



**BETWEEN TRADITION, ISLAM & MODERNITY
CARVING BARDIC MODALITIES IN COASTAL GAMBIA**

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INTRODUCTION

Asking the Questions

“My great-grandmother was a powerful *jalimuso*. She lived in the time of Musa Mollow Banda, a very evil king. He was so brutal, that whenever he spotted a pregnant woman he would order his men to cut open her stomach, just out of curiosity...One morning, my great-grandmother went to his *kunda* [compound]. She started praising him, telling him how noble he was, but that he was not behaving like he should...She went on for more than twenty-four hours! In the end, her legs were swollen. She could not even stand anymore. The king was so touched by this, that he promised never to hurt his people again. Finally, there was peace!” When I looked up from my notebook, I saw that my translator, who was also a *jalimuso* by birth, had tears running down her cheeks. “I don’t even know this story,” my translator remarked. “But now,” the *jalimuso* continued, “things are different. Most *jalolu* are no longer motivated by conflicts. All they care about is money. Everything is different.”¹

Throughout history, the Mande bards of West Africa, known as *jalolu* and *finoolu*, have captured the imagination of their fellow men and women, Arab traders and historians, colonisers and missionaries, explorers and academics alike. Dating back to pre-Islamic times, these bards have played a vital role in Mande societies, functioning as harbingers of peace, mediators between kings and their subjects, and keepers of history. As one of my key informants Alhaji Mbye explained, they were held in such esteem that when a bard was killed during battle, the contending parties would cease fighting for no less than forty days.²

In spite of colonialism, the pressure of nationalism, the resurgence of neo-colonialism, and most significantly, “...the onslaught of many waves of Islamic and Western cultural influences that,” as Hale (2007:317) describes it, “continue to sweep across the Sahel and Savanna Regions,” the Mande bards still feature prominently in West African societies. However, the circumstances in which contemporary bards operate differ markedly from the traditional structure from which they originate. Whereas Mande values still permeate West

¹ Interview, Jalimuso Yeye Kouyate, 18 March 2012, Serrekunda Talinding

² Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 20 February 2012, Serrekunda, Willingara

African social life, historical processes of Islamisation and modernisation have complicated matters, making for an ethically pluriform condition in which multiple, divergent and sometimes contradictory values bear their influence on the aspirations, motivations and practices of the bards.

Drawing from ten weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in coastal Gambia, in this thesis I present how: contemporary Gambian bards, referring to both the *jalolu* and *finoolu*, reconcile their 'traditional' roles with the precepts of their Islamic faith and the process of modernisation, both in their informal and actual performances. Answering this question, provides us with insight into the issues of agency, the capacity to act in the world; pluriformity, which can be considered a central trait of the modern world; and cultural survival, a pressing concern for academics, politicians and societies at large. The basic argument that I put forward in this thesis is that bards do indeed possess the ability to creatively engage and reconcile the various ethical structures within which they operate, that they do so in highly diverse manners, both intellectually and practically, but that at the same time, the ethical structures interfere significantly with their motivations, aspirations and agential powers, and that consequently, their agency, instead of preventing, actually catalyses a process of inevitable change.

Besides being relevant for issues of cultural survival in African societies, in a broader sense, this thesis speaks to questions pertaining to the ways in which ethical structures impinge upon practices and processes of identity formation, but also from what sources people draw their power in order to *withstand*, *adapt to* or *re-appropriate* and *transform*, the very ethical structures within which they come to be formed. Ultimately, as is fundamental to any anthropological project, this thesis constitutes an exploration of human nature and reality.

Finding the Answers

To learn how Mande bards operate within an ethically pluriform condition, I have, from the 7th of February till the 13th of April 2012, conducted research in the coastal area of The Gambia. The main method of enquiry has been participant observation, which in Berger's (1993:174) words constitutes the "...*sine qua non* of modern anthropology, the ritual initiation experience in the discipline." Participant observation entails a physical, emotional and mental immersion in the social world under study. By being actually present, one is able to intimately relate one's observations of practices, and the informants' motivations, with the multidimensional context within which these are situated. Such dimensions are cultural,

religious, historical, political, economic and ecological in nature. As is well known, however, this immersion or involvement is never complete (Powdermaker 1966:9). In order for the researcher's social integration to remain scientifically sound, it must be coupled with a degree of detachment, which essentially means that the anthropologist approaches the knowledge he gains, and the methods by which this knowledge is obtained, in a systematic and disciplined manner. The anthropologist should be continuously committed to the act of abstracting one's experiences and observations, and through a cyclical process of planning, analysis and reflection, strive to construct an empirically grounded coherent body of knowledge.

I agree with Ingold (2000:14-15), that this dedicated effort to safeguard a degree of objectivity, implies that "...natural science and cultural anthropology converge on a common vertex." Both anthropology and natural science claim authority on the basis of a "...double disengagement from the world." The first entails humanity's step back from nature, into culture, and the second supposes the ability of the scientist to transcend culture and examine social life from a culture-less distance. While this is indeed the ideal, academia has generally come to terms with the fact that scientific research is seldom value-free, a truth that is obviously the case with anthropologists who –like any human being- will always be partially informed by their own biographical circumstances. This should however not be seen as a weakness. Rather, I argue that it can serve to strengthen the knowledge-claims of our discipline.

First, we need to call to mind the primary purpose of anthropology as distinguished from ethnography. According to Ingold (2008:69), the goal of anthropology is "...to seek a generous, comparative, but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing." On the basis of research conducted around the world, in different societies, at different times, by different anthropologists informed by different worldviews, a continuous debate takes place within an academic community, contributing to an ever growing, but never complete, body of knowledge of human reality. Epistemologically speaking, the reliability and validity of this knowledge is enhanced as more modes of human existence are taken into consideration. This is where ethnography's purpose becomes apparent: Ethnography seeks to "...describe the lives of people other than ourselves, with an accuracy and sensitivity honed by detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience." Whilst undoubtedly the anthropologists' values will interfere when doing ethnographic research and theorising about it, I believe that once his account enters into that higher plateau where anthropological debate takes place, his 'particular perspective' can only add to the richness and soundness of our 'communal knowledge'.

Second, instead of conceiving of anthropology as the study *of* human beings, I agree once again with Ingold (2008:82-83) that it is rather the study *with* human beings. Immersing ourselves in the social life of our subjects means trying to adapt our ways of being and knowing with that social world in which our subjects live. Ethnographic research, and participant observation in particular, then entails realigning our perception of the world with that of our subjects. This changes the relationship between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ significantly. Indeed, “we do our philosophy outdoors,” as Ingold writes, and in this endeavour our subjects become our co-thinkers and teachers. They educate our perception. Once again, by doing so, our own values no longer serve as blindfolds. Rather, they constitute a *necessary difference of viewpoint* that, connected to those of our research subjects, serves to enhance the quality and accuracy of the knowledge we obtain.

This education of perception entails not just a visual re-alignment on the part of the researcher. Giving precedence to this particular sensorial dimension of reality is a product of Seventeenth century rationalism that assumed a Cartesian split between body and mind, and that distrusts information gained through the ‘lower senses’. Simply because the ‘eye’ is physically removed from the object under observation, sight, as Enlightenment theorists would have it, was regarded as the most objective sense and was thus strongly associated with reason (Stoller 1997:xii; Herzfeld 2001:240-241; cf. Ingold 2000:243-247). This consequent downplay of the other senses, although widely criticised, still affects anthropology. It has led to what Stoller and Olkers (2007) have termed “tasteless” forms of representation.

Taking heed of this critique, but mindful of the fact that a mere ten weeks of research is actually too short to develop the required sensitivity sufficiently, I have sought to pay due attention to other factors in the field such as smell, sound and the texture of things. Practically, this meant taking into account what the taste was like of certain foods that were handed out during ceremonies, to whom they were given, and why; whether the bards would speak, yell or whisper, in what situations they would do either one, and why; or whether they would play their music fast or slow, and once again, when and why. More specifically, I have tried to sense the world as they do in relation to values. What ‘sounds’ are appreciated, with regard to music or modes of speech? What ‘tastes’ and ‘smells’ are associated with Islam, modernity and tradition? Such questions are relevant, because the *education of perception* that we undergo in the field, besides re-aligning all our senses, also entails getting to know what meanings are associated with that which is sensed.

Apart from participating and observing how bards practice their roles in their daily lives and at various events, I have conducted informal and semi-structured interviews. These

interviews have primarily served to provide insight into the motivations, aspirations and ethical considerations underlying their actions. Through these dialogues, and by explicitly letting the bards guide the direction in terms of content, I have sought to understand how the bards reason about particular subjects and what values they associate with tradition, Islam and modernity. My intention behind this approach has been to establish a sense of rapport, based on equality and mutual responsibility for the progress of 'our' research. Of course, our interests differ. For me, this research is part of my graduation. For them, it seemed to serve as a means to gain access into the academic discourse and to ensure that their personal critiques of societal issues are also taken into account. Generally, there was also a sense among the bards that their sharing of their knowledge would in the long run contribute to the furtherance of their cultural heritage.

In order to enhance the validity of my account, I have interviewed and engaged both male and female, young and elderly bards. I have furthermore intensively associated with non-bards. Not only to learn how the bards are perceived in society at large, but also to get better acquainted with the cultural context in which the bards operate. Having said this, I have however, focussed my attention on two male bards especially. Whilst this does indeed limit my analyses in terms of generalisation, 'zooming in' also has its advantages. What must be remembered in this regard is that my research revolves around the issue of agency and seeks to unravel the complexities involved in *particular* patterns of action. By focussing on individuals, instead of a group in general, I argue that I have been able to go deeper into questions of motivation and personal aspiration. My purpose after all, is not to describe a 'general' pattern of action, or a statistically sound 'average' mode of thinking. On the contrary, my objective has been to qualitatively bring into focus diversity and the ability of bards to engage structures in a creative and unique manner.

My research differs from 'traditional' ethnography in the sense that I have not immersed myself in a single village or town. Rather, although each was located in the coastal area of The Gambia, I have travelled to a multitude of towns. Apart from staying in Tanje for four days at the Tanje Village Museum, I was based at the Mansea Beach Hotel in Kololi, a touristic town. My two main informants, Jalikebba Kouyate and Jali Alhaji Mbye, respectively stayed in Brikama, which is regarded as a Mandinka cultural hotspot, and Serrekunda, which is among the largest and busiest towns in The Gambia. The reason for doing research in more than one town is primarily that the bards that I have studied, although connected in history, do not share a common territory. I could have chosen to stay with one bardic family, but in my view, by travelling to different places and studying together with a

variety of bards from different families, I have been able to assess the degree of the diversity that I was looking for and thus make a well-founded selection of which bards to focus on in more detail. Below I present a map of the area in which I have conducted my research:



Map of The Gambia, highlighting the area of research ³



Map of coastal Gambia, the towns where research was conducted are dotted ⁴

³ <http://www.maps.google.com>

⁴ <http://www.maps.google.com>

Thesis Outline

In the first chapter I theorise about identity formation, agency and structure, performance as a site for enquiry, and I propose how tradition, Islam and modernity can be accommodated by one common framework. Besides providing insight into the main debates concerning these topics, how they have developed over the years, what assumptions undergird them, and how they can be related to one another, I also formulate my own theoretical perspective which has informed my methodology and in light of which my report should be read. In the last section of this chapter, based on literature research, I introduce the bards from a traditional Mande perspective in relation to the theoretical concepts that I have examined.

In the second chapter, drawing from the power of ethnography, I seek to take the reader into the context, in which contemporary Gambian bards operate. A general image is provided into issues of gender, religious and ethnic relations, political and economic circumstances, and some of the ways in which tradition, Islam and modernity feature in coastal Gambian life.

