses on careful observation, discriminative attention to detail, and an assumption of knowledge as fundamentally open to experience and experiment. Moreover, the fact that in Islamic thought “knowledge remains the goal of all worthwhile aspirations” (Rosenthal 1970:32) aligns well with the injunction to “pay attention” to all potentially meaningful details of one’s lifeworld and specifically the moral imperative to “go out in search of knowledge” that is based on the same ideology of *kolosi*. The moral aspect of knowledge acquisition is in fact made explicit in the immediate post-Qur’anic period, when the important legal scholar Malik compiles a collection of hadith that includes a chapter on “the search after knowledge,” on par with chapters on other moral prescriptions (Rosenthal 1970:70).

Bringing the analysis of the key concept of *ilm* to the ethnographic context of West Africa, we find that some Africanist scholars of Islam have studied the concepts and practices pertaining to knowledge in specific contexts. Brenner historicizes the study of *ilm* by relating it to changing discourses and practices about schooling in late 19th through late-20th century Mali (Brenner 2001). In particular, Brenner argues that the French Soudan (later to become Mali) and pre-colonial West Africa in general, has long been characterized by an “episteme of esoteric knowledge,” which he defines as follows:

Among the defining features of an esoteric *episteme* is a hierarchical conceptualization of knowledge, the highest levels of which are made available to only relatively few specialists. Knowledge is transmitted in an initiatic form and is closely related to devotional praxis. The acquisition of knowledge is progressively transformative: one must be properly prepared to receive any particular form of knowledge, the acquisition of which can provide the basis for a subsequent phase of personal transformation. (Brenner 2001:18, *italics in original*)

Brenner's understanding of the esoteric episteme and its formative influence on Muslim thought throughout West Africa has distinct intersections with the ideology and practices of *kolosi* as I understand them. For example, the presupposition that meanings are not out in the open, but can be discovered only after intensive study with those more knowledgeable, mirrors a Mande understanding that significance has to be gleaned from potentially meaningful things in a process of sustained attention to detail guided by a continually honed sense of discernment.

By highlighting the importance of knowledge in Islam, and particularly a kind of knowledge that is hidden, yet available to the diligent seeker, the work of scholars like Brenner and Rosenthal provide a valuable backdrop against which to appreciate the mutual affinity of the Qur'anic theme of seeking knowledge and a Mande ideology and practice of *kolosi*. The different notions become in fact intertwined in people's accounts of Islamization in Mande, where Islam is often conflated with "knowledge" and the pre-Islamic past is consciously recast as a time of "ignorance" (cf. Chapters 3 and 6). What remains to be seen is how much of the emphasis on knowledge, as the basis for (particular forms of) religious practice, also owes something to a Mande ideology of *kolosi*. Moreover, it is an open question of how ordinary Mande Muslims used strategies rooted in a habitus of "paying attention" to make sense of the growing body of Islamic knowledge and learning they were being introduced to.

In this respect, the dissertation aims to integrate the study of Islam with other aspects of people's lifeworlds—a goal I take to be in line with Schielke's recent remarks about the over-emphasis on religious piety and Reformist ideals in the anthropology of Islam (Schielke 2010). This is not to diminish the fundamental importance of Asad's (1986) original formulation of the anthropology of Islam as the study of a discursive tradition, which was the impulse for the rapid growth of literature on Islam in Africa (Launay 1992; Soares 2005a; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Seesemann and Soares 2009; Masquelier 2009; Schulz 2008; 2003a; Loimeier 2003; Janson 2005) and elsewhere (Bowen 1993). However, I do agree with Schielke's seemingly obvious acknowledgement that "Islam" is not a totalizing force in the lives of most Muslims, except the relatively small per-

centage of those who believe that Islam should be the normative ideal in all aspects of life. In Mande, such totalizing conceptions of Islam are indeed rare, and if some people do express this aspiration it is hotly contested by others. Thus, my aim in the dissertation is to discuss Islam as an integral part of Mande people's lives—which indeed it is—without swinging too far in the other direction, presuming that the category of Islam is the only relevant framework for making sense of their lives. Specifically, I am inspired by Masquelier's nuanced study of the incorporation and contestation of so-called Reformist Islam in a context where Islam had not hitherto been of great significance to people (Masquelier 2009). For one thing, Masquelier makes a convincing case for the relevance of studying (Reformist) Islam in rural as well as urban contexts and against the presumption of rural believers as "naïve and all-accepting"; I hope to show the same in my portrayal of Muslims in rural Mali.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

The central argument of the dissertation is that ideologies and practices of "paying attention" constitute a continuous thread in the richly textured lifeworlds of people living in the Mande region of Mali, linking everyday practices of sociality with morality and aesthetics as well as epistemology and political economy. Thus, the dissertation traces the pervasive nature of *kolosi* across a variety of activities and contexts, from disputes over land and resources to the "small details" of practices of infant care, and from debates about the appropriate form of Islamic rituals to changes in marriage preferences. It shows the salience of *kolosi* in how people in Mande make connections between and among local histories, the material world, and speech, in order to construct and inhabit their world in locally specific ways. In my analysis, I highlight the social and moral aspects of "paying attention" for the Malians I have come to know, both in the imbrications of *kolosi* with other material practices as well in people's more explicit theorizing about its workings and importance.

Moreover, I contend that the Mande-centered notion of *kolosi* as a particularistic combination of ideologies and practices pertaining to perception, person-

hood, and place, as well as social relationships and speech, could be productively worked into an analytical concept allowing for the comparison of the mutuality of similar processes elsewhere. This larger argument structures the narrative arc of the remaining chapters, which I outline briefly here.

In Chapter 2, I discuss how my choice of *kolosi* as the pivot of the dissertation stems directly from my fieldwork and the experience of the close attention people I knew gave to their environment, the talk and actions of others, and live-in anthropologists and their families. The chapter illustrates that paying attention is a fundamentally material practice, embodied and inculcated in children from a young age, and is in turn premised upon and entails a host of other material practices. The relevance of *kolosi* goes well beyond being an organizational device allowing me to discuss other material practices, as I had first conceptualized it. Moreover, the openness of paying attention as a process—as opposed to approaches that focus on concepts such as knowledge or culture as finished products—is clearly brought out in the chapter’s discussion of how my methodology and research practices converged with a locally salient “education of attention.” Specifically, this openness allowed me to pragmatically draw upon alternative frames of interpretation for knowledge production—alternately “staying put and sitting still” and “going out in search of knowledge”—and to shift between my various identities as guest/stranger, friend, student, mother, and sometimes source of infinite hilarity.

In Chapter 3, I draw the reader’s attention to the significance of the Mande landscape, much the same as my friends and acquaintances brought it to my own. In the physical landscape of Mande, history is present in visible features, remembered spaces, and invisible presences or concealed places alike. Indeed, I argue that the history embedded within the Mande landscape makes it a particularly appropriate object for paying attention, because the landscape reveals its multiple, sometimes conflicting, layers of history only to an attentive and discerning observer. Whether hidden in plain view or re-imagined in the mind’s eye, embedded histories of the landscape rely on an attentive observer to be experienced and are made present through the stories told about particular places. Even the better

known stories associated with the framework of the Sunjata Epic are anchored more deeply in the Mande landscape than commonly recognized in the literature on the region.

Chapter 3 also makes a novel argument by analyzing griots' speech practices in the framework of *kolosi*. Specifically, I argue that griots make the past and present coincide in their historical narratives and praise songs in much the same way that history is an inextricable part of the contemporary Mande landscape. The first part of this process is relatively well known: in recounting the Sunjata Epic and through praise singing, griots establish linkages between contemporary patrons and the space-time of Sunjata. Yet what is equally important is that the griot-based "history through words," just like "history in the landscape," relies on the expert capacities of someone skilled in *kolosi* to bring out the significance of what is seen or heard. Griots draw attention to what other people need to pay attention to. On one hand, griots reinforce the expectation of their audience that every bit of their speech has "meaning" (*koro*) through the explicit meta-discourses embedded in performances. On the other hand, they undermine the audience's attempts to reach this meaning by using opaque, archaic, and grammatically incomplete phrases. In doing so, they offer up their performances as important objects for *kolosi* while simultaneously positioning themselves as superiorly endowed with the capacity for *kolosi*.

In Chapter 4, I turn my attention to personhood and the mutually constitutive nature of full social and moral personhood on one hand and the capacity for and effective performance of paying attention on the other. While the literature on Mande and nearby regions has commonly noted that without the genealogical ties established through praise songs, people would fundamentally "not be people" (*mogo te*), my analysis adds another major component required for full Mande personhood: *kolosi*. Individuals need to be capable of properly paying attention to everything that is worthy of one's attention, including one's own self. Those who are incapable of *kolosi*, primarily in the form of proper self-awareness and self-mastery, are thought to fall short of being fully human, which in turn is taken as a moral fault.

Additionally, Chapter 4 makes a contribution to the literature on linguistic and semiotic ideologies by analyzing *kolosi* in these terms, and showing how an ideology and practices of *kolosi* posit even the minutest details of one's surroundings—including natural and man-made objects, physical characteristics, speech, gestures, events, and space—as potentially significant. I highlight the inherent instability, ambiguity, and openness to debate and creativity of the process of making sense of signs, which might corroborate, compete with and negate each other, and the interpretation of which is fundamentally grounded in lived experience and social relationships. This process, no less, is inflected with the social relations and political concerns of observers who are ultimately responsible for actively performing attentiveness. Finally, I emphasize how practices of paying attention presuppose—and in the process, construct—particular understandings of objects as potential signs as well as of people as being fundamentally opaque, which in turn are congruent with a particular language ideology that stresses the dangerous potential of speech and calls for the restricted and indirect use of words.

The picture that emerges from the initial outline of *kolosi* in Chapters 2 through 4, then, is one of an ever called-for habitus of *kolosi* as an important social and moral value in Mande. In Chapters 5 through 7, I refine and complicate this picture by dealing more explicitly with issues of power and change. Specifically, I address the vexed questions of *what* exactly warrants one's constant attention and scrutiny, *who* is in a position to draw others' attention to certain things, and *how* conflicts of competing objects of one's attention are resolved. The question of what "things" (objects, practices, differences) among the multitude of possibilities are indeed meaningful is not solely an outsider's theoretical question, but a problem that many of my interlocutors have actively grappled with. In Chapters 5 through 7, I analyze how the people I came to know dealt with such questions and what strategies they used to come to an understanding of—and make claims and counter-claims about—which things are worth paying attention to, and which are not. I argue that in making such claims and by choosing to perform "paying attention" selectively, people are dealing with moral quandaries as much as problems of semiotics. Moreover, the examples provided in these chapters effectively

show that ideologies and practices are intrinsically caught up in social relations, which in turn involve power differentials and inequalities of various kinds (in terms of gender, age, caste status, wealth, or religious authority).

Chapter 5 also introduces a final context in which my interlocutors posited the salience of *kolosi*, i.e., the careful practices of paying attention that ideally precede a marriage and remain important throughout. Starting from the visual clues that indicate a “good spouse” and ending with the unexpected consequences of continued endogamy among *finaw*, I establish the significance of “paying attention” in creating relatedness. Practices of scrutiny are embodied in gendered and age-specific ways, in order to reveal the “inside” of potential marriage partners—something that is not readily available, but can be discerned by an attentive observer attuned to outward manifestations of internal qualities as well as “habitual” and “resemblance” signs.

Additionally, Chapter 5 addresses the rapid and widespread decline of “caste” endogamy in Mande, part of which I have been able to observe first-hand in the past ten years. Most striking in this regard is not so much the decline of endogamy per se, but rather the common theme of retrospective assessments about *siya* (“caste”)—i.e., that it should not have factored into marriage decisions to begin with—even if the “end of endogamy” is experienced and talked about differently in different villages. In other words, my analysis in this chapter illustrates the important process whereby what used to be a crucial sign of what a person is like—his or her caste *siya*—comes to be disregarded, and actively disparaged, as such. This means that the iconic linkage of certain characteristics of moral personhood, bodily composition, and forms of speech with pre-conceived categories of persons is reconfigured in important ways. In this context, I introduce the notion of experimentation as an important way in which the fundamental openness and creativity of *kolosi* is achieved.

Chapter 6 addresses the vexed question of how people decide what is and is not worth “paying attention” to in regards to the ritual practices required within Islam. Chapter 6 thus builds upon Chapter 5 in theoretical terms, while the two chapters are also related ethnographically. Some of my interlocutors in fact asso-

ciated the current disregard for “caste” in contemporary marriage practices with the increasing salience of so-called Reformist Islam. However, it would be premature to conclude that a greater local import of Islam entails a clear break with past practices of paying attention and the (semiotic) ideologies by which they were sustained. Instead, my analysis in Chapter 6 shows that despite people’s frequent comments about the radical shifts in social relations instituted by Islam (especially in its reform-minded forms), both Islam and perceived “traditional” modes of being alike employ and enact an underlying ideal of *kolosi*. Questions about how to pay attention, and to what, are part and parcel of debates about proper and improper ritual practice in Islam and an ideology and practices of paying attention help shape the way these debates play out.

Specifically, Chapter 6 illustrates how, in the context of Islam, the question of paying attention frequently comes up in relation to exemplary practice. The Prophet’s example in word and deed is considered more worthy of attention than anything else, yet it is not obvious just which actions of Muhammad should count as exemplary—in the face of a multiplicity of reported practice, for example. Previous scholarly accounts have analyzed this as a Wahabi/Sunni impulse, characteristically involving a move *away* from local centers of authority and *toward* the geographic and temporal centers of an idealized global Muslim community. However, my analysis shows that the stated desire of *bolominelaw* (who pray with their arms/hands held) to “follow the Prophet’s example” is shared by *bolobilalaw* as well. Moreover, the assertion that Wahabi/Sunnis are trying to go back to “purer” forms of Islam, rejecting “modern” inventions, and committing to “following the Prophet’s example” does not sufficiently address what “following the Prophet’s example” might mean for the people attempting to do so. Thus, an investigation into the semiotic processes by which people decide which practices ascribed to the Prophet Mohammed can properly be considered exemplary makes a significant contribution to understanding the dynamics and divisions of contemporary Islam in Africa.

Chapter 7, finally, moves away from the contexts in which my interlocutors framed their concerns explicitly in terms of *kolosi*—children’s education,

landscape, personhood, kinship, and exemplary religious practice—to a series of events that they did not directly couch in this way. Nevertheless, the two case studies of conflicts about history, land, and ownership of resources I consider in this chapter can effectively be analyzed with the concept of *kolosi* as I developed it in previous chapters. Ethnographically, the cases described in Chapter 7 delineate the entanglement of contested claims about the past with political conflicts and economic issues in the present. I show how the endeavors of poor rural villagers without much national clout to stake out convincing positions about the continued, reciprocal expectations of hosts and strangers, and/or to define the limits and possibilities for the commoditization of specifically defined categories of land and other natural resources, are also efforts to engage critically and in locally beneficial ways with global discourses and realities of development and within stark economic inequalities. In theoretical terms, my argument is that the claims and counter-claims people made in these conflicts implicitly relied on an ideology of *kolosi* in trying to make convincing arguments about *what to pay attention to* for historical evidence.

The dissertation concludes with a concluding chapter, Chapter 8, which explicates the theoretical contributions of the present study and proposes some avenues for further research.

¹ Alternative spellings of Mande that are common in the literature are Manden (indicating the nasalized *e* sound at the end of the name); Manding, and Mandingue (the latter two are most common in French-language publications).

² An illustrative example that generated considerable discussion—485 individual comments—was a piece published in the *New York Times* on June 6, 2010, entitled “Attached to Technology and Paying a Price: Your Brain on Computers,” by Matt Richtel (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html?src=me&ref=homepage> accessed 10/20/2010).

³ The main fieldwork for this project took place in 2005-6, for a period of fifteen months. This fieldwork was, in turn, shaped by my earlier fieldwork in the region in 1999-2000 and 2003, for a combined total of seven months. I did additional follow-up fieldwork for two months in 2007 and one month in 2009.

⁴ That is, in the following I focus on the meanings associated with “paying attention” in ordinary contexts and conversations in English. I do not include

technical or philosophical discourses about perception and attention, some of which are discussed in the next section. My pronouncements here about the usage of “paying attention” in English are based on dictionary definitions, mostly from the Oxford Dictionary of English, as well as my own usage.

⁵ The verb *kolosi* can be substantivized by adding the suffix *-li*; this substantive serves as the object for the verb *ke*, “to do” so that instead of *kolosi* you can also say *kolosili ke*. The form with *ke* highlights the quality and repetitive nature of the activity as opposed to a singular act.

There is also a noun *kolosi*, which has the same tonal structure as the verb under consideration here, yet is unrelated. It refers to the prayer beads some Muslims use in prayer.

⁶ The same examples as in Bazin (1906) are given in Sauvart (1926), and very comparable ones in Bailleul (1996).

⁷ For example, a program on Radio Mali once did a broadcast on the theme of *den ni kolosili ka kan*, or “children and paying attention/watching out (for them) are the same thing.” Similarly, a *den kolosikela* is the contemporary term for a babysitter or a nanny, while *kolosikela* on its own primarily refers to the guards who watch the houses of middle-class Bamakois. The separate entry for *kolosikela* or (shortened) *kolosila* in colonial-era dictionaries, with the specific translation of “gardien,” might suggest this usage constitutes a colonial neologism.

⁸ The opposite condition, of widening the span of attention instead of narrowing it, might be better expressed in English as “noticing,” especially in the sense of treating something with attention. Similarly, while the aspect of “attention to detail” might come into play in the common usage of “paying attention,” this idea might be more prominent in the English term “observing,” i.e., “to watch carefully especially with attention to details or behavior for the purpose of arriving at a judgment.”

⁹ More could be said about the genealogy of the concept of “lifeworld” as well as its “afterlife” in, or relations with, other popular concepts in anthropology, such as Bourdieu’s habitus, de Certeau’s notion of the everyday, Habermas’ attention to narrative, and not least the “culture” concept itself.

CHAPTER TWO

GETTING AN EDUCATION IN ATTENTION: *KOLOSI* AS LOCAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Doing ethnography can be a great deal of fun, and disguising the fact on paper is less than totally honest. (Basso 1996:111)

This chapter sketches how my own research practices in the field converged with the notion of *kolosi* and the local practices and understandings of how knowledge should be gained and transmitted, which amount to a veritable education in attention. This includes questions such as what counts as knowledge, how it is produced, revealed, and gendered into specific male and female domains, as well as about who has the authority to express it, to whom, and under what conditions. The people I encountered during my fieldwork obviously employed their own frameworks for understanding my presence in their villages and the contours of my research project, and tried to steer me towards appropriate forms of acquiring knowledge. At the same time, I also tried to align my research priorities with local modes of knowledge production as far as I understood them. Depending on the situation, this involved striking the fine balance between being properly attentive and inappropriately nosy, as well as exploiting the leeway afforded by drawing upon alternative frames of interpretation for knowledge production (“staying put and sitting still” and “going out in search of knowledge”). Finally, doing research in Mande also involves acknowledging the limits of a research practice

framed as a matter of education. I was never just a “student” but, among other things, often a guest as well.

AN EDUCATION OF ATTENTION

At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I had yet to realize the importance of *kolosi*, I was often confused about whether the kinds of observations people would share with me were “idiosyncratic,” or could be considered part of “shared ideas” with a larger relevance across time and space.¹ For example, one day the oldest woman of our *kabila* (group of related compounds), whom I greeted every morning, sighed that she must be the next one to go, because she kept seeing a particular kind of bird sitting on roofs or trees near our compound. This bird meant death, she said, reminding me of the recent death of two people from our compound. The continued presence of the bird, which she saw almost every day now, convinced her that there would be more deaths, and more specifically, that her own end was near.² I had a hard time figuring out how to take her words, or the significance of this bird, not knowing if this was something only old ladies knew and worried about, or only those people who had been born “on the other side of the river,” as she had, or if female friends my own age knew of its significance, too.

On another occasion, I was helping a family group husking their corn, when suddenly the male head of the family announced, “you know, you never find corn cobs that have seventeen rows of kernels; if you do, you’re very lucky.” I’d never heard this, but I knew that this man, who had put up a sign identifying him as *guérisseur traditionnel* (“specialist in traditional medicine”), was quite proud of his knowledge of traditional plants and some years spent the months of the agricultural off-season as a traveling healer, visiting clients in other regions of Mali. So I figured this could well be part of this man’s corpus of medicinal knowledge, and I asked him what it “meant” that one never found cobs with 17 rows of kernels (“*a koro ye mun di?*”). “Well, it does not happen. I’ve never seen it. You’ll see, if you try, if you would count the rows on all of the cobs you are going to come across, you won’t find any with 17.” His wife and some of the

other women agreed, but I was not sure if they had known all along that there just are no corn cobs with 17 rows of kernels, or rather that, come to think of it, they'd never seen one. In any case, they agreed that I should just try and see for myself, counting all the corncobs I'd come across this season. "I know there will be a lot [of corn cobs]," one of the women added, "because aren't you working with the women's *ton* (agricultural labor group)?" Upon confirming that I did intend to keep working with the women's group and would make a point of counting rows of kernels from now on, the old man concluded, "You'll see. It does not happen. It's like winning the lottery."

Over time, experiences like this made me realize that for my interlocutors "paying attention" and gaining knowledge was not so much a matter of learning a pre-existing chart of "things" or "events" that unequivocally meant something else—like a certain bird "standing for" immanent death or 17 rows of kernels "meaning" luck. Rather, what is important is the process of *kolosi* itself, as enabling a fundamentally observant and attentive stance towards one's life-world. In other words, *kolosi* entails "paying attention" to whatever aspect of one's life-world that presents itself as an object for attention or anything that might be significant. Knowledge results from these practices of observation and attention because they constitute in effect an active process of knowledge construction—not because they allow one to discover a pre-existing font of meaning. Instead, if you observe something to be the case, for example, by noting that whenever you observe A, a little later you will observe B, you might start taking A as a sign for B. This knowledge is not necessarily "shared," although it can be, and even when it is transmitted over time, it remains fundamentally experience-based.

* * *

The notion of an "education of attention" developed by Ingold (2000) is an apt way to characterize the ideologies and practices of knowledge transmission entailed in *kolosi* as I describe them above. According to Ingold, an "education of attention" amounts to the following:

The idea of showing is an important one. To show something to somebody is to cause it to be seen or otherwise experienced—whether by touch, taste, smell, or hearing—by that other person. It is, as it were, to lift a veil off some aspect or component of the environment so that it can be apprehended directly. In that way, truths that are inherent in the world are, bit by bit, revealed or disclosed to the novice. What each generation contributes to the next, in this process, is an *education of attention*. Placed in specific situations, novices are instructed to feel this, taste that, or watch out for the other thing. Through this fine-tuning of perceptual skills, meanings immanent in the environment—that is in the relational contexts of the perceiver’s involvement in the world—are not so much constructed as discovered. (Ingold 2000: 21-2, *emphasis in original*)

What emerges quite clearly from this description is that what is “transmitted” in an education of attention isn’t so much substantive knowledge, but a technique for acquiring experiential knowledge on one’s own (cf. Ingold 2000:146). The same holds true for the kinds of knowledge people in Mande associate with *kolosi*. *Kolosi* ultimately rests upon empirical observation rather than constituting a prescribed body of knowledge transmitted *in toto* from an older generation.

Ingold borrows the term “education of attention” from the psychologist Gibson and employs it to argue against the idea of learning as the transmission of information (Ingold 2000:167). As such, the notion is similar to that described by Lave and Wenger as “legitimate peripheral participation,” which theorizes the multifaceted kinds of informal learning that characterize the apprenticeship model of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Recalling the education in attention he himself received from his botanist-father, Ingold argues that this method of teaching and learning has larger cross-cultural relevance—evident, for example, in the experience of a novice hunter whose attention is drawn to subtle clues that he might otherwise fail to notice, or in the “grand tour” of Walpiri boys from Central Australia in which they learn by observing the environment and having salient features pointed out to them. Even if Ingold’s main points about educations of attention are highly relevant for our understanding of *kolosi* as well, some important questions remain unanswered in this framework. In this section, I address both the ways in which *kolosi* consists of an education in attention as well as some lingering questions about how paying attention is performed, by whom, and under which conditions.

A first aspect in which an ideology and practices of *kolosi* constitute an education of attention in Ingold's sense is in the understanding of my interlocutors that knowledge is at its base empirical, the result of careful observation of relevant occurrences over time. Even if certain substantive aspects of knowledge are transmitted from generation to generation (and they are), as in the case of craftsmanship or medicinal expertise, the transmitted knowledge is still considered empirical. It is felt to be "discovered rather than constructed," in Ingold's terms. For example, upon being told that a particular plant is effective for a specific illness, whose symptoms are, say, a persistent cough in young children without the presence of an elevated temperature, the person being entrusted with this knowledge is still expected to put this "to the test," as it were. He or she will need to see for him- or herself that the designated plant indeed works for the kind of illness described. Only if it does, and the transmitted knowledge fits one's own observations, is this knowledge really valid. If it does not, there must be a concrete cause for the mismatch of transmitted knowledge and observable reality: maybe the person who provided the information lied. Maybe there is a special formula that goes together with the application of the plant by way of medicine, which the person knowingly or unknowingly withheld from you. Maybe the symptoms of the illness were confusing, and it was not the illness you thought it was (but something else for which this medicine is not effective). Maybe something went wrong in the preparation of the medicine. Whatever the cause might be, the point is that there must be some reasonable explanation, so that in the end the knowledge one acquires through others becomes part of one's own lived experience.

Children in Mande are made to understand from an early age that observation and inference—i.e., "paying attention"—are crucial ways of gaining knowledge and skills. A variety of educational practices, ranging from allowing a particularly interested child to accompany one on an errand or inviting another to observe what one is doing instill the expectation that learning is a gradual process accomplished by watching and doing. The model of "legitimate peripheral participation" developed by Lave and Wenger is apt here, because it highlights "*participation*" as a way of learning—of both absorbing and being absorbed in—the

“culture of practice” (1991:95, emphasis in original). This is to say, Mande learning by observation is not only about learning specific skills through careful observation and imitation, as extensively described in the literature on the region (Doumbia and Erny 2001; Kante 1993; Laye 1976; Jansen 1995; 2000a; Janson 2002; Cissé 1994). More importantly, these educational practices also impart the understanding and practical experience that observation and attention are the major tools for learning. They imbue a sense of the important social value attached to attentiveness and the performance of observation.

It is the successful performance of attention that constitutes the ultimate outcome of an education of attention. Yet there are significant differences between individuals in respect to how well this goal is achieved. Much like the desirable mental quality glossed as “wisdom” is present in varying degrees in the Apache communities described by Basso, so too the successful deployment of attention as part of a habitus of *kolosi* is unevenly distributed in the towns and villages of Mande. To say that older people are more capable of *kolosi*, and have achieved a broader font of knowledge by way of a life-long application of *kolosi* is an obvious rule-of-thumb, yet it obscures the fact that there are clearly recognized differences in the sophistication with regards to *kolosi* within the oldest age groups. At the same time, greater sophistication is not just a result of old age—even if not every elder displays it in equal measure—but the reverse is also true. An individual’s greater capacity for *kolosi* makes him or her much more able to ward off sinister plots by others and to protect themselves from disasters; hence, it contributes in no small matter to a person’s longevity. Stories people told each other and myself in this respect frequently involved the perceptive realization that some food had been poisoned.

Another example of *kolosi* contributing to a person’s survival and ultimately longevity is illustrated by the reaction of one of my friends after a *Sotrama* (“bus”) accident that involved numerous women from Ksm.³ The accident, which specifically injured potters, was widely regarded as a sign that the *jinaw* of the clay pit were dissatisfied with the local potters; as such, it was a daily topic of conversation and a site for interpretation during the first months of 2007. During

one such conversation, a young woman on our compound explained to a friend of hers how her husband's attentiveness had preserved her from being involved in the accident.

"You know that [my husband] told me not to go. It was early on the morning of the accident. He had read the sand and saw that something was about to happen, so he didn't allow me to go because of that."

"And you know, [another woman] decided at the last minute not to go to Bamako and she, too, had visited [my husband] the day before. After visiting with him, she also visited [another man who reads the sand] and after that she went home without saying anything. The next day she didn't join the Sotrama to Bamako saying that her pots hadn't arrived yet and that she would first go to SSo in Mk to make sure when the pots would arrive. But that wasn't it! She had first observed the road (sira) before embarking on this trip. That's why I always listen to [my husband] when he tells me, and you should have him observe the road for you too before you go anywhere."

The contribution of attentiveness to matters of physical survival emerges clearly from this example—be it one's own powers of observation or the consultation of attention experts like those who read the sand. Incidentally, the same double association between wisdom and longevity obtains among the Apache:

Only a few persons are ever completely wise. By virtue of their unusual mental powers, wise men and women are able to foresee disaster, fend off misfortune, and avoid explosive conflicts with others. For these and other reasons, they are highly respected and often live to be very old. (Basso 1996:131)

What emerges from Basso's quotes, but remains largely out of view for Ingold, is the performance of attention. In order to be recognized, attention needs to be performed in particular acts of interpretation. While Ingold rightly notes that the idea of "showing" is important, his analytical framework does not adequately address the question of who has the authority to show things to others and under which conditions they are able or willing to do so.

THE OBSERVER OBSERVED

In a fieldwork context where "paying attention" (*kolosi*) is held up as an ideal moral disposition, and where a habitus of attentiveness is inculcated in children from a young age, it should come as no surprise that local people observed and

analyzed the anthropologist and her family just as much as, and maybe even more perceptively, than the other way around. Indeed, if the goal of my fieldwork was to “pay attention” to as many things as I could, I obviously was not the only one doing so. Nor was I the only object of people’s attention: my husband and young daughter (who turned three and later four in the field) also commanded attention. People’s attempts at forcing my parenting style into closer conformity with local norms were at times relentless, yet ultimately gave valuable insight into the intricacies of an educational ideology that I would need to respect in my own research.

I do not pretend to know what exactly my friends and acquaintances, along with others I interacted with for briefer periods of time, made of the observations they gathered of me. As many people would say, quoting a proverb, “*min b’i kono, ne t’a lon; min be n’kono, i fana ta lon*” (“I do not know what’s in your stomach, and you also do not know what’s in mine”). I leave the discussion of this aspect of Mande personhood and its relation to *kolosi* for Chapter 4. For the moment, I focus on the observations of me that people expressed to me most frequently—in the form of critique, praise, and generalizations about what “white people” were like, or comments specifically about what they supposed my research was about, why I was in Mali, and why I did what I did.

A common interpretation of why I was doing research in the first place was that our family was in Mali because my husband, who is a professor, was on leave from his home school in the US to teach English in the local high school for a year (which he did do, but only for two hours a week). According to this interpretation, I had tagged along to care for our daughter and was profiting from the occasion of being back in Mali, where I had lived before and learned the language, to do some research on the side. This interpretation, which was especially common among people whom I did not know very well or had just met, at first annoyed me, but I had to accept that it would keep coming up. Moreover, I came to understand it as an illustration of the gender hierarchy in place in Mali, which values complementarity between male and female roles more than it does equality, and which highlights the status of women as mothers and wives.⁴

People who knew me well, and who had the most occasion to observe me and my family going about our daily business, also seemed most interested in how well I fulfilled my roles of being, first of all, a mother, and second, a wife. Most of their comments on this score were criticisms of the ways in which they saw me fall short. For example, a major complaint was that I had not weaned my daughter at the appropriate time, but was still nursing her at the age of two and, later, three.⁵ Quite a few women joked that they would cut her tongue off if she didn't give up this habit soon, sometimes going as far as fetching a knife from the kitchen and pretending to actually follow through on their words. Other practices of child rearing that came under scrutiny were related to our daughter's bathing, eating, and sleeping habits, as well as our methods of discipline. Once, my husband and I tried to ignore a temper tantrum and let our 3-year-old daughter "cry it out" (per American childrearing books). An older woman on our compound immediately came into our room to check on us and demanded that we "stop beating her" (we were not) and "give her what she wants." While other two- or three-year-old kids were allowed to cry, ours never was—not only because she was, after all, "a guest," but also, I believe, because as long as she did not have a younger sibling, she was still seen as "the baby," and babies need to be made instantly better and should not be left to cry for any length of time. The biggest critique, in fact, was that I had not given my daughter a sibling yet (*ka norola*). People often suggested that if I would only stop making such long days, and sit at home a bit more, I would much more speedily conceive the second child I claimed to want.

This last critique of me as a (bad) mother is related to other criticisms about being a (bad) wife. In Mali, being a mother and being a wife are nearly synonymous, given the high value people place on having children. Yet being a good wife and being a good mother are more intricately related than just by the fact that most wives are also mothers. There is enormous pressure on the woman to behave in certain (respectful and obedient) ways towards her husband in order to ensure her children will turn out well. Both men and women would tell me, for example, that a young child would not grow well if the mother held a grudge against her husband or was openly angry towards him. Advice to women to keep

the peace with their husbands was often tied to an admonition that being a “good wife” was the best way to guarantee a successful outcome for her children, i.e., to get a chance at being a “good mother.” This link puts in perspective the idea that “everything/everybody is in the mother’s hands” (*bee b’i ba bolo*), as many in Mali fondly claim. Being ultimately held responsible not only for how one’s children turn out, but also for embodying all the good qualities that make one a “good wife,” which is the prerequisite for having thriving children in the first place, indeed places a heavy burden on women. I, for one, regularly fell short of accomplishing a host of required household tasks,⁶ and people who knew us often criticized me for having my husband babysit or bathe our daughter. Even worse, I once made him do laundry—but only once!

THE FLEXIBILITY OF *KOLOSI* AS FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

From what people shared with me regarding their observations of me, I was able to figure out a *modus inquerandi* for aligning my own expectations for knowledge production with those that were salient locally. My work was both constrained and animated by the tensions inherent in local politics of knowledge and frames of interpretation. The ability to draw upon different knowledge acquisition practices at various times proved very productive, and gave me quite some leeway in deciding how I would organize my fieldwork at any given moment.⁷ Indeed, my research methods were, by and large, aligned with local understandings of appropriate modes of seeking knowledge as I came to recognize these over time. In what follows, I describe my methodology in relation to the main modes of seeking knowledge, which I tried to embody depending on the circumstances. The first could be called “staying put and sitting still,” while the other was neatly summed up in the frequently cited observation “if you did not get anything, at least you saw something.”

Not only did I *want* to conduct my fieldwork in a locally acceptable and recognizable manner, but I also quickly understood that this was the only way people would let me do research at all. I had to respect that some people did not want me to sit in the *bulon* (“entrance hut” used for talking) on certain occasions,

or if others did not want me to tape particular instances of speech. Once I was a bit too nosy in wanting to hear the *kilisi* (“incantation”) for starting the fire to bake the pots in Ksm, because I wanted to compare it to the one I had learned elsewhere. Hoping to hear what I was not supposed to hear, I leaned over so much into the pyre of pots and dry tree branches, that I almost fell in, and I was teased about it for days afterwards.

As the teasing about my nosiness attests, sometimes I consciously had to work to have my research be interpreted within the framework provided by *kolosi*. Indeed, people would sometimes invoke other paradigms, too, to describe to themselves or others what I was hoping to accomplish in my research. Most prominent among these was what my interlocutors referred to as *ko nye nyini*, which can be translated as “seeking the essence of things” or even “getting to the bottom of things.” While the connotations of this term are not necessarily negative—for example, a good student might go to great lengths to get all the facts right—it does evoke a more active, inquisitive, and not always welcomed role for the researcher than I was willing to perform in most instances. Adopting a stance of *ko nye nyini* on a regular basis would have definitely opened me up to many more criticisms of being nosy, and put me in a category with police officers and government officials, as people who make it their professional goal to “get to the bottom of things.”⁸

“Having a conversation is better than asking questions”

A first mode of seeking knowledge that my friends and acquaintances articulated can be described as “staying put and sitting still.” This mode of knowledge transmission, which amounts to a veritable “education of attention” (Ingold 2000), was familiar to me from my earlier fieldwork in the region in 1999. At the time, I had apprenticed myself to one of the older potters on the compound where I lived. Indeed, the method of “staying put and sitting still” involves seeking out appropriate teachers (ideally older and particularly knowledgeable people), staying close to them, not asking direct or stupid questions, and most importantly, “paying attention” to what these people say, do, and show you. Just sitting next to the

old woman, observing, trying to carry out the simple tasks she required of me, watching her correct my mistakes, and waiting for things to be explained as they came up turned out to be the appropriate way for me to learn about pottery.

Even though I was female, trying to learn a skill gendered as female, the method of “sitting next to” and observing someone more knowledgeable is also a method of apprenticeship learning utilized by men. For example, the anthropologist Trevor Marchand who studied expert (male) masons in Djenne by means of an apprenticeship of his own, describes the experience of learning how to be a mason as a process of doing rather than asking or talking about it (Marchand 2009). Like Marchand’s instructors, many people I came into contact with told me that if I just made sure to keep my eyes and ears open, and keep close to the elder people on the compound, I would learn all I wanted to know, almost regardless of what it might be that I wanted to learn about. Indeed, I continued to use this “passive” research style for some aspects of my 2005-7 fieldwork, because I found it to work well for many of the quotidian practices I was interested in.

One way in which my friends understood this approach to knowledge was encapsulated in their pithy statement that “having conversations with people is better than asking questions” (*baro kausa ni nyinyikali di*). Engaging daily in the art of conversation (*baro*) provides the indispensable framework of Mande sociality, and a researcher cannot help but become part of the linguistic “ties that bind,” that is, morning and evening greetings, the frequent exchange of jokes and insults, and the pleasant chitchat over three cups of tea at night.⁹ In the context of my research, being part of regular social life, engaging a variety of people in conversation, observing what they were doing, and maybe asking a few questions afterwards was a productive strategy for much of my interests. Even if I did more formal interviews with people, especially if they were older, I would frame the occasion as me wanting to “have a chat” (*baro ke*). Framed as such, I would normally be able to ask questions as well as listen, and could also tape what was said.

The relevance of “paying attention” in informal student-teacher interactions of this kind goes both ways. That is, not only is the student closely observ-

ing the teacher and taking in everything she or he says, but so too is the teacher. A large part of knowledge transmission and acquisition depends on this mutual relationship of both the student and teacher paying attention to each other. In speaking about their methods of imparting skills, or the way they went about child rearing in general, numerous adults would indicate that they too, were closely observing the student/child to see what she or he was ready for, particularly interested in, or more skilled at than most, and gear their teaching to their observation of the child/student in question. This process of closely monitoring children and students is indeed often framed as a matter of *kolosi*, as indicated by an early interview I did about child rearing practices (in 2003):¹⁰

SD: “So, are there any indications, from a young age on, that a child will grow up to be a ‘good person’ (mogo nyuman)”?

SB: “You do not really know right away, but you see it over time. You watch the child growing up, and you pay attention (kolosi) to what he or she is like, if he or she greets people, and uses their names, and when it is a little bigger, three or four of five years old, you send them on little errands, saying, ‘go get me this,’ or ‘buy me that,’ so that you’ll be able to notice which child does this [i.e., accomplish simple tasks assigned to him or her], and which one does not, and you keep giving bigger errands to the child that can do them, and so, over time, you come to find out who is a good person.”

This quote indicates that older people pay close attention to the minute details of what children do, even inventing special tasks so that they can observe how well the child handles them. A more surprising way parents’ observations of the educational needs and attitudes of their children comes out is in regards to what looked to my middle-class Euro-American eyes as a very lax attitude many parents in Mande had towards their children’s learning in the formal school system; I knew of many cases where even very young children were allowed to drop out of school just because they either appeared or explicitly claimed not to be “interested” in school.

If the aptitudes and interests of children and students are closely monitored, I too was thus being paid close attention to not only when going about my daily routines, but also and particularly when it came to my endeavors to acquire knowledge. One consequence of this was that I was expected, in circumstances

where asking questions was appropriate, to ask *smart* questions—or in any case, not plainly dumb ones. Only very rarely would asking broad, open-ended questions—of the sort, “what do you do when a woman is about to give birth”—prove useful; more often, such questions, would be read as betraying my ignorance of even the fundamental issues, and produce overly general responses in return. Conversely, questions that betray a certain level of awareness and insight in their subject matter or how they are phrased received much more detailed and thoughtful answers—not infrequently prefaced by the approving observation, “ah, so you noticed/saw/heard that!” One aspect of the discouragement of “stupid” questions that I found much harder to circumvent was when I was hoping to get other perspectives on events that I had witnessed. Such questions would almost invariably be met with exasperation and the reproach, “Haven’t you been paying attention?” For example, I was almost entirely unsuccessful in trying to get people on our compound to tell me more about the fights between two particular people on our compound, and not just because conflicts are a somewhat inappropriate topic of conversation, because people did talk about such things. More particularly, my friends told me that since these fights and the events leading up to them had happened in my presence, I did not need to go around asking people about them—if I had seen everything for myself then surely I could draw my own conclusions.

To the extent that my research was understood as instantiating the common educational trajectory of learning by observation and imitation, I had an easy time being allowed to watch what people were doing, accompany them to their fields or on other business, listen to their conversations, or whatever else I decided to do, because I obviously could use instruction in almost any field. Some people took a special interest in me and became teachers of sorts for longer or shorter periods, taking it upon themselves to teach me the names and uses of local trees, improve my language skills, introduce their extended family, or instruct me in sand divination. In these cases, I happily complied by taking on the role of deferential student and youngster.¹¹ A more challenging issue was the fact that in an education based on observation, there is a fine line between being properly attentive and being inappropriately nosy. However fine this line might be, it must

not be crossed. In practice, this means that observation should be discreet: watching, but not staring; listening, but not asking; keeping your eyes open to see what you can see, but not going out inappropriately to try and see what you're not supposed to. It is this fine balance for proper "student behavior" that I also tried to strike in my fieldwork.

"If you did not get anything, at least you saw something"

The second mode of knowledge acquisition, which can be characterized as "going out in search of knowledge," follows the model established by the great cultural heroes of the Mande world, including most prominently Sunjata himself (Bird and Kendall 1980). Because of the importance attached to traveling widely to obtain knowledge, my being an anthropologist and having traveled far from home to study "how other people live" was considered not all that extraordinary. Traditionally, across large parts of West Africa, a young man would travel in order to make a name for himself, and come back only after having gained some valuable experiences. While the prototypical example of this practice is the quest of Sunjata recounted in the Sunjata Epic (Chapter 3), less heroic youth also regularly travel for a few years before settling down and starting a family. In fact, these trips allow them to acquire the financial means required in order to get married. Many of the 25-to 45-year-old males I knew had spent at least one agricultural season elsewhere, and some as many as five years; while many of the men who stay away for shorter periods of time remained in Mali, others had travelled to and worked in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mauretania, and Libya. More than a few had also, unsuccessfully, attempted to reach Europe. The search of these men is as much about gaining economic advantages as intellectual ones—the acquisition of knowledge or experience being a valued outcome too.

Obviously, a key difference between the heroic ideal of going out in search of knowledge and my own situation was that the former is primarily a male ideal, and that I am female.¹² Traditionally, women do not travel as widely as men do in search of economic or other opportunities. Female migration in/from Mande can take a number of forms, but rarely does it involve a (young) woman

striking out on her own to try and make a (temporary) living elsewhere, as is the case for many young men. However, there are a number of specific modes of mobility available to women in Mande. Young women, like men, also feel the financial demands of marriage, particularly with the practice of “seeking utensils” (*minanw nyini*); many newly-married women I knew had spent a few months away from their husband’s family to gather the required household objects needed to complete their marriage. Most frequently, they spent this time back at their father’s compound, but if a young woman deemed it too difficult to make enough money or otherwise acquire what she needed there, she might temporarily stay with a family member in Bamako or another village instead.

Women can and frequently do move around Mande and beyond, but more than for men, their trajectories are informed by their particular individual, familial, and marriage histories that provide linkages with some places but not others. My friend BD, for example, surprised me one day by saying she had never been to Kr SS, which is one of a handful of villages in easy walking distance of Krs.¹³ The reason this came up was that a mutual friend of ours had recently married in Kr SS, and with two more friends, BD and I were making plans to go visit her. In the end, BD didn’t end up coming to Kr SS with us because her husband did not want her to go. His refusal to let her go for the day¹⁴, and her compliance in deciding to stay behind, points to the fact that Kr SS is not really part of BD’s personal landscape—she might now have a friend here, but she has no indisputable reason to be allowed to visit there whenever she wishes.¹⁵ By contrast, it is considered very bad form for a husband to prevent his wife from visiting with her own family (which might include her father’s compound, or the house of the woman who raised her if this is elsewhere), especially for good reasons such as showing off a new baby. Many of the women I came to know travelled not infrequently to the places and people they were connected with, for occasions such as attending a funeral, presenting condolences, participating in a wedding, or also just to visit back home. In fact, my friends seemed to enjoy taking me along on such trips, at least partly to show me off to family members elsewhere.

In speaking about their own or others' travels (including mine), people often remarked, "if you did not get anything, at least you saw something" (*n'i ma do soro, i be do ye*). In fact, people would often use this phrase if they wanted to encourage me to take advantage of special events or the chance to seek out particular individuals when the opportunity arose. I was somewhat surprised at the relative ease of going places to seek out knowledge, because in my earlier fieldwork experience, I had often felt bound to the compound I lived on. This time around, however, I had been introduced to the village as a whole as "everybody's guest" (see below), and people were not shy in letting me know of events or places they thought I should go to. As with individual friends who liked to show me off to family members living elsewhere, my fellow villagers liked me to be present for "official" occasions where the village was presenting itself. Additionally, my main "host" (*jatigike*) in Krs, a somewhat younger and definitely more cosmopolitan head of the compound than many others I knew, had no problem with my going places. So if a friend of mine wanted to visit her parents at the other side of the river and asked if I would come too, I would happily tag along if I thought such a trip would be interesting. When a few women in Ksm announced they would make a special trip to go pray in Mnf (the oldest mosque of Mande), they had no problem in having me join them. When the River County Festival would be held in a neighboring village, it was expected that I would go there, too, along with the theater group, griots, hunter delegation, and anybody else who was interested. In fact, this is how I ended up as a member of the "Krs delegation" to the installation ceremonies for the new village chief of N, which forms the context of the vignette that opens Chapter 4.

Besides taking advantage of opportunities as they arose, there were two more systematic ways in which I consciously set out to employ the strategy of "going out in search of knowledge" as a research technique. The first was that besides having Krs as the primary site of my fieldwork, I also established a home base in a village across the Niger River, Ksm, which I had been introduced to in 2004 by a colleague at the University of Mali, Bamako, and where I had spent a few weeks then. Having a foot in this other village proved significantly easier

than I had expected, thanks to the installation of a region-wide cellular network in the course of 2005. This meant that I could keep in touch with people on either side of the River much more easily, and we could arrange how and when to meet up. The two villages I had selected formed a useful counterpart to one another, in that they exemplified salient regional differences in terms of village foundation (Keita versus Camara), religious composition, and political situation. Being at home in two places not only made me more aware of the distinctive issues in each, but also allowed me to grasp more firmly the importance of regional integration and the many linkages between people across large spaces. Some of these linkages also brought me back in touch with the people I had known during my fieldwork in 1999-2000 in the Mande Mountain region, and some of these people continued to teach me things this time around.

A second way in which I used the technique of “going out in search of knowledge” to systematically explore a specific topic in a larger regional setting was with regards to *finaw*. Upon arriving in Krs, I realized that one of the unique features of this village was that it incorporated a large neighborhood of griots known as *finaw*—griots that have been virtually ignored in the literature on Mande artisans.¹⁶ Yet their presence in Krs was quite prominent, and I was intrigued by the fact that while endogamy had been recently abolished for most *siya*, it was still in place as far as *finaw* were concerned. Thus over a period of about two months, after the agricultural season was over, I made a point of paying short visits to most of the villages where *finaw* were present. Specifically, I accompanied a Krs *finaw*, VC, on brief visits to his “uncles” in other villages, to learn more about *finaw* social position and marriage strategies. What made these visits successful, even if they were short in duration, was that I could tap into VC’s network, and rely on people’s relationship with him, instead of with me personally, to talk to me or show me things.¹⁷

While *going* places was easier than I expected, being further away from the two villages that served as my home bases made some interactions much trickier. The most pressing of these was the issue was of how much, if anything, to pay for information. Particularly in the case of “festivities,” such as the cere-

monies associated with the installation of a new village chief or religious festivals on the occasion of Islamic Holidays, I had to contend with griots (either *jeliw* or *finaw*) who were invariably present for the event and regularly part of the proceedings. Griots expect to be compensated for their words, specifically those of praise, as I explain more fully in the next chapter.

The exchange of words for money is hard to negotiate because the relation between these two is so fluid. Irvine (1989) was one of the first to argue that speech acts are caught up in the political economy precisely by highlighting the ways Senegal's Wolof griots are compensated for their talk. Since then, the entanglement of various forms of speech with monetary compensation and economic spheres of exchange has become common knowledge. A recent study of griots in Mali indeed highlights the importance of an exchange of money for words as the basis of what it means to be a griot or do griot work (Roth 2008). However, my concern here with the fraught exchanges of words for money is practical rather than theoretical, involving my decisions about how to deal with requests for money, on the part of griots and others, over the course of my fieldwork. On one end of the scale, the *finamusow* I knew in Krs would gladly accept 50 or 100 *cf*a (about 1 US cent) for a praise song at a local wedding, and others would go to the trouble of recording themselves on a radio cassette to present as a gift to one of their favorite patrons, even without the expectation of much compensation at the moment. On the other end of the spectrum, griots have been known to spurn gifts they consider too small, even shaming the donor by giving *him* (or her) money instead; other griots have received such expensive gifts as cars and airplanes for their words. While I had no problem paying them a few coins in return for their praise songs, just as everybody else did, I did resent the attempts of some griots to make me pay high "fees" for recording their words that seemed based on unrealistic expectations of both my financial situation as well as the importance of these words for my research. My solution, then, was to give to griots only when I had to, and not take them up on their offers to make recordings for me in return for pay. In those cases when I came to an event where griots would perform publicly, I often refrained from making recordings myself, and

opted instead for borrowing the cassette from one of the locals who I knew would also be recording, to make a copy for myself later on.

The relationship between knowledge and money was less of an issue where I knew the people involved, but not because I did not have to “pay” them. In fact, according to the Mande ideology of knowledge transmission, all important knowledge should be “paid for.” Usually this payment occurs over time, in the form of small gifts exchanged between a student and the teacher, between youngsters and elders, and is not directly tied to the exchange of any particular piece of information.¹⁸ In my IRB protocol, I describe the exchange of knowledge and money as a “symbolic payment” of one for the other, most commonly in the form of a gift of 10 kola nuts or its monetary equivalent (250 to 500 *francs cfa* depending on the quality, or less than 50 cents or one dollar, respectively). Yet the reality is more complex. The more I accompanied the people I knew on visits to friends or family, or went with them on other errands, the more I was struck by how frequently they would give very small gifts to people they knew or who made good recipients for “alms”¹⁹ like this, such as mothers of twins. These experiences made me much more inclined to lubricate my own social relations with small gifts of money, without thinking about who would give me what in return. I also began to appreciate that when elderly women came up to me to say that they had not chewed kola all day (which means that you better give them some, or some small change in the absence of the real thing), I was being incorporated into their realm of sociability instead of being treated as an outsider. Over time, I established good working relationships with many people. Even if I never paid for information, some of my most meaningful relationships with people would not have been possible without some material exchanges to solidify our social bonds, even if the monetary value of these exchanges is minor even by local standards. In fact, I came to realize that giving away small change to older acquaintances, making sure to bring back presents for people on our compound whenever I had travelled somewhere, helping out financially with funerals of people I was close to were not so much predicated on me being a wealthy foreigner, but also on ex-

pectations for social relationships among people living together and those related to being a guest.

STRANGERS, GUESTS, AND HOSTS: FIELDWORK AND HOSPITALITY

During my fieldwork I was not only a “student” in search of knowledge, but also a guest/stranger (*lolan*) in the homes and villages of my hosts. And maybe, I sometimes was a poet as well. In Jordan, friends of the anthropologist Andrew Shryock would regularly remind him of the dangerous and dark sides of hospitality by quoting the proverb, “a guest is like a poet” (Shryock 2004:36). The dangers of guests-as-poets, according to Shryock, lies in their potential to be critical of the hospitality received, snubbing any shortcomings in the quantity and quality of food. Moreover, there is the possibility that guests will air “dirty laundry” they have been made privy to. The practical implications of people’s efforts—which were not frequent, but nevertheless clearly felt—to steer me away from “dirty laundry” kinds of knowledge often became sources of knowledge, sometimes in unexpected ways.

First of all, noticing what people did and did not want me to see or hear was obviously interesting in and of itself. My appreciation for the tension between what people hold inside versus what they present on the outside, and the related theme of (in)visibility and (in)audibility partly stems from observations of this kind (cf. Chapters 5 and 7 for a more detailed discussion of these themes). Secondly, quarrels and fights (mostly of the verbal variety) were among the main events people did not want me to witness; an unexpected consequence of this was that I did some of my best informal interviews during fights! Whenever a quarrel got underway on our compound (or elsewhere), the yelling would immediately draw a crowd of both bystanders and those with ties to either of the quarreling parties seeking to break up the fight and disperse on-lookers as soon as they could. When I was attracted by the shouting—and even worse, seemed quite interested in what people were fighting about—someone on the compound would almost invariably come up to me in what felt as a clear attempt to distract me. Their “distractions” were well tailored to capture my interest, though: “Did I ever

tell you about my great-grandfather who was the first imam here?” “Let’s go, I have something to show you.”

“A guest is like a hot meal; her (or his) host should cool it off”

In Mande, like in Jordan, the dangerous nature of guests is expressed in proverbs, such as “a guest is like a hot meal, and her (or his) host should cool it off” (Jansen and Zobel 2002). A guest/stranger—two sides of the same coin, and expressed in Maninka with the term *lolan*, from *lu-ntan*, “without a compound”—is dangerous because he (most often) disrupts the normal order of things, and makes for a “hot” situation. The hosts’ task is thus to “cool off” the disruptive “hotness” caused by the stranger/guests, which is done by settling him or her, allowing him to wash and eat, and in so doing incorporate him in the household at least temporarily. The fundamental ambiguity regarding the stranger/guest is proclaimed in another proverb, “a stranger/guest is welcome only on troubled days” (Bird and Kendall 1980). Sometimes the intervention of the stranger is necessary to bring about much needed change; at other times, his coming is merely disruptive.

Proverbs aside, hospitality is widely practiced and highly valued in Mande. This too accords with Shryock’s observation that his hosts’ stated ambivalence about hospitality was regularly voiced amid wonderfully generous displays of hospitality. In fact, Shryock finds that the idealized presentation of “hospitality” as firmly located in the past and no longer attainable in today’s world is a defining characteristic of Bedouin ideas about hospitality (Shryock 2008). In a final similarity, his Bedouin interlocutors also understood hospitality as “a genealogical endowment and a physical compulsion” (2008:406), which I would argue is the case in Mande as well.

Several of the more specific aspects of Mande hospitality must be noted as well, particularly for what they tell us about the political aspects of hospitality (Amselle 1996). In Mande, a stranger/guest (*lolan*) is always the *lolan* of *somebody*. One practical implication of this is that I, too, was by definition bound to a particular host (family), who is ultimately responsible for whatever their *lolan* does; I discuss momentarily how I managed this. A more theoretical implication

is that stranger/guest is a relational term, which makes for a flexible situation in which strangers/guests are bound to hosts at different levels, and people can be hosts and guests/strangers simultaneously; I analyze the intersection of the host—guest/stranger dynamic with conflicting interpretations of history and claims for land and natural resources in Chapter 7.

For now, I want to note that the term for “host,” *jatigi*, operates in a number of domains. First, a *jatigi* is indeed a “host,” someone responsible for a particular guest/stranger the host has received in his or her house, or has allowed to settle on land provided by the host. However, the term *jatigi* also refers to the “patron” (male or female) of individual artisans and particular artisan families/lineages. The distinction between patrons and their artisans, moreover, replicates (without being identical to) that between masters and their former slaves—*tigiw* (“owners”) versus *jonw* (“slaves”). Finally, the distinction between hosts and guests/strangers operates in the context of political power—but with a twist. Throughout Mande and neighboring areas, political power is considered to adhere to “strangers” coming from elsewhere, who are thought to have forcefully overpowered the region’s previous populations characterized as “of the land” (Amselle 1996; Jansen 1996a; Luning 1997).

“I would like to give an account of what I have come here to do”

All guests give an account of what they have come to do, even if the objective of their visit is well-known. Thus, on the occasion of accompanying a new wife to her husband’s family, the delegation from the husband’s family explains that they have come “to receive something from the family,” whereupon a spokesperson of the former will inquire, “what is this thing that you seek, because there are many beautiful things here.” All along, it is clear to all concerned why the delegation—whose visit has been carefully negotiated for weeks if not months—is there and what they want. Moreover, guests are never asked to “give an account” of why they have come until after they have been properly refreshed with a drink of water, fed, and given an opportunity to bathe and rest—in other words, by the time they finally account for their visits, most people will already have heard the visit’s

objective through informal channels. The linguistic practices involved in giving an account thus contribute to a sense that one doesn't know what other people have on their minds (or inside their stomachs) unless they specifically state this, which I come back to in Chapter 4. For now, I want to stress that I had to "give an account" (*dantigelike*) of what I had come to do, because this is what guests do. From the outset, then, it was clear that my interactions with people would be framed not only as a teacher-student relation, but also in terms of the mutual obligations of hosts and guests.

The particularities of my giving an account also helped establish what kind of guest I was, or more precisely, *whose* guest. I gave my first account to YD, who would become my host for our time in Krs, in the summer of 2004, when I told him that I was searching for a good place to continue my research on Maninka language and culture. One reason for selecting Krs as a primary field site, and choosing Y's compound as my host was that this was the native village of my namesake, SD, and her sister, SD, who were two of my main consultants for my research in 1999-2000.²⁰ In the summer of 2003, I checked out numerous possibilities for the main site from which to conduct my dissertation fieldwork, and in the process gave many "accounts" or had someone else make them on my behalf. During the account given at Y's compound (and elsewhere) at that time, I had been accompanied by a classificatory son of my host from Nrn, who stressed in his account not only my good character but also the responsibility involved in taking me on as a guest, since I would be an extension of my host family in Nrn. In fact, in these visits and accounts I often felt like I was being "exchanged" from my original host to a new one, along networks of exchange that had been established quite independently of me.²¹

My original hosts in 1999-2000 had made it quite clear to YD (and other expected hosts) that hosting me and my family should be considered a weighty responsibility, not so much because of me, but because of my relationship with my original hosts. However, I stressed to Y in subsequent visits in early 2005 that I was interested in learning about life in the whole village, not just on his compound. Y himself, a much younger and more modern compound head than my

host in Nrn, also seemed eager to establish that I was a guest of the village as a whole, not just his compound. The fact that a host is ultimately responsible for his or her guest meant that hosting our family of three people would also be a burden, despite the fact that I contributed financially to the household where we lived. Maybe YD also feared the suspicion of others that he was benefitting from our presence more than he should. In any case, he was as much interested in “sharing” me as a guest with the village at large as I was to be considered “everybody’s guest” and not be tied to one particular family and lineage. As one indication of this, we decided that I should “give an account” to the village as a whole.

On the day after my arrival in Krs, YD thus informed the *musokuntigi*, or “leader of the women”²² of my arrival and asked her to call a meeting of all the town’s women for the next evening. After the 8 PM nightly prayer on my third day in Krs, as agreed with the *musokuntigi*, YD and I went to village square that was used for public events, where we found a group of women sitting on mats in front of the one of two shops lining the village square. Because it was the height of the rainy season, only 30 to 40 women were present; the *musokuntigi* explained that the others were too tired after a long day of weeding. Nevertheless, she thought that there were at least one or two women from all the families living in town, so most people still would get to hear through family members or friends what I would have to say. YD introduced me to those who were present, and then let me give my account. Giving an account always goes through a spokesperson, and in this case, YD was mine. Thus I addressed my account to him, speaking in Maninka, and through him I also addressed everybody else: “Y, I am here to do research on the language and ways of life of people here, because my university, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in America, has sent me here. I would like to get to know everybody and learn from them, for example, how the women take care of their children.” After my short speech, YD addressed the *musokuntigi* to repeat what I had just said, after which the *musokuntigi* addressed Y to say that she had understood what he (and I) had said—that I was here to live among them and learn from them. She also said I was welcome, and that everybody

should try to help me with my work as much as they could; in turn, I should also help them, by not forgetting about them after I left.

My account to the leader of the women not only positioned me as a particular kind of guest—of the village at large, but one who would be closest to other women by virtue of my own gender—but also gave the *musokuntigi* an opportunity to spell out what was expected of me as a guest. Most importantly, these responsibilities entailed “remembering” the villagers, particularly its women, after I had left. That is, she positioned our host-guest relationship as a potentially enduring one—as is the ideal for social relations in Mande (as well as elsewhere, cf. Munn 1992)). She also stressed the obligation this relationship would mean for me, which would ideally materialize in the form of future financial support to the village. More immediately, she told me I should go help the women’s agricultural work group, or *ton*, which would convene the day after tomorrow at her home. Turning to me, YD repeated what the *musokuntigi* had just told me and the other women; in return, I asked YD to tell the *musokuntigi* and all the women to thank them for their hospitality and help; YD repeated this to the *musokuntigi*, who repeated it for all to hear and to acknowledge and to accept my gratitude and YD then repeated this back to me a final time. Following the meeting, I talked to a few of the women, and promised that I would show up again for the meeting of their *ton*.

The importance of small things

If my involvement with women’s agricultural work was directly in response to a request by the “leader of the women” that I as a guest of the village be involved in its activities, I also pursued opportunities for systemic engagement with a broad range of persons through activities of my own choosing. Over the duration of my fieldwork I observed, recorded, and participated in infant care practices (Gottlieb 2004), as part of my original research design.²³ The “small things” of daily and incidental care practices for infants—as well as the subtle differences therein between families and individuals and also the contested nature of changes over

time—proved to be a fruitful context from which to start to appreciate the local salience of ideologies and practices of *kolosi*.

The routine that I established early on was to go visit the local midwife every two to five days, to find out if any new babies had been born, and to whom. Then I would visit the compounds where there was a newborn baby, and spend some time with the baby, its mother, and any other people present.²⁴ Over time, pregnant women came to expect that I would visit them after they gave birth. Most mothers, who are not supposed to leave their house until the “coming out” on the 8th day of the birth, seemed glad for the company and were usually up for some conversation. In total, I recorded 85 births, all but one of them of a living child, for the 14 consecutive months I lived in Krs in 2005-6 and I visited all of their families at home within the first week.²⁵

The visits to the compounds of newborns were mostly unstructured, and I always ended up learning different little things—and over time started to realize precisely that such “small things” were an important, if uncertain, arena for paying attention. Originally, one of the objectives for these visits was to find out when the *denkunli* (“hair shaving”) ceremony would be held, as this was a ritual I was particularly interested in, involving as it does people from different *siya* alongside Islamic clerics in the establishment of a newborn’s personhood. However, my question about attending this ceremony more often than not was met with the response that the family would not be able to host a “*denkunli*” anytime soon.²⁶ Instead, I could be present when they would “shave the hair” (*ka den kun li*). In attending these low-key events for practically all newborns whose births I recorded, I was introduced to another domain constituted by small yet significant practices, on a much smaller scale than I had expected, but also with much greater variety in the minute details of the tasks at hand. From finding somebody to shave the baby’s hair to putting some coins in the baby’s wash water, and from washing the newly bald baby to having an older sibling carry it on her back for the first time—all of these are seemingly quotidian, yet potentially very significant small actions.

At the same time, there was no consensus as to whether such practices—preparing *dege*, presenting gifts of kola or money, rolling the infant’s hair and umbilical stump into a tight ball (Chapter 4)—were to be considered meaningful and if and how they should be carried out, if at all. These practices, while small and seemingly trivial, were nevertheless highly meaningful, if not so much for what they signified, but for the uncertainties and discussions they sparked. The young women whose infants I had come to visit were often acutely aware of the wide range of acceptable or required practices in regards to newborn care. If they often expressed uncertainty about which “little details” were necessary or appropriate and which were not, this was because of a keen sense that the way things had been done in their childhood compound might well not be the same as they were on the husband’s compound. The death of an older woman on the compound that now leaves someone else in charge might also lead to modification of the compound’s little rituals for a newborn, as might the move of a household to a new part of town (Chapter 7) or potentially a new consensus about what should be done and what is better left undone. For example, in some families, an older woman would chew up a piece of kola nut—elder women often received kola nuts as “payment” for their attendance at a hair shaving—and stick it on the infant’s forehead. While most of the older women I talked to agreed that this used to be done in the past, only some of them insist on still doing it themselves. Among those that do so, there is again no agreement as to whether carrying out this practice should be done for the sake of “tradition,” or if it also constitutes a meaningful act in and of itself. Whereas some of them argue that putting a piece of chewed-up kola on a baby’s forehead and observing how long it stays put can be taken as a sign of the child’s expected lifespan, others have their doubts. As the moment of my fieldwork was marked by the proposition of stricter interpretations of Islam, many people were actively questioning and reconsidering whether many of the practices transmitted from the “ancestors” were still meaningful.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined my research methodology in the field and the way my own education of attention—as an anthropologist wishing to learn about social life in another place—became an object of attention for those among whom my family and I lived. Moreover, the fact that my own actions and peculiarities were so closely and skillfully observed is testament to the importance attached locally to the capacity for *kolosi*, which is fostered in children from a young age through an education of attention.

In highlighting the lack of consensus and potential for ambiguity and change in regards to the small things of infant care practices, this chapter has also touched on a key aspect of *kolosi* that recurs throughout the dissertation, namely the fundamental openness and social nature of paying attention as embodied and theorized by people in Mande. In subsequent chapters, I discuss such subtle signs as a broken corn stalk lying across the road: how and why does one know to take this as a sign, and on what or whose authority? The conflicting attitudes towards the significance of various practices associated with shaving a newborn's hair are a first indication that people in Mali's Mande plateau region were grappling with issues of which things can be said to signify, and how their potential for significance might change over time. In the following chapters I do not aim to answer such questions as much as I aim to show the contexts in which they are being asked, the discourses evoked to come up with convincing answers, and how the notion of *kolosi* functions as a semiotic ideology that conditions many of the interpretive practices and political strategies surrounding these kinds of moral quandaries.

¹ I think the reason I framed my confusion in these terms, at the time, was because of the influence exerted on my thinking by the discussion about the merits or flaws of Griaule's famous "conversations with Ogotomelli," which gets played out, partly, in similar terms (Van Beek 1991, Clifford 1988). From my

current perspective I would say, with regards to the Ogotomelli issue, that it is somewhat beside the point to try and determine whether or not knowledge is idiosyncratic. More importantly, I would argue against the tendency to equate idiosyncrasy with a lack of authenticity. Rather than dismissing the “conversations” as the fabrications of a particularly imaginative Dogon man or co-constructed knowledge based as much on Griaule’s questions and apparent interests as on Ogotomelli’s “real” knowledge of his society, I would argue that this creativity could be precisely the point. When we shift our attention away from “cultural logic” as a pre-existing font of meaning towards the processes by which knowledge is constantly being created and re-created, Ogotomelli’s conversations with Griaule would appear to be a possibly useful illustration of how these processes worked in a concrete case.

² There was one particularly sad death on our compound only a few days after this conversation. As of this writing, though, she herself is still, fortunately, alive.

³ One of my friends (S)—who was herself injured in the accident—recounted the accident to me and others about two weeks after it happened (in Bamako):

“There were eight women from Ksm in the Sotrama along with three of their children. All of us were going to Bamako to sell pots. As soon as we reached [the outskirts of Bamako] the sotrama gets into an accident with another sotrama. Three of the women end up with severe injuries and two of them are still recovering in Bamako with wounds to their head and leg respectively. One of the severely injured women is home but she still cannot walk all that well. My own injury is on my side; I can do all my regular work and activities but still cannot look over my shoulder because then my side hurts.”

Numerous people explained to me the accident was a clear sign that the *jinaw* of the clay pit wanted something from them. Otherwise something even worse would happen. The accident was pretty bad as it was because it involved so many women from one village and some of them are still not home almost two months later. Also, my friends stated, it is significant that all those women were going to Bamako to sell their pots: they were hurt specifically in their capacity as potters.

The accident was the direct cause for the decision of all Ksm’s potters to bring another sacrifice for the clay pit. Sacrifices for the clay pit regularly happened in the past, often on a yearly basis, but I had never observed one or heard about it taking place in the periods of my fieldwork. Indeed, some scholars suspect that the practice of doing these sacrifices for the clay pit has been abandoned altogether (Frank 1998). Yet the Sotrama accident spurred concrete plans to have a renewed sacrifice for the clay pit in Ksm. When I was in Ksm in 2007 I witnessed many of the preparations for the sacrifice, although not the actual event, which took place after I had left. The plan was for all working potters to put money together to buy a sheep to give as a sacrifice to the clay pit, but it was delayed multiple times because people disagreed about the amount of money that should be contributed and by whom exactly. However, the women on the com-

pound where I lived were confident that the sacrifice would be done sooner rather than later. They explained that depending on the amount of money collected, they would most likely get a sheep. This will be killed by the imam and prepared by the potters themselves, who will then eat the meal together, it in the vicinity of the clay pit. At this occasion the young women who are not *numu* by birth but are now working as potters—like my friend S—will be integrated into the community of potters. They will be officially introduced to the *numumusokuntigi*, the old KD.

⁴ The recent debates about changes in the Family Code, which would have given women equal rights as men, illustrate the prevalence of patriarchal ideals in contemporary Malian society. Led by Islamic clerics, thousands of people in Bamako came out to protest the proposed changes in the Code, for example the statement that husband and wife should support one another, instead of the older formulation that the husband should provide for his wife and the wife should obey her husband.

⁵ The critique against what people perceived as “prolonged nursing” forms an interesting counterpart to Dettweiler’s work on breastfeeding in Bamako, based on fieldwork in the early 1980s (Dettwyler 1988). While prolonged nursing, along with sexual abstinence, and (as a result) widely spaced pregnancies may have been the norm in the past, this seems to be changing. Specifically, people—mostly other women of the same age—objected to mothers nursing their children beyond the age of two or two and a half, for three reasons: 1) according to local explications, the Qur’an says a woman has to wean her daughter at 1 year, 2 months, and a son at 1 year, 3 months; 2) a child who nurses beyond the age of 3 will become a “moron” (*naloma*—see Chapter 4) 3) instead of nursing the current child, the mother should try to conceive its younger sibling.

⁶ The one household task that I never took on, yet was also never criticized for not doing, was cooking. We ate on the compound where we lived, where the wife of the elder and younger brother took turns cooking for all people on the compound (mostly around 20 people). I provided the grain for the meals to the head of the compound, and gave the woman whose cooking turn it was that day money to buy the ingredients for the sauce. The fact that was never criticized for this construction may have been because it was obviously doubtful that I’d actually be able to cook for everyone on the compound); to the contrary, people appreciated the fact that we were eating with, and the same food as, them. Moreover, most comments were brought on by the fact that they saw my husband doing tasks he was not supposed to carry out, such as washing the baby, whereas he was never seen cooking.

⁷ Despite my best intentions to the contrary, it is also more than likely that I sometimes unwittingly overstepped local bounds of how one can go about searching for knowledge.

⁸ On occasion, my interlocutors and I *did* employ the discourse of *ko nye nyini* to describe my research activities. This was mostly in the context of me travelling to another village with the specific goal of talking to someone there or observing a special event.

⁹ See Schulz for the importance of *baro* in the aptly titled article “The world is made by talk” (Schulz 2002). Referring to the well-known Mande proverb cited in the title (*duniya ye baro ye*, in Bamana) Schulz notes that “conversation [baro] is the central medium and expression of commensality” and that “[Baro] designates talk-as-action and points to its socially constitutive quality.”

¹⁰ I use initials for all of my interlocutors quoted or described in the dissertation; because of the limited number of both first and last names, this method better protects the confidentiality of people; for every pseudonym I could come up with, I (or someone else in Mande) would easily know one or more people actually named this way, which would potentially be misleading by seeming to attribute certain words or actions to people who were not their actors.

My own initials when I appear in a transcript are SD.

¹¹ In general, it seemed rare for other students/apprentices to openly flaunt the rules of this educational system. This might be because the consequences of this would be dire, as illustrated by the story I recorded about a girl in Nrn who was learning to be a potter from her mother. Because the girl repeatedly misbehaved towards her mother, people told me, she was killed by the very material of the craft she was trying to learn, namely the clay at the clay pit. The story I was told goes as follows:

“The clay has killed a young girl that was misbehaving towards her mother. Her mother woke her up in the early morning to fetch her some clay, and as soon as she entered the clay pit the clay fell on her and killed her like that. This was because the girl had sworn against her mother. You see, the clay does not fall on somebody just for nothing. When you are a real numu, you know that the work of the numuya [being numu] is difficult.”

¹² A way of dealing with this discrepancy was that people would assume it was in fact my husband who was travelling for work/research, as I noted above.

¹³ I use abbreviations for the places described in the dissertation except Bamako. While it is common in most (mostly European and African) scholarship on Mande to identify places (and indeed people) by name, I do not follow this convention in order to protect confidentiality.

¹⁴ Women like BD would frequently have me ask their husbands for permission to go places they wanted to go, but as this case shows, I was not necessarily as successful in obtaining permission as my friends hoped I would be.

¹⁵ Lest BD’s husband be considered a brute here, let me say that I do think that BD will be able to visit her friend in Kr SS at some point (and maybe already has by now). At the time, however, he said he did not want her to walk so far with a young baby in tow.

¹⁶ Two of the few studies are those by Conrad (1995) and by Janson (2006).

¹⁷ The same was true when I went, for example, to a funeral with a brother or son of one of my hosts (either in Krs or Kns), or when I went home to her family of origin with a woman whose husband lived in Krs (or Kns).

¹⁸ An exception here is the procurement of “power objects” such as *basiw* or *boliw*, which need to be paid for, even if in an “installment loan.” Falling behind on the payments for a *basi* endangers the buyer, because the *basi* is thought to become impatient and start “fighting” (*kele ke*) his new owner. An partly unpaid *basi* was said to be responsible for the death of a young man in Krs, and after his death, his family went to great trouble to get the rest of the loan paid for fear that there might be more victims. When the father of the young man died shortly after his son, at least some people attributed this second death to the dissatisfaction of the son’s *basi* as well.

¹⁹ Some of the discourse about these small gifts was in terms of the Islamic notion of “alms,” or *saraka*, which can be given to a recipient of one’s own choice at a moment of one’s own choosing (as opposed to the concept of tithe/tenth, or *zakat*, which is given at a fixed moment and an officially designated recipient. Many other exchanges, however, are not linked to either concept, but are part of what it means to be related to others and part of the social fabric of one’s community.

²⁰ I received the name SD early on during my fieldwork in 1999-2000, after a short stint of being AF in 1998. The name was given to me by my host in Sb in honor of his mother, SD; moreover, SD’s eldest sister was the wife of my host in Nrn. Because the main village of my 2005-7 fieldwork was the native village of my original namesake SD there was no question that I would retain my name here. In the other main site of my fieldwork, however, I had originally agreed (during a first visit in 2003) to be named after the “leader of the potters,” KD, but I could not get used to the name and officially reverted back to SD after about two weeks. This turned out to be a good decision, as the linkages between the two villages and the larger regional networks in which people in Mande move proved to be more extensive than I had assumed, so that having two different names would have been confusing.

²¹ To escape feeling like an exchange object being passed on to my original hosts, I also established contacts with potential hosts in other villages outside the network of my hosts and without their help. For example, through a professor at the University of Mali I arranged for my family and one of the professor’s students to visit some other villages. In the end, I also selected a village I came to know in this way as a site for my fieldwork: Ksm. However, the fact that I was introduced in this village through academic channels did little or nothing to make me less of a guest. Moreover, I soon realized that the networks linking Mande places and people together through a multitude of linkages made me part of many of the same networks as people in Nrn, Krs, and Ksm.

²² The *musokuntigi* is the oldest woman who is married into one of the lineages from whose ranks a village chief can be named. Only women married into these families can aspire to the rank of *musokuntigi*, which for the rest is based on the relative ages of those women who are eligible. Obviously, the lineages that can supply a village chief are those that are considered the “noble” or “ruling” families of a village (but not necessarily its first residents). It is understood that women who are allowed to marry into these lineages are of similar

rank, even though they might not have been born into a “ruling” lineage themselves. Interestingly, it is the woman’s married affiliation to a lineage that counts, not her lineage through her father.

²³ There are numerous reasons for focusing on childcare practices, not least the fact that this focus allowed me to observe and participate in a small number of selected activities in a systematic manner and across a broad subset of the village population was an equally important consideration. For these same reasons, I was eager to take up the *musokuntigi*’s suggestion that I become part of the women’s agricultural *ton*. As I suspected, working with the *ton* proved very useful in building up a network of people with whom I could be involved over an extended period of time and in a more or less structured manner. Besides agricultural work (mainly weeding, rice cultivation, and husking corn), the women of the *ton* also organized a rotation credit group and a biannual festivity where they called upon non-resident griots or other performers to come to town and perform.

²⁴ Sometimes, if it was less than 24 hours after the birth, I would still find mother and child in the newborn ward. In that case, I would chat with the mother, take a look at the baby, and ask if it would be okay if I came by in the next few days to come see them again—and if so, where they lived. Otherwise, I would find out through the midwife’s log that a particular woman had had a baby, learn from the women at our compound where she lived, and visit her there. In almost all occasions, the women on our compound would know immediately whom I was talking about if I mentioned the woman’s name and the fact that she had just delivered, because they would have obviously seen her walk about town pregnant, and over time, I myself got better at knowing which women and girls were pregnant and where they lived.

²⁵ I did not continue to record births or make a point of visiting all newborns when I was back in Krs in early 2007 nor in the summer of 2009, because I knew that I could not make systematic observations over these shorter intervals.

²⁶ A full-fledged *denkunli*, or “hair shaving” ceremony for the arrival of a newborn, ideally is celebrated with the slaughter of a goat, the preparation of a festive meal, the presentation of rolls of cloth and childcare necessities, the presence of male and female “griots” (*jeliw* or *finaw*), and nowadays likely the provision of musical ambiance from a portable sound machine as well. A ceremony like this is a huge undertaking, and was consequently rare in the villages where I worked, particularly in the busy (and lean) times of the agricultural year. However, *denkunli* are much more prevalent in Bamako, where more people have somewhat greater access to cash, and even in the village of Bcm only 15 km from Krs, but home to a greater number of slightly wealthier villagers, mostly because of greater diversification of their livelihoods. Regardless of whether a full *denkunli* will be held later, on the 8th day of the child’s birth a small group of family members will get together early in the morning to shave the baby’s first hair. In most cases, this is also the time when the baby will officially receive its name, being spoken into its ears by a grandmother, grandfather, or its own father, or (very rarely) the Imam. However, in some families the name giving takes place sooner, sometimes as early as the day after the birth.

