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Chappatte, André

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THEMED COLLECTION:
THE TURN TO LIFE, PART 1

INVISIBLE HANDS OF LIFE: ALTERNATE MODES OF PROSPERITY

ARTICLE

"The vulture without fear"

Exploring the noble Muslim in contemporary rural Mali

André Chappatte, *Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO)*

This article explores the relationship between religiosity and prosperity through a particular ethnographic case from Mali and interrogates the suitability of applying models that use the lens of neoliberalism to this relationship. In the eyes of many Muslims in West Africa, the material prosperity displayed by Muslim scholars indexes a pious life based on the practice of Islamic precepts. In contrast to neoliberal interpretations, I analyze a resilient mode of prosperity in rural southwest Mali associated with a figure of moral success that Malians nostalgically date back to a precolonial Mande era: "the noble Muslim." I do so through an in-depth portrait of a particular individual who described himself as "Rasta Muslim" Moussa, whose life epitomized a diffuse traditional ethics and notions of prosperity in the region. Excavating the sedimentation of experience back in time, I investigate how Moussa interpreted the contemporary noble Muslim through a dynamic of *le terroir*. This concept stresses a cultural formation that stems from a creative engagement with the soil as a vector of tradition in dialogue with larger contemporary Rasta influences.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, prosperity, Mande, ethics, Islam, Mali

After the end of the Cold War, with the "second coming" of capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), the advance of neoliberalism—understood as processes of political and economic liberalization in a globalizing world (Ferguson 2007; Soares and LeBlanc 2008)—has accelerated across the world. In the context of increasing transnational and global interconnections, neoliberalism stresses not only the accumulation but also the multiplication of money and goods. Numerous ethnographic studies have explored the linkage between neoliberalism and religion by defining the relationship between prosperity and perceptions of being a "good Muslim" in terms of the market (e.g., Sloane 1999; Haenni 2005; Osella and Osella 2009; Rudnyckyj 2010).[1] In popular cultures of twenty-first-century Europe and North America, prosperity is often interpreted in economic neoliberal terms as well; standard figures of the prosperous person include the Wall Street trader and the entrepreneur. But the etymology of prosperity reveals that it has not always been associated with the market in the West. The English word "prosperity" comes from the Latin *prosperare* and *prosperus*: the former means "to cause to succeed, render happy," the latter, "favorable, fortunate," and both come from the Old Latin *pro spere*, signifying "according to expectation, according to one's hope."[2] The definition of "prosperity" has been increasingly shaped by neoliberal forces in late modern history without completely erasing its Latin meaning. Sometimes the two sets of meaning are perceived as being in tension with each other, as if they were mutually exclu-

1. A similar linkage has been made in anthropological studies of the "prosperity Gospel" (see Haynes 2017).

2. See https://www.etymonline.com/ (retrieved September 17, 2018).

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sive. The film *Prosperity* (1932), for instance, illustrates the contentions that can arise when a happy family with a comfortable lifestyle gets involved in risky business to become even richer. At other times, prosperity refers to a state of flourishing that encompasses material wealth yet also includes immaterial factors such as happiness and health.

Whereas the anthropological literature on Islam exploring the relationship between prosperity and the perception of Muslim morality has often focused on economic indices in the context of neoliberalism, I analyze a resilient mode of prosperity in rural southwest Mali associated with a figure of moral success that Malians nostalgically date back to a precolonial Mande era: "the noble Muslim." I do so through an in-depth portrait of a particular individual who described himself as "Rasta Muslim" Moussa, whose life in 2010 embodied a traditional ethics that was present in a diffuse way in the interior of Bougouni. Calling into question the good (wealthy) Muslim of our allegedly neoliberal era, I document that Moussa was esteemed as a noble (good) Muslim among his fellow villagers because his life embodied a moral prosperity based on uprightness, witty wisdom, and hard work.

In this article, I unpack the relationship between religiosity and prosperity through a historically informed ethnography of Moussa's life. I first introduce this original character through a description of my first encounter with him and of the moral prosperity he represented in this part of Mali. Anthropologically, Moussa belongs to the class of strong individuals[3] whose lives personify a cultural trait that is present in a diffuse way in their society. I then juxtapose Moussa to another good Muslim of his village, the local *marabout*, a type of traditional scholar, in order to compare their forms of prosperity and to stress that the notion of wealth as blessing displayed by the *marabout* long predates neoliberalism in this part of Africa. Although the types of prosperity they represent seem different at first glance, I suggest that Moussa's moral prosperity is related to a historical continuity parallel to that of the *marabout*. Following this interrogation, I then explore the sociocultural dynamic that underpins Moussa's moral prosperity in terms of what Guyer (2004: 172) calls the "long-term sedimentation of experience." To complement this, I also borrow the concept of *le terroir* from human geography to stress a cultural formation that stems from an informed engagement with the soil as a vector of tradition in a creative dialogue with broad contemporary influences. In utilizing both analytical lenses, I demonstrate that Moussa's moral prosperity stems from his own informed reading of local agrarian Mande culture, a creativity that he articulates with wider Rasta influences. I conclude by arguing that, although economic observations tend to predominate in anthropological studies of prosperity due to the power of neoliberalism to influence our ethnographic perceptions of the tangible world, the case study presented here suggests that both neoliberal and moral notions of success shape the experience of prosperity.

Encounter with a man of strong presence

Between September 2008 and April 2010, I undertook fieldwork in Bougouni, a provincial town of southwest Mali. In the morning, I used to spend time in a small coffee shop in the center of town. Once in early 2009, a colorful person parked a motorcycle next to this shop. His Rasta look immediately grabbed my attention. The body of his Yamaha RX 100 was dotted with green, yellow, and red paint; stickers of a marijuana leaf adorned the starter; and the word "RAS-YAMAHA" could be read on the gas tank. With his long dreadlocks and striking appearance, such a man would not go unnoticed in town. Taking a seat next to me, he was warmly welcomed by the server making coffee, who hailed him with "*Duga Siriman!*"[4] (The Vulture without Fear). After having greeted people around the room, he gave me a firm handshake while looking straight at me with his smiling, bloodshot eyes. He then introduced himself by his first name, Moussa,[5] a common one among Muslims. Striking up a conversation with him, I asked him about the meaning of what seemed to be his nickname, *Duga Siriman*. He replied, "I do not harm the living; I am just the one who opens the feast by eating the eyes of the cadavers [laugh]!" I did not know what to think, since the vulture is known as a necrophagous bird, embodying symbolism that Hoffmann (2013: 517) finds to embody a variety of macabre significations across historical periods and cultural spaces.