In chapter three, four and five, I present my empirical findings. Chapter three is relatively general in scope. I bring to light some of the tensions that exist between tradition, Islam and modernity, and also how bards are able to carve their personal modalities in this condition. I furthermore present two strategies that bards apply to legitimise their patterns of action. Namely, historical manipulation and utilitarianistic legitimisation. In chapter four I focus on one bard, Jalikebba Kouyate, whom I regard as representing the strategy of utilitarianistic legitimisation. By examining his personal bardic modality, motivations and aspirations, we learn about some of the intricate ways in which the various ethical structures impinge upon him. I also expand the theory of agency by relating it to knowledge. In chapter five, I zoom in on Jali Alhaji Mbye, another bard which I take to represent the strategy of historical manipulation. By examining his pattern of action, once again, we learn how knowledge is implicated in agency. We furthermore gain insight into some of the manners in which he selectively re-appropriates parts of the contending structures in order to achieve his goals. At the same time, we become aware of the limits to his agency, which I will in turn relate to the issue of cultural survival.

In chapter six I formulate my conclusion, highlighting the main points developed in this thesis and discussing their implications in relation to the main theoretical concepts. In the appendix I have included a reflection, in which I critically assess my own thesis in relation to my fieldwork experience and in which I want to address some problematic issues that I have had to deal with in the field.

| CHAPTER 1

ENACTMENTS OF THE ETHICAL SELF & THE CHALLENGE OF PLURIFORMITY

"If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless."

Scheper-Hughes (1995:410)

Deep Identity: Towards a Dynamic Self

As the world changes and humanity becomes ever more entangled, ideas of ourselves and the world flow, crash and mingle, resulting in pluriformity, ambiguity and sometimes uncertainty. Long-held practices and beliefs are inevitably challenged. Certain customs, once the epitome of morality, may suddenly be held in contempt. Indeed, as Anderson (2006:36) argued, it is this condition through which fundamental cultural conceptions lose their axiomatic grip on the minds of men, that has strengthened the necessity to imagine a community set off from Others. Within such a community, in which members are believed to share characteristics and homogeneity is idealised, *identity* – etymologically meaning ‘sameness’ – seems to be a useful concept. However, if identity is the mediating factor between the individual and the social, and we consider the spirit of the time which entails an ever-advancing global flow of peoples, ideas, images, resources and technologies, changing social compositions in the movement, the conventional conception of identity proves to be inadequate (Appadurai 1996).

Before globalisation and the consequent inevitability of pluriformity became as apparent as they are now, the endeavour to deal with pluriformity had long been discernible in the social sciences. As Ortner (2006:12-13) argues, the classical anthropological concept of ‘culture’ was part of this effort. Although highly essentialist, it was positive in that it constituted a turn away from racist towards a more sympathetic explanation of difference. Within this paradigm, it was the anthropologist’s task to clarify people’s ‘strange’ behaviour by unravelling the cultural system of which they were part. Mead (1934) and later Goffman (1959), in an attempt to break with essentialism, coined the idea that an identity was not something one was born with, but that it was shaped through processes of social interaction wherein people took on roles through mimicry. Although their interactionism did move

anthropology towards a more dynamic idea of the Self, it still bore traces of that ‘old idea of culture’ as a bounded, homogeneous and self-reproducing system of shared meanings (Van Meijl 2004:168). Mimicry could not satisfactorily explain social change.

Instead, through Barth (1969), who argued that the boundaries between the Self and the Other are fluid, and scholars such as Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2004), we now think of identity as a construct. Not ‘sameness’ but ‘difference’ seems to its defining feature. In this postmodern age, identity is no longer regarded as a stable axis, but rather a “nexus at which different constructions of Self coincide, and sometimes collide” (Van Meijl 2004:174). As social compositions undergo constant transformation, the Self is also continuously becoming. However, this process is not just driven by social forces, but also through the agency of the individual. “One becomes aware that ‘belonging’ and ‘identity’ are not cut in rock,” Bauman writes, and “that they are not secured by a lifelong guarantee, that they are eminently negotiable and revocable; and that one’s own decisions, the steps one takes, the way one acts (...) are crucial factors of both” (Baumann & Vecchi 2004:11).

While I agree that the agent herself takes part in the process of identity construction, I do so reservedly. I wonder whether the concept of construction is not too mechanistic. Instead, I propose that identity can also be dealt with in terms of *perception*. First off, my interest does not go out to the nominal aspects of identification, referring to processes by which people come to be categorised in ethnic groups or classes. Rather, it is that deep experience of identity that intrigues me. How people perceive themselves to *be* in the world and how this influences their idea of proper practice. Furthermore, in contrast to construction, perception allows for rapid experiential shifts and connects the individual explicitly with his material and social surroundings. Identity formation from this perspective implies not the conscious act of collecting and connecting elements of the social edifice. It denotes a process of realigning with reality as it is continuously (re)perceived. This invokes an image of people moving through life whilst constantly refining their attention, developing their ideas and manifesting themselves in bodily terms accordingly.

A second reservation that I have with constructionism, as articulated in Bauman and Vecchi’s (2004) work, has to do with the humanistic notion of agency which is taken too far. While our perceptions can shift and our sense of Self can change, there are limits to the ways in which we are able to deal with this in terms of Self formation. Not only do corporeality and historical forces form a powerful basis from which the agent cannot freely depart, but also the natural desire to be accepted and respected is a significant factor to consider. Cultural and religious values that are so often experienced as an intrinsic part of that deep identity impinge

upon our behaviour and influence our becoming. I would agree with the obvious objection that these physical, historical and religious factors are themselves also malleable. However, I do not regard the world as an 'empty slate' upon which meaning and purpose are invariably stamped; the consequences of which would be unconstrained relativism and an acceptance of cultural incommensurability (cf. Spiro 1996). As should be clear from my conceptual preference for perception, I argue against the idea of a purely discursive world. In conjunction with Ingold (2000:20-21), I take the world to be imbued with meaning that can be gradually approached through different perspectival lenses. Such an approach, that adheres to the idea that certain values are rooted in a reality beyond discourse, provides us with a foundation for productively considering ethics.

Agency, Structure & Ethical Formation

Having established my position with regard to the Self -as undergoing a process of becoming as one perceptually realigns with reality- it is important to connect to questions pertaining to praxis. I must make clear, from the outset, that I do not regard the relationship between identity and its materiality in terms of representation, as if identity is merely an internal affair and bodily movements are but its expressions. Treating bodily practice as such, means treating "the body as a diminished version of itself" (Jackson 1983:329). Rather, partially collapsing the Cartesian split between mind and body, I take the Self to be synonymous to 'being-in-the-world', to use Merleau-Ponty's (2005) terminology. This implies that the Self is embodied and at once experienced, formed and enacted *in the world*. It is here where the *subject* of identity and the *object* of identification meet and the tension between agency and structure is played out. The reason why this conception of the Self is useful, is because I do not seek to find out how people deal with pluriformity in terms of 'who am I', but in 'what *can* I do, what *ought* I to do and *how*'. In order to tackle this issue a critical examination of the tension between structure and agency is in order.

In reaction to functionalism that regarded social structures as stable and benign wholes, interpretativism, structuralism and Marxist theory took charge. The latter saw structures as exploitative, structuralism enquired into its underlying logic and interpretivism wondered about its meanings. Although different, within all these paradigms the relationship between the structure and its members was still seen in terms of constraint. Structures were self-generative and determinants of individual consciousness (Ortner 2006:1; Bilge 2010:12). Goffman's interactionism constituted an extreme answer to this in that it swept away all

constraints and overemphasised interpersonal interaction. Although it never gained much prominence, interactionism did leave us with a rigid structure-agency opposition (Ortner 2006:2).

To overcome this, Bourdieu (1972) devised his theory of practice which centred on the idea of the habitus. Integrating phenomenological and structuralist approaches, the habitus denotes a 'hidden' structure that causes subjects to internalise the content of their behavioural environment and unwittingly accept their subjugation. Against this idea, Giddens (1979:6) argued that subjects possess the agency to actively resist systems of control. Ultimately Giddens, Bourdieu and Sahlins, moved social theory from an oppositional towards a dialectical view of the tension between structure and agency (Ortner 2006:2). Sherry Ortner (2006) has aimed to go beyond the idea of agency as a mere capacity to resist. Not so much as an exercise of free will, but rather a reflexive and strategic ability, she argues that agency encompasses the power to engage with the world as if it were a game. Whereas she acknowledges that the structure limits the agent in terms of what he *can* do, it is the agent who decides *how*. While I find this an attractive idea, I agree with Mukerji's (2009:562) critique that Ortner's conception of the subject as a self-interested strategist is too neoliberal. Instead, Mahmood's (2005) ideas on agency and her concept of ethical formation seem more plausible.

The 'ethical' is of use here because I am not just concerned with practice, but with *proper practice*. Especially when divergent values and norms impinge upon one's deep sense of Self. In order to understand how the agent copes with such a reality, I follow Mahmood's argument that attention should be paid to the *actual forms* ethical practices take. Opposing Kant's postulate that ethical action can solely come about through reason by which one transcends cultural habits and bodily inclinations, Mahmood argues that we should explicitly focus on the body with regard to conduct, social demeanour and etiquette. Although Bourdieu had also called for a focus on the body, according to Mahmood, he was interested in bodily practices only because he regarded them as indexical; symbolising the ethos of the collective (Mahmood 2005:25-26). Indeed, this is reminiscent of Geertz' (1973:10) notion of culture as a manuscript, "written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior." Along with Giddens and Ortner, Mahmood is weary of these kinds of conceptualisations, and rightly so. As Jackson (1983:329) argues, they reduce the embodied Self to a mere sign, reducing it to a 'thing' onto which social patterns are inscribed without any obstruction whatsoever.

Instead of rehearsing often heard critiques that emphasise resistance to social inscription, Mahmood, like Ortner, aims to transcend the dualistic logic of constraint and resistance. However, where Ortner took self-maximisation as the agent's motive, Mahmood builds upon the idea that the agent is driven by a desire for 'doing what is right' and a conviction of precisely *how* to do it. From this perspective, she enquires into the *different modalities* in which the Self inhabits ethical structures (Mahmood 2005:24-27). In other words, on the basis of their own perception of what their place and purpose in the world is, people shape their Selves differently within a single context. They are free and bounded at once. This theoretical move is of great significance for my research. It shields me from conceptualising agency amidst pluriformity simply in terms of a strategic "...doing and undoing of norms" as Mahmood (2005:24) calls it. Her conceptualisation of ethical formation allows for creativity.

Performance: A Productive Site for Enquiry

As should be clear, I adhere to the idea that identity formation cannot be divorced from practice. Distancing myself from social determinism and reductionist notions of the body, I have adopted a concept of agency that allows for creativity and that beckons us to enquire into the different modalities by which one lives within ethical structures. In order for us to trace these modalities in the actual field, the concept of 'performance' is useful. Performances here should be thought of in terms of a continuum that accommodates both 'informal performances', or daily practice, and 'actual performances' such as plays, ceremonial dances and the like.

Performance theory emerged at the same time practice theories were formulated. It constituted a convergence of ideas such as Turner's 'social drama', Kenneth's examination of dramatism and Goffman's approach to social interaction. Like practice theory it was concerned with a critique of the inadequacy of structuralist approaches to account for social change and acting individuals as mind-bodies, instead of just minds. Furthermore, similar to practice theory it focused explicitly on what people do and how (Bell 1997:72-82). Goffman's (1959:22) definition serves as a good point of departure to demonstrate why this concept is of use here and to develop my own idea of it. He defined a performance as an "activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers." His notion of performance involves both the *environment*, or 'setting', and the items with which we identify

the *performer* herself, or the ‘personal front’. This can mean anything from speech patterns and gesticulation to styles of dress and musical expressions.