CHAPTER THREE

ASPECTS OF MANDE TIME-SPACE: HISTORICAL IMAGINATION, LANDSCAPE, AND ISLAM

Socio-cultural practices do not simply go on in or through time and space but they also constitute the space time in which they go on. In this sense, actors are concretely producing their own spacetime. (Munn 1992:11)

The regional specialist is aware that research has not consisted of an encounter between a fieldworker and the 'Other,' but the nuanced continuation and modification of a relation between an approach delineating a region and the people who live within it. (Fardon 1990:25).

Friends and acquaintances would often quiz me with questions as to whether or not I had noticed certain things, thus simultaneously testing if I was properly “paying attention” and subtly instructing me to do so. As I gradually came to appreciate the importance of “paying attention” (*kolosi*), I also realized that many of the things I was asked to pay attention to were related to details of the surrounding landscape—the roots of a particular tree, a termite mound, a bend in the river, a field, an abandoned house, a crossroads, a kind of brush. This chapter takes up the insistence of my interlocutors on the physical and social landscape of Mande as a particularly salient object of attention.

My argument is that the Mande landscape is one in which the past and present co-mingle, and that material practices of paying attention allow people to

bring into relief the various layers of significance embedded in it. Moreover, I propose that the ideologies and practices of *kolosi* needed to attend to the histories embodied in features of the Mande landscape also illuminate central aspects of Mande history as recounted by griots. While the relevance of griot-based forms of history—which I call “history through words”—is well established in the scholarly literature on the region, the role of landscape as an alternative mode of historical imagination—which I call “history in landscape”—is much less appreciated. Crucially, the co-presence of past and present is as much evidenced in people’s experience of current landscapes as it is in ongoing social relations and identities based in history. This makes both the landscape of history as well as the histories recited by griots ideal objects for paying attention, because it is only through sustained attention and careful observation that the multiple layers of history which are invisibly present in the everyday lifeworld of social and natural interactions can be discerned.

The historical imagination of Islam in Mande—as both an ancient religion in the region and a relatively recent presence—provides an excellent example of how “history in landscape” and “history through words” alike construe the past and present as co-present and demand perceptive attention to detail in order bring out the salience of multiple, complicated strands of history. It illustrates the salience of the lived-in landscape as a mode of historical imagination in which markers such as mosques reveal the multiple trajectories of Islam in Mande and the continued reworkings of what it means to be a Muslim. Moreover, this example makes clear that the different modes of historical imagination operate on a continuum instead of being radically opposed or entirely separate.

SEEING WITH TWO EYES:

PAYING ATTENTION TO “HISTORY IN LANDSCAPE” IN MANDE



1: Wooden platform called *ga*;
photograph by Nienke Muurling

One of the “have you paid attention”-questions that I was asked quite often was whether I had noticed that Krs’s neighboring village Kll had a *ga*, a low wooden platform, on which older men socialize and watch the goings-on in town. Moreover, my friends continued their questioning, had I also noticed that Krs did *not* have a *ga*? The way people drew my attention to the presence of a *ga* in Kll and its absence in Krs and how they explained this striking juxtaposition is a useful starting point from which to introduce the manifold ways in which history is made present in Mande. By extension, it underscores the central importance many people in Mande attribute to history and how this continued relevance is recreated and reshaped by people’s experience of their natural and social environments as ones imbued with history. I call the mode of historical imagination exemplified

by the *ga* “history in landscape,” or the ways in which history in Mande is embedded in the landscape and its social and physical features.

When JT, a middle aged woman on our compound first asked me if I had noticed Kll’s *ga*, or rather Krs’ missing one, I hadn’t noticed either of these things, or if I had, I hadn’t given them much thought. Once JT had pointed out these two facts, however, I had to agree that this was a striking set of observations. I thought back to my earlier fieldwork near the Manding Mountains and realized that there was no *ga* in Nrn or Sb either, as far as I knew, but I also remembered seeing them in other mountain villages. As JT and later others pointed out the significance of having or not having a *ga* in a village, I started noticing that indeed they were present in some villages—such as Snd where I went to a funeral—but not in others, like KK, which I visited regularly. With a set of two simple questions, JT had taught me to see with new eyes, to notice what was there as well as what was not there, and to be ready to discern the significance of these observations. In pointing out what could no longer be seen (in Krs), she simultaneously revealed the local salience of representations of history, regardless of it having left visible traces. In slightly different terms, then, JT taught me to have a “double vision: reading the past with one eye, while keeping the other wide open to the present” (Sarró 2009:11). I also learned to realize how the past and present are present simultaneously.



2: *Ga* in Kll, temporarily used for storage of firewood; photograph by Nienke Muurling

For JT and many other people in Krs, the presence or absence of a *ga* was a sign of their village's history. Specifically, they took it as an indication as to whether or not the army of Samori Toure, the late-19th century Jihadist from Guinea, had subdued a particular village. JT told me the story as follows in my second month in Krs, on the way to her peanut field to do some weeding:

“Wherever Samori came and subjected the population, he erected a ga. But if you see that there is no ga in Krs, it is because ‘the Imam’ [Alamami, Samori’s nickname] has not been able to conquer it. One day, his army was getting very close to Krs, they were already at Kll, and people were scared their village would be overtaken next. That day, all the men were out working on the fields as Samori’s soldiers marched towards town. But one woman ran into the bush to gather a nest of bees, which she hurled at the soldiers. Being attacked by ferociously stinging bees, Samori’s men left. The woman, of course, was a sorceress, which is how she could get the bees.”¹

In this explanation, the contrast between a *ga* being absent in Krs, yet present in Kll and other villages upstream, speaks to the powerful achievement of Krs having withstood the forces of Samori. No less, this feat was accomplished by a sole woman, who managed to use her powers to organize an attack of bees that scared away the soldiers. I did not often hear this story being told, but it likely is in quite wide circulation in Krs (although presumably not outside it). For example, in the summer of 2005, the leader of the youth’s “theater group” had plans to develop the story into a dance performance,² which suggests that it must be quite well known, or in any case, not considered a “secret” (*gundo*).

The presence of *gaw* in villages upstream and their absence in villages downstream led many people in Krs to claim that the “border” (*dan*) of Samori’s power, at least on this bank of the Niger, was between Kll and Krs. While it is certainly intriguing that the contours of Samori’s power as marked in the landscape by *gaw* coincides with what we know of Samori’s reach from other sources,³ the historical accuracy of Krs’ villagers is not my point. In fact, as suggestive (or not) as the association of a particular architectural structure with the trajectory of Samori’s army (as well as attacks by stinging bees) might be, the same connection is not universally made in other villages in the region. In an interesting twist, I had been told a story about Nrn’s missing *ga*, too, although here

the point was not to celebrate the structure's absence from the landscape, but to claim that there used to have been one in the past. More importantly, the original *ga* had been built at night, in top secret, by the women belonging to the secret women's association called *Nyagua*, who had used their magical powers to haul the huge logs from one end of the village to the other (or so I was told by LC and the then-chief of the *Nyagua*). Because the *Nyagua* association was not very active anymore, the *ga* had not been rebuilt since it had fallen down.

"History in landscape" in the context of an anthropology of landscape

The example of the *ga* usefully illustrates both the considerable import that people in this region attribute to historical knowledge, as well as the varied ways in which they perceive, remember, and talk about their past. Following Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), I use the term "modes of historical imagination" to refer to the multiple, particular ways people experience and construct their past in practices of remembering, memorializing, and arguing about it.⁴ Additionally, I use the term "history in landscape" to refer to the memories of the past embedded in the lived environment. The people I knew in Mande understood their lifeworld as a richly textured environment of trees, fishing ponds, storage houses, rocky plains, as well as ruins, disintegrated roots, and memories of places that signaled that "something happened here." The literature on Mande has by and large ignored the history embedded in the landscape in favor of the histories produced by griots that pivot on the time-space of Sunjata. Yet "history in landscape" is a highly salient mode of historical imagination here as well as elsewhere.

In focusing first on the salience of Mande as a landscape of history, my research inserts itself in the literature on landscape and memory, following the foundational works of Casey (1996) and Nora (1989) on "place memory" and *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory") respectively. The anthropology of landscape now encapsulates a broad and still growing body of literature, which brings together socio-cultural anthropologists and archaeologists, alongside social geographers, historians, and philosophers (Bender 1993; Tilley 1994; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Ingold 2000; Basso 1996; Stewart and Strathern 2003; S. M.

Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003; Feld and Basso 1996; Smith and Gazin-Schwartz 2008; Jordan 2003; Kùchler 1993). A basic premise of this literature is the mutual construction of people and the places they inhabit through dynamic processes of “dwelling,” or the way “the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of—and testament to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves” (Ingold 2000:189). Another premise is the dialectical nature of place, or the physical aspects of landscape, and space, the experience of movement within the landscape (Smith 2008).

If landscape has come to be understood as an integral part in how people live and make sense of who they are, the corollary is that landscapes are inevitably politically charged and contested, when different groups of people imagine the same landscape in conflicting ways (Bender 1993, Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003, Smith and Gazin-Schwartz 2008). In fact, the salience of political concerns in regards to specific places has been understood by Africanist anthropologists and historians since the pioneering work of Hilda Kuper on the politics of space in Swaziland (Kuper 1972). The case studies of conflicts about land and claims to natural resources that I discuss in Chapter 7 illustrate the fraught relationships between historical narratives, features and places in the landscape, and differently positioned social actors.

In a recent overview of this literature, Low and Lawrence-Zuniga identify a concern with “narrating place” as one of the important strands of the anthropology of landscape. They characterize this approach as fundamentally concerned with “details of how local populations construct perceptions and experience place” (2008:16). In order to accomplish their goal, scholars taking this approach draw from phenomenological approaches and insist on the importance of narrative—broadly defined to include stories, music, songs, and poetry—for understanding “local theories of dwelling” (Feld and Basso 1996). In this strand of the literature, the work of Basso remains relevant for its evocative description of how place and history are inextricably linked in the place names and stories triggered by points in the land and recounting the relevance of the place’s history in con-

temporary situations (Basso 1986). My attention to “history of landscape” has most affinity with the “narrating place” approach because of a shared conviction that the stories triggered by landscape, such as that of the retreat of Samori’s soldiers, are a privileged site for specific modes of historical imagination.

“History in landscape” as an object of kolosi

In this section, I discuss the Mande landscape and its embodiment of multiple layers of past and present dwelling practices in order to highlight the intersections between this “history in landscape” and an ideology and practices of paying attention. Such an analysis has not received much sustained analysis in writing about landscape and history in Mande or elsewhere. Yet the relevance of historically and culturally situated modes of paying attention to one’s environment would seem to be at work in numerous socio-cultural contexts, whether or not this is as explicitly theorized by local observers as it is in Mande. In this section I illustrate how in Mande the “landscape of history” intersects with local theories of the importance of and specific practices of paying attention. I also give some comparative examples from the literature to illustrate the salience of perception and experience in the ways people in different cultural contexts constitute their lifeworlds.

The fact that Mande as a “landscape of history” needs careful attention on the part of an attentive observer in order to be known, or seen with new eyes, illustrates some of the key characteristics of an ideology of *kolosi*. Not only are specific places or (remnants of) structures in the landscape remembered as historically significant—sites of memory, triggering stories about what exactly happened there—but moreover, these places are somehow noticeable by attentive observers, or can be pointed out to them. The way in which JT and other people drew my attention to the *ga* in Kll, and the concomitant absence of such a structure in Krs, is illustrative not only for the unobtrusive ways history is marked in the landscape but also for the everyday practices of drawing someone’s attention to salient environmental features, explaining their significance, and in the process “priming” one to expect that many more features might be meaningful. The landscape of history as constructed by an ideology and practices of *kolosi* forces an

observer to carefully note and “pay attention” to features of the landscape that might not at first seem meaningful. Moreover, an appreciation of the embodiment of past events in the landscape requires an expectation on the part of the careful observer that even insignificant parts of the environment could potentially carry significance. The potential that anything can be constructed as a sign—in this case, of the past—without predetermining which aspect of it is worth paying attention *to* is, in turn, a key component of the ideology and practices of *kolosi*, as I illustrate in the next chapter.

An unexpected illustration of the relevance of a specific ideology and practices of paying attention can be found in a recent article describing the way memories of Samori are expressed in the Wasulu region, to the Southeast of Mande (Peterson 2008). Peterson characterizes the Mande historical landscape as consisting of “a plurality of lesser sites of local importance, the whole of which serves as a sort of regional *aide-mémoire*” (Peterson 2008:262). His account concludes by stating: “local history is inscribed into the land, *in places which to the casual observer appear to be unremarkable* stands of trees, swamps, ordinary fields, hills or streams” (277, my italics). The example of the *ga*, I maintain, clarifies precisely the significance of the passing comment I italicized in the quote above. In other words, the fact that a person needs to go above and beyond “casual observation” to perceive the historical meaningfulness of seemingly ordinary sites is in fact an integral component of what makes Mande and other places landscapes of history. Again, this points to the fact that “history in landscape” is inextricably tied up with an ideology and practices of *kolosi*.

Finally, the *ga* at Kll along with many other examples of the rich “history in landscape” of Mande reveals an interesting tension between being (in)visible and being the object of attention. On one hand, history embedded in the landscape is hidden in plain view and can be properly seen and understood only by people who know what they are looking at. On the other hand, the salient features of my new surroundings were regularly pointed out to me, as I have no doubt they were to other novices, such as children.⁵ Thus, this kind of knowledge is not “out there” and available to all, nor is it “secret” in any strict sense; while it is entirely

possible to be oblivious to it, at the same time, it is actively brought to one's attention.

The historical significance of a place, then, does not necessarily have to be visible. The absence of a *ga* in Krs is equally if not more significant as the presence of such a physical structure in Kll. In the case of Nrn's no longer existing *ga*, which I also discussed, people also remember the place where it stood and its historical significance (linked to the workings of the powerful *Nyagua* association). Other historically significant places also need not be seen in order to be remembered. In a recent study of iconoclastic movements in Guinea, Sarró makes a similar point, challenging ethnographers "to develop a 'double vision' to see simultaneously a cornfield (in the present) and a sacred forest (in the past)" (Sarró 2009:11). This notion of "seeing" what is no longer physically present alongside that which is, also applies to Mande's "history in landscape."

Attempts to make me see what was not strictly speaking "visible" formed an important part of the social interactions I had in the field. Many people I knew made a point of alerting me to features of places and referencing sites they thought I should get to know. For example, after a visit to the village of N, a Krs woman who was originally from N asked me whether I had noticed the small hut there, whose door was never opened. On another occasion, my host in Ksm told me about a hut in Krtbg, where Fakoli supposedly left his blacksmithing tools, and insisted that I go see it. When I had spent some time on the other side of the river, people back in Krs asked me whether I had passed Dk, the plain well known for its historical links to the founding of the Mali Empire. In the same vein, my friend MK was intent on showing me the ruins of Krs' previous location, which were close to his fields; once there, I was also told about a nearby well left by slavers, used to trap unsuspecting passers-by and capture them as slaves.

* * *

The way an ideology of *kolosi* enables Mande people to perceive the physical landscape as one of history has parallels in phenomenological approaches to place in other parts of the world. Henkel has argued recently that perception and experi-

ence are crucial to a full picture of people's daily practices of place-making in Istanbul. In the Turkish case he describes, self-identified pious Muslims (adherents of a stricter interpretation of Islam) strive to construct their everyday environments—houses, offices, and neighborhoods—as specifically “Islamic” spaces and set them apart from the many spaces that are not. Henkel argues that “strategies of inhabitation and perception” (Henkel 2007:68) are indispensable for the ways these believers make “Islamic homes” and other religious spaces for themselves in Istanbul. A critical part of these strategies, as Henkel describes them, is a form of *selective attention* that enables social actors to experience their heterogeneous lifeworlds as properly Muslim. This process of “foregrounding Muslim elements and backgrounding other elements” and “designating certain elements as significant and others as unimportant” (Henkel 2007:58) offers a suggestive parallel for the way people in Mande rely on an ideology and practices of *kolosi* in experiencing the Mande landscape as one suffused with history.

Similarly, the attention to place and history among Apaches living in Arizona, which Basso describes as ultimately concerned with “finding wisdom,” provide another comparative case of a culturally and historically specific theory about paying attention (Basso 1996). Apache ideas of wisdom are grounded in an informal theory of mind, which postulates the development of three mental conditions—smoothness of mind, resilience of mind, and steadiness of mind—as crucial for the attainment of wisdom. These conditions are not given at birth, but actively acquired over time in a process that closely parallels the “education in attention” required by *kolosi* (Chapter 2). Moreover, in the Apache case, as in Mande, paying attention to the landscape and the stories evoked by it are a privileged site to hone one's skills at paying attention.

Visibility and invisibility, haunted landscapes, and other observations

The last two examples refer to the more sinister aspects of a landscape's history—its memories of slave raiding and the continued presence of *jinn*s, who are not always benign. It should come as no surprise that I never was actually shown the slavers' well in Krs, although MK repeatedly told me he would show it to me; he

never did, I think, because whenever he mentioned to others that he would take me to see it, they argued strenuously against it. Nor did I see another such well that is supposedly left in Dk, a highly evocative place because of its connections with Sunjata but also a dangerous one. Indeed, when I had passed the general area of Dk with VC, on our way to visit some relatives of his in NK, the latter asked us about what we had and had not seen in the vicinity of Dk. I was curious what there would have been there, because VC had not said anything about it *en route*. One of his friends, a young man from NK, described that for one thing, there was a well here, which was used to capture slaves (slavers would cover it with branches so people would not realize there was a big hole in the road and fall in—the same strategy as the well in Krs). VC, however, was adamant that there was no way he would go there. He continued:

“Because it is a very bad place and you don’t want to see it. The road only goes past it, but there aren’t any other roads there; didn’t you notice that there is only the one road [instead of a multitude of alternative roads]?”

This led VC and his friends to a further discussion about the “bad” character of the general region of which Dk is part, called Sl. Sl is referred to as the place of “betrayal” (*janfa*), and the slave well is an important part of the rationale for this designation.

VC’s reaction to the suggestion that he might go see D1 and MK’s aborted attempts to show me a presumed slave well highlight the lingering tensions about how much of the “history of landscape” can safely be known, and what parts of the “landscape of history” should remain invisible. In this respect, the more sinister aspects of a Mande “history in landscape” resemble the “haunted landscape” of Georgia, evocatively described by Auslander (Auslander 2009). The haunted landscapes of Georgia and other places in the American South, “are stalked by the remembered specters of racial violence, oppression and hatred” at the same time as they are “layered, ambivalently, with oscillating associations of profound belonging and horrific exclusion” (Auslander 2009:190). The dangerous place of D1 resembles the ambivalent memories evoked for rural Georgia residents (mainly African-Americans) by the surrounding landscape, as they are remembered

proudly for their connection with Sunjata but also feared as a place for treachery and slave raiding.

Closer to Mande, Shaw has described a Temne “landscape of terror and capture” (Shaw 2002:11), which she explicitly views as a non-discursive, even subconscious, substrate of memories of the slave trade:

Rather than being told in a story about the landscape, the slave trade is more generally remembered in the dangerous invisible presences that pervade the landscape itself, and in the protective ritual techniques that people use in order to live in this landscape. (Shaw 2002:50)

Here too, the tension between what is visible and what is not, between what can be made known about the landscape through historical narratives and what is better left unsaid or even forgotten, emerges as an important theme.

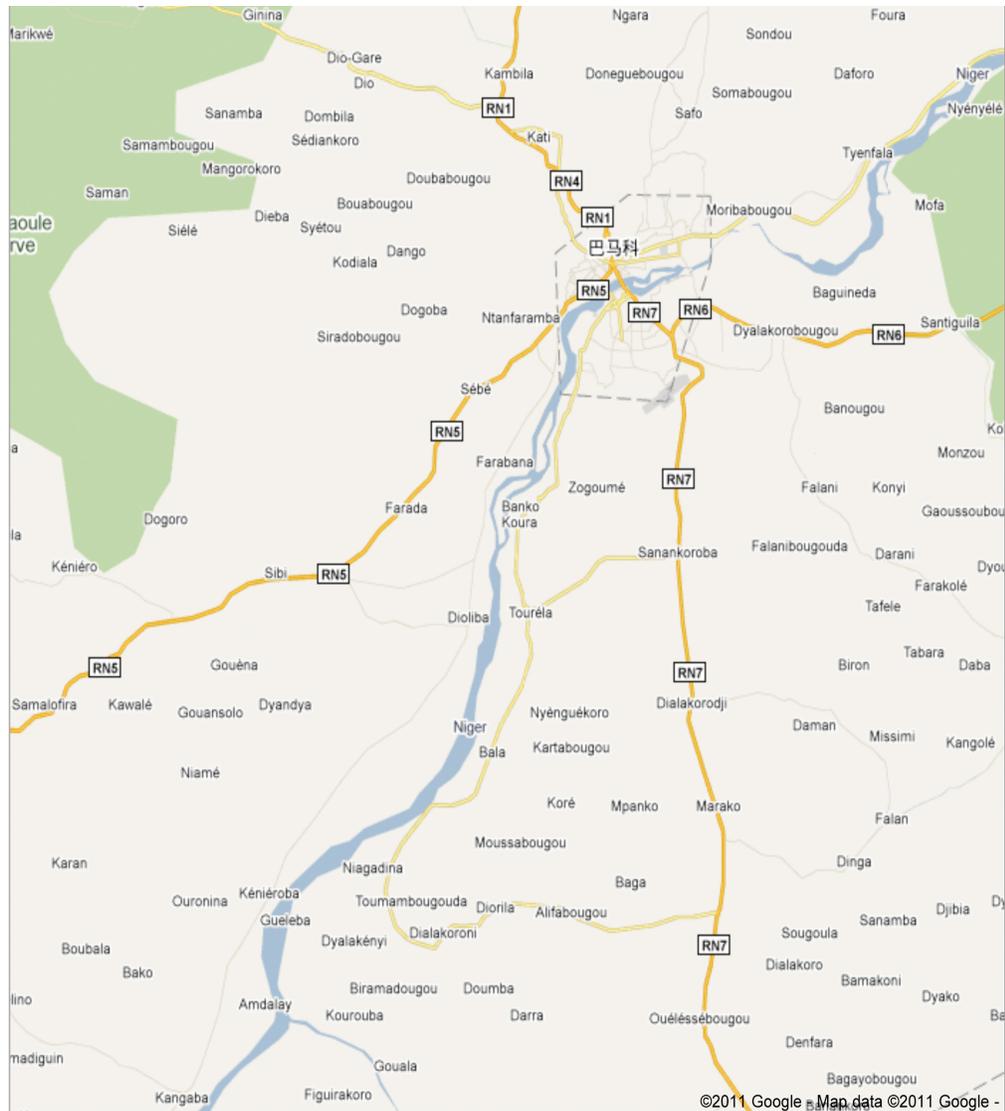
Another invisible, potentially dangerous, presence that makes itself known through the history of landscape are the spaces where *jinaw* (“spirits”) live: trees, rivers and streams, along with other landmarks such as termite mounds and cross roads, and specific places such as the clay pit where potters dig up their clay. The presence of invisible entities like *jinaw*—comparable to humans in all respects except that they are invisible (to most)—might not seem properly historical. However, people’s knowledge on where *jinaw* live and how one should behave towards them are nevertheless based on careful observation (*kolosi*) over time. A number of people on the compound where I lived in Krs warned me about two particular paths through our compound that I should avoid at night because of the *jinaw* who lived there (their malevolence being well known, and more pronounced at dusk and dawn than at other times). There is no doubt that at least some *jinaw* are dangerous, or at the very least unpredictable—this is why they periodically need to be placated by offerings at the clay pit, for example, to ensure they will not make trouble for the potters who use *their* clay (of the *jinaw*).⁶

Places occupied by *jinaw*, and other places to be avoided for different reasons—such as for many men, the space of the daily market when it is in full swing, which makes it a “women’s space”—create the lived experience of the Mande landscape. This landscape is one in which history is ever present, both in its positive associations—the places of Sunjata’s victories or material evidence for

having escaped a brutal war—as well as its more negative, dangerous and haunting modes, associated with legacies of slavery and the capriciousness of non-human beings.

MANDE AS TIME-SPACE AND GENEALOGY

The Mande region of southwest Mali and northwest Guinea is loosely bordered by the Manding Mountains to the East and the Niger River to the West, and extends between Mali's capital Bamako to the North and Guinea to the South. To distinguish it from a much larger region in which one or more of the so-called "Mande" languages are spoken, the region I call Mande is sometimes referred to as the "Mande heartland" (cf. Charry 2000; Jansen 1995; 2001; Zobel 1996; Conrad 1994). I do not follow this usage but instead prefer the local convention of referring to this more narrowly defined region simply as Mande, in contrast to other nearby regions such as Wasulu, Segu, and "Guinea."⁷ Conversely, I do not use "Mande" as a general term for the languages (nor the people speaking them, nor the areas in which they are spoken) that are related to the language spoken in the area of my research (i.e., Maninka). Here too, I follow the lead of the people I worked with and refer to the language spoken by all of my informants, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, as Maninka.



3: Mande region in Mali; from Google Maps

Scholars of Mande have long insisted that history—or as I prefer to call it, historical imagination—is of foundational social importance for people living in this region. While the strong attachment to history is not exclusive to Mande-speaking people as compared to others in the region,⁸ what is remarkable is the extent to which the historical nexus between the concerns of present people and the legendary 13th-century ruler Sunjata continues to be reworked and adapted to changing circumstances. Indeed, a particular understanding of history is at the basis of the very idea of Mande itself. In the words of Belcher, whose definition of the term

reflects the understanding of many other Mande scholars, Mande can be defined as:

A space, in some ways perhaps a time, and for many, an idea. The space is roughly defined by the headwaters of the Niger and its affluents and lies in Western Mali and Eastern Guinea; it is occupied by the Malinke, for whom it is the symbolic heartland from which the more widespread branches of their people have departed at various times to take on different names (Mandinka, Dyula, Konyaka, and others). As a time, the Manden looks back to its period of unification and glory under the emperor Sunjata. To speak of the Manden is, of necessity to evoke the time and space of Sunjata's rule: thus, the Manden is also an idea spread across Africa. (Belcher 1999:89, my italics)

Succinctly defined as a “space, a time, and an idea,” this understanding of Mande avoids the identification of “Mande” with a particular linguistic⁹ or ethnic group¹⁰ in favor of an identification with geography and history. The focus on the “time and space of Sunjata’s rule” as the defining characteristic of the “idea” of Mande is indeed an interpretation closely aligned with the self-identifications and representations of history of many of the area’s current inhabitants.¹¹ As Conrad claims, “It is no exaggeration to say that, regardless of gender, the ancestors who are described in *kuma koro*, or ‘ancient speech,’ define the identity of virtually everyone of Manding origin” (Conrad and Condé 2004:xvi). Even as the notion of Mande as a Sunjata-centered space-time is most closely associated with the dominant lineages, families, and individuals in the region, many other local people also accept this particular historical perspective as a framework for understanding the region’s history, as well as their own.

Mande’s inhabitants experience the various towns and villages where they live as meaningful places not only because of a shared past, but in the concrete experience of how linkages based on historical connections continue to connect people and places in the present. Settlement patterns formed because one village allowed another to settle in its vicinity establish invisible yet socially crucial links between villages as “hosts” and “guests” (cf. Chapter 7). So too do memories establishing kinship relationships between the respective founders of different villages. Within villages or clusters of villages, the founding or other politically important lineages are also often linked as “patrons” to “guest” lineages, with the

former allowing the latter to settle in town. Marriage, too, creates linkages between lineages—literally called “marriage roads” (*furu siraw*)—often across village boundaries, but within established conventions about which lineages can marry which others. As mentioned in Chapter 2, women walk these marriage roads quite literally every time they travel from their husbands’ home to their fathers’ home, whether to return home to give birth to a first child, to present condolences on the death of someone in their family of origin, or to “return the tears” after the death of their own husbands. Together, the invisible linkages created by history, settlement, kinship, and marriage extend over large distances and so tie much of the area that is considered Mande together.

At the same time, the multitude of different, only partially overlapping networks of relationships, never coincides so as to construct Mande as a separate, bounded entity. At most, “Mande” encompasses those places where the interlocking networks of shared history, “host” and “guest” relationships, and marriage roads are densest. Many other networks, in fact, crisscross the interlinked places that make up Mande and tie them to different centers and regions that are distinctly not Mande. Many lineages, for example, posit a non-Mande origin for their earliest ancestors, be it Muslim connected to the time and place of the Prophet or Bamana tied to the Empire of Segou, or yet a Fulani heritage traced back to Wassulu or Segou. Trade networks, too, link individual Mande places to centers external to the region, and have done so for centuries (Brooks 1993; Perinbam 1998; Lydon 2008). The same is true for the movements of individual Muslims in search of Islamic knowledge or desirous to spread it, as I discuss later in this chapter. Obviously, too, these kinds of linkages, networks, and movements are nothing new but have been an integral part of the West African region—quite likely for millennia, as archaeological evidence suggests (McIntosh and McIntosh 1981; Insoll 2003).

The notion of Mande as a space, time, and idea, forms the core of a mode of historical imagination I call “history through words,” which simultaneously imagines the geographic space of Mande as the key locus of “the time and space of Sunjata’s rule” (to the exclusion of other times and places), and identifies the

“space-time” of Sunjata as the area’s defining characteristic (thus erasing other historical processes). Like other modes of historical imagination, this vision of the historical importance of Mande—and conversely, the importance of history to Mande—is necessarily partial. Thus, it downplays the non-Mande “elements” that are—and have historically been—present in the region.

Indeed, as a *space*, Mande is home to many people who do not identify as Maninka—but instead as Fulani pastoralists, Somono fishing people, Bamana farmers, or in terms of occupational categories such as blacksmith/potters, griots, and leatherworkers.¹² These people, too, commonly refer to the larger area in which they live as Mande. In regards to Mande as a *time*, most families and lineages cannot trace their descent directly back to the time of Sunjata and his generals, nor can the griots associated with these families do so for them. Instead, shallower and more localized genealogies tie people to more recent ancestors, or their own past behavior can become the basis for a griot’s praise in the present.¹³ At the same time, people do generally expect griots to praise them and their lineage by referring to the people and time of Sunjata, because constructing a social identity for oneself in the present inherently involves the identity of one’s genealogy and lineage in the ancient, Sunjata-dominated past. Finally, as an *idea*, “Mande,” has long been highly portable, fluid, and capable of imposing itself in numerous contexts—an aspect to which I shortly return.

The historical dominance of the Mande (or Mali)¹⁴ Empire established by Sunjata, the portability of specifically “Mande” institutions and traditions, and the prestige enjoyed by the “idea” of Mande both internally and in neighboring areas all contribute to the prominence of Mande as a contemporary social and political force as well as a scholarly category. Indeed, the dominance of the very idea of Mande as the defining moment in the region’s history is evidenced in observations as diverse as that of numerous well-documented cases of “Mande-fication,” in Senegal, Guinea, and Sierra Leone,¹⁵ and the organization of a scholarly association specifically devoted to Mande Studies.¹⁶ The prominence of “Mande” in the literature is not simply the result of scholarly bias, but rather of a mutual rein-

forcement of scholarly practices and an ideology of Mande superiority that is widely shared in the region—even if not uncontested.

While people whom I knew during my fieldwork were quite convinced of Mande's central importance to the nation-state of Mali and even the continent, they were also concerned that its influence might be waning in the contemporary political context. Moreover, they were well aware of the severe inequalities between their own conditions and those in Europe or some other African countries. At times, my friends and acquaintances expressed critical sentiments or disappointment in the state, which they felt did not do enough to address the harsh economic realities of their lives. The misgivings about being relatively overlooked by the state that my friends shared with me are not without merit, as the central position of Mande for the nation-building project of Mali has undeniably decreased since Independence (in 1960).

Mali's first president after independence, Modibo Keita, put great emphasis on the importance of Mali's past as a key building block for its future (de Jorio 2006:83). In his view, the newly independent Republic of Mali was a direct descendant of the 13th-century Empire of Sunjata, and to a lesser extent the later Empire of Segou, just as he himself was considered a lineal descendant of Sunjata (Snyder 1967:83). The Mande-centrism of this selective construction of history as basis for the future is evident in the exclusion of the historical experiences of people who do not identify with Sunjata (or to a lesser extent, Biton [Coulibaly] of Segou) and the exclusive emphasis of particular historical periods only (13-15th century for Mali and 17-18th for Segou). A few years after independence, the Malian historian Sidibe summed up the historical imagination of the Keita government as follows:

There is no shadow of doubt about the bright future of the descendants of Soundiatta (sic) and Kankou Moussa; it is certain and may astonish the world one day. The Republic of Mali will be a daughter worthy of the great Soudan Empire of the African Middle Ages. (Sidibe 1964, cited in Snyder 1967:83)

Comparatively less is known about the historical imagination and cultural politics espoused by the military regime of Moussa Traore, who ousted Modibo Keita in a 1968 coup and remained in power for over two decades. In a compara-

tive overview of cultural politics under Keita, Traore, and later the democratic government led by Alpha Oumar Konare, de Jorio notes an important continuity between the cultural politics of Modibo Keita and the Traore regime, particularly until the economic and political crisis of the late 1980s. For example, she finds that “under Traore, a number of cultural initiatives were first discontinued, only to be revived soon thereafter with slightly modified labels and forms” (2006:85). Some continuity in regards to cultural politics is again evident between the (early) Traore and Konare governments; Konare himself, for example, first worked as a bureaucrat in the cultural sector for the Traore regime, before becoming disenchanted with its politics (de Jorio 2006:86). In other respects, the cultural policies instituted by Konare (president between 1992-2002), harkened back to some of the precepts of Modibo Keita, whose political philosophy and cultural politics had been an influential factor in Konare’s and his advisors’ understanding of nationalist culture and history (Arnoldi 2007:11).

The suspicion of my informants that the idea of Mande has played a much less prominent role in the cultural politics and historical imagination promoted by the Konare and post-Konare (Toure) governments is born out by a number of recent analyses of memorialization in Mali. While these articles address only Bamako and not the rural areas, this focus is in itself rather illustrative of the government’s attempt to create a centralized, nationally shared and nationalistic representation of its past. In contrast to both one-party regimes, which tended to ignore the country’s history of colonialism, Malians’ shared struggle against colonialism has become the central trope of current memorialization projects in Bamako (Arnoldi 2007; de Jorio 2003; 2006). In this respect, Arnoldi highlights a strategy of paired monuments—two monuments that are linked visually, architecturally, and thematically—to “promote a shared postcolonial national identity in the public imagination by valorizing and linking the heroes of Mali’s independence struggles with student leaders of Mali’s prodemocracy movement” (Arnoldi 2007:13). Yet with the key exception of Modibo Keita, none of the actors of the struggle for Independence, nor those for democracy four decades later, are clearly associated with Mande’s rural inhabitants. Finally, political events, too, such as

the Tuareg insurgence of the 1990s and the accommodations of Northerners' demands, have helped shift Mali's modes of historical imagination further away from the Mande-centrism that first characterized the independent state.

Situating Mande "history through words" in the literature on griots

If the very idea of Mande pivots around the figure of Sunjata and the time and space he represents, the transmission of this history pivots around griots, who are considered the sole repositories of history as well as its exclusive performers. The crucial role of griots in the Mali Empire was remarked upon as early as the 14th century by Muslim scholars and from the early 1500s by Portuguese and other European explorers (Tamari 1991b). A continued fascination with griots has produced a large literature on those whose birthright it is to recite genealogies, tell history, praise their patrons, serve as emissaries, diplomats, and mediators, along with other speech-related activities (cf. Zemp 1966; Makarius 1969; Irvine 1973; 1989; Jansen 1995; 2000a; 2001; Diawara 1996; K. Kone 1997; Hoffman 2000; Schulz 2001; 1997; Janson 2002; Muurling 2003; Conrad and Condé 2004; Ly 2007; Roth 2008; Sory Camara 1992; Irvine 1974; Ebron 2002). The dominant understanding of Mande as the time-space of Sunjata entails a mode of historical imagination in which the past is understood to be most clearly and authoritatively known through the words spoken by griots. In this and the following section, I address the voluminous literature on griots to bring out some key aspects of "history through words" as a form of griot-based history and griot speech. More importantly, a reexamination of the literature on griots reveals that *kolosi* is as important for "history through words" as for the "history in landscape" discussed above. Among other things, this includes paying careful attention to musical clues, subtle turns of phrase, and other small details of potential significance.

As mentioned above, I use the term "history through words" to refer to the mode of historical imagination in which griots create social identities and relations for people living in or asserting a connection to Mande. Griots' praise songs establish individuals as descendants from famous ancestors associated with the space-time of Sunjata—hence the notion of "history."¹⁷ In using praise and narra-

tive to connect individuals to their past, griots simultaneously harness the dangerous powers of speech—which I reference by the short-hand “through words.” Indeed, many of the observations about the particularities of griot speech are also relevant for an understanding of “history through words.” Besides constructing the time and place of Sunjata as the defining moment of Mande history, crucial elements in “history through words” are the social position of griots and an ideology of language based on the efficacious nature of words. Related to these characteristics is the idea of history as performance, bound up in social relations marked by hierarchy, and inherently fluid.

The first element—the special position and power of griots—refers to the fact that griots’ involvement with history and words is part of their “birth right,” which defines them as a particular category of persons. As I explain in more detail later, griots are a particular “kind” (*siya*) of people. The term griot that I use throughout glosses two distinct *siyaw*, namely *jeli* and *finaw*; in the region where I did my fieldwork, *jeliw* and *finaw* were both responsible for speech tasks in its widest sense.¹⁸ Indeed, griots (of either kind) are considered to have an inherent (and inherited) propensity to harness the power of words to shape social life; they are charged with all tasks involving speech precisely because of their capacity to deal with speech safely and effectively. Finally, griots share this innate proclivity to work with dangerous powers (in this case, of words) with other *siyaw* whose work involves the transformation of equally powerful and potentially dangerous substances such as iron, clay, and leather. These *siyaw* are collectively called *nyamakalaw*, which is commonly translated as “artisan groups.”

Griots, then, as “word smiths,” necessarily combine a great many social roles; besides historians, they are also performers, singers, orators, musicians, and go-betweens. None of these roles is entirely independent of another, but for our purposes the link between history and performance is most important. Indeed, as Ebron has noted in a study of Gambian griots both at home and abroad, “history is made in performance” (Ebron 2002: 100). This means that history is not a supposedly objective account of what happened in the past, disengaged from present concerns and people. Rather, the past and the present mutually constitute each

other each time griots perform the historical accounts of Sunjata or praise his contemporary descendants.

Moreover, as *nyamakalaw*, griots stand in a hierarchical relationship *vis-à-vis* their patrons. Hence, griots do not just perform history, but perform it for a particular patron. For some scholars the patron-client relationships in which griots are intractably bound up is a major factor in accounting for the fluidity in griots' performances of history. These scholars are skeptical of griots' accounts as bearers of history, preferring instead to see them as reflections of current concerns or as "charters" reinforcing local expectations for appropriate social behavior (Austen and Jansen 1996; Jansen 1995; 1996b; 1996c; 1996a; 2000a; 2001). Others, however, have suggested that the fact that a griot is tied to particular "noble" lineages, yet has to be able to acknowledge the historical significance of other patrons, too, provides a sort of built-in mechanism for ensuring the transmission of more reliable accounts of history (Irvine 1978). Yet others maintain that matters of historical accuracy are less relevant than a consideration of "what history looks like" from the perspective of those who are locally privileged as being those who know and are allowed to speak history (Conrad and Condé 2004; Ebron 2002).

An important part of the local understanding of history in the context of "history through words" is its inherent fluidity. An apt metaphor for the fluidity of Mande history is the image of the *miniminikolon*, or the "ever-revolving well," which Jansen noted repeatedly in the discourse of the renowned Diabate griots in Kela. The metaphor of an "ever-revolving drinking well," of which one never can get to the heart, in effect denies the existence of any fixed truth in matters of Mande historiography. Several of Jansen's griot friends and teachers in Kela explained their sense that one can never find stable footing in Mande history, because there is always an extra layer, a new facet to know, and some small detail that puts what one thought one knew in a whole new perspective.¹⁹ Images such as the ever revolving drinking well, or alternatively, a winding road, convey this same sense of infinite scale, never reaching a final end point. I, too, was regularly told that Mande, or Mande history, including the Maninka language, "has no end" (*a te ban*) and can never be fully known.

The second key element characterizing “history through words” is the power of words, or a language ideology premised on the efficacious nature of speech. The supposedly innate capabilities of griots to deal with words described above speaks to the powerful nature of speech, such that it requires specially equipped people to utter it. A number of scholars have shown the importance of an understanding of the power as well as danger of speech among a number of Mande-speaking peoples (Zahan 1963; Sory Camara 1992; K. Kone 1997). Whether or not explicitly identified with *nyama*—the “mystical force inherent in all things,” also invoked in the general descriptor *nyamakala*—the power of words, in these accounts, directly relates to the particular status of griots in society. It simultaneously accounts for both the scorn reserved for griots—as people who speak openly and frequently (speech being not only powerful and dangerous, but shameful as well)—as well as the high regard in which they are held—as people who give their fellow humans a social identity by placing them in history. Such is the power of words that without it, people would have neither a history nor a proper identity as social beings in the present. As Ebron astutely notes, “Words themselves have the charisma to make history, and *jali* performance is the enactment of the power of words” (Ebron 2002:100).

The power of speech is visually captured by an image of words “eating” and “being eaten by” griots, as Stoller suggests in connection with Songhay griots living in Mali and Niger (Stoller 1997:34) (Stoller 1997:34). The *finaw* I heard perform in Krs and elsewhere also frequently claimed, “my stomach is full of speech tonight” (*n kono falen kuma la*). Speech, in this metaphor, is pushing to get out and be made known by the griot. In another formulaic phrase that Krs *finaw* regularly used, they stressed the mouth as another physical space where words reside: “whose account is in my mouth?” (*jon ka koro fo be ne da la*), *finaw* ask themselves and the audience when they are collecting money on behalf of their patrons during funerals, marriages, or name givings—and they immediately answer their own question by saying, “[so and so’s] account—[he or she] is contributing X amount.” Here too, the formula conveys the sense that griots are so “full” of speech that they cannot help but speak it; this can be for both good

and bad, of course, which in turn reinforces the fear inspired by the griot who is capable of saying *anything*.

Indeed, the danger of a griot saying something unexpectedly negative is always present. Most of what griots like KC, VC, JK, and KK said during the performances I attended with them (mostly on the occasion of a wedding) employed standard phrases and was either neutral or positive. But not always. One night, VC realized that a fellow-griot from a different village was present at the event he was speaking at, and he called him out for having slighted him:

“J, I see that J is here; J, you know that I am mad at you? I am so mad at you! You know, we have not been on good terms lately. I have been mad at you ever since you held your name giving ceremony [for your youngest child] and you didn’t invite me. I know I would have gotten a complet (three pieces of cloth for an outfit) if I had been there; J, you owe me a complet, do you hear me?”

Only moments later, the score between V and J had been settled, and V announced to the audience, “I am no longer mad; J has just promised me my *complet* [“3 pieces of cloth”].”

The power of words as a key characteristic of “history through words” also means that history is made “true” and takes on an aura of fixity (at least for the moment) by the words of griots—despite its fluidity and dependence on context. The past must be seen as fixed and unambiguously knowable because a person’s reputation consists in his or her link with history through one’s name. A last name (*jamu*) indexes someone as a member of a particular lineage, and as such, ties that person to the larger historical framework making up the Mande world. A first name (*togo*), by contrast, is the name one makes for oneself, which can also be praised by griots.²⁰ In fact, among the terms commonly used for the praise singing of griots are *majamu* (literally, “to evoke the last name,” hence “to praise”) as well as *matogo* (literally, “to evoke the first name” hence “to praise”), showing the source of praise to be one’s *jamu* and *togo* alike. The importance of having a name, that is, a history, is the main rationale for why griots are often lavishly rewarded for their praise singing, even though in private many patrons express exasperation with their griots. Indeed, the example of VC’s angry outburst against J—accusing the latter of lacking in generosity by not inviting K to the

name giving ceremony—nicely exemplifies how griots derive their social power in large part from their ability to make or break people’s reputation (Roth 2008).

In sum, then, “history through words” rests upon the mutual reinforcement of the special power of griots and a language ideology of the power of speech to constitute social reality. This dynamic enables griots to effectively give people a social identity in the present by linking them to the heroic deeds of their ancestors in the past. The word-skills of griots and the inherent flexibility of Mande history that they espouse means that non-Mande “elements” (be they people, religious practices, or global processes) can be incorporated into the general framework of Sunjata-centered stories. The fluidity of Mande as an idea makes this concept almost endlessly susceptible to being “stretched and reshaped” in order to incorporate disparate elements, narratives, and histories. Genealogies of non-Mande families can readily be tacked on to the general framework of stories about Sunjata and his various generals, for example through the “translatibility” of non-Mande last names into those that are thought to originate in the region (Dieterlen 1955). Similar processes allow variously constituted populations that do not currently reside in Mande to consider this place their ancestral homeland.²¹

The role of kolosi in listening to and producing griots’ speech:

“Ah, this is the melody of Sunjata, all right”

The importance of Sunjata, the power of words, and the particular social position of griots—this much is well known to scholars of the region. However, the intersection of these themes with an ideology and practices of *kolosi* has not until now been appreciated. Yet there are multiple ways in which “paying attention” is crucial to understanding the workings of griot speech, both on the part of the griots preparing and in the midst of uttering speech as well as on the part of the audience listening to it. In this section I reexamine a few examples described in the vast literature on Mande griots to show how a framework of *kolosi* helps illuminate some key aspects of how griots work and how and why their speech is so powerful. In the process, I also further my discussion of the contours of *kolosi* as a theory about and particular mode of paying attention.

First of all, the process by which a griot over the years becomes a person capable of performing history and praise songs is almost entirely one of careful attention and observation to family members who are established griots (Stoller 1997, Jansen 1995 and 2001). These griots have in common with most other *siyaw* (“kinds” of people), that they learn the specific skills that are their birthright in an “education of attention” (Ingold 2000:146 and 190) as described in the previous chapter.

More specific to griots is the problem of meaning in griot speech. Various scholars have suggested that griot speech is so dangerously powerful, and the griots who utter it so feared, because of the opaque nature of this speech. Highly formulaic, consisting mainly of nouns, lacking predicates, employing numerous “archaic” (*koro*) or apparently meaningless words, and delivered in a high-pitched sound, griot speech indeed sounds rather impenetrable (cf. Hoffman 2000). Praise phrases in particular are indecipherable to all but a select few senior griots, if anybody. Based on such observations, much griot speech would seem to be devoid of meaning,²²—indeed, its apparent meaninglessness might be exactly the point. At the same time, however, griots employ a discourse of transparency and meaningfulness when discussing their own speech in public. For example, in a published version of the Sunjata Epic, LD, the “master of words” (*kumatigi*) from Kela who does the recitation repeatedly draws attention to the fact that every part of his speech, however small, carries meaning:

“We Mande griots do not utter speech unless we also lay its meaning on top of it”

(anw Mandenjeliw te kuma fo ni an ma min koro fo ka d’a kan)

(Jansen, Duintjer and Tamboura 1995: 36, my translation)

This quote clearly reinforces an ideology of *kolosi* in instructing audiences to expect meaning (*koro*) everywhere in griots’ speech, even in the smallest details. It also encourages the practice of *kolosi* on the part of listeners, who should be alert to subtle turns of phrasing and appreciative of the importance of every little thing that is said. Moreover, LD crucially implies here that if the meaning of anything in his words is not clear, the fault for this lies with the listener, not with the griot, who has after all “laid the meaning on top” of everything that needs explaining.

Thus, griots actively work to create the *expectation* of meaningfulness for their speech, which is obviously in line with an ideology of *kolosi*, even if other linguistic practices they employ (lack of predicates, archaisms, etc.) work just as actively *against* the transparency of their speech. In creating this paradox, where griot speech is supposed to be transparently meaningful but most listeners fall far short of understanding it, griots both reinforce the salience of *kolosi* and position themselves as uniquely capable of it.

Another arena of griots' work in which an ideology and practices of *kolosi* are important is the preparations griots go through anytime they get ready to become embodiments of words. Because words are dangerously powerful, speakers need to be ready and prepared before using them, even if griots are especially capable of dealing with the potentially lethal force of words thanks to their hereditary qualities. My *finaw* friends talked about how they had to prepare themselves before each important speech event in order to 1) ensure the efficacy of their words and 2) protect their own integrity from physical or verbal attacks in response to their words. An outward sign of this preparation during particularly fraught discursive events is the medicinal stick (*gese*) senior griots hold in their mouth when speaking. *Gesew*, or "medicinal" sticks, are collected from specific trees that are prepared for their speech-enhancing function by means of a *kilisi* ("incantation") and continually reinvigorated by their contact with the speaker's spit (*tu*) in his or her mouth.²³ Griots use these *gesew* while speaking and to "wash their mouth" (*k'i da ko*) prior to doing so, in much the same way people customarily use sticks to brush their teeth and tongue. Only after having prepared themselves to speak in this way, do griots feel confident that their words will achieve their aims.

At particular fraught events—i.e., most large gatherings where the powers of other attendees might not be known²⁴—it is imperative also to be vigilant of any signs that others might be out to cause harm. The observational skills employed here, too, are part and parcel of *kolosi*. Only someone who is observant of his or her surroundings and has honed his or her observational skills well enough to know what certain behaviors might indicate will be able to appreciate the sub-

tle, but telling signs that others are up to no good. For example, someone who does not greet others in a large crowd might not be a human being, but a possibly malicious *jina* (“jinn”) instead, my host in Ksm warned me before allowing me to attend a big event in Dnk. In another example, VB remarked to me, “You know what it means if you see something like that at a hunters’ meeting, right?”—referring to a mutual friend who let three little green lemons slip out while reaching for a packet of tea in his deep pockets. Indeed, showing the three little green lemons in one’s pocket is a way of subtly letting on that one is protected from any malignant powers aimed at one’s person; conversely, observing the presence of such protective objects on somebody else will make one think twice before trying to harm them; in either case, the practice underscores and indeed enhances the salience of *kolosi*. In this and similar cases, “paying attention to oneself” (*i yere kolosi*, cf. Chapter 4) entails preparing oneself against the harmful actions of others as well as being on the look-out for potential evil-doers, or even possible victims.²⁵

A final context in which *kolosi* plays an important part in griot speech is in the relationship between words and music. The songs praising the ancestry of specific patrons are recited to different “melodies,” called *fasaw*. In their performances griots sometimes specifically note the fact that their recitations match the appropriate melody, as does LD in the following comments in a recording of the Sunjata Epic: “Ah, this is the melody of Sunjata, all right” (*aa Sinbon ka juru fokan ye nin ye*) (Jansen, Duintjer, and Tamboura 1995:43 and 110). Audiences too need to be alert to these melodies, for example when the praise songs sung by female griots occasion dancing. Breaking out of the circle of listeners to actively dance to the music being performed is not done indiscriminately. Instead, women come out to dance when they have a specific relationship to the person being praised, who might be their own ancestor, their husband’s, or someone else’s to whom they feel connected. The music as much as the words is part of recognizing whose praises are being sung—and hence, calculating whether or not to join the dance for this person.

Recognizing the appropriate relationship between a piece of music and the particulars of one's person is not as easy as it might seem, yet it is crucial to get the relationship right, as inappropriate reactions to a piece of music can have negative consequences, and potentially be lethal. MD, a young man on our compound who was active as a drummer in the "theater group" one day offered to show me the "lion dance" (*wara don*), which consisted of him bending over to dance on all fours, with a small rock in each hand.

"Only we can dance to this. People like Y and M (two of his older brothers), even your husband, they cannot dance this anymore. They are too old. This dance is for youth like us. If they try to dance it, they will break their back."

While the reference to "breaking one's back" might seem a figure of speech, MD and his agemates assured me that people from slightly older age groups would actually die when they tried to dance the *wara don*, which is why they never danced it anymore now that they were "too old."

If the problem of the lion dance as laid out by MD consists in inappropriately dancing to a rhythm one can no longer dance to, the failure to participate in a dance when one should is equally problematic. It is a major slight when someone refuses to dance to the praise song for someone to whom they are connected. Conversely, it is a clear show of support when, for example, everybody related to "Fakoli" steps out the circle of bystanders and comes out to dance to the music of Fakoli *Janjo* (the name for the particular *fasa*, or "melody" associated with Fakoli). At a dance in Krs, a woman who had been adopted into our compound, once acknowledged the praise for Fakoli, the ancestor of the Db on our compound, by getting a large drinking pot from her house, dancing with it all over the open dance area, and presenting it to the griots who were praising her adoptive compound.

Slightings are less noticeable than shows of support, because they consist of an "invisible presence." One has to be aware of exactly who is present (no small feat at night, with a big crowd of people standing around the dance space) and know a lot about their familial and social relations in order to notice who is not "coming out" to dance when they should, or could reasonably be expected to.

This level of intimate knowledge about who was related to or friends with whom was sometimes outside my scope as a relative newcomer, but when I was once the object of an obvious slight of nonparticipation, I definitely felt its sting.²⁶ The sting, in fact, comes from observing someone (not) doing something specific, constructing this as a “refusal” and interpreting this refusal in turn as a sign of her inner state. Thus, such a slight is predicated on people’s capacity for and appreciation of *kolosi*. Insults don’t sting those who are clueless.

River County: overlapping modes of historical imagination

One of the two specific places in Mande where most of the research for this dissertation was carried out is Krs. Krs is a medium-size village of about 2,500 people on the western bank of the Niger River, about 50 km from Mali’s capital, Bamako. Due to its proximity to Bamako, the lifeworld of people in Krs is inextricably linked to that of the capital, despite its very different “feel” and real differences in the material conditions of life (cf. Wooten 2009). Everybody I knew in Krs had relatives or friends in Bko, who were there trying to take advantage of the (economic) opportunities that the countryside lacks. Administratively, Krs is part of the *commune du Mande*, (“Mande administrative unit”) a grouping of circa 25 geographically contiguous villages that came into being with the state-sponsored move towards “decentralization” from 1992 onwards (cf. Chapter 7).

Historically, Krs forms part of a geo-political entity called “River County,” a group of four core villages (including Krs) founded by a pair of brothers belonging to a specific branch of Sunjata’s lineage (Keita) as well as 1) a village of griots attached to the lineage of the founding four, 2) a number of farming hamlets associated with the four founders, and 3) other villages which the original four allowed to settle in the area under their control. Interestingly, neither Krs nor most of the other villages making up River County figure prominently in the Sunjata Epic—not even in the versions recorded with the famous griot Wa Kamissoko of Kr, the official griot village of River County. The reason for this is apparently simple: the founding of Krs and the rest of River County—with the crucial exception of the griot village of Kr itself—postdates the time of Sunjata.

Unsurprisingly, people in Krs as well as the other towns of River County readily tell stories about their villages' origins, founder(s), and trajectories through the Mande landscape, and other events that happened there. Rather than providing these local stories here,²⁷ I want to make two additional points about these stories and the ways in which they intersect with both “history through words” and “history in landscape.” First, different modes of historical imagination are best conceived of as falling along a continuum—“[which] does not entail a zero-sum conception of particular cultural forms as located exclusively at one or another of these extremes” as Shaw has argued (2002:7)—or as complementary. Even though the stories based on local heroes are only tangentially related to the overarching framework of the Sunjata Epic (cf. Jansen 2003), they are still linked in specific instances, such as in the village founders' descent from a particular branch of the Sunjata Keita lineage (even if many intervening personages have been lost). Conversely, even the Sunjata Epic is more place-conscious than commonly assumed, as the references to actual places in some of the published versions of the epic make clear (e.g., the description of the “bow of Fakoli”—a rock formation near Sb—in the version of Wa Kamissoko (Cisse and Kamissoko 1991).

The following comments about a “fieldtrip” a group of Africanist scholars took with the famous griot Wa Kamissoko exemplifies both the locally felt salience of place for adequately grasping history as well as the relative neglect of this in most scholarly accounts. One of the participants in the one-day trip to places associated with the time-space and person of Sunjata, the filmmaker Jean Rouch noted the next day:

I want to thank the organizers for the outing we had yesterday, because for one thing, it was very pretty, very pleasant, but more importantly for me, it was the revelation of the parole sur le terrain [‘words being spoken on the spot’]. Indeed, Wa told us on several occasions that what is important when telling historic oral traditions about Mali was to go to the places themselves where the events took place. Because, at that moment, oral tradition becomes an unforgettable scene. When we arrived at that spot in the Manding Mountains, where that thin column of rock stands and when Wa told us what had happened there, the sacrifices people made there, in front of this stone witness of a history that has been going on for centu-

ries—you experience a new dimension [of the story]. And I said to Tam-sir Niane yesterday that it would be really good if the Epic of Sunjata could one day be told as a movie. When you read Delafosse, Monteil, Levtzion, you'll often ask yourself the question: but where did this take place? What was the country like? What were its trees like? What were the contours of the brush there? Where did its river flow? (Rouch, in SCOA 1975:91, *my translation*)

Rouch's comment on the importance of knowing what historical places look like seems to be shared by local observers, not least the griot Wa Kamissoko himself.

If the histories spoken by griots really come to life in the places where they occurred, as Rouch comments and Kamissoko's own words suggest, it is no accident that the practicing griots I came to know all actively travelled the Mande landscape to learn the localized histories of various places. In other words, even if there are no locally privileged categories of people who are considered experts per se in knowing or telling "history in landscape," practicing griots seem to consider this kind of historical knowledge indispensable for their training. Indeed, I learned to appreciate the relevance of spatial embodiments of history particularly through VC, a practicing griot (specifically, a *fina*) for whom a deep knowledge of history was an important part of his social persona. Many other people pointed out features of the landscape to me and told me what they knew of the stories associated with them. However, VC was one of the few people I knew in Krs who actively set out in search of this kind of historical knowledge, going out to visit well-informed elders or titleholders to chat with them.²⁸ In fact, this was a key consideration in asking VC to be a research assistant and help me visit other villages, mostly those where *finaw* lived. Over time I noticed that whenever we did interviews together, VC would almost invariably ask about land and landmarks:²⁹ With what other villages does this village share a border? In which *ko* ("fishing pond") does this village fish, and what village fishes from the *ko* close by? From VC's questions I came to understand that knowing the landscape is an important component of knowing history, and that as a practicing griot, VC was eager to learn as much as possible about the past in all modes of historical imagination.

A second point I want to stress regarding the localized histories of the villages making up River County is that the continued presence of historic realities is

palpable here, regardless of the mode of historical imagination in which they are expressed. One aspect of this is the political nature of historical knowledge. In this respect, “history in landscape” is by no means more stable than the “ever-turning drinking well” of griot-based history, and the telling of localized histories is as much fraught with politics as are griots’ claims for their patrons’ glorious past. The occasions when questions about landscape (from VC or myself) were not answered make this clear. Exactly what knowledge was considered too “politically sensitive” for the ears of an outsider (or an interested local) also shifted during the course of my research, following the eruption of specific conflicts about particular plots of land, borders, water, or other resources.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, for example, I had no problem talking about the history of “Kr SSo,” a fishing hamlet currently located closest to Kr, and its trajectory through the landscape. After only a few months, though, a simmering conflict about the “ownership” of the Niger River, came into full force. This case is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. For now, I want to highlight that earlier promises to record the history of the hamlet—which people in Krs now insisted on calling *Krs SSo* instead of *Kr SSo*—never materialized once the conflict had started again. No doubt, this had to do with the fact that the history of the place bore directly upon the underlying issue in this conflict. At the end of an interview with an older man in Krs, VC asked a pointed question about the historic boundary of Krs/Kr SSo, but the latter laughed at the inappropriate timing of the question,

“Well, we all know what is going on with that; the history of the place, we cannot talk about that now. You know people don’t want to talk about that now. I mean, yes, the conflict is over now, but to talk about the land—no. If you see that the place has been called Krs SSo, KK SSo, and Kr SSo, well, that tells you something. The land, it was really for Krs. The pond in which they fish, all of these places (Krs, KK, Kr, SSo) could fish there. It wasn’t anybody’s exclusive right. But the land, it was for Krs, but we cannot really talk about it.”

THE PARADOX OF ISLAM IN MANDE

The palpable presence of history in Mande is evident in numerous contexts. The embodiment of Islam in the regional historical landscape, however, presents a particularly interesting paradox. The paradox of Islam in Mande, as I call it, refers to the fact that Islam is perceived as both a centuries-old presence in the region as well as a relatively recent reality of daily life. “History through words” on one hand, links people’s earliest ancestors not only to the time and space of Sunjata, but to the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad as well, through Sunjata’s own ancestor, who is presented as a companion of the Prophet. “History in landscape” on the other hand, embodies more recent memories of the introduction of Islam in the region, such as the sites associated with the mid- to late-19th-century Jihad of Samori, or the first mosques, dating to the early decades of the 20th century. This neat picture of the two sides of the paradox is, in turn, complicated by the presence of a supposedly centuries-old mosque in the tiny village of Mnf, which is often said to embody the oldest presence of Islam in Mande.

Mnf’s mosque and the spatial history of Islam

The second major location of my fieldwork was the small village of Ksm (population ca. 750), on the other side of the Niger River, and about 10 km further down than Krs. Ksm forms part of the newly established “commune du Ngd,” although its historic allegiance to Dnk, which contests the leadership of Ngd, has so far meant that the actual relevance of the administrative designation of Ksm as part of this commune is limited. By contrast, people in Ksm are oriented towards Dnk for a host of everyday activities and services, such as the market, elementary school, and medical clinic. The population of Ksm consists entirely of *numuw* (blacksmiths and potters), along with the descendants of their former slaves.

Not far from Ksm lies the even smaller village of Mnf (ca. 350 people). Despite its small size, Mnf is well known throughout Mande as the first village in the region to have a mosque. People in Mnf and surrounding villages described the physical characteristics of the mosque as markers of its antiquity. Two middle-aged women (BS and MC) on the compound where I lived in Ksm explained:

“The ceiling inside is very low, as is the entrance, which is very, very low; it forces you to bend over when you enter the building. If you see that you have to bend over to get in, that is because the mosque is very, very old. Because when the mosque was built, people were a lot smaller than they are now.”

They continued to tell me how the mosque was built with mud originating from Mecca, as far back as “the time of the Prophet.”

“Seven camels were transporting the building material from Mecca to Dnk, where the mosque was supposed to be erected. This was in the time of the Prophet. They were on their way to Mande, to Dnk. But it was a very long trip, and eventually the camels got so tired that they dropped down in the vicinity of Mnf, at the place where the mosque now stands. So the people from Dnk told the chief of Mnf that he should build the mosque right there, where the camels had stopped. Because it was meant for Dnk, but if the camels stopped there, that’s where the mosque should be built. The mud came all the way from Mecca. That’s why when later on, whenever they built another mosque in Mande, they sent a delegation to Mnf. They took some of the mud from Mnf’s mosque to mix it with the construction material for the new mosque. Even now, this is done. They use the mud from Mnf.”

This story about the first mosque of Mande—dating back all the way to Muhammad’s time, yet still visibly present, and bearing the markers of its antiquity in the very particulars of its construction—serves as a vivid illustration of some of the salient aspects of the history of Islam in Mande that I want to draw out in the rest of this chapter. Specifically, the story highlights the paradox of Islam in Mande at the same time as it subverts the stability of how Islam’s presence is most commonly embodied or embedded in histories “through words” or “in the landscape” respectively. Thus, the story of Mnf’s ancient mosque also usefully illustrates the multiple spaces in-between the two poles of the paradox of Islam in Mande, which represent the religion as ancient and recently introduced at the same time. It is indeed in these in-between spaces where we find the highly varied, localized, lineage- or family-based memories of (and claims to) an Islamic past and/or ancestry.

Many people I spoke to, especially in Dnk and Ksm, felt that the presence of Mande’s oldest mosque, supposedly predating all others by several centuries substantiates Mnf’s claim to a unique position in Mande’s religious history. When I accompanied three women from adjacent compounds in Ksm to Mnf for a

Friday prayer, they exchanged stories about other people they knew who had successfully prayed for their “needs” (*mako*) in Mnf: one mother, for example, had prayed for her son who was trying to enter Europe, and she had succeeded. As they explained to me, “praying at the mosque is the poor person’s pilgrimage, and if you pray in Mnf’s mosque on seven consecutive Fridays, it counts as the pilgrimage to Mecca.”

This prominence comes to the fore particularly on the occasion of the Islamic New Year, which attracts large numbers of people to Mnf. In 2007, several hundred people, in my estimation, attended the all-night New Year’s celebration in Mnf. Mnf’s New Year’s celebration is particularly salient in how it reconstitutes the important historical role of Mnf as Mande’s key site of Islam through the retracing of specific ties based on the Islamic history of the place. One such historical linkage that is embodied in the invisible landscape of Mande’s history is that between Mnf and Nrn. According to oral traditions recounted to me by DK in Nrn, his regionally known ancestor, Nankoman, owed his ascent to power to the Islamic specialists in Mnf. To honor the “friendship” (*teriya*) between the two places, or rather their politically powerful lineages, every year a delegation from Nrn attends Mnf’s New Year’s ceremony to greet the family whose history is now intertwined with theirs. In DK’s words:

“Nankoman went on a religious retreat to Mnf before going to war trip against Kon. There, he became friends with a Sgn, the village chief and mori [“islamic scholar”] of Mnf, who told him that he [NK] would achieve great power. They planned to meet up again after NK’s return from his trip, but NK died on his way from Kon. In the meantime, his friend in Mnf had also died. But NK’s descendants decided to bury their father in Mnf because of the special relation of friendship between NK and Mnf’s mori. The tomb of NK is still in Mnf, close to, yet not actually inside, the mosque. Every year there is a delegation from Nrn, or more precisely the descendants of NK who go to Mnf.”

“When a descendant of NK would obtain the blessing of all of his fellow descendants of NK to accomplish a certain goal, for example, to become a powerful politician, and he would then go and ask the moriw in Mnf to pray for that goal, he would achieve it. But a descendant of NK should never go to Mnf and ask for things like that of his own accord, only when sent by (or at least vetted by) the rest of the family.”

Others, however, disagree that Mnf holds a particularly prominent position in Mande's Islamic landscape. For Muslims who advocate forms of Islamic moral renewal, for example, the very connection of Mnf's mosque to an early phase of Islamic influence in the region disqualifies it as a true Muslim place, because they maintain that Islam at the time was not nearly as "developed" (*bony*) as it is now. Obviously, they discount practices such as taking mud from Mnf's mosque to mix it with the building material of subsequent mosques as objectionable "innovations" (*bidan*).

Still others do not disagree with Mnf's prominence on religious grounds, but they doubt the professed efficacy of Mnf's New Year's ceremony. For example, when I told some of my friends that I planned to attend Mnf's New Year's ceremony, they expressed their own disappointment with the power of the place. Some said they had been, but it had not helped them at all, while others had never felt the need to go because they did not think it would be useful.

The history of Islam and islamization in Mande: a paradox

I have referred to the particular history of Islam in Mande as a paradox. That it constitutes a paradox rather than a contradiction, owes much to the instability and unfixed nature of what it means to be a Muslim. The "unfinished business" of becoming a Muslim, in Mande as elsewhere, provides an implicit rationale for why people (individually or as a group) can "become Muslim" more than once, at different points in time. Thus, stories about Sunjata and other lineage ancestors being descendants from forebears dating to the time and space of the Prophet establishes an imaginative history of Mande as having "always already been Muslim" in some sense. Yet this does not mean they would necessarily measure up against current local standards of what it takes to be a Muslim, such that people can still remember their own grandparents and great-parents as "not yet Muslim." Moreover, there are important geographical and familial differences in regards to *when* particular towns, neighborhoods, lineages, or individual families started to carry out specific Islamic practices, just as the issue of exactly *which* practices and performances made one "a Muslim" was redefined over time. The category of Mus-

lims in Mande, then, never referred to an unproblematic identity or unified, monolithic group (either in the past or in the present), but was and is a differentiated category.

In talking about the paradox of Islam in Mande, I am primarily addressing the issue as one of historical imagination, or the situated ways in which people understand their past. However, it is interesting to note that the secondary literature on the introduction of Islam in this area and the wider region of West Africa similarly highlights the unfinished business of becoming Muslim. In the next two sections, then, I outline how the introduction of Islam in this region has historically been a continuous process that was never entirely complete. This brief overview of Islam in Mande, which relies on the secondary literature on Islamization in West Africa, forms a crucial backdrop for my discussion (in Chapter 6) of contemporary discussions about Islam and the role “paying attention” plays in them. Recurrent elements include: 1) the influence of self-identified Muslims coming from elsewhere, 2) increases in Islamic learning, and 3) constant reformulations of what being a Muslim entails. In the second half of this section, I look more closely at some of the oral traditions concerning Islam that I collected in the field as well as at the material remnants speaking to people’s engagements with the religion.

Making and remaking Muslim space in Mande

The process by which Islam gained roots in Mande amounts to a gradual, not necessarily linear or cumulative creation of Islamic practices, institutions, spaces, and identities across the region over roughly one thousand years. Robinson’s metaphor of “making Muslim space,”³⁰ which critically involves “*remaking* it in successive generations” (Robinson 2004:199, my italics) aptly captures the permanent incompleteness of “Islamization” in Mande and elsewhere. Indeed, Mande’s experience with Islam mirrors that of much of the rest of West Africa, in that the introduction of Islam involved recurrent debates and reformulations of what being a Muslim entailed at particular historical moments. In Robinson’s terms, across the continent, the dual process of “Islamization” and “Africanization” was played

out through continual “remakings” of “the boundaries between what is Muslim and what is not” (Robinson 2004:204). He also argues that this process is best studied in the particularities of each case, where the variously situated actors who cross, renegotiate, or erase these boundaries appear in greatest relief. Mande’s engagement with Islam over the span of more than a millennium constitutes just such a particular case of the making and *remaking* Muslim space over time (Robinson 2004; 2000).

Islam became established in what Arab writers called *Bilal-al-Sudan*—the wider Saharan and Sahel region that includes Mande—as early as the 9th century. The presence of Islam in this part of West Africa is thus almost as ancient as in North Africa and the Middle East, the respective regions from where the religion was introduced, and where it originated. Arabic sources from the first half of the second millennium present the early period of Islamization of the region as a time of expanding contact between Muslims and non-Muslims in the context of the trans-Saharan trade. As early as 1068, the Spanish Muslim geographer Al-Bakri noted that there were significant Muslim populations in the towns of the Western Sahel (Levtzion 1973:53-4). A few centuries later, in 1393-94, another Arab scholar, Ibn Khaldun, described the Mali Empire founded by Sunjata as including major Islamic elements. He also described a famous pilgrimage to Mecca made by one of Sunjata’s successors, Mansa Musa, whose reign is customarily dated to the mid-fourteenth century (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:323).

Contemporary scholarship on the history of Islam in Africa, based on the critical examination of Arabic texts and other sources, still finds merit in the basic narrative of the interconnectedness of trans-Saharan trade and Islam as a first step in the Islamization in the Sudan (Levtzion 1973; Levtzion and Hopkins 1981; Levtzion and Spaulding 2003). As far as the Mali Empire is concerned specifically, the scholarship also generally accepts the evidence provided by Arabic writers about the presence in the Empire of certain Islamic practices and linkages to the Muslim world. Indeed, the story of Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage is commonly understood as an indication of his conversion to Islam. In this respect, the Mali Empire under Mansa Musa illustrates broader trends in this historical period,

which saw several important Western Sudanic rulers adopt what had up until then been a religion of itinerant North African merchants and traders. In a somewhat older scholarly tradition, the conversion of kings and rulers is often considered the second “phase” in the historical trajectory of Islam in West Africa. According to Levtzion, the ways in which kings and ruling classes related to Islam fall into a number of patterns, from “the nominal and partial acceptance of Islam in Gao” to “the zealous adherence to Islam of the king of Takrur on the Lower Senegal.” Between these two extremes, the Empire of Ghana presents a middle ground, with Muslims who live under the auspices of pagan rulers but keep a mutual distance (Levtzion 1973:183-6).³¹ Exemplifying more recent scholarly concerns, Robinson’s notion of “accommodation” complicates the notion of successive phases and regular patterns and gives greater attention to the diversity of political, economic, and social conditions involved (Robinson 2004; 2000).³²

The position of Islam in the Mali Empire in the centuries following Sunjata was probably most like that described for Gao several centuries earlier. In Levtzion’s words, “the precepts of Islam were observed in different degrees by the various social groups in the kingdom” (Levtzion 1973:196), which leaves Mali far from being a fully Islamic empire. Instead, the Mali Empire, with its hierarchical categorization of people according to *siya* (see below), likely resembled the case of the Haalpuular’en in Senegal, where Islamic knowledge and practice were assigned to specific categories of persons only. Dilley shows that the Sudanese model of social organization in terms of endogamous experts readily lent itself to the incorporation of practicing Muslims as another category of experts among the Haalpuular’en in Senegal (Dilley 2004). The same applies to the Mali Empire. At the creation of the Empire at Kurukan Fuga, where Sunjata is presumed to have outlined the social organization and relationship between its 33 constituent “clans” (*siyaw*), there are five clans who are designated as Mande *moriw*, or “Islamic scholars” (Dieterlen 1955, Jansen 2002).³³ The term *moriw* refers both to experts in Islamic religion as well as to practicing Muslims—in fact, these two categories are considered one and the same. This, in turn, is consistent with the basic premise of *siya* as an inherited status granting access to an exclu-

sive domain of knowledge. In the Empire of Mali then, as among Senegal's Haalpuular'en, Muslims were most likely a distinct category of people, characterized by their hold on a specific domain of knowledge, to which they had access through birth.

At the same time, through its gradual expansion from its center on the confluence of the Niger and Sarakani Rivers, the Mali Empire came to include established centers of Islam in the Saharan regions to the North (Levtzion 1973:191). Among these centers of Islamic learning were Timbuctu, Gao, Nioro, and Jenne, all of which had been home to great scholars and institutions for the study of Islam long before they were incorporated into the Mali Empire. In the course of the 14th and 15th centuries, these towns became ever-more important hubs for higher Islamic learning and attracted scholars from all over northern and western Africa. Resident Islamic scholars, such as the famous Ahmad Baba (1556-1627), based in Timbuctu, achieved widespread acclaim and helped create Mali's reputation as an Islamic Empire highly regarded by Muslim visitors from elsewhere (Hunwick 2006). Indeed, Timbuctu and the other centers of Islamic learning continued to flourish long after the dissolution of the Mali Empire in the early sixteenth century, as part of the Songhay Empire and subsequent political entities.

At the height of the Mali Empire in the 14th and 15th centuries, and continuing after its dissolution, groups of Mande-speaking people, either from the original Mande region or from more recently conquered areas, moved throughout the larger Sudanic region. Most of these people self-identified as Muslim and established Muslim communities in the regions where they eventually settled. For example, Mali's rulers encouraged groups of Muslim merchants to emigrate southwards, to what is now Côte d'Ivoire, where they came to be known as Jula (Robinson 2004; Wilks 1968). Some of these groups settled even more eastwards, in northern Ghana, and became Wangara (Wilks 1982a; 1982b). At around the same time, Bainuk communities welcomed in their midst the Mandinka-speaking Muslims who had migrated West after the fall of Mali, thus beginning the process of Islamization-cum-Mande-fication of the Middle Casamance region (Drame, personal communication 2010).

Mande itself never became a hotbed for Islamic learning. In this respect, the region contrasts with neighboring areas, such as the Futa Tooro in Senegal, the Futa Jalon in Guinea, and the central and northern parts of Mali. Specifically, the Islamic (Sufi) brotherhoods such as the Qadiriyya and later Tijaniyya that gained strong footholds in these other regions from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards (Robinson 2000; Soares 2005), did not acquire similar followings in Mande. As late as the 19th century, Person notes, the Mande villages situated between, yet independent from, self-consciously Islamic-styled states surrounding them were a cultural and religious backwater with little Islamic learning (Person 1963; 1979). Person convincingly argues that even Samori's connection to Islam, coming out of this context where Islamic scholarship was greatly limited, was rather tenuous, despite the latter's attempts to couch his conquests in the Islamic discourse of *jihad* (1979).³⁴

At the same time, one should be careful not to read the absence of centers of Islamic learning, and particularly of Sufism and its characteristic practices of knowledge transmission, as an absence of Islam in Mande *tout court*. Mande *moriw* lineages, for example, were still present and likely continued to provide "Islamic" services to those in need of them. For example, oral tradition holds that the Fofana *moriw* of Mnf were instrumental in securing Nankoman Keita's victory over his detractors (ca. 19th century), as discussed above (Seydou Camara and Jansen 1999). Pre-colonial Mande is probably best described, then, in the words of Otayek and Soares, as an example "of other ways of being Muslim in Africa, which might have little to do with Sufism" yet are no less organically connected to African societies (2007:4). In the case of Mande, I take this quote to mean, *not* that self-consciously non-Sufi modes of being Muslim prevailed here, but instead that the region remained on the periphery of the major Sufi brotherhoods and that not many local people indentified with them.³⁵

Even if Islam were not an important factor in the lifeworld of most people in Mande until at least colonial times, the spread of this religion was nevertheless of great concern to the French (Harrison 1988). After the defeat of Samori at Woyowayanko, the Mande region became part of what was then the colony of

Sudan Francaise in 1880. As Brenner and others have detailed, the French policy towards Islam was based on a stark dichotomy between *Islam noir* (“black” or “African” Islam) and the pure, “Arab” version, which were presented as wholly different in the scholarship of the day. Fearing the possibility of “Arab Islam”—considered more “aggressive”—pushing out a more tolerant “African Islam,” the French established the notion of “containment” and sought to prevent Islamic knowledge from spreading (Brenner 2001; Mann 2003). French colonial concerns with the spread of Islam decidedly influenced and in some instances continue to influence scholarly notions of what constitutes Islam in Africa (Otayek and Soares 2007, Robinson 2000, Brenner 2001, Mann 2003).