3. Like the figure of Israr described by Marsden (2005: 95–98), Moussa was also considered as a deep thinker who acted and spoke "from his heart."

4. The local language used was Bambara, the lingua franca of Mali.

5. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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Moussa next told me that he was a "farmer" (*sɛnɛkɛla*) in a village located forty kilometers south from Bougouni. He came to town to deal with government administrative papers on behalf of his fellow villagers. Since I was aware of the elite status of the French language in rural Mali, where farming and household chores often lead students to drop out of school early, I was surprised that this farmer spoke French well, a sign indexing a good education. His deep voice, slow delivery, and emphasis on certain words also demonstrated a rare sense of eloquence. Our conversation was interrupted several times by passers-by of different backgrounds, such as young men, traders, a woman, and a local entrepreneur, who stopped by to warmly greet him. People seemed to regard him with esteem.

Customers at this small coffee shop were discussing the topic of heaven in the afterlife. More precisely, they were exchanging ideas on how to collect *barajiw* (divine rewards) in order to prepare for death at the unavoidable gate on Judgment Day. Moussa joined the conversation by arguing that one can already find happiness here on earth. For him, heaven is sought "here" and continues "there," that is, in the afterlife. He jokingly concluded, "If you give the key of heaven to Muslims in the mosque, they will not accept it but will try to run away through the windows, doors, and roof [laugh]. Because they think that in order to ascend to heaven, they should die first. They don't want to die!" Everybody burst into laughter. Moussa then "asked for the road" (*ka sira nini*), a traditional way of courteously informing people that you are about to leave. He needed to visit a few state administrative offices in town before the midday break.

What struck me the most about Moussa was how he radiated a sort of warm integrity that put his interlocutors at ease, as well as using an edifying form of humor that clearly attracted their curiosity. I, too, found myself wanting to spend more time in his welcoming, intriguing presence. This first encounter with Moussa introduced me to what I would gradually learn was a notion of moral prosperity that people in this part of Mali held and which he embodied: uprightness, witty wisdom, and hard work.

Moussa and the local *marabout*: Prosperous Muslim lives in contrast?

I encountered Moussa again in town a month later. We talked and joked together at the same coffee shop. Before leaving, he proposed that I visit him in his village. I accepted his invitation and, a few weeks later, went to meet him there. In the morning when I arrived, he suggested we pay a customary visit to the village authorities. One of them was the local *marabout*. As elsewhere in West Africa, the *marabout* is a type of traditional Muslim scholar expert in Islamic esoteric sciences.

Even from a distance, the *marabout*'s compound stood out from the rest of the village. The walls that enclosed the courtyard and the houses inside it were made of bricks and reinforced with cement, topped by roofs of sheet metal. These imported materials contrasted with the traditional mud houses with thatched roofs enclosed by mud walls found in the rest of the village. In rural parts of southern Mali, cement buildings and sheet-metal roofs are typical signs of wealth. Before entering the courtyard, a man hailed us from within a small but well-stocked shop that overlooked the street. As I learned later, villagers could buy a wide range of daily necessities in this *butiki* (from the French *boutique*), such as sugar, tea, oil, vinegar, bouillon cubes, powdered milk, biscuits, and batteries. This *butiki*, run by the *marabout*'s young brother, was the sole shop in the village.[6] Once inside the courtyard, we came across a dozen young men clustered in a few groups. Some of them carried stones in their hands and seemed to be waiting for something. Moussa told me that most of these young men came from this rural area, having left their village a few months ago to take their chances eastward from Bougouni in a newly opened gold-panning site called *Damanda*.[7] While few of the miners won a bonanza, most of them managed to extract enough gold to cover their daily expenses. The risks, however, were high: some unfortunates even met death if a hole collapsed. The miners said that powerful *jinɛw* (jinns) dwelled in these uneven, glittering soils. The stones I saw the young men holding in the courtyard were ones they had dug out from their mining holes and brought to the *marabout* to ask him whether they would find gold in them. If he said they did, they would then ask him to undertake the necessary sacrifices for controlling the occult forces that jealously guarded the gold. They were here "to seek their *sababu*," concluded Moussa. In a lay context, *sababu* refers to a cause-and-effect way of thinking, proper to human rationality; in an occult context, it means something "lies in the hands

6. Malians often assessed the development of a rural locality based on the presence and number of *butikiw* (plural of *butiki*—in Bambara, a final *-w* indicates the plural).

7. Southern Mali has been known for its gold deposits since the colonial period (Méker 1980: 169–70).

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of God" (*Ale [sababu] bɛ Ala bolo*; see also Bailleul [2007: 381]). These young men, if successful, would later give a share of the monetary value of their gold to the *marabout*, since he was the one who facilitated the sending of their request to the ears of God.

When we walked into the entrance hall of the *marabout*'s house, I immediately noticed that it smelled like a new construction; as I found out, the floor had recently been cemented and the wall painted sky blue. The size of this entrance hall was more spacious than common entrance halls. A brand-new Jakarta motor scooter was parked in a corner, a vehicle made in China that was in vogue in urban Mali at the time (Chappatte 2014: 29). After waiting for a few minutes, the *marabout* welcomed us, wearing his traditional *boubou* made of rich damask. The *boubou*, a wide-sleeved robe historically linked to Islam and ruling families in West and East Africa (Gardi 2000), was brought southward into sub-Saharan West Africa by Arab-Berber traders during precolonial times. As for Moussa, he wore a traditional cotton garment of local origin, which has historically been linked to Bambara farmers in southern Mali (see both of them in Figure 1).

The *marabout*, a native of the village, had undertaken a decade of religious studies in various localities of the Ivory Coast. He settled back in his village three years prior to my visit, after his father had passed away. As the new head of the family, he had to take charge of all its members. The family courtyard had since regularly hosted visitors from abroad, and the living standards of his relatives had considerably improved, illustrated in their houses and the family *butiki*.

Figure 1: The *marabout* and Moussa during our visit to the former's compound (Photo: André Chappatte).