Although Goffman’s definition is useful, it does require adjustments in order for it to correspond better to my position. Whereas Goffman saw performances as a means by which one *presented* his Self to Others, I am disinclined to adopt this idea as such. It bears too many traces of those text-based approaches that adhered to a view of social life as a fixed, rigidly structured whole. I am drawn to the ephemeral, fluid and improvised (Barber 2007:29). Taking a dynamic view of social life as my starting point, I think of performances as being 1) a site wherein the dialectical tension between agency and structure is visibly played out; and 2) as a mode of action by which experience and perception are rendered accessible to Others, engendering intersubjective processes of becoming (see Rogers 1999:5). Indeed, this conception brings the problem of agency and structure into empirical reality.

To clarify the first point with regard to agency and structure, Mans (2005:6) argues that performances and their aesthetic evaluations will always be embedded in “deeper socio-cultural values such as morals and ethics.” The rhythmic patterns one employs, the melodies one plays, but also in what ‘setting’ one performs, each of these elements and their assessment will be informed (but not determined) by the ethical structures with which the performance is identified. It is just like in a theatre, as Asad (2003:75-76) explains in his discussion on the concept of agency: Without reducing the theatrical actress to a passive object, we know that the actress’ action on stage is not solely her own, as it is also informed by the dramatist’s script, the director mediating between the two, and the particular tradition of acting in which the actress was schooled. Observing performances with this idea in mind should make us susceptible to observing processes of negotiation between the creative agent and the structure being played out. This seems especially interesting when multiple ethical structures impinge upon one’s performance and several interspectival assessments take place.

The second point constitutes a further step away from representationalism, because it emphasises performances to possess the power to *affect*. This affective power is encapsulated in Austin’s concept of performativity. Initially, as Austin was a linguist, performativity served to account for language that went beyond conveying information, but that actually *altered reality* (Austin 1975:6-7).⁵ Focusing on performativity does not merely emphasise the fluid nature of identity. More than anything, it enables us to tackle the issue of why and how identities come to be (re)produced (Bell 1999:2). Again using the example of music, I borrow

⁵ Perhaps it is odd that I use a concept from linguistic theory, while at the same time I explicitly distance myself from text-based approaches to social life. However, it is a warranted choice because just as Austin’s concept of performativity was intended to account for the *power* of language, by adopting it I also aim to recognise the creative *power* of performances.

the idea that sound is in itself significant to shaping identity: “It is in the *doing* of music that being and becoming occur” (Duffy 2005:689). To clarify, when a certain space is acoustically reconfigured and participants are immersed in a ‘soundscape’, they will relate to this soundscape in some way. They might feel reinforced in their identity, experience a feeling of estrangement or they might identify with the sound but disapprove of the performer. Of course, the performer himself is also shaped through his performance. As Vikki Bell (1999:3) states, “identity is the effect of performance, and not vice versa.” Connecting this back to the concept of ethical formation, as elaborated upon by Mahmood (2005:163), this implies that the ethical Self should not be seen as preceding its performance. Rather, it is *through the performance* of ethical action that the ethical Self is formed.

Tradition, Islam & Modernisation: One Common Framework

Having deliberated subject-centred discussions on identity, agency and performance, it is now necessary to zoom out and concretise the issue of pluriformity. Since my research revolves around the question how bards reconcile their traditions with Islam and modernisation, and thus seek to achieve a state of ethical coherence, the most obvious construct that can bring these markedly distinct realities together within one common framework, is the concept of ‘ethical pluriformity’. I coin this term to denote a condition in which multiple, divergent and sometimes mutually exclusive values and norms simultaneously impinge upon a person or community. In order to build this framework, I discuss some of the conceptual and practical tensions that seem to exist between these realities. By highlighting particular anthropological concerns with regard to these tensions, the concept of ethical pluriformity flows out of this discussion naturally.

The tension between Islam and tradition has been the subject of anthropological enquiry and debate for several decades now. The work *Islam Observed* by Clifford Geertz (1968) is important to be considered. Geertz comparatively analysed Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, arguing that Islamic conceptions of life and consequent enactments of Islam vary between these contexts, due to different cultural and historical circumstances. In Launay’s (1992:2-4) estimation, it was due to this work that Islam came to the fore as a subject of anthropological enquiry in itself. Surely, Islam had featured in ethnographies before, but primarily in the context of holistic approaches, merely as an element of society that was still seen as a bounded whole. A crucial insight that was gained over the years, is that there exist a wide variety of divergent beliefs and practices throughout the Islamic world, raising the

question of whether the idea of a single Islam is even justified. Instead, it became clear that Islam is not as cohesive and self-contained as it has often been depicted, that it constitutes a space for contestation, has multiple histories, and that it doesn't just shape, but that it is also shaped by the context in which it develops and the Muslims that live it (Launay 1992:7; Brenner 2000; Bowen 1998).

Reactions to this new approach were not all positive. In his *Islam Obscured*, Varisco (2005) criticises anthropologists such as Geertz for paying too little attention to primary texts such as the Qur'an; for prioritising their own interpretations over those issuing forth from the Muslim informants themselves; and for the rigid categorisation of peoples that are too complex for superficial ideal-types (see Talib 2007). As had already been pointed out many years before Varisco's critique, there are significant differences between the study of Islam from an anthropological perspective and that of theology. Both of these "...emerge from different assumptions concerning Man, God, and the World, use different languages of analysis, and produce different descriptions of religious life" (El-Zein 1977:227).

One response to this friction, came in the form of a proposition to raise up an 'Islamic anthropology', which would depart from assumptions grounded in Islam (Tapper 1995). While I am appreciative of endeavours to democratise anthropology, I am not in favour of cutting up the discipline. We should furthermore guard against overstepping the epistemological boundaries of our discipline. Anthropology is not concerned with the question which Islamic form is the 'true one', nor is it our goal to come to a full description or explanation of Islam in itself. Anthropology is curious as to *how* people live Islam, what role scripture plays in their daily lives or how they practically deal with pluriformity.

In order to study this, and bring into focus the different ways of being a Muslim, we should examine Islamic practices at the local level, whilst taking heed of those universalising processes where local, supralocal and translocal practices and discourses intersect (Soares 2000:282-283). Thus, whilst asking the question what it is to be a 'good Muslim' by local standards and what ideas and practices are perceived as acceptable, desirable, obligatory, objectionable or prohibited (Launay 1992:9), we must also enquire into those grand processes that influence these perceptions. For example, a political discourse that promotes secularisation, or developments in the field of education. Islam's internal diversity is not simply an outcome of an arbitrary mingling with traditional practices. Rather, it is my conviction that certain values and norms are consciously prioritised or downplayed in light of historical, political, economic and material circumstances. Whilst a rich Muslim might staunchly adhere to the principle of cleanliness, the destitute may emphasise detachment. And

whilst an Arab Muslim may find Islamic history to support his own cultural primacy, African Muslims might commit to racial equality, finding solace in the story of the Ethiopian Bilal.

How people modify traditional and Islamic ethics in practice, becomes even more complex when taking modernisation into the analysis. Rather than some overarching, intangible process, I perceive modernisation as a structuring force laden with certain values and norms, that just like those grounded in Islam and tradition are weighed in the scale of particular circumstances. Due to the influential works of Weber, modernisation is conventionally equated with a process of occidental rationalisation and consequent secularisation, and an ethical reorientation from collectivism to individualism, in which behaviour is informed by utilitarianistic reasoning. According to Martinelli (2005:15-19), these elements, along with an unremitting quest for knowledge and a perception of the Self as an autonomous being, naturally entitled to liberties, rights and opportunities, constitute the core of 'the modern identity' (cf. Taylor 1989). As exemplified by this conception of 'the modern', modernisation is often-times intimately associated with Enlightenment ideals and unproblematically conflated with 'Westernisation'. This has lead Habermas (1985), among others, to point out the paradox that besides modernity's commitment to emancipation, it is also an ideology used to legitimise Western expansionism.

As could be expected, this narrow and rather Eurocentric conception of modernity has been criticised by anthropologists, other social scientists and philosophers alike. Not only has it become clear that modernisation does not necessarily equate the decline of religion in the public sphere or a radical shift towards individualism, but even the idea of a single version of modernity as such has been a topic of debate (see Hefner 1998). The actual developments in 'modernising countries' have discredited the expectations of theorists such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Across various parts of the world, developments in different spheres of social life have given rise to a wide variety of institutional and ideological patterns. Although 'modern', these patterns were apparently influenced by idiosyncratic cultural ideas, traditions and history (Eisenstadt 2002:1-2).

In response, new explanations of the contemporary world were proposed, among them concepts such as 'postmodernity', denoting a general disillusionment with Enlightenment ideals; 'reflexive modernisation', which assumes the emergence of a new level of modernity, in which individuals, faculties and institutions aim to overcome the consequences of modernisation in a self-confrontational manner; 'liquid modernity', depicting the contemporary as a chaotic furtherance of modernity, a condition characterised by alienation, uncertainty and cultural, sexual, existential and political nomadism; and then there is the

concept of ‘multiple modernities’, which constitutes a critique against the idea of modernisation as a Western project, aims to overcome the assumption that the traditional and the modern are fundamentally incompatible and postulates that there are indeed multiple versions of the modern, which can each in their own respect be regarded as authentic (Lee 2006; Eisenstadt 2002:3).

Whilst these discussions are important, I should emphasise that, just as with Islam, I am not in search of a ‘true modernity’. As has been clearly shown by authors such as Geschiere (1997) and Deeb (2006), both African traditions and Islam exert their own particular influence on modernisation, weave into the fibres of its meaning and although transformed in the process, seem to retain their place in society. In that sense, the idea of ‘multiple modernities’ is appealing. Frankly, however, I am disinclined to take a strong position in this field of debate. Not necessarily advocating for relativism, but rather to return to the epistemological grounds of our discipline, I argue that what is important for my purposes here is that we delve into the lives of the bards and discover what tradition, Islam and modernity mean for them. Only by understanding what values they themselves associate with these structuring forces, can we begin to analyse how they go about reconciling them.

The Jalolu & Finoolu: From a Mande Perspective

In this section I examine the traditional societal roles of the *jalolu* and *finoolu*, as presented in the literature, in relation to identity, agency and performance. This automatically necessitates an elaboration upon the Mande social structure in which the bardic profession is rooted. This particular structure dates back to pre-Islamic times and retains its bearing throughout the Mande Diaspora, a cultural, historical and geographic reality that stretches to include the nations of The Gambia, Mali, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea and Ivory Coast (Ebron 2002:17).

The Mande structure can be divided into three main categories: that of the ‘nobles’ (*mansalu*); the specialised professionals (*nyamakalaw*); and that of slaves (*jongolu*). The category of specialised professionals is made up of blacksmiths (*numoolu*), leatherworkers (*karankeolu*), bards (*jalolu*) and Islamic bards (*finoolu*) (McNaughton 1993:1-3; Janson 2009:97; Conrad & Frank 1995). Although the *nyamakalaw* constitute an endogamous group and inherit their status and right to engage in their particular professions, designating this group as a ‘caste’ is incorrect. While this colonial term is still in use by some scholars (e.g. Roth 2003), the term ‘status category’ is an appropriate alternative (see Jansen 2000:1).

Nonetheless, the hereditary aspect of their identity should not be downplayed, especially in this research. Herewith I take heed of Jansen's statement that the concept of agency should be used carefully in Mande studies. "[A]gency may influence an individual's prestige," Jansen states, "but never his status, the qualities ascribed to his structural position in society" (Jansen 2000:2). As I am primarily dealing with ethical formation, which is related to prestige, my focus on agency does not pose an immediate problem. However, because I am also dealing with Islam and modernity, both of which are grounded in different assumptions about human nature that might or might not clash with the Mande concept of status, I felt that I should critically test Jansen's statement and see whether the inherited status which is perceived to be fixed by birth is truly beyond the limits of the agential powers of the bards.