The Mande region seems to have been of less concern to the French in this regard compared to other regions, such as Wasulu to the south, where newly established Islamic scholars and teachers gained large followings (Soares 2005). At the same time, colonial administrators who periodically visited Mande produced a number of reports about Muslim matters in general, and the role and position of “marabouts” in particular (Archives National du Mali, *Fons Anciens* 4E 36 and 78). For example, they diligently took note of when individual villages in the region constructed their first mosques: Kenieba in 1910, Saguéle in 1916, Kangaba in 1920, Narena and Samalofira both in 1925, and Kenieroba in 1930 (Archives National du Mali, *Fons Anciens* 1E 2650). The construction of purpose-built, mud mosques—as opposed to temporary or repurposed spaces where Mande Muslims used to pray—was indeed an indication that Islam was becoming a more prominent and visible part of social life.

The colonial period also saw more people from Mande being able to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and bring back new modes of practicing Islam as a result.³⁶ These changes are generally described in terms of greater exposure to the ways Islam is practiced in the Middle East; a growing concern with Islamic knowledge at home; and the emergence of so-called reformist movements.³⁷ Amelle (1985) describes how as early as the 1940 and 50s, reformist movements were particularly popular among upwardly mobile merchants in Bamako, spreading to other social classes in subsequent decades. However, the oral traditions I

collected from several Mande villages (which will be discussed in more detail below) demonstrate that such reform movements were never solely an urban phenomenon. In two cases, I found that the introduction of “reformist” ideas and practices—particularly a new form of prayer—by a returning pilgrim was eventually taken up by practically the entire village (in Kll and Ngd). In other towns, some of the returning pilgrims reformed their own ways of prayer (and carried this change over into later generations), while others did not. Bespeaking the importance of individual religious trajectories and village-level politics, the percentage of people initially attracted to reformist Islam seems to have varied considerably during the 1940s through 50s; inter-village differences in this regard remain significant in the present as well.

The role of Islam, particularly in its various reformist understandings, has grown steadily in Mali since Independence (in 1960). Despite the constitutionally enshrined ideal of a secular state, Islam became increasingly dominant in people’s lifeworlds and particularly in the political sphere (Launay and Soares 1999; Soares 2005b; Otayek and Soares 2007). In the socialist period (from 1960 to 1968), some Muslim organizations such as the Reformist UCM (*l’Union Culturelle Musulmane*) were forbidden (Amselle 1985). At the same time, Islamic knowledge was ever more widely disseminated through Qur’an schools and *medersas*, which enrolled steadily growing numbers of schoolchildren and embraced new ways of teaching the Quran and the Arabic language (Brenner 2001). Concurrently, radio emissions of sermons and other Muslim topics were also instrumental in increasing people’s familiarity with and knowledge of particular Islamic ideas and practices (Sakoua 2004). Attendant to the wider reach of Islamic knowledge, then, Muslim practices such as prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and almsgiving became more important in the daily lives of most Malians throughout the second half of the 20th century.

With the transition to democracy, including multi-party elections, in 1992, Islam gained additional legitimacy, particularly in the political realm. According to Launay and Soares (1999), the post-1992 period has been characterized by an ever-growing “Islamic sphere”—a term that refers to the increasing importance of

Islam in the public domain and the co-option of religion by various political leaders. This process is evidenced, for example, in Muslim organizations—barred from establishing religion-based political parties—seeking to back political candidates and weighing in on important socio-political issues. Most recently, the Muslim umbrella organization *Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali (HCI)* in Bamako mobilized its adherents in mass protests against the proposed changes in Mali’s Family Code, which it claimed went against the “Muslim values” of the majority of the population (Schulz 2003b:regarding earlier debates).

In sum, this brief history of Islam in Mande makes clear that there was no one point at which the region can be said to be “Islamized,” nor has there for the past ten centuries been a period when people in the region were not in some ways touched by Islam. The acceptance of Islam from an early date might have been a function of the openness to other religious ideas noted by Levtzion or the particularities of Sudanese social organization fore-grounded by Dilley. Over time, the “Muslim space” carved out by earlier generations of Mande Muslims was continually shaped by new debates, issues, and actors, as Robinson suggests. In Soares’ analysis, the ongoing process of creating and recreating Islam in what is now the nation-state of Mali centers on political questions of “who gets to decide what is and is not Islam and Islamic . . . and how such orthodoxy might change over time” (Soares 2008:212). In Chapter 6, I show that the ideology and practices of “paying attention” remain an important ground from which to argue for particular claims of what being a Muslim in contemporary Mali entails.

*“History through words” and “history in landscape”
as sources for Islamic history*

Person’s (1979) characterization of Islam as relatively absent from the Mande heartland until at least the mid-19th century is quite different from the picture presented by the Islamized versions of the Sunjata epic told by Mande griots in the past century, yet is generally in line with local stories and sites of memory. Indeed, the paradoxical nature of Islam in Mande is most clearly brought out in comparing the thoroughly Islamized “history through words” with the memories

of much more recent moments of Islamization embedded in “history in landscape.”

The history of Islam’s influence on “bardic art,” in Conrad’s terms, forms a clear illustration of how Islam gradually gained importance in the larger region, particularly among the ruling political classes. As a result, Islamic ancestry and claims about the early adaptation of Islamic practices were increasingly seen as prestigious, which in turn influenced the ways in which griots told episodes of the Sunjata Epic (Conrad 1985:34). In the analysis of Conrad, griots started to incorporate Islamic elements in the stories about Sunjata from an early date, as part of their effort to guarantee the political power and prestige of their patrons. Because genealogies were especially crucial to claiming and maintaining a patron’s status, these parts of the Sunjata corpus were most extensively transformed by the growing Islamic influence in the region. As Conrad notes:

The high value placed on Muslim antecedents has given rise to such extensive manipulation of traditional genealogies that at some point in the chain of oral transmission, pre-Islamic forebears began to lose status in favor of relative latecomers from the Middle East. (Conrad 1985:45)

Thus, it now has become commonplace for Mande griots to trace back Sunjata’s paternal lineage to one of the Prophet’s companions, Bilali Bunama, and that of their own *siya* to another companion, Surakata³⁸ (Conrad 1985; cf. Robinson 2004). The *finaw* I worked with, too, pointed to an Islamic ancestor for their *siya*, in the figure of Fisana (cf. Jansen 2002:120-1).

While Conrad convincingly argues that the incorporation of Islamic topics, characters, and practices in the Sunjata corpus must have started at a loosely defined “early date,” the entwinement of Islamic and non-Islamic elements has remained characteristic of griot-based stories up until the present. Contemporary stories about Sunjata portray him as a hero who uses both traditional power objects and Islamic knowledge practices to achieve his dominance. In another example of griots’ stories postulating a long Islamic tradition for Mande, Sunjata’s general Fakoli is reported to have traveled to Mecca and obtained power objects from the land of the Prophet—even if they ended up slipping into the Niger River on his way back (Brett-Smith 1996, Jansen 2004). As Ebron (2002) has noted,

contemporary griot discourse in the Gambia is thoroughly Islamized. This Islamization of “history through words” is among the legitimizing moves griots employ to answer challenges to their profession as being “un-Islamic” (Janson 2002). The ongoing processes of incorporating Islamic elements in the Sunjata corpus as well as portraying the griot tradition itself as deriving from Islamic or Arabic sources—in the figure of Surakata—are thus an important locus where notions of what it means to be a “Mande person” as well as a “Muslim” intersect and continually refine each other.

* * *

In contrast to the griot repertoire of “history through words,” in which Islam is an ancient and legitimizing factor, most people I encountered during my fieldwork told the history of Islam in the region as a much more recent story. As the evidence of the *ga* shows, even in the late 19th century, villages in Mande actively resisted Samori, who was by then considered a Muslim ruler (cf. Person 1963).³⁹ Indeed, stories about Samori make clear that at the time of his power, most people in Mande were not Muslims, nor did they consider themselves as such. The exceptions here prove the rule, such as the settlement story of the Jn families in Krs, from neighboring Kll (the same village where Sunna reforms would hold great sway a few generations later). As KJ, one of the two imams who presently serve Krs’ two mosques, told me,

“My great-grandfather came here to Krs from Kll. This was at the height of Samori’s wars. Originally we came from further along the Niger River, but at that time, my great-grandfather was at Kll. Samori’s men were also at Kll. They killed all the other men from Kll, except for him. They allowed him to pass safely [to Krs], because he was a Muslim like Samori.”

In this example, KJ’s great-grandfather’s status as a Muslim—apparently one of the few in the region—allows him to safely move around and escape from a village where non-Muslim men are targeted for execution. It is interesting to think about what “being a Muslim” means in this story, both for KJ’s great-grandfather and for Samori. According to Person, Islam might not have been as important a part of Samori’s identity as sometimes assumed.⁴⁰ Similarly, the Janne name identifies the person being spared by Samori as a Mande *mori*; it is not clear to

what extent his identification as being a “fellow Muslim” was based on a significant aspect of the man’s self-identity and religious practice as opposed to a generic understanding about the Muslim status of certain lineages.

Stories such as KJ’s about his family’s historical experiences with Islam are neither representative of other people’s trajectories of Islamization nor are they wholly idiosyncratic. Rather, they point to the variegated ways in which people in Mande encountered Islam, and how current descendants of particular lineages and families, living in specific geographic locales, remember these encounters. In some places, stories about “the first person to practice Islam here” are rather unspecific, presenting not a clear distinction between a time “before” and “after” the introduction of Islam, but a more ambiguous situation, in which early Muslims at first “hid” (*k’i dugu*) this from their fellow villagers. For example, KC told me in colorful terms about the generation of his “grandfathers” and some “fathers” who “did not yet pray” but instead “were drinking alcohol”—thus invoking the two contrasting tropes for identifying someone’s status as a Muslim or not (yet) a Muslim. On occasions such as namegiving, KC recounted further, men were frequently drunk, swaggering about and speaking unclearly. In this context, he said, it is not clear who the first Muslim in town would have been, because even if there were Muslims at the time, they would go inside their rooms to pray instead of doing so openly.

In other villages—mainly Kll and Ngd, where the large majority of the population adopted a specific mode of prayer from the 1940s and 1950s—stories about the early local histories of Islam tend to conflate the moment of “becoming Muslim” with the introduction and large-scale acceptance of the form of Islam indicated by this new form of prayer. In this case, the local history of Islam is told as the story of particular named individuals who are remembered for their impact in (re-)defining what it means to be Muslim in specific villages. An example of this is the account of the introduction of Islam in Kll, told to me by an older female resident of the village.

“Everybody in Kll [prays with arms/hands held] (a particular mode of prayer to be discussed in Chapter 6). The first one to introduce [this mode of prayer] in Kll and from there in Bcm and Krs was ElHaji YC.

Originally from Jg, he settled in Kll because he was so learned. His brothers had shown him the animosity that is common among brothers. They didn't have an outright fight, but if one person is very learned and the others are not, that is a problem. Besides, El Haji YC was getting more and more students so space was becoming an issue too. So he went to Kll and asked for a spot to settle; he was granted a space where he could live with his family and students. El Haji YC brought a lot of interest to Kll and attracted many people to this place. He died about ten years ago, but his children are still living here and they too are very learned. El Haji BC is the oldest son and FC is the new imam."

"El Haji YC himself was very learned. He studied with many Islamic teachers, including some from Guinee, and introduced the [new mode of prayer] in Kll when I was a "young girl" (npogotigi). [By my calculations this must have been in the 1940s or 50s]. Until his death ten years ago, El Haji YC still did the Quranic instruction in Kll, including for women. All children in Kll take Quranic lessons."

In this account, the history of Islam in Kll is inextricably entwined with the story of the town's characteristic mode of prayer. The variety of "Islamic origin stories" indicates that the process of "becoming Muslim" does not have a single clear beginning, just as it continues unfinished into the future.

* * *

Over time, as Islam became more institutionalized, it also became embedded in the Mande landscape in the form of mosques. Nowadays mosques form an integral part of most Mande towns and villages, except for the smallest of them. The stories associated with when, where, and by whom these quintessentially Muslim spaces were built forms another spatial indicator of the varied regional experiences with Islam over the last century. Whether or not a place had a mosque relatively early comes to stand for the quality of its Islamic character up until the present. For example, two young women and I were once listening to an older woman's account of the festivities put on for the opening of the new mosque in Bcm, a large cement building erected about 30 years ago to replace the village's older mosque. She mentioned that a delegation from Tg announced on the occasion of Bcm's mosque opening that they, too, would open their new mosque—the first one ever built in Tg. From this remark about the relative times at which

Bcm's and Tg's first mosques were erected, the following exchange ensued between one of the young women (MS) and the speaker (JS):

MS: "Oh, I would never go to the opening of a mosque in Tg. Tg is bad."

JS: "You're right. Nobody went. Except for a small delegation from the mosque itself, the imam and a few others, nobody from Kll (where both MS and JS are from) or Bcm went to the festivities. Think about it, they are not really Muslims in Tg."

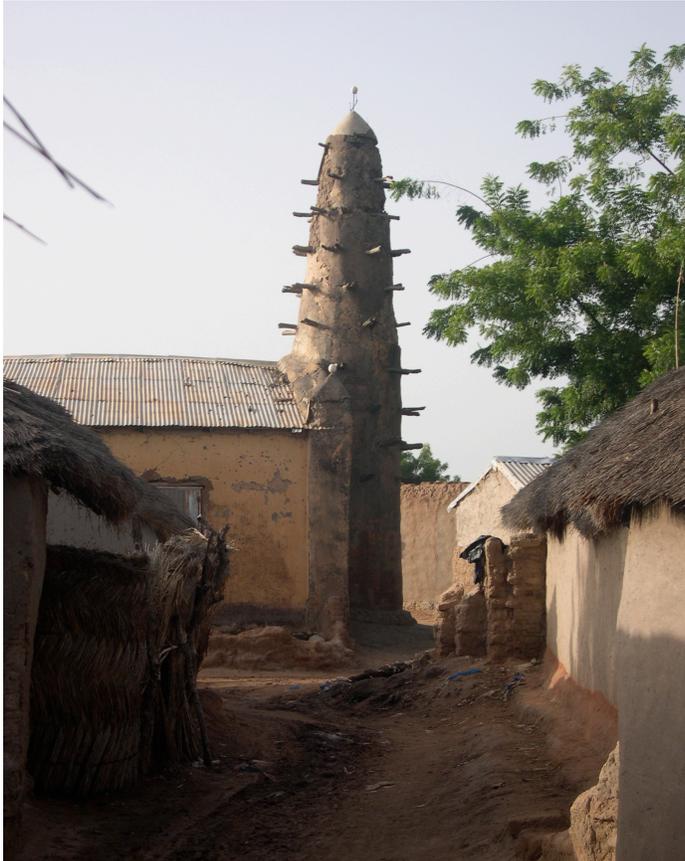
For these women, the fact that Tg is getting a mosque much later than the towns they are familiar with, indicates that the town and its people aren't really Muslim.



4: New mosque in Krs, 2006;
photograph by the author

To conclude this section, let me briefly sketch the history of the two Friday mosques that currently operate in Krs, because the fact that there are two mosques in town is relevant for my discussion in Chapter 6. Krs' two mosques are most commonly referred to as "neighborhood" mosques, associated with the D and K *kabilaw* (group of related compounds who carry out certain tasks together) respectively. As best as I could ascertain, Krs' oldest mosque was built around 1910. Following a dispute over the succession of the Imam, pitting a Db candidate against a D, a second mosque was built no later than 1950. The contention over who should become the new imam might have been associated with the mode of prayer being favored by the respective candidates,⁴¹ but this is unclear. More recently, the original 1910 mosque was abandoned in favor of a new, much

bigger cement mosque that so far has taken nearly a decade to finish. Because this new mosque was built further away from Krs' center than its predecessor (instead of built over it), the old mosque is still an important landmark in the D neighborhood, where it is left to slowly deteriorate in place.



5: Oldest mosque of Krs, 2006;
photograph by the author

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have drawn the reader's attention to the significance of the Mande landscape in much the same as my friends and acquaintances brought it to my own attention. When my friends and acquaintances in Krs and elsewhere directed my attention to the Mande landscape, they also pointed out the continued importance of the histories embedded in it. The history embedded within the Mande landscape makes it a particularly appropriate object for one's attention,

which reveals its multiple, sometimes conflicting, layers of history only to an attentive and discerning observer. The co-presence of past and present intimated by the notion of a “history in landscape,” which lends itself so well to being scrutinized through practices of *kolosi*, is evident in different ways in the “history through words” recounted by griots. In using praise and narrative to connect individuals to their past, griots simultaneously harness the dangerous powers of speech, construct the time and place of Sunjata as the defining moment of Mande history, and give contemporary people in Mande a social identity and sense of self. Without the genealogical ties established through praise songs, people would fundamentally “not be people” (*mogo te*). Yet having a “place” in history, both genealogically and geographically, is not enough to be a fully human person. In order to be a “real,” fully realized, person (*mogoyereyere*), individuals also need to be capable of properly paying attention to everything that is worthy of one’s attention, including one’s own self. The injunction to “pay attention” as a critical function of personhood forms the topic of the next chapter.

¹ I heard a similar story in Ksm about NB, the wife of the village’s founder, who was considered to have had great powers. In case of war, she used bees to scare of the incoming soldiers, so that no army ever managed to reach Ksm. Because of its connection with the founding story of Ksm, the story of the bees, too, refers to the general time of Samori, as Ksm’s founding was a direct result of population movements in the wake of Samori’s wars.

² The term “theater group” is a direct translation of the French term (*groupe du theatre*) people used to refer to it, but the name is a bit misleading. Most of the performances would probably be more aptly called music and dance performances, although sometimes with a narrative element to it. Groups like this—primarily made up of young girls and slightly older boys and men—became very popular in Mali (as elsewhere on the continent) after Independence (1960), as part of the newly established state’s culture politics (Charry 2000).

I don’t know that the plan to have a performance devoted to Krs’ escape from Samori’s wars ever came to fruition. However, Nienke Muurling told me that a similar performance about a town’s interactions with Samori was put on in

KI in 2009 (Nienke Muurling, comments on an earlier version of this chapter, September 2010).

³ Historical analyses of Samori's sphere of influence in Mande, most notably in the writings of Person and Jansen, estimate that Samori's power on the Eastern bank of the Niger—in contrast to the Western bank, which he dominated in its entirety—reached downstream from Kangaba (one of Samori's allies) yet not as far as Bamako (Person 1963; Jansen 2000c; 2002). Krs is exactly halfway between Bamako and Kangaba.

⁴ As Comaroff and Comaroff point out, the aim of taking into consideration different modes of understanding the past is not to produce “a realist, or essentialist, history” (1992:20). Similarly, my aim in this chapter is not to offer up an exhaustive historical account of the region where I did my fieldwork (for this, cf. Perinbam 1998) or even a localized history of oral tradition as an evolving genre (cf. Jansen 2003). Instead, I am interested in understanding how people remember, experience, and interpret history, for example, by talk about the past and construct arguments about contemporary issues using claims to history.

In other words, my definition includes discursive practices alongside non-discursive ones as part and parcel of all modes of historical imagination. This is in contrast to some other approaches to landscape and memory, which focus explicitly on *non-discursive* memory, such as Shaw (2002) in the case of Sierra Leonan memories of the slave trade. Rather than *a priori* excluding particular ways of engaging with the past, my concept of historical imagination allows for the question of where lies the primary locus of historical knowledge and memory to be asked for each mode. Indeed, among the defining characteristics of the different modes is the way they privilege different configurations of sources and authority for knowing the past.

⁵ Let's say, for example, that a child were to observe that “there is a *ga* in Kll and not in Krs” and questioned his or her elders as to “why.” (This is a hypothetical example, not something I observed.) Such an observation would be a perfect example of *kolosi* in action, and the child's capacity to notice such things would undoubtedly be looked upon favorably. One can imagine that the child would also be told that his or her question was a good one indeed, and, furthermore, that he or she probably would have been enlightened as to the “why” eventually—if not on that first occasion, then on a later one.

The same seems true for researchers. Like the stream Peterson's informants in Wasulu pointed out to him, or the cassava field that the people with whom Sarró worked pointed to as a former sacred forest, the significance of a place's historical markers might seem hidden, yet it is actively brought to the researcher's attention.

⁶ Even more perniciously, *jinaw* sometimes abduct human children. I first learned this when a toddler went missing on the compound where I lived during my 1999-2000 fieldwork. I was told that a *jina* had abducted the child, and if she was willing to give it back, she would do so under a tree. This didn't happen in this particular case, although people told me about other situations where it had.

Sadly, in this case the child was later found dead; it had presumably been murdered for magico-political reasons.

During my later fieldwork, another young child went missing in a fishing community that is part of Krs; this child was assumed to have been abducted by the *jinaw* who live at the riverbank. As an upshot of this event, when it became clear that the child might not be recovered, the family eventually split up and some members moved away from Krs's community of fishers (Somono) to join another one.

See also Khan (2006) for stories about *jinns* and children in Pakistan.

⁷ The latter term obviously refers to an entire country, which is in turn comprised of various different regions; yet my informants often spoke about as a uniform region, much like they did for "Senegal" and "Ivory Coast." In practice, however, people's experiences with these three countries were only in specific regions of these countries.

⁸ For example, in his recent book about iconoclastic religious movements in 20th century coastal Guinea, Sarró notes how he soon realized that in order to write an ethnography of present-day Baga farmers, he could not ignore their history. According to Sarró: "people in Guinea have a very historically oriented way of thinking and talking about themselves (and) an *interest* in their own representations and interpretations of past events" (Sarro 2009:10, italics in original). The same can be said about the people I knew in Mali.

⁹ An alternate definition of Mande occurs in the literature on African languages and linguistics. Here, the term Mande refers to a language family of over thirty languages and dialect continuums, some more distantly related than others. A commonly accepted classification of sub-branches of the Mande language family is that proposed by Kastenholz (1997), as is Vydrin's "external and internal classification of Mande languages" (published on-line through the University of Saint Petersburg). The main language spoken by people in the region of my fieldwork—Malinke or *Maninkakan*—is part of the "Manding" branch of the Mande family in both of these frameworks.

¹⁰ I consider the dislodging of the category of Mande from a particular ethnic or linguistic group a major plus of Belcher's definition, because it disrupts the pernicious assumption that groups of people can be demarcated in terms of neatly coinciding boundaries of place, language, and ethnicity (or culture). At the same time, I realize that Belcher's further specification that Mande as a geographic location "is occupied by the Malinke" (in the quote cited in the main text) risks bringing ethnicity back into the definition through the back door. Thus, my own definition of Mande strictly as a space, time, and idea attempts to guard against this slippage between Mande as a region and "Maninka" or "Malinke-speaking" people as its sole or privileged inhabitants.

¹¹ The effects of colonial rule in solidifying group-level terms for self-identification and to describe others has been well described in the case of the "Bamana." Literally referring to "those who refuse [Islam]", the Bamana were constituted as an "ethnic group" in colonial times and came to be regarded as quintessential "pagans" and "fetishists" (Bazin 1985). Indeed, in the estimation

of colonial observers, scholars, and locals who identified more strongly with Islam, people would “become” or “cease to be” Bamana in relation to their acceptance or rejection of Islam. To the extent that “Malinke,” understood as a thoroughly Islamized population, was conceptualized as a direct opposite of “Bamana,” this category is tangled up in the same “ethnifying” logic of the colonial imagination.

¹² If one of the advantages of defining Mande in terms of a space is that it moves away from an unwarranted focus on ethnicity and language, this is particularly relevant when considering the diversity of people who self-identify as something other than Maninka. Among those who do not primarily identify themselves as “Maninka,” the most common self-designations are “Fulani” (or Fula) pastoralists (also referred to as Peul in the Francophone literature), “Bamana” farmers, “Somono” fishing people, or some category of *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”). While the former two categories are commonly recognized as “ethnic groups,” who moreover “possess” their own language, the situation is much more unclear in regards to people who identify as Somono and *nyamakalaw*. The different categories of *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”) are commonly considered “castes,” not ethnicities, although some scholars have pointed out that the problem is more one of scholarly convention than anything else (Launay 1995). In the same vein, Somono have troubled some scholars because of their “intermediate status” (Tamari 1991), as it were, between “proper castes” and “full-fledged ethnicities;” in this case, too, the real problem is that the scholarly vocabulary isn’t sufficient to describe Mande realities, not the other way around. Again, a definition of Mande as a time-space circumvents many of these pseudo-problems.

¹³ Krs’ griots (*finaw*) regularly praised people by referring to their own past actions. For example, at a dance for a wedding, VC singled out a woman currently living in Bamako for praise with the words:

“Ah, it is J. I will show J to the people here who don’t know her, so they can all do blessings for her. Ah, J! Last year I was in Bko without any money. I had no money at all and there I was at Voxida [a main stop for the cheapest form of public transportation, the sotrama]. I got into a sotrama, and J was in the same sotrama, I didn’t even know me, but she knew me. She recognized me, she said, V! She paid my fare, and she gave me 1,000 francs CFA [about 2 USD]. Ah, because we finaw don’t praise people who aren’t worth it!”

¹⁴ The two terms appear to be etymologically related, with “Malli” being the Fulani pronunciation of Mande (Camara 1990).

¹⁵ For a discussion of “Mande-fication” in Senegambia, see Niane (1989) about the Gabou Empire and Linares (1981) about Diola agricultural practices in the Casamance; for different examples from the coastal areas of Guinea and Sierra Leone, see McGovern (2004) and Ferme (2001) respectively.

¹⁶ A first “International Conference on Mande Studies” was held in London in 1972, followed by the formal organization of a dedicated “Mande Studies Association (MANSA)” in 1986.

¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the “history through words” presented by griots operates from different premises than the standards professional historians trained in a Western scientific epistemology generally apply to historical accounts. In this respect, Conrad rightly notes: “the Manding peoples’ ideas of what is most important in the past are markedly different from the kinds of history that are studied and appreciated by people strictly adhering to European standards of scholarship (Conrad 2004:xvii).”

¹⁸ In the scholarly literature, *jeliw* are much better known than their *finaw* counterparts, as is evident in comparing the wealth of references cited above for griots—nearly all of which concern *jeliw* specifically—with the scant literature on *finaw*, which is limited to Conrad (1995) and Janson (2006). In some cases, *finaw* are mentioned in passing, without apparent in-depth study of their specificity (cf. Tamari 1991). The lack of studies focused on *finaw* might explain the considerable uncertainty in the literature about their particular domain of activity, especially in how it differs from that of *jeliw*. Tamari simply notes that *finaw* characteristic functions are “various” (Tamari 1991:226). A more common characterization, drawing a distinction between *jeliw* and *finaw*, is to see the former as “oral historians/bards” and the latter as “Islamic bards” (Conrad 1995). A less common, yet intriguing distinction is that while both categories are bards and historians, male *jeliw* do not play an instrument, while male *finaw* do (Aly Drame, personal communication, October 2010).

In “River County,” where I did much of my fieldwork, the presence of *jeliw* was limited to one particular village, which was described as the “griot village” associated with the dominant lineages of River County. River County’s *jeliw* lived in this village, and only there. In contrast, most villages making up the core of River County had one or more *finaw* families living within their borders, if frequently in a distinct neighborhood. Thus, in my experience, *finaw* were present at many more occasions (marriages, funerals, name giving ceremonies, conflict resolutions) than were *jeliw*, presumably because of the former’s closer geographic proximity to these events. It follows from this that in River County at least, *finaw* carried out many if not all activities otherwise (or elsewhere) practiced by *jeliw*—hence my decision to call both of these categories “griots,” except in cases where the distinction is locally relevant (in which case I use the local terms *jeliw* and *finaw*).

¹⁹ Another way in which Jansen’s interlocutors expressed this sentiment was through the often quoted proverb that “Mande is like water in the palm of one’s hand: you can see the bottom, but can never get to the end of it” (Jansen 1995, my translation).

²⁰ This is true even if the first name that one is given is often the heritage of a particular older person, living or deceased, who is expected to have a special kind of relationship with the child that is his or her namesake.

²¹ For example, Dogon (in Mali)—see Dieterlen (1957), Jula (in Côte d’Ivoire)—see Launay (1992), and Wangara (in Ghana)—see Wilks ((Wilks 1982a; 1982b)) people generally consider themselves to have originated in Mande or the Empire of Mali.

²² Cf. Kassim Kone (oral presentation, January 22, 2011).

²³ Unsurprisingly, the specifics of practices such as washing one's mouth in preparation for particular speech events, are themselves also learned through observing and apprenticing with other griots.

²⁴ Importantly, not all attendees might even be human, even if they look as if they are. A number of people over the years have warned me that, in the words of a middle-aged woman in Krs,

“Whenever there are many people present, you will see some people who aren't people. Some are jinns. Jinns love festivities, they love humans.”

The implication of the final sentence in this statement is that because jinns love humans and their events, they come out to mingle with humans when the latter have festivities going on.

²⁵ If skills of self-protection and attention to one's environment are particularly important to griots, who often find themselves in the company of potentially un-known others, griots are not the only ones who need such skills. Other *nyamakalaw*, and people in general, too, have occasion to be weary of others, suspect their motives, or fear that what they have set out to do might be thwarted. Some of the potters I worked with, for example, mentioned the old practice of *tomali* (“offering up something as a present in exchange for a return”) as one in which they were particularly vulnerable to not getting what they wanted. Thus, they would prepare themselves for the confrontation with their patrons by uttering a *kilisi* (“incantation”) ensuring the generosity of the latter.

²⁶ This happened at a wedding in Sb, where I had had an argument with one of the young women from the compound, who was married elsewhere (the argument was about money). When one of the griots at the wedding dance started a praise song specifically for me, all the women from the compound joined in, as well as others who knew me; however, while we were making the rounds on the floor, I could see that the woman whom I had an argument with hadn't joined in. Thus she made it clear to me that she was still mad.

²⁷ I discuss some of these local stories of the relationship between villages in the course of my argument in chapter 6.

²⁸ VC would record some of the more interesting aspects of these conversations on a cassette tape upon returning home. I (nor anyone else) was allowed to listen to this cassette, which, he said, contained mainly formulas to accompany certain “medicines” based on local plants and trees.

²⁹ We always started or ended our interviews with VC asking the interviewee questions of his own. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I learned as much, if not more, from the questions VC posed on his own behalf as I did from my own questions. Here, I focus on the fact that so many of his questions had to do with the landscape, landmarks, and social and physical boundaries between places. I also learned much from how he analyzed interviewee's responses afterwards, when he would note such things as people's willingness to talk, their knowledgeable ability about certain issues, and any particular insights he had not heard from others.

I like to think VC also learned some things as a result of my questions, even if what he got out of our conversations might have been different from what

I hoped to learn about. Our biggest scoop, as far as VC was concerned, was when the father of a girl he had been hoping to marry for some years, unexpectedly told us the “secret” of how to attract a woman so she wants to marry no one but the person who has put this “secret” to work on her.

³⁰ Robinson borrows the metaphor “making Muslim space” from Metcalf 1996.

³¹ The varied “patterns” exhibited by early Islam in the region share a basic openness to the new religion and a willingness to accept its followers. Indeed, Levtzion also maintains that Islam generally encountered little resistance from the political classes in West Africa. For one thing, Sudanese rulers seem to have viewed Islam as complementary to indigenous religious systems. Secondly, they found it relatively easy to incorporate its adherents and their religious practices into the royal courts without them undermining existing political institutions and social values (Levtzion 1978).

³² An aspect that receives more attention in Robinson’s account compared to earlier assessments of Islam in West Africa by Levtzion and others is slavery. In general, the varied ways in which Islamization and systems of slave holding and raiding were intertwined in different historical periods and regional context has become an important theme in current scholarship on the history of Islam (cf. Lovejoy 2000).

³³ The particular “clans” or lineages mentioned as making up the Mande *moriw* vary according to the regional context from which this piece of oral history is collected. For Dieterlen’s informants, the Mande *moriw* are the Berthe, Toure, Haidara, Fofana, and Saganogo (Dieterlen 1955:10), while the griots of Kela whom Jansen worked with mention the Fofana, Cisse, Berthe, Janne, and Toure (Jansen 2002:140).

³⁴ In this respect, the people living in Mande during that time look more like the “pagan, fetishist Bamana” who lived immediately to the east and south of them than the stereotypical “Malinke,” who are supposed to be “devout, learned Muslims” (J. Bazin 1985).

³⁵ In my experience, the people I worked with in Mande identify only rarely, if ever, with a particular brotherhood. While one should be cautious not to project this finding back in time, it still seems to me that there is no indication that the situation would have been different in the 19th century.

³⁶ With new modes of transportation, the pilgrimage became easier and cheaper, even if it remained a relatively time-consuming and expensive undertaking (cf. Amselle 1985). While the number of pilgrims from Mande remained small, the effects on people’s religious lives and self-understanding as Muslims were substantial.

³⁷ The terminology here is varied and contentious. Brenner makes some useful points about the various terms used in the Malian context and their respective connotations (Brenner 1993). Most often, the literature glosses these movements with the short-hand designation “reformist.” I will follow this practice on the understanding that the term is indeed a short-hand that might cover a variety of specific concerns on the ground. Some authors also use the terms “Islamic re-

newal,” “Islamic moral renewal” and “proponents of Muslim moral renewal,” all of which are useful as well. In Mande, some of the people who identified as “proponents of Muslim moral renewal” actually preferred to call themselves simply “Muslims,” or followers of “Sunna Islam.” As I will discuss in more detail later, the most commonly accepted local usage identified two broad categories of Muslims in terms of their respective ways of prayer: “arms/hands down” (*bolow bila* or *bolow jigi*) or “arms/hands held” (*bolow mine*).

³⁸ According to Conrad, the Arabic “proto Surakata” was Suraqa ibn Malik ibn Ju’shum (1985:43), while Bilali is the griots’ name for Bilal Ibn Rabah (1985:37).

In contrast to the Keita lineages and the griots’ (both *jeliw* and *finaw*) own *siya*, the blacksmith *siya* is not presented with a recognizable Islamic and Arabic forebear. Instead, mythological blacksmiths/ ancestors such as Nun Fajiri and Fakoli, are placed in distinctive Islamic, Middle Eastern context, such as Muhammad’s battle of Kaybara and the pilgrimage to Mecca, respectively (Conrad 1984:39 for the theme of Kaybara and Morias Farias (1989) for Fakoli’s pilgrimage).

³⁹ A number of villages, Kgb foremost among them, choose to join the French against Samori (Jansen 1995).

⁴⁰ In a rather horrifying story I collected in Krs, Samori’s Muslim character was indicated by the fact that he spared every 10th man (after killing 9) as a way of fulfilling the Muslim obligation to tithe.

⁴¹ As I discuss more fully in Chapter 6, a new mode of prayer had been introduced in Mande at around this same time, and the two mosques were later on distinguished by their characteristic mode of prayer.

CHAPTER FOUR

PAYING ATTENTION TO COMPETING SIGNS, OPAQUE OTHERS, AND CONTAINED SELVES

This chapter introduces another important context my interlocutors brought to my attention as a key locus for *kolosi*, namely understandings of personhood and sociality. An ideology and practices of *kolosi* as encountered in the lived experience of irredeemably social worlds suggest that potentially *everything* is meaningful, so that it becomes essential to pay attention to even the minutest details of spaces, speech, objects, people, and natural phenomena. The chapter also highlights the inherent instability in the signifying and other characteristics of material signs, their intersection with other potential (and potentially contradictory) signs, and the difficulty people experience in properly identifying and interpreting such things as signs. It is understood that the expectation of a densely meaningful universe is not unique to Mande; nevertheless, it is important to describe the particular forms this expectation takes in Mande and how it relates to the practical workings of *kolosi*.

Secondly, I show how the injunction to “pay attention”—not just to the outside world but also to oneself—constitutes an integral aspect of Mande moral personhood, which is ideally exemplified by a habitus of attentiveness, self-awareness, and self-mastery. The fact that *kolosi* refers to “objects” in the outside world and ideals of personhood alike should come as no surprise in light of the central premise of material culture as well as personhood and kinship studies,

namely, that objects and subjects mutually constitute each other (Chapter 1). The analytical concept of semiotic ideology, too, deals explicitly with this dynamic, because conceptions about what counts as a sign immediately entail specific notions of personhood as well, specifically along the axes of intentionality and authorship. Accordingly, this chapter considers the interplay between *kolosi* and a theory of personhood that considers the “inside” of others as fundamentally unknowable, as well as a language ideology and linguistic practices that actively work to produce the inscrutability of others. On the one hand, the idea that others are opaque in what they say and do, and use a variety of routine linguistic practice to deflect attention, lends salience to an ideology and practices of *kolosi* as a more reliable way to glean from others the information that they would not divulge otherwise. On the other hand, the premium placed on paying attention to others and one self creates the very environment of constant scrutiny by others in which the deflection of this attention would seem to become desirable.

Finally, I illustrate how the Mande conception that an individual is always at the same time a certain *kind* of person intersects with an ideology and practices of *kolosi*. The practical ways in which people deploy attention, try to deflect or evade it, and construct themselves and others as attentive observers and inscrutable containers of secrets both construct and reveal the situated personhood associated with *kolosi*. Yet in Mande as elsewhere, an individual is never just a person, but a socially located human being, who is intrinsically related to others and positioned in terms of age, gender, and other salient categories. In line with the hierarchical valuation of social distinctions between persons in Mande, I show that ideas of personhood are associated with a (presumed) capacity for paying attention on the part of specific kinds of people.

MAKING SENSE OF SIGNS:

THE BROKEN CORN STALK AND KEY ASPECTS OF *KOLOSI*

Making sense of the signs offered up by the world around us is a process. As such, it is never closed, because additional signs can always come up (or be brought to bear on the situation at hand) to trump a previously established infer-

ence. The process of bringing signs to bear upon one another is also not without its pitfalls, such as misattribution of signs to the “wrong” author, competing signs that seem to afford very different inferences, questions about authority, and equivalences of signs without one clearly trumping the other. These difficulties are brought out clearly in the following case, where an ostensibly very simple sign—a broken corn stalk—caused a great deal of confusion.

Early one Saturday morning in the spring of 2005, I joined a group of friends and acquaintances from Krs to attend the installation of a new village chief in N, a village at the other side of the Niger River. A varied group of hunters, griots, and the female singers and jembe players making up the theater group constituted the official delegation of the village of Krs to assist in the installation celebrations in N. We arrived at the river bank at various times over the course of the morning, having travelled the 1-mile distance in small groups, on foot, by bike, on motorcycle, or in a rented *Sotrama*.¹ Once we were all there, it took many more hours of waiting until two low boats (*pirogues*) finally set off from the other side to come over and get us. In the meantime, there had been quite a bit of anxious discussion as to whether boats would be coming for us at all, as the attendance of a delegation from Krs had only been arranged at the last minute.² The Somono fishermen who took us across assured us that we were expected in N and that, in fact, another *Sotrama* was on its way to transport the women who had come on foot. Thus after we had crossed the river, the men, who were mostly on bicycles or some on motorcycles went ahead, while the women started off on foot in anticipation of being met by a *Sotrama*. Because I had a bike, too, I also went ahead.

As we were getting close to the village of “new” N, a small village on the outskirts of N itself, the *Sotrama* still not having come, we decided to halt and wait by the side of the road. This would give the women a chance to catch up with us, so that we would be complete and enter N as a group. It was important we enter N with the entire delegation and show off our impressive numbers, so that the villagers of N, along with other visitors, would know that Krs had really “helped them celebrate.” (*k’olu deme nyenaje la*). Very soon now, we would file

into town—the hunters shooting their rifles, the jembe players drumming in front, the motorcycles going slow, two older women playing the *karinyan* (metal instrument), the younger women and girls singing and clapping, and the audience also dancing and clapping, looking for the presence of an acquaintance or family member in our delegation, or just relishing in anticipation of the night’s performances—and slowly make our way through the village, stopping and performing at the compound of the village chief whose installation we were here to celebrate, and ultimately ending up on the open space between the school and the mosque, until we would be assigned to the compound where we would eat and sleep for the next two days.

But for the moment we were just waiting in the shade, sitting and chatting along the sides of the small road; the first group of women had already gotten a ride with the *Sotrana* and found us at our waiting spot, and we were now waiting for the final load of people. At that point, two young men riding together on a motorcycle came up to our dispersed group and started waiting in the shade too; except for a short greeting, they did not talk to any of us. After a while, someone from Krs asked the young men why *they* were waiting here at the outskirts of the village, since “we,” who all were “people from Krs” were waiting for our fellow villagers. Since they were not from our village, there was no need for them to wait *with* us (as there was for us to wait for the others); in which case, what were they waiting *for*? In response, one of the men pointed to a broken corn stalk lying at a sharp angle on the path ahead, which I do not think anyone of us had noticed up to that point. A corn stalk, broken like this and laid out across a path as if to block further progress on it, *can* be a sign that something secret is going on nearby, and that anybody who is not supposed to be part of the goings-on is advised to stay put until the path is, literally, cleared (i.e., when the corn stalk is removed after the proceedings have concluded).

The young man explained, laughing now that he realized his mistake, that he and his friend had taken the broken corn stalk as a “stop sign” preventing them from going any further—just as we, too, they had presumed, were prevented from going forward. They had interpreted the corn stalk, not unreasonably, as a sign of

blocked entrance to the village, pending the completion of secret ritual procedures taking place in the woods surrounding it. Similarly, they had taken our presence on the side of the road as confirmation of the correctness of their interpretation, as it appeared that we were also waiting for this sign to be lifted before we, too, could proceed to N. We all laughed as we realized the obvious, but understandable, mistake: while a broken corn stalk might very well mean that dangerous rituals are taking place close by, and that one is advised to stop then and there, this was not the case here. Instead, here the broken corn stalk was just that: a stalk of corn accidentally trampled on, ending up over the small road at a particularly sharp angle; there was no reason to believe otherwise. Thus the young men continued on their way, and someone took the stalk and put it to the side of the road so as not to confuse any more people. Not long after this, the *Sotrama* came back, too, and our delegation was ready to enter the village.

Analysis: key aspects of kolosi

The incident above speaks to the salience of “paying attention” and observing even minute details for many of the people I came to know in Mande. The fact that it was no anomaly for the two young men to interpret the corn stalk in the manner they initially did offers a first intimation of the Mande conception of a socio-cultural universe replete with potentially significant signs. The broken corn stalk is but one among the multitude of objects, gestures, events, spaces and instances of speech that—under the right circumstances, in conjunction with appropriate corroborative signs, and if observed by a sufficiently attentive observer—can be taken as signs. Yet the example also highlights the inherent instability in the signifying and other characteristics of signs, their intersection with other potential (and potentially contradictory) signs, and the difficulty people experience in properly identifying and interpreting things as signs of particular “objects.”

People living in Mande readily interpret a broken corn stalk lying across the road as a sign, or specifically, a warning to the uninitiated of something going on in the bush ahead. Indeed, the practice of making small “breakings” forms part of a habitus of navigating one’s way in and out of the brush. Breaking a twig

upon entering the bush is a common gesture of crossing an important, if not necessarily clearly marked, border, and something I observed quite frequently over the course of my fieldwork. Part of the rationale is way-finding: when leaving a path or road, marking the point where you left it helps you find the spot again later, or explain its locations to others. Once BS and I found a spot with the kinds of snail shells that are used to make pots extra shiny; she indicated the spot by marking our way towards it and later sent back her daughters-in-law to gather more of the shells.

In a productive twist, a booklet produced by Mali's National Committee for Literacy and Applied Linguistics (DNAFLA) uses precisely this practice of breaking twigs and branches to explain the concept of a linguistic sign. Designed to give local schoolteachers a better understanding of the field of linguistics and turn them into amateur scholars of their native languages, the booklet combines brief explanations of linguistic concepts with series of questions and short assignments that relate these concepts to the teacher-students' everyday experiences. The prompt used to clarify the notion of a linguistic sign asks the reader to consider the practice of breaking off twigs as a possible analogy for this concept; it asks and then answers the question:

Q: I have to find an object hidden in the brush. Branches have been broken to point me in the right direction. Are these broken branches a sign?

A: Yes, the broken branches are a sign: they have been broken on purpose to lead my way.

(DNAFLA 1980:19 and 24, *my translation*)

This example shows that the Malian authors of this tract must have considered the practice of breaking twigs to indicate a pathway in the brush to be both common and meaningful enough for their intended audience, primary and secondary school teachers, to use it as a key example in their text.

Taking something as subtle as a broken corn stalk as a potentially crucial sign speaks to the larger point that many people in Mande conceive of their lifeworlds as replete with potentially meaningful signs. While this might well be true elsewhere too, it is nevertheless important to insist on this point. Examples such as that of the broken corn stalk intimate a richly meaningful universe, in which

people, places, objects, and (speech) events—however small or seemingly insignificant—are always at least *potential* signs, which might or might not need interpretation. In other words, the fact that anything can be a sign is seen as already given within the way the world is, while at the same time, the significance of any particular instance of a sign remains an open question.

Indeed, as much as the broken corn stalk we encountered on the road to N could have been a sign, telling us and other observant passersby to stop and wait for a secret ritual to be concluded, in this case, it was not a sign of the particular object—a ritual going on nearby—it had at first been taken to be a sign of. However, it was still a sign of something having broken the cornstalk (the wind or a wandering cow, even a child mindlessly breaking a stalk on his or her way home).³ Moreover, the broken corn stalk has to be counted as a sign because it was interpreted as such, at least initially. The example thus intimates the crucial ambivalence at the very heart of all these “things” that might or might not be signs, and the potential for error, dispute, and creativity when people decide to take or not take them as such. Most of all, it establishes the central role of sociality in the interpretation of signs—both in the social relationships that help shape the process of inference and through the “social life” of signs that depend on other signs to fulfill their signifying potential.

The crux of the incident on the outskirts of N, then, is the fact that the broken corn stalk turned out not to be a sign of a particular ceremony, even though it very well could have been. The previous sentence conveys how we, the participants, eventually came to understand the situation, but it is important to realize that there is no logical reason that this should have been the final interpretation. For example, it could have turned out that the broken corn stalk *was*, after all, a sign of exactly the ceremony the young men had originally assumed it was a sign of, which our group would then have failed to appreciate. The interpretation we arrived at, however, was final in the sense that once we all agreed on it, the matter was considered resolved. It is equally important to explicate the conflicting inferences and how one was considered to trump the others. The two young men originally inferred from the combination of the corn stalk laying over the road and

members of our group waiting beside it that the corn stalk should be interpreted as a “stop” sign. Yet later on, the men and our group decided together this was a faulty inference. That is, the young men had originally taken our group waiting by the side of the road as a corroborating sign that “something must be going on ahead, and it’s better to wait for it to be over.” However, our group’s explanation as to why we were waiting made clear that our waiting didn’t corroborate the men’s initial interpretation of the corn stalk. Once we established that, it also became apparent that no other corroborating signs were present either (such as the sound of gunshots to signal the beginning or end of a secret business). This absence, in turn, could be taken as another corroborating sign of the different interpretation that was emerging, of the broken corn stalk “just” being a corn stalk, not worthy of specific attention.

The correct inference, we ultimately and collectively agreed, was that the stalk must have accidentally broken and fallen on the road at the particular angle it did, maybe trampled on by an animal, for example. In other words, this inference posited that there had been no author for the sign in its original interpretation: no subject with the intention of breaking off the corn stalk so as to warn us not to proceed. To the extent that there is still an agent in this interpretation, it is not a subject characterized by intentionality; it assumes an animal, the wind, or even a mindlessly wandering person to have broken the stalk *unintentionally*. This is a good example of conceptions about signs, objects, and persons being inextricably bound together.

There is more to say. For example, let’s note that the young men were not considered “stupid” for having made an incorrect inference. To the contrary, my friends seemed quite impressed that the men should have noticed the corn stalk in the first place—after all, it would have been easy to miss (as we had done ourselves!). The people I was with specifically pointed out the youth of the men, too, which made it all the more laudable that they had not just noticed the stalk but also made an inference from it that could well have been correct. The fact that the young men had known to make the inference they did, even if not precisely extraordinary, was still to some extent remarkable and definitely something that

spoke well for them, identifying them as “serious” young people. I discuss the ramifications of (not) being able to pay attention for the valuation of one’s character later in this chapter.

I also want to stress the openness of the process of inference—that is, the ever-unfinished business of interpretation. I already pointed out that the inference we came to agree on was not necessarily the final word on the matter; in fact, the ideology of *kolosi* suggests that there is always an opening to notice one more thing, to bring a previously overlooked sign to bear on the situation at hand, to say, “well, *actually*, . . .” Here I want to add that the way people act on their (provisional) interpretations of signs can bring about the very effects anticipated by the interpretation, and thus making it more “true” and less provisional. For example, when we had come to the inference that the broken corn stalk was “just a stalk”, one of the men removed it from the road. In doing so, he effectively removed the conditions of possibility for the stalk to be taken as a sign and *turned it into* a “mere” broken stalk—thus making his inference come true. Moreover, once we had decided the stalk was *not* a warning sign but “just” a broken corn stalk, it became subject to a different set of implications: removing a stick or stalk blocking the road is a frequent mentioned example of “giving an offering” (*sarakati bo*—see the discussion in Chapter 6). Thus, removing the broken corn stalk—now constructed as a potentially dangerous tripping hazard, the removal of which counts as a quintessential good deed—was predicated upon our collective interpretation of the thing as a “mere object,” not signifying anything. Acting upon this inference, we also made it so.

In sum, the broken corn stalk productively complicates the notion that signs are historically and culturally situated, as anthropologists have long realized. Obviously they are, as my brief analysis of techniques of “way-finding” in Mande suggested. Yet the processes involved in making sense of such signs are much less straightforward than the model of “people walking around with codebooks in their heads” suggests (see also Keane 2003). In fact, the attraction of Peirce’s model of signs to scholars such as Daniel (1984), Parmentier (1994), Keane (2007) and Engelke (2007) is based on the realization that we need more complex

accounts of signs than the Saussurean model allows for. Daniel, for example, notes that the different kinds of signs recognized by Peirce—icon, index, and symbol—are more effective to talk about cultural understandings than Saussure’s category of sign, which (roughly) covers only the Peircean symbol (a sign standing in an arbitrary relation to its object). As Daniel rightly points out, “not all signs are, from a culture’s point of view or even a cultural point of view, symbols, characterized by and for the users of these signs as defined by their arbitrariness” (Daniel 1984:38). Something that looks like a symbol to an outside observer might well be felt as an index or icon by a cultural participant. Moreover, the example of the broken corn stalk shows that what looks like one kind of sign might later turn out to be a rather different kind, even for cultural insiders. Thus the social process of making sense of signs deserves greater analytical attention.

In the course of my analysis I have made three additional claims that bear repeating here because they guide the subsequent sections. First, I have noted that signs function in relation to other signs, which might corroborate, modify, negate, or reposition each other in unexpected ways; the relations between signs might consist of their spatio-temporal proximity, or additional signs might be “discovered” later and be brought to bear on a previously established inference. Second, I have stressed the unfinished business of interpretation, whereby new (that is, newly interpreted) signs always risk trumping previous ones. Indeed, *kolosi* is understood as a fundamentally open-ended process; an obvious indication of this is the ready admission that one can always be wrong in one’s interpretation. Moreover, this openness allows for creativity, argument, and power differentials to all play a part in how people make sense of the dynamic interplay between signs. In the example of the corn stalk, the process of inference was loosely collaborative and as far as I know uncontested, but this need not be the case. In fact, *kolosi* is an ideal site for debate, misunderstanding, secrecy, and the creative construction of new knowledge. At the same time, *kolosi* is a privileged site for the performance of an ideal of moral personhood, in that the need to interpret and one’s capacity and willingness to do so makes one a particular kind of person. Third, I have established how the inference that something stands in a particular

sign-relation to an object simultaneously builds on and entails a particular understanding of what counts as a subject. This makes the concept of semiotic ideology highly relevant for understanding the ideology and practices of *kolosi*.

Small things, minute details, and the agency of objects:

kolosi and the study of material culture

The example of the corn stalk and what it reveals about *kolosi* ties in with a growing body of literature that attempts to take seriously “the messy materiality of things” and resists “to immediately to get past [the messy materiality] to discern the transcendent meanings” (Manning and Meneley 2008:3). An important strand of the literature on material culture since the seminal works of Miller (1987) and Appadurai (1986) has indeed been concerned with the particularly material character of objects, as opposed to viewing them solely as passive carriers of meaning. Contemporaneously, scholars working in different fields also questioned the rigorous distinction between material signifiers and immaterial meanings, which had become an enduring heritage of the Saussurean model of signs (Irvine 1989).

A particularly salient feature of material objects functioning as signs, sometimes referred to as bundling, is indeed amply illustrated in the corn stalk example. “Bundling” refers to the inevitability and often contingent manner in which the significant features (or qualisigns) of an object are bound up with a whole series of other qualisigns (Keane 2003:414)—or as Daniel puts it, “a sign runs in a bundle of cables, so to speak, not a single strand” (Daniel 1984:39). Because of the bundling of a variety of features into any one object, its signifying capacities are of necessity murky and open to failure—and this in a variety of directions, i.e., by distracting from the object’s intended meaning, or by inscribing it with a particular meaning where this was not intended (as in the case of the corn stalk). In an earlier work, Keane gives the example of a piece of cloth—a “banner” for the top piece of a tomb—that got ripped in the process of dragging the tomb stone and was later presented as a gift from the organizing party to their affines. Reasoning along lines that would also be entirely understandable in a Mande context, Keane’s Anakalangesse interlocutors infer that the ripped cloth can

only have been an insult, instead of an accidentally torn piece of textile, unwittingly given as a gift in its ripped state. The fact that the corn stalk was ultimately interpreted as having, in fact, accidentally broken off does not diminish the larger point that the materiality of objects poses potential problems for their functioning as signs.

A second key point I want to highlight is that a Mande ideology of *kolosi* accords considerable weight to the capacities of a careful observer. The social value of attentiveness will be considered more in depth in the second half of this chapter. For the moment I want to highlight that in terms of *kolosi*, the disposition of the observer and his or her level of attentiveness in a particular situation, is crucial for the potentiality of a sign to be properly realized. In the example of the corn stalk, it is not insignificant that the breaking off of a twig is an almost minuscule gesture. Both the act itself, of breaking a small branch, and the result, a half-broken twig hanging somewhere in the brush might easily be overlooked and never be evident at all to a not-so-observant casual onlooker.⁴ But this is precisely the point. It is important for a person to be attentive to even the minutest details of one's surroundings. Only if the observer embodies a proper habitus of attentiveness can such seemingly insignificant signs as a broken corn stalk lying on a path nevertheless grab his or her attention, and in so doing allowing it to function as a sign in the first place.

As I learned to appreciate through my interactions with various local teachers, many of the most meaningful things in the Mande universe are seemingly "small things." This includes many of the features of the Mande landscape, which I discussed in the previous chapter. For another example, I was often reminded of what one of the potters, BT, whom I worked with during previous fieldwork had explained to me. In an interview in 1999, BT had insisted:

"Making pots is very difficult, there are so many details. Pottery is a work of small things."

In effect, BT was saying here that part of what children (and anthropologists) need to learn is to appreciate and come to embody a habitus of attentiveness, the scope of which includes the minutiae of manifold small things.

The onus placed on the attentive observer as a key feature of a Mande ideology of *kolosi*, can be related in interesting ways to the ongoing concern with the analytical category of the fetish and the issue of agency of object. A recent discussion of the materiality and historicity of objects in the religious system of Candomblé bears this out. Echoing a by now familiar theme, anthropologist Sansi-Roca stresses that Candomblé is “a dynamic system that builds persons” through the ritual manipulation and care for certain objects, i.e., the stones that are wrapped in cloth, and encased in pots or other containers (Sansi-Roca 2005). Most relevant for the present discussion is the fact that Candomblé stones need to be found, that is, recognized by the person who comes to be established as a “saint” through the possession, care, and manipulation of the stone. There is a distinct resonance of the process of finding Candomblé stones described by Sansi-Roca with the way an attentive observer is posited at the center of *kolosi*:

If stones are not bought or made, but found, it is because they want to be There is a certain element of chance, but a ‘driven chance,’ a *hasard objectif*, to use the surrealist expression, in which it is the stone who is asking to be found. There is recognition of the agency embodied in the stones before their consecration, although this agency is only recognizable at the right moment and by the right person—it comes out as a gift of the object to this person. (Sansi-Roca 2005:143, *italics in original*)

In this quote, Sansi-Roca is concerned with showing that “finding” a Candomblé stone is not purely accidental, but involves the capacity of recognition on the part of the person in the process of becoming a “saint” as well as some sort of agency emanating from the object itself. A similar foundational act of recognition, I argue, is presupposed in the emphasis on an attentive observer in the ideology and practices of *kolosi*. Let’s look more closely then at the intersection of *kolosi* with Mande modes of personhood and embodiment.

“IT’S A MATTER OF PAYING ATTENTION”:

CONCEALMENT, CONTAINMENT, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF *KOLOSI*

My argument so far has stressed the role of an attentive observer and of social collaboration in making sense of signs. Even so, the outcome of processes of making inferences is by no means assured, due to any number of factors: lack of

attention on the part of participants, conflicts between divergent interpretations, or new signs that are brought to bear on old situations. Before addressing people's relative capacity for paying attention in the next section, I need to clarify here that even a successful "education of attention" does not automatically result in the valued performance of attention in specific circumstances. That is to say, a general disposition of attentiveness may be socially valued, but not everybody is willing to effectively perform this attentiveness in acts of interpretation.

A useful example to illustrate people's occasional unwillingness or claimed inability to perform attentiveness is the considerable variety in regards to the interpretation of the little balls of hair that are rolled together after an infant's first head shaving. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I attended the hair shavings for the majority of the 85 infants born in Krs over a 12-month period, and in other places on an ad-hoc basis.⁵ Hair shavings in Krs were decidedly low-key, quick affairs, yet there were major differences between families in almost all aspects of the ceremony. Here, I want to focus on the interpretation of the little balls that were rolled from the scrupulously collected hair resulting from the shaving; in most cases, the umbilical stump was rolled into the little ball as well, but not always. Even before attending my first hair shaving, I had already been told about these little balls of hair and how they yielded clues to the attentive observer about aspects of the infant's and its mother's future:

"We used to analyze the hair. We would roll it into a little ball and if you do that if the child shall have a younger sibling you know whether it is a boy or a girl because of this analysis. If it is someone who will live long, you'll know it and if it is somebody who won't, you know it too. And it shows you which saraka ["offering"] to bring. If the child is somebody who will be a king it shows. Or if it is someone who will be an adventurer, who won't stay in the family, the hair will show so. Not everybody knew this, only some people. Some knew, some didn't. It's a "matter of learning" (karan fen). With us in the past there were no nurses. Only the old women. The old women who lacked the strength to do this themselves taught their work to one of her children or sisters. You teach them your work until she becomes good at it and succeeds you. This is how one finds out those things. It is something you learn gradually. If you are with somebody who is teaching you, then you roll the hair in a ball and it takes on different appearances. You show it to your student. If she is paying attention (kolosi) you'll teach her and she'll know it too."

In other words, the interpretation of the little balls of first hair is clearly a site of *kolosi*, as the speaker makes quite explicit.

Yet in practice, many of the old women were apparently unwilling to perform the careful scrutiny of *kolosi* with respect to the balls. A majority of older women, in fact, glanced only briefly at the result of their work, even though they all took great care to roll the hair together carefully. (After the ball is rolled, the mother is instructed to put it in a mouse hole in her room; this too, creates the conditions for the ball to become a sign, as the speed with which the ball disappears is considered—at least by some people—to correspond to the speed with which the mother will become pregnant again). Only a minority of women inspected the ball closely and/or discussed their observations with the other women present. Very rarely was I invited to see for myself: “see, here, this tells you the next child to be born to the mother will be a boy.” Indeed, in the few cases where an interpretation was pronounced, it concerned the gender of the next baby. More often than not, however, the older women responsible for the hair shaving declined to answer my question as to whether looking at the ball had shown her anything. A woman I knew well quipped, “well, I’ll tell you, if the next child is not going to be a boy, will it not be a girl?” Others flat-out stated that they didn’t know what such things signified, that they hadn’t learned this, or that interpreting these balls wasn’t done anymore.

What this example reveals is again the importance of an attentive observer. But it’s not enough to be attentive; one also has to perform this attentiveness through interpretation. That this is not a given, and is greatly impacted by the social relations in which the signs occur becomes clear when we analyze the sociological underpinnings of women’s refusal to make pronouncements about possible signs. A first factor is the growing influence of Islam and the influence of so-called Reformist interpretations of proper Muslim practice. Elder women’s refusal to make inferences from the “hair ball” signs was sometimes explicitly linked to their affiliation with Krs’ Reformist mosque (cf. Chapter 6). One woman said about her disinclination to pay attention to the little ball of hair she had just rolled so carefully, “Islam has grown, so we don’t do this anymore.”

Other women mentioned the same religious considerations, but valued them differently, noting, for example, “They say it is against Islam, but it’s not. It is something from the past.” Yet other women claimed to have no functional knowledge of the practice in question, explaining how they had never learned to interpret such signs. But in some cases where this was claimed, the next-older woman or the child’s mother contradicted this. According to them, the older woman did know how to infer a pronouncement from her observation, yet was not willing to do so. Some also claimed that they themselves were able to interpret the signs provided by the little ball of hair, but were prevented from doing so if their elder had refrained from giving an interpretation. Finally, I could not help but feel that in more than a few cases where attention and interpretation failed to be performed, the woman in question was unwilling to risk being proven wrong in her pronouncement. My friend’s facetious remark, “if it’s not going to be a boy, will it not be a girl?” seems at least partly designed to avert this risk.

Interestingly, the social framework in which people choose to make inferences from signs or refrain from doing is also described in the case of Australian Aboriginal women’s relation to signs in their lifeworlds (Povinelli 1993). Quoting earlier research, anthropologist Elisabeth Povinelli observes that Australian Aborigines’ attentiveness to the signs embedded in the landscape is well-known; what is less clear, however, is just how women (in the cases under consideration) decide to interpret certain objects in the environment as signs, and if so, of what. Povinelli’s quote from Stanner clearly resonates with my earlier example of the uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of the broken corn stalk we encountered on the road to N.

[Australian Aboriginal women] do not, however, see every overturned stone as manifesting Dreaming intentionality. There were many things in the environment that were just things, themselves only and no more, without import, standing for nothing. (Stanner 1965:217, quoted in Povinelli 1993:690)

On the basis of Stanner’s observation quoted above, Povinelli perceptively notes that the gap that Stanner opened up between Aborigines’ distinct attentiveness to signs in the landscape and their careful discernment of which signs are considered significant remains to be bridged. The examples provided by Povinelli, like my

brief discussion of the lack of interpretation of hair signs, point to 1) the intersection of social factors with people's propensity to interpret signs, 2) the importance of attentive observation, and 3) the real risk of people making mistakes—such as loss of status in the community.

“It is a matter of paying attention” : conversations and contexts of kolosi

The contexts in which people talked about certain things as being objects for *kolosi* are quite varied, as the examples discussed so far show. In this section, I present two further examples of the quotidian concern with *kolosi*, which focus on considerations of oneself in relation to others, and on specific aspects of others' otherwise hidden capacities, respectively.⁶ Taken together, they reveal a specific local rationale that makes paying attention so crucial, particularly in the context of personhood and sociality. This rationale is the assumption of the non-transparent nature of others' thought and motivations and their tendency to conceal their true intent. I alluded to this idea earlier by quoting the often-used proverb that one knows what is inside one's own stomach, but not what is inside others'. Practices of paying close attention are thus not only part and parcel of Mande personhood but also in some ways a remedy to the particular problem of inscrutability based by such an understanding of personhood.

The first conversation occurred when I was back in Nrn, the site of my first fieldwork, for a short visit in 2009 to see old friends. In the late afternoon, I had gone with a young man (AC) of our compound to pay a visit to the new wife (AK) of a friend of ours (DK). We all made some tea, which attracted two other women from their compound, who then joined the conversation intermittently. The young woman had previously been married elsewhere, so at one point my friend asked her how things here compared to the village she had lived in previously. AK explained that the system of “age groups” (*kare*) worked differently here,⁷ and then went on to highlight the importance of *kolosi* (and the related term, *jate mine* to be discussed below) in deciding which age group to join. I later wrote down the following notes from this part of the conversation:

AK: “It is a matter of *kolosi*, you know, you have to be careful. You have to observe closely to find out who your real age mates are as opposed to those who are older (*korow*) or younger (*dogow*).”

[The others agree that this is very important. AC asks whether she has already joined her age group here in town].

AK: “No, I haven’t [joined an age group here] yet. You must be careful that you don’t incidentally join your younger siblings, because when you join, you can’t come back on your choice later and change. Once you declare a group of people your age mates, they are your age mates, and the only way to move is down [to join your younger siblings, but not your elder ones]. Also, you want to make sure that you join an age group that is active: not all age groups do the same things, some exist practically in name only, while others also have a ton (“agricultural work group or informal credit association”) within them, so that you can save and make some money. So, I am holding off a bit and paying attention to all of that, because you want to join an age group that is active, does stuff for the village, and is of personal benefit to you as well.”

[They go on to talk about the specific age groups in *Nrn* and who is part of which one].

Paying attention, as AK talks about it here, is clearly a weighty matter, because a careless action, based on insufficient observation of what others are really like (in terms of their age) or what they effectively do (being active or not) will have lasting consequences.

The second example adds other important considerations to the importance of *kolosi* from a local perspective, including the fact that careful observation (as opposed to, say, outright questioning) might more effectively counteract people’s tendencies to not be forthcoming about their “inside” (*kono*). Moreover, this conversation attests to the important fact that *kolosi* can apply to any of the senses, not just the sense of sight and hearing that featured in the examples discussed so far. The context for this conversation is that after coming back to *Krs* after a brief absence, I find that one of the people of the agricultural work-group I am part of has been kicked out. I discuss this with three of the young women on our extended compound—one of whom is also a member of the work-group. *KD* explains what has happened—the woman in question was spreading lies about another member, whose marriage had only lasted a few weeks; according to the now-ostracized woman, the other woman’s marriage was dissolved because she

was a witch, and that her husband found out. The others don't agree with the official story, though. Both AT and SD suspect that the recently divorced woman might have some "knowledge" (*lonni*) after all, particularly the "evil" kind (*lonni-jugu*), and I have heard such allegations about her numerous times before. I ask them how one would know whether or not Y does have such knowledge. AT responds right away that this is a matter of "paying attention" (*kolosi*):

AT: "That's not something that questions will bring out in the open, no. That's a matter of paying attention (kolosili dun). You observe this over time, slowly."

Q: "But what exactly would you observe?"

AT: "The smell (suma)"

Q: "What is that?"

AT: "The smell (kasa); suma is the same as kasa, smell. It is the smell that comes off her. It's somebody who can transform into something else [i.e., an animal] (yelematigi dun). The smell of the animal she turns into at night, that is the smell that comes off. It stays with you. So if someone "knows smells" (min be kasa lon) he or she will recognize the particular smell, so they'll know what animal she turns into at night, for example, a snake."

SD: "Yes, she has this from her mother. At night, they turn into something black."

Our conversation went on to discuss other people who might have possessed the same knowledge that Y seemed to have, and the recent interactions Y had had with her. I was also interested in the issue of smell,⁸ so I tried to bring the conversation back to it. Unsurprisingly, none of my friends "knew smells" in this way, because this would imply that they, too, had the same problematic knowledge and could transform themselves into something else. However, we briefly discussed another characteristic smell that they claimed most people would recognize, namely the permanent body odor that results when a baby isn't properly washed in the first week of birth. "It doesn't really matter if that happens, except he will probably have a somewhat harder time finding a wife," they laughed.

Looking back at the conversation now, it is clear that AT was positing the particular information we were interested in as a matter of *kolosi* as opposed to something to be brought out by questions (*ninyinkali*). More importantly, the rea-

son that *kolosi* is the appropriate way of finding out about Y's potential "evil knowledge," AT implies, is that Y would never volunteer this information about herself if asked directly. Even more interestingly, it was the woman who had inappropriately divulged this information about Y who was excluded from the women's group, not the supposed "witch" Y.⁹ In the first case, too, there are many conceivable reasons why the women making up the various age groups, of which AK needed to pick the "right one", would present a rosier picture of themselves (in terms of numbers, activity level, charisma of its leader and position in the village power structure) than is warranted. Thus, AK too understands the issue to be one of paying attention, rather than outright asking, and of taking her time to carefully observe what people are really like. In other words, the injunction to "pay attention" is itself embedded in particular ideas about personhood and what others are like, to which I now turn.

Everyday practices of secrecy

Many people in Mande claim that the "inside" of others is fundamentally unknowable and that their fellow human beings have a strong propensity to conceal their true intentions. Although this estimation is obviously not unique to Mande and comparable to, for example, the language ideology of Gapun villagers as described by Kulick (1989:89-91), a comparative description of these ideas falls outside the scope of this dissertation. In this section I restrict myself to illustrating some of the routine ways in which people in Mande deflect seemingly harmless questions and in so doing create their "insides" as not open for inspection by others. The opaque character of other's "insides" in turn is a key reason for the importance of *kolosi*: you need to observe for yourself what you cannot expect to get as a straightforward answer in response to a question. Simultaneously, the mundane (linguistic) practices people in Mande use to deflect questions are also effective ways through which women and men can deflect some of the constant scrutiny to which they are subjected because of the prominence of *kolosi*.

Although being "secretive" is frowned upon, I learned early on that people are certainly within their rights to choose *not* to divulge certain information when

they are being asked for it, regardless of how significant or insignificant the information might be. For example, I was explicitly instructed by some of my friends to give up my un-reflexive habit of answering people truthfully and diligently whenever I was asked about my plans or whereabouts. However, a number of people over the course of my fieldwork taught me that this transparency was not necessary nor even desirable. Especially when I was going somewhere with someone else, this person would often inform me that I was supposed to answer in much vaguer terms, responding with the indefinite forms of “somewhere” and “something” upon being asked where we were going. So the conversation would go something like this:

“Where are you (two) going?” (Aw be taa min?)

“We are going somewhere (unspecified)” (An be taa yoro do la)

“Why are you going there?” (Aw be taa yen munna?)

“Yes, we’re on our way to do something (unsp.)” (Ohon, an be ci dò la).

I even learned that an appropriate way—at least in conversations with peers—to deflect further questions was to throw in the teasing “oh, I’m going all the way to Mafukabé” (Mafukabé is a non-existing place). This would end the questioning and give way to mutual laughter. In other words, the fact that one is being asked something doesn’t mean one has to answer the question with any factual information.

Moreover, some of the conversations I was part of or overheard show the considerable amount of work that goes into constructing the shared knowledge that something is being concealed or reinforcing people’s suspicions that others are not willing to show what is on their “inside.” The latter seems to be going on in the following conversation, which took place between two young women on our compound in Ksm. On the morning of the weekly market in Dnk where the potters of Ksm sell their wares, Nt, asked her sister-in-law A about going to the market. In the back-and-forth that ensued, A clearly implied that her interlocutor could never really know her (A’s) mind.

Nt: “A, are you going to go to the market?” (A, i bena taa sugula wa?)

A: “I’m not going now. I don’t like the market in the morning” (N te taa sisan. Sogoma sugula amandi ne)

*Nt: "You don't like the market in the morning? What's wrong with it?"
(Sogoma sugula a mandi i ye—ko mun a la?)*

A: "I don't like it." (A man di ne)

Nt: "Oh, I understand." (Ne ya faa mu)

A: "What?" (Mun?)

Nt: "Well, you say you don't like the market in the morning, and I understand [why]." (Ko sogoma sugula amand'i ye. Ne ya faamu.)

A: "That's what you think [about it]; it is not what I think." (O ye i hakili de, o te ne ta di.)

The notion that you cannot really know somebody else's *hakili* ("thoughts") is indeed very common. It is expressed in many sayings to the extent that "you can know what is in your stomach but you cannot know what is in mine." Conversely, this points to the importance of things needing to be out in the open—either visually or by being spoken aloud—in order for them to be known. It also suggests both the need for and the suspicion of secrecy as inextricably entangled with the process of paying attention.

While most of the information that people routinely disguised in this way didn't seem all that important to me, I realized that from the perspective of the people I interacted with, even quotidian bits of information like "we are going to the market" might potentially be important. For example, if a female friend and I were seen to leave her compound and would acknowledge that we were going to the market, the person who had asked the question might think that, at the market, I might (or might not)¹⁰ buy my friend some groceries, or give her money to buy ingredients for her cooking. And in that scenario, where my friend would have been known to have gone to the market with me, and on that basis could be suspected to possibly have saved some money on groceries, my friend would not be in a strong position if, say, she were to ask her husband for some coins to buy ingredients for the sauce later that day, or when another woman on the compound were to come up to her at night and remind her to pay back a small loan that was still out-standing. To avoid unpleasant situations like this, better to avoid letting on that she and I had been to the market together in the first place.¹¹

My point here is that information is disguised and questions are deflected as a matter of routine. This doesn't mean that outright lying or ignoring someone's question point blank are acceptable. While people undoubtedly lie or ignore each other on occasion, the more acceptable strategy is to deflect the question (i.e., by vaguely answering "somewhere") rather than ignoring it or lying (i.e., saying that one is "going to the market," when in fact one is going to see the health care worker). A final example shows the linguistic means of disguising potentially meaningful information and the prevalence with which people used these techniques. One day, I was talking to a few friends of mine, one of whom (MK) always delighted in teaching me expressions and riddles in Maninka. As was common, the topic of language and my language skills in particular came up again.

MK: "You know, you know a lot of Maninka but you don't know all of it."

SD: "Oh, I know, the Maninka language cannot be exhausted," I responded, quoting a well-known proverb [Maninkakan te ban]; "there's still so much to learn."

MK: "Yes, because you don't know kunu ko ("yesterday's thing")."

SD: "Well, actually, I do know kunu ko. It means the thing from yesterday, like something you did yesterday."

MK: "Yes, but you don't know what it is; for example, if I say to BK here, 'remember our kunu ko?' you don't know what that is."

Now BK got into the conversation, too, questioning me as to what their *actual kunu ko* was. I answered that it was whatever they had done yesterday, even though I admittedly didn't know what that was. But I maintained that even though I didn't know the exact content of their *kunu ko*, I would still understand that they were talking about something that had occurred the day before. MK and BK, however, were not impressed by my conclusion. "The fact that you just don't know what the *kunu ko* is proves that we can "make you get lost in our conversation" (*k'i latunu kuma la*) in less than five minutes."

* * *

My conversation with MK and BK easily inscribes itself in the larger anthropological literature on secrets (Bellman 1984; Piot 1993; Gable 1997; Brenneis and

Myers 1984; Rosaldo 1984; Luhrman 1989; Freeman 2000). MK and BK insist that secrecy can be readily accomplished on the level of language, and through their example make clear how this is done in such a way as to actually *draw attention* to the secret and the very exclusion of those who are not privy to it. First of all, this has to do with conflicting language ideologies, in which I understood “knowing” (*ka lon*) a certain word to mean that I knew its literal translation, whereas my friends insisted that to “know” a certain word or expression I needed to be able to tell what it refers to in the real world. Indeed, while it is true that I might know what *kunu ko* means in general, I will not really be able to understand the conversation nor understand anything useful about the “inside” of my conversation partners. Even more, these linguistic practices precisely draw attention to the fact that I am missing a crucial part of information to participate in the discussion in a meaningful way. In doing so, they contribute materially to the sense that what others think and feel is unattainable for my understanding.

MK and BK’s explanations, then, echo the insight of numerous anthropologists, following Simmel, that what makes a secret a secret is not so much its content, but who gets to tell it and who ends up being excluded from it. Bellman, for example, has argued that the secrets that are central to Kpelle Poro societies are more about the processes of creating such secrets than their contents (Bellman 1984). Building upon this argument, Piot has noted that a “language of secrecy” is not restricted on the kinds of ritual contexts Bellman describes, but rather is most salient in “the everyday encounters and seemingly casual conversations of individuals” (Piot 1993:354). Elaborating on another aspect of Simmel’s work as taken up by Bellman, anthropologists have also stressed how practices of secrets amount to an exercise of power, specifically “the power to create boundaries and alliances” (Gable 1997). In the conversation with MK and BK, they pointed to their power unequivocally, as their ability to “make me get lost” in their speech whenever they chose to do so.

This study adds to these insights about secrecy the notion that we should also look at locally valued counterpoints to the everyday constructions of secrecy as described by Piot and others. What has been lacking in the anthropological

study of secrecy is not just sufficient attention to the “indigenous motivations for secrecy” (Piot 1993: 353), but also to the locally perceived consequences of and solutions for widespread practices of secrecy. As I noted above, a Mande ideology and practices of *kolosi* can be understood as culturally and historically constituted counterpoints to secrecy, in that they provide specific ways to deal with others’ propensity for creating secrets. While the capacity for paying attention in the face of others’ opaque nature and quotidian linguistic practices of secrecy and deflection of attention coalesce in specific ways in Mande conceptualizations of personhood and sociality, it would seem likely that culturally elaborated modes of paying attention complement local “languages of secrecy” elsewhere as well. Additionally, paying attention to “attention” in addition to secrecy might well help anthropologists and others to move away from the simplistic assumption “that it is by peering behind the façade that we see things as insiders rather than as outsiders and thereby discover the truth” as Gable (1997:215) usefully warns against. This warning seems particularly relevant in regards to the growing trend to see aspects of local culture in terms of “heritage,” where “authenticity” is easily conflated with what are perceived to be “deeper” layers of meaning and less accessible practices. Yet, as Gable also points out, “crucial cultural truths are as likely to be obvious as hidden or esoteric” (Gable 1997:227).

“MAY ALLAH MAKE HIM/HER INTO SOMEONE WHO PAYS ATTENTION”:

DIFFERENTIATED PERSONHOOD AND THE UNEQUAL CAPACITY FOR *KOLOSI*

If one should pay close attention to others because they are deliberately vague in their speech and fundamentally opaque when it comes to their inside, it is equally crucial to “pay attention to oneself” (*i yere kolosi*) in order to fulfill the ideal of self-aware and self-contained human being. In this section I show that a moral imperative to “pay attention” extends to being self-aware (*k’i yere kalaman*) and capable of self-mastery (*ka se i yere ma*). Be it a technique for staving off illness or beseeching Allah that a newborn be blessed with attentiveness and self-awareness, “paying attention to oneself,” and the moral qualities it entails, is of paramount importance to live up to the full potential of being human. Conversely,

people who are incapable of proper self-awareness and self-mastery fall short of being fully human and are in a fundamental sense “not a person” (*mogo te*). Not being a person, in turn, is a character flaw, a moral fault.