Benjamin Soares (2005) explains how, during the postcolonial era, mercantile logics have progressively supported the development of a "prayer economy" or a "fee-for-service religion" in Mali. In Nioro-du-Sahel, for instance, certain Sufi leaders who are deemed to be saints "trade" their proximity to God (*baraka*) via prayers and blessings to ordinary Muslims in exchange for "gifts" (money or material goods). Their sainthood has also increasingly been evident through public displays of their wealth, such as traveling in luxurious four-wheel-drive vehicles and living in spacious cement houses with multiple storeys.[8] Besides these prominent religious leaders, few in number, the *marabout* of Moussa's village exemplified the esoteric livelihood of the more numerous "religious entrepreneurs" or *marabouts d'affaires* in urban Mali (2005: 251–53). This type of *marabout* neither has followers nor is considered a saint; nevertheless, he, too, acquires wealth by helping to fulfill his clients' requests through his closeness to God. If they attain economic success, such *marabouts* purchase prestige goods and build cemented houses. Their material accumulation, a sign of God's blessing, further advertises the effectiveness of their esoteric services. The *marabout* I met in Moussa's village was thus considered as a good Muslim among his fellow villagers due to his display of wealth, which allegedly indexed a pious life based on the practice of Islamic precepts. In general, it was not rare to count a *marabout* among the better-off villagers in rural southwestern Mali.

In fact, the view of wealth as blessing long predates neoliberalism in this part of Africa. Since the eleventh century, Muslim traders progressively moved south-

8. Recent developments in Mali further demonstrate that entrepreneurialism has become a "key mode of action" in a religious market characterized by a multiplicity of available options (Soares 2017: 147–48). Similarly, social inequalities based on material consumption have increased in Mali, with the blessings, it seems, of numerous Muslim scholars. I sometimes wondered whether ordinary Muslims in Mali also perceived God as being part of the neoliberal governance "from afar" (Soares 2006: 78).

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ward into sub-Saharan West Africa, a region that had been overwhelmingly inhabited by non-Muslims. The economic power that the Muslim traders exerted increasingly shaped the understanding of prosperity in southern Mali. Bamako (the current capital of Mali), for instance, grew considerably after the arrival of *Suruka* families, sub-Saharan Muslim traders and scholars who claimed to be of Moorish descent.[9] With the instigation of their commercial activities, Bamako became an influential market locality, where kola nuts from the Worodugu (from the south), gold from the Bouré (from the west), and salt from Taoudenit (from the north) were exchanged for other products (Meillassoux 1963: 207–12; 218–19). Such Muslim families claimed that their wealth was a sign of God's blessing. It was also strategic for non-Muslim rulers to host and protect the minority Muslim traders against warfare in order to have access to the prestigious products (e.g., kola nuts, salt, horses, and slaves) they brought through long-distance trade (Launay 1988: 55). The trans-Saharan trade in West Africa developed through a network of Muslim traders established in roadside localities and regional centers. They enriched themselves and consequently stimulated the material dimension of prosperity in its local enactments (Amselle 1977). Muslim actors played a central role in the development of the early capitalistic economy in West Africa. Contemporary forces of the market in Mali have intensified the historical interpretation of wealth as a sign of blessing.

Anthropologists who study the relationship between prosperity and religiosity in the contemporary world tend to overplay the strength of the former over the latter; to a much lesser extent, some overplay the inverse. This propensity largely results from two factors: considering both as separate sociomoral domains, whereas in reality both "entail processes of subjectification or habituation" (Osella and Osella 2011: 157); and overlooking their long "history of reciprocity" (Osella and Rudnyckyj 2017: 4). To avoid reducing one domain to the status of an epiphenomenon of the other, some anthropologists have recently used approaches that study their coexistence, convergence, and divergences (Mittermaier 2013) or their particular historical configurations (Osella and Rudnyckyj 2017). Nevertheless, the elaboration of most contemporary research on the relationship between religiosity and prosperity remains stuck in an era largely focused on neoliberalism in a globalizing world.

9. A precise dating is difficult since the sources are oral histories (Meillassoux 1963: 186–87).

In our allegedly neoliberal era, Moussa did not evince the same devotion to Islamic precepts that the local *marabout* did. He prayed regularly but omitted a prayer from time to time. He lived in a typical courtyard and did not own prestigious possessions. He had a motorcycle, but it was only an aging one that he used for both business and private affairs.[10] Despite his unexceptional living standards, Moussa was esteemed as a "prosperous Muslim" among his fellow villagers. How was this possible? Although the forms of prosperity attributed to the local *marabout* and to Moussa seem different at first glance, I wondered whether Moussa's moral prosperity might also be related to historic recurrences. Part of the answer came from his engagement in the local agrarian society.

A farmer with manifold activities

Moussa was a married man and father in his early forties who lived next to his oldest brother and his mother in an ordinary village of southwest Mali. According to the history of his family, he was part of the seventh generation of the original family that settled in this village.[11] Like any healthy villager, his main livelihood was farming. Before following this traditional village life, however, he had lived in the Ivory Coast, as he mentioned to me one quiet evening at home while reflecting on his life trajectory:

> I don't want to go back to the Ivory Coast or to go on a *tunga* [adventure] abroad. I thanked my parents for having shown me my origins. One day, I brought them kola nuts to thank them; they didn't understand it [laugh]. The soil here is fertile. I want to live from what it brings.

His father was a *marabout*, but Moussa did not follow his footsteps. He was born in this village and then spent most of his childhood with an uncle who lived in a town in southern Ivory Coast. Until the 1990s, this coastal country was a significant destination for labor migrants from southern Mali drawn to the plantation

10. Moussa had received this motorcycle when he became a committee member of a local association.

11. This temporal information might have pointed to a village of local residents who, after being enslaved by Samory, settled back in the area after the abolition of slavery in 1905 (see later discussion).

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economy (Gary-Tounkara 2008). There, he was educated under the practice of child fosterage (Alber, Martin, and Notermans 2013). When he was fourteen years old, his biological parents brought him back to his native village to help them with farming.