The *nyamakalaw* (specialised professionals) are believed to possess great quantities of *dalilu*, a spiritual power that enables them to work with an occult force called *nyama*. This animating force is thought to be latent in certain animals such as poisonous snakes, but also in raw materials such as ore, wood, clay, skins, specific types of music and even words. Working with these materials can liberate their *nyama* and is seen as a dangerous activity (Charry 2000:48-49; McNaughton 1993:15-17). To clarify, the activities of the *nyamakalaw* constitute acts of transformation. They change 'nature' into 'culture', ore into iron, wood into furniture, clay into pots, skins into clothing and the bards transform persons into social beings (Jansen 2000:4-5).

In contrast to what is often assumed, the *jali* is not unique to Mande society. Similar figures are also found among the Wolof (*gewel*), Fula (*gawlo*), Moors (*iggiw*), Soninke (*jawe*) and the Songhai (*jesere*). Interestingly, it has been argued that each of these names all stem from the Arabic word *qawl*, which in its root form (q-w-l) stands for 'speech', carrying connotations such as 'eloquence', 'travelling poet' and even 'itinerant singer and musician' (Charry 2000:109-114). The best known term however is 'griot', which encapsulates all these names. It is an ambiguous term that carries both negative and positive connotations (see Hale 1997). Surely, as this term is most commonly used in academic discourse, there would be advantages in using it here too. However, because I want to stay close to emic terminology, I stick to the terms *jali* (male), *jalimuso* (female) and *jalolu* (plural), except in citations of course.

While Stoller (1997:26-27) agrees with the conception of "griots...as the "archivists" of their cultures..." and even as "...the living memory of Africa," I find such a depiction rather limited. The *jalolu* actually perform a wide variety of functions. Besides being historians, they fulfil a their roles as praise-singers, advisors, diplomats, musicians, genealogists,

spokespersons, mediators, interpreters, composers, exhorters, witnesses and ceremony participants (Hale 2007:18-58). It should be admitted however, that their engagement with history and their praise-singing do stand out as dominant features of their practice. This praise-singing is not mere flattery to attract gifts, but rather constitutes a complex drama in which history is drawn from in order to motivate audiences to live up to their potential (Ebron 2002:17; McNaughton 1993:6). Acknowledging these creative and affective aspects of their performances, through which social identities are negotiated, Stoller (1997:32) states that “[t]heir words are performative: they help to create social life by talking it.” What can be drawn from this, is that the *jalolu* do indeed fulfil an important role in society with regard to identity formation and maintaining the Mande social structure.

As to their musicality, the male *jalolu* traditionally own the right to play the *kora* (a harp-like instrument), the *balafon* (xylophone) and the *koni* (plucked lute). Although often competent in multiple fields of practice, they are usually experts in either speech (history, genealogy); song (singing and composing); or instrument playing. Traditionally, the women (*jalimusolu*) only sing and play the *neo* (a metallic percussion instrument), even though they are also known and feared for their power of speech (Charry 2000:90-91). This ‘fear’ aspect is important to take into account. In traditional Mande culture, *jalolu* are held in awe, mixed with fear and sometimes aversion. Not only because of their association with *nyama*, but also because besides possessing the knowledge to praise the ‘nobles’, they are evenly capable of smothering family names (Roth 2003:57-59; McNaughton 1997:7; Charry 2000:96-97).

Whereas the *jalolu* are essentially perceived as ‘secular’ guides to human behaviour (Hale 2007:57), *finoolu* are regarded as Islamic bards. They recite verses from the Qur’an and the Hadith, although they are also known to engage in occupations such as basket-making and miming. Interestingly, The Gambia is the one place “...where the *finoo* role can be regarded as an exclusively Muslim vocation” (Janson 2009:97-98). In contrast to the *jali*, the *finoo* is much less known and relatively understudied. What is known is that while both the *jali* and the *finoo* are bards and perform at many of the same events, such as naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals, initiations and installations, they belong to separate categories. Both have their own origin stories and perform differently (see Janson 2007:40). A crucial similarity between them, of particular interest for my purposes, is that both the *jalolu* and the *finoolu* are Muslims. Thus, besides the Mande social structure, they are also inextricably connected to Islam, an ethical structure that is not always in agreement with their profession (Janson 2002:163-191, 2009). Exactly how they reconcile these traditional roles with Islam and the process of modernisation, is of course the central issue under study in this thesis.

| CHAPTER 2

SETTING THE SCENE

The Smiling Coast of Africa

“*Allaaah-u-Akbar!.....Allaaah-u-Akbar!.....Allaaah-u-Akbar!.....*” Twenty-two minutes past five in the morning. A small band of men and the occasional woman, shuffle their way through sandy roads towards a local mosque. “*Ashhad anla ilaha illa-llah!.....Ashhadu anna Muhammadan-rasulu-llah!.....*” The recognition of the One True God and His Prophet is sounded from the minarets, spilling into compounds, past curtains, into houses, through mosquito nets, into the ears of men and women, elders and children alike. The same call to prayer has nurtured the hearts of many generations before them. Indeed, as Bravman (2000:489) remarks, although this part of Africa is generally regarded as but a distant province of Islam, far removed from the heartland with its imperial courts, metropolitan centres and famed seats of learning, Islam in Africa is almost as old as the religion itself.

Having just gotten on the bush-taxi in Kololi to go to an early morning ceremony in Brikama, The Gambia, or the Smiling Coast of Africa, slowly comes to life. Women, with their babies strapped to their backs, are the first to wake up to go about their daily chores, such as retrieving water from the well, preparing porridge for the family and sweeping the communal part of the compound. Small groups of people assemble by the side of the coastal road, waiting for a bush-taxi to take them to the market of Serrekunda, the hotels of Kololi and Fajara, or the offices at Banjul. At the same time, Western tourists make their way to the beaches, where a cool breeze, fruit juice and a warm ocean await them.

As the coastal road fills with traffic and flocks of cattle, my eyes fall on big signs by the side of the road. Apart from commercial advertisements, most of these signs serve as channels of communication from the President to his people. One sign shows President Jammeh in his snow-white African attire, holding in the one hand a traditional wooden staff, indicating his kingliness, and in the other a Holy Qur’an, by which he professes his loyalty to Islam. Below his picture, we read: “A vote for him in 2011 is a sacred duty for all Gambians.” Another sign reads: “Congratulations Mr. President! We look forward to another term of development in The Gambia!”

Although referred to as a “*façade democracy*” (Walraven & Thiriot 2002:122), and despite the harsh restriction on freedom of expression, The Gambia, ever since it gained independence from Great Britain in 1965, is formally a democracy. And although President Jammeh took office in 1996 through a *coup d'état* and has been in power for over fifteen years now, in contrast to other (ex-)leaders in West Africa, he is relatively popular. Especially because of his continuous commitment to build roads, support education and criticising international power structures. This popularity is not only evident because of heart-shaped posters of him hung on walls inside bedrooms, but it also becomes clear during his tours along the main road, when hundreds of people gather, pushing each other aside to catch but a glimpse of his face, yelling “Long live The Gambia” and “God bless you, Mr. President!”

As the sun makes its way down, for me it becomes easier to think again. Forty-five degrees during the day, makes for a slow pace of life and decreases the quality of interviews. The evenings are different. Pink clouds, the rustling of the leaves of trees, the smell of burning sugar and overcooked green tea, the laughs of children running after a rolling car tire, each of these elements contribute to the evening’s soothing atmosphere. As people relax in front of the entrance of their compounds, having just shared a large bowl of rice, fish and peanut sauce, in the distance the roaring of drums can be heard. Simply listening to the rhythm is enough to know which ethnic group is celebrating. As was often stressed by my informants, coastal Gambia is characterised by peaceful relations between the various ethnic groups such as the Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, Serere, Sarahoule and Jola. In like manner, although ninety percent of Gambia’s population adheres to Islam, animosity towards Christians or smaller religious groups is strictly forbidden. In fact, just as Tabaski –a Muslim feast- is celebrated by Christians, I am told that Christmas is celebrated by Muslims. Once it even occurred that while I was interviewing Mr. Gomez, the former minister of Justice and a Christian, he received a letter from the Vice-President, a woman and a Muslim, in which she acknowledged Easter as a holy day and reaffirmed their peaceful relations.

As nightly celebrations come to an end, and the compounds quiet down again, the Smile of Africa likewise disappears. As I was staying in a hotel in Kololi, I also got to experience this ‘other side’ of The Gambia. After midnight, loud reggae music can be heard from the beach. With streetlights switched off, one sees only human shadows move, accompanied by small moving red lights and clouds of smoke. This is the time of excess: elderly tourists gone wild, young prostitutes, con-artists and police interventions. Then as the night comes to a close, cigarettes are put out, stereos are turned down, and screams turn to whispers, once again, in the distance, faintly: “.....*Allaaah-u-Akbar!*.....”

| CHAPTER 3

HOLLOW TRADITIONS MUSLIM OBJECTIONS & MODERN DREAMS

In this chapter I uncover some of the tensions that exist between the bardic tradition, Islam and modernisation, and provide an overview of various patterns of practice that bards engage in. In addition, I propose two main strategies of reconciliation that bards apply to legitimise their particular practices.

Tracing Divergence, Cutting Tensions

With amazing dexterity, he played a song about a crocodile hunter, whose heart no one could tame, except the *jali*. Whilst his enchanting melodies filled the small bedroom we sat in, his cousin who sat next to me exclaimed: “You see, he is a professional!” After the *jali* stopped playing, he asked me what I wanted to know from him. Upon discovering my intentions, he got into a discussion in Mandinka with a friend who had been observing our meeting quietly. “He is saying that you are actually not supposed to know these things,” his cousin explained, “but he is willing to share his knowledge.” “Yes,” the *jali* said, “you are asking much. Secret things. But I can make an exception and even show you a book that is full of secrets.” He continued to play his song. “Now,” his cousin whispered to me, “it is good if you can agree on a price.”⁶

I knew that fieldwork, however well planned, was also dependent on luck. And surely, how could an interview on the very first day of my arrival be anything but luck? However, being so new to the field, I did not yet understand that this *jali* had put on a ‘traditional act’ that is usually performed for tourists. His claim to secret knowledge, I later understood, was a mere adaptation to the oddity of this ‘tourist doing research’.

⁶ Interview, Jali Filly Suso, 8 February 2012, Bakau

It is usually on the radio or television, but most significantly at hotels and other tourist settings, that one can hear *jalolu* perform traditional songs in coastal Gambia. There is something tragic about this. One of these hotel-*jalolu* said to me that “...these tourists don’t know anything. They don’t understand what I am singing about and what is a griot...” and that “...the only reason why I am here, is because I am looking for a chance. Maybe someone will notice me and then I can have my own band and go to England or Holland. I would like to go to Holland.” I asked him whether he also performed at traditional ceremonies. “No!” he said, “I don’t want to degrade myself.”⁷

Among many *jalolu* this aspiration to have a band, travel the world and become internationally known, is a prime objective that motivates them to pursue kora-playing. Similar to Ferguson’s (1999) experience in Zambia, the concept of modernisation for these *jalolu* is similar to those ‘old ideas’ that are hardly accepted in current social scientific thought. Modernity is regarded as a synonym for Westernisation, by which the traditional is reduced to a commodity, or rather a luxury, no longer accessible to local audiences. Instead of sensitising people to the history of their surroundings, their origins and potentialities, within this pattern of action the role of the *jali* is no more than the mere act of kora-playing.