Because for most of the people I worked with, being a person immediately implies being a particular *kind* of person, they insisted on the interconnectedness of “paying attention to oneself” (*i yere kolosi*), “being aware of one’s self” (*i yere kalamán*), and “not ‘ruin’ one’s restrictions” (*i kana i ka tana tiyèn*). Indeed, knowing one’s “kind” (either in terms of gender, age, lineage, and/or *siya*) and behaving in a manner accordant with what is appropriate for such a person, is crucial for individuals of all kinds. Falling short of the expectations for, or failing to adhere to the restrictions associated with, one’s kind results in one not being a “true” (*yereyere*) instantiation of one’s kind. This is equally true for those who stand as the most likely candidates to embody the dominant ideal of Mande personhood (i.e., male elders from “noble” or “free” lineages) as for those who inhabit more constricted subject positions, such as women, young people, and artisans.

Coming up short:

paying attention to oneself and the language of blessings and insults

As much as an education of attention seeks to develop children’s capacity for paying attention, not all children will benefit from such an education equally. The distinctions that people in Mande routinely make between an “ordinary person” (*mogo gansan*) and a “real person” (*mogo sobe*) highlights the fact that not every individual is automatically a person. In fact, in a Mande understanding of personhood there are certain categories of people who are considered to fall short of full personhood precisely for their perceived shortcomings when it comes to paying attention. These shortcomings are not necessarily apparent in developmental challenges of the individual, although this is sometimes a factor too. But the lack of potential for *kolosi* might be inherited as well. In the cases where such a lack is inherited, the shortcomings in a person’s capacity for *kolosi* concern paying attention to oneself—*i yere kolosi*—more than to others or one’s environment.

The notion that the capacity for paying attention is something that can be developed is succinctly encapsulated in the blessings for a newborn, which I heard frequently at the hair shavings I attended. Alongside blessings that the child may live a long life, be a true Muslim, grow up in the presence of one's father and mother, and have many younger siblings, friends and family members of a newborn would also beseech Allah to "make him/her into someone who pays attention" (*Ala k'a ke kolosilikela di*) and "someone who understands things (*Ala k'a ke jateminela ye*).¹² Both of these blessings convey the sense that being someone who pays attention and understands or mentally "gets" things is an ideal state of being, which anybody would be indeed "blessed" to attain. Being capable of paying attention is thus seen as a key aspect of being human and living a good life. Moreover, it would appear that the capacity for paying attention is seen as at least somewhat mutable at birth, so that by the grace of Allah, the newborn may grow up exhibiting more rather than less of this critical skill.

Blessings are also a privileged site to begin to perceive the inherently moral nature of Mande concepts of personhood. In Mali as elsewhere, personhood and morality are closely intertwined, to the point of being indistinguishable. To be a person (*mogo*) in the proper sense of the word means to be a morally good person, just as to fall short of certain moral prescriptions means to "not be a person" (*mogo te*). People express morality as integral to full personhood in the blessing that the newborn may become a "veritable person" (*Ala k'a ke mogo sobe di*) or a "real person" (*mogo yereyere*). The same sentiment is also expressed in the blessings that a baby may become a "man" (*Ala k'a ke ke di* or *k'a ke ce ye*) or a "woman" (*k'a ke muso di*), as the case may be. Taken together, the blessings uttered for newborns formulate concisely what it means to be a proper human and to live a worthwhile life. Tellingly, the blessings enumerate attentiveness and discernment as some of the qualities that mark a moral person and as good in their own right, as much as is having a good destiny, or growing up with both of one's parents alive.

Another context in which the moral implications of paying attention are evident is that of health and disease. Jaffré's (2003) study of perceptions of ill-

ness and the transmission of disease among rural populations in Mande demonstrates this admirably. “Paying attention to oneself”—*i yere kolosi*, which Jaffré translates as “auto-surveillance”—emerges as a key way people in Mande attempt to protect themselves from illness and ensure they do not unwittingly cause disease in others. Jaffré describes how the villagers he interviewed considered that most illnesses were transmitted through social relations with other people. Thus, one needs to be vigilant in paying attention to one’s self in relation to others, in order to avoid the diseases circulating among people (Jaffré 2003:36-8). This “auto-surveillance” is not just for one’s own good, however. People can “give” certain illnesses to others not only with the intention of harming them, but also *without* any such intention, by virtue of not being master enough of their own selves. Examples of such diseases are the illnesses that befall children, especially those that are “too beautiful,” after someone has complimented them on their beauty, or another has looked at them with “jealous eyes” (*nyè kèlèyàto*) (Jaffré 2003:38). Because someone can give this kind of illness to others even unintentionally, Jaffré’s informants claim, it is imperative to be master of oneself in order not to accidentally become the cause of another’s misfortune—or even worse, be *perceived* by others as having been a cause of another’s illness.¹³

* * *

Insults provide a useful frame for the various ways of falling short of being a “real person,” which in turn are different forms of immorality, or moral flaws. Like blessings that are routinely offered on the occasion of a new birth, insults are another mundane part of a children’s upbringing. Blessings and insults alike also remain important components of everyday speech events among adults. While blessings are exchanged between adults irrespective of their social position, however, most insults occur in the context of *senankunya* (“joking relationships”). Sometimes described as a social “pact” that intimately binds together different categories of people, across generational, lineage, or “ethnic” divides, *senankunya* relations between individuals allow and even encourage the exchange of insults among them. Thus the insults discussed here are directed either at children (and

could be characterized as “pedagogical”) or at peers/adults who are tied together in *senankunya* (and are hence considered humorous).¹⁴ Taken together, the insults exchanged in these contexts highlight three of the most important kinds of less-than-human people—“morons,” “bastards,” and “slaves”—and show how lack of attentiveness and self-awareness are key factors in these assessments.

The first way of being less than a full person is by being a “moron,” or *naloma*, which is a favorite insult for children and same-age peers alike.¹⁵ People regularly scold children for not paying enough attention to what they are doing, for example, when they lose something, run into something, or are being unruly. While there’s a whole repertoire that can be used to scold children into better behavior,¹⁶ the insult *naloma* links the lack of appropriate human behavior evidenced by the child precisely to an incapacity to pay attention to others and/or to insufficient self-mastery. That is, only a *naloma* would forget to bring the *sambala* for the sauce, drop the lamp, lose the spare change, have “an accident” outside of the toilet space, or bump into someone on the street.

The link between varying degrees of being human, morality, and attentiveness/self-mastery is clear as well when *naloma* is used in regards to adults who are intellectually challenged. When used to describe these adults, the term *naloma* is felt not so much as an insult, but more as a descriptive, though pejorative, term. Because adult *nalomaw* are often incapable of carrying out the tasks associated with full personhood (be it cooking, farming, or proper bathing, eating and speaking), the people I knew as *nalomaw* were never taken seriously and were often made fun of. Indeed, the lack of self-awareness (*i yere kalaman*) displayed by these individuals, who did not know or do what they were supposed to, was used to explain how they fall short of moral personhood. Because attentiveness and self-awareness are part of moral personhood, those who are not able to pay attention to either themselves or others are not considered equally human. This, in turn, is considered a moral failure, not an intellectual one. According to many of my friends, being a “crazy person” (*fato*) is a disease, while being a “moron” (*naloma*) is an example of bad character (*jigo jugu*).¹⁷

Another frequently used insult that brings out a second kind of person who falls short of being fully human is “*nyamogoden*,” or “bastard.”¹⁸ Children who are misbehaving are scolded for being a *nyamogoden* and admonished to improve their ways. In the context of *senankunya*, calling each other *nyamogoden* is a common way for “joking partners” to express their bond by insulting each other. Like its English equivalent, the term “bastard” can be used as a general derogative term, but it literally refers to a “before-person-child,” or a child born out of wedlock. While the actual status of *nyamogodenw* is a complex issue,¹⁹ the proscriptions banning “bastards” from a number of important social positions testifies to the fact that being an illegitimate child is considered a serious flaw, which makes one unfit to lead. This became an issue in one of the villages in the larger region where I did my fieldwork, when the most likely candidate for the office of village leader turned out to be an illegitimate child.²⁰ Even if this individual had up until this point led a highly successful life, when it came to the possibility of him exercising political power, which always implies some form of ritual or metaphysical power as well, his presumed “impure nature” became a problem. Being a *nyamogoden*—even if only very few people are aware of this—proved prohibitive to this person assuming office, which in turn caused a lot of posturing among those “in the know” to bring about an elegant solution.

As in the case of “moron,” the insult *nyamogoden* intricately ties being an illegitimate child to falling short of moral personhood, even if the digression of adultery has not been perpetrated by the child itself but by the parents. Not only does the impure status of such a person make him unfit to rule, he or she is also marked as being the product of a serious lack of self-mastery. The literal reading of what it means to be a “bastard” points to the rashness displayed by the impatient parents, who could not wait to be properly married, as primarily being responsible for the child to end up as a “before marriage child.”²¹ This recklessness is a prime example of not being master over oneself (*ka se i yere ma*), which marks someone as morally flawed. A similar lack of self-control is exhibited by individuals committing adultery, and indeed, the term *nyamogoden* also applies to the children resulting from such relationships. As Dnk’s imam states explicitly in his in-

terpretation of moral personhood above, the imperative to refrain from adultery is central for ensuring the proper state of one's moral character, and hence for being a fully human person.

At least in an idealized version of Mande moral personhood, being the product of adultery is as bad as actually committing it oneself, because the taint it carries is inherited along with other aspects of personhood. Being an illegitimate child not only permanently taints one as a lesser person, incapable of asserting full rights, this status can also be passed on to future generations and become an identifying characteristic of a particular lineages. For example, in many places there are certain sub-lineages *within* the broader ruling group of "descendants of the founder" that cannot pretend to the office of village chief. In two of the villages that I knew best, the reason that a sub-lineage within the ruling family was permanently excluded from the position of village leader was that they were the offspring of an adulterous relationship many generations ago.²² Although the people from the "adulterous" sub-lineage were never referred to as *nyamogoden*, their lesser status *vis à vis* the other sub-lineages that *could* provide the village chief, was expressed in the collective name for their compounds: "place of the children." The act of adultery in the past, involving individuals who by definition were not able to master themselves, is felt to have reduced their offspring to a permanent status of childhood and disqualify them from ever being appropriate candidates for the highest positions of power. The fact that a moral deficiency such as exhibited by adulterers was understood to be hereditary, in turn, implies that in this moral system people can be responsible without having been personally at fault.

The possibility of hereditary transmission of certain moral faults also helps explain the significant emphasis on being a "pure" (*yereyere*) descendent of one's parents and all of one's ancestors. At least until the recent past, this was true across the different *siyaw* ("categories"), so that blacksmiths, for example, prided themselves on being "pure" blacksmiths and many positions of authority as well as ritual roles require the candidate to be a *yerewolo*, or "legitimate child." Literally, a legitimate child (*yere-wolo*) is someone "who has given birth to oneself."

He or she thus faithfully reproduces the essential core of one's inherited essence, or "oneself." Interestingly, one of the terms to express the fact that a woman has (recently) given birth is that she has "found herself" (*a y'a yere soro*).

A third discourse of insults that relates to ways of being less than fully human involves calling someone a "slave" (*woloso* or *jon*) in the context of *senankunya* ("joking relationships"). Among the people I worked with in the Mande plateau region, the kind of incomplete personhood embodied by slaves is no longer openly recognized as such. Moreover, it is deemed inappropriate to refer publicly to individuals whose ancestors were once considered slaves with a term to that effect. Mostly, people retain a respectful silence as to the "slave" status of certain lineages in the past, at least in public.²³ Nevertheless, jokingly calling one's *senankun* a "slave" is quite common—and not as fraught with anxiety, because given the *senankunya* relationship between the individuals, it is immediately evident that neither could ever have been the actual "slave" or "master" of the other.

As was the case with "moron" and "bastard," insults evoking the idea of slavery provide clear evidence that the less-than-fully-human status of being a slave, too, is primarily associated with slaves' lack of self-mastery or self-restraint. Indeed, in the case of slaves, not being able to be one's own master constitutes the defining characteristic of their basic status: a slave can never be master over him- or herself, precisely because they *have* a master in someone else. In my own experience of being a "joking partner" to (primarily) Keita and Fulani lineages, calling one another a "slave" (*jon*) or "little slave boy/girl" (*jonkenin/ jonmusionin*) is a frequent first move in establishing oneself as someone's *senankun*. Following the declaration of the servile status of one's conversation partner, often a playful exchange ensues centering on the question of who is effectively the master (*matigike* or *tigi*) of whom. The basic back-and-forth of many of these conversations, in which both partners try to position themselves as the rightful "owner" (*tigi*) of the other, is captured in the following exchange recorded by Canut. In a not uncommon twist, this conversation also nicely interweaves the idea of slavery with that of adultery and illegitimate offspring.²⁴

A: “Ah! So your last name is Diarra. Well there, bastard (*bataraden*), you have hurt me.”

B: “You got lucky that you are my little slave boy (*jonkenin*), because if not, I would have put some fire in your hands.”

A: “Stop uttering these ridiculous words and get up so that your master (*matigike*) can take you to the hospital.”

B: “Well now, if you’ll accept that I am in fact your master (*matigike*), I will get you treated [in the hospital], and afterwards, we’ll go to my house, and I’ll show you to my family and I’ll say, ‘look, we’ve found us a new slave (*jon*).’” (Canut 2002, my translation)

In addition to the terms *jon* and *woloso*,²⁵ which directly mean slave, there are a number of more euphemistic terms that highlight how certain people are not quite “their own person,” and (thus) no more than slaves. As with *jon* and *woloso*, these more euphemistic terms for slaves are most commonly used in the context of jokes. In fact, the first time I came across one such term, *mogofèмого*, or “person at the side of a person,” I did not know that it used to be a slave term, but I did realize immediately that it was meant as a joke. I had been working with the women’s agricultural *ton* for two Saturday “work days” in a row—at this point in the agricultural cycle, the work was weeding—and on the third day I felt I was getting the hang of it, although obviously not quite keeping up with the other women, and still needing my neighbors to help me out so I would not fall too far behind the row of workers. So, when at the end of the day, the secretary of the *ton* asked, “so, how many people are we today—twelve?” and started writing down the names, I asked, “are you sure there are only twelve people here? What about me?” Another woman chimed in, “that’s right, she did a good job today, so write that down, twelve people, plus (my name).” “Okay,” said the secretary amidst a lot of laughter, “so that’s twelve ‘real people’ (*mogow*) and one ‘person at the side of a person’” (*mogofèмого*).

The concept of *mogofèмого* as someone needing someone else beside him or her neatly conveys the incomplete status of a slave as someone who is not capable of being one’s own person, but rather is dependant on someone else for everything, including even his or her personhood.²⁶ The emphasis that many Bama/Maninka speakers put on the importance of social relations and interde-

pendence²⁷ might make the negative connotations of depending on someone else easy to miss at first. However, when I once misused the term I quickly realized how negative its connotations are outside of a joking context, and how delicate the issue of former slaves still is.²⁸ In fact, I was trying to make a joke myself, playing on the considerable laughter I usually drew when I told people the “twelve people and one person-at-the-side” story. One night, I was expecting some of my female friends to come over for tea and talking, and when the first woman had come into our *karata*, I called out to one of the women living on our compound, “BK, do you want to come chat too? We’re starting the tea!” BK responded that she was not quite finished with the day’s chores and would come a little later. Besides, it was still early, and, she said, “*mogow te folon*,” (“there aren’t any people yet”). Attempting my joke, I answered, “what do you mean, no people; there is one real person here and one slave” (“*ko, mogo te, cogo di; mogo kelen ni mogofèmogo be yan*”). The moment I said it, I realized I had said something horribly wrong. The friend who I was sitting with looked alarmed, apparently not getting the joke at all. Then I remembered someone had told me, a long time ago and rather obliquely, that she was in fact from a family of slaves, which made her a slave too. That I had seemed to openly refer to her as a slave was just awful. Obviously, I had intended for *me* to be the *mogofèmogo* in this instance, and for my friend to be the “real person,” as a reference to the fact that I’d once been called a *mogofèmogo* when working with the *ton*, but because of the overriding negative connotations of the word, neither my friend nor the other woman had understood it that way. I tried to save face for everyone by explaining my joke, stressing how funny it was that *I* was a *mogofèmogo*, because I needed so much help when working with my *ton*. My friends laughed, but I learned that being a real *mogofèmogo* is not very funny.

So far, I have established that the capacity for paying attention is both something that can be developed over time through an “education of attention” as well as a quality that is associated to varying degrees with particular kinds of people in ways that do not primarily pertain to their personal achievements. The latter, for example, is the case for “bastard” lineages and descendents of former

slaves, who are considered to fall short of full personhood—including the capacity for *kolosi*—as a matter of descent. It is hardly surprising, though, that the distinction between *kolosi* as an acquired skill and an inherited, innate capability is fluid.

Auto-surveillance: intersections of kolosi and unequal personhood

In a Mande ideology of personhood, being a person immediately entails being a certain *kind* of person: man/woman, older/younger, of a particular *siya* (“category of person” or “caste”), from a specific place, related to particular others. A final aspect of “paying attention” is that it also applies to knowing what kind of person one is and observing the specific obligations and restrictions associated with one’s *siya*, gender, and age/ generation (to name the most important factors). The role of *kolosi* is double here. On the one hand, it constitutes an integral aspect of Mande moral personhood, which is ideally exemplified by a habitus of attentiveness, self-awareness, and self-mastery. On the other hand, the kinds of behaviors an individual should engage in and/or avoid in order to attain the ideal of Mande moral personhood are only fully embodied by a very narrow section of the population, i.e., those who are male, elders, and “nobles” (*horonw* also called *tontigiw*, “bearers of arms”). An important dimension of *kolosi* that pertains to the latter aspect is its association with the values of being self aware” (*i yere kalaman*) and not “ruining” the restrictions set for one’s kind (*i kana i ka tanaw tiyèn*). The injunction to be self-aware about the kind of person one is—part and parcel of paying attention to oneself—stands in tension to the more general ideal of *kolosi* as a key component of moral personhood.

There is an extensive literature on the social organization of Mande and elsewhere in Africa as premised on the understanding of hierarchically related “kinds” of people (*siyaw*) that are seen as fundamentally physically and spiritually unequal (Irvine 1973; Todd 1977; Pankhurst 1999; Vaugh 1970; Mbow 2000; Richter 1980; Sterner and David 1991; Hoffman 2000; Dilley 2004; Bérédogo 2002; Tamari 1997; Babou 2009; Maquet 1970; Tamari 1991a; Reddy 2005; Lindgren 2004; Conrad and Frank 1995; Diop 1981; Sory Camara 1992).²⁹ The

presumed differences between persons of different *siyaw* present themselves both in personality as well as in bodily make-up, among other aspects, such that, for example, griots are thought to be fiery and short-tempered (Irvine 1989) and potters are considered to gestate their babies for 11 or 12 months instead of 9. Yet the differentiation between *siyaw* in regards to their assumed capacity for paying attention has not so far been noted in the literature.

To make this clear, let's take the example of griots—a particular “kind” (*siya*) of people already discussed in the previous chapter.³⁰ Griots are considered to have heightened powers of observation in comparison with non-griots, which is to say that their particular disposition makes them well suited to embody an ideal habitus of *kolosi*. (Obviously, the perfection of this capacity involves many years of training to become a fully professional griot, as mentioned in Chapter 3; conversely, in practice, not all griots display the capacity for *kolosi* in equal manner.)³¹ The greater than average capacity for *kolosi* on the part of griots—and artisans in general—is expressed eloquently by the griot Tayiru Banbera in a published version of the Sunjata epic:

If a *nyamakala* (“artisan”) goes to your house, do not say it is only a beggar who has come.
You should say that an observant person has arrived.
We observe how a noble enters his house,
How you speak in your house,
The relationship between you and your people,
The extent of your manhood,
If you are a brave man or a coward.
We will know all these things as soon as we enter your house,
The way you look at things and the way you speak will tell us.”
(Conrad 1990:284-5, lines 6566-74)

In this example, *kolosi* is highly valued, identifying the person who performs it as a value member of society, as opposed to a worthless beggar. Moreover, it is the griot who is thought to embody the capacity for *kolosi* here, paying close attention to the way his or her patron enters the house, speaks, etc. In another passage, however, Tayiru Banbera presents an altogether different picture of the capacity for *kolosi* of different kinds of people. Indeed, he precedes his characterization of artisans with a highly normative account of the restraint required of nobles:

If the tip of a noble's tongue is too sharp, he is either a thief or a liar
 That is why, our master teacher,
 If a noble is able to control his feet, he pleases us, the *nyamakalaw* ["artisans"]
 A noble able to control his mouth pleases us, the *nyamakalaw*
 A noble able to control his stomach pleases us, the *nyamakalaw*
 But if a noble controls his hand, we are soon separated from him.
 We do not share the same father
 We do not share the same mother
 We like you because of the things you can give us.
 If you can control your feet,
 We will find you a home.
 If you can control your mouth,
 We will be able to tell you what we have to say and you will hear it.
 If you can control your stomach at mealtime,
 We can pout the sauce on your food and devour it.
 We will say that we were at so-and-so's house,
 We ourselves were the ones to pour sauce on his food.
 (Conrad 1990:284, lines 6545-61)

The ideals of controlling one's feet, one's mouth, and one's stomach presented here as favorable characteristics in a "noble" are indeed important aspects of a Mande ideology of personhood. Moreover, the quality of restraint that is extolled here is closely associated with the habitus of *kolosi* I have outlined so far. But in contrast to the description above, griots are thought to inevitably fall short of the ideal of *kolosi*-as-restraint.

The moral domain of *kolosi* extends to notions of *i yere kolosi* ("paying attention to oneself," or "auto-surveillance"), *ka se i yere ma* ("being master over oneself" or "being able to keep oneself in check"), and *kana i ka tana tiyèn* ("not 'ruining' the restrictions set for one's kind"). The emphasis here is on restraint: keeping close watch over oneself, keeping oneself in check, and not overstepping the boundaries imposed by one's particular positionality. Indeed the value of restraint in "ways of doing, speaking, and seeing" (*kècogo, focogo, yecogo*) (Jaffré 2003) underscores the practices of secrecy and the routine deflection of attention described earlier. "Holding in" one's words, thought, or emotions, allows one to be a person whose "inside" remains opaque to others.

Attentiveness is an ideal of moral personhood, yet the various practices entailed by *kolosi* as self-awareness and/or auto-surveillance are sometimes at

odds with each other. The idealized version of Mande personhood, characterized by restraint in ways of speaking, doing, and seeing, reveals itself as rather narrowly applicable. That is, only “nobles” are seen as really capable of attaining this ideal, even if evidently not all of them do so. In contrast to “nobles,” griots and other artisans are positioned much worse to embody the ideal of restraint by virtue of the activities required of them. For example, refraining from all manner of “shameful actions,” including speaking too much or too loudly, goes directly against the other values associated with (and appreciated by) griots and others serving as spokespersons.

In fact, non-dominant groups such as *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”) at times upheld the dominant ideals of personhood and their focus on restraint and auto-surveillance, while espousing quite different ideals for themselves in other contexts at other times. Many professional spokespersons I knew prided themselves precisely on their lack of restraint—“having no shame” (*malobaliya*) or “having no fear” (*an te siran*) to say whatever truth, or dangerous or inappropriate things, that needed saying. Similarly, griot children are being taught to “be shameless” (*malobali*) in order to fulfill their potential as griots. Calling someone “shameless” is normally a scolding insult to griot and non-griot children alike, but it is understood that only by being “without shame” can griots be effective in praising their patrons and telling the truth when needed (Janson 2002: 77-8). In these contexts, the values attached to shamelessness are quite positive (Roth 2008:57, Hoffman 2000, Janson 2002). Yet it is in instances like this, where alternative modes of personhood come to the fore, that “artisans” are easily perceived by others to fall short of the more widely espoused ideals of being human—to which they themselves, too, subscribe most of the time. Much of the discussion among scholars about the relative level of “prestige” held by “artisans” or the “ambivalent status” as a structural feature of this category can be understood as a fundamental difference of opinion about the ontological status of *nyamakala*-specific, context-bound “alternative”—maybe even subaltern—ideologies.³²

Besides *siya* status, two other categorizations that are particularly important for Mande personhood—including its relation to *kolosi*—are gender and age.

One's social position is premised on the fact that in relation to others, a person is always either male or female, and either younger or elder (or both at the same time).³³ How and when one inhabits any one of these categories is not necessarily stable, but depends on how hierarchy is worked in actual relationships and encounters, including the exchange of greetings, as discussed by Irvine (1974). Social organization in Mande is patriarchic as well as gerontocratic, so that elder men are presumed to be the best exemplars of fully human personhood, and women and youngsters are considered as almost inevitably falling short of it. N'Daou (2005) usefully details the continued salience of hierarchical relationships between people in terms of gender and (generational) age in neighboring Guinea, where such power inequalities are not only an integral aspect of social relations, but also pertain to other domains, such as historical memory.

Gender and age involve behaving within certain parameters (however shifting) and being subject to particular expectations about what different categories of persons are like. With respect to *kolosi*, women in particular are considered to be insufficiently capable of restraining themselves. They are thought to be more likely to fail to hold things inside. At funerals, for example, people are not supposed to cry, at least not loudly or openly. Yet at more than a few funerals I attended, one or more women who were especially close to the deceased could not keep themselves in check and were crying. At the same time that these women were harshly admonished not to cry—"because every tear you shed is a flame reaching the dead person"—the fact that they could not contain themselves nevertheless seemed expected. In a sense, they were performing their own lack of full personhood (in much the same way as some former slaves do in continuing to carry out the tasks required of them as slaves).

As in the case of griots, however, women are not only characterized by a lack of *kolosi*. For one thing, women can and do pay attention to a host of relevant signs; further gendered aspects of *kolosi* are discussed in Chapter 5. Moreover, to the extent that *kolosi* involves not only restraint, but also self-awareness and respecting the boundaries of situated personhood, these values are as relevant to women as they are to men. Moral personhood, in this respect, entails being

self-aware (*i yere kalamán*) and making sure not to “ruin” any of the restrictions imposed on one (*i kana i k’a tana tiyèn*), which are two different ways of saying the same thing: that you have to know who you are and what you are supposed to do and what not.

Many people I knew linked the notion of “auto-surveillance” (*i yere kolosi*) with “being self aware” (*i yere kalamán*) and not breaking the rules set for one’s kind (*i kana i ka tana tiyèn*). Paying attention to oneself in this context refers to doing what you’re supposed to do based on the kind of person you are, and refraining from what you’re not supposed to do, or heeding the restrictions (*tanaw*) associated with one’s particular position. One’s *tanaw* normally relate to one’s *siya*, and differ for men and women; some *tanaw* may also be associated with particular lineages or sub-lineages as well, or even with highly particularized offices of local ritual power.³⁴ Moreover, for women it is not uncommon to take on the *tanaw* associated with their husband’s lineage or family, too, in addition to observing their own. For example, only by observing all the *tanaw* associated with being a potter (*numumuso*) would one be able to become a “real” one (“*numumuso yereyere*”), my mentors assured me. In other words, being a *numumuso* (“potter-woman”) means knowing, and abiding by, the rules laid out for potter-women since the time of the ancestors: not taking clay on Mondays or Fridays, not taking clay when one’s “hand is in the water,” not having sexual relations with any other man than one’s husband, and *a fortiori* a Fulani, and not even sitting down on the same mat as the latter.

To conclude: the notion that different “kinds” (*siya*) of people are qualitatively different from each other not only involves differences in personality and bodily composition, but also entails that “knowing one’s self” must be a crucial aspect of moral personhood. Just as one has to exhibit “auto-surveillance” (*i yere kolosi*) in order to be both respected and protected in social life, so too does one need to know what *kind* of person one is—and behave accordingly. The need to be “aware of oneself” immediately entails making sure not to “not break one’s ‘taboos’” and in general to understand the limitations one’s *siya* might imply for embodying a dominant ideology of personhood. While this latter point has been

recognized as a frequent feature of ideas about personhood elsewhere (see below), it has not been sufficiently appreciated in the context of Mande.

Rethinking personhood in Mande: the Griaule school

Both the inherent morality of personhood as well as its unequal embodiment are crucial ideas that seems to have escaped scholars of the “Griaule School,” whose work has most famously dealt with notions of personhood in this region. Scholars such as Dieterlen, Zahan, and others who worked in what was then “Soudan Français” were keenly interested in the ensemble of terms and notions making up “the person” among France’s colonial subjects in West Africa (Dogon, Bambara, and Malinke among others).³⁵ Yet their abiding interest seems to have been in linking concepts of the person to cosmological concepts, without much regard for the practical context in which these ideas take shape (Griaule 1966; Calame-Griaule 1965; Dieterlen 1951; 1955; 1957a; 1957b; 1959; Zahan 1963; 1974; Paques 1954). Thus the work of many of these scholars today reads as very detached from the intricacies of social interaction and the lived experience of people’s daily practices. Moreover, their overriding attention to the cosmological implications or underpinnings of their informants’ ideas about personhood correspondingly obscured their appreciation for other relevant aspects, such as morality. To the people I worked with, however, the morality of notions of personhood is of much greater import than that of its supposedly cosmological implications, if indeed there are any.³⁶

An example of how my interlocutors would stress the moral—instead of cosmological—relevance of concepts of personhood is brought out by the overview I was given one day by my friend VC, and confirmed by many others. First, VC said, there is one’s *dusu* (“heart”) and one’s *son* (“heart”), which are very close to each other in terms of their meaning. Both of them veer toward the negative, in that the qualities ascribed to them would most likely be negative—for example, one would say things like, “his or her *dusu* is quick,” meaning that the person is short-tempered. Similarly, according to VC, it is more common to say of a person’s *son* that it is bad (“*a son mayn*”) than that it is good. The opposite is true

for a person's *jigo* ("character"), which one would more commonly describe in someone as being good ("*a jigo kayn*"). One's *kono* ("stomach"), on the other hand, can be described equally well in terms of being good ("*a kono kayn*") or "bad" ("*a kono mayn*"), and take on both positive and negative qualities. VC also noted, and others agreed, that one's moral dispositions could be changed, for better or for worse, by one's *ni* ("soul"). "You have to force your *ni* to focus on doing what is right," he explained, "because if you do not force it, the *ni* will only want "peace and rest" (*here ni lafia*)."

If their focus on morality differentiates how the people I knew talked about personhood from Griaule-school descriptions that are overly cosmological and cerebral, a second divergence concerns the contexts in which my friends used "personhood" terms such as the parts of which we are made up. Much like the English terms "heart" or "head" are not purely moral concepts, but actual body parts as well, so too are the Bamana/Maninka terms referring to the make-up and moral quality of people often used in concrete, physical ways. In fact, I learned a lot about the parts that make up humans by observing the slaughtering of animals (goats, sheep, and cows) on the occasions of religious holidays, and by seeing the actual body parts that concepts such as *dusu*, *son*, and *kono* encompass being distributed to participants. Being part of the painstaking process of deciding which parts should go to whom, I realized that the *kono bara* is quite literally the animal's "stomach container," even if the term *kono* (stomach) as applied to people also refers to "what you hold inside," in terms of thought, feelings, and speech. Similarly, an animal's *dusu*, or *son*, which as a choice kind of meat always goes to a specifically assigned key recipient, is physically the heart. Observing animal sacrifices also taught me that the *ni* is what is present as long as animals—or humans—are alive, but leaves them shortly after they die.³⁷ *A ni tara* ("it's *ni* has gone") means that the slaughtered animal is dead now. All in all, the concreteness of animal slaughtering helped me understand better how to "place" certain expressions and ideas about people's physical and psychological make-up, such as the idea that when someone's *dusu* had been made to "cry" (*kasi*), it meant he or she had been angered or was very unsatisfied.³⁸

The physicality of body parts, then, helps us better understand how the personhood “concepts” identified by scholars of the Griaule school are first and foremost parts of one’s body, and thus much more concretely embodied than earlier accounts would lead us to believe. At the same time, our shared human anatomy should not lure us into thinking that the conceptions of personhood in which body parts figure so prominently are also largely shared. They are not, as Griaule, Dieterlen, and their colleagues so clearly understood. My quibble is with these scholars’ privileging the “metaphysical” or “cosmological” side of these concepts. In contrast, the people I spoke to seemed much more interested in the morality of personhood, and regularly discussed the relative moral worth of others with reference to the status of their “head,” “heart,” “hands,” “mouth,” or other body parts. Moreover, the way these body parts figure in evaluative speech—expressing moral valuation with reference to the color of certain body parts, for example—signal some of the more salient notions regarding Mande personhood that have been discussed above. For example, the emphasis on interior processes as distinct from outward manifestations or the constant requirement to keep things (speech, tears, displays of emotion) “inside” clearly resonate with the importance of secrecy and deflecting attention.

A final respect in which previous studies of the “make-up” of Mande persons are lacking is in their presentation of a “universal” Mande person, which fails to acknowledge that there are gradients of being human, and that there are a number of ways in which someone can fall short of the ideal of being a *mogo yereyere* or “real person.” As I have argued, in the Mande conception an individual is always at the same time a certain *kind* of person. Partly, the difficulty in acknowledging the very real ways in which for many Mande-speakers—at least until recently—not all people might be equally human stems from the fact that this view is antithetical with our own cultural and moral understandings that have come to stress the fundamental equality of all people.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has addressed the importance of “paying attention”—in order to notice *anything* that might be important—in relation to the minute details of one’s surroundings, including natural and man-made objects, physical characteristics, gestures, events, space, and speech. Describing *kolosi* in terms of a semiotic ideology, I highlighted the way practices of paying attention presuppose—and in the process, construct—particular understandings of objects as potential signs as well as of people as being fundamentally opaque. This model of signs in society, moreover, is premised on an appreciation of the ambiguity and unstable nature of signs and the open-ended character of the process of making sense of them. This process, no less, is inflected with the social relations and political concerns of observers who ultimately are responsible for performing attentiveness in a context of multiple, often conflicting, possible signs.

Secondly, I discussed how *kolosi*, as a set of embodied moral practices aimed at auto-surveillance, self-awareness, and being in control of oneself, is an integral part of how moral personhood is understood and enacted among differently situated categories of people in Mande. People who are incapable of proper self-awareness and self-mastery fall short of being fully human, which in turn is taken as a moral fault. Moreover, because in a Mande ideology of personhood, being a person immediately entails being a certain *kind* of person, “paying attention to oneself” is a particularly salient component of people’s understanding of the moral precepts associated with their *siya*. In this context, I also discussed the gradual development of *kolosi* as an “education in attention” in which proper modes of asking, looking, and listening—all of them “bodily techniques”—are inculcated in children from a young age on.

The analysis of *kolosi* in this chapter, then, has presented *kolosi* as an ever-called-for habitus of attentiveness. Nonetheless, the question of *what* exactly warrants one’s constant attention and scrutiny—what “things” (objects, practices, differences), of the multitude of possibilities, are indeed meaningful—remains unanswered. In the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I show that this is not solely an outsider’s theoretical question, but a problem that many of my interlocu-

tors actively grapple with: What makes a sign a sign? What are the signs of a “good woman”? Does it “mean” anything that the Prophet used to pray with His hands up, or is this a contingent fact? In each of these cases, which will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, people have to figure out which things are worth paying attention to, and which are not—and in so doing, they are dealing with moral quandaries as much as problems of semiotics.

¹ A *Sotrama* is a green Toyota bus of the kind that serves as the main mode of public transportation in Bamako. These buses can be rented for festivities like this by people who have the money and the connections to do so.

² When the word had first come that the official installation for the village chief of N would be celebrated shortly, the message had quickly been followed by another one, saying that this would be a “low key” affair, without a lot of extravagant festivities. The reason for this warning against surplus attendees is primarily economic, in that the current “hard times” in Mali make it hard for most villages to entertain large delegations from other villages, especially those that do not have close or obvious (historic) relations with the organizing village. The prospect that the festivities in N would not require a sizeable delegation from Krs was disappointing to many people, particularly those associated with the theater group, which had already been planning its attendance.

Only on the eve of the event, I learned that there would be a full delegation from Krs after all—that is, one of which the entire roster of the theater group would be part. This propitious development had come about, I learned, because MMT, the wealthiest villager (but not a resident) of Krs, was sponsoring the theater group to go and perform. From the outset, MMT had been very intent on having a large group of people from K be present for the celebration of the installation of N’s new village chief, because N was the village where his mother was from. Thus he arranged with the organizers in N that he would provide both the rice and the sauce that the delegation from Krs would consume during their visit, thus offsetting the organizers’ financial concerns. Were it not for MMT’s insistence on the theater group’s presence, it would have sufficed for the village chief of Krs to send only a small delegation, maybe consisting of a hunter, a council member, and one or two *finaw*, as there are no particularly strong or important historic ties between the two villages—although there *are* those strong personal ties for MMT.

³ It is important to be precise here. In Saussurean terms, the broken corn stalk was not a sign—something standing in an arbitrary relationship between something else it signifies. For Peirce, however, it is still a sign, even if it is not a

symbol—the designation Peirce prefers for arbitrarily defined signs. Yet as evidence of something breaking it and causing it to fall down—maybe an animal, maybe the wind, maybe a child doing so unintentionally—the stalk is an index. For Peirce, an index is characterized by the relation of contiguity between the thing and what it signifies (here: the broken corn stalk is a sign of the act of breaking, where the act and the result are obviously continuous).

⁴ In this sense, the easily overlooked sign is like a Peircean index, which also does not need an interpretant, in that “an index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant.” (Peirce 1932[1902]: 304). At the same time, the essence of an index is precisely that, ideally, it *does* manage to focus our attention to its object, as mentioned in Chapter 1.

⁵ In Krs, these hair shavings take place on the 7th or 8th day after an infant’s birth (provided the umbilical stump has fallen off by then), that is, the day that mother and child leave the mother’s room for the first time—an oft-given reason for the hair shaving is indeed the fact that for some people it is “taboo” to see an infant’s original hair (either all infants or only those of a particular lineage). On this day, too, the child’s name is announced officially and the child is given an elaborate bath.

Only women were present for all of the hair shavings I attended, except for one, where no woman was available on the compound to do the shaving, and a neighboring man was asked to do so instead. On most occasions, the only people present were the child’s mother, an older woman to do the shaving and bathing, one to three additional older women from the same compound or group of related compound, the anthropologist, and any small children of the compound that had realized something was going on. These small children were often the recipients of part of the white *dege* (“millet paste”) if it had been prepared for the ceremony, or the candy, if provided.

⁶ Both examples are taken from everyday conversations I had with female friends, either at their place or mine, at the end of the day. I wrote many of these conversations down afterwards, because the mix of gossip, bantering, and just pleasant conversation was frequently interesting even if I quite articulate how and why at the time.

⁷ The main difference being that in the other village only married women can be part of the age groups, whereas here all women are, regardless of marital state.

⁸ Regarding the issue of smell, Hallowell’s point about the “social function” of perception is particularly relevant for pointing out how sensory modalities—such as smell, in my example—bring us into experiential contact with even those aspects of the outer world that are not universally recognized (like spirit-animals or Mande *subagaw* (“witches”). These things are nevertheless made real, and felt to be real, by being sensuously experienced. Hallowell formulates this as follows:

“Perception serves such a [social] function to the extent that it is one of the chief psychological means whereby belief in reified images and con-

cepts as an integral part of a cultural order of reality are substantiated in the experience of individuals. It is through the same sensory modalities that have always been considered sufficiently reliable in bringing us into contact with the 'reality' of the outer world that the reality of objects that have their roots in man's inner world are reinforced" (Hallowell 1951:184, emphasis in original).

It should be noted that Hallowell does not understand this process simply as a matter of cultural determination but rather of influence. He is in fact quite interested in the differences exhibited by individuals of a shared cultural background.

⁹ Internal politics undoubtedly played a role here, too, in that Y was a (distant) cousin of the woman who has organized the group, whereas the woman who had been gossiping about Y was unrelated to the group's leader.

¹⁰ Even though I might be in a better position than most local women to help people out financially, this scenario doesn't hinge on me being a (relatively wealthy) foreigner. In fact, on the occasions that I did buy or bring groceries for a friend, they tended to present and announce this quite publicly upon our return to her compound.

More importantly, the point is that anytime somebody does something slightly out of the ordinary (or even firmly inside of it), there is room for speculation. Someone might seem to be going to the doctor for a persistent cough, but what if she secretly tries to obtain birth control? Or less calculatedly, what if someone goes into town to visit with her sister, and the sister ends up handing her a few balls of soap, maybe obtained at a recent wedding at the sister's compound? In all these cases, the operative principle seems to be that it's best to tell others as little as possible, *even if one has nothing to hide*.

¹¹ Of course, in this hypothetical example, my woman friend and I could always be *seen* at the market together (in fact, this would be highly likely). However, the person who would see us at the market would have to be physically present there, too, as opposed to the person who was asking about our whereabouts while presumably staying home. Moreover, I don't argue that my friend would seek by all means to conceal information that might improve her economic capacities even very slightly, but rather that for people I knew it was a rather mundane, routine practice to deflect questions and resist giving out any more information than strictly necessary.

¹² In Bamana/Maninka, the quoted blessings, which commonly follow the first blessing "*Ala ka den balo*" ("May Allah grant the child life), are "*K'a fa-ma balo, k'a ba-ma balo, k'a ke Silama ye, k'a dogoni caya*". Besides the cited examples, there are many more blessings: "*k'a yeelen k'an ta di*" ("to make his or her light be ours"), "*k'a nakan diya*" ("to grant that his or her destiny be good"), "*k'a gerejege fon*" ("that he or she will do well), and many more.

¹³ Of course, anybody who is perceived by others to have been the cause of someone else's serious sickness or misfortune is by definition a *subaga*, or "witch." Again, Jaffré stresses the fact that this term does not necessarily imply bad intentions on the part of the perpetrator, but can equally refer to someone who

is not capable of keeping themselves in check as much as they should—which is obviously still a moral shortcoming. Interestingly, Jaffré mentions as a third possibility that the unwitting causer of another’s misfortunes might him or herself be the “simple victim of *tèrè jugu*” (Jaffré 2003:38), which forms an interesting counterpart to the discussion of *tèrè* in Chapter 5.

¹⁴ That is, I disregard those instances where insults were used as part of interpersonal arguments and conflicts. One reason for this omission is a lack of sufficient data on this phenomenon.

¹⁵ From my own perspective, informed by Western European sensibilities about acknowledging the full personhood of all human beings, regardless of their intellectual/mental abilities, I found it often troubling that insults of this kind were lodged against adults whose mental capacities seemed limited. While I found these kinds of insults neither pedagogical nor humorous, however, most of my interlocutors did.

¹⁶ Some other examples of scolding insults directed towards children are *nyamogoden* (“bastard, illegitimate child,” see below), *i wolosoden* (“you slave-child”), *i jinaden* (“you child of a spirit”), *i jahanamaden* (“you child from hell/damned person”) *i kalabaanci* (“you pigheaded/stubborn one,” or “you liar”), and the rhetorical question, *faa b’i la de wa?* (“are you crazy or what?”)

¹⁷ From what I know about Mande ideologies about learning, the fact that someone is a “real” *naloma*—as opposed to a child who does stupid things every once in a while and needs to be scolded for that—would be “diagnosed” around age seven. This is in contrast with those who are considered “crazy” (*fato*), which is an illness that can strike at any time, before and after the age of seven. The fact that a child being a *naloma* typically becomes really evident when he hits about seven years of age, is that around this time children must start “paying attention” in earnest, to learn the skills they will need later in life (Dolumbia and Erny 2002:53). As is to be expected, some children turn out to be very poor observers, and have a hard time learning much of anything, including basic skills in the household. Moreover, this age is also when children supposed to start their studies of the Qur’an, which can also bring out the inability of some children to learn and memorize things. According to some of the people I knew, a child is ready to begin Quranic schooling when he or she knows how to count till five, and the child who never reaches this level is properly called a *naloma*, thus putting a religious spin on an already morally charged category.

¹⁸ Another insult that I heard used in the sense of “bastard” is *bataraden*. Bailleul’s Bamana dictionary glosses the term *baataraden* as “scoundrel” or “child of a scoundrel” (1996:16), while Canut translates it as “bastard” more directly (see below). Nienke Muurling suggests a suggestive etymology for this term, namely mother-gone-child (*ba-taara-den*) (Nienke Muurling, comment on an earlier version of this chapter).

¹⁹ As Launay shows for the Dyula of Côte d’Ivoire, the fact that the discourse about *nyamagodenw*, or illegitimate children seems straightforward in principle does not prevent that its application to specific cases might be anything but. A major ambiguity with the definition of an illegitimate child as one born (or

conceived) before marriage arises in situations—common throughout the African continent—where “marriage” constitutes a process, rather than a singular event (Launay 1995).

In Mali, too, “marriage” is a multi-step process, which can be abandoned at various points along the way, as well as a multi-varied concept that can be considered from several angles (i.e., “religious,” “traditional,” “official”) (de Jorio 2002). As far as my own fieldwork is considered, I know of only two cases where an unplanned pregnancy did *not* result in the biological father claiming the child as his and instigating some form of marriage talks with the family of the girl (and probably as a result, both of these cases ended dramatically). In the majority of cases, however, an unplanned pregnancy results in at least the opening up of marriage negotiations between the boy’s family and that of the girl, and very few children indeed are “illegitimate” in the sense that the biological father does not acknowledging them as his and pays the costs associated with labor and delivery. Even if the (proposed) marriage eventually falls through, the child will be considered legitimate if the father has thus claimed it.

A rather different case occurs when a married woman is considered to have conceived a child through an adulterous relationship with another man. Regardless of any rumors, any child born to a married woman will be considered to belong to her husband, except when that he expressly disowns the child and sends away the adulterous wife. (This seems very rare, though, because as one of the men on our compound said: “a man never gives up a claim to a child, because one never knows what will become of him or her”.)

²⁰ As Launay points out for the Dyula of Côte d’Ivoire, to stigmatize someone of one’s own family as a *nyamogoden* is highly inappropriate and presumably self-defeating as well (Launay 1995:119). In my experience, too, if the father has accepted the child as his own, it becomes inappropriate for other people to openly acknowledge their doubts about the child’s legitimacy, regardless of the rumors they may have heard about (and may even continue to spread behind the family’s back). Thus, the identity of these children is actively concealed from others, and over time, the circle of people “in the know” about cases of speculative paternity/possible adultery varies greatly in extent depending on the case.

²¹ Johnson, Hale, and Belcher interpret the term *nyamogoden* or “before-person-child” as “the child of someone who came before,” that is, “before the wedding” (Johnson, Hale, and S. Belcher 1997:116).

²² This was not openly talked about, and not something that just anybody would know. It might be that the adulterous relation here was more specifically a case of incest between a man and his brother’s wife, but this is not entirely clear to me.

²³ Some people disliked discussing the issue of former slaves in more covert contexts as well, while others saw no problem in doing so. Compared to other groups in Mali, the disinclination to discuss or even acknowledge slavery and the former status of slaves of fellow villagers, seem to be greater among Bamana/Maninka speakers than other groups, such as the Fulani (De Bruijn and Pelckmans 2005).

²⁴ The context for this exchange is that two people have gotten into a minor car accident and start to argue about who is at fault. Then they realize that the two of them are tied together in a *senenkunya* (“joking”) relationship, which changes the tone of their conversation, from which the quote has been taken.

²⁵ The details of the practice of slavery in this region are beyond the scope of this section, yet most commonly *jon* is understood to refer to captured slaves, whereas *woloso* are those “born at home” (i.e., in the home of their master), or the descendents of a captured slave. Indeed, like the hereditary component of being a “bastard,” the status of slave used to be hereditary as well.

²⁶ The incapacity of slaves is bluntly expressed in some typical slave names. Documented Bamana/Maninka slave names include *Jontese* (“a slave is not able/capable” or “a slave has no power/means”) (Traore 1999). Nobody I knew went by such obvious slave names, but I did encounter one in the most unexpected of contexts. One day, I was talking with a female friend in Krs, who was explaining how her husband was related to the woman who I was originally named after in Mali. Out of the blue, she mentioned that my namesake’s father had been named *Jontese*—something I had never heard before, for obvious reasons, but was able to confirm with others later on.

Moreover, Keane’s remarks about the salience of names in relation to slaves among Anankalang—particularly the greater ease with which slaves could be called by their “real names” as well as the practice of slaves taking their master’s name resonate with what we know of Mande slave names (cf. Keane 1997:131).

²⁷ One of many examples is from my friend DK, who like to say that, “when one is born, it is into the hands of other people, and when one is buried it is through the hands of other people.”

²⁸ The same is true elsewhere in West Africa, and likely beyond. Some recent discussions on the silence around slavery in the wider region are Baum (1999) on Senegal, Shaw (2002) on Sierra Leone, and Holsey (2007) on Ghana.

²⁹ A recurring feature of this literature is the considerable emphasis placed on matters of categorization, specifically in regards to whether or not the notion of a “caste system” can be used appropriately to describe certain aspects of social organization in Mande and elsewhere in the Saharan/Sahellian region of Africa. I do not think the arguments against the use of the term caste—that it invokes too much Indian context and/or that it implies a notion of hierarchy that would be incompatible with the Mande case (Conrad and Frank 1995)—are sufficiently convincing to abandon its use.

Specifically, the critique of the term “caste” as being too India-centric as to be productive for the West African context seems to me to rest on two questionable assumptions, namely: 1) that here is only one way in which the Indian caste system can be productively understood (which is a way that is not applicable to other contexts); 2) that the applicability (or not) of the “caste” concept primarily refers to the level of practice instead of ideology. Let me explain my concerns with each of these assumptions in turn.

1: the fact that the precise contours of the Indian caste system—and the transformations therein—remains a productive terrain of scholarly investigation and debate belies the implicit assessment that the ins-and-outs of the Indian caste system are already fully understood, as well as the further estimation that the understanding of the Indian case has been tried on West African cases and found to fall short. In fact, competing understandings of the Indian caste system such as those put forward by Dumont (1980) on the one hand and Marriott and Inden (Marriot and Inden 1977; Marriot 1976) on the other make clear that the question of how best to understand the caste system in India is not a foregone conclusion. Moreover, while the application of a Dumontian view of castes (starting from a structural definition of the term) has been attempted for some West African cases (Camara 1992 and Van Hoven 1995), the same is not true for the more culturalist approach proposed by Marriott and Inden (Marriott 1976, Marriott and Inden 1977).

2: while the assumption that “practice trumps ideology” is never explicitly stated in the scholarship arguing against the applicability of the term “caste system” to West African systems of social organization, this particular understanding of the relationship between ideology and practice can nevertheless be seen as central to the argument of these scholars. Thus, to cite but the one example of the edited volume that promoted the non-applicability view for “caste,” the introduction to the 1995 edited volume on Mande *nyamakalaw* duly notes “the pervasiveness of an ideology of hierarchy in Mande” (Conrad and Frank 1995:12). Yet the authors go on to counter the claim that Mande social organization might be characterized by hierarchy by noting that “in practice” various *nyamakala* individuals enjoy more prestige and political clout than would be expected based on their “low status.” The argument put forward here is surprising to me, as a common understanding of another aspect of *nyamakala* status, namely specialized domains of work, involves the same distinction between “ideology” and “practice,” without this being seen as a problem. Thus, Conrad and Frank state—rightly—that even though not all *nyamakalaw* carry out the activities that only they are allowed to perform, the important point is that nobody but someone of *nyamakala* descent **can** do these kinds of activities, as part of their birth right. In a similar vein, it could then be argued that even if not all *nyamakalaw* are looked down upon, the important point still remains that ideologically the category of *nyamakala* is situated “behind” that of non-*nyamakala* or *tontigi*. This, however, is not how the argument proceeds, which points to an underlying inconsistency regarding the valuation of ideology and practice in regards to Mande *siyaw*.

³⁰ Another illustrative example is that of blacksmiths/potters. Many of the activities that are commonly associated with blacksmiths, too, rely on greater than average skills for *kolosi*. This includes many of the practices related to wood- and ironwork, as well as various techniques for prognostication, such as “reading the sand.” While new categories of people are now also learning these techniques, blacksmiths are still considered to have an edge in this area, by having inherited some of the requisite sensibilities. Additionally, they can more easily turn to their fathers or other family members to teach them, because at least some of these

would be experienced sand readers themselves. Such was the case of AK whose skills in “observing the sand” (i.e., divination) were extolled by his wife in a conversation quoted above. AK acquired his skills of *kolosi* in regards to the sand from his father, who had also been known for his skills at various forms of divination.

³¹ While the capacity for *kolosi* might be more closely associated with a particular *siya*—for example, griots—than others, a person nevertheless has to develop this capacity to fulfill its potential. Indeed, there is frequently a tension between inherited qualities and predispositions associated with particular categories of people on the one hand and the clear individual differences in the extent to which these qualities get developed on the other. It seems to me that this simple realization would clear up much of the confusion in the literature on Mande “castes” and other similar systems of social organization.

³² Instead of saying that *nyamakalaw* and other non-dominant groups simply fall short of these ideals, we could also see the discrepancies in terms of *siya*-, gender-, and age-specific ways of embodying moral personhood. That is, the discussion could instead be framed as questioning the reach of the dominant ideology of what it means to be a person and asking how and when it can be contested from the positionality of individuals categorized as *nyamakala* and/or female, and/or younger.

³³ This is due to the fact that social organization in Mande is based on both chronological age as well as generation position. Thus, it is not uncommon to have an uncle, for example, who is elder in generation yet younger in years than his nephew.

³⁴ An example is the ritual position of *maren* in Dnk, who plays an important role in the yearly Benba ceremony. Upon assuming his position, which can only be held by members of a specific lineage of village founders, he also assumes a host of further restrictions in regards to food, mobility, and everyday activities.

³⁵ The scholarly work of many of the scholars associated with the so-called “Griaule school”—first and foremost Marcel Griaule himself, his long-term collaborator Germaine Dieterlen, his daughter and colleague Calame-Griaule, as well as Viviane Paques, Dominique Zahan, Jean Rouch, Solange de Ganay, and despite their later distancing themselves from the “school,” also Michel Leiris and Denise Paulme—has been heavily criticized by later authors for fundamental flaws in methodology, theoretical concerns, and/or fieldwork ethics (Jamin 1982; Hountondji 1983; Clifford 1988; Beek 1991; Beek and Jansen 2000). For two recent assessments of the discussion, both focusing on the Dogon material but very much in line with my own concerns, see Apter (2005) and Buggenhagen (2006). Like these authors, I think a wholesale assessment of the research associated with the “Griaule School” as invalid or scientifically unsound is not warranted. For one thing, there are significant differences between the bodies of work produced by individual scholars, and in some cases, such as Zahan or Dieterlen, within those as well. Moreover, the scholarship produced about what the call “the Dogon” and that about “the Bamana” might not be equally questionable, so that

while most of the criticism concerns the Dogon work, the same concerns do not all seem to be true for the Bamana work. Nevertheless, there are some clear problems with the work of some of the individual scholars working on “Mande” data as well, and I will mention those whenever they become relevant. In my own work, I have found for the most part that the findings of Zahan, Dieterlen, and Calame-Griaule are hard to incorporate into my own account, because our bodies of data are so incongruous in terms of level of detail, generalizability, and orientation. In some instances, however, their findings make surprisingly much sense to help me understand some of the things that I was told in the field (for example, Dieterlen’s brief 1947 account of *tèrè*, which forms the basis of further discussion in Dieterlen 1951) (Dieterlen 1947; 1951).

³⁶ A particular point of critique formulated by “field scholars” with a deep knowledge of the region in which the Griaule scholars also used to work is that the kind of data produced by authors associated with the Griaule school does not square with what later observers have found, or rather not found, in their own research (See Van Beek on Griaule, 1991, and Jansen and Van Beek on De Ganay, 2000). This was also true in my case, and so I never found anybody who would, for example, explain the *ni* as being composed of five distinct parts, each of them linked to one of the five fingers of the hand, as Zahan describes (1963:51-2). Because I do not know that the people I came to know share any of the more esoteric views on what makes up a person presented by Zahan and his collaborators, I am not using these materials here.

³⁷ As long as there is still breathing, the *ni* is still there, so that after the animal has been slaughtered, but the blood is still coming out and there is still movement in the breast, it still “has *ni*,” or, conversely, still “partakes of *ni*” (Cuello 2005:73).

³⁸ However, it does *not* mean that the person is sad. Crying, spilling tears, does not mean sadness, but dissatisfaction and anger. This is the reason people should never be seen crying, except maybe briefly when they are clearly in great and acute physical pain.

CHAPTER FIVE

PREGNANCY AND ENDOGAMY: WOMEN'S BODIES AS SIGNS AND OBJECTS OF NON/ATTENTION

This chapter discusses a final context that my interlocutors posited as key arena for *kolosi*, namely the practices of scrutiny at the basis of the establishment of new social relations, particularly through marriage. A first theme in this chapter thus concerns the gender implications of *kolosi*, or the varied ways in which women and men differentially employ strategies of paying attention to others as well as how women in particular deal with the strains of being the object of constant attention of others. Women are the object of manifold “attention paying” practices of others, and nowhere more so than when they are being scrutinized as possible marriage candidates and even more importantly, future mothers of a family’s offspring. At the same time, some of the characteristics of women that once were key factors in determining their suitability as marriage partners—including, in particular, their “caste” background—are now no longer considered proper objects of attention.

The second theme to emerge from this chapter, then, concerns the tensions between the injunction to “pay attention” and the equally pressing need *not* to notice certain distinctions or practices. The case taken up here is the rapid decline of endogamy, or the practice of “like marrying like,” which has occurred in the recent past in some villages and is still in progress in others. The reproduction of a social system where different “kinds” of people (*siya*) were seen as fundamen-

tally, physically and spiritually unequal (as discussed in previous chapters) crucially entailed the practice of “like marrying like” to ensure the substantial basis of difference. In this sense, endogamy is an inherently political practice, regulating the production of particular kinds of persons within a system of unequal relationships (cf. Williams 1995). The fact that variously positioned local and supra-local actors have in the last two generations or so successfully positioned the differences between kinds of people as no longer worthy of attention in the context of marriage, then, is equally political. At the same time, contemporary research on kinship and relatedness has argued convincingly against the facile assumption that the political and judicial dimensions of kinship carry greater analytical significance than the “small everyday acts of creating relatedness” (Carsten 2000: 17). In fact, practices of endogamy and discourses about its decline form a fruitful locus to examine the mutually constitutive character of political processes, social change, and intimate practices of domesticity—including, in the Mande case, the careful attention paid to others and the instances in which doing so is considered no longer appropriate.

As this chapter documents, local experiences of these changes show considerable variations between particular Mande villages in the particular trajectories by which endogamy was abandoned or is presently on the wane. I use the example of Krs on the one hand and Ksm on the other to illustrate the differential process by which endogamy has been, or is gradually being, abolished as a primary consideration for marriage; while my informants in Krs dated the start of this process to the early 1960s, those from Ksm attest that it is very much a contemporary “issue,” which people are still working out. Beyond the historic and geographic specificity of the decline of caste endogamy, my discussion specifically addresses two ethnographic puzzles: 1) if the abolishment of caste restrictions on marriage partners means that “anybody can marry anybody now,” why does this logic not apply to the category of griots called *finaw*? 2) if the decline in caste endogamy is clearly a fraught process that incites real concerns in some local observers, as the Ksm case illustrates, then why and how does the erasure of

the significance of endogamy as a past practice come about in Krs and other places where this decline has slightly older roots?

OBSERVING WOMEN'S BODIES (AND TODDLERS' SIGNIFICANT ACTS)

If people in Mande are always the object of attention by others, this is particularly true for women, and nowhere more so than in the context of pregnancy and marriage. Jokes and insinuations that someone might be pregnant almost invariably formed part of the all-female conversations I was part of, whether the meetings of our rotating credit group on Friday afternoons or other occasions when the young married women I knew had time to socialize, either over some tea, or more likely, household duties such as shelling ground nuts. “Look, she is pregnant, see the wide clothes she is wearing,” someone would say about one of the other women present (including me). The woman concerned would invariably deny that she was, regardless of whether she looked to me to be in her final trimester or whether there was not anything noticeable at all. More often than not, indeed, the jokes and insinuations that someone was pregnant seemed more often than not baseless to me, and not just in my own case. Several women who were at various points singled out as being pregnant in such conversations did not in the end seem to have been pregnant at all,¹ even if in other cases it became evident over the course of the next weeks or months that the observation had in fact been correct.

The tone of these “pregnancy accusations” is playful, to the point that on a few occasions a woman got up and tried to lift up her friend’s clothes to show that the latter was really expecting. The ways these pregnancy accusations were deflected is both routine (cf. Chapter 4) and often playful as well. “It’s nothing, it’s just my stomach” or “it’s only ‘shit’” are common, yet also witty, retorts. Conversations about who amongst us might be pregnant can—among appropriate participants, like female friends—be an arena for playfulness and witty responses in part because no matter how pregnant a woman actually is, she should never admit so. Of course, after a certain point a woman’s pregnancy becomes too obvious to deny, but even so, she is expected to deny the charge when asked. Most women I knew did in fact deny they were pregnant for the durations of their pregnancy, al-

though good sense dictated that they would largely be spared the “dumb question” about whether they were pregnant as this became increasingly clear.

Writing about the importance of procreation for Bamana women in Beledugu (the region immediately east of Mande), Brett-Smith has linked her interlocutors’ denial of pregnancy as inspired by a fear of the “evil eye” and being accused of undermining their husband’s lineage (Brett-Smith 1994). According to her (male) informants, if a woman would so much as admit to the fact that she was pregnant—or even worse, draw attention to her state herself—she would invite potential malevolent people or other beings to put an end to the pregnancy she was “bragging” about. Moreover, to the extent that she is considered to have drawn attention to her pregnancy herself (and even the failure to conceal would seem to count as such), she can also be accused of *purposively* having caused the end of her pregnancy, which in turn could easily be interpreted as thwarting the interest of her husband and his lineage (Brett-Smith 1994). None of the women I asked about the issue of concealing a pregnancy offered up this reasoning. Yet it does not sound too far-fetched considering the premium placed on concealment and deflecting attention I have discussed previously, nor is it surprising that men would volunteer such an unabashedly patriarchal explanation.

The women I spoke to, on the other hand, presented the concealment as a point of pride, which shows the toughness of women (particularly those in the past). The concealment should ideally extend up until the moment of birth, when the newborn’s screams finally give away the mother’s “secret.” (Indeed, this ideal favors women giving birth alone and on their own as an ultimate sign of toughness and self-sufficiency.) Because the two villages I knew best both were serviced by a birth clinic (which women *had* to use under penalty of a fine)² it is now exceedingly rare for women to give birth at home, and a fortiori without any assistance. Nevertheless, Nt, a young woman on our compound did just that and give birth in her room. Despite being just a few feet away from her, sitting outside in front of my room, I was completely unaware of what was going on until Nt called me in. Indeed, Nt presented this to our friends as an instance where my skills at *kolosi* had failed miserably.³

The fact that my friends' observations proved incorrect as often as they proved correct does not diminish the importance that women attach to being able to perceive other's pregnancies early on. As with the examples discussed in the previous chapter, being able to determine whether someone is pregnant depends on well-developed skills of *kolosi* in a context where straight-out asking will invariably produce an uninformative answer (because everybody always denies it). One of the older women I spoke to explained the issue as one of things slowly coming out in the open, quoting a proverb about the "fire of truth," so to speak, to eventually become clear:

"Yes, that goes way back. If a woman is pregnant she doesn't want everybody to know. In Mande we have a proverb: 'the fire underneath the rubbish, if it lasts long enough (n'a mena), it burns away the rubbish (a be mene—note the pun on mena/mene). It is the same with pregnancy. This is not something recent, but instead very old, since the time of our ancestors: if you are pregnant you don't tell anybody but over time it becomes very obvious."

In other words, whether or not someone is pregnant is not something that will become clear by asking about it, but is something that will be revealed in due time. In the meantime, presumably, questions of pregnancy are an ideal arena to hone one's skills in *kolosi*. Indeed, older women are considered to be particularly skilled at recognizing pregnancies in the very early stages, which suggests that this too is a matter of practice.

Obviously, observations about the timing and length of a woman's pregnancy inform further conclusions about the potential illegitimacy of the resulting child. Given the concerns about illegitimacy as permanently marking a person as less than fully human, it is not surprising that invoking their presumed skills of *kolosi* in detecting pregnancy, is a critical way in which old women can exert power over younger ones. Indeed, it is the old women of a lineage who determine whether a given child will be determined a "bastard," as was the case in the accounts about such a person whose problematic (but largely concealed) status prevented him from seeking nomination as village chief. From what I was told by other men in charge of installing a new village chief, if it had not been for the close observation on the part of the older women on the compound some 70 years

earlier, the crucial fact of this man's illegitimacy would not be known (which would in turn lead to a certain death upon being installed as village chief).

“What happened is this. When his mother married his father, she was already pregnant with somebody else's child. This makes him a “bastard” (nyamogoden). At the time, nobody noticed her pregnant stomach except the elder women who are particularly discerning in this regard. Later on they shared this information with the people of their compound so that they might know for future reference that the child was a nyamogoden.”

Yet it is not necessarily in the best interest of older women or others on the compound to be forthcoming with their observations about the length of a suspicious pregnancy. In one case I knew well, there was considerable discussion as to whether or not it was too early for the child to be born when it was, and the official story was that it had been born in the 7th month of gestation, so as to coincide with the return of the woman's husband after a year's long absence. I was very worried about the prospects of survival for such a prematurely-born child, but also greatly relieved when I saw it—it looked like a perfectly healthy newborn. In fact, I could not stop talking about how fortunate this woman was for giving birth to such a healthy baby after such a short pregnancy—until I was swiftly pulled aside by the mother's aunt, who reprimanded me sternly: *“It's full-term, ok! You need to stop talking.”* Only then did I realize the more likely scenario of the conception and (premature) birth of this particular child. I also noted how the other women on our compound in their discussions about the timing of the birth all came out on the side that “actually, a mid-rainy season pregnancy is indeed due around this time—look at [another woman], they were pregnant around the same time and she delivered, too.” For all this image management, however, other friends outside of my family later volunteered their own observations of the case.

In sum, pregnancies are a privileged site in which women pay attention to each other, although the inferences arrived at through observations of this kind might well be concealed, just like the pregnancies concerned. Older women are not the only ones interested in a woman's pregnancy, but they are considered more capable of recognizing the early signs through their long years of experience. Nevertheless, the expectant mother, too, should pay close attention to the

clues her pregnancy might present as to the future of her child. This kind of information is again unlikely to be shared, and I do not know much about how individual mothers experienced their pregnancies. Once, however, when I asked an older woman who was known to have helped many women give birth “How do you recognize if a baby will be a good child?” she made it clear that this could be observed even before the birth.

“It is a matter of paying attention [kolosi]. The mother pays attention. Since the fifth month of her pregnancy she can tell by the movements of the child, if they are on the right side, the child will be a boy, if on the left, a girl. The child is in one of those places. If a woman is very attentive, when the delivery nears, she sees the whole situation of the child. If the child will have a long life, God shows you a light, just like the light on your recording device. But if it is a child that won’t live long, it appears different, with a small light, almost black. Every child that will live for a long time moves a lot and you see a light, like on your cassette recorder. But the child that won’t live long, you don’t see the light. If you deliver such a child it just comes into the world and you recognize it won’t be worth much.”

Signs of a good wife:

outward manifestations, habit, and resemblance in the working of kolosi

The close scrutiny of women’s bodies is not restricted to the time of pregnancy, but extends to many other moments of their lives as well. When they are being considered as future spouses, women are also the objects of attention-paying practices of others—in this case, mostly men. At various points during my fieldwork, three male acquaintances of mine were looking for wives—either for themselves or on behalf of their younger brothers or sons—so I was privy to numerous aspects of the search to find a good wife. Additionally, my host in Ksm was the frequent recipient of requests to find marriage partners in his extended family to be married out, and I was often present when MLK followed up on these requests by talking to the fathers of the prospective brides, and, at a later stage, the young women themselves. Finally, my contacts with all mothers of newborns in Krs for one year, also allowed me to meet a number of recently married young women, as

did my weekly meetings with SK's rotating credit association, whose members were all young women.

Through these interactions and conversations, I learned that paying close attention to a host of details was crucial when it comes to finding a wife. Some people explicitly referred to the process of finding a suitable spouse as "a matter of paying attention" (*kolosi ko di*), as did JS, an older woman from Kll whom I will introduce more fully in the section on endogamy. In discussing marriage practices in the past and present, JS noted the importance of "paying attention" and "making observations" about the individual characteristics of a prospective bride or groom, including the individual's overall comportment and the character of his or her family. She continued:

"My father was a good observer of these things. He used to tell his children: 'go marry this one, this one is good.' Or he'd say, 'don't marry that one, that one is not good.' His sons now have the same knowledge, particularly FS."

What JS implies here is that skills of *kolosi* take on a particular salience when it comes to marriage and selecting a spouse. For JS, this skill serves to distinguish a worthwhile marriage partner of either gender, as she explicitly states later in our conversation. While it might well be the case that her father used to indicate "good husbands" as well as "good wives" for his children, in practice the notion of "paying attention" in selecting an appropriate spouse is much more commonplace in the case of women than men. That is, men speak of "going in search of a woman" or "laying eyes on a woman," not the other way around.

Even if *kolosi* is less important in women's choices of accepting someone as a husband, it is important to note that women are always consulted in the decision about their marriage, which can only be conducted when both partners agree to it. Quite a few of my friends, however, indicated that the degree of their consultation and consent was to inform them of a particular marriage prospect, to which they had simply replied that they were "in their fathers' (or master's) hands," i.e., they agreed. *Kolosi* nevertheless becomes a pivotal skill employed by young women when it comes to deciding to go through with a particular marriage. Marriage in Mande is a multi-stage process, in which a new wife first

comes to live on her husband's compound for a few months before returning back home for another few months, and returning again to the husband's compound (de Jorio 2002).

I know of more than a few cases where the marriage fell through after having been agreed upon by both partners and their families, and this at various points: before the bride even came to the husband's compound, or when she did not return after a stay with her parents. My data here are anecdotal, and there are clearly a host of reasons as to why a woman would decide not to go through with a marriage after all. In a case I knew well, however, the woman in question was quite adamant that living on her new compound had given her a chance to observe her husband up-close, and that she did not like what she saw. When I asked her how she liked her new compound, she responded by invoking the importance of *kolosi*—not just on her part, but mine as well. “Have you not been paying attention,” she sneered, “he has all kinds of girl friends!” When I said that I did not know whether that particular charge was true, she made it clear that I should really pay more attention: “Well, maybe you haven't noticed, but I sure have.” Not long after, my friend and her son went back to her parents and the marriage was eventually dissolved. Regardless of why exactly this marriage failed—and people later told me, characteristically, that they had “no idea” why the woman in question decided not to return—this example shows clearly the importance that women, too, bring to paying close attention to their (future) husbands. A woman obviously would do well to carefully observe her new husband, his family, and goings-on on their compound, which is gradually becoming her own.

* * *

The scrutiny exercised over young women on the brink of marriage takes various forms but are all understood in the larger framework of *kolosi* and premised on the understanding that paying close attention to others is the only way to achieve reliable information, as discussed previously. Just as much of the inner life of others is not accessible to us except through our careful observation through well-honed skills of paying attention, the same is true for the innate qualities of others

and their suitability as marriage partners, which only become evident to the attentive observer who is able to recognize the outward signs of these. While on the one hand people maintain that knowledge about others' qualities as spouses and the success of a proposed marriage is almost impossible to attain, there are a host of "little signs" that can be used by attentive observers to predict certain aspects of others' future success at marriage and inform the selection process. In line with how *kolosi* is supposed to involve acquired knowledge that is fundamentally experience-based, what are taken as outward signs for particular internal qualities differs from place to place and person to person. Similarly, there is an unequal distribution of this kind of knowledge based on situational and individual factors that make some people (such as JS' father in the quote above) more versed in inferring the qualities of women from their bodily signs.

Moreover, this domain of specialized knowledge related to *kolosi* is marred by consistent insecurity as to what can be known in this matter and how, as well as more recent questions about whether the "little signs" are still relevant and what the risks are of ignoring them. In this section, I focus on the "little signs" revealed in the bodies and actions of women and small children, as they serve to elucidate some of the ways in which "paying attention" is locally understood to work. The subsequent section takes up the discourses of the decline of endogamy as a prime arena of "what not to pay attention to" in the context of marriage and social relations, but it is understood that some people similarly consider the "little signs" discussed in this section outdated or misguided.

Let's start with JS' father and brother, who were said to be particularly skilled at "paying attention" and gauge how "good" or "bad" particular people would be as spouses for their children. What these men were so skillfully observing in fact were the bodily signs that are considered to be outward manifestations of a characteristic called *tèrè* ("destiny"). *Tèrè* is not a word that comes up much in day-to-day conversation. When I first heard the term, in a conversation between my host in Ksm and a friend of his, I had to ask them what it meant. My host seemed somewhat embarrassed that I should have overheard a word that referred to such things that I as a young European woman would probably not un-

derstand. His friend (KT), however—the father of one of my closest female friends—did not seem to share these reservations, and went on to try and explain what *tèrè* was:

“It is something that both humans and animals have; it can be either good or bad. In animals, cattle, it is something that can be observed, but not in the same way that slaughtering an animal turns up its stomach or heart; rather, it can be inferred, from an animal’s behavior, or its coloring, or maybe even its entrails upon having been slaughtered. For some animals, when you kill them, their tèrè is not compatible with you and you will be hit by the animal’s nyama (“force”). Because of their tèrè you can’t kill these animals. But if you still do so, you will pay the price.”

KT’s explanation focused mostly on animals,⁴ except to note that humans, too, have *tèrè*. Yet in the conversation I had been following, KT and my host had not been talking about animals, but women. When I asked him about that, KT said that the worst sort of *tèrè* was the “bad *tèrè* that some women have” (*muso tèrè jugu*), which entails that the woman in question will endure the loss of three successive husbands. (This apparently had been the case with the woman they were gossiping about.)

“There are women whose tèrè is bad. This means that the man who marries her will die, as will the second husband, and the third. She’ll only die in the marriage to her fourth husband, after she has seen her first three husbands die before her.”

As I would learn from other interlocutors, *tèrè* is not restricted to (some) humans and animals either, but includes other kinds of beings also, especially (some) trees.⁵ In all cases, the *tèrè* associated with a being of any kind is somehow “special” or “incompatible” and results in negative consequences (i.e., death) for the person who ignores the (special character of) *tèrè*.⁶ Rather than elucidating the nature of *tèrè*, here I want to focus on how people determine that this dangerous substantive quality inheres in someone (or some animal, or some tree). As JS, KT, and BC imply, *tèrè* is something that can be inferred, by those that know what to look for, from certain outward signs. In trees, these signs might be a particular formation of the trunk, combined with the knowledge of the specific kinds of trees where it is most likely for *tèrè* to inhere. In animals, KT points to their behavior and coloring as readily observable (but not necessarily easily interpretable) signs, while their entrails might provide post factum corroboration.

In women, their *tèrè* also is supposed to be inferable from their bodies, particularly when it comes to the “bad *tèrè* some women have” that makes their first three husbands die. The two characteristics that I was told most frequently about in this respect—flat feet and an unusually long neck—are indicative of the kind of specific, and from my perspective rather “unfair” criteria my male friends were looking for. Yet the consensus on flat feet and long necks as “bad signs” should not lure us into thinking that the workings of *kolosi* gives way to a fixed reservoir of “cultural knowledge,” as an earlier generation of anthropologists might have supposed. Some of them undoubtedly are quite fixed and over-determined, such as the fact that a girl who puts her left foot first when entering a room is considered to bring bad luck, while she who puts her right foot first will bring good luck. However, when it comes to the signs of good and bad *tèrè* in future wives, the indicators that people look for and the inferences they make also allow for the possibility of idiosyncrasy. This, in turn, should not be surprising given the considerable creativity and fluidity of *kolosi*.

The following example of the “search for a wife” of my friend MK makes clear the room for individual, regional or other kinds of difference in what counts as a sign. MK, with whom I frequently discussed the Maninka language, started looking for a wife towards the end of my fieldwork, after his previous wife had died. Over the next few months, he frequently wanted to update me on his search, which consisted of him and his friend and age-mate going to “lay our eyes on” a particular girl.⁷ In this context, I once asked him to explain what some of the signs of a “good” and “bad” women were that he and his friend looked for. (Besides MK and myself, the friend with whom he traveled “in search of a wife” as well as another friend of ours were also present during this conversation, which took place at MK’s compound). “One thing is if her footprint is all filled out, and there is not the empty space between the back and front [i.e., if the woman is flat-footed], that is a bad sign,” MK said, picking out one of the more senseless indicators as far as I was concerned. But as much as the particular indicator seemed outlandish to me, I was not overly surprised by it either. After all, I had long know that a woman with a long neck is not a good choice either, “because she can

look straight into her husband's grave," nor is one who walks with her hands facing backwards, for "she will cause all the wealth and luck to disappear from the household" (by contrast to someone who walks with her hands facing forwards, because she will bring in wealth and luck). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the conversation, then, was that MK considered my suggestion about the way a woman holds her arms entirely laughable—"where did you hear that? Do they say that in the mountains?" he asked. On the other hand, his friend VB remarked that he, too, had heard something similar.

Whatever the specific form—and I have argued that there is considerable room for regional, individual, or other kinds of specificity here—the innate, bodily signs that women presumably present share in common that they are supposed to be outward manifestations of internal, probably inherited qualities. Insofar as these qualities have to do with the propensity for seeing one's first three husbands die, they can be considered manifestations of *tèrè*. In other cases, they refer to other qualities, such as that of generosity or stinginess in the case of how one's hands are positioned when walking. What more can be said about such outward signs indicating if someone would make a good wife or not? I suggest that two categories of signs, which I call "habitual signs" and "resemblance signs" are singled out as particularly meaningful in the context of marriage. Taken together, these two, partly overlapping, kinds of signs illuminate some of the local ways in which the process of paying attention is supposed to work in practical terms.

"Resemblance signs" are things that are taken as signs because of what they resemble, and as such are comparable to what Peirce called icons, "which serve to represent their objects only in so far as they resemble them in themselves" (Peirce 1998[1909]:461). What MK called *mogonorojugu* ("a person with bad *noro*") is an example of things that are taken as signs because of what they resemble. A *mogonorojugu* is the opposite of a *mogogerejegema*: while the latter kind of person will bring prosperity and good luck to a household, the former will only bring the opposite. MK explained the concept of *mogonorojuguya* or "being a person who brings no good" as follows,

“It means that somebody is doing something that is bad because it evokes something you do when something bad has actually happened. For example, putting your hands on your head. Because if your parents or siblings were to die, you would put your hands on your head in despair. So putting your hands on your head like that means that somebody like a parent or a sibling will die.”