Back in his native village, Moussa took the traditional work of farming seriously. He became one of the most productive farmers in the village. He kept a vegetable garden after the usual harvest season, an activity that few villagers dared to undertake during the warm season because of its high water requirements. Thanks to his working the soil, his family had a satisfactory standard of living. At the same time, he began to value and learn local skills, such as the techniques of mud masonry. He did not aspire to build, as the local *marabout* did, a trendy but expensive house made of imported materials. He liked how the inside of traditional mud houses with thatched roofs stayed cool in the dry season and warm in the rainy season, in contrast to the lack of insulation that characterized cement buildings with roofs of sheet metal. Moussa also valued local arts, such as *bogolan*, a traditional woven cotton cloth dyed with dried leaves and tree bark and then painted with mud. While he was growing up, he also became interested in local history. He spent time listening to elders who talked about the past. When we were riding across the countryside, Moussa often associated landmarks (e.g., a camp, large baobab tree, hill, or river) we passed with epic tales that recounted the feats of local heroic figures of the past. He would also narrate the history of when local villages were settled and would describe villagers' traditions past and present. Since Moussa had not finished school when he was younger, he attended adult education classes in the evening in a large neighboring village; he dropped out just before the examination for the *Diplôme d'Etudes Fondamentales* (Diploma of Basic Studies) because he felt he could read, write, and speak French well enough for his activities. Thanks to his intellectual skills, he managed a communal library and sold stationery in a nearby market held weekly. He also acted as a sort of public scribe for illiterate villagers when they had to deal with government administrative issues, and he taught at the primary school in his village when necessary. Furthermore, he was involved in the committees of various local associations, such as the powerful *Association Villageoise* (Village Association) of cotton producers, and was the representative of the municipal community health center in his village, being in charge, for instance, of the local vaccination campaigns.

Moussa used kola nuts, as mentioned above, to express gratitude to his parents for having brought him back to his natal village, since he felt so at ease and fulfilled in this rural life. In Muslim West Africa, kola nuts have been for centuries the gift par excellence for marking life-cycle ceremonies and showing respect to elders one visits.[12] His parents did not fully understand his gesture because it went against the tide of social change. In rural Mali, younger generations aspire to live "*là où ç'est civilisé*" (there where civilization is), that is to say, in urban centers (Chappatte 2013: 150; 2014). A son would more likely give money or prestigious items (e.g., a TV or cellphone) to his parents for expressing gratitude. To fully understand Moussa's gesture toward his parents, we must explore more deeply how he was investing in his origins.

A man of and for *le terroir*

Moussa's investment in his origins, in fact, did not follow a simple trajectory of a return to the source after a childhood spent elsewhere, nor did it represent an attempt to reproduce the past. Rather, his mind moved back and forth between the local and the wider world in a way suggestive of what I would argue reflects the values of *le terroir*. In everyday usage, this French term (without any suitable English translation) designates "a cultural landscape with which the inhabitants maintain historical and affective ties" (Basset, Blanc-Pamard, and Boutrais 2007: 104). As a concept, *le terroir* was initially developed in agronomy and human geography (Prévost 2011: 50–51) to stress the subtle creativity that inspires people and their descendants who have lived off the land on a specific piece of soil over a considerable period of time. James E. Wilson, for instance, writes: "Beyond the measurable ecosystem, there is an additional dimension [of *le terroir*]—the spiritual aspect that recognizes the joys, the heartbreaks, the pride, the sweat, and the frustrations of its history" (1998: 55). For Bérard and Marchenay (1995), *le terroir* also evokes a culture's relations to a particular site, time, and society—in other words, a cultural formation and regional belonging that stem from a society's historical ties to its soil at large that are perceived as ancient.

12. For a history of kola nut as a major commodity in West African trade, see Lovejoy (1980).

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During the twentieth century, *le terroir* became linked to the concept of heritage, a way of conceptualizing the space and structure of the production of vanishing agrarian products. For the *terroir* school of human geography,[13] the *terroir* was first defined "*the socio-natural heritage of a group* in which its internal organization and pattern of resource use were inscribed in the landscape" (Basset, Blanc-Pamard, and Boutrais 2007: 123; italics in original). In an increasingly globalizing world, this concept has not only been used in efforts to preserve a disappearing culture, but it has also become a forward-looking protective concept. However, it is still linked primarily to heritage for reasons of "authenticity" and marketing regional products and crafts. Here, *le terroir* does not represent a culture cut off from the world; on the contrary, in a living environment, which is shaped by broader influences, a *terroir* perception of heritage stresses a dynamic between people and place that considers the wider world as a creative factor of this dynamic (see Hermansen 2012). In this regard, *le terroir* remains bound to the local or regional while being open to the wider world. *Le terroir* can also stress a long-term bond between people and place that is reinvigorated through an informed dialogue with the wider world.

I therefore employ this subtle concept to stress a cultural formation that stems from an informed engagement with the "soil" in all its dimensions, as a vector of tradition in creative dialogue with the wider world. In doing so, this concept allows me to explore how Moussa, through his involvements in the agrarian society of southwest Mali, made "the old new in the ongoing process of history" (Barham 2004: 131), that is to say, renewing Mande heritage in the light of larger contemporary influences. In other words, Moussa—a man of and for *le terroir*—revalued the local agrarian culture in an informed and creative way (see Bérard 2011: 50). This process revealed his affective link with a Mande past that was inscribed in the soil of his home region, which he read anew through broader Rasta messages.

Moussa's fellow villagers perceived Moussa as a *mɔgɔ sɛbɛ* (reliable man) whose deeds embodied a sort of long-standing knightly spirit that they called *hɔrɔnya* (nobleness). The way he lived this Mande heritage through a dynamic of *le terroir* is gradually unpacked in the three following sections. I first outline the historic peculiarity of *hɔrɔnya* in southwest Mali; I then explore the relation between *hɔrɔnya* and Islam in contemporary southwest Mali; and finally, I explore Moussa's moral prosperity as the outcome of a dialogue between Muslim faith, the Rasta look, and *hɔrɔnya*.

The Mande heritage of statuses in southwest Mali

The term "Mande" refers to a vast historical region of West Africa in which people shared cultural features and linguistic roots. The Mande world now crosses several West African countries, but its heartland was southwest Mali and eastern Guinea, the birthplace of the great Mali Empire established by Sundiata Keïta in the thirteenth century.[14] Instead of associating the Mande to a static past, I explore it as an intertwined set of sociohistorical "spaces of exchange" (Amselle 1985: 24–26), the heritage of which is lived through creative, fluid, and dynamic traditions (see, e.g., Ferranini 2014).