It is this selfsame perception of the modern, in which traditional and Islamic motives are relegated and the desire to play one’s own songs and appeal to a ‘modern audience’ is central, that bears its influence upon Islamic settings. One such as a setting is the naming ceremony, which is worth examining briefly: The purpose of the naming ceremony is to embed a newly-born in the community. This is brought about by the imam and the bards who make the baby’s name public, inform the community about its familial ties and elaborate upon those moral principles that relate to parenthood, education and the proper attitude that should be observed by the parents and the child, with regard to each other and God. The ceremony is primarily Islamic. This is not only evident in terms of content, but also in form. During the morning, imams and pious elders –exclusively men- play a dominant role. Together with the male bards they are seated on a mat, surrounded by a male audience seated on chairs. This audience participates in blessing the child and by giving money to the bards. They also partake from kola nuts and various foods such as rice-balls and pancakes that are handed out by the bards. In general, women are not involved. They sit outside the ceremonial space and prepare lunch.

Usually, during the morning, bardic performances are restricted to repeating the imam’s speech and reciting verses of the Qur’an. Bardic instruments do not feature. In-

⁷ Interview, Jali Afsin Diabate, 14 March 2012, Kololi, after hotel performance

between ceremonial moments, the occasional praise-songs of *jalimusolu* who highlight attributes of their recipients, such as generosity or kindness, can be heard. Oftentimes though, these acts are not actually part of the ceremony, and the *jalimusolu* that engage in these praise-songs come uninvited.

This brief description does to some extent demonstrate that the bards do still fulfil their traditional roles in Islamic settings. However, this is not the whole story. During one of the naming ceremonies I attended in Brikama, while the imam and the *jali* were elaborating upon the importance of attending the mosque and how ‘togetherness’ was a crucial element of Islam, I was suddenly struck by the fact that the imam’s speech was being translated to me by Jalikebba Kouyate, a *jali*, who was sitting next to me. I looked at him. Unlike most of the people present, he was not wearing an African dress, but simply a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. “Why are you not performing here?” I asked him. He shook his head. “I don’t really do these things. Maybe when someone like my sister has a baby. But not now. I will perform later.” “Where will you perform?” “Outside, around the corner. With the band. Many people will be coming.”⁸

What is notable about this particular situation is that Jalikebba Kouyate is just as much a *jali* as the bard performing on the mat. Thus in order for us to evaluate the bardic practices during naming ceremonies, we cannot merely focus on what is happening ‘on the mat’. Jalikebba Kouyate’s *non-action* by the sideline is just as telling. His ‘modern’ style of dress separated him from other participants of the ceremony. In addition, his answers to my questions made it clear that circumstances had to be quite special if he was to perform at a naming ceremony in the morning. Rather, his preference went out to performing “later,” “around the corner” and “with the band.” Although this example demonstrates how a particular perception of the modern can bear its influence upon bardic practices in Islamic settings, it is difficult to know for sure why Jalikebba Kouyate was disinclined to perform in the morning. One plausible explanation is that as a famous ‘artist’, he feels that such a ‘local’ performance is below his stature. Another explanation however, that need not necessarily exclude the former, is that his performance would not have been appreciated or even accepted. Jalikebba Kouyate rarely, if ever, attends the mosque. One might wonder if a speech by him about the importance of attending prayer and ‘togetherness’ would have been credible.⁹ Either way, Jalikebba Kouyate was clearly focussed on the evening part of the naming ceremony, which, as we will see, is markedly different from the morning.

⁸ Naming ceremony, 27 February 2012, Brikama

⁹ This aspect will be dealt with in the next chapter with regard to the issue of knowledge and agency.



Naming ceremony, imam addressing the male audience, 27 February 2012, Brikama

The second purpose of a naming ceremony is to celebrate the mother of the child. During the day she hardly features as a prominent participant, but in the evening, after the imams and elders have left and she has changed her clothes and covered her face with colourful make-up, she is the centre of attention. Whereas the morning is markedly masculine and Islamic, supported by vocal performances of bards, the night belongs to ‘the modern’ and arguably ‘the traditional’, depending on the aspects taken into consideration.¹⁰ To clarify, the evening is when the *kora* first features. Not as part of a ‘traditional’ repertoire, but rather in collaboration with a fully amplified band playing up-tempo dance songs to entertain women and a handful of men. Without a doubt, these evening celebrations are no place for songs about history or Islam. As one *jali* explained:

“...at naming ceremonies there are many elders and imams. I have to be respectful and sing traditional songs. But in the evening, the young people do not want to hear this. They want music that they can dance to.”¹¹

¹⁰ In this context, with ‘the modern’ I refer to the *bardic practices*: their repertoire, style of playing and the content of their songs. ‘The traditional’ here mainly refers to the audience’s styles of dress and dancing. Therefore, as my research is primarily focussed on the bards and the discontinuity between their practices in the morning in comparison to the evening, I argue that the evening is primarily ‘modern’ whereas the morning is mostly associated with Islam and tradition.

¹¹ Interview, Jali Tatadinging, 20 February 2012, Brikama



Naming Ceremony, at night, women dancing, 13 February 2012, Serrekunda

For some Muslims, such as Adama Biyo from Brikama, who is part of a fundamentalist Islamic movement known as the Masalau, these nightly practices at naming ceremonies are objectionable from an Islamic point of view. Not only because instrument playing is *haram* (forbidden), according to some interpretations. But also because by conforming to the desires of the flesh these bards are contributing to the moral degeneration of Muslim society. With their loud music and up-tempo rhythms, my informant stated, bards are inhibiting Muslims to properly remember God and even worse, causing men and women to mingle together and dance in ways that God finds blameworthy, if not abhorrent.¹²

This contrast between day and night is important with regard to the issue of agency and reconciliation. Because while bards apparently serve as active supporters of Islamic ethical standards in the morning, their evening practices in which modern repertoires and (traditional) dancing take centre stage seem to be in discordance. It shows us that they are capable of fluidly adapting to different expectations and as they are Muslim in both situations, it begs the question of how they ethically legitimise the discrepancy between them. One bard, whom I had asked what he thought of the supposed tension between Islam and his bardic practices, did so by explicitly putting forth his bardic identity as an excuse or rather an

¹² Interview, Adama Biyo, a Masalau, 23 February 2012, Brikama

imperative to “...stay in the middle,” be moderate and by giving primacy to his cultural heritage over Islam. As became clear from our conversation, this ‘cultural heritage’ did not so much refer to repertoires, whether modern or traditional, but rather to the act of music-making itself. In fact, in rather dramatic terms he stated that he would be willing to die for his music, because music was his “true religion.” In his case, his objective was *not* to reconcile, but rather separate his traditional role (i.e. music-making) from Islam:

“I respect Islam, but I do not always pray five times a day. I am first a *jali* and not some fanatic like those from Saudi Arabia...You know, even yesterday I had a discussion with my father. He said that we should change our ways, because Islam does not approve of the things we do. I said no! We are *jalolu*. We have to stay in the middle, in between. It has to go parallel...” He stared at the ground for a while, seemingly trying to find the right words to capture his sentiment. Suddenly, he looked up and dramatically whispered: “Religion is good, no question. But Islam will never bury my culture.”¹³

While I have encountered this line of reasoning a number of times, most bards with whom I spoke on the subject of modernisation, Islam and their bardic tradition, did aim to reconcile them in a variety of ways. In the next section we explore two of these strategies, namely, historical manipulation and utilitarianistic legitimisation. I furthermore continue to bring those values to light that bards associate with the various ethical structures.

In Defence of the Self: Strategies of Reconciliation

In contrast to the experience of time that we are familiar with in Western societies, with its past-present-future order, Ruhe-Schoen’s (2011:15) depiction of Eastern time as “...one river, the present, in which the past is a forever-living current” captures the Gambian experience well. Not only among the bards, but in society at large, historical consciousness is an ever-present reality that impresses upon social relations and practises. For example, the Fula are known to be the first ethnic group in Africa that converted to Islam, imbuing them with a sense of natural piety, whilst the Jola are known for their pageantry, which, according to Janson (2006:503), is one of the reasons why the President (who is a Jola) is so keen to accentuate his Islamic virtuousness. Also, joking relationships, or *sanankuya*, grounded in history, inform behavioural patterns between various families, such as the Kanute and Diabate

¹³ Interview, Jali Tatadinging, 20 February 2012, Brikama

families.¹⁴ And Muslims, especially those actively striving for public piety, draw from Islamic history, and in particular from the Person of Muhammad, to behave and dress in certain ways. In addition, and perhaps contrary to ‘pre-modern’ times, as a result of basic educational curricula, people are generally familiar with stories about Sunjata Keita and Soumaoro Kante, historical figures that stand at the basis of Mande culture.

Just as the Qur’an serves as a powerful basis for ascertaining truth and value, history or ‘tradition’ holds a similar power, especially when linked to Islamic history. This being the case, it should not come as a surprise that historical manipulation is one of the most salient strategies for reconciling the bardic tradition (again referring primarily to the act of music-making) with Islam.

How bards can draw from history to legitimise their behaviour is best exemplified in the following event:

Just after lunch, while we were resting under the cashew trees, the *finoo*, who had lead the naming ceremony, started playing a drum. I was startled by this and wanted to ask him why he was drumming, as it had been my understanding that *finoolu* never play instruments. Before I could even get up, the father of the newly-born went up to him and told him to stop playing immediately. His sister, seeing this happen, rushed to the scene and told her brother to go away. She gave the *finoo* some money and asked him to continue. She started dancing excitedly on the spot. Shortly after, she came back to us to sit in the shade when the father started saying how inappropriate it is to play drums at a naming ceremony because Islam disapproves of it. A heated discussion took place between various family members. All of a sudden, the *finoo* came towards us and raised his hands. In a soft, but firm tone, he stated that they need not worry. Islam does not disapprove of the drum. In fact, he said, the first *finoo*, named Sourakhata, who personally attended to the Prophet, has been known to play instruments. So, he concluded, Islam is not against drumming. The father grew silent. His sister content.¹⁵

I have heard such references to Sourakhata countless of times, when bards defend their tradition. The story was always different however. For some, Sourakhata is the first *jali*, who after failing to kill Muhammad three times, professed his loyalty to Him. He used to travel ahead of Muhammad to proclaim Islam and prepare people for the Prophet’s arrival.¹⁶ For another, it is quite clear that Sourakhata was a *finoo*, as he never played any instruments. In

¹⁴ Interview, Jali Djikiba Kanute, 19 March 2012, Kololi

¹⁵ Naming Ceremony, 21 February 2012, Brikama

¹⁶ Interview, Jalikebba Kouyate, 14 February 2012, Tanje

this depiction, *finaya* is part of Islam, whilst *jaliya* is a pre-Islamic African phenomenon.¹⁷ One *finoo* elder emphatically stated that all of these versions are erroneous. According to him, the first *finoo* in history is Fishana, Muhammad's half-brother. The first song he composed, which should only be performed by *finoolu*, is the 'Recital of the 201 Names of Muhammad'. In this account, Sourakhata is Fishana's eldest son, and he was indeed the first *jali*. He furthermore explained that *finaya* is always in tune with Islam, because it stems from Islam. It can only be practised *by* and *for* Muslims. In contrast, *jalolu* are not restricted to Islamic topics and audiences. When I confronted him with the fact that according to most of my informants, both *jaliya* and *finaya* already existed before Islam, even before the Mande Empire was founded, he assented to this, but explained that only after the coming of Islam did these phenomena come to full fruition. In other words, before Islam the 'true' *finaya* and *jaliya* had not yet emerged.¹⁸

Another line of reasoning that fits this history based strategy, with regard to instrument playing, is the argument that the bardic instruments originate from the spiritual realms, and that they are thus meritorious in the sight of God. One rather interesting argument went as follows:

"How can the kora be bad? It was given to us by the djinns [whom besides humans and angels constitute another conscious life-form in Islamic cosmology -BC]! This might be difficult to believe....if you want to know for sure, then buy a kora and leave it standing in your room. I am telling you, after a few days, you will hear melodies coming from it during the night. You will hear the strings being played. Do you think the wind can do that? No, it is because of the spirits...The kora is of God."¹⁹

In addition to the strategy of historical manipulation, there is another mode of legitimisation more utilitarianistic in nature. To clarify, utilitarianism states that the moral value of an action is determined by its outcome. Even if one breaches a law or a cultural boundary, an action is still *proper* if it causes happiness. For Jaliba Kouyate for example, who is generally regarded as the best kora-player in the country and who has been appointed the ambassador of the kora, the ethical value of his practice is not vested in history, but rather in the content of his discourse, his demeanour and most importantly, the way he is able to affect his audiences.