There are a number of bodily stances like this that are reminiscent of specific negative occasions, such as death, so that they should be avoided in ordinary life. Children or anthropologists alike are scolded for comporting their bodies in such problematic ways and reminded to “take your hands from your head.” On one occasion, I was trying to pour sauce over the meal when I was not positioned quite right to do so properly, because of a squirmy toddler on my lap, so I ended up pouring the sauce with my hand bent backwards. My friend immediately stopped me: “do not ever pour like that. That is how you pour the water when washing a corpse.”

Small children, in particular, are also frequently considered to exhibit “resemblance signs” through their actions. Thus, whenever our 3-year-old daughter (or one of her age-mates) would try and sweep the courtyard, someone would draw attention to it and explain, “have you noticed that she is sweeping? That means a guest is coming.” Or on the occasions when she insisted on tying a stuffed animal on her back, like she saw women do all around her, my friends interpreted this as a sure sign that I was pregnant. Both the sweeping and the carrying of a pretend baby signify future events through the child’s carrying out actions that resemble those their elders will do in the event that an actual stranger will come, or a new baby is born. Interestingly, the anthropologist Paul Riesman noted the exact same examples of the significant small acts children are thought to carry out in his work with Fulani in Burkina Faso. Quoting the examples of sweeping the courtyard, carrying a pretend baby, as well as handing someone a straw, a handful of dirt, or looking over the shoulder, he notes,

Certain small acts of children have special significance. They are like signs for grown-ups to read. Perhaps this is another reason why parents interfere so little with what children do prior to reaching the age of reason. (Riesman 1992:172)

Some of the actions carried out as part of infant care, especially in the crucial first weeks, also resemble the outcomes they hope to refer to. On the occasion of the first hair shaving (cf. Chapters 2 and 4), the way some of these quotidian acts are carried out is considered especially significant. Bathing the infant is a good example. When the baby is washed as part of the hair shaving, the older woman who does so takes great care to bend its arms all the way to the back, where she has both arms trace a path up and down the infant's back. Washing the baby in such away, bending its arms to the back, I was told, is "good." A few women explained, "We do it so that when he or she has become an old person, he or she can still reach there, and wash his or her own back." Younger women, particularly the infants' mothers, frequently told me they did not like washing the baby themselves in this way, for fear of accidentally breaking its limbs; older women are considered to be much less softhearted about this. Additionally, one could speculate that being carried out by an older woman—who has already achieved the state the bath points to—makes the significance of the bathing as a future-oriented sign more pronounced.

"Habitual signs" refer to things or actions that are taken as a sign because of the presumed relation between what a person does at any particular instant and what he or she does habitually or regularly. These signs, too, are a kind of likeness or icons, linking significant actions in the present with both the past and the present. Whatever the person is doing at the moment of being observed is considered to be indicative of what he or she habitually does, and thus, what he or she is really like. Because the intentions and character of others remain largely opaque, the notion of habitual signs that can be used to make inference about a person's likely future actions carries great social value. Habitual signs, which equate what a person is doing at a particular moment, are understood as indicating what he or she will continue to do in the future, as one's spouse. Habitual signs, then, form a connection between past, present, and future, by allowing inferences about what someone is really like.

The clearest example of this in the case of "searching for a wife" is that her industriousness (or lack thereof) can be inferred from whatever it is that she is

doing at the time you happen to lay eyes on her. A girl's relative industriousness, in turn, is taken as a gauge for her overall good character as a wife, the capability to do housework being understood as a main task of a wife.⁸ This was an important point for my friend VC, who was looking for a wife for his younger brother when we worked together traveling to various other villages where *finaw* ("griots") lived. Our traveling together provided him a nice opportunity to "lay eyes" (*nye lo*) on a number of potential marriage partners for his brother. When I asked him, too, what he was looking for, he responded that two things are important: a woman's family and her character, as exemplified by the habitual sign of her actions at the moment you see her.

"The first thing, when you are looking for a wife, is to observe her father and mother. If both of these are "good people" (mogo nyuman) you are fine, but if either one of them is not, you might have a problem on your hand. And if both parents "aren't good people" (n'o mogow fila te son), then it's impossible for the marriage to work out. Then you have to refuse to marry her, because you will not be able to keep her. "She cannot be kept [in check]" (a te se marala). With only one not-so-good parent it might still be possible to marry her if you are strong and strict, but definitely not if there's a problem with the both of them. Second, if you have come to a compound to find a wife, you should marry the one who is working. She is good. The one who is sitting is bad. You look at what she is doing: if she is fighting—don't marry her. She will always be fighting with you. If she is sitting and chatting—don't marry her; marry the one who is working."

While stressing the importance of paying attention in his own search for a wife, VC simultaneously criticized the fact that many men his age and younger were not as carefully attentive: "Of course the big problem these days is that men do not take the time to investigate the girl's parents. They start right away by getting the girl pregnant and then end up marrying her."⁹

The notion that when it comes to finding a good wife it is important to pay attention to what her parents are like, is mirrored in the notion that when one seeks to have good children, the most important step one can take is ensuring that one marries a good mother. This latter concept was amply illustrated, again, by Paul Riesman in his study of Fulani (and their former RiimaayBe slaves) in Burkina Faso (1992). The Fulani injunction to "find yourself a good mother" would imply that the parents' character says a lot about that of the child's, as VC's

words also imply. Yet Riesman makes clear that this is not because of a notion that “good” parents will produce “good” children through the quality of the education they provide. Instead, a child’s personality is either believed to be directly transmitted from the mother through her milk, or given by God—making the quality of “early childhood education” irrelevant either way. In Mande too, God grants the child certain immutable characteristics, yet the observed character of a person’s parents weighs as much if not more than that of the person herself.

In sum, the injunction to pay attention to oneself and others crucially extends to the process of selecting a suitable marriage partner. Time and again, people talked about this process as a prime locus for the exercise of *kolosi*. Yet there are limits to its relevance. In the Fulani case Riesman describes, he ultimately concludes that the most important characteristic of a potential bride—making her a “good mother”—is her caste/lineage background. However, precisely this characteristic has become dramatically less relevant in Mande in the past decade. In fact, marriage networks based on “caste” endogamy that characterize people’s memories of the recent and deep past are being reconfigured as different considerations of what makes a good marriage partner take root. In the process, the caste/lineage background of a prospective spouse is rapidly becoming something *not* to pay attention to.

THE END OF ENDOGAMY

The second half of this chapter addresses the varied experiences of the “end of endogamy” in the two main sites of my fieldwork as an example of the kinds of things no longer considered worthy of attention. The question of what is worth paying attention to was never far from people’s minds, especially in regards to objects and practices associated with Mande’s “traditional” past. By “traditional” I mean the practices that people in Mande imagine to have characterized their past; I am more interested in these representations of the past than in establishing or discrediting the authenticity of such claims. A key concern in people’s assessment of the continued significance of traditionally recognized signs is their rela-

tion with Islam. Endogamy is no exception, and stories about its demise often recognize the rise of stricter interpretations of Islam as an important factor.

Over a relatively short time period of ten years, between my first fieldwork in Mali and now, I have witnessed radical and rapid changes in regards to attitudes about *siya*, particularly in regards to marriage. These changes are not uniform, however, but differ among villages and among families within a single village, as will be clear from the accounts about this experience in Krs and Ksm respectively. Thus, my discussion points to the historic and geographic specificity of processes such as the decline of caste endogamy, even if the general direction of change is clear. From as early as the 1960s in some villages and much more recently in others, endogamy practices whereby people married within their own *siya* are no longer the default option that they were previously.

In this regard, the transformation in my friend DK's views on the possibility of his politically powerful family agreeing to the marriage with a *nyamakala* ("artisan") is illustrative. When I did fieldwork in Nrn in 1999-2000, a girl on DK's compound had recently given birth to a baby fathered by a young man from the *numu* compound where I lived. The couple had wanted to marry, but was forbidden to do so by the fathers on both sides of the "caste divide." Speaking eloquently about the *horon* status of his family, my friend DK assured me in no uncertain terms that his family would never allow one of their daughters to marry into a *numu* compound or agree to take a non-*horon* girl in marriage. His strong response stayed with me, because even at the time some other young *numuw* from the compound where I lived (and where the girl's suitor was from) *had* been able to marry *horon* women. For his part, LC, the *numu* patriarch and my host father in town, was also firmly against one of his sons marrying a girl from the family that had traditionally been their *jatigiw* ("patrons," or "hosts"). Both LC and DK were indeed very clear that the fact that the relationship had even gotten this far, resulting in the birth of a child, was in itself an indication of how much things had changed, as something like this would never have happened in the past. As it was, the families drew the line at marriage; even if they had not been able to pre-

vent the pregnancy, they were able to prevent the marriage, despite the objections of the couple.¹⁰

Almost ten years later, DK's stance on caste endogamy was radically different. When I met his new (second) wife in 2007—someone, no less, whom his family selected for him—I was surprised to learn that she was a griot (*jeli*) by birth. When I asked him to compare his previous stance with how he sees his things now, DK just smiled and said his own marriage is just evidence that “things change.” Indeed, more and more families are allowing their daughters to marry into compounds where they would not have been married in the past, sometimes just a few years ago, as in DK's case. And like DK, many people talk about the waning importance of considerations of caste in determining the suitability of a marriage partner in terms of the inevitability of change.

As an anthropologist I fully suspected that the practice of endogamy, while openly denounced, might have transformed into something else, so that exclusionary marriage preferences continued to shape relatedness, except in a different “guise.” For example, it could be that marriages that would have been objected to in the past on the grounds that “our family does not marry *nyamakalaw*,” like the one refused by DK's family, would now be refused under the guise that “their family are not good Muslims.” That is, it could be that only the discourse about endogamy had changed, but not the actual practice of restricting marriage to certain families to the exclusion of others, based on some of the latter's inherited characteristics. However, despite my predisposition to find endogamy still going on “in disguise,” this proved not to be the case, except in the case of *finaw* (one of two categories of griots).

The continued endogamy prescribed for *finaw* (“griots”) is the clearest illustration that “the end of endogamy” is neither complete nor uncontested. *Finaw* form the sole category of *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”) who continue to marry exclusively amongst themselves and to be shunned as marriage (or sexual) partners by all other social categories. I was reminded of this when spoke with my friends DK and BK in Bko in the summer of 2009. Because I would not have time to travel to Nrn, I had asked DK to meet me on the compound of BK, an ambitious

young Keita who had lived in the capital his entire life, and someone who prided himself on his cosmopolitan outlook in terms of politics, development, fashion, and religion. So I found it remarkable when in the course of the afternoon the two men came to talk about the continued un-marriageability of *finamusow* (female *finaw*, or griots). BK had just recounted his favorite story of how he had managed to marry his decidedly beautiful wife despite the objections of his family, who had pressured him to marry someone else. From there, he started to talk about the prettiest women of all, and whether DK had noticed (*kolosi*) that these were always *finaw*? DK had indeed noticed this, and mentioned how someone he knew had almost married a *finamuso*, so enchanted had he been with her looks—but of course, nothing had come of it. BK also had a story about someone wanting to marry a *finamuso*, and things not ending well. They ended up agreeing about the fundamental “forbidden fruit” quality of *finamusow*, who were the most beautiful of women yet whom one could not take for a wife.

Both the seemingly unproblematic shift in DK’s and his family’s stance towards (not) marrying *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”) as well as his and BK’s naturalizing understanding of *finaw* as fundamentally un-marriageable need explanation. In this chapter, I provide an account of both these issues in terms of *kolosi* to suggest what local theories of perception can tell us about memory and erasure, as well as the cultural bases of experience. In the following sections, I first establish the prevalence of caste endogamy in the past and the waxing and waning concern with its abolishment since independence. Then I move to representations of the past in local discourses that juxtapose a historical practice of endogamy with its decline in the recent past (in Krs) or the present (in Ksm), before addressing some of the continued complexities and enforced silences in contemporary discourses and practices of marriage.

Parallel developments: caste distinctions, politics, and marriage on the national scene, from Independence till the present

The re-conceptualization of kinship as relatedness, touched upon in Chapter 1, involved a new appreciation of the central importance of quotidian practices of do-

mesticity, commensality, and bodily care in the creation, reworking, and un-doing of social bonds. This attention to the small details and little acts involved in becoming kin was not just motivated by a desire for better descriptions of what kinship is all about in different cultural contexts. In many cases, it was also an argument for the political relevance of seemingly inconsequential practices going on in the intimate contexts of family life and often involving women and children. In this sense, re-thinking kinship as relatedness was meant to undo the false distinction between the anthropological *topoi* of “kinship”—encompassing lineage and descent as forms of political organization—and the “family”—dealing with women, children, and the intimate life of domesticity (Carsten 2000). The entanglement of every-day practices of generation and sustenance entailed in relatedness with the constraints and possibilities of socio-political realities on a global scale has a particular relevance for the topic of caste endogamy.

Anthropologists such as Meillassoux (1981) have long pointed out the power afforded by control over marriage. According to this argument, in agricultural societies it is the power of male elders over marriage that ensures their power over women and younger men, and thus their continued control over the productive process and other key aspects of social life. This model—based in part on ethnographic research in Mali—continues to resonate with important themes and tensions of sociality in Mali. Writing about another cluster of Mande villages, Wooten notes the “very important ‘small change’” of social juniors trying to establish themselves more forcefully in the marriage process, which he speculates might ultimately result in important transformation of the position of local elders (2009:97).

My focus in this chapter is different, addressing instead some of the intricacies involved in the representation of endogamy as a quintessential “traditional” practice, of which the past rationale is systematically forgotten. This particular focus allows me to analyze one of the theoretical questions at the heart of the dissertation, namely, how the creative inference of making sense of signs creates “former signs” of practices that used to be considered significant yet are ada-

manly denied this significance in the present. The political ramifications of such processes, I would argue, might be less obvious, but no less important.

* * *

The status of caste in the political arena from independence in 1960 to the establishment of policies of decentralization at the present moment forms an instructive parallel to the waning importance of considerations of caste in marriage. As in the case of caste endogamy, the recent history of the relevance of caste in the political arena is characterized by considerable inter-village differences in the continued exclusion from power of people of certain caste (or slave) backgrounds. Indeed, besides marriage, another key site for the relevance of caste distinctions used to be—and on occasion continues to be—political organization, particularly on the village level. Specifically, *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”) were prevented from holding positions of political power such as village chief, as were descendents of slaves (*jonw*). (Women of any category, too, were traditionally excluded, from holding the position of village chief, if not other positions of authority in gender-specific associative structures.)

The politics of Mali’s first post-Independence, socialist government [1960-8] under Modibo Keita included an ideological emphasis on equality, which in principle is antithetical to the hierarchical nature of Mande *siyaw* and the principled exclusion of certain categories of people from political power. Yet the political aspects of equality seem to have been less important to the Keita government than the economic (Snyder 1967:81). This should not be surprising in light of the neo-traditional values that were enthusiastically embraced by Keita and his government, not least Keita’s status as a lineal descendant of Sunjata and the ambitions of the new state to reclaim the glory of the former Empire (cf. Chapter 3). In contemporary documents, Keita is quoted as defining the ideal of socialist equality in decidedly economic terms as opposed to more explicitly political ones. Equality at its core, for Keita, is a situation “where there will be no unemployed, there will be no multi-millionaires, [and] where there will be no

beggars, and where everyone will eat when he [or she] is hungry” (Modibo Keita, cited by Grundy 1964:193).

The socialist government seems to have been not very interested in actively working against the disenfranchisement of people of *nyamakala* or slave descent. Contemporary and later authors have noted that among the various countries espousing “African socialism” after independence, Mali espoused classical Marxism more closely than many of its neighbors (Grundy 1964, Snyder 1967, Jones 1976, Francois 1982). Yet these authors also stress that, despite its intellectual debt to the Marxist-Leninist tradition, the political thought of Modibo Keita and his government parted way with Marxist orthodoxy in some significant aspects. In classic Marxist fashion, Keita stressed historical evolution, associated with distinct stages, and moved forward by moments of progressive action in response to certain basic contradictions that become inevitable. But where for Marxists the basic contradiction is one of opposing classes, between those who control the means of production and those whose labor is exploited, Keita and his government envisioned the contradiction as pitting European colonial powers against African peoples (Snyder 1967:82). Whether Keita and his allies downplayed the role of an indigenous exploitive class for Mali’s “underdevelopment” at the eve of Independence because doing so served their own class interests (Francois 1982) or because there was no meaningful “exploiting class” at the time (Grundy 1964) is debated. However this might be, it is clear that Keita’s socialism focused primarily on the negative consequences of colonialism as the cause of Mali’s exploitation, and sought to valorize pre-colonial institutions as a way of undoing the damages of colonial rule. As a matter of cultural policy, this was manifested in a clear reaching back to pre-colonial traditions such as those associated with Sunjata and the Mande area, as discussed earlier. Contrary to the efforts of Seku Toure in neighboring Guinea (and also socialist) to destroy “problematic” aspects of “traditional society,” the Malian government was more inclined to uphold “traditional society” as predominantly positive (Grundy 1964).

It is clear that the goal of “social reform”—improving the position of formerly disenfranchised groups—was the one that was least accomplished over the

eight years of socialism. In an article taking stock of the legacy of Malian socialism that appeared one year after the military coup, Hopkins details three main areas in which the socialist government sought to effect social change: political organization and participation, economic organization, and “social changes involving marriage and the position of certain traditional groups of inferior or ambiguous status” (Hopkins 1969:462). According to Hopkins’ account of the socialist legacy in Mali’s rural areas,¹¹ it is precisely this latter respect in which government “efforts have been unsuccessful so far” (Hopkins 1969:462). The government was only slightly more successful in its political goal. On the one hand, Hopkins notes that an enduring legacy of socialism in the Keita area was the creation of new political institutions in the form of village councils (created in 1959) and village party committees (in 1962, but coalesced with the village councils in 1967) (Hopkins 1969:467). On the other hand, these institutions were not exactly new, and even in the respects that they were, they owed much of their eventual success to the fact that they could easily be put to “traditional” uses (Hopkins 1969:462 and 467).

To the extent that opening up the political arena to formerly disenfranchised groups was a government priority, this goal failed almost entirely. A telling indication of this is that when popular elections were held for village heads and village councils, “this changed nothing”, according to Jones. He continues, “Villagers elected by universal suffrage the [“nobles”] with the traditional right to be [village chief] and the sublineage heads with a traditional right to be represented on the [traditional village council]” (Jones 1976:289). For Mande specifically, a contemporary study after the elections revealed that of 38 villages surveyed, popular elections had confirmed the traditional chief in power in 33 cases (Leynaud 1962, cited in Jones 1976:289). Of the remaining 5 villages, there was room for dispute about whom within the founding lineage should hold the traditional chieftaincy to begin with and/or villagers “were disposing (or believed they were) an imposter line imposed by the French” (Jones 1976:289). These numbers mean that non-“noble” lineages, such as those of artisans, former slaves, and strangers, remained excluded from the political domain. The same was true for

women, at least in the rural areas. Speaking specifically about Mande again, Jones notes that party efforts aimed at the political organization of women were also disappointing and that “women’s organizations were non-existent or non-effective” (Jones 1976:288).

Another key task for the Keita government was to create a constitution and various new laws for the newly independent nation. The legislation that is of most interest for my purposes is the Family Law as codified in 1962. As described by Schulz (2003), this legislation bears the clear marks of the secular, modernizing aspirations of the first post-Independence government. However, the more progressive articles—regulating such things as consent to marriage, the minimum age for marriage, and the maximum bride price—were largely disregarded, especially in rural areas, and adherence to them was not enforced (Schulz 2003:141). In many respects, this remains true for rural places like Krs and Ksm to this day. For example, of all the marriages I witnessed over the years, only one was registered officially with a local government official, even if doing so has been required by law since the Family Act of 1962. On the other hand, people were quite adamant that nowadays, a girl was asked to consent (not necessarily freely) to marriage—although this was considered an Islamic obligation, not a secular-legal one.

The dearth of scholarship about the period 1968-1991, when Mali suffered through twenty-plus years of military rule, prevents me from addressing either the role of caste distinctions in the political arena or the legal context for marriage. With the overthrow of the military regime in 1991 and the transition to democracy after the 1992 elections, those issues again come to the fore. The democratic government of Alpha Oumar Konare was committed to build up political participation and organization, both of which had been harshly repressed during the years of dictatorship. Part of these attempts was aimed at opening of political office to previously excluded categories, such as women, *nyamakalaw*, and descendents of slaves. The overall framework for political reform was “decentralization,” which was implemented incrementally from 1993 onwards, with a new phase beginning in 2002. Social scientists of a broad spectrum of disciplinary backgrounds have

taken a keen interest in this process from the beginning, and have analyzed the successes, shortcomings, and tensions of the ambitious project of decentralization (Fay, Y. F. Kone, and Quiminal 2006; Fay 2006; Amselle 2006; Bérédogo 2006; Y. F. Kone 2002; Seydou Camara 2002, 2006; Kassibo 2006; Diarra et al. 2004; Benjaminsen 1997; Hagberg 2009). I will have more to say about this in Chapter 7. Here, I want to continue my narrative of the course of caste distinctions as a political factor.

Writing specifically about two clusters of villages in Mande, the historian Seydou Camara notes that the process of decentralization has certainly opened up new avenues for formerly excluded categories of people—by which he means artisans, descendants of slaves, and youngsters. Not all of these changes, however, can be attributed to decentralization, and are as much part of imaginations of modernity that have gradually taken root in the region since colonialism (2006:161). At the same time, the greater openness towards the participation of formerly disenfranchised groups is neither complete nor uncontested; descendants of slaves, in particular, continue to experience difficulty in achieving political prominence in Mande (Seydou Camara 2004).

In contrast to Camara's narrative of the slow but steady process of (political) modernization as the gradual incorporation of "Western" ideals such as equality, Schulz (2003) presents a picture of growing importance of Islam in the discursive space of Malian politics since the democratic turn. According to Schulz, the use of "Islam" as a distinctive category of argumentation is particularly clear in relation to the project to reform of Mali's Family Law, which was initiated in 1999. The general picture that emerges from Schulz's discussion is that of the proposed reforms undermining the legal and factual basis of kinship-based structures of authority. Yet while the legislation would legislate a decrease in power of older men in favor of younger ones, the effects for women are less clear-cut. Indeed, the women right's groups closely involved with the legislation reform process faced serious opposition from a diverse spectrum of male-dominated groups, loosely allied with Muslim organizations including both men and women. More than ten years into the process, successive governments have

not yet succeeded in passing the new legislation. Massive protests in Bamako against the proposed reforms by a loose coalition of Muslim organizations forced the government to table the issue in late 2009.

Economic factors were also important for the processes described by Schulz and Camara (along with other scholars). Decentralization was heavily favored by international donors, who saw it as a way to trim the costs of Mali's top-heavy government and, even more importantly, a kind of opening up of the country-side to local-level development opportunities (Amselle 2006, Fay 2006, Hagberg 2009). Concurrent with the political project of decentralization, neo-liberal economic policies were instituted as well, as part of the Structural Adjustment programs imposed on Mali since the early 1990. At the time, Mali's economic situation has deteriorated tremendously, partly due to the large droughts in the region in the mid-1980s and the impacts of a global economic recession. During this period, Mali's (shared) currency, the *franc CFA*, was devaluated by 50%—causing severe hardship for many rural villagers, which is still well remembered by middle-aged men and women. In response to these deteriorating circumstances, more young men took up labor migration and/or the cultivation of garden crops for additional income (Wooten 2009). In Mande, young men who had achieved comparative wealth (by local standards) through new economic activities were particularly attracted to the newly created positions of power in decentralized local government structures. The new political structures in part developed as parallels, or indeed alternatives, for the older political hierarchy based on age and descent, from which young men remained largely excluded (Camara 2006). However, over time young men's greater access to money made them more able to finance their own bride price, and hence less dependent on their elders (Schulz 2003).

In sum, the political ramifications of caste distinctions and the institution of marriage both have seen gradual rather than abrupt changes since 1960. The demise of caste endogamy inscribes itself in this larger political-economic and legal context, and the “end of endogamy” is largely in line with the general direc-

tion of change. Yet the way this change was experienced, debated, and made significant locally has not been sufficiently explored.

“In the past, blacksmiths used to marry potters”: the past of caste endogamy

A conversation I had with JS—whose praise for her father’s attentiveness to the signs of good spouses was noted above—forms a good place to start addressing the lived experience of the demise of caste endogamy as it is currently being felt and critically assessed in Ksm. “In the past, blacksmiths used to marry potters; if it were not for that, I would never have been married here,” JS told me one day when we were sitting in her room in the village of Ksm, where I had by that time spent a few weeks after several months in Krs. JS liked talking to me about her life, because we knew many people in common—for example, one of my closest friend’s in Krs is JS’s classificatory daughter. JS is originally from Kll, on the other side of the river and only a few miles from Krs. In this conversation, she was telling me about her life, how she ended up in Ksm, and reflecting on the relative extraordinariness of having been married “across the river” (*bako*). Comparing her own marital history with a keen observation about the current changes in marriage preferences and patterns, she concluded that if it were not for the prescription of endogamy within the blacksmith/potter (*numu*) category, she would not have ended up married so far from home, relatively speaking.

Indeed, Krs/Kll, on the east bank of the river, and Dnk/Ksm on the west, often seem far removed from each other. Even though the distance between the village where JS was born and the one where she was married is not far as the crow flies, the fact that one has to cross the Niger River makes the trip between them arduous. Thus there is not a lot of contact between the two villages. Most people from the one village would not have much business in the other, as neither of them has a big weekly market nor serves another regional function in terms of health care or schooling. Moreover, there are bigger towns on each side of the river, where people go for the weekly market, or for medical, educational and government services. For most people in both Krs and Ksm, then, there is no

need to go to the other village, and there are not many personal relations between individuals from the two places.

The exception to this lack of contact between Krs and Ksm, however, are the *numu* (“blacksmith/potter”) families who were my principal hosts in both places. As JS pointed out in the quote above, the practice of endogamy (at least until recently) ensured that blacksmiths and potters moved between the two villages much more frequently than others because of the “marriage roads” between the *numu* lineages in both places. Talking about her personal experience, JS noted how not only was she herself married “across the river” in Ksm, so too were a number of younger cousins after her. In the other direction, for example, KK on the compound I used to live on in Krs is the elder sister of my host MK in Ksm. By contrast, very few of the non-*numu* wives in Ksm (who are married into the Cm lineage) have come from “across the river.”

It is important to note that JS’s words, spoken in Ksm, address a situation where the end of endogamy for *numuw* blacksmiths and other *nyamakalaw* artisans is a recent phenomenon. In JS’s current village of Ksm changing marriage practices is indeed very much a present concern, and something JS, a perceptive older woman, liked to speculate about in terms of its consequences and reasons. The recent change towards non-endogamous marriages in Ksm in only the last few years contrasts with the situation in Krs, where these marriages have been practiced for at least two generations and have become so common as to be utterly unremarkable (see below).

A further point in JS’s assessment of the past practice of caste endogamy is that it resulted in particular geographic patterns where *numumusow* (potters) like her ended up being married far from home. In JS’s view, the reason she has been married outside of her native Kll—and quite far outside it, too—is because of endogamy. Endogamy is what leads to *numumusow* being married away from home. Just how extended, and dense, the marriage networks linking *numu* families are became clear to me when I attended the funerary rites for SS, the recently deceased senior blacksmith of Bld. While I had never been to Bld—about a 3-hour cart-ride away from Krs—before, I realized quickly that I knew many people

in the large network of *numuw* brought together by this death, and that I could easily trace the ways I was related to those I did not know personally. As a pleasant surprise, I also unexpectedly reconnected with my first host and original “namesake” (*ntoma*) from Sb—also about 3 hours away from Bld—whom I had not seen in almost four years. As it turned out, SS had been the spouse of the younger sister of my namesake’s (now deceased) co-wife (MK, whom I had also known well). From the perspective of the people making up Krs funeral delegation, SS was, first of all, the father of the spouse of KK’s son, while he was also related, more distantly, to some of the S women married on our compound. More than any other occasion, then, funerals such as this one brought home to me the multitude of marriage linkages tying together Mande’s *numu* families over a large geographic region.¹²

Finally, JS’s intuition that nowadays more women will end up married in or closer to their home village because of the decline in endogamy resonates in interesting ways with larger discourses about contemporary marriage practices. Her remark about wives marrying closer to home implies that these women are now marrying their neighbors (*siginyogon*). Indeed, people I knew in Krs and other villages often talked about the demise of endogamy in terms of a change in marriage practices from “marrying one’s maternal relatives” (*balimafuru*) to “marrying one’s neighbor” (*siginyogo furu*) or “marrying each other” (*nyogofuru*). This terminology would suggest that nowadays geographic proximity and shared social experiences tied to a place is a more important consideration for deciding whom to marry than are linkages established between families through previous marriages. I come back to this point in the next section.

* * *

JS was by no means the only one to describe for me a more or less clearly defined “past” (*folon*) in which caste endogamy had been the norm. In fact, most people I talked to about the past practice of caste endogamy presented their understanding of it by way of contrast with the present. “In the past, *numuw* would marry *numuw*, *finaw* would marry *finaw*, *jeliw* would marry *jeliw*, and *tontigiw* would

marry *tontigiw*,” people would tell me time and again. While statements such as this might sound entirely too categorical to contemporary anthropologists and historians, the point here is not to argue for the accuracy of such statements as factual representations of the past.¹³ Rather, I consider it significant that the past is represented as structured by a practice that many people now consider to have been problematic all along.

“We have become neighbors now”:

neighborliness, familiarity, and becoming the same

People in Krs claim that endogamy ceased to be important in their village “a long time ago” (*a mena*, “it has been a (long) while”) and insist that one would be hard-pressed to find a *lu* where there were not numerous “cross-caste” marriages. Indeed, the ca. 30 marriages I recorded (and at least partly attended) in Krs in 2005-6, reveal a broad spectrum of possible marriages, with *numu* women marrying into the founding/ruling Keita families, *numu* men taking non-*numu* wives, and all major sub-lineages in town marrying all others, including those of slave descent. (The one exception being the *finaw* as will be discussed below.) On the *numu* compound where I lived, about half of the current “wives” are *Maninkamuw*, the term *numu* use for non-*numuw*. Similarly, there is not a Keita compound to be found where there are not some *nyamakala* women who have married into the family.

An intriguing story about the end of endogamy in Krs was told to me by the imam (later also village chief) MK. According to him, endogamy had not been practiced in Krs since the early 1960s, when a previous village chief effectively decreed its abolishment. The timing of this event is particularly suggestive, as it coincides with the presidency of Modibo Keita. As outlined above, change in marriage practices was one of the goals of Keita’s political program, albeit not a very central or successful one. Nevertheless, the explication of the obsolete nature of endogamy MK puts in the mouths of one of his predecessors in the village chieftaincy seems to echo Modibo Keita’s political concerns.

“One day, the village chief—my late (classificatory) father—and all of the heads of compounds came together to discuss the issue of marriage. The village chief said that they had all been living together in Krs for a long time, they were dealing with all of their “issues” (kow) together, they—the K, D, and smiths—had all become neighbors. Because they were all neighbors, and did everything together, they were now all the same. Therefore, they should not withhold their daughters from each other, but marry amongst themselves. Everybody agreed with the dugutigi, saying that indeed they have all become neighbors. That is why from then on, everybody in Krs can marry everybody else.”

“Except for the finaw (particular category of griots)?” I ask.

“Yes, except for the finaw,” MK answers, adding, after a short pause, “and the jeliw (different category of griots), too, because there are no jeliw here.”

While MK’s story seems apocryphal—indeed, none of the other elders I asked about this “decree” remembered any such thing—it is interesting for the connection it makes between neighborliness/being neighbors (*siginyogonya*) and the abolishment of endogamy.

In MK’s story “being neighbors” entails living together in a place for a long time, doing things together, and becoming familiar with each other. Eventually, living together as neighbors makes people “the same” (*kelen*); and when they are the same, they can no longer maintain exclusionary marriage practices between them. Even if other accounts of the decline in endogamy in Krs never mentioned an explicit decision or decree from the village chief, the sentiment expressed in MK’s story was nevertheless widely shared. Indeed, I have already noted the terminology people commonly use for the non-endogamous marriages that have become so common: *nyogonfuru* (marrying each other) or *siginyogonfuru*.

Other people I talked to about changes in marriage patterns in Krs echoed MK’s insistence on the importance of familiarity. I conducted a number of interviews with elder men and women about their family’s traditional marriage partners (*furunyogon*). One woman, who is herself a D and married into a Tr compound, listed the Tr, D, and K as her family’s *furunyogon*, adding that “these were the families in town with whom we married; there were also some strangers/recent settlers (*sigiw*) here, but you ca not marry a stranger.” Again, the

statement itself might be too absolute—there are contrary examples where strangers were able to marry local women—but the sentiment that a certain amount of familiarity or even intimacy is a precondition for marriage is notable. In a different way, JS (quoted above) also links neighborliness or familiarity with marriage. The difference here is that for JS, like MK, but unlike DT, the familiarity of being neighbors is a characteristic of current marriage partners. In the past, it was the preexisting marriage roads linking *nyamakalaw* families together (*balimaw*) that ensured this familiarity, even if the families in questions lived far away from each other. My earlier discussion about finding a good wife also indicated that familiarity is important for marriage bonds, which in turn makes marrying a “stranger” a dangerous proposition.

A final point regarding MK’s story is the notion that familiarity gradually builds from living together in the same place and doing things together, to the point that this familiarity evolves into “becoming the same” (*ka ke kelen di*). The idea of people becoming the same through familiarity and sharing their lives together was also important to many of the people I spoke to, especially in regards to marriage. If MK portrays the familiarity and eventual similarity between neighbors as a prerequisite for the establishment of marriage relationships between them, most others suggested that familiarity and finally “sameness” was a result of marriage bonds.

“Becoming the same:”

substance and difference in the anthropology of relatedness

The process of “becoming the same” that MK talked about is crucial for how people talk about the larger transformations wrought by the end of endogamy. Gender is a prime arena in which some of the wider implications are played out, because it is women who become “the same” as the people on their husband’s compound, not the other way around (not surprisingly considering the patriarchal nature of Mande society). The wholesale integration of women in their husband’s family—at least as an ideal the young woman should aspire to—is evidenced in a variety of larger and smaller ways. A maybe trivial example of the specter of

change brought on by a shift from marriages rooted in the substantive sameness of the partners to a system where a form of sameness needs to be constructed is the current practice for “modern” women to include their husband’s last name in their form of address. Numerous ethnographers of Mande have noted, as I have, the importance of *jamuw* (“last names”) for people’s sense of self and as a marker of “what they are made of;” one of the indications of the fundamental character of a person’s *jamu* is the fact that it is never given up in marriage but belongs to the person for life (Jansen 1995; Jansen and Zobel 2002). Yet many urban, professional women now prefer to be addressed as (for example), Salimata Doumbia, *Madame* (“Mrs”) Keita—in fact, quite a few people in Krs, too, loved to address me like this as a means of teasing me.

The ideology of women becoming integrated into their husband’s family, to the point where his family becomes hers, is also made clear in the going-away speeches addressed to a new bride. The following example is from Ksm, and involves BC admonishing her classificatory daughter right before the girl’s departure to her husband’s family. Immediately prior to BC’s short speech to the girl, the latter has made the rounds of family members to ask forgiveness for all she might have done wrong in her life on the compound, so the mood is already tense and tearful. Then BC reminds the girl that from now on she will not have a home in Ksm anymore:

“Remember you don’t have a father and mother here in Ksm anymore. Your father and mother are now in Wlg, on your husband’s compound. If anybody asks where your father and mother are, you say to them, ‘they are in Wlg.’”

The harsh-sounding words that from now on her parents are no longer her parents—instead, her husband’s parents are—vividly expresses the ideal that a woman becomes part of her husband’s family, even if this ideal is by no means easily accomplished in practice.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the notion of women integrating to their husband’s family to the point of sameness becomes even more important in the context of cross-caste marriages, where the “sameness” between marriage partners is no longer a given.

The process of becoming the same as their spouses in the context of cross-caste marriages also entails—for women—the idea that their bodily make-up undergoes substantive transformations. As discussed previously Mande *siyaw* are premised on the notion of inherited physical differences between categories of people. But what happens if “Salimata Doumbia” becomes “Madame (Mrs) Keita” in the case of a cross-caste marriage? I got a first answer to this in the unexpected context of accompanying my “younger sister” KD (a *numu*, married to a non-*numu*) to the maternity ward. We had come to see the midwife because KD’s pregnancy seemed to be in trouble as she suddenly started getting severe cramps. The subsequent conversation between KD and the midwife went more or less as follows:

Midwife: “How far along is your pregnancy?”

KD: “Five months, no six months.”

Midwife: “Ok, so it’s still too early. Way too early, especially as you’re a potter. You should not be ready to deliver anytime soon, not until the twelfth month. How many months did your previous pregnancies last?”

KD: “Yes, that’s right, it is true that a potter’s pregnancy lasts for 12 months, that is, if you’re married to a blacksmith. But it really depends on the man. Because if you are married to a Maninka, as is my case, then what is true for them becomes true for you. So with my previous pregnancies I delivered in the ninth month in case of the oldest one, and in the tenth month for the others.”

Midwife: “Well, that means you are not yet close to the delivery. I will give you some shots and you should try to take it easy, not farm too much, ok.”

This discussion reminds us of just how obvious it is that for a potter (*numumuso*), pregnancy will last twelve months, so that it might even be part of a medical consultation.¹⁵ But the conversation also points to the apparent mutability of women’s bodily characteristics based on who she is married to or whose child she is carrying. As KD concisely stated, “it all depends on the man. What is true for [him and his family] becomes true for you.”

If “what is true for the man also becomes true for his wife,” as far as bodily characteristics are concerned, this logic would imply that the couple’s offspring would share most, if not all, of their inherited physical characteristics with

the father. Yet this seems not entirely the case. In writing about Moroccan Berber communities, Delaney has characterized the dominant procreational ideology there as one of the “seed” and the “soil,” whereby a child inherits all of its crucial components from the father and the mother serves only as a container (Delaney 1987). This ideology certainly resonates with some of the procreational theories I learned from some Mande (female only) friends. They agreed that a child comes into being through the mixing of juices from the man and woman, but dismissed my suggestion that like the man, the woman also contributed a seed; instead, the woman serves as the container for what from the moment of conception (the congealing of juices) develops into a human being through the intervention of Allah (who provides the bones, flesh, and spirit) and the male partner (who nourishes the fetus through continued contributions of juice). In terms of Delaney’s conceptual framework, then, the notion of women as the fertile soil resonates well with Mande conceptions, yet the ideal of men as sole source of the child’s seed, less so.

In practice the status of offspring, especially in the case of cross-caste marriages, is far from straightforward. On the one hand, a child is said to be “the same as his father,” which is why it bears his name and shares his father’s *siya* if it is different from the mother’s. (An unequivocal example of this will be presented in the section about *finaw* endogamy below). At the same time, the notion that in order to be a “pure” (*yereyere*) potter or noble one needs to have parents who are *both* of this *siya*, points to the importance of the contribution of the woman to the child’s substance as well. This is particularly the case with illegitimate children, as I illustrate in the next section. Moreover, it is not at all clear to most people if some of the substantive particularities of a “pure” *numu* (for example), such as having two more sets of ribs than others, are also true of children who only have a *numu* father and a non-*numu* mother. Most people simply claimed that they did not know how such things would work out. Yet at least some older people think that the “mixing up” of people in marriage indeed results in children that have less *fanga* (“power” or “strength”) than people had in the past. Indeed, they assert that mixed-marriages can have far-reaching and troubling consequences for the moral order of the world in general, as I discuss pres-

ently. Finally, in Mande as elsewhere, traits such as the capacity for sorcery (*suya*) or the ability to change into an animal (*mogohaliki*) are commonly thought to be transmitted through the maternal line, thus complicating the idea of men as sole contributors to their offspring's make-up and capacities.

* * *

Processes of “becoming the same” have been a major focus of studies of how relatedness is conceptualized and created in specific local circumstances, as discussed in Chapter 1. Studies on the implications and the lived experience of relatedness in local contexts have made clear that the connections between people, which have traditionally often been described in genealogical/ biological terms, can be described in other ways as well. Specifically, even in kinship systems that are organized on the basis of patrilineal descent groups, alternative processes of creating relatedness are also at work. An illuminating example of this is Holy's re-analysis of Nuer kinship.¹⁶ According to Holy (1996), Nuer kinship cannot be understood without taking into account the conversion of one substance into the other, or the idea of the creation of kinship through the transmission of substances (Holy 1996:160). The gradual incorporation of Nuer women into their husband's compound, precipitated by the birth of children, is paralleled in a Mande conception of becoming the same.

In Nuer terms, once children have been born to a couple, [the wife] “is like your mother; she cooks for you and milks the cows and performs the other services which your mother once performed for your household. She is a real kinswoman. She is like your mother.” (Holy 1996:195, citing Evans-Pritchard 1949:100)

In other words, even in what looks like an unambiguously patrilineal society, there are also other models for kinship that both help explain and intersect with the patrilineal model, and which can be productively viewed in terms of substances and material practices.¹⁷

“It was something the ancestors did”:

divergent valuations of endogamous pasts and mixed-up presents

My choice to present the narratives of caste endogamy and its decline by means of two distinct stories from Ksm and Krs respectively is motivated in part by a desire to highlight the importance of geography in the experience of caste endogamy coming to an end in Mande. The lived experience of the “end of endogamy” was felt—and actively produced—at different times in the various towns and villages of Mande. The specific reasons for the comparatively earlier or later abolishment of the practice will likely remain obscure, no least due to the concurrent rise of discursive practices downplaying the importance of endogamy. Nevertheless, the sedimented history that distinguishes different towns makes that geography matter. It matters for the particularities of past practices of endogamy and the specifics of its decline, as well as for understanding people’s present position on the value of endogamy.

In other words, the geographic location of people like JS and MK is a first factor contributing to the sociological picture of how different people evaluate the two sides of the contrast between a past characterized by caste endogamy and a present (or recent past) witnessing its demise. JS, as mentioned, has been married for many decades in the village of Ksm, where the decline of endogamy is comparatively recent. Indeed, JS’ stance towards endogamy that emerged over the course of the conversation was one that valued the predictable ordering of marriage relations in the past over the present state where “everything is all mixed up” (*a bee be nyagamina*) and everybody can marry everybody else. This was indeed a common perspective of the older men and women I knew in Ksm. For example, my host in Ksm was quite clear in his misgivings about newly opened “marriage roads” between blacksmiths/potters (like his own family) and non-blacksmiths/potters. At the same time, he had to acknowledge that his opposition to this kind of marriage was becoming less and less widely shared by the younger heads of family in Ksm.

For many people in Ksm—elders in particular—then, the decline of endogamy was broadly equated with a lack of paying attention, an inattentiveness to

what should in fact be an important consideration. In this line of reasoning, the end of endogamy and the concurrent rise of “mixed marriages” entail a host of lamentable consequences. According to some elders, the fact that people are “getting all mixed up” (*o bee be nyagamin*) is reflected in a similar “mixing up” of the natural order of things in other aspects of life. One potter, for example, noted a parallel development of the mixing of people in the clay becoming mixed up: “The clay with which potters work has become spoilt, the work of us potters has become spoilt.” Another claimed, “It is bad for everything, the land and the food we grow, too.”

In Krs, where the end of endogamy is all but complete, scarcely anybody I knew was much concerned with the potential negative consequences of mixed marriages. On the contrary, people of all ages assured me that there was “no problem” with these marriages, even if they might have been problematic in the past. In fact, I was quite struck by how thoroughly the previously significant knowledge related to *siyaw* in general and the rationale for caste endogamy in particular was now devalued in Krs. Concerns with caste were presented as a lack of knowledge. “We did not know any better in those days” was a constant refrain in my conversations about the practice of endogamy in the past. In Krs, the fact that caste endogamy was not practiced anymore for over a generation or longer—without apparent problems as a result—reinforced the idea that caste endogamy had just been an “ignorant custom” to begin with.

A second sociological axis along which the valuations of an endogamous past and a mixed present can be mapped out is related to the religious orientation of one’s interlocutor. A characteristic response I would get to the question of why caste endogamy had been strictly observed in the past—as everybody agreed it was—was, “It was something our ancestors did when we (or our parents) were growing up, so we continued to do it as well.” Yet while for some people—those who self-identified as “traditional” Muslims in particular—continuing the path of the ancestors was a self-evident good in its own right, for others it decidedly was not. This divergence on the importance of doing what one’s ancestors did was a regular feature of debates about the proper way of being Muslim, which in con-

temporary Mande mainly involves the opposition between self-identified “traditional” and “reformist” Muslims. These debates form the topic of the next chapter.

Reformist Muslims frequently contrasted an un-illuminated past, both literally and figuratively, to an illuminated, Islamicized present. With regards to endogamy, the ignorance of the past consisted of the imposition of unreasonable boundaries between people, while the knowledge illuminating present practices had led to such distinctions being abolished. This was the perspective of the imam of the Reformist mosque of Krs, TK, who frequently took up this general topic in his Friday sermons as well. He vividly described the time when there was no “learning” (*kalan*) in Mande, using the Arabic term *jahiliyya* (“ignorance”) to refer to this state. Employing a well-known Qur’anic metaphor, TK equated the time of ignorance with darkness, and the coming of Islamic knowledge with light. Whichever practices had been instituted before the light of Islam did not nearly carry the same weight of those established by the Prophet—another direct Qur’anic reference and a stance that betrays TK’s identification with Reformist Islam. In his metaphors of darkness versus light, ignorance versus knowledge, TK directly reversed the value placed by a number of his fellow-villagers on continuing the “path” (*sira*) laid out by the ancestors. Applying the logic that the light of Islam should take precedence over the paths of ancestral practice established before the time of Islamic learning, TK argued that caste endogamy has been an “ignorant” practice. Therefore, endogamy should no longer be practiced, because of its lack of connection to the faith.

Forgetting caste: the first cross-caste marriages in Krs

If the general consensus in Krs was that endogamy had been abolished a good while ago, there was much less agreement on exactly how and when this might have happened. Most people found it hard to pinpoint an individual couple that might have been the first to marry across caste lines, or to indicate which families were the first to allow their sons and daughters to marry across caste barriers. Instead, they would talk about the changes in more general—and absolute—terms,

contrasting a past where “nobody” married outside their *siya* to a present and more recent past where “everybody” did so. This also meant that the exact timeframe in which these changes had taken place remained rather vague, as in the chronological expression *a mena*, “it has been a (long) while.” Obviously, if changes in caste endogamy and marriage preferences had been gradual, as seemed likely from how these same issues were playing out currently in other villages, recalling just “how endogamy had come to an end” (*a dabilalen cogo di?*) was not so easily done. Yet there seemed to be more to peoples’ inability (or unwillingness) to remember what must have been fairly contentious marriages, which for the most part also happened well within the lifespan of many of my discussion partners.

In this section I address the paradoxical importance of both “paying attention” and forgetting—again, a form of willful inattention—in the demise of endogamy such as it was experienced in Krs over the last two generations (roughly from around the 1960s onwards). If paying attention is important in determining whom to marry—“finding a good wife”—it is an equally crucial factor in assessing the effects of previously eschewed marriage unions. At the same time, the way some of the earlier “experiments” with the possibilities and limits of marriageability involved problematic categories of people such as “slaves” and “bastards” seems to have contributed to a pervasive “forgetting” about the rationale for former caste endogamy.

I would first like to suggest that an ideology and practices of paying attention played an important role in establishing that “everybody now marries everybody else, and this does not present any problems,” as most people in Krs maintained in 2005-6. The clause that the current practice of cross-caste marriages “doesn’t present any problems” reveals that a major concern with marrying outside of one’s own *siya* might in fact present various problems for one or both partners. If the practice of caste endogamy was one “which we found in place because our ancestors used to do it this way,” this in itself was a strong incentive to continue doing things this way. Even if the reasons why the ancestors might have instituted such a practice was no longer clear, most people suspected that there

had been a good reason for instituting it. Along these lines, people would frequently tell me that according to their ancestors, it was “not good” (*a mayn*) to marry outside one’s *siya*. For one thing, such marriages would not be good for one’s integrity as a person; indeed, an important *tana* (“restriction”) that *numuw* (blacksmiths/potters) needed to observe was to never sleep with, let alone marry, someone who was not *numu*. Not respecting one’s *tanaw* (“restrictions”) would be a clear case of not being sufficiently human to pay attention to oneself (Chapter 4) and would have disastrous, if imprecisely spelled out, consequences.

While the specifics of how and when endogamy ceased to be considered part and parcel of who one is as a person will likely remain murky, the current proof for the irrelevance of caste endogamy—i.e., “it does not lead to any problems”—clearly points to the importance of experimentation in deciding just what is and is not worth paying attention to. In other words, *kolosi* is fundamentally a matter of lived experience, not dogma. Indeed, anthropologists have long realized that “cultural rules,” like any other rules, can be broken; moreover, social life inevitably involves dealing with situations where more than one set of rules could be said to apply, and where people need to weigh the different courses of action. What is interesting in the Mande case is that the flexibility of cultural “rules,” such as those associated with caste endogamy, as well as the fundamental importance of lived experience, are at the heart of a local ideology of “paying attention.”

I have noted already that it was not easy to find out whose marriage might have been the first cross-caste union in Krs, but as I came across some of the unions that had been among, if not *the*, first, I realized that there were some factors here that considerably mitigated the “mixed” character of these marriages. In other words, the marriages that I found to be among the first to link partners of different *siya* involved one or two partners whose *siya* was not so clear to begin with. Either because of illegitimacy or slave ancestry (or a combination of both), the individuals involved in the first cross-caste unions were not considered “pure” (*yereyere*) *numu* (or *horon*, *jeli*, etc.) at all at the time of their marriage. These marriages were thus not really cross-caste marriages as far as the *substance* of one

or both partners was concerned, even though they linked people across caste lines in name. In a sense, these marriages could be seen as experiments whereby people were putting the continued applicability of received wisdom to the test by allowing marriages that were not what they seemed. In other words, I think that in retrospect, at least some of the first cross-caste unions can be attributed to a sense that they must have felt considerably safer than some other possible unions for the “experiment” of observing possible negative consequences of such marriages.

The marriage between MD and JT illustrates this well. From what I knew about the two families involved, this was clearly a cross-caste marriage (between a *horon* and a *numu*), and because of the age of the couple’s children, I had also realized early on that it must have been one of the first of its kind in both families. Only when the husband died in early 2007, however, did people on our compound start reminiscing about this union as “one of the first, maybe the first” union between a *numu* and a non-*numu*:

“He was a good-for-nothing, but she wanted to marry him. Their parents were against it, but she kept sneaking out at night to visit with him. At the time, people “weren’t very enlightened” (o nye ma yelema kosobe). She sneaked out every night, and she sneaked back every morning. Her parents hit her every day, this went on for a long time, until in the end, he could marry her.”

“She was very brave, because when they got married, everybody talked about it. They said things behind her back [that the marriage wouldn’t work] and it took a very long time until they stopped. But she never listened to them, she was very brave.”

Several things are interesting about this case. First of all, the same people who had claimed not to remember who had been the first to marry across caste lines in Krs (and our *numu* compound specifically), in fact remembered quite well the unorthodox, and hence widely criticized, character of MD and JT’s union. Yet it was not until after the death of one of the partners that they started to talk about it—and even more so after the subsequent death of the wife also. Perhaps surprisingly, however, for all the renewed talk about JT’s insistence to be married to MD, nobody indicated to me that maybe the less-than-ideal outcome of the marriage between the two of them might have been related to their incompatibility in terms of their *siya*.¹⁸ This I take to imply that at the moment, the demise of caste

endogamy in Krs has been so thorough that an analysis of the problems having befallen JT and MD in terms of caste incompatibility does not seem to carry much, if any, explanatory power.¹⁹

When I found out that the marriage between MD and JT had in fact been among the very first cross-caste marriages in Krs, and had been the subject of heated local discussion at the time, I realized that some further characteristics of both MD and JT might well be have been relevant here. Beyond JT's persistence in seeking out the man she wanted to marry, what other factors might account for the fact that precisely *this* marriage became one of the first to eventually be sanctioned by both families? In light of MK's emphasis on "neighborliness" as negating possible barriers to marriage, it is interesting to note that they are in fact from neighboring compounds. A second observation is that the Tr are relative newcomers in Krs. As will become clear in Chapter 7, the status of JT's family as relatively recent "immigrants" was much more tenuous in 2007 or 2009 than it had appeared in 2005-6; thus one can speculate about how much the Tr's stranger status was a factor at the time of the marriage, and how this might have impacted the considerations in MD and JT's respective families.²⁰

Other relevant factors in understanding how this union came together as one of the first cross-caste marriages in Krs might be illegitimacy and slave ancestry in one or both families. In documenting the genealogy of Krs' *numu* compounds, I came across a number of slave ancestors that some informants admitted, in hushed voices, to have been grandfathers or grandmothers of people currently living on our compound. One of these slave ancestors was the second wife of DD, of whom MD's father was a son. Apparently, DD's wife had bought a slave woman to be her co-wife, "as was not uncommon in those days," according to my informant. MD was a grandson of this slave woman, through his father. At the same time, there were quite persistent rumors also that MD was not a son of his father. Instead, people recalled that his mother, NS, had had an affair with another man (a K, non-*numu*) and that MD had been the result of this relation. Whatever the specifics of MD's descent might have been, it is clear that on either count, he was not a "pure blacksmith" (*numu yereyere*). It is not a stretch to think

that this ancestry might have impacted the acceptability of a previously unheard of kind of marriage, as a comparable case in Ksm shows. (I have less information about the genealogy of JT's family, except for the fact that they came from "across the river", and her oblique statement that one of her grandmothers might have been a slave as well.)

An explicit acknowledgment of the presence of "hidden components" in cross-caste marriages appears in the following case from Ksm, where the decline of caste endogamy is only a recent phenomenon; in particular, my host MLK is still dead set against any marriage between his own family and that of their former slaves, who live with them in Ksm. I was thus considerably surprised to find that one of the wives on the Cm compound in Ksm is a Kn—as all non-Kn compounds in Ksm are those of former slaves. Yet when I asked MLK in a subsequent conversation how this apparent contradiction had come about, he had a simple explanation:

"Oh, that's easy. [The girl married on the Cm/slave compound] is called Kn but she isn't really ours. She is the illegitimate child of [one of MLK's classificatory sons]. His wife had an affair with a C in Dnk and this girl, the resulting child, is thus a nyamagoden. Even though she bears the (official) father's last name and was raised on his compound, everybody knows she isn't a real daughter of the Kn numuw. If she were, the Cm who are here would never have been able to marry her. They are our slaves and could never marry a real Kn woman."

Not only does MK tell me all of this quite openly when we are chatting outside at his favorite spot by the side of the road, he insists that everybody knows the real story here. According to him, it was even mentioned as part of the "giving an account" (*dantikelige*) at the girl's marriage ceremony.²¹ The ambivalent status of illegitimate children here means that to the casual observer it might seem that certain marriage unions cross caste boundaries whereas to the more knowledgeable observer it is clear that these boundaries remain intact.

In cases where "cross-caste marriages" are not what they seem because of hidden factors of illegitimacy or slave ancestry, the relevance of *kolosi* lies in the fact that only those who pay close attention to the "real facts" will be able to appreciate what is effectively going on here. However, even if these marriages do not really occur across caste boundaries, it seems unlikely that they would not be

closely watched to see if any problems result from them. Indeed, a similar process of experimentation and observation is evident in other arenas where the continued applicability of ancestral knowledge is in question. For a brief example, consider another fraught dimension of ancestral knowledge, also related to caste: do potters still need to observe the *tanaw* (“restrictions”) associated with their craft? One of these *tanaw*, which all potters, including the youngest children, know about is not to dig clay on Monday and Friday. “In the past, the ancestors told us not to dig clay on those days, because that’s when the jinns who are the owners of the clay pit make their pots,” people would tell me. Yet in a number of pottery communities, there have been questions as to whether this *tana* still applies, together with some other pottery-related *tanaw*, which in turn have led some intrepid souls to put them to the test, so to speak. Thus, in Ksm, the Monday-Friday *tana* on digging clay was gradually being abandoned about a decade ago. The “experiment” came to an abrupt end, however, when three women from Ksm were killed while digging clay one Friday. The impact of this accident went well beyond the village of Ksm; it was pointed to by potters I knew in Mkn, Kll, and Krs as a clear indication that the ancestors had been right about these pottery *tanaw* after all. A similar dynamic is at play in the reactions to the *Sotrama* accident that left many potters wounded (Chapter 2).

Opening up new marriage roads in Ksm

Where Krs falls early in the timeframe of when endogamy was abolished, Ksm is late—in fact, it is something that was just starting at the time of my fieldwork and far from being widely expected or accepted as it was for most people in Krs. Indeed, the following account that I noted in Ksm presents one of the few instances of public discourse expressing a strong preference to marry one’s “own kind” (*siya*). The occasion was a visit by a middle-aged man from Trl, accompanied by a *finna*, to my host in Ksm, MLK. In their “account of what they had come do” (*dantigeli*), the guests explained that they had come to talk about the possibility of finding a suitable wife in Ksm. They gave their account to MLK, one of MLK’s sons, and me, who were all seated on MLK’s veranda, and within earshot of one

of MLK's wives and two daughters-in-law. With the *fina* as his spokesman, the visitor began his account by referencing an earlier visit to MLK about this same issue of finding a wife in Ksm. They have come to repeat their request.²² The *fina* spokesman stressed:

*“My friend here wants nobody but a numumuso for his wife; he is himself a Doumbia numu and his first wife is a numu, too; he only wants to marry a numumuso. In fact, this is why he came here to Ksm to find a wife, because everybody in this town is numu. This man is not looking for anyone in particular; he just wants to marry a second wife. This (the fact that the search is for a second wife) is also the reason why he has come himself to ask you for assistance [albeit with a fina as his actual spokesperson], instead of having a father or friend conveying the request.”*²³

This account establishes that for some people at least the caste background of a prospective spouse is still relevant. I only rarely encountered this sentiment, but it did occasionally figure in talk about contemporary marriages.

A crucial difference between the marriage proposed by the visitor from Trl above and the many marriages where Ksm's *numuw* are marrying non-*numu* wives or being married to non-*numu* husbands is that in the latter cases, there are no preexisting marriage roads tying the two families together. Even if the visitor and his spokesperson did not mention the previous marriages between Trl and Ksm *numu*, after their departure, MLK explained to me in great detail some of the linkages between the respective families. In contrast, marriages between a *numu* and Maninka in Ksm generally involve the opening up of new “marriage roads” (*furu sira*), because of how recent such marriages are here.

Let me illustrate the discourse surrounding new marriage roads by quoting from the accounts (*dantigeli*) given at a wedding in Ksm, marking the opening up of just such a new road. One of the factors that comes out quite clearly in that example is the need to establish that the reason the families in question did not have a marriage history prior to this point in time is *not* related to slavery. This adds an important nuance to the argument developed in the previous section about the possibility of slave ancestry, along with illegitimacy, being a hidden factor in seemingly cross-caste marriages that are not really such. Another factor that emerges is the expectation that these newly opened marriage roads need to be reciprocal, that is, that women should travel on them (to become wives) in both di-

rections. This seems to be a particular concern of men in a comparatively isolated rural place such as Ksm.

In early 2007 I attended the *furusiri* (“marriage ceremony”)²⁴ for a girl from Ksm, to be married to a man from Fgr. The *furusiri* is fundamentally a matter of “talk” (*kuma*); first, the head of households from Ksm discuss the matter amongst themselves before the arrival of the guest from Fgr. In this first round of talk, as in the latter, when the guests are present too, the younger men get the chance to speak first, followed by their elders, that is, MLK and the *dugutigi*, who speaks last. The younger men do not take much time speaking, except to acknowledge the reason they are here (because of the marriage of one of theirs to a man from Fgr) and to do blessings for this union. At his turn, MLK takes up the issue that previous speakers had alluded to, namely that this marriage will be the first of its kind. Asking didactically, “so, how has it come about that one of our daughters will be married into a family where up until now none of our daughters have married?” MLK provides the following answer to his own question:

“They are not slaves; they are not people-at-the-side (jonw te; mogofemogow te; cf. Chapter 4 for the term mogofemogo). It is true that there aren’t marriage relationships between them and us, but this is not because they are slaves. They are horonw (“free people”), the tigiw (“owners”) of Fgr. They aren’t slaves because if they were, I would never have agreed to this union. The people who are coming from Fgr are not slaves. Why do we say they are not slaves? Because the slaves of the county [that Fgr belongs to] are in Sgdl. That was the slave village of their county. The only people who live here are slaves. They have been placed there by their masters to guard the mango trees there.”

The second round of speech takes place as soon as the four members of Fgr’s marriage delegation have arrived into the reception hut. After the visitors have properly made their request to receive a certain young girl in marriage,²⁵ the conversation turns again to the lack of previous marriage relations between the two families involved. The visitors point out that until not too long ago, marriages to a non-*numu* were not permissible in this *bolon* (“reception hut”); since this practice has now changed, unions like the current one have become possible—in fact, the current union between the two particular families constitutes a first link between them. The local men, particularly the younger ones, take up the

theme of the marriage being a first, to stress the expectation that future marriages will result from this first one, and that such marriages will occur in the both directions. One of them states explicitly, “If we give you our daughter in marriage, it would not be good if we are not able to marry one of yours in return.”

The sense that the marriage might be the first but should not be the last in linking two families—and in both directions—neatly captures the Mande idea of marriage roads. The way people are related to each other is often expressed in terms of the roads by which they trace their relationships—for example, in the expression that “grandchildren aren’t all from along the same road,” which I noted at a *modentulonke* (“grandchildren’s skit”). Literally called roads (*siraw*) that link families in marriage (*furu*), the networks established by marriage form an important aspect of the lived experience of the Mande landscape.²⁶ A marriage road that is well traveled, so to speak, becomes naturalized. Marriages between the families involved cease being the first of their kind, as in the case under discussion here, but instead become routine.

One of the multiple ways²⁷ in which marriage roads become routine and “natural” features of people’s lifeworld is the practice of having a “little dog of the wedding” (*konyowolodenin*), a younger sister or other young girl, accompany the bride for the first few weeks on her new compound. This practice helps establish a physical road between the two compounds by her going back and forth between these two places over time. Such a practice is particularly important where there does not exist a previous marriage road. Among the other functions attributed to the girl serving as *konyowolodenin*—alleviating the bride’s loneliness, providing companionship, helping with household tasks—another explanation is that her presence points towards the future when she (or her sisters) will again travel the marriage road between the houses, following in the current bride’s footsteps. On one occasion, I heard a young man express this idea quite directly, when he came to greet a new bride and her entourage, including the *konyowolodenin*. He told the latter: “now that you know the way, in a few years when you are bigger you can come back and be married here, too.” Indeed, when a woman is married, her compound of origin becomes the *birinado* (“maternal family”) to

her future children, as well as to those of her co-wives. Marrying a girl from one's *birinado*, in turn, is often mentioned as a preferred form of marriage. Stated differently, in this case a girl replicates the marriage road of her aunt or grandmother before her.

The desired reciprocity of back-and-forth travel along marriage roads has an economic impulse as well. The younger men in Ksm not infrequently expressed resentment about “their” women going elsewhere to get married, while they were not always able to get women from these places to come to Ksm. Marriage negotiations are considered to be easier if previous marriages link the two compounds. More importantly, getting married helps establish a young man (or woman) as an adult in his (or her) own right, which entails certain privileges. The lack of success a number of men from Ksm had recently experienced in trying to entice young women from Bn to agree to be married in Ksm was felt as a serious problem in this respect. (The men I knew in Ksm attributed this failure specifically to the relatively isolated geographic position of their village, especially in the many outlying hamlets where more than half of Ksm’s families live; women are said to be disinclined to locate to such a place.)²⁸

In sum, the creation of new marriage roads and the up-keep of old ones have significant social and economic value. A newly established marriage relation will have been a lasting success not only if it results in healthy offspring for the man’s lineage, but even more so if it results in a routine marriage road as an integral part of the Mande landscape that women walk on in both directions.

Finaw endogamy and exceptionality

The significant exception to the “end of endogamy” briefly mentioned above are the specific category of griots known as *finaw*. Even now, *finaw* only marry *finaw*, and nobody else wants to marry a *finaw*, either male or female. The “mixing up” of people in marriage as a main factor in the world becoming more and more mixed up, too, with all the negative consequences of lack of food, agricultural deterioration, and general lack of prosperity this entails is in fact most dangerous when the specific category of griots known as *finaw* are concerned. In this sec-

tion I argue that, in a process of what Gal and Irvine (2000) have termed “fractal recursivity,” the specific category of griots known as *finaw* have become synonymous with the broader category of *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”). By this I mean that the *finaw* have come to exemplify all *nyamakalaw*, while the other main categories of *nyamakalaw* have silently moved out of this category (thus exemplifying the process of erasure that is an integral aspect of fractal recursivity also).

Prime occasions for reinforcing social norms such as the un-marriageability of *finaw* are conversations like the one I present below, where the behavior of third parties is scrutinized. By openly denouncing the dangers inherent in engaging with *finaw*, the conversation partners not only verbalize and reinforce what everybody is already supposed to know, but also present themselves as both knowledgeable as well as morally upright in upholding proper standards of conduct. In the present example, a younger male acquaintance of MLK and his family has come from Bn to arrange a marriage in Ksm; he spends the day on our compound, chatting with MLK, his wives, daughters-in-law, and me. The conversation soon turns to mutual acquaintances, including a young man in Bn who, the man tells us, is having a relationship with a *finamuso*:

“You know, he hasn’t married her but they are together regularly. Really, his “luck is finished” (gerejege banna). But the problem is, he doesn’t realize this himself. He is only a child so he doesn’t realize it is bad to sleep with a finamuso. Even though he doesn’t plan to marry her, she is a steady girlfriend and that too is bad. Because you know, if you have [sexual] relations with a finamuso, if she sleeps behind you, you are getting shorter each time and your “luck” (gerejege) is shrinking as well.”

MLK and the younger man agreed that the whole situation is bad, bemoaning the ignorance of the youth who is “only a child.” Thus they also cast the situation as one of “lack of knowledge” instead of, for example, as a willful or “experimental” investigation of the continued applicability of ancestral restrictions (*tanaw*). In the process, they restate for the benefit of all those present what the dangers are of disregarding (or “ruining”) these *tanaw* (“restrictions”) in the case of sleeping with a *finamuso*. Where I was sitting with the women, overhearing the conversation as we were busy making pots, the message did not fail to make an impact, prompting some to repeat the warnings in examples of their own.

A second point about this conversation and others like it, is the obvious male-centeredness of the warnings. Even if people state the practice of endogamy of *finaw* in general terms, the specific examples of problems resulting from overstepping the boundaries here overwhelmingly highlight the experience of men. For example, the shrinking that results from sleeping with a *finaw* was always explained to me as affecting men, regardless of whether a man or woman told me about it. JS, whose insights about endogamy were discussed above, formulated it thus:

“If you sleep with a finamuso, you shrink: you put a mark on the wall at night, before sleeping with her, to indicate where the top of your head is; the next morning, when you wake up, you’ll see that you don’t reach up to that point anymore.”

This perceived literal shrinking is moreover related to a metaphorical shrinking of one’s luck, as JS continues to explain:

“If you marry a numumuso, being yourself a Maninka, even if you’re very poor, you’ll find something. You’ll rise upwards. And the same is true for a jelimuso. But with a finamuso, you’ll go down. Everything you have in terms of luck and material goods will come to an end. In contrast, it’s much more favorable to marry a numumuso or a jelimuso. This did happen in the past from time to time but only very rarely.”

It seems that the male body is affected most by the physical shrinking and misfortune resulting from intercourse with a *finamuso*, even if the marriage restrictions extend in both directions.

The gender discrepancy is also evident in the rather laconic reaction following the only case in Krs where I was able to ascertain that an illegitimate child had been born from the union between a *finaw* and a non-*finaw*. The fact that the boy was a *finaw* and the girl a non-*finaw*, instead of the other way around, seems significant here. I heard about this case from my friend SK, who liked to take me around town and introduce me to her friends and family. One morning, after we had visited one of her friends, she asked me whether I had noticed one of the children on the compound. I had not, but she proceeded to tell me about the boy anyway:

“You see, he is a C, a finaw (“one of two kinds of griots”). His mother is a good friend of mine; she now lives in Bko and is married there. But the child is a finaw, and his father is here in the finaw neighborhood of Krs. [She

tells me who the father is and makes sure I know him.] He didn't end up marrying the boy's mother but his family is still taking care of the boy. The boy now lives with the mother's family but will go to live with the father's family when it is a little older. [He is now about seven years old.] From the beginning the father's family has laid claim to the child. On the day it was born they went to the delivery room with baby clothes, towels, talc powder and soap. They also paid the full 15,000 fee for the delivery [which is much higher than the normal fee because it includes a fine for delivering a child without being married]. And even now, the father's family still provides clothes and millet for his upkeep, they sent it over all the time."

First of all, this example shows that despite the strong claims that marriages and sexual relations with a *finaw* are still taboo, these relationships do happen. But when I asked SK whether there had been any talk about marriage in this situation, she dismissed the possibility immediately: "Oh no, our people do not accept that (*an ka mogo te son*); we do not want that here (*an t'a fe*)—it is bad (*a mayn*)."

The rationale for why "our people do not accept" the marriage with a *finaw* of either gender was much less clear to people than the widespread acceptance of the idea that this was "bad." Speaking in general terms, another young woman explained that the "category" of *finaw* ("griots") is just "not good" (*si nyuman te*); "they are a bad sort" (*a siya mayn*). Similarly, as much as people liked to tell me that one's physical height and luck would shrink because of engaging with *finaw*, they also said they did not know how or why this would be the case—much as they claimed ignorance of the reasons why caste endogamy was so widely prescribed in the not too distant past.

The current discourse surrounding *finaw*—including their exceptional status and character and the notable fact that they can only marry amongst themselves—closely mirrors the discourse about *nyamakalaw* ("artisans") in general presented in the literature on Mande and other "caste systems." First of all, the generalities and stark moral contrasts expressed in people's ideas about the *finaw* take up the representation of *nyamakalaw* in general as "low-caste," "despised," "beggars," etc. which is particularly strong in the older literature (cf. Camara 1992). As if to underscore this connection, many of the people I spoke to about *finaw* would preface the discussion by noting that *finaw* are *nyamakalaw*, or even "the real *nyamakalaw*" (*nyamakalaw yereyere, olu a di*).

In talking to *finaw*, a radically different picture of their exceptionality emerged—similarly to the revisionist literature on Mande caste that trades in a *horon* (“noble”) bias for a focus on the *nyamakala* perspective, and a second indication that the *finaw* are coming to stand in for the *nyamakalaw* as a whole. Scholars like Conrad and Frank (1995), Hoffmann (2000) and Janson (2002) move away from accounts of *nyamakalaw* as uniformly “bad” and “despised” to a more nuanced picture that celebrates instead the “ambiguous status” (sometimes high, sometimes low) of *nyamakalaw* and the pride many *nyamakala* artisans take in their birthright. Certainly, a similar picture can be painted for the *finaw*. For everyone claiming that the *siya* (“category”) of *finaw* was very bad, someone else—many of them *finaw*, but also some others—was instead “very good” (*siya nyumanba dun*). While many people would point to the fact that *finaw* can ask from and are entitled to receive from all other *siyaw* as an indication of their low position, others, to the contrary, interpreted as indicative of their high position. One man, himself a *numu*, not a *finaw*, explained:

“We give to them, because it is very good to give to them, as they are the first of the nyamakalaw; they are not below, they are above—not behind, but in front; we give to them because of their ancestor [Surukuta, a companion of the Prophet, cf. Chapter 3].”

Instead of interpreting this quote and other more positive interpretations of the status and character of *finaw* merely as evidence that this category is more “positive” than often assumed, I use these examples to make a different argument: namely, that the ambivalence expressed about *finaw* specifically captures much of what used to be a more general discourse about all *nyamakala* categories (besides *finaw*, also *numuw*, *jeliw*, *garankew*, and *kaulew*). Another aspect of this discourse is the notion that differences between *siyaw* rest on certain immutable, inherited characteristics. Yet as we have seen, this ideology seems to be changing in cross-caste marriages where most people agree that wives are “becoming the same” as their husbands (hence *numumusow* being pregnant for nine months instead of 11 or 12). Similarly, the resulting offspring from such marriage shares the father’s *siya* and thus “are” *horon*, *somono*, or *numu* like him. Even the one case of the illegitimate *finaw* child might be read along these lines. Still, it is sig-

nificant that people often made a distinction between other nyamakala occupational practices as a matter of “learning,” whereas those associated with *finaw* were indisputably a matter of “their kind, who they are” (*siya*). To me, this suggests that notions of inherited physical difference remain important in the case of *finaw*, even if they are being downplayed in most other cases.

The *finaw* I talked to had a very different understanding of the reasons for and implications of the injunction against marrying or even sleeping with a *fina*. In his version of the story about shrinking men, an old male *fina* in Krs, JC, focused on the awesome powers of *finaw*, and the need to protect oneself against those if one is not a *fina* oneself. Thus, according to JC, in the past some men had been able to take a *finamuso* for a wife, but only if they were wealthy enough to afford the protection they needed in order to safely sleep with them: “if somebody wanted to marry a *finamuso*, he would have her weighed, and the amount of her weight in gold he would give to her. But this has not happened in a long time.” Exchanging the woman’s weight for gold, first of all, evokes the practice of weighing the infant’s first hair and purchasing the weight in gold as seed capital for his or her later endeavors. In this case, too, the first hair (present on the child at birth) is considered to be dangerous, which is why it needs to be shorn off and neutralized with an equal amount of gold. Secondly, in establishing an equivalent between a *finamuso*’s body and gold, it suggests that there is something special about her bodily substance.

KS, an older woman from Dnk who used to be married into my family in Nrn but subsequently married in Ksm, also brought up the substantive basis for the exceptionality of *finaw*. Her warnings regarding *finaw* go much further than those against sleeping with a *finamuso* or sharing a seating mat with a *fina* of either gender, as other people commonly mention:

“You shouldn’t sleep with a fina, and you shouldn’t be friends with them either. All of that is bad. In the past, a fina never shared a seat or a mat with somebody who is not a fina. I personally don’t even allow finaw to come to the compound. And I would never eat from a bowl where a fina had put in her hand. Because under the fingernails of finaw they have nè (“fluid”) on their three middle fingers. If a fina puts his or her hand into a food bowl the nè will get into the food.”

The explanation of KS, confirmed by others in Ksm, then, highlights the innate physical differences such as *ne* as the basis for the separation of *finaw* in terms of sexual and commensal relations. Moreover, this reasoning, with its openly racist presumption of the innate, inherited inferiority of certain categories of people, references the prevalence of inherited bodily aspects and the importance of separation that has been described in regards to all *nyamakalaw* (“artisans”). While the previously inferior status of such categories of *nyamakala* as griots (*jeliw*) and blacksmiths/potters is erased by virtue of their “becoming the same” as their neighbors, the qualities formerly thought to be characteristic of the category of *nyamakala* as a whole become displaced to a finer level of distinction, marking a stark boundary between *finaw* on one hand and all other *nyamakalaw* on the other. (Cf. Irvine and Gal 2000 for the dual process of fractal recursivity and erasure at play here.) Thus, it is only logical that *finaw* were quite frequently described to me as the real *nyamakalaw*.

Coda: finaw and economic considerations in (the decline of) endogamy

Let me briefly note an ironic twist to the continued exclusion of *finaw* from larger marriage networks. Marriage is an expensive undertaking, as has been alluded to periodically in this chapter. Because of the high cost of marriage—involving bride price and presents on the husband’s side and a trousseau on the wife’s side—elder men are (or were) able to exert power over both younger men and women by providing the means for the former to marry and making marriage decisions on behalf of the latter. The economic deterioration of the 1980s and the subsequent pressure on younger men to pursue new economic opportunities have alleviated some of the strong grip of elders. However, it has not made the economic burdens of marriage any easier to shoulder; on the contrary, it is now commonly expected that young men ready to marry acquire at least part of the bride price themselves. While there is a legal limit to the amount of bride price that can be exchanged (first established in the 1962 code of Family Law and proposed for downward revision in the new code), this provision is never enforced. Thus, the economic burden of marriage is decidedly a further complicating factor

in young men's search for a wife, even if bride prices are largely uniform in the countryside. For women, the endeavor of bringing together a trousseau (for themselves or their daughters) presents a comparable economic challenge, albeit one that only needs to be faced after the first few years of marriage.

The twist is this: in early 2006, *finaw* from all over Mande came together for a celebration of their common heritage, as more and more lineages are starting to do on an annual or biannual basis. On the occasion of the *finaw* gathering—as KC later reported to me—the assembled head of households had agreed to cut the required bride price in half. This constitutes a considerable economic relief for young *finaw* men, and by extension *finaw* families, especially in comparison with the regular bride price in Mande. People estimated the total cost of bride price and accompanying presents (including further gifts of money) to be about 100,000 francs CFA (roughly 2,000 USD); from 2006 onwards, however, *finaw* paid only about 50,000 francs CFA (1,000 USD) in marriage-related expenses. This considerable difference meant in practical terms that it was comparatively much easier for young *finaw* men to marry, and at an earlier age. Since the value of the trousseau is roughly equivalent to that of the bride price, women too had a much easier time “finding the household wares.” In short, the collective decision to cut the bride price in half made marriage more easily attainable for both genders—something the code of Family Law had also attempted to do, but without the legitimacy to have any real effect locally. Clearly, the lowering of the bride price could only have been realized so effectively in the context of continued *finaw* endogamy, where the social and economic pay-offs of such a change were felt to be directly and evenly available to all.

CONCLUSIONS: NOT PAYING ATTENTION AND FORGETTING,
OR THE AFTERMATHS OF CASTE, SLAVERY, AND ANCESTORS

Starting from the visual clues that indicate a “good spouse” and ending with the unexpected consequences of continued endogamy among *finaw*, this chapter has established the significance of “paying attention” in creating relatedness. Practices of scrutiny are embodied in gendered and age-specific ways, in order to re-

veal the “inside” of potential marriage partners—something that is not readily available, but can be discerned by an attentive observer attuned to outward manifestations of internal qualities as well as “habitual” and “resemblance” signs.