The societies comprising the Mande world were structured into multiple groups with a complexity that became codified during the colonial period under three main vocational statuses: *hɔrɔn* (free man, noble),[15] *ɲamakala* (artisan), and *jon* (slave).[16] Most studies of Mande statuses focus on the *ɲamakala* (e.g., Camara 1976; McNaughton 1993; Hoffman 2000)[17] and, to a lesser extent, on the *jon* (e.g., Bazin 1974; Klein 2005, 2009), with only minor references to *hɔrɔn*, and this mostly by comparison. In southwest Mali, the free status of the *hɔrɔn* was intrinsically linked to the servile status of the *jon*. According to Bazin (1974), their opposition was even central to Bambara culture of the Kingdom of Segou

13. This school was initiated at the French Overseas Scientific and Technical Research Office (ORSTOM) in the 1960s.

14. On the epic of Sundiata Keïta, see Sisoko and Johnson (1992).

15. This is "transposed from the Arabic *horr*" (Bazin 1974: 135).

16. This tripartite system has been known since the colonial period as the "Mande caste system" (Conrad and Frank 1995: 7). For a historical and linguistic analysis of caste systems in West Africa, see Tamari (1991).

17. The *ɲamakala* appears to Westerners to be the most alien category forming the Mande statuses (McNaughton 1995) due to their manipulation of an occult force called *ɲama* (among other reasons).

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(approximately 1720–1861). Although the French administration ended legal slavery by decree in 1905 in the colonies of the Sudan, Guinea, and Senegal, these two Mande statuses still exist in contemporary Mali in ways that illustrate their structural discrepancies across the country. Traditional Mande statuses have been regionalized in complex sociohistorical ways.

Toward the north of Mali,[18] for instance, people of slave descent are officially free; however, they can hardly ever marry people of noble descent because the local society still cultivates the endogamous structure based on these traditional descent groups.[19] In this context, nobleness means aristocracy by birth. In the region of Bougouni, however, the birth status of these traditional descent groups is much less significant in marital issues, and aristocracy by birth does not exist per se. The criterion of autochthony is certainly relevant in local elections and issues of land access, but those who claim autochthony do not feel they are of higher status by birth than foreigners, no matter what their Mande status is. The reasons for this discrepancy are historical. During the nineteenth century, the region of Bougouni was part of a "buffer zone" between larger political units (e.g., the Kingdoms of Segou and Kenedougou) (Peterson 2008: 263); this savannah borderland was characterized by a series of decentralized societies with small slave holdings, which were frequently targeted by larger political units for enslavement (Peterson 2011: 89). The region was also targeted for slave raiding due to the nonmonotheistic identities of its inhabitants. Moreover, the latter suffered a short period (ten to fifteen years) of mass enslavement under the yoke of Samory Touré in the late nineteenth century (ibid.: 24–57). In the decade following the end of legal slavery, "southern French Sudan was the single largest recipient of former slaves," according to colonial document (ibid.: 89). These former slaves were able to downplay the social consequences of this brief but shameful past for three main reasons: they were not born into slavery, hence they knew who they were before being enslaved;[20] as they moved away from their former masters and returned to their region of origin, their statuses were no longer shaped by former master–slave social ties (in contrast to the Sahel); and nearly all local families were targeted by this Samory-led slavery.[21] This massive but transitory period of enslavement left little trace of lowered status by birth on their descendants, mainly because all families gained by suppressing what happened during this forced exile. As Peterson observed, however, slavery and its idioms would remain a "cultural artefact of the mind" for describing any unequal social relations (ibid.: 154).

At the same time, I would argue, history left its imprint on nobility as a cultural artefact of the mind. When local families began converting to Islam in the late colonial period (ibid.), the Islamic stance on the equality of all Muslims before God further dismantled the traditional Mande status of the noble from its ethics. The heritage of *hɔrɔnya* is thus peculiar in this savannah because it is no longer necessarily linked to the birth status of the nobles (*hɔrɔn*). *Hɔrɔnya*, "being noble," became, above all, performative, since this region was shaken by the specific history of mass enslavement, which abruptly dismantled the ethics of the noble (*hɔrɔnya)* from the status of nobility through a collective suppression of memory.

In 2010 in the interior of Bougouni, to describe someone in a conversation as *hɔrɔn* referred first and foremost to the ethics of *hɔrɔnya*.[22] Besides the history of mass enslavement, the linguistic scope of *hɔrɔnya* goes beyond its classic scholarly definition as a "statutory condition of free lineages" (Berger 2010: 149–50) to express the ethical disposition of the noble. More precisely, this reference to *hɔrɔnya* is often associated with Islam

18. For this analysis, I consider northern Mali to be at the periphery of the historic Mande world.

19. See http://www.maliweb.net/societe/lesclavage-chez-soninkes-mali-a-paris-1773502.html (retrieved September 21, 2017). For a study of modern forms of slavery in contemporary Mali, see Keïta (2012); for a study of the historical evolution of the status of slave descent in West Africa, see Klein (2009).

20. Lacking a history for one's own descent system is central to the construction of one's internalized status as a slave (Klein 2009: 36; see also Bazin 1974: 119).

21. Another official observed that because local families had "similarly experienced this terrible institution," the slave owners (few in number) were more inclined "to understand the sad situation of the slave" and hence to let slaves go free, "as they themselves await the return of a father or a brother, disappeared since the wars of Samori" (Peterson 2011: 93). For a more general study of slavery and colonial rule in French West Africa, see Klein (1998).

22. In Bambara, the suffix *ya* indicates the state or condition of being characterized by the quality named.

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through the idiom *Silamɛ ye hɔrɔn ye* (literally, "the Muslim is a noble"), which I translate as "the noble Muslim."