¹⁷ Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 20 February 2012, Serrekunda Willingara. The terms; *jaliya* and *finaya* refer to the bardic profession. They can be translated as *jali-ism* and *finoo-ism*, respectively.

¹⁸ Interview, Finoo Mamadou Kamara, 3 April 2012, Bakoteh

¹⁹ Interview, Jali Djikiba Kanute, 3 March 2012, Kololi

Surely, that he doesn't sing traditional songs, isn't occupied with history, that he plays with a band, doesn't engage in praise singing, doesn't have a patron and that he is 'too big' to perform at naming ceremonies in the morning, all of this begs the question of whether this 'modern *jali*' is still a 'real *jali*'. When evaluating the *form* of his performance, especially in daily life, one would easily confuse him with a noble-man, or even a king of some sorts. In fact, his three-story, marble-white house is generally regarded as the palace of Brikama, and his international renown and popularity is such that, according to him, the President dislikes him and regards him as a potential political threat.²⁰ In traditional terms, even the mere thought of him entering politics, constitutes a serious rupture from the Mande structure in which the law of *nyama* unequivocally establishes that a *jali* can only 'serve', and never 'be', a *mansa* (king).²¹

However, for Jaliba Kouyate, all of this is not problematic. In his view, a *jali* is first and foremost an educator and social worker, and this is exactly what he claims to be. With his songs he encourages people to be humble, persevering, to submit and not to let trouble discourage them. By stimulating people to develop these particular attributes, in his view, he is not only a 'real *jali*' but also loyal to Islam, because just like the Qur'an, his kora is geared towards helping people to become 'good and happy human beings'. Thus, with regard to both Islam and tradition, he legitimises his modern practices by emphasising the correspondence between them in terms of effect, which is ultimately happiness and prosperity. He addresses issues such as AIDS, calling upon people to be loyal to their partners, and socioeconomic inequality, advising those who have travelled abroad and returned to The Gambia as *semestalu* (re-migrants) to share their wealth with family and friends.²²

Frankly, just as a *jali* should, according to Stoller (1997:32), Jaliba Kouyate does seem to have a performative power in society at large. Expressions such as *hakatumas* (forgive me, I'm sorry) and *munioning sabaro* (take life easy, be patient), which come from his songs, have become part of daily lexicon in society at large. In addition, it is not uncommon to hear his music playing from mobile phones, setting in motion discussions about some of the topics and values he promotes. There is however another way in which his performances are performative: It should be clear that he is indeed loyal to his bardic identity, as he still advises and encourages his audiences and tries to resolve societal conflicts, but in addition, the *particular way* in which he performs his role is changing current understandings of what it means to be a *jali*.

²⁰ Interview, Jaliba Kouyate, 23 February 2012, Brikama

²¹ Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 20 February 2012, Serrekunda Willingara

²² Interview, Jaliba Kouyate, 9 February 2012, Brikama

Thus, to recapitulate, whereas the strategy of historical manipulation draws from the normative power of history and seeks to ‘re-authenticate’ a particular bardic modality by arguing for its apparent rootedness in history, the strategy of utilitarianistic legitimisation highlights an *essential similarity* between the effects ‘modern’ bards strive to have in society and the effects that both Islam and tradition have, and that therefore, even though modern practices might differ from the traditional or clash with Islamic standards for propriety, these practices are still in tune with tradition and Islam, because they still share a common purpose.

In this chapter, I have brought to light how some bardic practices, such as instrument playing in general or playing music that women and men dance to, clash with particular interpretations concerning Islamic standards of propriety. I have furthermore shown how some bards who aspire to become accounted among the modern, re-appropriate their traditional repertoires, or as in the case of Jalikebba Kouyate even disregard them altogether. This chapter also demonstrates that bards do indeed possess agency to such a degree that they can break with Islamic and traditional restrictions, or even fluidly ‘change face’ as they move from one ethical setting to another. In order to legitimise these discordances, and re-authenticate their particular patterns of action, I posited that there are two main strategies, namely, historical manipulation and utilitarianistic legitimisation that bards apply.

In the next two chapters I focus on two bards in detail, although at times I do branch out to other bards. The reason why I have chosen this biographical approach is because 1) whilst in this chapter I have focused on particular ‘moments’ that are but parts of larger patterns of action, focusing on an individual will make it possible to study a continuous ‘line’ of action which can bring to light those fluid and discordant complexities; and 2) it enables us to go beyond superficial analyses, and really gain insight into underlying motivations and aspirations. The next two chapters are not only to gain a deeper understanding of those strategies of reconciliation that we have addressed in this chapter, but they are also geared towards critically identifying the sources of agency from which the bards draw.

| CHAPTER 4

JALIKEBBA KOUYATE

“ARE YOU HAPPY?”

A Guide into the Future: The Jali as Educator & Social Worker

Jalikebba Kouyate was born in Brikamaba, a small village in the interior of The Gambia.²³ At a young age, his mother had sent him to Brikama to live with his uncle, Jaliba Kouyate, who taught him how to play the kora. Although he is formally a Muslim and a *jali*, he is primarily focused on his musical career as a kora-player. Not once during our time together did he heed the call to prayer, let alone attend the mosque. Like many *jalolu* that aspire to stardom, such as Jaliba, Jali Tatadinging, Jali Haruna, Jali Pappies and Jali Bakary, Jalikebba Kouyate hides his Muslim name and prefers to be known by his alias, or ‘artist name’. With regard to his bardic role, he is not concerned with praise-singing or keeping history. He is first and foremost a music artist.

During naming ceremonies, in the morning, he participates like any other regular member of the non-bardic audience. In the evening, however, after putting on an African dress, he and his band serve to entertain the primarily female audience with their own songs. He is aware that some Muslims object to the mingling of women and men, but discards these criticisms as ‘fundamentalist’. Quite literally, he represents the utilitarianistic mode of legitimisation that I have encountered in the field. He claims that his key objective is to make people happy. This justifies his transgressions of certain Islamic or traditional rules of conduct. Better yet, because he brings people happiness and fosters amity and love amongst his audience, in his view he is loyal to the core purpose of both Islam and his bardic tradition: “Allah and Muhammad are not relatives,” Jalikebba Kouyate said. “Their connection is one of love...That is why the *jali* should promote love. This is the heart of Islam, and it is the heart of *jaliya*.”²⁴

Just like Jaliba Kouyate, Jalikebba Kouyate uses his music to promote an educational discourse. Instead of history, he is primarily concerned with the contemporary. As such, he

²³ Jalikebba Kouyate did not disclose his date of birth to me. However, I do recall him pointing out to me once that we differed approximately ten years, meaning that he must be around thirty-five years of age.

²⁴ Interview, Jalikebba Kouyate, 14 February 2012, Tanje

claims, he is still true to the bardic role, because “...with my music, I help to avoid conflicts and bring peace.”²⁵

In order to see how Jalikebba Kouyate comments on contemporary problems and aims to educate his audience, it is useful to examine his most famous song, *Fiserwale*, meaning ‘disappointer’ in Mandinka.²⁶ This song is about how people should properly deal with success. He bids his audience to be loyal and to honour friendships:

Fiserwale
Allah kanan kati
Moming mang baling nyina
Samateyeh

A disappointer,
I pray that Allah
will not make me to be one

Terima dukareh kanen njangfa
Isem mira komalla kanen njangfa

To anyone who is not part
of those fighting disappointment,
you will not have a good future

Janibe siseo fala
Fiserwaleye
Selung fong nayetah wolleh fisayanyi

My friend, please don’t try to disappoint me
Think about the good things
that passed between us
Please don’t betray me

Nah telle kata nyolo nung
Biring dingdin ma ayeh moto soto
Lum ming aka fonyi ‘bye bye!’

Before you kill a chicken for a disappointer,
Let the eagle come to take it away

When we were young we used to be together
But as soon as he had a car,
He only said ‘bye bye!’

Woto janfala lehmati janfala
Janfala lehmati janfala

Then he is a disappointer,
Disappointer, he is a disappointer

Besides at radio and television shows, the occasional hotel and ceremonies in the evening, Jalikebba Kouyate and his band, also regularly perform for free at fundraising concerts. During one of these performances, where they performed for schoolchildren, to raise money for their education, he would oftentimes ask them if they were happy. Their positive answers came in the form of joyous screams, applauding and enthusiastic dancing.²⁷ After the concert I asked him why he took part in these fundraising concerts. Following the definition of Jaliba,

²⁵ Interview, Jalikebba Kouyate, 16 March 2012, Brikama

²⁶ Although the word ‘disappointer’ is not found in the English dictionary as such, this neologism does capture the term *Fiserwale* best. It was translated in this way by a number of native speakers with whom I spoke about this particular song. The full translation of this song was done with the assistance of Jalikebba Kouyate himself. Although, both of us are not professional translators, it must be remembered that we are not analysing the text *an sich*, but its meaning. In that sense, there is an obvious advantage in letting Jalikebba Kouyate, the author, do the translation, whilst regarding grammatical rules and aesthetics as of secondary importance.

²⁷ Fundraising concert, 9 February 2012, Brikama

he told me that besides being an educator, a *jali* is also a social worker. At first this seemed to perfectly fit Mahmood's (2005) concept of ethical formation, because although he played non-traditional repertoires and he encouraged dancing among the youth, his *modality* –or pattern of action- was motivated by a deep desire to do 'the right thing'. Thus, he did adhere to his bardic role, but he decided *in what manner*. However, he went on to explain that there is another reason why he performs for these children:

“Of course, that we are not being paid for these concerts is a problem. But I look at it like this. When I go there, the children get to know and love me... In the future, I am sure, some of them will be very important in society. Maybe some will be ministers or businessmen. If they know me now, in the future they remember.”²⁸

Two-sided motivations like these are not uncommon among the bards with whom I have spoken. Whilst many of them seem to be driven by a certain conviction and desire to be 'ethical', at the same time, more in line with Ortner's (2006) concept of the agent as a strategist, the advancement of their own socioeconomic position in society weighs significantly.



Jalikebba Kouyate performing at a fundraising concert, 9 February 2012

²⁸ Interview, Jalikebba Kouyate, 9 February 2012, Brikama

The Power of Not Knowing: Agency Re-Evaluated

Although Jali Kebba Kouyate is an exquisite kora-player and he knows some of the traditional songs, he does not occupy himself with the keeping of history, singing of praise-songs or the propagation of Islam. Whilst it is clear that the reason for this is partly because it is not where his heart lies, another reason seems to be a general lack of knowledge about both *jaliya* and Islam. He is highly knowledgeable when it comes to musical technicalities, but in terms of genealogical knowledge, the bardic role as prescribed by Mande culture, Islamic scripture and the ways in which *jaliya* and Islam are historically tied, he oftentimes admitted to his inability to explain. Interestingly, this ‘lack of knowledge’, although inhibiting him in some ways, also provided him with a certain freedom, or agency. To illustrate, on the 14th and 15th of November 2008 Jali Alhaji Mbye had organised the first kora festival in The Gambia. For this gathering, as Alhaji Mbye told me, all the great *jalolu* and *finoolu*, and especially those well-versed in history, were invited. The purpose of this festival was to exchange historical accounts, so that once and for all the actual origins of the kora could be agreed upon.²⁹ When I asked Jali Kebba Kouyate whether he had also participated, he answered the following:

“Well, they asked me, but I didn’t want to. I don’t know these stories very well. But also, I don’t want to get caught up in that group. You know, those elders have power and I would have to be like they want me to be. But now, I am free as an artist. I can play the songs that I want to play, and they still respect me.”³⁰

Because of his lack of historical knowledge, Jali Kebba Kouyate is not included in that particular network of bards that strive to maintain a sense of cultural authenticity. As such, he is able to focus his full attention on ‘making it as an artist’, without having to answer for his behaviour. This issue relates to the question I addressed in the previous chapter, where I wondered whether Jali Kebba Kouyate was reluctant to perform at naming ceremonies in the morning because he felt that it was ‘below his stature’, or perhaps because it would not have been appreciated or even accepted. In light of the similarity between both situations, I argue that his reluctance to perform at both the kora festival and naming ceremonies in the morning, is primarily because it does not fit his profile as a ‘modern artist’, but also because his lack of knowledge of both history and Islam does not provide him with sufficient authority to perform at these events without risking a loss of credibility and respect. In this sense, his *not-*

²⁹ Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 25 March 2012, Serrekunda, Talinding;

³⁰ Interview, Jali Kebba Kouyate, 29 March 2012, Soukuta

knowing both ‘liberates’ him from performing certain tasks, whilst at the same time it restricts him in terms of access to certain spaces of performance.