Yet what used to be a crucial sign of what a person is like is now commonly, and deliberately disregarded. This characteristic is of course a person’s caste status, or *siya*—i.e., the iconic linkage of certain characteristics of moral personhood, bodily composition, forms of speech with pre-conceived categories of persons. The role of “paying attention” is however more complicated than a mere disregard for signs that are for the most part no longer accepted as such. Just as important is the sense of experimentation encouraged by the experiential basis of *kolosi*. When people in Krs reassured me that it was really “no problem” to engage in mixed marriage, they pointed to actual cases of successful mixed unions, which presented vivid examples of the viability of non-endogamous marriages. In contrast, marriages with *finaw* continue to be considered not only undesirable, but very near impossible because of the readily observed negative consequences of mixed unions with particularly this category of people. While this distinction might seem illogical to an outside observer, there is no a priori reason that people should choose to pay attention to the same few observations presented by their surroundings to make inferences about what the world is like. This is indeed a key point I make in this dissertation.

Taken together, the continued endogamy of *finaw* and the abolishment of endogamy in all other instances brings me back to the original problem of how people decide what to pay attention to and what not, and how this changes over time. I have no definitive answers here, only a number of striking observers that suggest, at least to me, the relevance of attending to the semiotic aspect of this kind of transformations, as well as, again, the inherently unbounded, unfinished, and uncertain character of people’s lifeworlds. Among the observations presented in this chapter, the active downplaying of the past relevance of caste endogamy—which I call “forgetting caste”—is of particular interest for further comparative study. As mentioned throughout, the “forgetting caste” was more pronounced in places like Krs where the practice was abolished comparatively earlier. I suggest

that the aftermath of caste—i.e., its discursive re-construction after the practices most centrally associated with it—is indeed characterized by such forgetting. As such, it inscribes itself in other processes of forgetting—of slavery and of ancestors—that have been addressed more extensively in the literature.

A study of contemporary attitudes about caste in Senegal (Mbow 2000) reveals that the “forgetting” of caste is not limited to Mande. Pende Mbow reports a similar distinct unwillingness of people in Senegal to talk about caste, both in response to her own questions and when a well-known filmmaker proposed to have a discussion of the topic on national radio. A woman called into this show dedicated to the “problem of caste in contemporary Senegal” to complain about its very topic: “why talk about it? This is not something with contemporary relevance” (Mbow 2000:74). Characteristically, the Senegalese quoted by Mbow thus couch their refusal to speak about caste in an idiom of caste as no longer relevant. Against this discursive erasure, Mbow presents data from her own research to suggest the continued relevance of caste in terms of self-perception and social opportunities. For Mbow, then, the issue of caste in Senegal presents itself as a veritable paradox: while the stigma attached to caste continues to have strong sociological significance, most people downplay its importance. Approaching the issue in terms of human rights, Mbow considers the willful forgetting of caste in Senegal a major obstacle to effectively overcoming its lingering effects.²⁹

A comparative analysis of the aftermath of endogamy, in Mande and elsewhere in Africa, in relation to the “aftermaths” of other disregarded practices and forms of knowledge, such as slavery and rituals involving ancestors, might well prove productive. All three practices—endogamy, slavery, and rituals honoring ancestors—are centered on notions of descent and work to define a person’s place in society. By simultaneously denouncing endogamy, slavery, and rituals invoking ancestors, I suspect, people are grappling with the implications of different semiotic ideologies that entail divergent understandings of persons, substances, the role of descent, the locus of moral and religious worth, and the boundaries between different kinds of being.

¹ Of course, there is also the possibility of miscarriage. However, the pronouncements about other people's pregnancies were so frequently not born out over time that it seems highly unlikely that miscarriages alone could be responsible for the discrepancy.

² Villages are responsible for setting their own fees for the services rendered by the birth clinics within their boundaries, just as they are also responsible for paying the salary and supplies of the midwife and nurse who work there. In Krs, the all-male village council decided, in consultation with the leaders of the women's groups, to set the fee for an un-medicated birth by a married woman at 3,000 francs CFA (about 1,5 USD), which includes the price of the birth certificate. There are supplemental costs if the mother needs shots and for the required vitamin K eye-cream for the baby. Unmarried women face an extra 5,000 francs CFA fee, which is paid by the family of the man lying claim to the baby. (In all, of 85 births, 11 were to "unmarried" mothers, yet in all these cases, the boyfriend did recognize the child at birth and pay all fees). Finally, there is an additional fee for women who feel to deliver at the clinic, except when it can be shown that she was in fact on her way to the clinic but was "surprised" by the birth *en route*, or if she was getting ready to go but was "surprised" by the delivery at home. (Obviously, this clause is open to considerable debate in individual cases, but it has proved successful in so far that the large majority of births in Krs now occur at the birth clinic.)

³ My capacity for *kolosi* had, in fact, failed on two counts: 1) I had failed to realize that she was giving birth the whole time I was sitting outside, and 2) I had misrecognized the duration of her pregnancy, as I had backed up Nt not two days earlier, saying that she wasn't due to give birth for at least a month.

⁴ If *téré* is primarily a matter of "incompatibility," though, it is not clear to me what exactly a being's *téré* is incompatible with. For example, in the case of the "bad tere that some women have," it is clearly implied that her first three husbands will die *regardless of their particular characteristics*. If this is a matter of incompatibility, it would seem to apply to all men, not to any of them in particular.

⁵ For example, my host mother in Ksm explained *tèrè* as "something that only some things have" and focused particularly on trees in her explanation:

"Some trees you can't fell "just like that" (kun fe). No. A numuke ("blacksmith," whose customary skills extend to woodworking as well) will never do so, although some other people will. They have no sense about these things. They cut everything to make charcoal to sell at Ngd's market. It has now gotten to the point that there are almost no trees left for the numukew to do their work. In Ksm they don't even make stools anymore, only the basins and pounding sticks [because they yield more money per amount of wood used]. But in any case, téré adheres to some

trees, which means you can't fell them just like that, you know, apart from the problem of charcoal."

⁶ It stands to reason that a woman being marked by such *tèrè* would sooner or later end up no longer being able to get married, which constitutes a real problem. Several people, men and women, told me that unlike men, women needed to be married at all times, except for the four months-and-ten-days period when she is mourning the death of a recently deceased husband. After the mourning period is over, she should be remarried quickly, be it to a younger brother or other eligible family member of her previous husband, if she wants to go that route, or to someone from a new family. If she is too old to bear any more children, she can remain at the compound of her deceased husband, yet she still needs to have to agree to be married to a new husband (*ka furu siri*) either on the compound where she lives or elsewhere. In English we might say that in this case, she is married "in name only," and the expression would be very appropriate here, as various people told me that a woman always prays "in the name of her husband." So, quite literally, an unmarried woman has no one in whose name she can pray, and this being the case, she cannot pray in the mosque (at least this was the case in Krs) or even at all. Also, people said that, because she can't pray, she will not be admitted into Paradise when she dies. Thus, for a woman it is considered highly perilous to be without a husband, and there is strong pressure to at least have a *furu siri* with someone. In the case of *musu tèrè jugu*, then, it would seem that the woman would find it nearly impossible to find someone willing to marry her once one or more previous husbands have died.

⁷ In the course of his search, MK also consulted with yet another friend of his, who was an Islamic specialist (*morike*) and who would tell him if and how a girl could be "had" (*soro*) or not. For example, the *morike* once informed MK that of the two women MK had seen, the latter was "no good," but the former would be a good choice, and was available to be married. (In the end, this didn't work out, but the council of his *morike* friend helped MK decide to pursue further marriage negotiations with the first girl's family).

⁸ The equation of capacity to do housework with suitability for marriage might seem unremarkable, yet I was struck at the strictness with which the people I knew maintained the identity of these two considerations. A particularly sad example of this was when a friend's second wife—who had returned home with her infant in order to prepare for the final step in the marriage process—suffered an apparent stroke that left her paralyzed on one side. As soon as we received this news, my friends all commented on the fact that the marriage was now surely over, and when I asked why, they informed me that "she can't do work now." In the months that followed, the husband at first diligently visited his wife at her father's compound, bringing gifts of food and carrying our well wishes and blessings for a full recovery. During this period, people still referred to the young woman as my friend's wife, and described her disabled state as an illness. When it became clear in the course of many months that the girl would not get better, even if she did make impressive progress and learned how to do many things using only her good arm, my friend slowly gave up on the marriage and started

looking for a new second wife. While I was quite horrified about the way this marriage was not continued, none of my (mostly female) friends were; they kept explaining to me that it made no sense to continue with the marriage now that the wife could not work.

⁹ VC's strong insistence on paying attention as a critical prerequisite for marriage might be partly related to the fact that he is a *fina* ("griot"), and *finaw* are the sole category of people for whom endogamy is still the norm. An interesting example of the different valuations of endogamy appears in the example VC gave me of someone hurrying into impregnating and marrying a girl without properly investigating her or heeding the advice of his seniors who had done so. In this case, YD's father ND (a *numu*) had been very much against YD's marriage to JK (a *horon*), because he (ND) knew she would not be a good wife. He repeatedly told his son, who wouldn't listen, however, and proceeded to make his girlfriend pregnant and marry her. Many years later, the marriage ended in a bitter divorce. VC clearly implied that the whole disaster could have been averted if only the son had listened to his father and respected the latter's skills in discerning a good wife from a bad—a calculation in which the family's divergent caste background certainly would have played a role as well. At least implicitly, then, VC champions the prudence of marrying one's own *siya*. Yet as much as the failed marriage between YD and his wife was a popular topic for gossip and speculation, other people never suggested the incompatibility of *siya* as a reason for the union's dissolution, nor did they bring up how the warnings of ND had turned out to be true.

¹⁰ By the time I came back in Nrn in 2003, the mother had been married to a man from another *horon* family and lived in France. The father lived in Bko but hadn't married yet. The baby girl now lived on her father's compound, where her grandmother took care of her until the latter's death in 2005. It is a common arrangement for children born out of wedlock to live with their mothers for the first few years and move to the father's compound when old enough—provided that the father has recognized the child at birth and has continued to take care of him or her (by providing money for food and clothes). When he has failed to do so, though, the child stays on the natal compound of the mother; when the mother gets married, the child does not move to the compound of the mother's husband.

¹¹ The site of Hopkins' fieldwork was the village of Kita and its surrounding hamlets in the Mande region.

¹² And some other *numu* families in what is considered Bamana territory as well. In Ksm, people consider themselves part of the history and space of Mande, yet they also recognize many of their neighbors as being Bamana. In the past, Ksm's *numuw* intermarried with *numuw* living both inside and outside Mande, that is, among the Bamana as well. Here, the equivalency between "caste" and "ethnic group" as possible translations for *siya* is particularly salient and points to the problematic nature of both translations.

¹³ The genealogical data I collected seem to bear out the prevalence of "same-caste" marriages in all generations except the present. I established genealogies for the two principal *numu* lineages in Krs, as well as for one important

lineage each in two more villages (Nrn and Ksm). In each case, I worked with the elder men and women of a particular compound to document the familial relations (as parents, spouses, and children) between the current generations living on the compound, working our way backward as far as memory served (in most cases, to the “grandparents” of the current generation of elders). Focusing on breadth rather than depth, I asked about the names of the fathers and grandfathers, the mothers and grandmothers, taking care to note whether or not they had been *numu*, and where they were from. The data contained in these genealogies show a clear pattern of marriages exclusively among *numu* families, with multiple linkages between any two of these families. Anecdotal genealogical data for other *nyamakala* lineages (primarily *finaw* and *jeliw*) as well as for Keita branches in different villages suggest that the same holds true there.

Historians are rightly suspicious of genealogical evidence, because genealogies, like other representations of the past are easily manipulated in light of current political interests. Thus, my genealogical data need additional evidence in order for us to make more precise announcements about the prevalence of caste endogamy at various moments in the past. Because the collection of these kinds of historical data are beyond the scope of the current project, I leave the question of the history of caste endogamy aside for the moment. Instead, I am concerned here with the contemporary discourse that situates these marriage preferences and practices squarely in the past.

¹⁴ The absoluteness with which a daughter is admonished to transfer her loyalties to her husband’s family is not matched in practice by a complete separation of the ties between them. To the contrary, many women spend considerable time at home with their parents in the course of the years’ long process of becoming fully married and an integral part of her husband’s family. Moreover, there are numerous examples of marriages not working out and the girl being welcomed back into the parent’s compound until another husband can be found. Yet it is equally true that many girls are pressured to remain married and to patiently suffer in a difficult marriage. Especially when her own father and mother are no longer alive, it might be exceedingly difficult for a woman to be accepted back at home and her family will exert considerable pressure on her to stay with her husband. In a particularly sad case I knew of, the woman was barely allowed back to her older brother’s compound (after the death of their parents) once her husband divorced her. To force her out, even if she didn’t have any viable place to go, the brother also denied her and her young children access to any food prepared on the compound.

¹⁵ The idea that *numumusow* have longer pregnancies than other women is part of a wider practice whereby social differences (between *numumusow* and women from other social groups) are couched in biological terms. In a similar vein, one of the *numukew* I spoke to maintained that *numuw* (both men and women), because of their longer time in the womb also had more ribs than other people, and more *fanga* (strength, power, stamina) too. Moreover, the greater *fanga* of *numumusow*, as evidenced in their longer pregnancies, can also somehow be transmitted to other women. One of the *numumuso* I spoke to explained:

“A woman who is not a potter can jump over the dagawoloso (long stick with metal sickle at the end, used to retrieve baked pots from the fire), and if she is of childbearing age, then her pregnancy will last for twelve months. There will be no problems. If she jumps over it, then her pregnancy will last a long time, because numuw are strong. The stomach of a numu and the stomach of a woman who is not a potter are not the same. Pregnancies of other women last for only eight or seven months, but for us they last much longer. If you jump over the dagawoloso, your pregnancy will last ten or eleven months. It is the pregnancy of the numumusow. If a woman does not carry her child to term, people tell her to jump over the dagawoloso when the numumusow are firing their pots. Then her children will be strong and she will not deliver them early. The child will be big and strong at the time of delivery.”

¹⁶ “The Nuer” constitute a paradigmatic case of a lineage-based (patrilineal) society, which was made classic in the writings of Evans-Pritchard. Holy’s analysis, however, shows that Nuer people recognize other ways of constructing kinship besides patrilineal descent, including affinal relations and change brought about by the birth of children.

¹⁷ Stafford (2000) makes a similar point concerning the Chinese system of patrilineality, by showing the importance of relationships of “affairs of the heart” for understanding Chinese notions of relatedness. He argues that the exclusive focus on patrilineal descent in accounts of Chinese kinship has resulted in a mistaken view of Chinese kinship as rigid and nonfluid, while in fact the system is much more creative, fluid and processual (Stafford 2000:38).

¹⁸ The union between MD and JT was hardly considered successful by local standards. First of all, both partners (but the wife in particular) died before having attained full “old personhood” (*moyokorobaya*). Of their four children to survive through adolescence, two had died as adults (one of them recently, which was widely considered a very traumatic experience for both parents), and a third had just lost his wife and child. Their compound was extremely poor (even for local standards), both in material resources as well as able-bodied persons to help with farming. The husband, while a relatively successful trader in the past, had long been ill and unable to work much; he spent the little money his son brought in (before the latter passed on) on liquor and cigarettes. His wife was widely considered “brave” because she continued to work hard at both farming and pottery, even going so far as to defy custom and plead with the elder women on the compound to let her pick up pottery again well before the required 4 months and 10 days of her “widowhood” (*firiya*) were over.

Considering the many traumas that this couple had endured in recent years, I was almost inclined myself to see this as evidence that their cross-caste marriage might have been ill-advised. After all, my informants would tell me repeatedly that in the past these marriages were considered “not good” because they would lead one or both partners to die prematurely and/or result in offspring dying young. Indeed, for the few cases people had heard about of marriages with a *fina* (always in Bamako), the negative consequences were always played up (“it

didn't last young, or he fell ill and eventually he died"). The lack of such explanations in the case of MD-JT's marriage just struck me as notable.

¹⁹ Additionally, at this point it isn't just the marriage between MD and JT that is at stake, because their marriage has been followed by numerous other marriages between the D and Tr families. The density of marriage linkages that currently bind these families together would seem to make it hard to go back to the premise that they are fundamentally different *siyaw*, incompatible in marriage.

²⁰ For example, while the D family might have felt that the T were "only strangers" and the T, similarly, that the D were "only *numuw*," in this scenario, both families might also have felt that they each had something to gain from a marriage union. I admit that this is speculative.

The reason I hadn't noticed sooner that the T's status might actually have been problematic for the D family (and not just the other way around) is that for most of my stay in Krs (before the land conflict), the stranger heritage of the family was never stressed. Moreover, the current T families seemed to do quite well economically, compared to some other families, and besides, since the first marriage between JT and MD, the two families had been linked by a number of more recent marriages in both directions.

²¹ Obviously, there is a difference between knowledge and the contexts in which (and by whom) it can be made public. As discussed in Chapter 4, illegitimacy is considered a crucial issue in Mande, so that the knowledge about who is or isn't a legitimate child is crucial to have. MK's statement suggests that this kind of information is publicized in the course of the marriage proceedings is interesting, because it suggests one of the contexts in which this kind of knowledge is made public (and in doing so, transmitted to younger generations). At the same time, people obviously don't go about calling this girl (or any others in a similar situation) *nyamagoden* in regular polite conversation.

²² In response to this first part of the account, MLK's son TK explains, speaking on behalf of his father, that they haven't been able to find a wife because the young man hasn't until now come back since first making the request was made; granted, the man phoned them from time to time but this is not a matter for phone calls, TK cautions. However, now that they have come back, MLK agrees to find the man a wife.

²³ In response to the man's request, MLK agreed to find him a wife. That same night, MLK called for a neighbor whose daughter might be a suitable marriage candidate. The man listens to the story and says they'll ask the girl. If she agrees, which they refer to as "honor her master" (*mansa bonya*), he says they will be able to marry. But this is not something to discuss at night, so he suggests MLK call the girl the following morning to ask her then. This is indeed what happens; the girl answers that she is "her father's" (*ne fa ta di*), which means she agrees to the proposed marriage. From there, the marriage negotiations between the two families can start, but I wasn't around to follow those.

²⁴ See de Jorio (2002) and Grosz-Ngate (1988) for accounts of the multiple steps involved in "getting married" among Bamana people living in Bamako and Segou, respectively. In Mande, the *furusiri* accomplished the requirements for

marriage according to Islam, as well as being a first step in the multi-year process of becoming fully married in a traditional sense; in Krs, the *furusiri* was commonly carried out at the mosque, while in Ksm it took place takes place in the *bolon* (“reception hut”) of the village chief, as the owner of the village and everything in it. See also Muurling (forthcoming) about the intricacies of Mande marriage practices.

²⁵ This request is conveyed cryptically, as I have observed on some other occasions as well (yet far from all). The mood in the room is joyous, and Ksm’s village chief (*dugutigi*) is decidedly playful in this exchange. According to my notes, the visitors first ask the chief “to give us something.” The *dugutigi* answers that it is no problem but that he doesn’t know what they would like him to give them, as his village has sheep and goats and so many wonderful things.” “Indeed,” the same visitor who has asked the original question answers, “the kinds of things that exist in the world are numerous, but what we would like is the daughter of DK.” The *dugutigi* again says sure, no problem. But if so, they’ll need to give him a 100,000 francs CFA (ca. 200 USD) finder’s fee, because he is the one giving it to them. This again is a playful touch because the money for the assembled fathers and grandfathers from Ksm is customarily only 1,000 francs CFA (ca. 2 USD).

²⁶ A similar conceptualization of marriage relationships in terms of roads has been described for Papua New Guinea (O’Hanlon and Frankland 2003).

²⁷ Another way in which the idea was expressed is in the blessing I noted at some of the weddings I attended, “May the name of the *furunyelo* be forgotten.” The *furunyelo* is the person, always a man, who is in charge of being the intermediary between the two families, one on each side. Thus, the marriage road is first created, or more precisely, scouted out, by the person responsible for bringing a couple together. The blessing that his name be forgotten concretely refers to the continued role of the *furunyelo* in mediating and being a spokesperson for the respective partner and family in cases of conflict in the marriage. In other words, the blessing asks that the union may be successful and with no need to call upon the services of the marriage intermediary. Moreover, if he is never called upon people will eventually forget who he was, which is the hoped-for situation. The blessing thus concisely makes the case that the *furunyelo* may be the one who started the road between two families, but ideally his name should be forgotten and the road continue to exist on its own.

²⁸ The “marriage problem” in the countryside is mostly a male problem; in Bamako, however, it is also well-educated women who have a hard time getting married.

²⁹ Interestingly, Mbow’s evidence for her first claim—the continued relevance of the “problem of caste”—specifically highlights the importance of marriage preferences both in sustaining the “caste system” and /causing the majority of “caste-related” suffering:

“The caste system is particularly intractable when it comes to marriage relations [because] everyone has to submit him or her self to pre-marriage scrutiny (l’enquête matrimoniale): above all, one has to avoid

the mixing of blood. The consequences of this situation are multiple, but the most frequent ones remain premature divorces and/or a break with one's family of origin. Other consequences are abortions—which are not always caused by a problem of caste, but they might be the reason for it—the majority of suicides and attempted suicides, infanticide, and life-long traumas because of a lost love.” (Mbow 2000:86-7, my translation).

Mbow's words are worth quoting at length for the different perspective she brings to the “problem of caste” in contemporary African societies. Regarding the persistence of caste, she notes:

“Today, the social condition of people of caste has changed, without the system of castes itself having disappeared; its relicts, indeed, have a tangible impact on the collective conscience imposed by the Wolof, Fulani, Bamana, or Sereer [cast] systems, and they constitute real barriers to the start of an actual democracy—particularly at the basic level—as well as to the individual's “taking account of him or her self” (Mbow 2000:73, my translation).

Similarly, she concludes her impassionate account of caste as a human rights issue, by asking:

“How can we fight our economic lack of development without promoting new ideas in order to discredit certain dogmas, prejudices, fanaticism, arbitrariness, social parasites, that is, all the anachronisms of a society that has become too intelligent, so to speak, for its own social structures? Answering this question means first of all proposing the total eradication of the caste system, among other anachronisms.” (Mbow 2000:90, my translation).

CHAPTER SIX

“THIS THE PROPHET HAS DONE, THIS HE HAS NOT” EXEMPLARY PRACTICE, VISIBILITY, AND ERASURE IN ISLAMIC RITUAL PRACTICE

Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. (Smith 1987:103)

If ritual is “first and foremost a form of paying attention” as the historian of religion Jonathan Smith has argued, a study of culturally specific ways of “paying attention” must address the modes of ritual that are most pertinent in the social context under consideration. In the case of contemporary Mande, ritual is indeed a productive site where questions of paying attention—most crucially, to what—are play out. First, Islamic ritual practices, which constitute by far the dominant religious practice in the region, rely on the notion of “the Prophet’s example” and thus invite attention to the particular practices constructed as exemplary and possible distinctions between signifying and contingent practices. Second, divergent interpretations of what following the Prophet’s example entails in terms of one’s ritual practice—divergences that can be associated with sociological and geographic factors—produce a varied ritual landscape; however, instead of becoming objects of attention, differences in Islamic ritual practice are actively ignored. In contrast to the willful inattention to divergent Islamic ritual practices, rituals that are considered non-Islamic (at least according to some local observers) are frequently constructed as discursive objects of attention, employed rhetorically to

oppose Islam and non-Islam. In practice, the greater or lesser visibility of ritual practices considered un-Islamic by some seems to have some bearing on whether or not they continue to be done.

This chapter makes an argument about what it means for Muslim believers to “follow the Prophet’s example.” This is an important issue in light of the increasing importance of so-called “reformist” understandings of Islam in Mande and the rest of Mali, as well as elsewhere (the label “reformist” and other matters of terminology are discussed momentarily). The “Prophet’s example”—what the Prophet has and has not done—emerges as a key component of the debates between those espousing “reformist” views and those who do not. Yet the way this category of “Prophet’s example” is constructed in everyday discussions, critical assessment of locally and non-locally produced sermons, and daily religious practice remains ill understood. In this chapter, I address the everyday sociality in which religious concerns take shape by taking seriously my interlocutors’ claim that as Muslims they endeavor “to follow the Prophet’s example.” What do they take this injunction to mean? How do they reconcile the distance in time, place, and cultural context between when, where, and how Muhammad set his examples and the circumstances in which his followers try to follow them? What do they make of the readily observable differences in religious practice among fellow-Muslims who nevertheless all feel to be following the example set by Muhammad? How can one tell if a practice carried out by the Prophet in fact constitutes an example to be followed?

Previous research largely fails to address how local people who are not religious experts decide, debate, claim, and contest that they or others are (not) following the Prophet’s example, and the semiotic processes at work here. However, with exemplary practice as a key concept for Islamic religious practice, we need to better understand the semiotic ideologies framing some practices as exemplary, while others are taken to be contingent. This is not only a theological question—although Muslim theologians have been centrally concerned with the issue—but a matter of considerable local concern as well. My contribution lies in detailing how these debates evolve in a particular local context, where differences

in Islamic interpretation and practice are a conspicuous aspect of social life. Thus, reflection on this diversity is to be expected. Moreover, such reflection is not restricted to those who would return to more pious Islamic practice, but also pursued by those who are skeptical of those attempts. As detailed in Chapter 3, Islam has become a growing presence in Mali—punctuated by crucial moments such as the 1940s when pilgrimages became more common and new interpretations of Islam were introduced, the 1960s when Muslim associations and Qur’anic schools were established *en masse*, and the 1990s and 2000s when Islam came to play an important role in the public sphere. Yet I have still to show how the products and means of a growing “Islamic sphere” (Launay and Soares 1999)—sermons on cassettes and local radio stations, instructional pamphlets, amplified calls for prayer—are critically received and assessed by variously positioned local people.

There is little doubt among scholars and participants of Islam alike about the importance of correct ritual performance and its basis in the exemplary practice of the Prophet. In theological terms, the criteria for assessing if a specific ritual practice conforms to the Prophet’s example and/or in what formal or other aspects are required for it to constitute a faithful rendering of this example are based on the discursive tradition of the Qur’an and the Hadiths (oral traditions about the words and deeds of the Prophet.) The notion of *isnad* (“the chain of transmission”) is of particular importance here, since the assessment of ritual’s appropriateness and proper form ultimately relies on the faithful transmission of a ritual’s core constituents over time. In a study of the Muslim prayer (*salat*) in Indonesia, Bowen highlights the importance of exemplary practice, noting “Carrying out the ritual of *salat* correctly means replicating those acts performed by the Prophet Muhammad *that were intended to serve as guides for the Muslim community*” (Bowen 2000:24, my italics).¹ Similarly, studies of so-called reformist Muslims in Africa have amply documented the desire of such believers to “return to proper Muslim practice” (Schulz 2008, Masquelier 2009, Janson 2005, LeBlanc 1999, Lambek 2000, Launay and Soares 1999). As I alluded to above, however, the notion of “returning to proper Muslim practice” conceals as much as it reveals and

begs the question of just how believers—reformists, traditionalists, and those who are uninterested in the whole discussion, among others—decide what counts as “proper Muslim practice.”

My analysis explores the possibilities for everyday discourses, opposing understandings, and broader debates afforded by the key trope of “exemplary practice” and its entailments about, for example, the intentionality attributed to the Prophet in providing certain practices *as* examples. By highlighting how variously positioned people frame certain Muslim ritual practices as conforming to (or deviating from) an ideal of “following the Prophet’s example”—including how others react to their claims, how they convince or fail to convince others, and how the discourse of exemplary practice constitutes a shared discursive space—my analysis extends the range of what count as “Muslim voices.” Indeed, an important finding here is that the discourse of “following the Prophet’s example,” which is normally associated with so-called reformist understandings of Islam, is taken up by those skeptical of a reformist agenda to “talk back” to them.

In contrast to the current trend to focus particularly on the positionality of self-identified pious Muslims, the discourses that I describe in this chapter—circulated regardless of the distinction between “reformists” and “traditionalists;” which may be verbally or bodily enacted, resisted, or ignored (studiously or not); and that crucially involve silences and gaps—involve a much wider range of participants. I present the insights of not just reformist believers, but also of those who are staunchly proud of Mande’s traditional ways of being Muslim, as well as those who are still making up their minds about the issue, those who do not care either way, or those who content themselves with being quiet observers. In doing so, I heed the call of Schielke (2010), who has recently taken anthropologists of Islam to task for playing into the ideas and ideals of self-identified pious Muslims, often “reformists,” privileging their views on who or what is “really” Muslim. While I appreciate Schielke’s point that a narrow focus on only those believers for whom the pious practices of the self are at the forefront of their daily lives unduly excludes the perspective from many Muslims, I do not follow him in his rethinking of Asad’s notion of Islam as a discursive tradition. Asad’s basic ap-

proach still seems quite useful to the study of Islam, as the numerous ethnographies employing this framework attest (Masquelier 2009). Masquelier's recent book (2009) is a particularly appropriate model for this chapter because of its focus on rural Muslims and her call to take more seriously the sophistication of rural believers and their critical assessments of key religious questions.

* * *

Before proceeding with the argument, let me clarify the terminology used in this chapter and my rationale for using the terms I do. So far, I have used the terms “reformist” and “traditional” Muslims as broad categories for the two main ways of being Muslim in Mande. While these two categories were indeed commonly recognized and talked about by my interlocutors as opposing identities, they did not use these particular terms. More precisely, they did not use the term “reformist” at all, and the term “traditional” only infrequently, and only as a French gloss. Instead, those who self-identified as “traditional” Muslims understood their religious practice as the “way of our ancestors” or the “old/original” form of Islam in Mande; they tended to refer to “reformists” as Wahabi—a term with strong negative connotations. In contrast, so-called Wahabi most commonly referred to themselves as Sunnis. To bring out the more precise local understandings of this terminology *and* the contradictions therein, Brenner (1993) employs the terms Wahabi/Sunnis and Traditional/Orthodox; indeed, these terms are useful to describe the Malian religious landscape, provided that the internal variety and specific history of both terms is clearly understood.²

As Brenner has noted, there are several ironies in the way this terminology of being Muslim in Mali is employed in Mali generally. The characterization of Wahabi/Sunnis as “reformist,” for example, might be well established locally, yet clearly conflicts with a larger international perspective wherein Sunnis call themselves “traditional” (Brenner 1993:67). Indeed, the theological position of Wahabi/Sunnis maintains that this form of Islam is ideologically “pure” as opposed to other modes of Islamic practice that they criticize for being riddled with “innovations” (*bidan*).³ Moreover, the notion of “tradition” in the context of Islam—

which as I indicated is always used in French—covers a complicated discursive field: the French connection points to the defining relevance of the colonial period as the time when the opposition between different kinds of Islam came to be solidified, not least due to French interest and fears about Arab influences in their colonies. As discussed in Chapter 3, the colonial period saw a proliferation of Islamic identities, which were variously associated with socio-economic factors as well, such as the predominantly urban and merchant character of Wahabiya/Sunna Islam (cf. Amselle 1985). The social, economic, and political intersections with religious identities continues to complicate the simple opposition between variously positioned Muslims, let alone the notions “traditional” and “modern” (Brenner 1993).⁴

The terminology that I propose to use in the remainder of this chapter highlights the difference that is locally felt to be emblematic of the two distinct ways of being Muslim described so far. This difference is that of the characteristic mode of prayer practices by “those who pray with their arms/hands up” versus “those who pray with their arms/hands down.” Like other terms, then, the pair of local terms I prefer are used oppositionally and presuppose the existence of distinct groups of Muslims in a way that is problematic from a scholarly perspective. Unlike other terms more commonly used in the literature, however, my terminology corresponds closely to local usage and is locally felt to be descriptive enough that it is used by either side, and as both self- and other-identifying terms. Most importantly, the terminology aligns the locally relevant modes of being Muslim with one’s mode of prayer, which forms the primary case study discussed in this chapter.

PRAYER BETWEEN OBJECT OF NON-ATTENTION AND EXEMPLARY PRACTICE

When my research assistant VC and I were visiting relatives of his in another village, VC’s classificatory uncle, who had observed him at prayer, asked him, “So, are you still praying that way?” The uncle was referring to the way VC held his arms and hands during prayer—outstretched alongside the body instead of held crossed over the breast, as was the uncle’s own way of prayer. VC responded po-

lately, “Yes, I am only a youngster, I haven’t yet arrived at the point of holding up my arms.” I did not give this short exchange much thought, even if it was uncommon for people to directly ask about, let alone challenge, one another’s mode of prayer. More importantly, though, VC’s response was perfectly aligned with the dominant discourses on prayer—that is, if people are going to change their mode of prayer, it will be from “arms/hands down,” as VC was doing currently, to “arms/hands held,” as he apparently could envision himself doing in the future.

To my surprise, a few months later VC mentioned that his father had taught him how to pray—with his arms/hands held. We were sitting on the veranda of a mutual friend and talking about how different people in town prayed. VC’s comment surprised me, first of all, because I had seen him pray many times, and always with his arms down. Secondly, I remembered his earlier admission (to his uncle) that he was as yet “too young” to pray with his arms held, so I retroactively became confused about his response to his uncle, as well as about the uncommon direction of his switch in prayer mode. When I asked him why he had stopped praying with his arms held and started praying with arms down, he explained, “I switched a few years ago, because I did not want people to insult me” (*dogoya*, literally “to diminish, to make smaller”).

The two examples above, of VC discussing his mode of prayer in public and rationalizing an actual and (maybe) envisioned shift in how he prays, raise a number of questions that this chapter will address. First of all, what is at stake in these different modes of prayer, which are locally referred to as “arms/hands down” and arms/hands held respectively? That is, why would VC feel it necessary to switch from one mode to the other, and why would he do so in a direction that reverses what is commonly perceived as the “natural” direction of such changes?; and how, in fact do (or do not) modes of prayer align with discourses about knowledge, generational difference, and a propensity for being insulted? Secondly, if one’s mode of prayer references how the Prophet Muhammad used to pray, as many people say, how did some of my interlocutors simultaneously maintain that the Prophet prayed with his arms/hands held while also arguing that they themselves should continue to pray with their arms/hands down?

*Bolominelaw and bolojigilaw in a sociology of religion:
local and scholarly accounts*

Let's begin by looking more closely at the two modes of prayer that I referred to above as a terminological issue and which also figure in the account about VC. As will be recalled, these modes are “arms/hands down”—*bolojigi* or *bolowbila* in Bamana/Maninka—on the one hand, and “arms/hands held”—*bolomine*—on the other.⁵ These terms can be substantivized by adding the suffix *-law* (“those who commonly or habitually do the action expressed in the verb”) to form the most common local expression of two main modes of being Muslim in Mande: *bolominelaw* (“those who pray with their arms/hands held”) and either *bolojigilaw* or *bolobilalaw* (“those who pray with their arms/hands down”). In Brenner's terminology referenced above, *bolominelaw* can be further identified with Wahabi/Sunnis, whereas *bolojigilaw/bolobilalaw* can be considered traditional/Orthodox.

Yet in Mande, the distinction between *bolominelaw* and *bolojigilaw* does not solely identify Muslims along the Wahabi/Sunni versus Traditional/Orthodox axis, even if this is an important part of the two terms' connotations. Beyond signaling their adherence to one of these general interpretations of Islam, rural Mande Muslims also employ the embodied practices of prayer to make salient statements about knowledge, power, and kinship. The distinctive direction of the shift in prayer made by VC is in fact an apt example of how modes of prayer do not just signify a person's broad-stroke religious identity, but can also be made to establish one's social persona in much more subtle ways. In order to explain how this worked in VC's case, I first need to sketch more of the way people in Mande understand the basic distinction between *bolomine* and *bolojigi* modes of prayer.

As the history of Islam in Mande (Chapter 3) showed, returning pilgrims who were swayed by Sunna Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Egypt were the first to introduce the mode of prayer with “arms/hands held” (*bolomine*) in Mande, from circa the 1940s onwards.⁶ Thus, this mode of prayer is locally seen as both “newer” as well as associated with an agenda of Wa-

habiya/Sunna Islam much as Brenner discussed for Mali as a whole. Yet it is important to note that the actual adherence to reformist ideals by “those who pray with their arms/hands held” (*bolominelaw*) varies considerably, depending on people’s particular family histories and the personal trajectories that resulted in their adoption of this mode of prayer. Indeed, for some who were raised to pray “with arms/hands held” from infancy—as opposed to their father or grandfather adopting it upon returning from Mecca or as a result of observing and learning about it from a friend—this bodily habitus might be the source of very little consideration, theologically or otherwise. On the other hand, an original impetus to a “reformist” understanding of Islam is sometimes explicitly transmitted within certain families.

Just as the *bolomine* mode of prayer is undisputedly considered a “newer” form of prayer, everyone I spoke to also agreed that the original way for Malian (indeed, African) Muslims to pray was *bolojigi* or *bolobila*: with arms/hands stretched out, down along the sides of the body. “In the past,” people said—which might refer to different historical moments depending on their particular village, town, or lineage—“everyone prayed with their arms/hands down.” The equation of *bolobila* or *bolojigi* with “traditional” Islam thus first refers to temporal primacy for the specific geographic context of Mande. Secondly, and again in line with Brenner’s assessment, this mode of prayer is considered “traditional” or “traditionalist” by way of contrast with the “arms/hands held” mode of prayer introduced by proponents of reformist interpretations of Islam.

Attendant on a difference in mode of prayer, then, are other distinctions between people who self-identify as either *bolominelaw* or *bolojigilaw*. These differences might include subscribing to certain theological interpretations of the Qur’an, attendance at particular mosques, and a practical orientation towards performing rituals in particular ways. These differences are more pronounced in towns where there is more than one Friday mosque, such that one is more strongly associated with one mode of prayer and a second one with the other (this is the case in Krs, for example). They also tend to be more salient, particularly in the

case of *bolominelaw*, for those who have adopted this mode of prayer more recently.

Not unlike scholars who have mapped differences or shifts in prayer onto sociological factors—such as the adoption of Wahabiya Islam predominantly among urban Malian merchants (Amselle 1985), my interlocutors in Mande also espoused a sociological interpretation of sorts to explain why particular people prayed in particular ways. Regardless of their own mode of prayer, most people had a clear view of what the “ideal-typical” *bolominela* (“who prays with arms/hands up”) looked like: young, male, and with a keen interest in the Qur’an and all matters Islamic. Especially when it comes to actively changing one’s mode of prayer—as opposed to following one’s received mode, regardless of its form—the people I spoke to also agreed that this generally happened in one direction only: from arms/hands down to arms/hands held. The salient discourse here is one of Islamic learning. The more knowledgeable about Islam, the more likely someone is to pray with arms/hands held (*bolowmine*), the way of prayer associated with knowledge of Islam, which in turn is considered to be the key factor in people’s decision to change their mode of prayer. As though to back up this sociological discourse, a number of young men in Krs had changed in recent years from praying with their arms down to arms held. For example, our neighbor JC was a schoolteacher in Krs, who had changed his mode of prayer some years ago. Indeed, he explicitly linked his own shift from *bolobilala* to *bolominela* to his deepening Islamic knowledge.

Interestingly, prayer is one domain where the authority of youth and elders is considered to be reversed, because the gerontocratic ideal of elders as prime sources of knowledge emphatically excludes the domain of Islamic knowledge. As noted above, Mande contrasts in this regard with neighboring areas in Guinea, Senegal, and central Mali, where an established tradition of Islamic learning associates Islamic learning also with elders, even if some youth might contest whether elders in fact possess the “right” Islamic knowledge. In Mande, however, many elders readily acknowledge that they are not much learned in Islamic scholarship,

just as most people in discussions of how the Prophet himself would have prayed readily conform to reformist claims of authority.

At the same time, many people also hold that increasing Islamic knowledge does not necessarily lead to a reversal in one's mode of prayer. Obviously, those who pray with their arms/hands down disagree and point out that increased knowledge of Islam does not *necessarily* lead to prayer with arms/hands held. As BC, a young man who was fairly critical of those who prayed with their hands held, insisted that even if someone acquired more Islamic knowledge, there were still two options, "once someone starts studying the Qur'an in more depth, some of them continue to pray with their arms/hands down, and some of them start praying with their arms/hands held." Praying with one's arms/hands held is thus by no means the only possible result of acquiring more knowledge about Islam through in-dept study of the Qur'an. However, even if the other possible outcome of a person's deepened religious knowledge of the Qur'an is that he or she continues to pray with arms/hands down, the reverse is not the case.

An important aspect of making sense of divergent modes of prayer is also geography, where certain villages were identified by a particular mode of prayer. By and large these assertions might be true, which only serves to place the original question of why certain people were persuaded to adopt a particular mode of prayer further back in time (i.e., the 1940s and 50s instead of the current moment). Furthermore, the wholesale identification of particular villages with a mode of prayer belies the greater variability that exists locally.

This might be seen most clearly in the case of women. The women I knew indicated that they had been taught how to pray as girls (most often by their fathers, but sometimes at Qur'an school); moreover, they felt they needed to continue to pray "the way they were taught." Because marriages are not arranged according to the respective families' mode of prayer, a woman might easily find herself praying differently from her husband. For example, MS, a young woman on our compound in Ksm had been born and raised in Kll, where "everybody" prayed with arms/hands held. She, too, had thus been taught in this way, and remained committed to doing so in Ksm as well. In fact, she was quite critical of

the lack of Islamic schooling and learning in Ksm, in which she compared Ksm unfavorably with her hometown. Yet while she saw no reason to change her father's way of prayer after marriage, this choice might have been facilitated by the fact that her prayers were largely beyond others' powers of observation. That is to say, like all young and middle-aged women I knew, MD did her prayers in the privacy of her own room.

“The ‘head’ of all worship taken together” and “the worst of all the word’s works”: prayer and its ‘other’

Scholars working in a variety of other Islamic contexts have noted that prayer is locally recognized as the key practice in defining what it means to be a Muslim, as is the case in Mande as well. Recent scholarship on Islamic prayer has pointed out some of the ritual's central qualities—its portability, visibility, dramatic nature, and repetition—and specifically discussed its potential to shape Muslim moral subjects (Mahmood 2005, Simon 2009, Henkel 2005, Parkin 2000, Masquelier 2001 and 2009, Starrett 1995). The centrality of prayer is as great in Mali as it is in West Sumatra, according to Simon's description:

Prayer is one of the most frequent topics of sermons and religious lectures, which regularly emphasize the obligation to pray, the benefits of prayer, the proper way to approach prayer, and the gravity of sin of the neglected prayer. When my conversations with people turned to matters of religion, or even the idea of being a good person, prayer usually found its way to the center of the discussion. (Simon 2009:259)

I too found that in Mande, as in Sumatra, no other Islamic practice was so widely advocated as the obligation to pray, both in sermons and by lay people counseling each other.

Let me introduce the importance of prayer in Mande by means of a sermon on the topic delivered by a local Muslim scholar (AK) on the radio station of Bcm (“Foot County Radio”). This radio station was important in the region where I did most of my fieldwork, and could easily be received in both Krs and Ksm, which are both within a 50-kilometer radius of Bcm. The programming on “Foot Country Radio” was exclusively in Maninka, and on Fridays many pro-

grams were dedicated to Islamic topics, including sermons. A regular contributor of sermons was AK, a Qur’anic scholar from a hamlet not far from Bcm. Like most people in Bcm, AK prays with his arms/hands held, although this fact is not relevant for his explanation of the importance of prayer that follows. Identifying his mode of prayer is, however, important for some of the other topics he addressed later in the sermon, and in another sermon I discuss in a later section.

In the first fragment, AK argues that prayer is the most important of all religious practices required of Muslims, calling it the “head” of all worship:

*Kira y’o fo,
a ko alikiyamadon,
adamaden ka baara folo
min be ta ka la mijani na ka pese
o de ye seli ye.
Ni seli nyena,
i ka sun be laje,
ka hiji laje, ka jaka laje.*

*Nka, n’a soro,
ni seli ma nye dun,
a ma k’a kejogo la,
a ma ke ka nye,
o tuma, gafe min b’i bolo,
Ala b’a tugu ka d’i ma,
k’ale mako t’i ka gafe to la tuguni.*

*Hali n’a soro jaka nyena,
hali n’a soro sun nyalen,
hali n’a soro hiji nyalen,
hali n’a soro i ye jahadi min ke,
o nyalen,
Ma Adama a b’i ka gafe tugu
ka d’i ma,
k’ale mako t’a la.
O b’a yira ka fo,
ko bato bee lajelen kun de
ye seli ye.*

The Prophet has said
that on Judgement Day
the first work of humans
that will be weighted on the scale
is prayer.
When one’s praying was good,
your fasting will be looked at,
and your pilgrimage and your almsgiving
will be inspected.
But if it turns out
that one’s praying wasn’t good,
wasn’t done in the way it should,
wasn’t done so as to be good,
at that time, Allah will close the notebook
that is yours, and give it to you,
saying that He doesn’t need your notebook
anymore.
Even if it turns out the alms giving was
good, even if the fasting was good, even if
the pilgrimage was good, even if it turns
out that the internal striving for self-
perfection you have done was good,
Ma Adama will close your notebook
and give it to you,
saying he doesn’t need it.
This goes to show that
the “head” of all worship taken together
is prayer.

The fact that prayer forms the “head” (*kun*) of Islamic practice constitutes it as sitting at the very top of the hierarchy of religious practice as conceived of in bodily terms. The head is also the core, as in expressions such as *musokuntigi*, the

“leader of the women,” where the position of highest authority is conceived of as the ownership as the “head” of all women.

The emphasis of prayer as the core ritual practice, whose singular importance outweighs that of fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage, and even the striving for moral perfection, is not restricted to those who pray with their arms/hands held but is a widely shared sentiment. For example, several people told me that mosque-based prayer was the “poor people’s pilgrimage:” even if going on the pilgrimage to Mecca remains out of reach for most poor people, their regular attendance at the Friday prayer will count for just as much. Prayer also appears as a key marker of Islamization in people’s stories about their ancestors’ experiences with Islam. Here, prayer is the one religious practice that sets apart Muslims, “the ones who prayed” from non-Muslims, or “those who did *not yet* pray” (notice the teleological expression). On the most basic level, then, to pray means to be a Muslim, and conversely, to be a Muslim entails that one prays. Someone who does not pray—which was rare in my experience⁷—cannot properly be considered a Muslim. Moreover, the Bamanan/ Maninka term for prayer, *seli*, specifically refers to Muslim prayer, not the prayers carried out in other religious traditions.⁸ Hence the convoluted little dialogue I often had with people who asked me whether I prayed—*I be seli wa?* “Yes, I pray in church” (*N’be seli eglisi kono*). “Okay, so you *don’t* pray” (*Ohon, i te seli dè*).⁹

The discourse about prayer commonly involves contrastive terms, setting apart those who pray from those who do not (in the past) or those who pray properly and those whose prayer is somehow defective (in the present). Contrary to what the little conversation above implies, the identification of Islam with prayer is most commonly contrasted with Mande’s previously dominant ritual practices, not with Christianity.¹⁰ The distinguishing feature of these non-Muslim Mande ritual practices, from a contemporary Muslim perspective, is that they involve frequent “offerings” to various beings other than Allah. Bringing this kind of offerings is referred to as *son* (“making offerings”) and those who engage in it are by extension *sonikelaw* (“those who bring offerings”). In stories people told me about their ancestors not (yet) being Muslim, they would describe them as *soni-*

kelaw.¹¹ The receivers of these offerings could be many kinds of beings, but linguistically, the notion of *son* is most commonly employed to indicate a particular location or object as being on the receiving end. Thus, people frequently talked about the ritual practices of their not-yet-Muslim ancestors in terms of *ko son* (“making offerings to the fishing pond”), *jala son* (“to a particular kind of tree”), *basi son* (“to a power-object”), etc.

AK’s sermon also addresses the contrast of prayer as the quintessential marker of Islam with the practice of *son* (“offering”) with non-Islam. In the excerpt below, which followed the previous excerpt, AK rounds out his discussion of the “best” of all Muslim practices by contrasting it with the “worst” of all non-Muslim practices. In this context, it is important that AK prays with his arms/hands up, because his construction of the practices that qualify as *sonni* (“the act of offering”) includes ones that people who pray with their arms/hands down would not characterize as such. While AK does not use the term *sonni*, his argument is evidently in line with the general case against “offerings.” The specific practices AK’s sermon refers to are four-fold, with one substitution between the first and second time they are mentioned: throwing cowries, reading the sand, and divination with pebbles are mentioned both times. These are problematic both if engaged in by oneself as well as by means of someone’s services. In the first iteration, AK adds the practice of slaughtering an animal to get something in return, while the second time he includes the practice of maraboutage instead. All these practices have in common, according to AK, that they presuppose some powerful entity that could intervene in human concerns—a presupposition that is not only false, but a clear example of idolatry.

*Kira ko a ma,
alehin salatu wasalam:
silamake i ye seli la,
silamake i ye sunna,
silamake i ye jaka bo la,
nka e be don kolonnin filila kan,
e be don tinyelala kan,
e be don bere filila kan.
E be fen kan tige fen fene la.*

The Prophet—peace and blessings
be upon him—said to him:
You pray as a Muslim
You fast as a Muslim
You give alms as a Muslim
But you know based on cowry throwing,
you know based on reading the sand, you
know based on inspecting pebbles.
You slaughter something because of

*Sagajigigwe be e ka so kono,
 ko be e ka so tanga.
 Ah, a dunankorogwe be e ka so kono,
 ko be e ka so tanga,
 n badenw, k'ole ka jugu
 ka teme dinye baara bee lajelen kan
 Ka Faraona ci Misirakaw ma,
 o bee temelen.
 Nka Alakira kera bee lajelen ma.
 I ko, ko o sabatilen dun.
 Mun koson e b'oyi
 ka ta deme nyini danfen were fe?
 Mun koson e b'oyi
 ka ta nafolo nyini fen were fe?
 Mun koson e b'oyi
 ka ta den nyini fen were fe?
 Mun koson e b'oyi
 ka ta fen nyini fen were fe
 minnu Alahu Taala te kelen ye.
 E wato a nyini fen mun fe,
 o fene ye danfen ye
 i komi e yere ye danfen
 ye cogo mina,
 e Ala, badenw.
 An ka jija,
 silamaya te se ka ta hakili ko.
 O la, badenw, a ko o de ka jugu
 ka teme dinye baara bee lajelen kan.*

*Silamake e ye sunna,
 e ye seli la, e ye jaka bo la.
 E be ban tuguni ka taga mogo fe,
 mogo min ye morigwanani di,
 walima mogo min ye kolon filila di,
 walima mogo min ye kinyedala di,
 walima mogo min ye berelala di.
 Ah, balimake, balimamuso,
 i kana i yerekun janfa,
 i kana Ala janfa,
 i kana lahidu tinye,
 i ye lahidu min ta.*

something.

You have a white ram at home, and you say that he protects your house.
 Ah, you have a white cock at home, and you say that he protects your house.
 My brothers, he says that is worse than all the word's works taken together.
 And Faraone [?] was sent to the people of Misira, and they all have past.
 But the Prophet has become everything taken together, and it has been fulfilled.
 Why do you leave him aside to seek help from another creature?
 Why do you leave him aside to seek wealth from another creature?
 Why do you leave him aside to seek a child from another creature?
 Why do you leave him alone to seek something from something else, which is not (the same as) Allah?
 The thing you are seeking it from is also a creature like you yourself are a creature, in that same way,
 ah, Allah, my brothers and sisters.
 Let's try our best,
 Islam cannot go and leave thinking behind. That's why, brothers and sisters, he said that is worse than all the world's works taken together.
 You fast as a Muslim, you pray, you give alms.
 But you end up again going to people, people who are *marabouts*, or people who throw cowries, or people who read the sand, or people who inspect pebbles.
 Ah, my brother, my sister, don't betray yourself, don't betray God, don't break your promise, the promise that you have given.

In this excerpt, AK explains the problem with practices such as throwing cowries, and divining by means of sand or pebbles: they are idolatrous because they attrib-

ute powers to objects that do not have them, or alternatively to the people who manipulate those objects. Yet neither cowries, stones, pebbles, nor diviners of various kinds, nor again animals who are supposed to protect one's home from evil have the powers attributed to them. Supposing otherwise detracts from the unique power of Allah and thus is "worse than all the world's works taken together." Indeed, the theme of idolatry is a very common concern of those who pray with their arms/hands up and a staple of their sermons; moreover, such concerns are obviously not restricted to Mande. I have more to say about this below.

* * *

A final aspect of AK's radio sermon that I want to address here concerns a question he was asked by a listener afterwards. The possibility for listeners to call in to a particular show has become an increasingly popular feature of local radio, and Islamic programs are no exception. The caller's question brought up something hitherto excluded from AK's account, namely the readily observable fact of divergences in how the practice of prayer is carried out—or in this case, at what times exactly. The call for prayer is announced five times daily from local mosques, some of which are now amplified, but it soon becomes evident that the timing of the required prayers is not the same at different mosques. Like the visibility of modes of prayer with arms/hands held or down, the audibility of prayer calls inevitably draws attention to small but potentially significant differences in how ritual practices are carried out by Muslim believers. In the excerpt below, the caller identifies the obvious divergence of prayer times as a problem that requires solution. Positioning himself as someone without much Islamic learning, the caller politely asks the learned AK to identify the single proper time for prayer (in this example, the midday prayer, but the same divergence applies to other prayer times).

*N Karamogo, i ko i kuma la
k'a fo seli ka ke a waati la,
ayiwa, an munnu ma kalan,
an b'a fe ka don i fe,
waati kelen jumen de be seli la?
Ka masoro, fen do be, selifana,*

[Question:] Teacher, you said in your words that prayer should be done at its time. Well, we who are not learned, we would like to know from you, which one time there is for prayer? Because it turns out, there is something,

*a be fo ka ta une heure wagati
fo deux heures wagati.
Ayiwa, an bolo,
o te wagati kelen ye.
Ayiwa, i ka kan ka ke
waati min kono,
waati precisilen,
eeh, an b'a fe i ke
an naloniya a la.*

*Eh, n balimake,
i ye nyininkali ke,
ko n ka kuma konola la,
ka seli ke a waati la,
ayiwa, wagati jumen de dun,
ni an be se ka jate kelen mina?
Kira, alehin salato wasalam,
. . .
an b'a fo midi pile.
Midi pile, Jibrilayi nana ka na
selifana seli ani alakira ye,
alehin salato wasalam.
A kera midi pile.
O dugusegwe, midi trente selen
a nana fene ka na selifana seli ni a
ye. O dugugwe sabanan,
deux heures selen, a nana ka na seli-
fana seli n'a ye.
Donc, nin waati saba,
a nana o seli n'a ye,
mais a do kun folo,
a kelen midi pile,
filanan ye mun di, midi demi,
sabanan ye mun di, deux heures.
O bee lajelen ye tinye.
Mais min baraji ka bon,
o ye a kun folo folo di.*

the midday prayer, for example, people say it goes from 1 PM to 2 PM. Well, in our opinion, That is not one (the same) time. So, well, it should be done At what time, The exact time, Uh, we would like for you to make us know that.

[Answer:] my brother, you have made this inquiry, saying that in my words, about that prayer should be done at its (proper) time, well, what time is that, if we are able to come to one calculation. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, . . . we say 12 noon (sharp). At 12 noon sharp Jibril came to pray the midday prayer with the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. It happened at 12 noon (sharp). The following day, when it was 12:30, he also came to pray the midday prayer with him, and the following day, when it was 2 PM, he came to pray the midday prayer with him. So, at these three times he came to pray with him, but the first time happened at 12 noon (sharp), the second is what—12:30, the third is what—2 PM.

All of these are true (correct). But the time of which the divine blessing is largest, that is its very first “head”.

AK's answer to the caller's question is illustrative. That is, he acknowledges the differences in practice and then proceeds to downplay them at the same time that he pronounces a value judgment about the various possibilities. He effectively says, “all three prayer times are ‘true,’ but the one that is more true than the others is the first.” Not surprisingly, the first time—12 noon—is the time advocated by

those who pray with their arms/hands held, as does AK. But the anecdote recounted by AK is also revealing for the implicit argument it makes about the Prophet's example. That is, how do we conceive of the Prophet's example, in the singular, when the traditions of His words and deeds establish with authority that He carried out certain practices at multiple times of days or in more than one way. One solution is to just accept the multiplicity of the Prophet's practice in a particular respect, which is the impulse behind the first part of AK's answer. Yet the possibility of multiplicity is immediately rejected for the notion that one way/time/form must be "more true" than others. Specifically, the first time something is done is presented here as the most exemplary of examples. Indeed, it is again considered the "head" of all three possibilities.

If AK's answer is illuminating for the way it approaches the conundrum of how to understand the Prophet's example in the face of multiplicity, the caller's question is equally important for pointing out that even relatively minor differences in ritual practice attract people's attention. Indeed, as a key marker of Muslim identity, which is executed multiple times each day, in a highly audible and visible manner, prayer can easily become an object of debate. At the same time, these differences are not generally drawn attention to—AK's radio sermon being a case in point. Indeed, the publicly espoused notion that differences in people's mode of prayer are decidedly *not* worthy of attention is especially prominent in official communication, such as AK's sermon. The next section explores the tension between prayer as an object of non-attention and the obviousness with which differences in religious practice manifest themselves.

"We are all Muslims now:" prayer as an object of non-attention

As potential markers of theological difference, family history, and Islamic learning, modes of prayer in Mande are an integral part of people's lifeworlds and hence a prime object for close attention. Yet there is widespread conceit in much of the public discourse about issues pertaining to Islam that the differences in modes of prayer are explicitly *not* worth paying attention to, as mentioned below. This lack of attention forms a contrast with, and might well be a conscious reac-

tion against, more open and even violent tensions between *bolominelaw* and *bolobilalaw* in Mali's recent past.

Arguments and sometimes-violent conflicts about the appropriate form of prayer have been a recurrent feature of changing interpretations of "proper Islam" in a variety of historical contexts and geographic locations. A well-documented case is that of Kano, Northern Nigeria, where the colonial government issued a decree in 1965 "that imams (. . .) should no longer be allowed to cross their arms while leading prayers" (Paden 1975:200). This mode of prayer, with arms held up and crossed in front of the body, had been introduced in Kano, as in Mande, in the 1940s. Over time it "had become a symbol of community for the Reformed Tijaniyya and a symbol of heresy for nonmembers" (Paden 1975:200). From the 1950s onward, the issue of prayer became the major source of contention between adherents of the Reformed Tijaniyya brotherhood on the one hand and Traditional Tijaniyya as well as Traditional and Reformed Qadiriyya on the other, leading to riots and violent clashes on separate occasions in the 1950s and 60s (Paden 1975:197-204, Loimeier 1997). Similar debates about "how, when, and where to pray" (Masquelier 2008:49) have periodically heated up and died down elsewhere in West Africa, such as Northern Côte d'Ivoire in the 1970s and 80s (Launay 1989), as well as in Niger (Masquelier 2008) and The Gambia more recently (Jan-son 2009).

As far as I could ascertain, actual violence had not broken out in the Mande region. At the same time, conflicts and tensions had accompanied the introduction of the "arms/hands held" mode of prayer from the start, around the 1940s or 50s when individuals like FJ brought it to Kll (Chapter 3). Indeed, FJ's decision to found his Qur'an school in Kll instead of his village of origin, was directly related to the fact that his new ideas and practices of Islam were not welcomed in the latter, according to FJ's son. In Krs, it is plausible that debates about proper Islamic practice were a factor in the succession conflict following the death of SD, probably also in the 1940s. Interestingly, but unsurprisingly if viewed as another example of willed ignorance (or forgetting), the fact that there *was* a conflict at the root of the decision to build a second mosque in Krs is much

more readily remembered than the matter of what this conflict was about, particularly if it was related to the issue of *bolomine* prayer.

The conflict that was foremost on people's mind in 2005, however, was a widely reported clash that had happened in the South of Mali. In 2003, violent tensions broke out between traditionalists and reformists in a small town near Koutiala, when the former tried to prevent the latter from building a designated mosque for their own use. The resulting violence, which left nine people dead and two seriously wounded, was widely reported in the Malian news, as were the sentences for those found guilty of perpetrating the violence (four people receiving the death penalty and 84 others being sentenced to prison, according to the International Religious Freedom Report, Mali 2005). In 2005-6, numerous people I talked to alluded to this violence as an example of the negative consequences that could result from giving too much attention to internal divisions within the Muslim community.

Against such reports and memories of violence, my friends' and acquaintances' insistence on a public façade of Muslim commonality is understandable. Open acknowledgement of differences in ritual practice risked threatening both the ideal of the Islamic community as well as the more localized community of *siginyogonw* ("neighbors," cf. Chapter 5). Thus, even if Krs had designated mosques for *bolominelaw* and *bolobilalaw* like the village where such had led to bloodshed, the people I knew stressed how they all got along much better. Much of the discourse involved in downplaying the significance of divergences in prayer mode was in fact highly normative. For example, in response to my initial questions about different modes of prayer people commonly told me that one's mode of prayer was of much less importance than the fact *that* one prayed. The imam of Dnk vividly demonstrated this idea for me during one of his Qur'an school sessions. "You can pray like this," he said, sitting in his chair and putting his hands alongside the sides of his body, "or you can pray like this," holding up his hands together across his chest, "or even, you can pray like this," putting both hands on top of his head. "It does not matter how you pray," he concluded; it is all the same for Allah and the Qur'an." His wife, who had happened upon the

demonstration, questioned him if there really *were* people who prayed with their hands on the top of their head, which he said was not the case. Nevertheless, he insisted, if someone decided tomorrow to pray like that, it would be okay to do so and not against the Qur'an.

In sum, the importance of differences in mode of prayer is discursively downplayed, particularly in public and in the official communications of local and non-local religious leaders (on radio, television, cassettes, and at gatherings). Even if people were keenly aware of who prayed in which way, and gossiped. Instead they preferred to focus on commonalities, most prominent among them the fact that “we are all Muslims now,” as I was told frequently. The willful ignorance of other modes of prayer was more apparent than real, however, and people whom I got to know better often complained rather bitterly about the “un-Islamic” behaviors engaged in by those whose mode of prayer—as a short-hand for their larger theological leanings and familial affiliations—differed from their own.

* * *

A useful example of the conceit that differences in mode of prayer are not worth paying attention to are the “How to pray” leaflets and booklets that visually illustrate the practice of Muslim prayer, yet do not in any way draw attention to the difference in the two modes of prayer that they obviously convey. These printed materials, ranging in size from less than ten to almost fifty pages, take the reader through a sequence of pictures illustrating the various steps of the Muslim prayer. Most of them, depending on the length, provide only minimal explanation, which depending on the edition is presented in French or Bamana. Many also feature excerpts from the Qur'an in Arabic juxtaposed with the depictions of the prayer, indicating the specific formula in Arabic that needs to be performed at specific points in the prayer sequence. The visual representation of prayer necessarily illustrates either the arms/hands held or arms/hands down mode of prayer (see illustration). Yet the reader's/viewer's attention is never specifically drawn to this one picture that differentiates the two kinds of brochures—as illustrated below. Strikingly, the accompanying text for the two pictures is exactly the same, which

means that there is no explanation in the text as to why one should pray in the particular way that is illustrated.



6: *Bolojigi* or *bolobila* mode of prayer

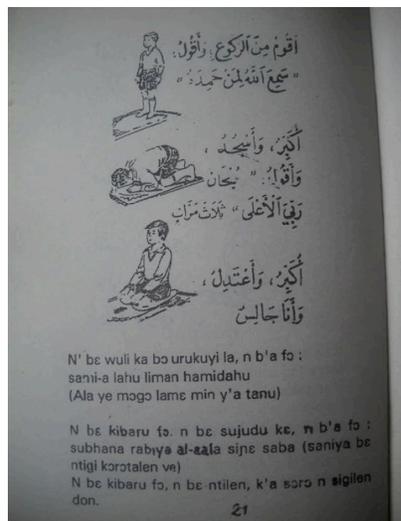


7: *Bolomine* mode of prayer

I obtained these booklets in Dnk’s weekly market, where the imam of neighboring Fb sold compilations of *surahs* (“sections” of the Qur’an) most commonly used in prayer, Qur’ans, and other Islamic materials. (The imam’s side business was restricted to the dry season, due to the high intensity of farming duties in the rainy season; during peak farming periods, he told me, he was too busy to make it to the market on a weekly basis). On the weekly market of Bcm (slightly smaller than Dnk), no pamphlets were available, even if there were two stalls where religious cassettes were sold. Fb’s imam also volunteered that he obtained his merchandise in Bamako, but he could not tell me more about the particular pamphlets he sold nor how and why he selected specific ones for sale.

On the basis of the (scant) information contained on the booklets and leaflets themselves, it is clear that at least some of the higher-quality ones come from elsewhere. One of my examples is—the only with a clearly indicated place of publication—from Kuwait. It explicitly states on the cover (in French) that it is intended for free distribution, even if in practice this is not the case. Nevertheless, the educational/proselytizing dimension of these publications is clear; their stated intent is to ensure that all Muslim believers understand the proper way of carrying out Islamic ritual practices, of which prayer is again the most prominent. What is interesting here is that either the arms/hands down or arms/hands held mode of prayer is illustrated as the sole, natural way to carry out this practice. While such naturalization of a specific mode of prayer might be less obvious in the places

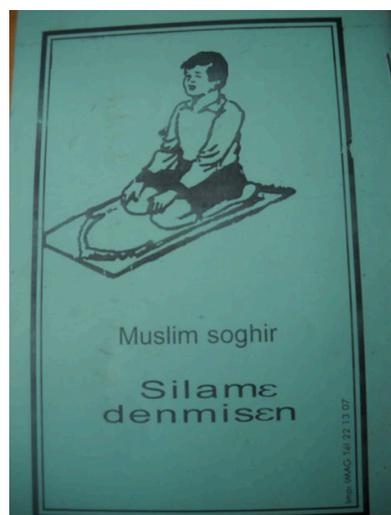
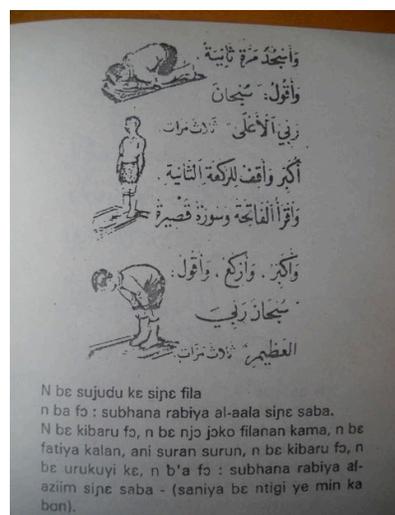
where some of these booklets are produced, the selection of a particular illustrative sequence of the copied versions produced in Bamako should be decidedly less self-evident. Indeed, it would appear that at least some of these booklets are produced in Bamako, presumably by photocopying images and text from imported examples.¹² Unfortunately, I do not have information on the producers of the Bamako-produced booklets, one of which is partly reproduced below. However, it would likely be illuminating to learn from them about the choices going in to producing the local versions of the internationally produced booklets.



8: Depiction of Muslim prayer, sequence 1



9: Depiction of Muslim prayer, sequence 2



The considerable work it takes to make distinctions in prayer into an object of non-attention is also illustrated in the discourse and practice around mosques. If there is more than one Friday mosque¹³ in town, where do people pray and how do they talk about these choices? First of all, the decisions and justifications around this issue reveal a delicate dance through which people try to align their own prayer practice with that of the mosque they attend for Friday prayers. Secondly, the subtlety displayed in these discourses points to the effort that is expended in *not* “paying attention.” Despite the frequent—and truthful—observation that “*bolowminelaw* and *bolowbilalaw* pray together in the same mosques,” it is also true that in villages where there is more than one Friday mosque a particular mode of prayer is dominant in and associated with individual mosques. The delicate dance here refers to the assumption that not only are all Muslims equal, but so too are all mosques. Thus, if an individual—for reasons I come back to below—decides to change his or her mode of prayer, it becomes important not to let a subsequent change in Friday mosque (if there is a change) be interpreted as a “preference.”

Because of the overt notion of modes of prayer as something not worth paying attention to, then, shifting allegiance from one mosque to another is not easily done. I realized this when a friend of mine from across the river accompanied me to Krs one day to attend a funeral for a woman married into the Db lineage (my primary hosts in Krs).¹⁴ Upon entering the village, TK expressed his long-standing interest in Krs’ new mosque and said he looked forward to praying his Friday prayers there (the day was a Friday). As it turned out, the funerary rites we would attend were on a compound that had relocated towards the side of the road, in close proximity to the new mosque. After TK and I had given our greetings to the family of the recently deceased, we went to the Db compound in the older part of town, whose residents—my hosts in Krs—were also related to the deceased as well as, very distantly, to TK himself. From there, we went our separate ways, and when I saw TK again late in the afternoon, I was curious to hear

what he thought of Krs' new mosque. But TK explained that he had not been able to pray there after all:

“When you left to visit [someone on yet another compound] I stayed and talked some more with [some people on our compound] and ate something there, too. But by then it was almost time to pray, and there were a lot of people outside at the mosque [the one adjacent to the compound where I lived], so I couldn't go and pass one mosque to go pray in another.”

In other words, one has to pray in the closest mosque, or maybe more importantly, one should not be seen to actively prefer one mosque over the other. While TK was the first person to state this explicitly, many people agreed with his sentiment that “one cannot pass one mosque to pray in another” when I discussed the example with them on later occasions.

Indeed, in villages like Krs where there is more than one Friday mosque—as opposed to more than one “daily” mosque, which is much more common—the question of where people pray is a matter not simply of how they pray, but also of geography and historical affiliation with certain neighborhoods or lineages. These considerations are sometimes hard to reconcile, for example when old mosques are abandoned and new ones built at different locations. The upshot of this is that even in Krs, where there are two Friday mosques that are quite explicitly identified with *bolominelaw* and *bolobilalaw*, respectively, the actual demographics of who prays where, is not quite as straightforward. Historically, the different mosques have been “affiliated” not only with a mode of prayer and larger theological positions, but also with Krs' two main neighborhoods. However, the move of Krs as a whole towards the road (cf. Chapter 7) complicates this spatial picture, as many of the relocated compounds—regardless of their neighborhood affiliation—end up on the side of town that is part of the “D neighborhood.” To complicate matters further, the original “D neighborhood” mosque was abandoned around 2000 in favor of a newly constructed building, which was still not completely finished in 2006-7 (it still remained to be painted and officially “opened” in 2009).

Most people in Krs who prayed in a different mosque than the one historically associated with their family's neighborhood, pointed to spatial proximity as the overriding factor for where they prayed. In the case where an entire com-

pound had relocated closer to the road, its inhabitants found themselves closest to Krs' newest mosque, which is the mosque simultaneously associated with the D neighborhood and also the *bolominela* ("arms/hands held") mosque. In this case, it was considered acceptable to continue to pray in one's old neighborhood mosque (for people from compounds historically part of the K neighborhood), although most people in this part of town, regardless of their previous affiliation, over time took to praying in the new, D/*bolominela* mosque. In a sense, spatiality was thus a factor in driving some of the religious changes—i.e., growing attendance at the *bolominela* mosque—I saw going on in Krs.

At the same time, it seemed more difficult to "change mosques" for those who did not live in the newly relocated compounds, even if they might have already changed their mode of prayer. For example, quite a number of young men from the old Keita neighborhood, where we lived, had started to pray with "arms/hands held," yet continued to pray in the neighborhood mosque. Even those few—such as JC, a some-time schoolteacher and nurse—who had changed both their mode of prayer and the mosque where they prayed (frequenting now the new *bolominela* mosque), presented this as a matter of the more "convenient location" of the new mosque, instead of related to their mode of prayer (with arms/hands held). Thus, what emerges from discussions about why people pray where they do is again the construction of the difference in modes of prayer as an object of willful in-attention. A remaining aspect is that of the gendered aspects of prayer, and mosque-based prayer in particular; I return to this shortly.

Uncommon directions: VC's shift in prayer mode

Despite the conceit of not paying attention to others' modes of prayer, the public nature of prayer at the Friday mosque, as well as at funerals and village-wide observation of Islamic holidays, differences in prayer are noted, commented upon among intimates, and taken as a sign of broader social and theological positions. The fact that such an obvious difference in prayer *is* commented on and taken as an indication of the religious attitudes and other characteristics of the individual involved should come as no surprise. The sociological associations of the two

modes of prayer are felt too clearly for the difference to be disregarded. The fact that these differences are discussed in private rather than publicly is also unsurprising, given the considerable pressure it seems to uphold a facade of Muslim unity. When discussed in private, moreover, the mutual characterizations of one group by the other are rather negative. My host in Ksm, for example, never had much good to say about “those *bolominelaw*,” or what he called “that Wahabiya talk” they favored. All this is to say that people *are* in fact paying attention to each other’s mode of prayer and ideologically link a particular mode of prayer with ideas about the individual’s qualities. Indeed, only in such a context does the shift in prayer mode made by VC (discussed in the beginning of this chapter) become meaningful.

The shift in VC’s mode of prayer illustrates the subtle and complex relations between paying attention (or not) and what is locally understood as the quintessential Islamic practice. We can now come back to some of the elements of the case with which I was presented above. To summarize briefly, when VC was asked by his uncle whether he “still prayed that way” (i.e., with arms down), he responded by invoking his position as “only a youngster.” VC thus relies upon the well-known perception that praying with one’s arms held is a result of the acquisition of more knowledge about the “true ways of Islam.” He also implies that when he gets older, he will start to pray with his arms held, as does his uncle.

As has by now become clear, VC’s claim that he was “too young” and hence “not knowledgeable enough” for the different form of prayer, does not quite match the local sociology of religion, which holds that younger men are particularly likely to pray with hands held. Indeed, in Mande, it is precisely a person’s relative *youth* that is expected to correlate with greater knowledge of Islam, while being *elderly* would translate in a less thorough grasp of it—in contrast to most other domains of knowledge.

VC’s uncle, however, did not comment on this somewhat uncommon representation of the value of being younger versus older in relation to Islamic learning. Instead, he graciously accepted VC’s explanation, and changed the subject by saying, “yeah, that’s right, so you better study up then.” In doing so, VC’s un-

cle acknowledged the importance of cultural discourses about “being only a youngster,” even if they might not be exactly applicable in the case of prayer. (Moreover, he deflected attention away from the difference between his mode of prayer and VC’s, to which he had drawn attention only moments earlier.) Relying on a trope of “being only a youngster” was in fact a tactic that VC often used, as he was trying to establish himself as a specialist in oral history without coming across as threatening to the older generation. He was usually very deferential to the elders, constantly saying that he was just a “youngster” (even if he was about 42 years old at the time of this conversation and a compound head in his own right). Moreover, VC explicitly connected his self-representation as a youngster to his professional identity as a *фина* (“griot”), noting that they both involved *dogoya* or “making oneself smaller in order to make others bigger.”

If in presenting himself as “only a youngster” VC actively pursued a strategy of self-diminishment (*dogoya*), he invoked a rather different side of the practice of *dogoya* in explaining again his considerations that went into his decision to shift his mode of prayer. In this second conversation—which I take to be a more accurate representation of the development of VC’s mode of prayer, although this is not crucial to my argument here—VC explained that he had switched his mode of prayer a few years ago, from *bolomine* to *bolojigi*, “because I do not like it when people insult me.” In this context *dogoya* means to insult, or more broadly try to do things to him, use “medicines” to harm him, or to diminish or destroy him or his reputation.¹⁵

His new way of prayer showed that he, VC, had “medicines” too, and anybody trying to harm him with their medicines should be aware, and wary, of him. The timing is important here: VC shifted in the wake of the death of his father, and indeed, almost as a result of it. When his father died, VC was still relatively young and people might question if he had inherited the important medicines of his father or that his father’s death had also left him bereft of important secret knowledge. So, in a sense, VC’s shift in mode of prayer is meant to signal his possession of potent medicines and by extension critical knowledge that he can use to protect himself from spiritual attacks by others. The direction of the

shift (from arms/hands held to arms/hands down) is meaningful as well, to the extent that arms/hands-held prayer is associated with “reformist” Islam, and the denunciation of traditional medicines is one of the hallmarks of proponents of Islamic moral renewal.

* * *

The success of VC’s uncommon shift in modes of prayer thus relies on a number of factors, of which the most important are: 1) the readily observable character of others’ prayer, 2) the existence of sociological ideas as to what the two different modes of prayer generally entail and what motivates shifts from one to the other, and 3) intimate knowledge of how others pray now and in the past, and how their family members prayed. I want to conclude this section by focusing on the aspect of “medicines,” which is an aspect of the stereotypical view of “those who pray with their arms/hands down” (*bolobilalaw*). This view is stereotypical because it generalizes over a large number of individual believers, without taking into account their actual knowledge or use of medicines. More importantly, it positions those who pray with their arms/hands down as lesser (or non-) Muslims, for their reliance on powers outside Allah. And most perniciously in the view of the *bolobilalaw*, it assumes that no *bolominela* has anything to do with medicines. While this is an image of them selves that *bolominelaw* certainly want to promote, most *bolobilalaw* are highly skeptical of such claims to not have anything to do with “medicines.”¹⁶

The crux of the problem with “medicines” is well expressed in the sermon by AK—a *bolominela* Islamic scholar—quoted above. In relying on somebody’s use of medicines or using them oneself, one posits the existence of beings who can somehow interfere in human affairs, say, by harming one’s enemy or healing a sick child. However, only Allah has this power. Thus, turning to medicines marks one as not a Muslim after all, because it breaks a Muslim’s “promise” (in AK’s terms) to Allah—i.e., to proclaim Allah’s fundamental uniqueness. The notion of semiotic ideology is again pertinent here, for it usefully frames the key issue as one of agency and its material forms. By locating agency in medicines,

they incorrectly assume that inanimate things have agency; more seriously, they denigrate Allah as the locus and source of all agency. Indeed, even if one supposes that the power of medicines does not come from their material substance, but rather from the human or non-human beings they emanate from, this would still be a serious attribution error, because as AK stresses, every being except Allah is a mere creature—something created by Allah. And how could a creature have any power or agency not given to it by its creator?