Silamɛ ye hɔrɔn ye: A spirit of nostalgia

On a sunny *petit soir* (end of the afternoon) in the late rainy season, Moussa, his younger brother, his friend Ahmed, and I were walking up a hill across a large field of tall grass overlooking his village. We were returning from a corner of the hill, a small rocky summit where, with clear skies, villagers were able to find a weak mobile telephone signal that was emitted from forty kilometers north by means of an antenna in Bougouni. Moussa had finished his call to a friend in town. Our walk was silent. All of us were enjoying the verdant natural surroundings. A slightly cool breeze announced the coming of dusk. Moussa contemplated the thatched roofs that emerged from the thick foliage of mango trees around the village (Figure 2). We could also hear the flowing rhythms of pestles coming from family courtyards as women were preparing dinner. Stroking the grass as he walked, Moussa started to chant a Bambara song with a deep and solemn voice, a song that told of traditional village life. We all kept on walking as we silently listened to Moussa's performance. I remember well the refrain, "If you are Christian, you do not lie. If you are Muslim, you do not commit adultery. If you are noble, you do not rob."[23] Intrigued by the relation Moussa made between an ethical norm and the noble, as well as by the juxtaposition between nobility, Islam, and Christianity, I asked him what he meant by *hɔrɔn* in his song. He replied, "*Hɔrɔn* is nobleness. It comes from a time before Islam and Christianity. Our religion was *hɔrɔnya*. Our ancestors did not lie. They did not rob. They were upright."

The rural landscape through which we walked crossed the ages in the sense that it gave Moussa a glimpse of his ancestors' way of life. This rural landscape evoked the past as it represented a traditional village life that, except from the mosque and its roof of sheet metal, seemed to date back to precolonial times. Such scenic contemplation reminded Moussa of the allegedly harmonious society of his ancestors in a way that demonstrates how places and landscapes are active agents of identity via their affective power (Tilley 2006). Pondering it in the late afternoon further reminds us that the time toward dusk is often conducive to insights and fantasies (Löfgren and Ehn 2007). Nostalgia as an idealized past filled Moussa in this moment of contemplation through a spirit of praise that helped him to cultivate *hɔrɔnya* as an ancient moral posture of Mande origin.[24] He embraced *hɔrɔnya* as an inclusive set of ethics, including the condemnation of slavery. His juxtaposition of Islam and Christianity with what he interpreted as the religion of his ancestors suggested that these two world religions were the contemporary heirs of *hɔrɔnya* in this part of rural Mali. The *hɔrɔnw*, the people of noble descent, indeed set foot in this countryside long before the colonial Christian missions of the first half of the twentieth century and the mass Islamization that occurred during the postcolonial period.

In his historical study of war and servitude during the Kingdom of Segou, Bazin (1974) mentions the status of the *hɔrɔn* in relation to the organization of production, distribution, and exchange of slaves. He succinctly defines "the condition of free man" (*hɔrɔnya*) as "a condition of economic and political autonomy" (ibid.: 110–11). He is also aware that a description of a long-past social formation can only be broad and partial. In her anthropological study of the griots (*jeli*, a subgroup of *jamakala*) of the provincial Malian town of Kita in 1980s, Hoffman writes that "the behaviour of an *hɔrɔn*, according to the Guinean *hɔrɔn* scholar Sory Camara, is distinguished by its 'sense of honour, restraint, respect of convention in all daily behaviours'"[25] (2000: 87), in contrast to the exuberant, energetic, and shameless behavior of the *griot*. Moussa's attitude, however, only partially corresponds to her description of the *hɔrɔn*; more-

23. Ni ɛ ye krétien ye, ɛ tɛ galon tigɛ. Ni ɛ ye silamɛ ye, ɛ tɛ jɛnɛya kɛ. Ni ɛ ye hɔrɔn ye, ɛ tɛ sonya kɛ.

24. "The spirit [of a landscape] is simply this: when you open a window, the scenery you see does not contrast with the room you are in" (Baraton 2017; my translation). Here, the room is a metaphor of the mind.

25. See Camara (1976) for the primary reference. Hoffman also mentions that in quotidian contexts, a young *hɔrɔn muso* (noblewoman) is usually "quiet, dignified, soft-spoken, gentle, somewhat shy, always genteel, and fiercely loyal to her best friend" (2000: 246). In another text, Hoffmann describes the sobriety of a young noblewoman when listening to her praise: "She sits still and calm, dignified in cool silence, not even deigning to look at 'her' griot" (1995: 38). Such descriptions of noblewomen are useful for complementing and contrasting with my observations of the *hɔrɔn kɛ* (nobleman) through my focus on Moussa.

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Figure 2: View of Moussa's village from the hill (Photo: André Chappatte).

over, one could perceive his Rasta look as a sign of exuberance.

Focusing on the regulation of public spaces in Bamako and Bobo-Dioulasso, a group of anthropologists have defined *hɔrɔnya* as "a social code of honour and shame" in which these two values are primarily framed by their public disclosure (Bouju, Ouattara, Touré, et al. 2004: 30–31).[26] For Bouju (2009: 7), the "sociopolitical space" shaped by this code involves a "market of esteem" in which a person socially exists uniquely through the public gaze. Although I agree with the public ramifications of the *hɔrɔnya*, I would argue that it also stems from an inner posture of the mind. For external observers, *hɔrɔnya* may express a code of conduct. As a lived experience, however, the spirit of *hɔrɔnya* can hardly be contained within this code. Moussa acted according to *hɔrɔnya*, that is to say, a path of virtuous behavior and contemplativeness, which, moreover, did not necessarily imply a specific identity by birth.

I also observed that, in ordinary conversations, the term *hɔrɔnya* was often discussed in contexts in which social life might be undermined by occult threats.[27] One time, while visiting a Muslim teacher who lived in a roadside village of southwest Mali, we spent the late afternoon in the workplace of his friend Aziz, a laundry worker. A group of men sitting in the *grin* (an informal male meeting spot) were chatting and drinking tea while observing activities around them. A sweaty man covered by dust suddenly stopped by the *grin*, who, I learned, was a well digger. He started to complain about the fact that he had just found a plastic bag full of feces in the well he was digging and another in his own well. He left to seek esoteric protection against what all agree was an occult threat. People were outraged by what had happened, and the debate became heated. For them, such odious acts were linked to "egotism" (*jɛgoya*) and "evil spells" (*dabali*). Aziz vehemently added that such hidden goings-on demonstrated the total "lack of *hɔrɔnya*" of their perpetrators and consequently their "un-Islamic identity." When the debate cooled down, I asked Aziz whether he could tell me more about what the word *hɔrɔnya* conveyed in his previous remark. He responded,

> Islam found *hɔrɔnya* here . . . *hɔrɔnya* has not disappeared, but it has diminished. . . . *Hɔrɔnya* is about

26. A range of behaviors have also been analyzed as codes of honor by scholars studying the western Sudan (Klein 2005: 840).