This ‘freedom’ or agency that comes from a lack of knowledge was even more clear amongst other *jalolu*. I have met quite a few adolescents with a bardic surname such as Kouyate, Diabate or Kanute. When I asked them whether they were bards they usually answered in the negative, explaining that they had not been raised as such and did not know how to sing or play an instrument. They were not aware of what role the bards should fulfil in society. As they were not familiar with the rule of *nyama*, this rule simply did not seem to apply to them. They had no problems with ‘exogamous’ marriage, engaging in a non-bardic profession, nor did they feel they needed to know more about history than anybody else.

This non-bardic perception of the Self, does indeed put Jansen’s (2000:2) statement, that agency can only influence a person’s prestige but never his status, into a different perspective. In my view, there is a kind of agency that flows out of the passage of time and the individual and societal loss of knowledge. If one is not aware that he is a bard, and if society does not remind him of this, how can we maintain that he, or his descendants, will not ‘change status’? To fortify this argument, one *jali* told me that in the past, sometimes when bardic families experienced a great deal of poverty, they would ‘exchange’ one of their sons for a bag of rice or some other valuable good. After the son was transferred and integrated into the other non-bardic family, his surname would change, and thus he would either forget or never become aware that he has bardic roots.³¹ Perhaps it could be argued that these transformations in status are not due to their own personal agency. Such a critique would depart from the assumption that *conscious intention* is central to the concept of agency, a notion that, as Talal Asad (2003:69) points out, seems to be “...very popular in anthropology.” However, without denying the importance of intentionality with regard to agency, what I am proposing here is that there is a *kind of agency* that emerges as a result of a ‘lack of knowledge’. *Without knowing* one is capable of crossing cultural boundaries, breaking traditional norms and indeed changing one’s status.

This connection between agency and knowledge is also dealt with by Lambek (1993). In his study, he analyses how knowledge and practice are implicated in a religious pluriform society. One of the arguments he puts forward is that ‘experts’ are tied to their specific religious tradition to a high degree. Not just because of social expectations, but also because their knowledge demands certain practices. One could say, that if one knows how to heal, he is expected to heal and he has a moral obligation to do so. In contrast, Lambek puts forward

³¹ Interview, Jali Djikiba Kanute, 19 March 2012, Kololi

that ‘persons on the path’, who know of many things, but only to a limited degree, are able to pragmatically engage in different practices, combining them by disregarding aspects that an ‘expert’ cannot afford to do.

In this sense, Jalikebba Kouyate fits the description of a ‘person on the path’. Not only is he flexible with regard to his bardic role, but also in terms of his Islamic identity: As I stated before, besides him telling me, there was little indication that Jalikebba Kouyate was a Muslim. Expressions that he used, such as *as-salamu-leikum* and *inshallah*, are part of daily lexicon, used by Muslims and Christians alike. However, one afternoon, in quite a sudden manner his demeanour changed drastically. This specific event confirms my theoretical idea of how *perception* is implicated in identity formation and it provides us insight into the fluid nature of identity:

After having advised Jalikebba Kouyate and me concerning our futures, the marabout explained about the relationship between *jaliya* and Islam. “*Jaliya* is really a ‘mark’. The name on a book is *jaliya*, it tells us who wrote book. A picture is *jaliya*, it reminds us of things past...When an imam preaches, it is *jaliya*, because his spoken words, bring us to the written Word. The Qur’an is *jaliya*, it tells us where we come from. This is what a *jali* does, he reminds people about their history, who they are and where they come from...Just like marabouts, *jalolu* are mediators, they guide people to the Straight Path, the Truth...A good *jali* will help people to remember Allah and to go towards their future.”

After washing our faces with lemon-scented oil, a prayer, and thanking the marabout, we walked back to the car. “You know,” Jalikebba Kouyate said to me, “Muhammad, peace be upon Him, also had his own *jali*, Sourakhata. When He and His companions received gifts, He always gave most of it to Sourakhata. One day His companions complained about this and asked Him why. The next day when they went out to teach people about Islam, Sourakhata had to stay behind. That time, no one gave them any gifts. Muhammad, peace be upon Him, then said, now you understand why Sourakhata gets more than all of us.”

“Allah has given us special qualities, you see. We are loud, but humble. We create *salam*, peace. Islam is not against our instrument, because it is a tool with which we promote love. If we wanted to use it to create war, Allah would not permit it. Things are as they should be. We are as we should be.”³²

³² Interview, Marabout Samba Sie and Jalikebba Kouyate, 14 February 2012, Tanje

Within a short period of time, Jalikebba Kouyate had gone from a ‘modern artist’, aspiring to stardom, to a devout *jali*, who perceived his role to be intrinsic to the divine scheme of Islam. This event, the experience of which is difficult to convey on paper, made me wonder whether my critique of agency as sometimes being overrated, was perhaps erroneous. Are people actually capable of ‘changing face’ so rapidly and with such fluidity? More importantly, has Jalikebba Kouyate’s engagement with modernity really ‘liberated’ him from tradition, giving him the freedom to fully determine his own bardic practice? During later interviews, I discovered that this is not the case.

First of all, it should be obvious that whilst Jalikebba Kouyate is breaking with ‘tradition’, with his promotion of an educational discourse he is, as he himself said “...following the line of [his] teacher,”³³ which in a sense can be regarded as a tradition in itself. In addition, whilst it is true that Jalikebba Kouyate wants to teach his daughter how to play the kora, disregarding traditional rules that prohibit women from doing so, and whilst he is disinclined to tune his kora the ‘traditional way’, which basically means aligning the tunes of kora-strings with the personal frequencies of the singer’s voice, a deeper examination of his motives behind his deviations reveals that these choices, though freely made, are simultaneously part of an endeavour to ‘conform’ to another ethical structure, namely, modernity. This became clear, after I had asked him what he wanted to achieve in life. His answer was that he wanted to put Gambian music on the world map. Instead of being stuck within the genre of ‘ethnic music’, he wanted to be up there with the great music stars, such as the late Michael Jackson.

“But if I want to achieve this,” he said, “I have to be open to change. Usually the kora is tuned to the voice of the singer, but if you want people outside of Africa to enjoy it, you must tune it to the international frequency. Otherwise it is impossible to make music with other modern instruments...Instead of Mandinka, I have to start singing in English, otherwise no one will understand...I also have to work with people that are not *jalolu*. You see, I want to go beyond Africa. I want to go international.”³⁴

Jalikebba Kouyate is not alone in this. Some *jalolu* had similar reasons to leave the kora and instead play the guitar or the bass. Those *jalolu* that followed this ‘modern’ pattern of action, generally viewed naming ceremonies, traditional songs and praise-singing as belonging to the

³³ Interview, Jalikebba Kouyate, 8 February 2012, Kololi

³⁴ Interview, Jalikebba Kouyate, 25 February 2012, Brikama

past and did not care to adhere to what was traditionally expected of them. However, as these statements by Jali Kebba Kouyate clearly exemplify: the agency it takes to deviate from one ethical structure, can in some cases be drawn from the process of conforming to another.

It could be remarked that this finding is naught but common sense, for how could it be otherwise? However, there are two points I would like to offer in this regard. Firstly, the observation that one's agency is (at least partially) drawn from the act of conforming to another structure cannot be taken lightly. Potentially it harbours a serious critique of agency in that it undermines notions of creativity and autonomy, drawing us back into those early notions of structures as self-generative and determinants of the subject's behaviour. Secondly, and connected to the first, if it is truly common sense, or more extremely put, 'always the case' that deviating from one structure is actually conforming to another, then this would radically limit the possibility for social change. Instead of producing novel patterns of action, changes in behaviour would be reduced to mere 'migrations' from one structure to another. Therefore, although I would concur that there is some degree of common sense to this finding, at the same time, without overstating my case, what I am trying to show in this thesis is that the bards also draw from *other* sources of agency in order to carve their personal modalities.



Jalikebba Kouyate and the Group, Performing at a cinema in McCarthy, Georgetown, 11 February 2012

| CHAPTER 5

JALI ALHAJI MBYE

“...THE LIBRARY OF AFRICA!”

A Window to the Past: The Jali as Reminder & Preserver

It was Jalikebba Kouyate himself who introduced me to Jali Alhaji Mbye. After Jalikebba Kouyate had left the compound and some initial small talk, Alhaji Mbye looked at me and said: “Jalikebba is a good man, and it is very wise of him to bring you to me. He knows what he doesn’t know, and I know what I know.” Then, in words reminiscent of the famous expression by Amadou Hampaté Ba, he said: “You are now sitting with the library of Africa!”³⁵

At approximately forty-five years of age, as I later was able to ascertain, Jali Alhaji Mbye indeed possesses a great deal of knowledge and as can be seen from this quotation, in which he pointed out the difference between him and Jalikebba Kouyate, a diplomatic skill. His father was amongst the celebrated and apart from him, Alhaji Mbye was also trained by the renowned Jali Nyama Suso (1925-1991), who is generally regarded as one of the best kora players of the 20th Century, the first to teach the kora outside of Africa, and who in spite of his being paralysed from the waist down -which he interestingly had in common with the legendary Sunjata Keita- has travelled the world and launched kora-music onto the world stage.³⁶

It was only after meeting Alhaji Mbye that I began to believe again that those bards that I had read about in the literature still existed in coastal Gambia. He made quite clear that a *jali* is first a mediator, then an entertainer and in the last place a musician. In this regard he is somewhat appalled by contemporary kora music and the way bards have ‘given in’ to the temptations of modernity. In his view, modernisation constitutes the biggest threat to the bardic tradition. His claim to being a living library, should therefore not be taken as a

³⁵ Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 20 February 2012, Serrekunda, Willingara. The expression referred to by Amadou Hampaté Ba, a West African member of UNESCO’s executive council who dedicated much energy to the preservation of West African oral literature, was “In Africa, when an old man dies, it’s a library burning,” which he pronounced at UNESCO in 1960.

³⁶ See: <http://www.accessgambia.com/information/jali-nyama-suso.html>, further details come from an interview, with Jali Alhaji Mbye, 25 March 2012, Serrekunda, Talinding/

sign of arrogance, but rather as part of a larger pattern of action and discourse geared towards the resuscitation of the traditional bardic practice.