The concerns voiced by AK and others and creatively displaced by VC's shift in prayer mode have clear parallels elsewhere. Among the Gayo of Sumatra, for example, Bowen notes remarkably similar concerns in debates between what he identifies as "traditionalist" and "modernist" Muslims. Gayo "modernists," like Mande *bolominelaw*, are highly critical of any ritual practice that might imply the worship of other beings. Bowen rightly notes how practices comparable to the use of medicines and divination methods are wrong on two counts:

Such [ritual forms] as the offering of foodstuffs at meals are intrinsically and doubly wrong: they are improper additions to religious ritual, and the signal the individual's polytheistic (and thus execrable) intent to worship spirits. (Bowen 1993:31)

The sin of polytheism is indeed the "worst of all the world's works," yet as Bowen shows for Gayo Muslims, just what constitutes polytheism is a matter for debate. For example, "modernist" Gayo Muslims, like their Mande counterparts, strongly restrict the kinds of beings that can be made the addressees of one's words—allowing only Allah to be entreated for help, whereas "traditionalists" feel they can legitimately address, for example, spirits as well (Bowen 1993:80). The matter of addressee is in fact crucial for the Mande examples as well, as all of the problematic practices mentioned involve speech practices as well: most "medicines" are incomplete and ineffective without their accompanying incantation, and in the throwing of cowries, reading the sand, and divining with pebbles, speech is addressed to the beings from whom the resulting signs emanate.

Similar concerns about the proper relationships between humans, God, and a variety of other beings, such as the Holy Spirit, ancestors, and spirits, are also encountered by the Zimbabwean apostolic Christians described by the an-

thropologist Matthew Engelke (2007). Here the issue is the apostolics' attempt to insulate themselves from ritual practices inflected by what they call with a blanket-term "African culture": witchcraft, direct communication with ancestors, and spirit possession. Among the notable aspects of Engelke's description are his deceptively simple observations that the kinds of boundaries apostolic Christians claim around their own practices are not necessarily accepted, but instead leave ample room for contestation "over whether the classes of spirits [recognized by apostolic Christians and non-Christian spirit mediums] are even the same—and whether any of them is stable sign" (Engelke 2007:185). Moreover, he emphasizes apostolics' concerns with appearances, fearing to be perceived to be communicating with ancestors, for example, most of all. In the following sections, I, like Engelke, take up alternative assessments of some concerns that have hitherto been described primarily from the perspective of *bolominelaw* ("those who pray with their arms/hands held"). I also come back to the theme of visibility.

A final observation is that the practices that are most problematic for *bolominelaw* crucially involve a form of *kolosi* on the part of the person who engages in them. In order to do "medicines," one has to be an attentive observer of the environment to learn the defining characteristics and whereabouts of various trees, bushes, and plants; diagnosing a particular concern again relies on extensive skills in paying attention to determine patterns of symptoms, probable causes of illness, and possibilities for treatment. The three practices AK mentioned are all forms of divining, either by means of cowries, patterns in the sand, or pebbles. The salience of *kolosi* is indeed obvious here.

Visibility, audibility, and gendered modes of prayer

An important finding to emerge from my analysis are the intersections and tensions among attention on the one hand and the audibility and visibility on the other. The readily observable nature of prayer on compounds, in mosques, and even at the side of the road,¹⁷ almost inevitably makes the practice an object of scrutiny. However, it is to be noted that the public character of prayer is gendered in important ways, with women's prayer being much less available to public view

than men's. While the highly visible and audible nature of mosque-based prayer creates the kind of conundrums and creative appropriations discussed above, the comparatively lesser availability of women's prayer poses its own issues.

In Mande, as elsewhere in Africa, women do not pray at the mosque until well after menopause. This is in contrast to men, who start praying in the Friday mosque from a much younger age than women. (My observations in Krs suggest that men start to regularly attend Friday prayer at the age of between 20 and 30.) At home, too, most of the women I knew prayed inside their rooms, out of sight from all but their own small children. There are, however, some exceptions to the general rule that (younger) women's prayer practices are less accessible. For example, in Krs, the whole town, including men, women, and children, comes together to pray on a large open square once a year on the morning of *Seliba* ("Id-al-Fitr"). At funerals, too, women's prayer (as well as men's) is openly visible, although the prayer here is somewhat different here because it does not include prostration (cf. Halevi 2007). Finally, on the compound where I lived in Nrn, all members of the compound prayed the 7 PM evening prayer together, outside, during the month of Ramadan.

The fact that the prayer practices of younger women are not generally accessible, though, can easily give rise to the charge that they do not in fact pray, or not as conscientiously as they should. For example, when my friend BC's toddler son died, the elder women on our compound not only frequently told her to pray, but also chastised her for not having prayed regularly in the past. One woman told her: "We never see you pray, whenever I come by here, you are talking, or making tea, or cooking, or doing other things; but I tell you, from now on, you will start praying"—clearly implying that BC's loss of her child had something to do with her less-than-perfect past observance of the obligation to pray.

Interim conclusion: what does it mean to "follow the Prophet's example" and when is a sign a sign?

The notion of exemplary practice is clearly important in the sermon of AK discussed above, where he uses the notion of the Prophet's exemplary practice—of

praying with Jibril at a specific time—as an argument for identifying the proper time at which to pray. The existence of two contrasting modes of prayer in contemporary Mali has opened up a space for people, at least in private, to reflect on prayer as a “signifying practice,” that is, a practice that constitutes simultaneously an intimate component of embodied experience and a concrete, publicly accessible form that becomes available to subjects as an external object of experience (Keane 2007:14). In Mande, the debates about prayers as a signifying practice, in turn, are crystallized around the notion of the “Prophet’s example.” The “Prophet’s example” and how it relates to a particular way of prayer is variously interpreted—mainly by *bolominelaw*—as a fixed example for contemporary believers to follow or as a bodily practice with a range of acceptable executions—as many *bolobilalaw* see it.

Interestingly, there is not much debate about the question of how the Prophet himself would have prayed in his time. There are some people who claim that Muhammad himself prayed in the “traditional” way, with arms/hands down,¹⁸ but they are a minority. Many more people, especially among *bolobilalaw*, hold that how the Prophet might have prayed is not something we can know. Yet many people, regardless of their own way of praying, are happy to grant that the Muhammad prayed with His arms/hands held, as indeed many *bolominelaw* claim. Rather than trying to ascertain how the Prophet might have prayed, the discussion centers around what this presumed historical precedence means for contemporary Malian Muslims. For some people, the Prophet’s way of praying becomes a moral “sign” that warrants both attention and observance, whereas others take it as a contingent occurrence that does not require people to attend to.

The issue here, then, is one of *kolosi*, of deciding what things are (and are not) worth “paying attention” to and when something needs to be taken as a sign, or in this case, an example. In other words, what are the implications for Muslim believers of the fact that the Prophet used to pray with his arms/hands held? For people who pray with their arms/hands held, especially those who have adopted this mode of prayer more recently (as opposed to having learned it from their fathers), this is relatively easy: they claim that the Prophet’s teaching needs to be

followed in all respects, including His mode of prayer. In the discourse of reformists, then, Muhammad's mode of prayer is constructed as an example, and hence needs to be followed. Traditionalist Muslims, while not necessarily denying that the Prophet prayed in the way reformists do, maintain that the way he prayed is contingent—hence there is no need to follow this particular practice.

Those who claimed that the way the Prophet had prayed was not, in fact, a meaningful example that contemporary Muslims needed to follow, argued that instead of a sign, his mode of prayer was a “natural” occurrence. For example, the imam in Ksm, VK, explained to me that the Prophet had prayed in this particular way because where he was praying, it was cold, so His prayer position mimicked what one does when one is cold—hold the arms/hands tight to the body to warm oneself. Since it is not cold in Mali, VK continued, there is no need for people to adopt the same prayer position. Recounting a similar story, a young man in Krs said that the Prophet had suffered from painful hands, but wanted to continue to lead his people in prayer, so he supported His hands mutually in order to be able to continue to pray. Again, assuming that one's own hands are not hurting, there is no need to follow the Prophet's particular practice of praying. In other words, these Muslims argue that it is incorrect to consider them as “not following the Prophet's example,” because the Prophet was not setting an example with his mode of prayer.

In fact, the story of the Prophet's sore hands was quite common. Crucially, it is not just the Muslims who themselves continue to follow the traditional practice of praying with arms/hands down who employ this discourse. In a slightly different story, BK also employs the theme of aching arms/hands to explain the different modes of prayer in contemporary Mali. BK prays with his arms/hands held, and has always done so, ever since he learned to pray from his father. BK mentioned one day that he had heard the Imam explain the reason for why they pray with their arms/hands held and others with their arms/hands down.

The imam had explained, according to BK, that the traditional way of prayer in Mali is with the arms/hands down the side of the body, but that this is not the real traditional way of prayer, originally, in the sense of how the Prophet

did it. It is actually a mistake, made when “Maliki” went to the land of the Prophet to find out exactly how the Prophet himself prayed.¹⁹ But the trouble was that, at that point in time, the Prophet had hurt his hands, so he was praying with his arms/hands down to the side of his body to ease the pain. Yet the others in the Prophet’s company still followed the original way of prayer, with arms/hands held. So Maliki, who had come to learn about the correct way of prayer, correctly notes that at this point in time the Prophet is actually praying with his arms/hands down, but he fails to notice that everybody else prays with their arms/hands held up and that this is the actual way to pray. So what he reports back to Mali is how the Prophet prayed this one time, and not how he normally would pray; yet that’s how people in Mali all start praying the “wrong” way there, although still thinking they do it the right way, because the Prophet did it this way too.

What is striking in BK’s story is that the same theme of painful hands is employed “in reverse,” by depicting the Prophet’s *temporarily* mode of prayer as “arms/hands down” and the supposedly permanent mode as “arms/hands held.” Yet the story does more than just reverse the way the Prophet is supposed to have prayed as a result of his painful hands. It also explains rather subtly why praying with arms/hands held is the right way to pray and why people in Mali traditionally have gotten it wrong. The subtlety of the story lies, for one thing, in making the point that Mali’s traditional mode of prayer was less than perfect, without denying that this traditional way was nevertheless inspired by the admirable quest to follow the Prophet’s example. The person most responsible for the wrong-handed way of prayer in Mali traditionally is, ironically, the person who went to Mecca supposedly to find out how to do the prayer correctly. This is an obvious snub to the Maliki tradition of Islam as it was traditionally practiced in Mali and West Africa more broadly.

Maliki’s main fault was that he failed to distinguish between a natural reaction to bodily problems and an actual sign. Specifically, he did not appreciate that while the usual mode of prayer employed by the Prophet qualifies as a sign—indeed, a habitual sign—the temporary way of prayer associated with a physical problem does not fulfill the same criteria for being a sign. Indeed, the distinction

implied here between habitual and temporary signs is reminiscent of AK's argument noted above about the primacy of the chronologically earlier sign, which AK calls the "head." Of necessity, the habitual sign precedes the temporary interruption of this habit. This should have been all the more reason for Maliki to give precedence to the first sign, at least from a *bolominela* perspective.

Indeed, another way to describe Malik's problem is as a situation where a multiplicity of similar actions are all legitimately attributable to the Prophet. It might well be that in situations like this, AK's argument for preferring the chronologically earlier sign is embedded in a broader Islamic framework of theological reasoning. Take for example the divergence of ritual practice in the case of burial ritual, specifically regarding the question of the construction of the grave. In the early history of Islam, two distinct ways of constructing a Muslim grave (as opposed to non-Muslim—Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian—graves) were recognized, both of them attributed to reliable sources. In the so-called "Mecca-style" burial, the grave is constructed as a plain trench, whereas the "Medina-style" burial requires the body to be put in a niche carved out of the side of the grave (Halevi 2007:188). The Hadith, which purports to describe the Prophet's own burial, explains the divine intervention by which Muhammad himself was buried in a Medina-style grave (with a niche). As described by Halevi, the fact that the chronologically earlier occurrence is taken as the more exemplary practice is not accidental.

Allegedly two gravediggers—one a Meccan emigrant, the other a native Medinese—were summoned to bury the Prophet. The Medinese happened to arrive first, perhaps by fate. (Al-'Abbas, who had sent for the two gravediggers, had prayed, O God, choose the right style for God's Messenger.) The Medinese provided Muhammad's grave with its distinctive niche, and consequently this style of digging graves became normative. (Halevi 2007:189, *parentheses in original*)

In other words, the Prophet's style of burial was settled by adopting the first of two possibilities—the fact of one rather than the other being "the first" in fact a direct sign from Allah. Moreover, after the Prophet's burial, the style used to construct his grave "became normative," in Halevi's terms—that is, came to be considered an exemplary practice.²⁰

Yet there is a twist here. Even if Halevi here indicates that the Medina-style burial “became normative,” he goes on to recognize that conformity to this burial style is neither strictly required nor universal. (A main concern being the quality of the soil, which determines the feasibility of carving out a side-ways niche.) Indeed, the way people are buried in Mande follows not the Medina-style, but the Meccan one.²¹ Even if practical considerations might explain why the exemplary practice set with the Prophet’s burial is not followed in Mande, the fact remains that the Prophet’s example is not considered equally binding in all cases—if it was, considerations of soil consistency would simply not be a relevant factor. Equally important, the fact that the Prophet’s example is not followed in the matter of grave construction has not been an object of local discussion, as far as I am aware. This is quite striking in light of the many contested issues related to death and burial that Islamic scholars have debated since the first centuries of Islam’s development and not infrequently into the present as well (Halevi 2007).²²

THE PROPHET’S EXAMPLE, OR, LISTENING TO THE RADIO IN KSM

Let me turn to the reactions of ordinary Muslims (mostly *bolobilalaw*, “those who pray with their arms/hands down”) to some of the claims made by local Islamic scholars (*bolominelaw* especially). I already indicated the back-and-forth of arguments about the Prophet’s sore hands. But in other contexts, too, do Muslim believers who have no extensive knowledge of the Qur’an talk back to the construction of particular forms of Islamic ritual practice as conforming to or diverging from the Prophet’s example. My key example here are the sacrifices offered on the 3rd, 7th, and 40th day following a death; a complete description of this ritual is outside the scope of this chapter, as are the numerous comparative cases—from Africa to Indonesia to Bosnia—where this ritual practice has become the site of contention between Wahabi/Sunnis and Traditionalist/Orthodox, loosely speaking (Masquelier 2009, Bowen 1993, Bringa 1995). Instead, I focus more narrowly in the way the notion of exemplary practice is constructed and debated in the context of these funerary rites. More specifically, I discuss the reactions of my hosts in Ksm to another one of AK’s sermons, on the topic of funerary ritual.

Friday nights after dinner, the family I lived with in Ksm often listened to “Foot County Radio” with at that time slot would air a radio sermon by a local Islamic scholar. Even though these scholars, being from Bcm or nearby hamlets, were *bolominelaw* (“who pray with their arms/hands held”) and my hosts in Ksm generally were skeptical of such Wahabiya/Sunnis, they nevertheless enjoyed the Friday broadcasts. One of the women voiced her appreciation to nobody in particular, noting “‘Foot County Radio’ is so neat on Fridays.” One night, the sermon piqued my interest because the speaker explained how there was a difference between *saraka* and *sarakati*—two terms I had always thought of as synonyms, referring to the “sacrifices” people bring on the occasion of life crises rituals, particularly in the wake of a death.

After establishing his authority as an Islamic scholar by reciting some verses from the Quran in Arabic, the speaker—who turned out to be AK—posed his audience an interesting question: When someone dies, do we need to organize “sacrifices” for him or her some time afterwards? This is undoubtedly an interesting question for the audience, because while the practice of “giving sacrifices” on the 3rd, 7th, and 40th day after someone’s passing is firmly established in Mande, it has in the past been branded as un-Islamic by *bolominelaw* (“who pray with their arms/hands held”). AK, however, answers his own question by saying that “sacrifices” should indeed be offered. Indeed, he invites his listeners to envision a conversation going on in a graveyard between corpses who are comparing notes about the care they have received upon their death; the one who has received “sacrifices” has also been graced with Allah’s pity. At this point, I was listening to the radio with most adults from our compound in Ksm, who all agree with AK’s point that organizing sacrifices is a good thing.

“But how then do you do such a ‘sacrifice’?” continued AK, tackling a topic whose answer is less obvious. As most of his adult listeners are aware, a major preoccupation of *bolominelaw* in the 1980s—in Mali as well as in neighboring countries—was the attempt to suppress the “sacrifices” after someone’s death. However, in the 21st century, *bolominelaw* are again carrying out these “sacrifices” just like the *bolobilalaw* who have never abolished the practice. Yet

the latter—Wahabi/Sunni Muslims in Brenner’s terms—maintain that their current “sacrifices” are not the same as the problematic practices they have been condemning since the 1980s and that their neighbors are still carrying out.

What piqued my interest in AK’s sermon that particular night was how he made an argument about the fundamentally different nature of the “sacrifices” carried out by *bolominelaw* and those associated with the past/*bolobilalaw* by relating these differences both to the Prophet’s example and the vicissitudes of linguistic translation. In regards to the former aspects, AK argued, “We know that to carry out ‘sacrifices’ is a good thing, but we have to do it the right way. The key is to do it as an actual ‘sacrifice,’ the way the Prophet meant for it to be.” With regards to the latter, AK made a linguistic argument that ordinary believers have confused the meaning of *saraka* and *sarakati*; just as “traditional” Malian Muslims have gotten the original translation of the Arabic *sadaqa* wrong, so too have they misunderstood the cultural practice referred to by this (wrong) name.

The notion of the Prophet’s example is constructed differently here than in the case of prayer. In the latter case, the central issue was whether the supposedly known facts about the Prophet’s mode of prayer were to be taken as exemplary practice to be followed by contemporary believers, or rather as contingent facts. In the case of “sacrifices,” AK makes a subtly different argument, which hinges less on the distinction between exemplary and contingent actions and more on the intentionality of Muslim believers. The notion of exemplary practice is expressed in this sermon in the repeated refrain, “The Prophet has not done this, Allah has not said this.” Thus, AK asks his listeners, “How exactly should these “sacrifices” be done?” and answers by delineating how they *should* not be done:

“How should these “sacrifices” be done?”

Not by gathering a large number of people and saying, ‘today I’m doing sacrifices because it is the 3rd day after the passing of my father, or my mother, or child.’ This the Prophet has not done, Allah not said.

It should not be done by getting out grain and saying, ‘today I am going to make a sacrificial dish because it is the 7th day and I’m doing sacrifices.’ This the Prophet has not done, Allah not said.

It is not getting millet and kola nuts and dege (“paste made from rice and sugar”) and dates together, and inviting people to say, ‘today is the 40th

day of my father's passing, or my mother's or child; hence I am doing sacrifices today.' This the Prophet has not done, Allah not said."

Not surprisingly, the examples of how “sacrifices” should emphatically not be done concisely summarize the most important features of how “sacrifices” have traditionally been carried out in Mande. The important role of food and the exchanges of food stuffs; the gathering of many people, often the entire village or at least neighborhood; the fact that carrying out these sacrifices is felt as a religious obligation, which need to be accomplished on specified dates—all of these are problematic from the perspective of *bolominelaw*. By dismissing precisely the most troublesome aspects of “sacrifices” as practices not carried out by the Prophet nor required by Allah, AK’s rhetorical strategy here seems to reverse the direction of how the notion of exemplary practice is constituted. It seems that the troublesome nature of specific ritual practices motivates the foregone conclusion that the Prophet could never have instituted such practices.

Meanwhile, the troubling nature of the practices singled out in the excerpt above is obvious in light of AK’s earlier concerns about the threat of polytheism by misattributing agency and the power to intervene in human affairs to beings other than Allah; indeed, no such beings should be elevated to Allah’s level. The linguistic argument about “sacrifices” addresses the concern with potential polytheism explicitly. According to AK, the Arabic root-term *sadaqa* has been mistranslated in Bamana/Maninka as *saraka*. *Saraka*, however, means “anything that can be made into a *saraka* (“sacrifice”).” To quote AK again:

“What is a saraka? A saraka is something you make into a saraka.

It is going to a diviner and he tells you, ‘go get kola nuts and make that as an offering.’ Or money, or cloth, or a chicken, or a sheep, or a cow—all these things that you make into an offering.”

The crucial difference between *saraka* as something that you make into an offering and the appropriate ritual practice of *sarakati*, for AK, is the different intentionality embodied in the latter. Whereas doing a *saraka* “sacrifice” is presumably self-interested—both because it has been ordered by someone else and because the thing is made into a “sacrifice” for a particular reason—a *sarakati* is

not. The reason for doing a *sarakati* “sacrifice” should solely be to receive pity from Allah.

The difference in intentionality envisioned for *sarakati*, as opposed to *saraka*, is reminiscent of the same concern with intent in debates about proper Islamic practice elsewhere. To take up Bowen’s study again of “modernist” and “traditionalist” Gayo Muslims: here, too, modernists and traditionalists construct intent in highly divergent ways. Whereas traditionalists maintain that intent “cannot be construed from the objects themselves,” modernists disagree. Instead, they maintain that intent is always present in any action. Bowen concludes that opposing understandings of intentionality are related to equally divergent ideas about the importance of ritual form:

For modernists, having the right intent at worship (*salat*), for example, means meditating on the words one utters and on the overall sense of submission to God that those words imply. In this view it becomes all the more critical to render the outer form of ritual correctly; by uttering the wrong words or acting in the wrong manner, one creates erroneous intents. (Bowen 1993:24)

In other words, in a Gayo modernist perspective, following the exemplary practice of the Prophet is important because the bodily motion itself is efficacious. It remains to be seen if the same can be said for the Mande situation.

Along different lines, AK’s argument also integrates linguistic practice with proper ritual form and the notion of the Prophet’s example. He explicitly connects the traditional mistranslation of the Arabic term *sadaqa* in Bama/Maninka to the ritual form of *saraka* also missing the mark. He also cautions his audience that while the difference between *saraka* and *sarakati* may seem small or even insignificant in Maninka, it really is not. If we hear many people using the terms interchangeably, this is due to the “ignorance” (*jahaliya*) on the part of most Mande Muslims, both with respect to the Arabic language and Islamic teachings. Many people do not understand Arabic and thus fail to appreciate the real import of the difference between the two translations. Indeed, just as the original meaning of the Arabic term got lost in the first attempt to translate it into Maninka (*saraka*), so too the form of the ritual was compromised in people’s way of carrying out the ritual, *vis à vis* the way the Prophet had intended it.

The apparent mistakes in the ritual form of *saraka* mirror the mistakes in the translation of the term. Conversely, now that believers are starting to understand that the “real” translation of *sadaqa* in Maninka is *sarakati* the funerary “sacrifices” that *bolominelaw*, such as AK, once condemned can now be reconsidered as in line with proper Islamic practice.

Despite AK’s ardent plea, however, it remains to be seen how convincing this argument is to ordinary believers who are not particularly learned in Islamic matters. After the sermon was over, I asked the people with whom I had been listening to it what the thought of AK’s argument. As mentioned previously, my hosts were in general not very fond of what they characterize as “Wahabiya ideas,” even if one of the sons is married to a young woman from Kll who (thus) prays with arms/hands held. My hosts had not been very impressed by today’s sermon. “Well, it’s clearly ‘Wahabiya talk,’ as is to be expected from Bcm” remarked MLK. His wives do not buy into the argument either. When I ask one of them the following day if she thinks that there is in fact a difference between *saraka* and *sarakati*, she refers me back to the broadcast of the previous day, “Well, that’s what the speaker said on the radio, isn’t it?” However, she adds that she has never heard this before, and reiterates that it is exactly the kind of kind of talk is to be expected from “Wahabi.”²³

Reforming the funerary sarakati: visibility and audibility reconsidered

In this section, I return to the aspects of audibility and visibility that make the ritual practice of prayer such an inevitable object of attention, despite active attempts to downplay the relevance of divergences in people’s modes of prayer. I suggest that visibility and audibility contribute as well to the criticism of practices of “sacrifice” on the occasion of a person’s death, as expressed primarily by *bolominelaw* (“who pray with their arms/hands held”) since the 1980s. Some key aspects that are singled out for Reformist critique—i.e., the improper focus on human agency instead of the ultimate authority of Allah or the adherence to a schedule of strictly prescribed days (3rd, 7th, and 40th)²⁴—are exacerbated by their accessibility to view and hearing.

The occasion of “sacrifices” for a person’s passing sees many things are going on simultaneously at different parts of the compound. On one part of the compound, Islamic scholars are sitting on colorful prayer mats, reciting the Qur’an. Near the kitchen area, young women are busy preparing the large meal that will soon be shared with everyone present. Inside one of the sleeping huts, the deceased’s wives receive condolences and blessings from a constant stream of visitors (a husband who has lost his wife, though, receives visitors outside). All around the compound, inside but mostly outside, visitors sit, separated by gender, on low benches borrowed from neighboring compounds, a few chairs, and more prayer mats. *Nyamakalaw* (“artisans”) move between the visitors, collecting small offerings of money and announcing the names of the givers and the amount of their gift as they go. Meanwhile, the Imam or another Islamic scholar gives a sermon reminding the audience of the inevitability of death and the necessity to prepare oneself while there is still time. In the back of the compound, the deceased’s grandchildren are preparing their “grandchildren’s play” (*moden tulonke*), beating parts of discarded gourds as improvised drums and singing loudly.

Of all the events associated with a *sarakati bo*, some are considered more problematical and “un-Islamic” than others, at least by some other families in town. I want to suggest that the knowledge or suspicion that some practices might not be in line with Islam intersects with their relative visibility and audibility in people’s assessment about whether or not these practices can be carried out. Most people I knew in Krs and Ksm did not consider themselves particularly learned in Islamic matters. Thus, they frequently presented their grasp of the finer points of Islamic knowledge as rather tenuous. Moreover, the content of Islamic knowledge seemed not quite stable to most people, which is not all that remarkable given that practices that were vehemently decried not too long ago seem to be making a come-back—the “sacrifices” for someone’s passing are a case in point here. Finally, different people expressed considerable doubt that certain practices that some of their fellow-villagers liked to claim were un-Islamic were not in fact as “heathen” (*kafiriya*) as others claimed. However, these people—

older women, for example—might well lack the requisite Islamic knowledge to make such arguments convincingly.

In this context, the highly audible and visible character of practices such as the *moden tulongke* would make them appear especially problematic. Indeed, the grandchildren's playing around consists of the deceased's grandchildren roaming about the compound or even the village at large, beating gourds and making a lot of noise, asking for money from the deceased's children (their parents), and threatening to bring the recently departed back to life if they are not properly rewarded. Granted, the bold nature of some of the texts announced by the grandchildren—"beware, I have resurrection medicine in my hand; beware, I will bring them back to life"—would certainly qualify as un-Islamic. Yet even without such statements or songs, as most grandchildren's performances are, there often was uncertainty as to whether or not the grandchildren could or should do their skits and noise-making.

On one occasion in Dnk, the grandchildren, after performing a series of very well-received skits had to wait a long time until some of their "representatives" concluded with the children that the wild run on the cemetery was no longer appropriate. On another occasion, no grandchildren's activities were performed at all. During the meal, the grandchildren nevertheless wanted to receive the hind leg, rice, and money for the sauce reserved for grandchildren on these occasions. The children refused to give these things to them, noting that they had done nothing to deserve them. In response, the grandchildren pointed out the location of the compound, which was new and in the D neighborhood—also associated with the arms/hands held way of prayer. The grandchildren claimed that they could not possibly have gone out with their pots and pans, circling the compound and loudly demanding money in this neighborhood. While this is only a brief example, during my fieldwork I was repeatedly struck by the way families' and individuals' decisions to no longer perform certain aspects of ritual practices seemed heavily inflected by their consideration of how these practices might look or sound to others. In contrast to the loud and obvious grandchildren's performances, for example, the rituals surrounding an infant's hair shaving or a new

mother leaving her room again for the first time were much more discreet, taking place behind a screen on the compound or inside. The intersections between being the object of attention, the public character of certain ritual and other practices, and families' and individuals' concern about how others perceive them would seem to be a fruitful site for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

Exemplary practice is important for establishing proper ritual form in Mande. In this chapter, I have established that *bolominelaw* and *bolobilalaw* alike employ the discursive framework of the Prophet's example. This is an important point, because the importance of exemplars is not obvious or natural, despite its resonance with the main tenets of Islam. As Bowen's work on Gayo Muslims on Sumatra usefully reminds us, not all Muslims feel a need to designate only one proper form of ritual practice. Bowen argues that it is particularly "modernist" Gayo Muslims who seek such un-ambiguity, whereas "traditionalists" are much more tolerant of diversity in forms of ritual practice.

[For traditionalists] because two or more distinct ways of carrying out religious duties may be appropriate, one should accept variety in ritual form. Traditionalists' idea that scripture offers alternatives is in direct contrast to modernists' conviction that scripture offers only one correct set of ritual forms. This idea also leads many traditionalists to urge tolerance of what may appear to be non-Islamic ritual behavior. (Bowen 1993:24)

Clearly, the "modernists'" conviction that there is a single correct form of ritual practice makes the notion of exemplary action much more pressing than for the "traditionalist" view of mutually compatible, diverse forms of ritual practice.

While in Mande, too, *bolominelaw* are more tolerant of a multiplicity of embodied modes of prayer, this case differs from the one described by Bowen in the direct ways in which people question what it means for the Prophet to set an example, and how one knows whether or not He intended to do so in the case of prayer. The example of the Prophet is not emphasized as a model to be followed for Muslim believers in all cases, but only in those where His actions can properly be considered exemplary. Thus, distinguishing between multiple plausible ways

in which the Prophet has carried out a single ritual form and deciding which among these gets to be considered as exemplary relies on an ideology and practices of paying attention, as is clearly the case in the example of prayer described here. One way of sorting out exemplars in situations characterized by a multiplicity of potentially exemplary practice is to privilege the practice that is chronologically prior. At the same time, mistakes are always possible; indeed, the possibility of misinterpretation of any sign is part and parcel of an ideology of *kolosi*.

In analyzing the notion of exemplary practice in relation to Islam, this chapter has also shown that vexed questions of what is and is not worth “paying attention” to are as relevant in the context of Islam as in regards to other social practices. Moreover, whereas previous scholarship has tended to associate a concern with the Prophet’s Example with Wahabi/Sunni interpretations, my analysis has shown that the stated desire of *bolominelaw* (who pray with their arms/hands held) to “follow the Prophet’s example” is shared by *bolobilalaw* (who pray with their arms/hands down) as well. Indeed, the frequent assertion that Wahabi/Sunnis are trying to go back to “purer” forms of Islam, rejecting “modern” inventions, and committing to “following the Prophet’s example” does not sufficiently address what “following the Prophet’s example” might mean for the people attempting to do so. By showing how these discussions are part of a larger framework of *kolosi*, then, I also make a significant contribution to understanding the dynamics and divisions of contemporary Islam in Africa.

¹ In an earlier work, Bowen similarly highlight the importance of exemplary practice, noting:

“Religious scholars have evaluated the collections of hadith—the messages that God sent to humankind as embodied in statements and actions by Muhammad—in part by scrutinizing the reliability of each link in the chain of transmission. Deciding on the correctness of a particular relig-

ious practice often turns on the reliability . . . of each transmitter. . . . Ordinary Muslims as well model their religious conduct on the life of the prophet Muhammad. Many Gayo know the general meaning of a number of hadith, and they can tell stories about Muhammad and other prophets. When fixing the form of worship, instructing people how to behave at funerals, or deciding how best to celebrate a feast day, the Gayo often justify their decisions by referring to Muhammad's example" (Bowen 1993:22)

² For the region where I did my fieldwork, additional terms that refer to different ways of being Muslim along different axes—particularly in terms of brotherhoods or legal schools—are not very useful. Brenner indeed presents the tripartite terminology of Qaudiri/Tijani/Hammallist, but notes that these distinctions are not very meaningful in those regions of Mali, like Mande, where Islam only became prominent in the colonial period. Such differences are relevant in places with deeper histories of Islamic learning, such as Nioro du Sahel (Soares 2005.)

³ The category of “invention” (*bidan* in Arabic) is a theological construct that defines the limits of Islamic practice on the basis of what has been reported for the life of the Prophet—beyond this lies the domain of later inventions. Later inventions are not necessarily in conflict with Islam—to the extent that they are not, they are part of *orf*, or the “local traditions” that are compatible with Islam.

⁴ This in turn is related to the political-economic nexus that emerged in Takengen (the local center) in the 1920s and 30s (Bowen 1993:32-3). Townspeople instead of villagers; traders, civil servants, and small group of traditional elite—not farmers. Cf. Wahabiya in Bamako: Amselle 1985: “almost exclusively limited to Bamako’s merchant class; anti-clerical and bourgeois position, combined with nationalist and pro-arab stance, met expectations of this class very well.” From 1945 in Bamako, in 1980s also moving beyond the merchant community and beyond the city; related to first West African graduates from Al-Azhar university in Egypt and increasing pilgrimages to Mecca from the 1940s onward.

⁵ The Bamana/Maninka term *bolo* refers to the hand and underarm up to the elbow, and depending on the context can be translated as “arm” or “hand” in English.

⁶ Certainly not everybody who went on the pilgrimage came back a Sunni Muslim, nor were they as successful as FJ in convincing the entire population of Kll to adopt the new way of prayer he brought from Mecca (Chapter 3). Ngd is another example where the pilgrimages of individuals resulted in the near wholesale adoption of a new mode of prayer and other tenets from Sunna Islam. But where Ngd and Kll became centers of sorts of reformist concerns, neighboring towns did not necessarily follow suit, and places like Dnk, Mk, Bl, KK, Sb, and Nrn did not up until much more recently include a single individual who adopted the new mode of prayer. In other towns, such as Kl, sometimes individuals from the same family might undertook the pilgrimage, and upon returning to Mande one of them adopted the new form of prayer and the other not.

⁷ I knew one young man in Ksm, an up-and-coming diviner who did sand and cowrie divination, who would proudly proclaim to me, and to the rest of his family, that he did not pray—much to the chagrin of his parents (and later, when he got married, his wife as well). In my experience, though, it is very rare to find people who openly acknowledge that they do not pray. Even rumors about certain people who are suspected not to pray are relatively rare, although I did hear this, for example, for the main diviner/ medicine specialist in Dnk (he himself would neither confirm nor deny this charge).

⁸ I never heard people use the Arabic term for prayer, *salat*, but it is possible that the terms are related.

⁹ In contrast to the restricted use of *seli* to refer to Muslim prayer exclusively, the term *Ala* (“Allah” or “God”) is shared by Muslims and Christians alike, and presumably other religious groups as well.

¹⁰ The presence of Christianity in Mande is minimal. I know of a protestant or evangelical church located on the road from Sb to Bcm, but I have never visited there. The Christian presence is more pronounced in places where White Fathers have been present since colonial times, like Sikasso, Bamako, and Ségou. Less than 5% of Malians identify as Christian, versus between 75 to 95% Muslims.

¹¹ Additionally, they would describe them in terms of their alcohol consumption on the occasion of life crisis rituals, noting how their ancestors were “still drinking alcohol.”

¹² The treatment of the text is variable: sometimes being translated into Bamana juxtaposed with Arabic, in other cases given in a Bamana translation only, or even altogether omitted.

¹³ The Bamana/Maninka term for mosque is *misiri*, which is a general term for a purpose-built structure where Muslims carry out their prayers, regardless of the size of the building or other architectural features. However, there is a distinction between smaller, “everyday” mosques where people carry out most of their prayers except for the Friday afternoon one on the one hand, and bigger ones that attract additional people for the Friday afternoon prayer only, on the other. For example, there are mosques in both KK and Fso, which the inhabitants of these places use for most of their prayers (in so far they are using a mosque to pray instead of praying at home). However, they come to Krs to pray the Friday afternoon prayer. Most of the time, people do not distinguish linguistically between an “everyday” mosque and a “Friday mosque,” although one can use the latter term to refer to the place where one “prays the Friday prayer” (*Juma seli*) if there is a need to be specific.

The number of mosques—that is, both “everyday” and Friday mosques—in a particular town or village is partly a matter of scale in that the bigger the town, the more mosques there will be. However, not all places have a Friday mosque, as I just noted for KK and Fso; the same is true for many farming hamlets. Most towns in Mande are small enough that they have only one mosque, although some (like Krs) have two. The problem of “where to pray,” however, still arises in places with only one “Friday mosque,” too. While most people in this

case would pray in the only Friday mosque, I know of a few cases where people preferred the neighborhood “everyday” mosque for their Friday prayers, too. Indeed, the “everyday” mosque is not “closed” for the Friday afternoon prayer, so Muslims can still pray there as far as I know. However, in most cases, people prefer to go to the larger “Friday mosque” for this particular prayer, sometimes including the imam of the “everyday mosque” himself (as in Fso, but not in KK).

¹⁴ Because of the importance of attending funerary rites, I could count on receiving a phone call in Ksm when I needed to attend a 3rd day funeral for someone from Krs, or vice versa. This was not something done for my particular benefit, as the practice of messaging the news of a death quickly and widely to family and lineage members throughout Mande is well established. At the time of my fieldwork, people relied on phones (both landlines located in small public “phone rooms” (*cabine téléphonique*) and also cell phones) and the family’s *mototigi* (“motorcycle owners”) to relay these messages very quickly to a long list of families to which the deceased and his or her family were related. Additionally, the family relayed the message to the closest local radio station, where “death notices” followed the early afternoon news bulletin and disseminated the news of a person’s passing to a much wider audience.

Upon receiving the news of a death of someone related to one’s family, the head of the family is supposed to send a delegation to offer condolences at the home of the deceased. A failure to do so is considered a grave breach of protocol, and a clear indication that the branch of the family that has been remiss does not value its kinship ties with the deceased’s branch of the family. In one instance, an old man of the Db family in Krs died without members of his extended family in Bamako sending a delegation to offer condolences. The deceased’s classificatory father, himself a young man, was very dismayed about this, scolding “They are not people,” (*mogow te*).

¹⁵ The “medicines,” or *fida* (literally, “leaves”) meant here are of the “spiritual” kind, involving not just extensive knowledge of local trees and plants to create various healing, protective, or harmful substances, but also the accompanying incantations to make them work.

¹⁶ Indeed, the premise of VC’s shift—that he inherited medicines from his father—directly contradicts the stereotypical view that no *bolominela* has access to medicines. However, apparently no one doubted the possession of important medicines in the hands of VC’s father (who was by all accounts a formidable man), no matter that he prayed with his arms/hands held.

¹⁷ I regularly observed people pray on the side of the road, as it has become customary for some drivers of *Sotrama* (public transportation to and from Bamako) to stop around the times of the Muslim prayers so they (and their passengers) can pray. Anecdotally, I would posit that the drivers who do this (not always to the appreciation of passengers) are themselves *bolominelaw*. As to the passengers, they almost always were a mix of *bolominelaw* and *bolojigilaw* (and, unrelated to this distinction, they sometimes had dramatically different ideas as to which direction to pray in, which I found quite remarkable).

¹⁸ According to the *bolobila* Imam of Krs (MK), for example, the Qur'an explicitly states that the Prophet prayed in this way, furthermore claiming "Those who would deny this, have not read the Qur'an."

¹⁹ Maliki is Malik ibn Anas [d.795], an influential 8th century Muslim scholar from Medina, whose work in Islamic jurisprudence is one of the four main schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. Malik's views on matters related to death and funerary ritual are explored in Leor Halevi's recent book (2007).

²⁰ According to Halevi, the practicalities of burial as related to the Prophet's own resting place do not receive further attention in other parts of the Hadith. Thus he estimates, as in the quotation above, that the use of "Medina-style" graves became widely accepted as the proper way of Islamic burial from an early date onwards. At the same time, he recognizes, with Malik's student al-Shafi'i, that this style is not easily executed under certain geological conditions, so that in these cases the use of branches or stones is allowed. However, the mere use of branches, as is done in Mande, does not by itself change the construction of the grave from a Mecca-style "trench" grave to a Medina-style "niche" grave (cf. Ragib 1992). Additionally, depth of the grave is of particular concern in the Islamic tradition; recommendations for the preferred depth diverge considerably between the various judicial traditions in this respect, varying between ca. 60 cm for the Maliki school and 2,5 m for the Safi'ites (Ragib 1992:395-6).

²¹ My husband made some observations about Mande burials on my behalf. As a woman, I was not allowed to be part of any funeral processions, but my husband, Arthur Verhoogt, went to the cemetery in Krs as part of the funerary procession on three separate occasions. He observed that Mande graves are dug by young men, a short while before the funeral procession of male relatives and friends arrives at the cemetery with the corpse. The grave consists of a knee-deep hole into which the body is lowered; it is then covered with branches that are angled from the upper right and lower left corners; finally, sand is put on top of these branches.

²² Besides the matter of tombs, shrouds, and wailing, Halevi (2007) discusses the gender division for washing the corps and the hierarchy of who can preside over funerals as all having been subject of intense debate in early Islam. The debates about several of these issues are still visible in the existence of different schools of thought on some of these issues.

²³ From the time I first heard about the difference between *saraka* and *sarakati*, in January 2007, I ask about it in all my interviews with Imams and religious scholars, as well as bringing it up with friends and acquaintances. Broadly speaking, the "arms/hands down" imams claim that the two terms are the same, whereas "arms/hands held" imams claim they are indeed different. However, a few of my friends, who pray with their arms/hands down, also indicate that they have at least heard about the distinction; some, like DD in Krs, also think there might be something to it.

²⁴ The issue of timing is related to that of human versus divine agency; the Reformist critique against holding the ritual on predetermined days (3, 7, and 40 days after a person's passing) is that this is a human invention, and as such takes

away from the free will of an individual to ask blessings from Allah whenever this seems appropriate. Moreover, Reformists charge that bringing offers on set dates implies that one thinks of the resulting blessings as automatically forthcoming, whereas in reality Allah will grant (or not grant) His blessings on His own terms, and even regardless of the ritual.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EXPLOITING THE GAPS: MAKING ARGUMENTS ABOUT OLD RIGHTS AND NEW SUBSTANCES

This chapter addresses two relatively recent practices involving commoditization of previously non-commodified objects: land and gravel from the Niger River. Indeed, “traditional” objects and practices are not the only ones to cause anxiety as to their signifying capacities. New objects or newly adopted “modern” practices pose their own moral and semiotic conundrums. By “modern” I refer to those practices locally considered to be associated with the elusive goals of development and modernity, which most pressingly involves attempts to raise living standards and gain access to a wider range of services commonly enjoyed by urban citizens: health care, schooling, electricity, clean water, irrigation, infrastructure, etc.¹ To those involved, none of these conflicts are “petty fights,” even if they are sometimes characterized as such by outsiders. In Bamako, my friend BK—the son of SK, the president of the “River County Association”—frequently expressed exasperation with his father’s frequent trips to Nfj to try and settle a land conflict there. He negatively compared the efforts River County villagers put into their various conflicts to his own efforts to improve life for himself and his family by building a pump and moving into irrigated rice farming in Nfj, where his family still owned land. Yet as I argue in this chapter, his concern with “development” on the one hand and villagers’ internal conflicts about access to land and other natural resources on the other are far from separate. The “petty”

concerns of villagers are also efforts to engage critically with global discourses of development and the economic difficulties exacerbated by neo-liberal policies, be it in the form of commoditization of land or the introduction of highly profitable, yet ultimately unsustainable new industries. In the process of formulating local responses to these larger issues, local participants seek to approach them as the multi-faceted problems they are, involving not just economic considerations, but moral and historical as well.

In terms of the analytical framework that has been developed in the course of this dissertation, people in Mande effectively employed an ideology and practices of *kolosi* to exploit the porousness of conflicting modes of historical imagination (Chapter 3). In so doing, they drew attention to ever-emergent new angles from which additional—corroborating, competing, or altogether different—sings could be brought to bear upon a previously established situation. The end result was not so much the resolution of the conflicts under consideration—the open-ended, dynamic character of *kolosi* and the unfinished business of making inferences hardly suggest such an outcome. Rather, the subsequent positions adopted by various interested parties precisely allowed a thorough examination of the complex issues facing Mande villagers today, while forestalling the danger of adopting closed and permanently “backwards” stances, as some urbanites predicted.

CONFLICTING CLUES: STRANGERS, HISTORY, AND LAND IN KRS

A newspaper article in the Malian newspaper *l'Indépendant*, dated April 2009, discusses the mounting tension between the head of the village and members of the Tr family in the village that was a main site of my fieldwork.² *L'Indépendant* is one of many privately-owned newspapers that have been started in Bamako since the fall of the military regime in 1991. While the readership of any such newspapers is limited outside of Bamako because of distribution issues and low literacy rates, the fact that articles from a variety of newspapers are re-published on-line on a number of Malian internet portals makes their content much more widely accessible to Malians in Europe and elsewhere. The series of articles I

discuss here is no exception in terms of its readership. None of my interlocutors from the rural areas of my fieldwork had read or heard about the article, even if they were not surprised that articles such as this might be written about them “by people who do not know the facts.” The comments posted in response to the on-line version of the articles reveal that another important part of the audience for such pieces are Malians living abroad, who stay connected with “home” through internet/news portals geared to Malians in the Diaspora. The three articles under consideration here drew comments from almost forty individual commenters, most of whom seem to be Malians who currently live in France and other European countries, as well as in North America, based on the name and look of their on-line identities (for example, including an European or American flag to indicate their geographical location). Even if a number of the on-line commenters could also be living in Bamako, our understanding of the audience response to these pieces is lacking most in regards to the Bamakois readers, particularly those who read the original printed versions of the articles.

Under the ominous title, “Communal Conflict in Krs: The Hunt is on for the Tr in the Mande Heartland,”³ and linking its reporting to that of a recent “interethnic conflict” in the neighboring Buguni region, the article seeks to portray the plight of the seven Tr families who call the town of Krs their home. “For having deprived the Tr families of water, forbidden them to come to the market or use any of the town’s public resources,” the article begins, “the head of the village of Krs has been arrested by the Bamako police.” It sums up what’s at stake—land—in the very next sentence: “The arbitrary measures taken by the village leader aim to force the Tr to either give up their claim to ownership of a 40-hectare parcel of irrigated land or leave the area.”⁴

A second article, from May 2009, reports that far from being over, the conflict has reached new heights. Fearing that “this latest relapse brings to light the precariousness of peace and social harmony in this town,” the author goes on to describe the latest mistreatment suffered by the Tr families living in the village, as well as the official measures taken so far by government and police forces. According to the report, on May 6, about one hundred young men from the town

went to their fellow villagers' (Tr) fields and cleared them of animals as well as crops; after that, they attempted to set their (Tr) houses on fire. Following the assault on the Tr property, the Bamako police arrested a number of villagers. "Even though the matter is now up to the courts," the author concludes, the explosive situation in this Mande town requires that the government take strong action "so that social harmony and national unity—as proclaimed in Mali's motto, "One People, One Goal, One Faith"—may take precedence over egocentric considerations."

A final piece (so far) appeared almost a year later, in May 2010, in the same Bamako newspaper. Evoking the "painful cohabitation of the Tr families and their fellow villagers for a number of years" as well as the "veritable witch hunt aimed at the Tr in 2009," this article euphemistically refers to the source of the conflict between the Tr families and Krs' village chief as a "misunderstanding" over a plot of land. The article goes on to describe how the volatile conflict that came to a head in 2009—with the arrest of the village chief in April and several villagers in May—had been calmed down thanks to the mediation by a group of griots from the Mande region and by the Islamic High Council of Bamako. On the eve of the opening of the fishing season in 2010, however, tensions rose again when the village leader forbade the Tr families to take part in the collective fishing, which the Tr claim to "have taken part in for more than 150 years." When members of the Tr families disobeyed the order of the village head and went to the fishing grounds nonetheless, their nets were confiscated and some of the men were beaten up. As had happened before, their access to public drinking fountains, water pumps, and the market were restricted again; some of those who tried to disobey the restrictions were publically stripped of their clothes and beaten. In response, the Bamako police arrested about thirty young men and one of their mothers for their role in enforcing the restrictions placed on the Tr villagers by the village chief by force, although I only learned about these arrests a year later (in early 2011).⁵

* * *

In early June 2009, when I went back to Krs, I readily found the village chief, who is also the Imam, in his usual spot on the veranda of his house, finishing up a Qur'an lesson. He told me that he had not really been arrested by the police, although gendarmes from Bamako had questioned him; they left after he gave them the facts as he saw him. People on the compound where I lived seemed quite amused that I would have read about the tensions in their village in an on-line newspaper all the way in America. However, they cautioned me not to believe what I had read, because, as they claimed, the newspaper people had just made up this wholly unreliable version of what had been going on between the Tr and the rest of them.⁶ "The newspapers will write anything if you pay them," they said. They charged that it was one of the Tr brothers, living in Bamako, who was behind the whole conflict anyway, and who must have asked some of his Bamako friends to run the newspaper story.⁷

Indeed, what is described in the newspaper articles as a conflict, even "misunderstanding," about land, brought into focus larger questions about the relevance of history and hierarchy, the status of strangers, and the limits of commoditization when it comes to land. According to the newspaper, the Tr claim ownership of a 40-hectare parcel of irrigated land, but are being forced to give up this claim or risk being exiled from town. What this rendering leaves out, from the perspective of the people I talked to upon returning to Krs in 2009, are a number of questions: how can people who have historically been strangers (*lolanw*) claim ownership to land in the first place? To what ends do they claim ownership to this particular plot in the first place? What exactly would it mean for them to give up this "claim to ownership"? And finally, what is an appropriate response from the rest of the village if the Tr question the very rules their fellow villagers expect them to follow? Some of these questions involve practical considerations, which were almost self-explanatory for people in Krs, but presumably not to some of the newspaper readers and commenters.⁸

The most salient point omitted from the newspaper coverage, according to anyone I spoke to in Krs in 2009, is the fact that the disputed land had been sold by the time the conflict came to a head, or at least shortly thereafter. *A faama*

(“rich and famous person”) from Bamako, presumably a cabinet minister, had apparently bought the plot for the sum of 8,000,000 francs CFA (around 15,000 US dollars), an enormous amount of money by local standards. As MK, who was involved in trying to resolve the issue as a *conseiller*, pointed out, the problem was that the land had been sold, for a lot of money, but not by its rightful owner. So, the buyer could neither take possession of the land, which he did not in fact own, nor could he just give it back to the village, because he had paid a lot of money for it. Obviously, according to MK and most others, the best solution would be for the Tr to return the money they had received from the sale (which would amount to an admission that they had been wrong to sell it in the first place).⁹ Thus what is ultimately at stake is land—not only as a means of providing individuals and families with a tangible link to their history or a way of providing sustenance, but also as the representation of significant economic potential in a neo-liberal economy.¹⁰

Another pressing problem, according to the people I talked to was the moral one of sociality—appropriate forms of behavior towards others as “neighbors” (*siginyogow*) and strangers (*lolanw*) at the same time. Most people did not quite know whether prior to the sale, the village chief and council had been aware of the Tr plans to sell the land but they felt it hardly mattered whether the Tr had gone against the village’s express wishes either wittingly or unwittingly. Either way, my friends argued, the Tr—or at least those involved in actively selling the land—knew that they were doing something wrong. Although in the summer of 2009, the restrictions on the Tr families’ access to the pumps and markets had been lifted, things were decidedly not back to normal. For example, the younger sister to the head of the compound where I stayed in Krs, who is married into a Tr family, had moved back to her native Db compound. She explained to me that this was temporary, but that it would be better this way, because her husband’s family had told her, “if you stay here, and you continue to cook for us, and if somebody were to get sick and fall ill, that would be a very bad situation for you.”¹¹ In the first months of 2010, because tensions remained high, the central government in Bamako stationed a small number of soldiers in town to “watch”

the villagers and prevent further mistreatment of Tr. “They are keeping a close watch on us,” my friend MK told me on the phone, using the familiar term *kolosi* to refer to the presence of the soldiers (*u be yan mogow kolosi kojugu*).

On a theoretical level, I also want to suggest that an analysis of the role of arguments about the past in making claims to land and natural resources productively shows how *kolosi* is an excellent basis from which to exploit the inevitable “gaps” in and between different historical accounts. *Kolosi* provides a useful framework for understanding situations where people pronounce competing historical claims stemming from different modes of historical imagination, even if they do not frame these conflicts in terms of *kolosi*. In this particular case, both “history through words” and “history in landscape” provide arguments for variously situated people to make claims as to how the past should be related to present concerns. Because neither mode of historical imagination, on its own, can tell the whole story, people are forced to consider what to pay attention to in the materials, evidence, and interpretations offered in either mode.

People and places on the move: moving towards the road and settling strangers

Various elements—particularly the presence of “strangers,” the shifting conditions of land ownership by lineages, the incipient process of commoditization of land, and a nation-wide political process of decentralization—play a role in the conflict which erupted in Krs a few months after I completed my fieldwork in 2007. In the following sections, I address each of these elements and their various intersections. Let me start with the expectations for the new road to be built in Krs, the construction of which had been anticipated locally since at least 2003, and finally seems to be under way (Esther Kühn, personal communication). In the wake of the (anticipated) new road, villages and individual compounds are moving closer toward it, creating conditions for the commoditization of land and bringing up new questions about access and ownership and the position of strangers.

As is the case with many villages around the Mande plateau, the exact geographical location of Krs has shifted over time and continues to shift. Pres-

ently, the movement of the village as a whole is away from the Niger River and closer to the road that links Bamako to Guinea through Sgr. The road was in very bad shape at the time of my fieldwork,¹² but the recurrent rumors that it would be reconstructed in the near future seem to have started to be realized with the grading of the road in 2010 (see picture).



12: Preparations for the new road in Krs;
photograph by Esther Kühn

Historically, the road passing by Krs used to be the main connection between Bamako (and further inland) and Kankan (and on towards Conakry) through the border town of Sgr. Known as the *Mande sira* (“Mande road”), the road was widened and reinforced under colonialism, using forced labor. After independence, too, the Mande road was used much more heavily than the other road linking Bamako to Kankan, known as the “Mountain road” (*Kuru sira*), and passing in front of the Mande Plateau. In 2002, however, the Mountain Road, not the Mande Road, was selected to be constructed as an interstate linking Bamako to Kankan and Conakry through Krml. This meant widening, grading, and finally asphaltting the road, a process that took between 2002 and 2007 to complete. Since the very start of the roadwork, much traffic from the Mande road has been

diverted to use the new road instead. Ever since the construction of the interstate road, which was considered a politically motivated decision, villagers along the other main road have envisioned another interstate for their own region. The construction of a new road was in fact an important part of local politicians' platforms. Just as villages along the interstate moved closer to the road, so too in the case of Krs, people have been building new compounds closer to the existing road for the past decade, and have also, more recently, started building on the other side of the road.

The move of compounds towards either side of the road instead of in the previously favored locations around the market square is a result of several factors, including expectations of economic opportunities as a result of a new road. Lack of space in existing compounds is often cited as a contributing factor as well. The current core of Krs, which includes the families descended from the town's founding lineages and other long-established groups, is a dense maze of walled compounds and parts of compounds, with narrow paths linking clusters of these together.¹³ Because long-established compounds in the heart of town cannot expand outwards, space is often at a premium, particularly in fast-growing compounds. Every once in a while, though, the pattern of tightly packed houses is interrupted by an open space, sometimes with the remnants of a house or two still standing. They have been abandoned because the compound as a whole was getting too crowded to accommodate all the people who were part of it. Thus, some of their people have moved away to build some of the new homes required for the compound elsewhere in town. If such expansion is needed, people now overwhelmingly favor construction of (part of) the compound at a different site outside the core of town, and towards the road. People of such "split" compounds still consider themselves part of "the same compound" for purposes of familial and work duties. They often call the old site in town "old house" (*so koro*) and the new site alongside the road, "new house" (*so kura*).



13: Old part of town, characterized by enclosed compounds;
photograph by the author

While compounds have always contracted and expanded demographically, the current spatial configuration of Krs, with many compounds maintaining an “old house“ and a “new house” is a direct result of people’s high expectations for a new road. When I asked people about the advantages of the placements of their new houses, they invariably stated that its proximity to the road was a key consideration. Especially when the road becomes asphalted—and thus good—they assured me, it would attract a lot of through-traffic so that it would be much easier to sell local products to passing traders from their new homes. While young women imagine themselves making some money selling prepared treats and locally available fruits to travelers, some enterprising young men and women are also building storage space along the road, where they hope to store and sell high-demand products like rice, Shea nuts, and millet.

The trend towards new compounds being built toward the road has had implications for the use of local land, including its commoditization and formalization of ownership (Benjaminsen et al. 2009). The first families moving to build homes alongside the road were those who owned land there. Previously this

land had been used for farming, but because for most families arable land is not scarce, they could afford to divert some of their agricultural activities elsewhere, and use these parcels for construction. Since the first decade of this century, families with no land of their own alongside the road have been able to convince their neighbors who did to sell them these plots. During my fieldwork, I was told that BD was the first to have sold a roadside plot to another family for the construction of their “new house.” While people talked somewhat wistfully about the lucrative opportunity of selling road-side parcels for construction that selected families now enjoyed, they understood the practice of selling these parcels mostly as being a good neighbor for allowing others to relocate towards the road too. As much as some people might make a nice profit from a sale, the town’s movement towards the road was seen as enough of a benefit for the town as a whole that the sales were considered practically “for the common good.”



14: New part of town, close to the road;
photograph by the author

Another expectation for the road’s impact on Krs is the idea that many “rich and important people” (*faamaw*) from Bamako will now want to live, farm, or have a second home in Krs and other villages along the road. On the one hand, the idea (and practice) of “strangers” (*lolanw*) settling in Krs is nothing new. Indeed, the

Tr family that is at the heart of this conflict is itself an example of the settling of “strangers” in the village of Krs. According to the stories that I collected in 2005-6, this family’s ancestor came from “the other side of the river” (*bako*) somewhere in the latter half of the 19th century. As such, the story is comparable to that of many others who moved into different villages at this same time—the second half of the 19th century was indeed one of considerable upheaval in the wake of Samori’s Jihads and the encroachment of French colonial forces. Many families thus tell stories of how their ancestor searched for better opportunities or tried to escape the perils of war in this general time period.

On the other hand, the kinds of strangers that are expected to come to Krs with the completion of a new road are envisioned in different ways than the current resident “strangers” in town. This goes hand in hand with the expectation of financial gains to come along with this new category of strangers, or “rich people” (*faamaw*). While previous cohorts of strangers brought an attractive resource to town in the form of “wealth in people” (Guyer 1993), the new kind of stranger is expected to bring material wealth and economic opportunities. For one thing, these *faamaw* are expected to buy plots of lands, instead of being given them, as was the case in the past. The most tangible basis for this change in expectations is the fact that in the 1990’s a French-Malian couple built a *campement* for tourists in Krs, on the banks of the Niger River. Although the *campement* has never been operational and is currently in disrepair, the general sense is that it would not be long until other *faamaw* from Bamako will come in to build houses, farms, and/or tourist facilities in Krs. This assumption seems to be warranted when compared to the experience of other “peri-urban areas” in Mali, such as the south-eastern cities of Sikasso and Koutiala and their surroundings, in the heart of Mali’s cotton belt studied by Benjaminsen. He found that in this region urban dwellers such as civil servants and merchants are very interested in acquiring (farm) land and “sales of land around the urban periphery has become rife” (Benjaminsen et al. 2009:30).¹⁴

Reading the field:

a critical analysis of the newspaper coverage of the conflict of Krs

The particular slant of the newspaper articles introduced above represents a first approach to the role of history in this conflict about land. Most glaringly from a local perspective, the newspaper coverage did not acknowledge the full implications of the historical fact that the Tr families in Krs are “strangers” (*lolanw*). In contrast to an understanding of Tr as “strangers,” the journalists and many of the on-line commenters argued for the fact that “we are all Malians”—presumably regardless of historical primacy or socio-political position. This approach does not deny the relevance of history per se, but brings up questions of historical depth. Some commenters, indeed, sought to position the Tr as non-strangers by referring back to an even earlier history, when the ancestors of the parties now pitted against each other were on very friendly terms. The multiple perspectives on history put forward by both on-line commenters and local observers exemplify the characteristic fluidity of “history through words,” where each layer of historical complexity serves to obscure a yet deeper historical truth. In the gaps within and between different modes of history, moreover, we can see the workings of *kolosi*.

The newspaper authors¹⁵ sketch some of the “historical background” of the conflict by noting the “past few years” when tensions have been evident, or the “over 150 years” the Tr families have fished in Krs’s pond—in fact the references stop just short of the time when the Tr ancestor came to live in Krs. From the perspective of most people in Krs, however, what matters is not how long the Tr families might have been living in town, but the fact that their particular status as *lolanw* (“strangers/guests”) remains relevant over time. The newspaper coverage, by omitting the precise historical roots of the Tr in Krs, thus makes an implicit argument that their particular history, or their contemporary status based on this history, should not matter.

A number of on-line commenters—mainly Malians living in the Diaspora¹⁶—take the newspaper’s approach to history to its logical conclusion. That is, they argue in so many words that past a certain point history becomes ancient

history, which should not matter any more. For example, one on-line commenter quips: “we live in the Republic of Mali, not the Empire of Segou.” In other words, the relevant discourse for approaching this conflict is one of modern citizenship (in the Republic of Mali), not historical accounts (of the no longer relevant Empire of Segou). Indeed, another observer asks rhetorically: “does the village chief think he lives in the 12th (*sic*) century?”

Many other commenters also take up the discourses of democracy and citizenship that the newspaper authors use to frame their analysis. Thus, the newspaper’s description of the measures taken by the village chief as “arbitrary,” “egoistical,” and “reprehensible,” is mirrored in a commenter’s question as to “who is this village chief that he thinks he can forbid fellow-Malians like himself to live in a Malian town?” Similarly, the coverage of the Tr families as being “besieged in their own houses” and “no longer wanted in their own town” plays into commenters’ ideals of—or pleas for—social harmony and national unity: “we are all Malians,” “we are all the same,” “Mali is for all Malians.” Echoing the importance of national unity as a founding principle of the nation-state of Mali, many of the on-line commenters agree that what is at stake here is the morality and legality of the treatment of the Tr families in the wake of a conflict about land, rather than the issue of land per se or the status of the Tr families, locally, as “strangers.” In the final analysis, most commenters thus agree that the village chief “brings shame to Mali as a country,” because he “incites communal violence” and was out of bounds in imposing such severe restrictions on the Tr families living in his village.

Yet even among the on-line commenters an alternative approach to the relevance of history is evident as well. While generally condemning the actions of Krs village chief, some comments suggest that, far from history receiving undue attention, a lack of historical consciousness is seen as the main problem here. For example, one person reminds us that “Sunjata [Keita] was helped by Tira Magan [Tr] and problems like this did not exist.” While this is obviously an idealistic view of what the past might have been like, the sentiment behind such a statement is characteristic of “history through words,” in which griots present the rela-

tions between Sunjata and his generals as models of social harmony. It also presents an example of the ever-elusive basis of historical knowledge, revealing, as it were, previous claims for the unimportance of history to have been referring to the wrong kind of history. A proper understanding of history as epitomized by the cordial relationship between Sunjata and Tira Magan—instead of the pasts of Biton of Segu and the 12th century (*sic*)—reveals history to be an important consideration after all.

In contrast to the majority of on-line commenters, the people I spoke to in Krs in 2009 invariably applied their knowledge of history to this case. According to them, the “historical facts” are clear-cut and hinge upon the commonly accepted view—by Tr and non-Tr alike—that the ancestor of the Tr families involved immigrated to Krs in the late 19th century. In fact, each of the five clusters of related Tr families in Krs, despite being lumped together in the newspaper coverage, has its own history of coming to Krs.¹⁷ While they all came from “across the river” (*bakò*) and settled in Krs in more or less recent memory, the various Tr family clusters in town refer to different “first ancestors” who made the move to Krs. Some of these are “great-grandfathers” of the current generation,¹⁸ as in the case of the Tr at the heart of the land conflict. This ancestor had been a native of Ngd—the ancestral home of many Tr— at the other side of the Niger River, who left his hometown because he was looking for a better place to live. In a story that was not unique among similar stories of families who had come to Krs from elsewhere, the Tr ancestor had asked, and was granted, permission from the village chief to settle in Krs. He was given land to farm and sustain his family, went on to marry, and remained in the village, as did most of his sons. His move to Krs, according to what people told me in 2005-6, coincided with, and was likely influenced by, the ravages left on the right riverbank by the armies of Samori and the French. This was a period of great upheaval and population movement, especially on the right bank of the Niger River, which the French yielded to Samori when they realized they could not subdue him (Person 1963; Jansen 2002, 2000c).

Most of Krs's inhabitants thus maintained that the more relevant perspective is that of comparatively recent historical events, in which the ancestor of these particular families came to Krs from "across the river" (*bakò*). This latter understanding of the conflict hinges on the fact that the Tr are "strangers" and presumes that their foreign status continues to impact their opportunities for land ownership and access to political office.

Planting trees: the duties and rights of strangers and hosts

Building upon their understanding of this history, the people I knew in Krs also maintained that these families' particular historical roots continued to define their current status. That is, my friends would argue that the real issue here is not about democracy or the appropriate power of village leaders, but the proper behavior of guests and the meaning of hospitality. As "strangers," those who owe their installation in town to the hospitality of the villagers who allowed them to live there, need to return this hospitality by behaving as good guests. This behavior involves, first and foremost, knowing that one is a guest—in this sense, being a guest/stranger (*lolan*) is a category of personhood, and as such "knowing oneself" (*i yere kalaman*) also applies to knowing one's particular status as a guest/stranger. While some of the expectations for being a proper *lolan* are formalized—for example, no stranger can aspire to the position of village chief¹⁹—many are not. Instead, they are worked out in interactions and conflicts such as this.

Just as importantly, the case also speaks to people's understanding of their environment and the salient distinctions therein. Differences of soil quality, suitability for particular uses, and differential rights of ownership are all embodied in the landscape in ways that might not be recognized by outsiders. However, an important outcome of the conflict was a renewed commitment on the part of River County's villagers to maintain a nuanced view of the physical landscape, and to precisely define different categories of land. In the face of ongoing economic insecurity and pressures of "development," rural people seek to engage these larger economic processes on their own terms, by specifying what categories of land can be bought and sold—and which one cannot.

Let me start by clarifying the differential links between history and access and ownership of land in the case of different lineages or families. Traditionally, recently arrived “strangers” have no ownership rights to the lands on which they were allowed to build their houses and do their farming. In Maninka, the technical term for allowing someone to come live and farm in a particular village is *lasigi*, or the transitive form of *sigi*, “sit down,” with the prefix *la-* “to make or allow someone to do something.” In the hierarchical context of Mande villages, it is only the village leader who can allow other families or individuals to permanently install themselves in town, although he would normally only allow such a thing if he knew he had the support of the other heads of households. Individual heads of households, however, can allow individuals or families to come live with them on their compound—much as was my situation on YD’s compound. In my experience, many of the strangers who were attached to particular compounds, instead of the village at large, were not primarily engaged in agricultural activities, but instead were traders, gold seekers, or other itinerants.

The person who is responsible for the *lasigi* of strangers provides them with land to farm on, while remaining the ultimate owner (*tigi*) of these plots. In the wake of the Tr conflict, many people in Krs would resort to the easy generalization that “all land is for the village chief” (*dugukolo bèe ye dugutigi ta di*) to emphasize the basic inalienability of land.²⁰ The village leader can assign the land under his jurisdiction to individual villagers on an as-needed basis. Indeed, one example of this during my fieldwork was when my friend JT asked the village chief for a new piece of land to cultivate groundnuts. After having cultivated a particular plot for a few years running, she was looking for a different plot, because the yield of the old field had started to go down. Her request was easily granted, as were all other requests I learned of for this period.²¹ Incidentally, this friend comes from the Tr family that is currently embroiled in the land conflict, which shows that at the time of my fieldwork the relationship between the head of the village and the Tr families was still harmonious enough.

As much as “strangers” are considered a permanent category, my data nevertheless indicate that there are gradations in how much “ownership” different

families have over the plots under their cultivation, rather than all land being uniformly “village owned.” From what I learned about land tenure and the allocation of parcels during my fieldwork in 2005-6, it appears that in practice, other lineages besides the Keita rulers do claim their plots of lands as inalienably “our own” (*an ta*). In practical terms, this means that villagers had no problems pointing out to me where their fields were, and indicating whether these were owned at the level of the *kabila* (“cluster of related compounds”), *lu* (“single compound”), or even personally. To take my hosts in Krs, as an example: in 2005-6, they held various plots of land, suitable for different agricultural uses, which had originally been given to their ancestor by the village chief at the time.²² This land comprised a collective sorghum field, other fields used for the cultivation of sorghum and corn by individual families, and fields used for irrigated rice farming (cf. Wooten 2009). Only part of this land was still held by the *kabila* as a whole (i.e., under the jurisdiction of the “head of the *kabila*” (*kabilatigi*)). Most of it was now held on the level of individual compounds (*luw*), and thus under the control of individual *lutigiw* (“heads of compound”). Finally, in 2005-6, individual members of these compounds cultivated rice (men and women alike), vegetables (mostly men), and groundnuts (mostly women),²³ on plots collectively owned by their *kabila* or one’s own *lu*, and granted to particular individuals to cultivate at their request.²⁴ The critical point here is that most of the plots my hosts cultivated were considered as properly theirs, even though they were neither the ruling family nor one of the founding families of Krs. This suggests some flexibility in the relationship between “stranger” status and the possibilities for land ownership, in the sense that the length of time lineages have been present in Krs—in the case of the Db, this is almost as long as the K and D—plays a role here too.²⁵

An easy test to see if a parcel of land is “owned” by a specific lineage as opposed to being the property of the village as a whole is to inquire about the trees. As embodiments of history, trees encapsulate the crucial knowledge of who planted them and as such mark the land as being owned by this person’s descendants. (The same is true elsewhere in Africa, for example in Ghana, cf. Berry 1988). People would often point out to me who had planted the trees on a particu-

lar patch of family land—usually a father, grandfather, or great-grandfather. By contrast, if someone requests the use of a piece of land for cultivation, he or she is not allowed to plant trees on it. In some cases, the land in question can be inherited from generation to generation, yet trees can never be planted on it. To try to do so nevertheless is a clear affront to the rightful owner of the land, an attempt at usurpation to be quickly and aggressively confronted. Indeed, most cases of land conflict would seem to be about the kind of land not clearly marked by trees indicating ownership, or where the knowledge of the exact person to have planted the trees has been lost over time, or is currently in dispute.²⁶

At the same time, even long-term access to land—on which trees have been planted and which people routinely refer to as “ours” (*an ta*)—does not constitute ownership in the sense that people can do with it as they see fit. In fact, in the early 21st century, there is considerable debate about what exactly it means for a lineage, family, or individual to claim a plot of land as “theirs” and precisely what kinds of rights they can assert over “their” land. Selling roadside plots to other villagers wishing to establish part of their compound closer to the road is now commonly accepted among Krs villagers, as long as the owning *kabila* is in agreement about the sale. Yet the sale of agricultural land is a different matter. I knew of only one such case in Krs, which was rumored to be the first of its kind in Krs.²⁷ The sale involved a plot of land that was held on the level of a single *lu*, after the *kabila* to which the *lu* belonged had split in two (for unrelated reasons). While many of the other *lutigiw* and others in the seller’s *kabila* felt his decision to sell his land was unwise, they felt there was nothing they could do about it. Indeed, most people I knew thought it was morally wrong to sell agricultural land, because it deprives one’s (future) descendants of access to productive land to feed themselves.²⁸

Because the commoditization of land is a divergent process, where different “rules” are emerging for different kinds of plots, the contested parcel between the Tr and the rest of Krs thus also requires close attention in terms of the kind of land.²⁹ The plot in question is the kind of land called *lè*, or a lowland open space that benefits from yearly irrigation with the flooding of the Niger River. Its prox-

imity to the river also means that this kind of land is not suitable for growing trees, so that the absence of trees as historical markers does not apply in this case. Instead, *lè* is used for the cultivation of rice or for gardening. It is attractive to hold *lè* parcels: their cultivation with rice or vegetables is profitable, because neither product serves as the staple food for the household; instead, rice and vegetables alike are frequently sold to generate cash for the individual responsible for their cultivation (Becker 2000).³⁰ Moreover, ownership of *lè*, which is located directly on the riverbank, provides direct access to the river itself.

One of the most intriguing outcomes of the Tr land conflict was in fact the “formalization”³¹ of the rules for ownership of and access to plots of land that are part of *lè*. In a series of phone conversations with MK, I learned that in the course of late 2009-early 2010 various representatives of River County—including members of the village councils of all affected villages³²—held a series of meetings about the status of *lè*. What they decided was that the fact that *lè* borders the river and allows the villages access to the riverside should be paramount: thus they established that from now on, all *lè* grounds (*lè kono dugukolo*) in River County as a whole are to be considered “village owned” and inalienable. Thus, nobody can buy or sell plots of *lè*. According to MK, and others I had previously spoken to in Krs, this had been the crux of the argument against the Tr all along, but this countywide decision, with everybody in agreement,³³ helps to justify the argument even more.

In sum, what makes this conflict so salient for people in Krs is the ways the debate about land intersects with both history and modernity. Historically speaking, as far as most people in Krs are concerned, the Tr are “strangers” without legal claim to land. But the members of the Tr family attempting to sell a plot of land they have farmed in the past are questioning, through their actions, the received wisdom of their fellow villagers. As such, the claim reported in the newspaper that the Tr have been established in Krs for “over 150 years” effectively is an argument about the proper relation between historical claims and claims to land, asking, as it were, just how long should be considered “long enough” to achieve full rights as a villager. A second argument employed by the Tr and

made explicit by the on-line commentators questions whether history is even relevant to the case at all, or if historical differences are now superseded by a “modern” discourse of equality and development. Yet importantly, it is not just the individual Tr who understand the conflict in terms of modernity. Krs villagers also understand well enough that in a neo-liberal context land becomes a commodity. However, they are asking just what kinds of land can be turned into commodities—refusing to lump all of these together—and demanding to make such decisions on their own terms, within the bounds of a framework for decision making in which historical considerations still come into play.

How to not resolve conflicts: griots as repositories of history and mediators

Questions remain, though, about the role of griots in the larger debates about the relevance of history and debates about “which history?” Where are Krs’ and other griots in all of this, as people who are particularly adept at speaking history? How does “history through words” that is their expertise shape the ongoing debate? Did they, as intermediaries *par excellence* succeed in resolving the conflict? This section addresses these questions, while also forming a bridge to the second case study where griots are key actors. As in other aspects of the Tr land conflict, the issue of modernity also comes out clearly in the way griots now share their role as mediators with other actors.

The relevance of griots to the Tr land conflict is apparent, first of all, in the number of on-line commentators who reference the time and place of Sunjata and his generals. The references to Sunjata, Tira Magan, and Biton Coulibaly in the on-line comments attest to the continued relevance of these figures for establishing the grand outlines of Malian history. As noted previously, the “history through words,” which the on-line comments evoke, is intricately bound up with griots as repositories of historical knowledge. The fact that such references continue to be an easy short-hand for people to make arguments about history thus suggests the continued relevance of griots as performers of this history, too, even if the specific references are not very sophisticated.³⁴

For the most part the role of griots as repositories and performers of history was rather limited in this conflict. In fact, upon arriving in Krs in the summer of 2009, I was surprised to learn that KC and VC, the two most prominent *finaw* in Krs had not done much “speech making” (*kuma kè*) in the course of the conflict. Nor did they see a big role for themselves in trying to resolve the conflict as it now stood. They viewed the historical arguments as straightforward, to which they could add little. Moreover, the conflict at that point was not so much about when and how the Tr had come to Krs, or if and when they had farmed the land they claimed was theirs, because the general outline of this history was so well-known as to not be amenable to serious discussion.

In contrast to Krs’ *finaw*, however, their counterparts from Ngd—the original home of the Tr families now living in Krs—over time became very actively involved in trying to resolve the Tr conflict. Since by the summer of 2009, the Tr had shown no inclination to abide by the wishes of Krs leadership (i.e., to undo the sale of the plot of land), even if threatened with such measures as restricting their access to all of the village’s “public goods,”³⁵ the most likely solution at this point was beginning to seem that the Tr would be expelled from Krs.³⁶ Had the Tr been forced to leave Krs, the obvious place for them to go to would have been their original village, Ngd. Fearing the expulsion and subsequent influx of over 100 people in Ngd, the village chief of Ngd sent his own *finaw* to plead with Krs’s village chief. They did so not by presenting an alternative historical account, but by acknowledging the facts as presented by Krs and admitting that yes, the Tr were originally Ngd’s villagers, and no, they have not behaved as good guests. Focusing on the theme of Krs as “host” (*jatigi*) in relation to their “guests” (*lolanw*), the griots’ key message was one of pity and generosity of spirit. On behalf of Ngd’s village chief, they implored Krs’s village chief to take pity on the Tr families and allow them to stay in town, and also to take pity on the village of Ngd to not burden them with an influx of more people than the village could sustain.

The performance of the Ngd *finaw* shows that griots’ main role in the course of the Tr conflict was that of emissary, mediator, and diplomat combined

(cf. Jansen 2008). These roles cannot be entirely separated from their role as repositories of historical knowledge, although they are somewhat distinct. As go-betweens from one village chief to another, Ngd *finaw* used their word skills and mastery of history to appeal to the various parties with an argument that at first blush would seem to downplay the importance of history, by bringing out the limits of “getting the history right” for providing an unequivocal solution to the conflict.

As much as the plea of Ngd *finaw* seems an appeal to disregard history—acknowledging that the Tr historically are from Ngd, but pleading not to be sent back—this is not the case. The argument constructed by the griots around the expected mode of behavior between guests and their strangers in fact relies heavily on the notion of history—particularly of the idealized space-time of Sunjata. Just as griots’ praise songs present the exploits of Sunjata and his generals as an inspiration and model for people’s contemporary behavior, so too does the current argument—about ideal hosts and guests³⁷—find its presumed origin in the distant past. The historical precedent for generosity of spirit—for example, by taking pity on one’s inferiors—is a key factor in accounting for the profound impact of the argument made by Ngd’s *finaw*. After all, the village chief has still not exiled the Tr, despite his stated intention of doing so in early 2009. Griots’ position as repositories of history thus makes them experts on good behavior as well, exhorting people to live up to the example set by their ancestors.

At the same time, the griots’ involvement as intermediaries was matched by efforts at mediation by actors who had only recently moved into this role. Particularly important in this case, once tensions had erupted to the point that the Tr were being denied access to the village’s pumps and markets, was the role of the Islamic High Council. My host YD, who used to make frequent trips to Bamako, first told me about the intervention from a group of Imams from the capital. According to him, they were planning a trip to Krs to persuade the village chief—who is also the town’s Imam—not to expulse the Tr. One Imam in particular, “the chief of all of Mali’s imams,” was considered to be influential. Indeed, the chief official of the Islamic High Council came to Krs and, according to YD, suc-

ceeded in having the Tr be allowed to stay in town. While not everyone is convinced they will be allowed to stay indefinitely, the fact is that they are still there, and their expulsion seems to be getting less likely over time.