27. As Hoffmann points out (1998: 88), "Mande notions of 'meaning' are based on orality," a dynamic that differs from the traceability of literate languages. The depth of this oral language is based more on the polysemic communication it offers than on a vocabulary that enlarges over time through literate techniques.

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> commitment. A nobleman does not lie. He does not betray either. He does what he says. He keeps his word. . . . His word is his honor. A good Muslim should behave like an *hɔrɔn*. . . . Two things have weakened *hɔrɔnya*: fear and greed. When you fear or you are selfish, you cannot tell the truth. Therefore, your word is null. . . . Now lifestyles are changing. People are not satisfied with a bicycle. We want a Jakarta [motor scooter]. Next, we want a car. People here think about building a big house with storeys; this is what we wish to be done. We don't want to leave this earth before achieving that [laugh]. We look at rich people. We want to live like them, but we are poor. To do so, some take out loans. Others steal from people. Greed has undermined our *hɔrɔnya*.

For Aziz, the anecdote of the plastic bag full of feces found in the wells, where people draw water for their domestic needs, indicated the presence of an act diametrically opposed to *hɔrɔnya* because it was so traitorous. Acting upon someone through hidden plots was adamantly un-Islamic; it undoubtedly indexed the presence of occult forces. Aziz's comments on the antithetical relationship between *hɔrɔnya* and acting secretly with malevolent intent resonate with what Moussa often said: *hɔrɔnya* is about uprightness, he explained, using the French term *la droiture*.

A dialogue between the Muslim faith and the Rasta look through *hɔrɔnya*

I visited Moussa a few more times in his village. Between our tours in what he called "my countryside," we rested in his family's courtyard. There we used to spend most of our time in what he called the *cɛso*, literally, the house (*so*) of a male (*cɛ*). According to local tradition, the *cɛso* is a house where adult men of the family gather to discuss and deal with male matters away from the sight of women. With the disappearance of the system of age groups, the association of the *cɛso* with initiation declined in this region, but its link to adult men still exists.[28] Being a restricted, private space, one should ask their permission before entering it. Like any traditional *cɛso*, Moussa's was a round mud structure covered with a thatched roof, but his lacked a door. On the contrary, it remained wide open all the time, and one did not need his permission to enter it. Moussa used the *cɛso* like a living room where he relaxed after work, welcomed visitors, shared ideas, and engaged with them in debates. It also served as a sort of exhibit room.

Inside, the wall was decorated with Moussa's paintings which, he told me, introduced who he was to visitors. One pair of them, painted in the Rasta colors of red, yellow, and green, depicted a map of Africa juxtaposed to a heart between two black lions holding a crown. The letters "RASTA-FARI" wrapped around the crown. These two paintings, he explained, expressed the Rasta value of dignified love in a united Africa. On the opposite semicircular wall, Moussa had drawn the internationally recognized peace symbol in similar Rasta colors. An educated visitor could also read the characters of the name of his village and the word "Welcome" in French, English, and Bambara. These paintings, depicting transnational ideas of Rasta, introduced him as an educated farmer who was peacefully connected to the wider world and was offering a warm sense of "hospitality" (*jatigiya*) to visitors.[29] This reappropriation of international symbols in a traditional hut followed a dynamic of *le terroir* in that its creative interface lay at a crossroad between the local agrarian community, Malian *jatigiya*, and transnational ideas of Rasta.

I once asked Moussa what he had learned from his time in the Ivory Coast. He simply responded, "I brought reggae music back to the village." He had listened to reggae music since an early age but started adopting a Rasta look only two decades later. He first began, as he put it, "to imitate Alpha Blondy," a historic iconic singer of Ivorian reggae music. "[He] did so in the shadows for ten years" because the Rasta lifestyle is frowned upon in Mali, mainly due to its association with marijuana, hence its supposed link to idleness and banditry. By imitating the singer, he meant behaving according to what he thought was the Rasta path. Moussa started to sport the Rasta look in public only in his early thirties, after he had already gained the "respect" and the attention of "the [local] notables." From this period on, his Rasta look did not bother his fellow villagers, since they perceived him as an upright man and a hard worker who engaged them through witty wisdom—that is, as a *hɔrɔn*. In other words, Moussa's Rasta look was just a noticeable style in the eyes of his fellow villagers. For them, he

28. For an analysis of Bambara institutions of initiation, see Colleyn (2001).

29. The traditional value of the host–foreigner relationship (Ouattara 2014) has been described by the Mali government as a typical Malian cultural trait (see, e.g., the rhetoric surrounding the 2002 Africa Cup of Nations held in Mali).

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exemplified above all the contemporary figure of "the noble Muslim" in their region. For Moussa, his Rasta look was more than a look; it was an integral part of his reformulation of Mande ethics, a crucial point that I explain below.

Moussa often received visits from other villagers until late at night. Some came to have fun, others to ask for advice, while yet others came for both. In the course of these lively exchanges in the *cɛso*, I could appreciate how Moussa's witty interventions created a relaxed, humorous, and festive ambience, which he punctuated with moral teachings. As he confided to me, he was "preaching" at these times. Visitors were often curious about his way of life; youths were especially captivated by his conception of the Rasta path. However, the latter were afraid to wear visible Rasta signs in public because of the usual condemnation of such a look and its connotation of an ephemeral youth culture.[30] Late one night, Moussa received a visit from two young men from a neighboring village. One of them, who wore a T-shirt of a famous reggae singer, was eager to embrace the Rasta path. He asked Moussa about what it meant to be a Rasta in contemporary Mali. Moussa replied that "Rasta is about *hɔrɔnya*," then paused so as to stress its significance. The young man swiftly reacted by asking about the meaning of having dreadlocks.[31] Moussa responded that wearing them was more than a look; it was a moral act:

> The Rasta is immediately noticed in a crowd. People point at you due to your dreadlocks. Therefore, Rasta must be a guiding identity. You cannot do whatever you want. You are observed; thus, you must control yourself. One day the police shaved head of a Rasta who stole an ox. Everybody knows that a Rasta who is at fault is shaved. This is not the case for Muslims!

Moussa's Rasta look was central to his reformulation of Mande ethics. Having dreadlocks certainly indexed a Rasta identity in the eyes of passers-by. For Moussa, however, displaying this look was something secondary in itself. Crucial in his mind was that the visibility of such a look in public implied the exercise of moral vigilance.

When I first entered Moussa's *cɛso*, the painting that spoke to me the most was not one of the depictions of Rasta colors, symbols, and values; rather, it was the one of a large bird depicted with its wings spread open; written above it were the words "*DUGA SIRIMAN*" (The Vulture without Fear) and below it, "KING *DUGA*" (King Vulture). This painting thus portrayed Moussa's most famous nickname.[32] It took me a long time to elaborate a credible reason why a carrion-eating bird would be part of Moussa's nickname, a riddle that had occupied my mind ever since our first encounter in Bougouni. Only years later did I discover that "*Duga*" was a popular traditional tune in Mali that was played long ago in the precolonial period for warriors who, left for dead on the battlefield, lay in the grip of vultures (Diabaté 1970). The vulture was later associated with Kore Duga Koro, a king of the area of Segou; it then became the emblem of the Segou King Da Mozon Diarra, who defeated King Kore in the early nineteenth century (Charry 2000: 155; Diagne 2005: 347). As a nickname, the vulture is therefore part of the terminology of bravery in contemporary Mali—a point that metaphorically evokes *hɔrɔnya* in Mande symbolism. Thus, this painting, when related to the Rasta value placed on love, metaphorically illustrated who Moussa was in his heart for those who knew him well: a harmless warrior who braves death out of his love of mankind.

Ultimately, Moussa believed in God and hence confided to me that he considered himself as a "Rasta Muslim."[33] What did this association truly mean then? I would argue that the Rasta look he displayed was put to the service of the spirit of *hɔrɔnya* that inhabited his agrarian activities, his Muslim faith, and his heart—a moral articulation that further demonstrated that he was a man of and for *le terroir*. Moussa rooted his acute moral vigilance in the *hɔrɔnya* that he first learned when he returned to his native village and that he thereafter reappropriated, treasured, and transmitted to others.

30. In Bamako, many people associated the wearing of dreadlocks with non-Muslims or Rastafarians (Soares 2010: 242).

31. Members of the Baay Faal movement wear dreadlocks. For a study of this Muslim movement in Senegal, see Pezeril (2008).

32. *Duga* is a nickname used in Mali; see http://bamada.net/disparition-douga-dembele-le-vautour-sen-va-avec-son-sourire-eternel and http://www.maliweb.net/necrologie/deces-lancien-commissaire-du-3e-arrondissement-lundi-dernier-les-hommages-papa-mamby-au-controleur-general-moussa-sissoko-356372.html (retrieved October 13, 2017).

33. For a study of '"Rasta Sufi" in urban Mali, see Soares (2010).

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Notions of prosperity under the yoke of neoliberal tangibility

The open-ended notion of prosperity that underpinned Moussa's reputation of the good (that is, upright) Muslim is often downplayed in contemporary ethnographic studies of Muslim life in favor of an overarching interest in exploring the good (that is, wealthy) Muslim, whose life is predominantly defined as being marked by the values of neoliberalism at large. Moussa's mode of moral prosperity, however, illustrates that the value placed on Mande heritage in a globalizing Mali should not be studied as mere "brave cultural resistance" but, more profoundly, as a "claim of worldly connection" (Ferguson 2007: Introduction), and which I argue is part of the dynamic of *le terroir*. In the final analysis, Moussa's mode of prosperity based on mindful abundance and moral success is not opposed to the local *marabout*'s material distinction as a sign of blessing and economic success in contemporary Mali. In reality, both modes shape the relationship between prosperity and the perception of the good Muslim in the early twenty-first century. This paper thus stresses the need for a more nuanced and balanced analysis of the relationship between economic and moral forms of success.

Anthropologists largely agree that prosperity may include but cannot be reduced to economic success alone. At the same time, they often interpret prosperity in neoliberal terms and increasingly do so across a wide variety of societies, thus effacing their singularity. Similarly, it is not unusual to come across nonacademic writers who criticize neoliberal influences and propose a more virtuous approach to prosperity, such as in the popular book *The prosperous heart: Creating a life of "enough"* (Cameron 2012). Studies in anthropology of prosperous lives nonetheless tend to largely define the prosperous life as one that is economically flourishing. Some argue that the predominance of neoliberal notions of prosperity is due to the strength of consumption in our daily lives. Following a more political vein, others argue that this neoliberal focus stems from the weight of political economy in our research agendas.

Moved by more methodological doubts, I question whether the predominance of explorations of neoliberal prosperity may also arise from the fact that the particular sort of tangibility of ethical virtues tends to elude our ethnographic observation because the empirical faculties of our minds are increasingly being shaped by the material tangibility of neoliberalism. My questioning assumes that tangibility is not necessarily material by nature; ethical virtues, too, are tangible through appreciable social interactions. But why is it, when exploring the field of prosperity, anthropologists' attention is so often grabbed by material tangibility rather than by its relational expression? Perhaps we should first probe the nature of tangibility, its malleability, and the transformations in the conceptualization of its nature in a late modern history that has increasingly been marked by the impacts of neoliberalism at large. If it is true that the empirical faculties of our minds are being ever more fashioned by the material tangibility of neoliberalism—thus narrowing our research questions and answers—then it appears that neoliberal impacts are far stronger than we have hitherto suspected. The pervasiveness of contemporary neoliberalism in ethnography may therefore go beyond a focus on observing material accumulation and consumption "out there" in our field sites; it might be influencing the very way our tangible relation to the world is being molded.

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André Chappatte is Head of Research Area at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), with a PhD in social anthropology from SOAS, University of London. His research focuses on Muslim life in southern Mali and northern Ivory Coast. His ethnographic approach is influenced by the anthropology of ethics, human geography, and phenomenology. As a member of the ZMO research group he directs, "Cities as Laboratories of Change," Chappatte's current research project explores people's sociosensorial experiences of the urban night in Odienné, a provincial town of northwest Ivory Coast.

André Chappatte
Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin
Kirchweg 33
14129 Berlin
Germany
Andre.Chappatte@zmo.de

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