The mediation on the part of Islamic officials, side by side with the intermediating function of griots, fits into a larger development whereby specialists in Islam are encroaching upon the traditional domain of griots and other *nyamakalaw*. While it has been recognized that Islamic and “casted” experts have historically occupied similar structural positions in the organization of social life in West Africa (cf. Dilley 2004), their rapprochement seems to be intensifying. For example, at many funeral ceremonies I attended, Quran scholars and *nyamakalaw* would occupy distinct corners of the compound, with the Islamic specialists reciting the Quran for the benefit of the deceased, while the *nyamakalaw* would give funerary speeches and coordinate the gift-giving from various parties associated with the deceased to his or her family. Afterwards, *nyamakalaw* individuals would often complain bitterly about the meager financial and in-kind rewards for their services, especially in comparison to out-of-town and even local Quran scholars (*karamogow*). The contemporaneous attempts of Mande’s griots and Mali’s Islamic leaders to resolve the Tr conflict in Krs, which makes it unclear which intervention, if any, ultimately swayed the village chief, suggests that the competition between these different kinds of specialists also pertains to the domain of mediation.

Resolution, however, might not be the goal of the various parties to the conflict. I do not want to imply that there is some stable equilibrium here that by itself would keep this conflict in a state of permanent non-resolution regardless of the actions and strategies of the interested parties. I do suggest that resolving the conflict in a zero-sum game might not be the result most local actors are striving towards. Instead, it might well be in people’s interest to keep the conflict dynamically un-resolved so as to allow both sides to simultaneously be “right” and maintain their equal status. Indeed, by exploiting the gaps within and between different accounts of history and its relevance for the present, local political office holders and their intermediaries are able to strategically position themselves as on

the right side of the issue. Neither party has been able to convince the other, let alone force it to take specific actions. What the various missions by griots from either side have accomplished, however, is for both Ngd and Krs to save face, so to speak. If the villages of Krs and Ngd are taken as the relevant units of analysis here, it appears that both sides can point to significant elements that are overlooked by the other side. Thus, the way the conflict played out owes its dynamic at least in part to an ideology and practices of *kolosi*. Furthermore, the openness entailed in *kolosi*, where new pieces of significances can always be brought to bear on previously established understandings of any situation, would suggest that it is highly unlikely that the equilibrium obtained at the moment will persist.

A final note needs to be made about the role of the state, specifically the national government and the military. The state's role has on the whole been limited. At certain moments in the conflict, the state has certainly been heavy-handed, sending in soldiers to watch the villagers and detaining a number of them in the wake of the destruction of T family homes. For the most part, however, the state has not intervened in the local political process and allowed the village council of Krs to stand by its decision not to allow the sale of this particular piece of land. This hands-off approach is in line with the political process of decentralization, which in Mali has entailed the creation of lower-level government structures—*communes rurales* (“rural communities” of a geographically continuous cluster of villages—and the gradual transfer of political authority to his level.

CLAIMS AND COUNTERCLAIMS:

OWNERSHIP RIGHTS TO THE NIGER RIVER AND ITS RESOURCES

The second case concerns the conflict pitting Krs and other villages of River County against Kr in a conflict about gravel being mined from the Niger River—which has become one of the more flourishing businesses in the region. The conflict over the rights to not just the Niger River itself, but the resources it holds, is an example of how claims over historical primacy gain new relevance in changing circumstances where gravel has emerged as a newly relevant economic resource. The changing political context emerging from the decentralization process is also

particularly relevant here, as the immediate impetus for the conflict was a dispute over tax revenues. One of the most important ways in which decentralization was envisioned to create opportunities for local development was by giving local “rural communities” (*communes rurales*) the authority to level taxes. (This is a big change for villagers, who had gotten used to not paying taxes throughout the 1990s, cf. Wooten 2009) Thus the collective taxation of grit extraction by a number of closely associated villages is exactly the kind of situation one would expect in the wake of decentralization; moreover, the uncertainty about how things such as local taxation are supposed to work has become another hallmark of decentralization.

As in the case of the Tr conflict, the notion of strangers plays a pivotal role in the Krn conflict as well. In the latter case, relations between hosts and guests/strangers link villages as a whole, instead of individual lineages or families. The question of who allowed whom to settle (*lasigi*) is a central argument in establishing the relative age of different villages, and the ownership rights that follow from seniority. The Krn case is the more interesting in that the key stakeholders in this case pitting divergent historical accounts (i.e., the inhabitants of Krn) are themselves griots—the privileged repositories of history. Specifically, Krn is the griot village of River County as a whole, so that the conflict pitted Krn’s griots against their long-time patrons. As parties to the conflict, Krn’s griots, then, had to walk a fine line between putting forth their arguments and maintaining their authority as knowledgeable repositories of history.³⁸ In this light, it is especially revealing to hear the main counter-argument against Krn’s claims explicitly phrased as a rejection of “history through words.” The critique of Krn’s griots’ rendering of history—charging that “Krn is an old name, but not an old place”—shows how a history centered on words and names (such as place names) runs into problems when encountering a landscape where the referents of these names are not necessarily fixed in place. Thus, the Krn case shows that despite a language ideology of speech as powerful and constitutive of action and value, there is also a sense that in some cases “words are just words”—or more exactly,

names. What happens, then, when villages move, as they often do in Mande? What is the proper relation between a place and a name?

Rights to the river: from fish to gravel

The conflict between Krs and Kr played out in several stages during my fieldwork in 2005-6, but the underlying causes date back to at least ten years earlier, when young men in villages on both sides of the Niger River started working to extract the gravel (*bèrè*) on the bottom of the river. While small quantities of pebbles (*korobèrè*) had long been taken from the river for use in Mande village, in the mid-1990s the extraction of *bèrè* started to become big business. A booming construction industry in Bamako gave rise to an increasing demand for gravel to be used in cement; both the demand for and the local availability of gravel continue up until the present.

Among the villages between Bamako and the border with Guinea, it is particularly the fishing villages alongside the Niger River, inhabited by Somono people, which have gotten into the gravel business. This is not surprising, considering the location of these villages immediately adjacent to the water, and the fact that people here already have the low boats, as well as swimming and diving skills, needed for the work. Even though diving up gravel from the river bottom is hard work, the effort is worth it for many young men, who evidently make a good living off of these new jobs. Their success is visually evidenced in the motorbikes that many of the young men in fishing villages can afford now. Once, a friend of mine in Ksm ruefully remarked, after seeing yet another “motorbike owner” (*mototigi*) return to his Somono village, “they do not even fish anymore in Somono village, it’s all gravel now; you see, gravel brings them motor bikes, but fish could never bring them that.”³⁹ Similarly, on the other side of the river, in the fishing village of Ggd young men have taken advantage of the new possibilities afforded by the gravel business; as many young people told me, almost every young man in Ggd owns a motorcycle, even though they are expensive and thus rare in most other villages.

The presence of fishing villages—inhabited by Somono fishermen—on both banks along the river is locally explained in the same discourse of *lasigi* (“allowing someone to settle”) as is applied to strangers such as the Tr who came to settle in Krs. Like all strangers, Somono fishermen are considered to have requested, and been granted, permission of the chiefs of villages to settle on village land at the banks of the Niger.⁴⁰ As both Somono and non-Somono see it, Somono remained more at the margins of Maninka sociability than others strangers, like the Tr, because of their different mode of livelihood, and subsequent comparatively isolated geographical position. Today, Somono are considered to be a particular *siya* (cf. Chapter 4), yet “not all that different from us, Maninka—except for their mode of livelihood.” One man from Krs who had made fishing his profession and had taken up residence in a Somono village, marrying a Somono wife, was said to be “almost a Somono” by virtue of exemplifying the most obvious characteristics of being Somono, namely fishing and living in a Somono river-bank village.

In order to understand the problems posed by the gravel business, it is important to know a bit more about the mechanisms in place between the Somono “guests” (*lolanw*) and Maninka “hosts” (*jatigiw*) in regards to their respective rights to the Niger River and its aquarian inhabitants. The main creatures of the river are fish on the one hand, and the water spirits, who among other things, ensure the plenitude of fish, on the other. By virtue of being the original inhabitants of the place, the Maninka villages who serve as hosts to particular Somono villages are the “owners of the water” (*jitigiw*) or the “owners of the river” (*batigiw*) and thus responsible for the yearly sacrifices to the river spirits or “people of the river” (*bamogow*). The Somono fishermen on the other hand are the only ones who may fish from the river—meaning the deep middle, where most of the fish live, along with the people of the river and an occasional hippopotamus or crocodile.⁴¹ Maninka villagers may fish in the river’s shallow mud banks, as well as in the ponds (*kò*) that fall under the jurisdiction of their particular village.⁴² As a sign of the traditional hierarchy between the Somono and their hosts, up until recently the Somono would make a yearly presentation of “the first fish” (*dantige*

jègè, literally “fish to give an account”)⁴³ of the new fishing season to their original hosts. Even though this presentation had not been held for many years by the time I did my fieldwork, the memory of this sacrificial practice nevertheless informed claims for historical primacy and the ancient status of the villages that used to be recognized by the Somono in this way.

With the Somono fishing business giving way progressively to the work of extracting *bèrè*, a similar mechanism for regulating the profits from gravel was needed. At the time of my fieldwork, there was a uniform system in place along the River—between Bamako and the border with Guinea—whereby gravel extractors, be they local or hired from Bamako, were taxed a fixed rate per day per boat for the extracting of gravel.⁴⁴ This gravel tax was collected directly by the villages that border the part of the river from which the gravel is extracted; these funds then fell under the authority of the respective village chiefs and councils, and was designated for the “village fund” from which individual villages fund, for example, the reception of visiting officials.

The Krn conflict came about when the village of Krn became dissatisfied with the arrangement about the taxation of *bèrè*. In early 2006, Krn started to claim that it was the true “owner of the river” (*batigi*), by virtue of being the oldest village of River County. Consequently, all income from the gravel tax collected for the stretch of river belonging to River County should go to Krn. The precise circumstances that brought about this claim, at the specific moment it did, are not clear. However, it seems likely that Krn was reacting against getting short shrift in the existing tax situation, which had not been in place long, because the gravel business was still quite young. Local observers like MK, for example, related Krn’s claim to its “jealousy” about not profiting from the gravel extraction as much as some other villages. Indeed, *bèrè* is not equally abundant everywhere, so that some spots in the Niger river, adjacent to particular villages, see much more *bèrè* extraction activity than others—and hence more tax revenue, as well. In the parts of the river belonging to Krn, there happens to be an under-abundance of *bèrè*.⁴⁵

The claim that Krn is the oldest village of River County is not new, but it took on an entirely new significance in the context of the *bèrè* extraction business. Even before the conflict, however, the extent to which Krn's inhabitants—the griots of the Keita who are the political elite in much of River County—downplay the historic importance of their patrons is striking. In the version of the Sunjata epic collected from a griot from Krn, WK, the core villages of River County are hardly mentioned, even if the ancestors of their founders are considered *bona fide* relatives of Sunjata (the children of his father's co-wife). This is in stark contrast to other versions of Sunjata's story, such as those from Kita, Kela, or Niagassola, where griots' concerns with locally prominent families, and particularly their historic patrons, come through much more clearly. But in both his rendering of the Sunjata story as well as his recorded responses to researchers' questions, Krn's WK takes a very different approach towards his patrons in River County. At one point in speaking about Nankoman's attack on Samale, WK explains, "Samalen is River County's oldest village, yet it was established after Krn was already there" (*Samalen, o ye Badugu duku folo-folo de ye, a takalen Krina sorola yen*) (SCOA 1975:338-9). This comment prompts WK's collaborator, YTC, to note that "at the same time as stressing the old status of Krn, Wa Kamissoko is essentially saying that its inhabitants, the Dereba-Kamissoko do not owe anything to the Masalen Keita in general and to those of Badugu in particular" (SCOA 1975:338-9, my translation).

In the context of gravel extraction, the claims for Krn as older than all the rest of River County take on the added significance. If Krn is indeed the rightful (sole) "owner of the river," it can also lay claim to all its resources—including *bèrè* and the tax collected for it. Thus, the economic repercussions of establishing who is the "oldest village" in River County are much greater now than they were in 1975, when WK was claiming historical primacy for Krn over all other River County villages during a scholarly conference.⁴⁶

Countering Krn's claims: "Krn is an old name, but not an old village"

In the course of 2006, Krn's neighboring villages countered Krn's claim of being River County's oldest village in two ways. First, they asserted, the former practice of the Somono presenting the "first fish" to the original host villages shows that Krn never functioned as the sole owner of the river. Second, there is a difference between a village having an old name and actually being an old village—and that the difference is relevant for deciding claims based on historical primacy. In the case of Krn, its "old name" as a site for one of Sunjata's major battles is directly contradicted by the physical evidence of earlier settlements of Krn that are still visible in the surrounding landscape. The remnants of old Krn that are still visible clearly invalidate Krn's claim to being the oldest village around in the eyes of many of River County's villagers.

The presentation of the "first fish" conforms to a well-known anthropological category of ritual practices, that of "first fruit festivals" (Luning 1997; Kuper 1980). Although by the time of the Krn conflict, the presentation of the first fish existed only as a memory of a former practice, the practice had still been in place as recently as one or two decades ago, and many people remembered it from personal experience. (Unfortunately, I did not have an opportunity to discuss this practice with people from Krn.) According to their descriptions, a day or two before the festival, all the Somono people from alongside the river between Bamako and the border with Guinea would assemble together in one of their villages on a particular date early in the new fishing season. The men would go fishing together, while the women prepared the fish and other meals. On the days following the fishing expedition, a group of Somono would go down the Niger and present a large quantity of fish to the village chief in each of their original host villages.

The special status of Krn as the sole "owner of the river" is not born out by the ritual practice as remembered by people in Krs, KK, and Bnkm. None of them singled out Krn as the sole or primary recipient of the Somono's first fish. Instead, they mentioned other villages where the Somono made presentations, including in most cases Dlb, Dnk, Krs, Krn, and Bl. In the opinion of people like

OS, the village chief of the Somono village Ngk, all of the villages included in the ritual had historically acted as hosts for the settlement of various Somono fishing villages. This explains why a big village like Bnkm, which now boasts a large Somono village on its outskirts as well does not figure as a recipient of the Somono's presentations: Bnkm is not one of the original host villages responsible for allowing the Somono to settle. The specificity of the remembered ritual, then, turns the accounts of who were the recipients in this ritual into a historical marker of the status of particular villages *vis-à-vis* the Somono.

Krn's argument for being the sole owner of the river is based upon the claim that it (Krn) is the oldest village of River County, which, in turn, includes the premise that it was Krn that originally settled (*lasigi*) the first Somono who arrived in Mande.⁴⁷ As specific evidence for Krn's status as original host of the Somono, Krn's spokespeople pointed, first, to their town's geographic proximity to the main Somono village, Krn Somono So. Secondly, they maintained that the original founding relationship is expressed in the very name of this village, too: Krn Somono So. Indeed, many Somono villages are simply called "Home of the Somono" (*Somono So*), or "At the side of the River" (*Dalakana*), and often prefixed with the name of its host village or closest neighbor. Thus, in the case of Krn Somono So, the obvious conclusion—and Krn's argument—is that the very name of the village carries the memory of Krn being its original host.

Yet the argument that makes Krn the original host of every, or even one critically important, Somono village is complicated by the fact that the Somono village in question was previously settled at various other locations. One of these locations, and chronologically the oldest one, was close to Krs. As people in Krs and KK were fond of pointing out, in the early to mid 20th century, when Somono So's village chief was the father of the old man who now holds this position, the hamlet used to be called Krs Somono So ("the house of the Somono at Krs"). Thus, people imagined the name of the fishing village as matching up with its geographical location (closer to Krs than to Krn) as well as with its relationship of historical dependence on its host village (again, Krs rather than Krn). Additionally, they claimed that remnants of the older village of Somono So are still present

in what are now again Krs' rice fields. On a basic level, however, the argument made by Krn on the one hand and Krs, KK, and others on the other, is much the same. The crucial difference involves whether the alignment of place name, geography, and history are still transparent, or have been lost over the course of time. Whereas Krs villagers referred back to the old location of the fishing village, and to its old name of *Krs Somono So*, Krn inhabitants argued that the current name—*Krn Somono So*—reflected an unalterable truth that had always been the case.

Interestingly, in the course of my fieldwork, the name of Somono So changed again—this time, not to reflect a new geographic location, but to align once again with what the people who lived here perceived as their historically correct designation. In 2005, the hamlet was consistently referred to as “Krn Somono So,” (“the house of the Somono at Krn”). This appellation seemed entirely appropriate to me at the time, considering how close the settlement in fact is to Krn. Together with two other young women, I visited the place a number of times over the course of 2005, because a third friend of ours from Krs had recently married there. In early 2006, however, when the conflict about the taxation of gravel was in full strength, people in Krs now were adamant in calling the place “Krs Somono So,” reverting to its original name. The most striking visual instantiation of this was at a political meeting I attended in Somono So, organized by my friend's husband and attended by delegations from Bamako and all five villages making up River County. For the occasion, the men and women of the village had produced a uniform outfit that referred to the hamlet as “Krs Somono So.” This designation—Krs instead of Krn Somono So—was also used repeatedly in the speeches given on the occasion.

Compounding the problem of claims for Krn's primacy even more is the fact that not only Somono So has moved, but so has Krn itself. At the 1975 colloquium on Mande oral traditions in Bamako, WK proudly explains that Krn is currently at its 12th location. Acknowledging the itinerant trajectory of his village of origin through the landscape, WK claims that the listing of all previous iterations of the town of Krn is in fact a form of praising (*matogo*) its current in-

habitants. “*Tunu ni Tana, Tara Kuma ni Kaya, Naninko anin Balaninko, Finya Dyon Dukuren, Finya Dyonbanna, Dyendyefe, ani Kayafe, Banankoro anin Krina*” is thus a praise song for Krn at the same time as it list the villages founded by Krn’s ancestors before settling down at their current site (SCOA 1975:332-3). Yet even after becoming “Krn,” the village continued to move, as Kamissoko and Cissé also acknowledge. Cissé indicates an earlier settlement of Krn closer to the river, the site of which is still marked by sacred tree. After that, Krn moved to the side of the *marigot*, and eventually towards the road linking Bamako to Sgr (SCOA 1975:106). Thus, Krn’s most famous griot makes no secret of his town having moved around widely and frequently, even if he stresses its ancient status at the same time as its itinerant past.

The relationship between place names, physical places, and history is thus a fraught one, and this inherent ambiguity was used as a key argument in the Krn case. Despite the carefulness exhibited in many Mande place names that distinguish between older and younger incarnations of the same village (SCOA 1975), the identity of villages that have moved from place to place remains an open question. Many place names carry the qualifier *koro* (“old/elder”) or *kura* (“new”), such as Krs and Krs-*koro*. Krn, too is recognized to have moved from a previous site now known as Krn-*koro*. Moreover, some places that are no longer inhabited but still recognized as a previous installation of a particular village are referred to with the qualifier *tomo* (“ruins”); Krn, too, has a *tomo* site associated with it. At the same time, many village founding stories refer to the renaming of a village when it was taken over by new political authorities.⁴⁸ The praise names of Krn seems to follow this logic, by listing the previous names attached to what is now the town of Krn at its earlier locations. Yet nothing in these praise songs, nor in the seemingly exactness of Mande place-names, indicates when Krn really becomes Krn.

During the Krn conflict, several people in Krs explained to me that an old name should not be equated with an old village. For example, WK argued that Krn was indeed an old name, as evidenced by the expression “Kri and Do” in accounts of Sunjata’s life. Yet, WK was adamant that an old name did not suffice

for Krn to claim more ancient status than other villages, particularly when the ruins of Krn's earlier settlements were still plain for all to see: "Kr is an old name, but not an old village" (*Krina ye togo koro di, nka a te dugu koro de di*). Moreover, he specifically tied this spurious use of historical evidence to the fact that Krn's politically most powerful people were all griots. Evoking griots' expertise with the "power of words," WK claimed that in this case, the history of Krn's griots were "just words/names" (*o ye togo dòròn*).

First, the Krn case brings out an unexpected refutation of "history through words" as being "just words." This might not seem such a surprising charge for readers accustomed to a language ideology wherein the referential function of speech is paramount, and words can thus easily be dismissed as "empty" or "false." Yet in the Mande context where the efficacious nature of speech is considered of primary importance, it is a significant assertion of a different view of language's relation to history. It implies that in order to know history, one has to know more than the name of a place or a person. Stories that are "just words/names" are insufficient to adjudicate claims of historical primacy; they need to be used in conjunction with other modes of history and observation, such as paying attention to the landscape. In other words, WK's argument implicitly relies on a notion of *kolosi* in suggesting that the underdetermined character of "history through words" necessitates looking for evidence in other modes of historical imagination. Moreover, it explicitly calls for the use of practices of *kolosi* to appreciate the clues in the landscape that show Krn's recent, not ancient, status.

Second, the explicit reservations about "history through words" brought up by the Krn conflict also included the privileged position of griots as the exclusive performers and repositories of this kind of history. The fact that Krn's griots were prime stakeholders in the conflict proved hard to reconcile with their role of River County's designated griots-as-performers. Thus, Krn's griots did not perform at weddings or other festivities in River County for the duration of the conflict. Neither did Krn's hunters take part in the yearly hunters' gathering in Krs, nor were there any official visits between the adversarial villages (except those aimed at resolving the conflict). While this situation must have been difficult on

Krn's griots, the solution that was eventually worked out in the conflict would seem to make up for this. The *bèrè* tax is now collected collectively for all villages in River County that border the river, and divided among them equally.⁴⁹ Not long after this solution was reached, did Krn's griots start to come to Krs again. The first wedding at which they performed was taken by many of Krs's inhabitants to mark the end of the animosities between the two villages.

* * *

The fact that the Krn conflict involved griots as prime stakeholders makes the case particularly salient as an example of people's reservations about a griot-based "history through words," which are not often recognized. At the same time, the case is not unique. The longstanding conflict between Dnk and Ngd, on the other side of the river, offers a suggestive parallel. Both Dnk and Ngd are situated on the riverbank, on the other side of the River Niger from Krs. On that side of the river, I spent considerable time in the small village of Ksm, which is located exactly between Ngd and Dnk. Socially and politically, however, Ksm is much more oriented towards Dnk.⁵⁰ Ngd, on the other hand is the village where the Tr families in Krs originally come from, as well as the home of several *finaw* ("griots") compounds I visited on a brief trip with one of Krs' *finaw*.

The animosity between the villages of Dnk and Ngd is longstanding and documented in colonial sources. In the wake of the decentralization process, their mutual relationship has again deteriorated considerably, with intermittent large-scale fights between the youth of both places. Both Dnk and Ngd also have rules in place that require its citizens to participate in their own weekly market, and forbid them to participate in that of their rival two miles away. One's absence from one's own village market as well as one's presence at that of the other town are punishable by fines. What I want to highlight here, however, is that in this case too, the conflict is couched in terms of the relationship between a town having an "old name" and its having longer or shorter roots in a particular geographic location.

My host in Ksm, MLK, explained that Ngd and Dnk have contested each other's power since at least colonial times, and presumably even before. When the French tried to combine the two towns into one administrative unit (*canton*), neither of them could accept being grouped together with the other. However, the French insisted on creating the *canton* along the lines they had originally conceived, and calling it the "*canton de Mugula*." According to MLK, the chieftaincy of the *canton* was first offered to Dnk, being the oldest village in the wide region. Yet, as MLK framed it, "Dnk did not want any political power," preferring instead to hold on to its religious power instead. The French then put the leadership of the *canton* in Klb, a city bigger than both Dnk and Ngd. Nevertheless, relationships between Dnk and Ngd remained tense throughout the colonial era, as is evidenced in a number of reports from colonial administrators called from Bamako to restore the peace. Dnsk's imam also told me that Dnk has settled Ngd. This also means that Dnk still holds power over Ngd. According to the imam, his father gave him the words to "curse" the inhabitants and chief of Ngd if needs be: "the words to curse them are at my mouth" (*a dankakuma be ne da la*).

The old rivalry between Ngd and Dnk has taken on renewed significance with the creation of new administrative units as part of Mali's move to "decentralization" beginning in 1992. The restructuring of villages into new administrative units (i.e., *communes rurales*) reignited the animosity between Dnk and Ngd, when the latter was established as the "main village" (*chef lieu*) of the proposed *commune de Ngd*. In a comparative analysis of the workings of a number of newly formed *communes* in Mande, Camara characterizes this case as one where "the way the commune was established was suspect and there were dissenting views [on who should be in charge]" (Seydou Camara 2002:45). He notes that of the five villages the state proposed to bring together in this new commune, Ngd is the largest, "while Dnk is undoubtedly the oldest" (Seydou Camara 2002:55). According to Camara, Dnk's more ancient history makes it impossible for this town to accept either the construction of a new *commune* of Ngd or a situation where Ngd would be considered the "main village" (*chef lieu*). In the end, Dnk and Ksm refused to become part of the new *commune* and at the time of Camara's

research, were trying to become a commune of their own (Camara 2002). The status of the commune of Ngd continued to be unresolved during the period of my fieldwork.⁵¹

The reasoning employed by Camara to conclude that “Dnk is undoubtedly the oldest” of the villages involved is illuminating for what it shows about the relation between history, access to and ownership of land, and the relation between hosts and guests, similar to the processes at work in the Krs case. Camara begins by outlining the oral traditions concerning Dnk’s original settlement, tracing it to—unsurprisingly—the time of Sunjata and one of his fierce warriors, Kamanjan Kamara. Kamanjan’s older brother, according to Dnk’s founding story collected by Camara, was Mansa Dan, a marabout who discovered the site of Dnk and settled there.⁵² By contrast to Dnk’s origin story, Camara considers the story of Ngd—founded by a group of Tr originally from Mkn—“at least surprising,” and even worse, false. In the final analysis, he claims, “this falsification of history is made possible by the fact that each village, regardless of its status, is the owner of the land in its immediate environment” (Camara 2002:46). In other words, *sigifenw* (“those [villages] that settled alongside [another village]”) over time acquire ownership over the land they inhabit and farm, in the same way as do strangers who settled into a host village. Because of this, the fact of ownership of land does not in itself prove a town’s antiquity or status as host.

The conclusion Camara arrives at concerning the relative antiquity of Ngd versus Dnk (Dnk wins), was not such a foregone conclusion for the people I discussed the issue with during my fieldwork. MLK’s friend from Mkn, KT, who would visit him from time to time in Ksm, was very hesitant when I brought up the oral traditions that claim an ancient history for Dnk. While his allegiance, like that of his friend MLK, was clearly with Dnk, he was quite hesitant about the historical basis for Dnk’s claims. Echoing WK’s comments about Krn, KT explained that Dnk is an old town, but its people wandered around a lot, and it took them a long time to settle. Again, the fact that the name/word Dnk had been around for a long time, but that the town itself “did not settle early” (*a ma sigi joona*) made the claim for historical primacy problematic.

Interestingly, the same paradox WK tried to elucidate regarding Krn—that it is the most ancient town of the region, yet has a history of prior settlement that also is a source of pride—applies to Dnk. Dnk, too, is praised by its griots through a recitation of the places of its previous settlement—the yearly Benba ceremony is a key occasion where these praises occur: “*Sobe ni Bali, Tabu ni Dankassa.*” At the same time, one is supposed to square the itinerant history of the town with its historical position as oldest town around, which critically involves having been in place long enough to cede some of its land to other villages to settle.

The parallels, then, between the Krn case and that of Ngd and Dnk are obvious. Both cases involve a conflict about which village is more ancient than another. The discourse in which these claims are made is again that of hosts and strangers/guests, which in the case of villages are commonly referred to as *sigifenw* (“those that settled alongside [another village]”). In both cases, stories about the founding relate the origins of at least some of the villages back to the time and space of Sunjata. At the same time, the relationship between founding stories and the evidence of the past remembered in different modes is not straightforward. On the one hand, the suspicion is that an “old name” does not equate to an “old village.” On the other hand, the fact that strangers become more indigenous over time problematizes the notion that referring to a history of land and land ownership necessarily presents a more truthful picture. Both “history through words” and “history in the landscape” can in fact be manipulated and are subject to interpretation. The porousness of their respective boundaries opens up some wiggle room for people on various sides to make arguments about history, land, and power by aligning aspects of continuously evolving situations with inferences from ever available potential signs.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has analyzed two case studies of conflicts about history, land, and ownership of resources. My argument here has been that people rely on an ideology of *kolosi* to understand competing claims about history and its relevance as

ultimately a matter of *what to pay attention to* for historical evidence. Conflicts about land and natural resources, which rely on divergent modes of historical imagination to make arguments about the appropriate course of action in the present, reveal that, in practice “history through words” and “history in landscape” do not neatly line up with different “sides” of the debate. More importantly, the gaps between these modes of historical imagination create the kind of under-determined space well suited to the ideology and practices of *kolosi*: what counts as a reliable sign of history? What does a satisfactory account of the past look like? Viewing the past through different modes of historical imagination produces competing narratives and kinds of evidence, often posited as fundamentally opposing viewpoints. It thus takes careful and selective attention for people to sort out the various claims and positions of others as well as themselves.

In practical terms, the conflicts described in this chapter occupied much of people’s attention for many months, and required a good deal of creativity on the part of all participants to come to a solution. The stakes involved—land, right of settlement, money from taxes, and political power—were important enough that people dealt with fights, imprisonment, and intensive scrutiny by government soldiers.

¹ A committee from the mayor’s office of River County conducted a survey about the most pressing needs in the 22 villages making up River County. The examples I mention here are taken from the results of this survey; their importance was confirmed by numerous villagers, who frequently commiserated with me and each other about many of the things that were lacking in Krs.

² I accessed this article electronically through the Maliweb website: <http://www.maliweb.net/category.php?NID=42906&intr=> (accessed October 2009). I thank Nienke Muurling for sending me the link to the article shortly after it appeared.

The first newspaper article was published in April 2009, exactly two years after my return to the US. In June of that year, I had the opportunity to go back to Mali for a brief visit, and was able to discuss the issue of the land conflict with

friends and acquaintances on both sides. The second piece came out when I was on my way to Mali and I didn't see it until after I returned again to the US. When I started writing this chapter, the third newspaper article was less than a month old. Frequent phone conversations with friends in Krs have also kept me in the loop about the status of the conflict in the course of 2009-11.

³ All translations in this part are from French.

⁴ According to a Tr spokesperson quoted in the first newspaper article, the problems already began “a few years ago, when the village chief began saying that this piece of land was not ours, but belonged to the village as a whole.” This would seem to contradict my earlier statement that in 2005-7, there was no conflict going on between the Tr families and the village of Krs, unless we take “a few years ago” as an exaggeration or referring exactly to the two years since March 2007. However, I think the crux is more likely that while the conflict did not come out in the open until 2009, its roots lie in events and circumstances that were in fact already present during my 2005-7 fieldwork. The new element in 2009 that makes the whole situation so fraught is the clear threat of the village chief to the Tr families that they will be expelled from the village if they continue their claims on this piece of land.

It might be useful to give a somewhat fuller picture of the land conflict as I understand it. The same Tr spokesperson is quoted as stating that, “our family gave this piece of land [at the heart of the conflict] to the village some forty years ago for a gardening project, but with the understanding that it would be returned to us once the project was concluded. This was so arranged by the village chief and my father.” The gardening project mentioned here was that initiated by the late Karamba Toure in the early 1980s. A native of Mali (but not from Krs), Touré and his French wife moved to Krs in 1983, to “think with the villagers about ‘self-development’” and start an irrigated garden. When Touré died the next year, his wife at first continued to work with local women on the garden project, but later decided to focus on other development projects elsewhere.

But how and when did the Tr family come to be in possession of the plot of land in the first place? Again according to the Tr spokesperson quoted in the newspaper article, the land came into the possession of his “great grandfather,” or “more than 100 years ago.” This date accords well with the relative chronology about the installation of the Tr in town that I obtained in 2005-6 in talking to people about the history of their town. If the gardening project came to a halt somewhere before the mid-1990s, it is possible that between that time and April 2009, when the “land conflict” is first reported in the newspaper, some of their members might have asked, on one or more occasions, for the return of the plot given up in the 1980s. I don't have information on this.

⁵ True to the Mande aversion of sharing negative news, a friend of mine only told me a year after the arrest of the exact number of people having been arrested, by cheerfully announcing in a phone conversation one day: “oh yes, and very good news, [such and such] were released from jail earlier this week!” Only then did I realize just how many people had been arrested and how long they had been in jail without being charged.

⁶ As far as I could ascertain during my visit to Krs in 2009, most if not all people were in agreement with the village chief—who acted in consultation with the village council representing all of Krs’ families—that the piece of land that had been sold indeed belonged to the village as a whole, and not to any individual family.

⁷ I did not have a chance to talk to MMT, who was said to have instigated the conflict and who was in Bamako when I was back in Krs in 2009; I did speak to some Tr women, both those married into the compounds concerned as well as those originally from them.

⁸ For one, the basic claim that the Tr are not able to “get back” a plot of land they lend out to the town “some years ago” ignores the basic practice in which the village chief allocates “farm land” in general: namely, the plot requested should be suitable to a particular crop, but would not be a specific parcel. Thus it seems unlikely that the village chief would feel under any pressure to return to the Tr family the exact same parcel as the one they had vacated many years earlier. On the other hand, it also seems highly unlikely that he would have outright refused to give them *any* land.

⁹ Indeed, the general opinion was that the majority of Tr individuals had either not been aware of the proposed sale or had actively advised against it.

¹⁰ Cf. Benjaminsen et al. (2009) about processes of formalization of land rights in contemporary Mali.

¹¹ This is a not so veiled threat to the woman that she will be considered to have poisoned the members of her husband’s family should anything happen to anybody. In this case, the woman is indeed much better off with her own family. Besides, since her husband wasn’t at the time residing in Krs, it would be no big sacrifice for her to (temporarily) leave her husband’s family.

¹² The road suffers from water overflowing its surface every rainy season. In the beginning of the rainy season, the bridge linking the road to the outskirts of Bamako collapsed, which threatened to make the city practically inaccessible except for a detour via the notoriously bad road linking Bcm and Sb. Thanks to the presence of (and the pressure from) the Peace Corps training center on the very outskirts of Bamako, on the road towards Guinea, right *past* the bridge, the bridge was speedily repaired.

¹³ Most compounds are relatively large, as has long been a hallmark of the Mande region, regularly being inhabited by one hundred or several hundred people (Leynaud and Cissé 1978). On large compounds like this, smaller clusters of more closely related people inhabit different parts of the compounds, where the positioning of cooking huts and granaries indicates the demarcation of these smaller groups. Outside walls, however, are only used to connect the houses on the outside of the compound.

¹⁴ However, against the optimism that Krs villagers express about being able to sell some of their land to *faamaw* from Bamako, Benjaminsen’s research sounds a cautionary note. In an analysis that rings very true for the present case study as well, he warns that the typical first “move” for a new owner—to establish formal title to the newly acquired land—contributes to the continuation of ex-

isting power inequalities. That is, while the “formalization” of legal title to land carries the possibility of alleviating rural poverty, this potential is not fulfilled in the Malian case, where it is not “original owners” who benefit, but “wealthy and politically strong outsiders” (Benjaminsen et al. 2009:33).

¹⁵ The article dated April 9, 2009 was written by a certain Kassoum Théra; the pieces dated May 13, 2009 and April 27, 2010 by a Kassim Traoré.

¹⁶ The on-line version of the article, on a news portal geared to Malians in the Diaspora, drew comments from almost forty individual commenters. Based on the name and look of these people’s on-line identities (including an European or American flag to indicate their geographical location), most of them are Malians who currently live in France and other European countries, as well as in North America.

¹⁷ While the newspaper articles lump together the different Tr families and make it appear as if they share a common history and present interests, this is not really the case. In terms of their history, each family has come to Krs at a specific historical moment, for whatever reasons, and as such traces its descent through the particular person from their branch of the family to settle in Krs. The different Tr *luw* in Krs did not cultivate common land, nor did they participate in one another’s yearly rituals, such as the one FT organized for the benefit of his *lu*. In terms of current interests, it was only one family of Tr, consisting of three inter-linked *luw*, which was involved in the land conflict reported on in the news. At the same time, however, FT was apparently embroiled in a land issue of his own, on a much smaller scale.

¹⁸ For other families, the arrival in Krs is much more recent. For example, the chief of hunters in Krs arrived in town only a few decades ago, when he was a young man looking for a better place to farm and raise his family. Also native of Ngd, where arable land is much scarcer than it is in Krs, he was attracted to the agricultural possibilities of the latter.

¹⁹ This, too, is not set in stone. Both during the socialist administration of Modibo Keita, Mali’s first president, as well as the current policy of decentralization attempts have been made to allow individuals, who would not traditionally have been eligible to do so, to occupy village-level positions of leadership. This includes individuals of “slave” and “stranger” backgrounds. However, most of these attempts have been, and continue to be, unsuccessful.

The exclusion of presumed “strangers” from positions of political power does not just apply to the local level either. The current crisis in neighboring Côte d’Ivoire continues earlier political battles in that country, which have long revolved around the issue of *Ivoirité*, or the question of who is a citizen and who is a stranger. The current democratically elected president, Allasane Ouattara—who is favored particularly among Muslim Northerners—is not recognized as the legitimate winner of the 2010 elections by the sitting president Laurent Gbagbo. Gbagbo’s refusal to cede power to Ouattara follows attempts in earlier elections to prevent his opponent (Ouattara) from running, on the grounds that he is a “stranger” because of his parents not having been born in Côte d’Ivoire.

The Ivoirian situation, in turn, is but one of many examples in which claims to autochthony and the exclusion of strangers has increased in Africa in the past decades, and become more violent as well (Geschiere 2009 for a useful discussion of the earlier phases of the current conflict).

²⁰ Benjaminsen also notes the ideology of the “basic inalienability of land” in “Mali’s cotton zone,” as well as the recent—rampant—practice of sale of “excess” farmland to urban dwellers such as bureaucrats and merchants (Benjaminsen 2009).

²¹ Note that people would request a parcel of land suitable for a particular sort of cultivation (groundnuts, for example), but not a specific parcel. In fact, because the land needs to be in fallow for a few years between bouts of cultivation, it is better to not be assigned the same parcel over and over again.

²² One of the ways the more recent arrival of the Db families in Krs, compared to the original inhabitation by K and Da families, was evidenced in the landscape is by the location of much of the Db land at a further remove from the village core. With the current move of Krs towards the road, this configuration will undoubtedly be affected, as some families will move closer to their main fields, and others, further away.

²³ The gender specificity of the cultivation of these groups is typical of this region; cf. Wooten 2009.

²⁴ In other cases, these parcels were part of non-family land under the jurisdiction of the village chief, from whom it could be requested as in the example of JT above.

²⁵ Another relevant consideration would be the Db status as *nyamakala*, specifically *numu* (“blacksmiths”). Besides the D *numu*, another lineage that has deep historical roots in Krs without being part of the town’s foundation are the Kn, who are *numu* as well (the Db *numu* are attached to the K, the Kn to the D). It might be that the fact that both of these lineages are *nyamakala* (in combination with their long presence in Krs) allows them to claim more secure ownership of their fields than the Tr, who are more recent “strangers” as well as non-*nyamakala*.

²⁶ In one such case that I encountered during my fieldwork, a particular plot had been cultivated by an individual for a long time, yet with no transfer of ownership rights from the original owner, who was a brother of the person cultivating the land. Upon the death of the brother owning the land, his sons demanded to be given back their land, but were refused by their uncle and later their cousins. Their conflict eventually resulted in the murder of two people, protracted negotiations between the families, and a court case in Bamako.

This conflict, too, had older roots, but I—and most people in Krs—only became aware of it in 2006, when the news spread that three young Keita men had killed two other youngsters in Nfj. Because Nfj and Krs are both part of “River County,” many people in one village know people in the other, so details about the case were soon circulating around our compound about the events leading up to the attack and the precise circumstances of it. I also heard about the case in Bko, through the son of the chairman of the “River County Association,” who is

originally from Nfj. After being on the run for a little while, two of the three were apprehended. Their case was heard in court in early 2010, when they were sentenced to long prison terms; the third person is said to have fled to Côte d'Ivoire.

It is obvious how in this case, the history embodied in any trees on the plot would still leave much room for negotiation, because as brothers (and in the next generation, cousins) both claimants could presumably argue that it was “their” (grand) father who had planted the trees, and that the land was thus “theirs.”

²⁷ YD had numerous connections in Bko through his position as a local *conseiller rural*, one of whom was interested in buying agricultural plots in Krs. YD and this *faama*—a civil servant who worked with YD in the mayor’s office—worked out an agreement where the latter would buy a significant portion of YD’s land, while the former continued to farm this land alongside his own, in return for part of its yield.

²⁸ DD, for example, argued that this was a matter of long-term loss versus short-time gain, because even though the money offered for land might be attractive in the short run, in the long run, the children of one’s children will be hard-pressed to take care of themselves for lack of suitable land.

²⁹ It is important to recall that the land conflict in Krs ultimately was a conflict about the commoditization of land: the Tr who claimed to be denied the “rights” to their land were seeking to sell it, not cultivate it.

³⁰ I learned through my work with the agricultural women’s work group that the cultivation of rice is a labor-and cost-intensive endeavor (the two go hand in hand, because the amount of labor involved in weeding and tending an irrigated rice field all but necessitates the hiring of a work group to help out with weeding at least once—and these services need to be paid). Far from everybody can afford to grow rice, as opposed to, say, millet or corn, which families have to cultivate to provision themselves with the staple food (*to*) or ground nuts and hibiscus, which are the typical crops that women grow on the side, to provide the ingredients for the sauce to go with the *to* (cf. Jansen 1995 and Wooten 2009).

³¹ I put this term in quotation marks here, because Benjaminsen et al. (2009) use the term “formalization” to refer to the bureaucratic process of establishing ownership rights on a plot of land by turning to the state (what Mande villagers call “putting a paper on it” (*papier k’a la*). What the representatives of River County are doing, though, is different; it could almost be called “informal formalization,” because it bypasses the state. In the context of decentralization, where local communities are asked to take greater responsibility for their own governing and development decisions, the representatives clearly feel within their rights to establish this kind of rules on their own, and fully expect them to be backed up by the state should they be challenged.

³² Not all villages of River County effectively have *lè*, because not all of them are close enough to the river. It is my understanding that only the villages that have *lè* participated in these meetings.

³³ Obviously, this decision about *lè* and the way it was arrived at—through a countywide meeting of village council members—replicates the existing power structures of these villages, where “strangers” (*lolanw*) are all but excluded from

the political process. As in the case of land, though, the situation on the ground is a bit more flexible than the ideology of permanent stranger-hood would suggest, so that positions of the village council can also be filled by those whose lineage status prevents them from aspiring to the apex of village leadership, i.e., the position of village chief.

Another way in which existing power structures are exclusionary is, obviously, with regards to gender and age: as far as I know, no women or youth are part of village councils.

³⁴ The reference to Biton Coulibaly refers to the Segu Empire, not the Mande Empire, and the latter was established only in the 13th century, not the 12th.

³⁵ The restriction of the Tr families' access to the village market, pumps, school, and other "public goods" in this perspective is only a mechanism to force the families to make a decision either way. Draconic as it may seem, restricting access to public goods or places is not an uncommon punishment for cases like this, or similar breeches of trust, like theft.

One of the on-line commenters on the newspaper articles shares the story of a colleague of his father who was punished in a similar way in a neighboring village. A somewhat similar use of the restriction is seen in the case of the conflict between D and N, two neighboring villages who were disputing to be the "main village" of the newly formed "community" of which they both would be part. Here, all villagers from one town were forbidden access to the market of the other town, and vice versa.

³⁶ Even more severe than a temporary restriction of access to the market or pumps is the wholesale eviction of the Tr families most directly involved, i.e., the cluster of three related *luw*. While I've never encountered the eviction of an entire family, even this measure is not an altogether uncommon punishment. One case I had come to know about in 2005-6 involved a number of individuals—at least one man with his wives and children—from another *numu* compound. When a friend from my *tonsigi* group had given birth to a new baby, she was visited by a brother of her husband, who was living with his family in the next town. Now, this seemed quite strange to me, as brothers will normally remain together on their father's compound, and even if the compound does split up, the new *luw* will be right next to each other. Alternatively, a man might move far away, to test his luck elsewhere, and might even end up settling in another place and starting a family there—but not in the next town over! As it turned out, this man had given the rest of the compound a lot of grief with his propensity for getting into arguments with other people in town, and had eventually been told that he was no longer welcome to live in town. As my friend told the story, the actual eviction went over quite smoothly, despite the man's reputation for always getting into arguments. He appears to have accepted the decision and went on to ask for permission to settle in Djoliba. At only 10 km of Krs, Jlb has a long history of being at odds with Krs, and has been known since at least the 1960s as a particularly progressive village that welcomes foreigners to settle there (Jones 1970:33) (Jones 1972:33 and 1976).

³⁷ The hierarchy in this relationship is important, because it allows the griots to implore Krs's village chief to behave like a good "host" (*jatigi*) even if his "guest" (*lolanw*), the Tr families, clearly have not hold up their end of the bargain.

³⁸ Interestingly, for the duration of the conflict, Krn's griots did not come to Krs or other River County villages to perform. Only when a solution was eventually worked out, did a delegation of Krn come to Krs again, to mark the end of the animosities with a large musical performance.

³⁹ Many people observed to me that Somono were turning their attention to gravel as opposed to fish, yet this is not the only reason why fish has become much less available locally. Equally important is the trend whereby local Somono men and women now market their fish in Bamako as opposed to locally on the market or by going door-to-door. Lastly, many people considered the quantity of fish in the Niger to have gone down considerably, as a result of over-fishing. Unfortunately, this could well be true.

⁴⁰ The general timing for the settlement of many Somono villages seems to be somewhere in the mid-19th century, although references to Somono fishermen are present in Sunjata stories as well, where they help Sunjata and his entourage cross the river at particularly dicey moments.

⁴¹ In most Somono communities I visited, people would tell me about at least one father or grandfather who had been able to catch hippopotamuses or crocodiles. However, neither of these species has been seen in these parts of the Niger River for many decades and I believe there are none left here.

⁴² There is an intricate system by which a village's *kòw* are fished at different times during the fishing season, which coincides with the "hot season" (*telemanya*) between March and April. All of a village's *kòw* are identified by individual names, and the name(s) of the pond(s) to be fished on any particular day are either broadcasted the night before by the village's announcer, or made known on the day itself by the person in charge of the fishing. This is a hereditary position, which in Krs is always filled by a *numu* ("blacksmith") from the Kn family. Before the opening of the first *kò*, this person used to give a sacrifice to the water spirits responsible for the *kòw* (like the river itself, the bigger *kòw*, too, are home to "water people"). In the years I was there, this sacrifice was no longer public, as it was said to have been in the past, but most people considered that it was likely still brought in private.

Like borders between village's land, the boundaries between neighboring villages in terms of their respective *kòw* can be hotly contested. Again, the discourse of *lasigi* ("allowing others to settle") plays an important role in these situations, because it is not geographic proximity that makes a village the owner of its surrounding *kòw*, but rather the question of original ownership and whether or not the village responsible for the *lasigi* of "strangers" in a village of their own also conferred ownership rights of a particular *kò* to them. When people are found fishing in a *kò*, to which they are not allowed to have access, they are chased away and punished—as was the fate of the Tr men who tried to fish in Krs's *kòw* in 2010 after the village chief had explicitly denied them this right.

The policing of *kòw* is strict, and anybody fishing in a *kò* or planting a net in the shallows of the river outside of the designated days is punished. A village's hunters take care of this policing, because they are regularly out at night.

⁴³ Cf. Chapter 2 about the notion of *dantigelike* as the first duty of a stranger visiting a new town. The “fish to give an account” (*dantige jègè*) thus explicitly situate the ritual practice in the context of the relationship between strangers/guests and their hosts.

⁴⁴ For the year 2005, this tax amounted to 250 *francs CFA* per day.

⁴⁵ Incidentally, the amount of *bèrè* in Krs's part of the river is quite limited as well. The relatively limited amount of *bèrè* overall also means that its extraction will probably not prove a long-term viable activity—even if the gravel business has only recently taken off in this part of Mande and is still quite lucrative for the moment. Many people in Krs recognized that it would not be possible to turn gravel extraction into a permanent economic endeavor, capable of sustaining families. This recognition is one factor why it is mostly young men, for whom even short-term economic gain is quite welcome, are the primary workers in this new activity (besides the obvious fact that young men are better able to carry out this physically demanding work).

⁴⁶ WK was speaking to a scholarly audience that did not include scholars from other Mande villages, even though many of them were from elsewhere in Mali. Thus, his claims about the relative history of Krn vis-à-vis the rest of Badugu do not instigate any discussion in this context. Nor do I know how villagers in various villages of River County would have responded to WK's claim in 1975, should they have known about it to begin with.

⁴⁷ Being the original host village of a region and being the region's oldest village are for all intents and purposes synonymous in Mande. While a village does not have to be the oldest in a certain area in order to become a host later villages—which critically involves granting them lands to settle on—clearly only an older, well-established village, with sufficient land holdings would be able to do so. As such, by presenting itself as the original host for Krn Somono So, from which numerous other Somono villages were founded later on, Krn was effectively claiming ancient status.

⁴⁸ An example is Nrn, which is named after the mother of the village's first Keita inhabitant, not the town's original founder of a different clan; previously, the place had been called Mm.

⁴⁹ As noted, Krn has relatively less *bèrè* in its adjacent river part, so this new solution is beneficial to Krn.

⁵⁰ For example, the population of Ksm, which consists primarily of *numuw* (blacksmiths and potters), shows its allegiance is by staying clear of Ngd's weekly market, and frequenting only the one in Dnk. Indeed, Ksm's blacksmiths and potters are an important feature of Dnk's market, where they attract wholesale buyers from Bamako, who fill up vans with mortars and pestles, and a variety of pots.

⁵¹ During the period of my fieldwork, Dnk and Ksm persisted in their refusal to join the commune of Ngd, so that the *commune* was still not a viable en-

tity. At the same time, Dnk and Ksm request to become a *commune* of their own had not been granted, because without Ngd and no real candidates for other villages-members, the proposed *commune* of Dnk would equally be too small. A few times during my fieldwork, fights broke out between youth from Dnk and Ngd, and in at least one case soldiers were brought in from Bko to diffuse the tension and arrest a number of young men. Some boys from Ksm were involved in these fights together with their friends from Dnk.

Since my last stay in Ksm in 2007, the conflict between Dnk and Ngd has flared up occasionally. One incident was reported in 2008 in the Malian newspaper *Le Republicain*, another of Mali's many independent Bamako-based newspapers whose content is partly made available through internet portals devoted to Mali and geared towards Malians abroad (see: http://www.malijet.com/actualite_dans_les_regions_du_mali/expedition_punitiva_dangassa.html, accessed November 2009.) The precise sequence of events of the confrontation between the mayor of Ngd and what the newspaper article claims is his "militia" on the one hand and the village chief and other public figures in Dnk on the other remains somewhat unclear in the newspaper article. It is, however, amply clear that the animosity between the two villages has not diminished; moreover, Dnk still refuses to acknowledge the primacy of Ngd as main village of their shared *commune*; some of the clashes are violent; and on occasions such as the one described in 2008, military/police intervention involves the arrest of several villagers (14 in this case). The parallels with the Krs conflict described in the first part of the chapter are evident.

⁵² The story as rendered by Camara goes as follows:

"Originally from Kong, in the East, the two brothers travelled along the Niger River on the river's right bank, until they came to what is now Bl, at the same latitude as the port of Krs; there they parted ways. Mansa Dan, a marabout, discovered the site of Dnk, where he settled close to a prairie of kasa herbs. Kamanjan, who was a warrior, crossed the river to settle on its left bank, at the feet of the Manding Mountains" (Camara 2005:45, my translation).

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This dissertation is an ethnography of “paying attention,” in its social and moral sense, as it is theorized and practiced by rural Malians living in the towns, villages, and hamlets of the Mande region of Mali. Paying attention—*kolosi*—emerged as highly salient in the field, even if I only fully realized its relevance and scope when I started writing. Choosing to focus on *kolosi* is in line with what I take to be the central strength of anthropology as a discipline: taking seriously the lived realities of people’s everyday lives in a wide variety of contexts and places and encouraging academic knowledge production based on these multiple vantage points—specifically including those from locales that are not at the center of the global political economy nor of knowledge production in most other disciplines.

I have shown that an ideology and practices of *kolosi* constitute a continuous thread in the richly textured lifeworlds of people living in this region—tracing its pervasiveness across a variety of activities and social domains, from disputes over land and resources to the “small details” of practices of infant care, and from debates about the appropriate form of Islamic rituals to changes in marriage preferences. I have also argued that a set of historically and culturally specific assumptions about what signs are and how they function—assumptions that are per definition unstable and subject to change—are instrumental in shaping the condi-

tions in which debates about history, moral personhood and religious practice take place.

Drawing on varied bodies of literature loosely united around the materiality of speech and the semiotics of things, I have aimed to develop the local notion of *kolosi* into an analytical lens with which to illuminate not only significant aspects of people's lifeworlds in Mande but comparable processes in other social and cultural contexts as well. The dual aim of this concluding chapter is to highlight the theoretical contributions of the dissertation as well as suggest directions for further research that would help sharpen the analytical and comparative potential of the notion of *kolosi*.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION

A first contribution of the dissertation is to the study of materiality. Paying attention is a material practice—but not one that is often studied. As an ethnographic analysis of a largely overlooked material practice, the dissertation adds to the scholarship that shows the critical socio-political salience of material practices such as exchange, feeding and eating, reproduction, and care-giving. The materiality of paying attention lies, first, in its embodied character—a habitus of *kolosi* that is inculcated into children from a young age and constantly refined through practice, growing awareness, and creativity. More importantly, people in Mande estimate that one's capacity (or lack thereof) to pay careful attention has real material consequences, in the form of authority and respect, as well as physical safe-keeping from potentially dangerous situations or harmful actions plotted by others. Finally, the material world in all its aspects is a prime object of attention, in that an ideology of *kolosi* positions one to acutely train one's attention on one's social-material environment, including the minutest details of shape, form, and substance.

An analysis of paying attention as a material practice illuminates the social processes involved in noticing observable signs as well as the collaboration and contingency of how inferences are made from them. My emphasis on the inextricability of *kolosi* from social relations distinguishes the dissertation from Geurts'

study of the Anlo-Ewe sensorium (2002), which is otherwise closest to the conceptual issues I address. Geurts highlights the cultural and historic specificity of the way Anlo-Ewe people conceptualize and embody the various senses, including the sense of balance. Besides the obvious affinity of attention on one hand and perception and the senses on the other, Geurts' account of the ways the senses are thought to work in the Anlo-Ewe context also resonates with the workings of *kolosi* on a descriptive level, such as in the Anlo-Ewe understanding of *seselame* ("feeling in the body"). Compared to Geurts' work, my dissertation foregrounds the relevance of "sociability, struggle, historicity, and contingency" (Keane 2003:413) that are entailed in the process of paying attention. Indeed, I have argued that *kolosi* is fundamentally grounded in the lived experience of social relationships and all that this entails.

My account of *kolosi* appreciates that material practices are at the core of people's lifeworlds and that they change over time, which compels us to ask how people make sense of, debate, or resist such changes. The analysis makes clear that the process of deciding what gets to count as a sign and of what, or what is worth paying attention to, is always unfinished business, while simultaneously bringing out the intersections and uncertainties of paying attention with new interpretations of Islam, changing marriage preferences, or conflicts emerging from the commoditization of new kinds of substances. In outlining the salience of *kolosi* for how people in Mande make connections between and among local histories, the material world, and talk, and in doing so construct and inhabit their world in locally specific ways, my work reinforces the findings of current scholarship on the materiality of personhood, kinship, and linguistic practice. In particular, I illustrate how the "stubborn materiality of things" resists being fully incorporated into a single meaning and thus impels the social process by which things, practices, or differences, come to be understood as signs.

A second contribution of the dissertation is to the study of linguistic, material, and semiotic ideologies. The concept of ideology is indeed a productive one to characterize the local insistence on the relevance of *kolosi* because it brings out how questions of paying attention—what one should pay attention to, and who

gets to tell you so, and how conflicts of competing objects of one's attention are resolved—are caught up in social relations, which always involve power differentials, and are also always loaded with value judgments and ethical valuation. Moreover, the concept of semiotic ideology stresses the fundamentally unstable nature of meaning. The inherent instability, ambiguity, and openness to debate and creativity of the process of making sense of signs—that might corroborate, compete with and negate each other—is clearly borne out in the Mande case. This process, no less, is inflected with the social relations and political concerns of observers who are ultimately responsible for actively performing attentiveness.

Indeed, *kolosi* is such a productive angle from which to approach Mande lifeworlds because it is not only embodied as a material practice, but also actively theorized. The discourse of *kolosi* provides an explicit language to talk about how and why people need to pay attention, what is worth paying attention to, the relations between perception, experience, and knowledge, and what the moral implications are of (not) paying attention. It provides a meta-level account of a range of issues—including kinship relations, modes of historical imagination, and pedagogy—whose importance is regularly stressed in everyday practice.

In presenting an ethnographically grounded account of a semiotic ideology, my dissertation is comparable to Engelke's work on the "live and direct faith" of Apostolic Christians in Zimbabwe (Engelke 2007). If the notion of semiotic ideology is in part a response to the notion that the material is and has been a problem for religion—particularly Protestant varieties of Christianity—my account makes clear that its usefulness extends beyond the domain of religion. Whereas the semiotic problem at the heart of Engelke's account is one of presence and immateriality, the issue I have highlighted in the Mande case is one of inference—the social process of discerning signs and making inferences from them. I have argued that *kolosi* posits a richly meaningful universe, in which people, their actions, relationships, and speech, along with substances, things, spaces and places, *all* are potential signs. The omnipresence of signs and the unlimited potential for the creation and interpretation of new ones is a prime reason people in Mande consider it imperative to "pay attention" to the minute details of

one's surroundings, of all kinds, in order to be an adequate, moral human being. At the same time, many of the signs that are present in one's lived world are "hidden in plain view." Their interpretation might only be obvious for people who have the knowledge (the "eyes" and "ears") to understand them; alternately, it might be considered inappropriate to (still/openly) acknowledge them as signs, even if it is accepted that they would have been considered signs in the past or could be considered as such under different conditions. Debates about the precise nature of the material world and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of particular material practices are thus at the core of Mande lifeworlds.

A third contribution is to the anthropological literature on Africa, particularly in regards to Mande and surrounding regions and the growing body of scholarship on Islam in Africa. The central importance of *kolosi* in Mande has not previously been recognized. However, the usefulness of *kolosi* as an analytical concept shows in how it allows me to provide a fresh perspective on a much-discussed aspect of Mande and neighboring societies such as griot speech. It also provides a culturally specific framework for bringing out the importance of many of the "small things" a fieldworker in Mande is confronted with on a daily basis, but would easily overlook without a framework for acknowledging their significance.¹ An interesting question that remains is that of the geographical breadth of the ideology and practices I describe with the Bamana/Maninka term *kolosi*. Suggestive parallels—with Fulani practices of interpreting the "small acts" of children as signs or Anlo-Ewe understandings of bodily sensations—as well as the mutual enforcement of *kolosi* and linguistic practices of indirection that are known to be widespread in the wider region warrant the suggestion that a distinct ideology and practices of paying attention might also be relevant in other West African contexts.

The dissertation's contribution to the study of Islam in Africa is significant in that it provides an account in which Islam is presented as an integral part of people's lifeworlds without assuming that these lifeworlds solely revolve around Islam and matters of piety. This is a valuable addition for the acknowledgement of internal differences in local Muslim communities, and the active ways in which

ordinary believers take up, contest, or ignore the claims of self-proclaimed pious Muslims. Another important finding of my fieldwork is that, despite locally perceived differences between pre- or un-Islamic modes of being and doing and those that are properly Islamic, *both* fit within the framework of *kolosi*, which encourages one to pay close attention to others, the world around, oneself, and one's actions. The shared space of *kolosi* simultaneously facilitates and constrains how debates are played out about what it means to be a good (or bad) Muslim and what the proper places and relationships are for objects, people, God, and His intermediaries.

Looking at practices and ideologies of paying attention, finally, carries an excellent possibility for comparative analysis. Attention is part and parcel of many topics of interest to anthropologists—from somatic modes of attention (Csordas 1992) to informal education and apprenticeship learning, as well as personhood and place, secrecy and speech. Indeed, I have made comparisons between the Mande case and ethnographic examples from a variety of socio-cultural contexts by drawing on analyses anchored around a variety of analytical notions. The promise of *kolosi* as an analytical concept in its own right is most evidenced in parallels with other cultural contexts where similar processes seem to be at work: acquiring wisdom by noting the landscape among Apache Indians, feeling signs in the body as part of an Anlo-Ewe sensorium, or the hesitance evidenced by Australian Aboriginal women in deciding when and how to proffer an interpretation for a potentially significant sign in the environment.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The research presented in this dissertation can be further developed along four principal axes, some of which are clearly related to each other. Specifically, the directions I propose for further research are the following: 1) the historical development of *kolosi*; 2) the use of *kolosi* as an analytical tool to study Mande's current experience of "heritization;" 3) the comparative analysis of forgetting in the aftermath of endogamy, slavery, and ancestors; and 4) the intersection of *kolosi*

with Islam, specifically regarding the similarities between the two as semiotic ideologies and forms of moral imagination.

Historical tangents of kolosi

My current account of “paying attention” is presentist rather than historical, yet it is obvious that the contours and salience of *kolosi* would not have remained unchanged over time. The accounts on the emergence of “paying attention” as a central philosophical, social, and aesthetic concept in late-19th century Europe discussed in the first chapter suggest the fruitful possibility of historical analysis of at first sight fleeting topics. An intriguing question remains about the possible relationship between the obsession with “paying attention” as described by historians of 19th century Europe and the concept of *kolosi*. It is a not entirely incongruent hypothesis that the present importance of *kolosi* in the Mande region of Mali could have been influenced by or brought on by colonialism in the 19th century. The chronology surely fits: if in the course of the 19th century the importance of “paying attention” comes to the foreground in the context of changing conditions of labor, and if the colonial conquest of Africa begins in earnest in the final quarter of the 19th century, the concept of “paying attention” could have been imported along with notions of time and timeliness, hygiene, gender relations and other established examples (cf. Burke 1996; Hunt 1999). At the same time, I suspect that the ideologies and practices of *kolosi* cannot be related to colonialism in any simple sense. In particular, it seems unlikely that *kolosi* resembles the “traditional” Kabre practices that turn out to owe much to the colonial context in which they became codified (Piot 1999) or to the kinds of practices resulting from a colonial or post-colonial “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992).

However, there are other ways to go about writing a historical account of *kolosi* in Mande. For the moment, I am inclined to see *kolosi* as part of the history of the *longue durée*, having been around as part of Western Sudanic sensibilities for a long time, like the power of words and the practice of mediated speech, as well as an Islamic educational ethic of personalized, internalized, and embod-

ied instruction. The latter has in fact been described by the historian Rudolph Ware precisely in terms of a history of the *longue durée*, and as such provides a model for writing a history that can account for both stability and change (Ware 2009). Such a view of the long past of *kolosi* would account for how and why it makes it such a strong “strategy” for dealing with all kinds of rapid changes, in religious views, marriage practices, political realities, gender and generation dynamics, global economics and inequalities, etc., and why *kolosi* still works to help people make sense of a lot of these changes.

A pair of studies on the British botanical explorer Frank Kingdon-Ward provides another fruitful model for a more fully historicized account of *kolosi*. In these studies, the anthropologist Erik Mueggler provides a richly nuanced account of the work of Kingdon-Ward on the periphery of empire, characterizing his efforts of collecting and describing botanical and geological features of the Chinese landscape as “labors of perception” (Mueggler 2005a:445). Mueggler takes note of the emergent concern with attentiveness in Europe at the time of Empire as described by Crary. However, he is careful to add that the “ideologies of representation” demanded by European imperial powers of their participants are never stable, nor do they remain unchanged in the face of the multiple, quotidian interactions of British imperial officers and the people among whom they worked. Thus, Mueggler invites us to understand the practices of reading, writing, and revising that Kingdon-Ward engages in on a daily basis as “important technologies of perception, shaping the body’s interface with the world and fashioning modes of social relatedness” (Mueggler 2005b:725). His account, then, is not of a simple imposition of imperial practices of attention on a foreign landscape, but rather of the subtle ways the landscape and people surrounding Kingdon-Ward shaped his modes of attentiveness as well.

“Heritization” the Mande way

A direction of research I plan to explore in the immediate future concerns the “heritization” of Mande culture and history. The conceptual framework of “paying attention,” constituting as it does a particular mode of objectifying culture, of-

fers an especially appropriate set of analytical tools for studying the field of heritage. Conversely, “heritization” seems a particularly productive arena to continue my work, because the designation of particular local geographies, practices, or objects as “heritage” deals with the same fraught issues of what gets to count as a sign (in this case, of culture/history), who among the various local, regional, national, and international actors gets to decide, and what particularized, regional or global concerns and discourses are used to do so. Heritage has by now become an important concern of anthropologists, historians, and other scholars (besides being a multi-billion dollar industry). Yet with few exceptions, studies in this field lack a sophisticated theoretical framework allowing for both fine-grained, nuanced analysis of particular cases as well as possibilities for comparison. However, I propose that the concept of *kolosi* could potentially provide just such an analytical framework, particularly for understanding current constructions of world heritage in Mande.

Mande “heritage” as presently understood by government officials centers on the space-time of Sunjata, the continued importance of which was observed in Chapter 3. The Malian government has recently proposed the site of Sunjata’s proclamation of Mande unity—a plain near Kangaba, known as Kurukan Fuga²—for inscription on UNESCO’s World Heritage List; as a first step in this process, the site has been placed on the List of Proposed Sites in 2009. Since a few years, the Kurukan Fuga site is marked by a commemorative plaque with the name of the site and the year of the battle that supposedly took place there. Presumably erected by a group of Kangaba youth, this inscription was one of the first attempts to put Kangaba and the larger Mande region on tourists’ maps.³ Another Kangaba-area site, the “sacred” hut known as Kamablon and the septennial re-roofing ceremony of this hut—which is the sole occasion for the integral recitation of the Sunjata Epic—have recently been placed on the List of Intangible World Heritage.⁴ Finally, the UNESCO recognition of Kangaba’s Kamablon structure and the Kurukan Fuga site is complemented by significant renewed interest in the so-called “Kurukan Fuga Charter.” This declaration was supposedly made by Sunjata at Kurukan Fuga and laid out the principles of government for

the newly unified Mande. The charter has recently been commented on by a number of West African scholars committed to reclaiming Mande oral traditions as part of an authentic, indigenous African heritage (Cissé and Sagot-Duvaroux 2003; Diakité 2009; Dia 2008; CELTHO 2008).⁵



15: Kurukan Fuga;
photograph [Directorat National du Patrimoine Culturel, Mali](#)

I will conduct further research in Mande and elsewhere in Mali over the summer, as well as in neighboring countries, on the quest for recognition of locally signified spaces and practices as (intangible) World Heritage, starting with the experiences around the Kamablon re-roofing ceremony and the Kurukan Fuga site/charter. The current interest in Kurukan Fuga, and the “charter” associated with it, constitutes the most recent emergence of Sunjata- and Mande-centric readings of history and landscape. Yet it also provides a fascinating example of history in the making, and the productive possibilities of combining different modes of historical imagination. My next project promises to be a fascinating case study of how particular social practices and relations, along with specific objects, places, and practices, come to be understood as “culture” and “heritage” by variously situated actors. Such a project would make valuable contributions to

the study of heritage, the objectification of culture, and the fashioning of global difference, and extend these issues beyond both the contemporary tourist encounter as well as purely local ways of objectifying culture such as those evident in ideologies and practices of *kolosi*.

Anti-Heritage: forgetting and the aftermaths of endogamy, slavery

A third direction in which I hope to develop the work of this dissertation further is in extending its geographic scope and comparative character. The heritization project is also a step in that direction, in that it envisions the case study of the creation of (world) heritage in Mande as providing a comparative analysis that could be juxtaposed with other cases on a variety of levels. Some of these comparative cases I could feasibly study myself: for example, the creation of Mande heritage as world heritage beyond Mali's borders in Guinea (i.e., the Sosso Balla) and Burkina Faso, or the larger heritage landscape in Mali, which boast world heritage sites in Jenné and Timbuktu, and is pushing for others (as in Sikasso). Other cases would be based on detailed studies of "heritization" processes elsewhere, which is indeed a topic that anthropologists and others are beginning to address in more nuanced ways.

At the moment, however, a much more extensive and rich anthropological literature that would allow productive comparison with some of the processes related to *kolosi* is that on the forgetting of a number of strands of particularly "difficult heritage." Difficult heritage is a loosely defined term that I have seen applied to the memorialization or active erasure of traumatic historical events: slavery, genocide, Apartheid, colonialism. In Chapter 5, I pointed out some of the silences in people's discursive constructions of past practice of caste, which at least some Africa-based scholars have approached as a human rights problem. Among the many studies that address silences in the wake of large-scale historic traumas, the work of the anthropologist Bayo Holsey stands out for its explicit connection of these issues to the field of heritage—namely diaspora tourism to Ghana's slave forts and castles (2007). Her study shows how complex histories of forgetting

and remembering intersect to create new understandings of slavery and the slave trade among African-American tourists, local Ghanaians, and others.

A different kind of “difficult heritage” appears in relation to changing religious interpretations, which might call into question the significance or acceptability of practices previously considered highly significant. A compelling argument here is that formerly highly efficacious practices—such as ritual speech—become refashioned as a form of local tradition or indeed “heritage.” This is the argument, for example, in Joel Kuipers’ rich study (1998) of Weyewa ritual speech on the Indonesian island of Sumba. The use of certain elements of Weyewa ritual speech in school performances here forms an illustrative example of how the “erasure” (in the sense of Irvine and Gal 2000) of many of its former performance forms enables the reconceptualization of Weyewa ritual speech and the Weyewa language in general (Kuipers 1998:147). I would add that this process not only involves erasure, but iconization as well: the emblematic character of ritual speech entails that a particular speech form comes to be equated with the language as a whole and by extension with an ethnic group: indeed, ritual speech in these contexts seems to become the “essence” of “Weyewa-ness.” In other words, from a religious phenomenon Weyewa ritual speech now has become heritage. Such processes seem indeed widespread, and my material on Mande could be fruitfully inserted in a comparative assessment of the various forms this mode of heritization takes.

Kolosi, Islam, Morality, and Signs

A fourth and final direction I am eager to explore involves the ethical component of paying attention. In explaining the moral issues at stake in being the kind of person who is attentive, able to grasp things perceptively, and capable of making convincing inferences, I have made a beginning towards construing *kolosi* as a profoundly moral concept. Continuing in this direction will be an important step in defining and refining *kolosi* as a more robust analytical concept, balancing its roots within an original Mande context with a wider applicability in comparative contexts.

Morality is rapidly becoming a frontier of anthropological theorizing (Lambek 2010), taking on new dimensions in the ethnographic study of ethics, such as the histories and transformations of moral concepts (Robbins 2007; Zigon 2009). Equally relevant is the analytical lens of Beidelman's concept of the "moral imagination," which involves "a world different from that which [people] actually experience" and highlights "the tensions and unresolved contradictions in [their] social life" (1993:1). Beidelman—along with other Africanist scholars such as Karp (1980), Jakobson-Widding (1997), and Riesman (1986, 1992)—have understood the "gap" between social expectations and lived experience as a hallmark of social life. These authors showed an early interest in how people deal with the disjuncture they perceive on a daily basis between who they should ideally be, as persons, and how they feel themselves as individuals, proposing the notion of "moral imagination" as the locally relevant ways to grapple with this disjuncture. My analysis of the morality of *kolosi* clearly resonates with these approaches yet could be taken further.

The case of *kolosi* in particular allows for an investigation of "how seemingly dissimilar ethical concepts and practices might not be fully distinct, but rather reflect shared roots or the historical or contemporary influence of one ethical framework upon another."⁶ Indeed, the link between *kolosi* and Islam is well worth investigating in this respect, in order to "explore the interconnections between [seemingly dissimilar ethical concepts] as a means of reconsidering how ethical life responds, as well as contributes, to changing social and political relationships both within and across cultures." Such an analysis, in turn, would contribute to our understanding of "how ethical concepts and practices reflect or resist impositions of domination through means that are not exclusively ethical." The relationship between *kolosi* and Islam is certainly fraught. On one hand, there is the "negative" association alluded to above, where particular interpretations of Islam make formerly significant ritual practices obsolete and force them into the category of "heritage". On the other hand, Islam and *kolosi* seem certainly compatible as well. The Qur'an, after all, states that if one would only "pay attention to" (or "observe") the camels, the heaven, the mountains, and the expan-

sive earth, one would recognize the undeniable existence of Allah (Surah 88:17-21). In further research, I would like to highlight the moral aspects of *kolosi* and the ways these intersect with Islam as a discursive tradition that entails numerous moral precepts. The centuries-long regional co-presence of an ideology and practices of *kolosi* alongside the tenets and rituals of Islam warrant closer attention to their potential imbrications.

¹ The centrality that I claim for *kolosi* does not imply that it is a master trope or key symbol of Mande culture—two notions whose fixity are antithetical to the continual openness of *kolosi*. What I take the centrality of *kolosi* to mean instead is that it is implicated in many aspects of people’s life, and not just one neatly cordoned off social context.

² As a place, Kurukan Fuga—literally “a rocky plain towards the mountains”—is a rather ambiguous geographic indicator in the landscape around the Mande Plateau, which harbors a number of such plains. Nevertheless, the particular site is currently identified with a “rocky plain,” about the size of a soccer field, just outside Kangaba—a historically important Mande village. Local people and griots alike remember Kurukan Fuga as a historically significant site where “something happened,” although opinions diverge on exactly what historical event(s) took place here. Indeed, the identification of Kurukan Fuga as the site where Sunjata proclaimed the unity and future social-political organization with the site outside Kangaba is not uncontested. In 1975, Krn’s renowned griot Wa Kamissoko dismissed the suggestion that the plain outside Kangaba would have been the actual site of Kurukan Fuga as erroneous. As Cissé notes: “According to Wa Kamissoko no historic event, other than the massacre of the people of Kinèroba at the hands of Alamami Samori Toure, has occurred at this site [which is now known as Kurukan Fuga]” (SCOA 1975:100, my translation).

³ In the town of Siby historically significant places in the landscape, such as the “Bow of Kama Jan” have also been developed as “tourist sites;” the fits and starts of this local tourism industry has been described by Doquet (2007).

⁴ The Kamablon of Kangaba is the most famous of the “halls” (called *bolonw* in Bamana and Maninka) that are “a historic and revered feature of Mande culture” (Hoffman 2000:39). The structure, which might have been constructed as early as the 13th century or as late as the mid-1600s (Niane 1959), serves as the storage place for some of Mande’s key “power objects” (*boliw*) and more recent Islamic objects. The Kamablon is particularly renowned for the re-roofing ceremony that takes place every seven years and forms the sole occasion

where local historians/musicians (called *jeliw*, or “griots”) perform a full version of Mande’s founding story, the Sunjata *jigin* (“Sunjata Epic”). On the occasion of the re-roofing ceremony of the Kamabulon, the only person who may recite the Sunjata Jigin (“Sunjata Epic”) is the *kumatigi* (“master of speech”) of Kela.

The descriptions of the ceremony that can be gleaned from the literature (Dieterlen 1968; Meillassoux 1968; de Ganay 1995; Jansen 1998), suggest that it constitutes an excellent case study in which to apply—and possibly refine—the conceptual framework of *kolosi*. In this context, the injunction to “pay attention” to the minute details of one’s surroundings takes on distinct moral connotations. Many of the activities carried out in conjunction with the Kamablon re-roofing ceremony could indeed productively be understood as part of a larger ideology and range of practices of paying attention—rehearsals by the leading griots, preparation of building and other materials, decision making about inviting and hosting guests, public understanding of the efficacy of the ritual and associates objects, substances, and speech.

⁵ Currently available in at least three different editions, the “Kurukan Fuga Charter” has rapidly gained popularity among African-based scholars, although some question its authenticity (Diakite 2009). The charter comprises the resolutions supposedly adopted at Kurukan Fuga by Sunjata and his generals, which were subsequently transmitted (by griots) as oral traditions, and eventually transformed (by Guinean scholars) into a written document in 1998. The written text of the charter, consisting of 44 “clauses” covering social and political organization, economy, and ecology, has been touted as the “founding document” or “social contract” for Mande social and political organization (CELTHO 2008). The charter has been held up as both a historically groundbreaking social contract that has served as the basis of Mande social organization since the 13th century and a quintessentially “modern” document eminently suitable to reorient Mande/Mali to the future. The key feature of the charter in this respect is that it condemns/abolishes slavery. The scholars championing the Charter are thus able to herald the document, and its originator, Sunjata, as being well ahead of his time. Yet in spite of the condemnation of slavery, the first decree of the “Charter” nevertheless stipulates a fundamentally hierarchical social organization in terms of *siya*, and reinforces the privileged social and political position of the Keita rulers. Indeed, both the “modernity” of the charter—evidenced in the abolition of slavery as one of its main clauses—and its centuries-old history are of equal importance for its appeal as a uniquely “African solution to African problems.”

While the “Kurukan Fuga Charter” is so far of limited relevance for the historical imagination of the people I knew during my fieldwork—who for the most part live not too far away from the site of what is supposed to have been the historic Kurukan Fuga—this might change. A college student from Krs I knew well, MJK, now has a personal website, which features as its second item the full text of what he describes as

“The charter (adopted by) the representatives of the ‘primitive’ Mande and their allies, united in 1236 at Kurukan Fuga . . . following the historic

battle of Kirina, to govern the lives of all in the greater Mande area”
(Keita 2010, my translation).

It is surely no coincidence that MJK is a Keita, that is, descended from the founding father of Mande and belonging to the ruling lineage in his hometown. Besides his personal connection to the lineage of Sunjata, his educational trajectory would seem another important factor for understanding his evident enthusiasm for the “Kurukan Fuga Charter.” As a recent graduate of the University of Mali in Bamako, MJK is one among many of the young intelligentsia intrigued by, or actively promoting, the idea of the “Kurukan Fuga Charter” and the historical vision of Mande that it entails.

⁶ This quote as well as the following are taken from the abstract for a panel that Karen Smid and I are proposing for the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

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