Being a master of history and genealogy, his primary tactic for reconciling *jaliya* with Islam is by means of historical manipulation. His approach to history is characterised by diligence and rigour. As such, his accounts are relatively solid and so convincing that he is seldom, if ever, challenged by fellow historians. With regard to Islam, in Alhaji Mbye's view, Mande culture is at once a child of Islamic civilisation, but at the same time West Africa as a whole holds a special place *at the edge* of the Muslim world. One of the ways by which he seeks to reconcile Islam with the Mande traditions, is by way of genealogy. According to him, Bilal, one of the companions of the Prophet and the first *mu'adhdhin* (the one who calls Muslims to prayer), was not an Ethiopian, but a Mandinka who had wandered away from his tribesmen in search of opportunities. Although some stayed in Arabia, a few of his descendants made their way back into Africa. Eventually, nine generations later, Sunjata Keita was born. Sunjata is the warrior king who founded the Mande empire in the twelfth century. He formulated the Mande constitution consisting of forty-two articles, the first of which is the law of *nyama* –the law that functions to separate people and keep them in their distinct 'status categories'. As Sunjata is the one responsible for the formalisation of the Mande social structure, *and* he is the descendant of such an illustrious figure as Bilal, Mande culture and Islam are compatible.³⁷

At the same time, and quite paradoxically, Alhaji Mbye makes a clear separation between Islam, the essence of which he conflates with Arab culture, and West Africa. From this perspective he admits that there is a definite friction between Islam and traditional Mande culture:

“Some Muslims stand up,” he exclaimed dramatically, while he himself also stood up, “and they say, ‘now that you are Muslims, there shall be no drumming! You may only have one drum, the *Tablah!*”³⁸ This may only be used to raise the alarm or at the end of Ramadan, the Friday prayers, the beginning and ending of Tabaski, or when someone has died! There will be no dancing!” Laughing out loud, Alhaji Mbye sat down next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. “There is big difference between African and Arabian Muslims. We are not so hard-line. We say:

³⁷ Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 25 March 2012, Serrekunda, Talinding;

also, for a further elaboration upon the genealogical connection between Bilal and Sunjata, see Conrad (1985)

³⁸ The *tablah* is a cylindrical double-sided drum. Whilst it can be understood why the Arabs preferred this Middle Eastern instrument -of which the used skins are undoubtedly *halal* (meaning, permitted)- over the African drums, further research shows that even the *tablah* is not universally accepted. Some Muslims argue that the *tablah*, because of its hollowness, has too much effect on the soul. Instead, it is argued, the *duff*, which is a classical type of Middle Eastern drum, is more appropriate, because it is the ‘least stirring’ of all the instruments (see: <http://islamqa.com/en/ref/152009/duff>).

‘Yes, we will pray to Allah! We will do our obligations! But we will keep our culture! We will keep dancing!’ You see?” He lifted his sleeve and showed me the *juju* [protective amulet-bracelet] that he wore on his upper arm. “The thing is, Islam was not always here. In the past, we drank palm wine and we could marry as many women as we wanted...We must remember, to be a Muslim does not come naturally.” He sighed and pointed to the gate of his compound. “But these days are different. Now there is democracy. No one has the right to step onto our premises and tell us what to do!”³⁹

What is interesting about this particular argumentation is that, although Alhaji Mbye perceives modernisation as a threat to the bardic tradition, which became clear from our conversation about contemporary kora-music which he generally disliked, here he shows that he also seems to recognise modernity’s democratic principle as a liberating factor. Especially because of the implications with regard to agency, the way he appropriates ‘the modern’ is worth examining in depth.

Jali Alhaji Mbye regards it as his life-mission, and duty as a *jali*, to remind people of their glorious past, to inform them about their traditional heritage and to ensure that the bardic profession remains a relevant force in contemporary social life. For this reason he is serious about the education of his own children, Boubakar and Jainaba Mbye. Both him and his wife Mariama Saho, who is a *jalinuso*, teach their children about history. Their son Boubakar is also learning how to play the kora. In addition, every week, on Monday, Alhaji Mbye, sometimes together with his family, performs at Kora FM, a radio station that thousands of people listen to throughout the country. He utilises this channel to talk and sing about history, particularly about how the Mande empire was founded, to answer questions from the audience and to sing praise-songs for present-day marabouts and other important social figures. I attended one of these sessions, which revealed some interesting ways in which he strove to reconcile his bardic role with modernity.

Traditionally, only the bards are permitted to promulgate historical accounts. However, these days ministers of culture and Professors of History (including Western academics) teach audiences about Mande history too. In Alhaji Mbye’s view, they are wrongfully excluding the oral historians from this educational field. They are perceived as “uneducated” as they do not have the necessary degrees. As such, modern historical renditions which are solely based on research of written accounts are incomplete.⁴⁰ Alhaji Mbye’s radio

³⁹ Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 20 February 2012, Serrekunda, Willingara

⁴⁰ Interview, Jali Alhaji Mbye, 2 April 2012, Bakoteh

sessions at Kora FM are part of an endeavour to correct this ‘modern deficit’. In fact, besides *jali*, the radio presenter regularly addresses Alhaji Mbye as ‘Professor’, and when Alhaji Mbye talks about certain historical problems, he makes it clear that according to his *research* it is so and so. Significant about this particular pattern of action, in terms of agency, is the way in which Alhaji Mbye seeks to secure the bardic influence in the production and maintenance of history.

Instead of opposing the modern by rejecting it altogether, Alhaji Mbye appropriates the power of modern means selectively. Radio is one of these. His organising of the previously mentioned Kora Festival in 2008, to which he attracted much media attention, can also be seen as an endeavour to forcefully ‘insert’ the traditional authorities of history into modern discourses. In the *Daily Observer* we read that “...griots, historians and other prominent and erudite custodians of arts and culture unanimously agreed that [the] Kora originated in The Gambia.” One elderly *jali* is quoted to say: “No single country in the world can claim ownership of the Kora apart from The Gambia.” This was “...wholeheartedly endorsed by the entire gathering including Alhaji Sarjo Barrow, an erudite and prominent broadcaster...”⁴¹



*Jali Alhaji Mbye, his wife Mariama Saho and son Boubakar (playing the kora)
at Kora FM, 2 April 2012, Serrekunda, Westfield*

⁴¹ Griots, historians on the Roots of Kora. *Daily Observer*, Tuesday, November 18, 2008, p.17

Agency & the Unavoidability of Change

In contrast to Jalikebba Kouyate, Alhaji Mbye's pattern of action is explicitly geared towards the preservation of the bardic tradition and its place in society. But just like Jalikebba Kouyate, he does not shun modern means to achieve this. Once again, we find that knowledge in this regard intersects significantly with a particular form of agency. His extensive knowledge of history and his connections with fellow elderly bards invest him with such an authority that it gives him access to various modern media that enable him to take part in, and bear his influence on, modern discourses that deal with history, Islam and societal issues. Although Alhaji Mbye does admit that there are certain frictions between Islam and Mandinka traditions, this does not seem to bother him. In fact, he is clearly amongst the devout. His attitude constitutes a combination of the Islamic tradition in which it is said that one must 'seek knowledge even unto China', and his personal motto stating that 'one must share what one knows'. He is as humble and self-effacing as he is critical and authoritative, and if I had to capture his persona in two words, I would say that he is the embodiment of joy and generosity. His gestures are big, when performing with other *jalolu* he plays the solo, he is constantly handing out money to relatives and friends, his voice is deep and his speech dramatic, and as Jalikebba Kouyate admitted, "only people like Alhaji Mbye can wear big African dresses like he does. No, he even has to do it. It is expected."⁴²

In many ways Alhaji Mbye manages to be a 'traditional bard' in a modern world. But in another sense, the agency with which he creatively reconciles his bardic tradition with Islam and modernity cannot prevent the tradition which he strives to preserve from changing significantly. For example, in order to safeguard the continuation of the bardic arts, he has set up a music school in Willingara, accessible to *all* who are interested in learning: children, adults and even Westerners. Clearly, and Alhaji Mbye is aware of this, despite the continuation of the bardic arts that this school ensures, its accessibility simultaneously constitutes a breach of the law of *nyama*, which regards access to the knowledge of the bardic instruments as the exclusive right of *jalolu*. Similarly, by broadcasting his expositions of history on the radio and automatically having it recorded, he is ultimately contributing to making himself obsolete as a producer and preserver of history. Indeed, if we take *jaliya* to be a 'mark' or an indicator of something's or someone's origin, as it was defined by the marabout Samba Sie whom I visited with Jalikebba Kouyate, then the process of digitalisation, which is part of modernisation, in the end might disconnect the *jali* from the practice of *jaliya*.

⁴² Jalikebba Kouyate, 9 April 2012, Serrekunda

Of course, this is a rather bleak scenario, and only time will tell. But in order to gain some insight into the future, I had a few conversations with Alhaji Mbye's children, Jainaba and Boubakar Mbye. When I asked Jainaba Mbye, a wise 11-year old, what she wanted to be in the future, she replied: "Of course, I am learning all the histories and it's really important. Maybe I will be a *jalimuso*. But my dream is to become the first female President of The Gambia...I believe that if you are pure and honest, God will give you good things in life."⁴³ Boubakar Mbye, who was in his mid-teens, seemed more interested to follow in the line of his father. He told me that he must learn the histories very well, because if his father were to perish, someone needed to take over. However, he also said the following:

"But I am very different. People even call me crazy! You know why? Because I am always trying out new stuff. Sometimes I tune the kora the Spanish way...Sometimes I even play my kora upside down!" He laughed out loud. "You see, crazy! I am not a regular *jali*."⁴⁴

Both these answers indicate that despite their 'traditional' upbringing as bards, these children have their own creative ideas of how they want to be in the future. Just as Jaliqebba Kouyate and Alhaji Mbye proceed to carve their own particular bardic modalities in the ethical landscape they live in, Boubakar and Jainaba are bound to do the same, contributing to an ever growing diversity of practices amidst a common structure. In my view, this diversification is part of a process or a reality that can be termed the *inevitability of change*. The question then is not *if* the bardic traditions will change, but *how*.

To put it into perspective. Do these chapters constitute yet another example of cultural loss? Are the 'oral historians', once so glorious, doomed to be exiled to the songs of history themselves? Does my analysis add but yet another chapter to Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, which laments the waning of the traditional? Is the agency of the bards, by which they are able to redefine traditional practices, the very cause of their own downfall? In my estimation, I think rather the opposite! I agree wholeheartedly with Scheffler (2007:108) that a culture's survival depends on its ability to deal "...with the contingent and ever-changing historical circumstances that the culture actually confronts," and that "...any culture that

⁴³ Jainaba Mbye, 2 April 2012, Serrekunda, Talinding

⁴⁴ Interview, Boubakar Mbye, 2 April 2012, Serrekunda, Westfield

survives will have changed over time: it will have assimilated new experiences, absorbed new influences, reaffirmed some prior practices and ideas, modified others, and dispensed altogether with still others. *Survival is successful change*” (emphasis mine). In this sense, a culture’s continuation requires the “...exercise of judgement, creativity, intelligence, and interpretive skill.” With this thesis I hope to have demonstrated sufficiently that the bards I have encountered in the field do indeed possess these vital agential qualities. Through their ability to creatively and fluidly come to their own bardic modality, their own ethical Self, and reconcile in their own manners their traditional roles with the reality of pluriformity, instead of contributing to the degeneration of their bardic culture, in my view, they are ensuring its continuation.



Small child with a kora, 14 February 2012, Tanje

| CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Tradition, Islam & Modernity: Strings on a Kora

Theorising can only provide the anthropologist with so much insight into human workings. Actual knowledge, beyond speculation, that penetrates into the heart of the matter, can only come from the actual experience of being in the field. It gives us that ‘feel’, that intuitive understanding of the subject of interest. This research, with which I have sought to expand our knowledge of how people cope with an ethically pluriform situation, is based upon that experience. Although ten weeks of ethnographic research is relatively short, still, through my association with them, it has become clear is that the bards in coastal Gambia do not constitute a monolithic group whose practices correspond exactly to that which we have read in the literature. Their personal relationship with history, their degree of knowledge about their Mande heritage and Islam, and their own vistas of who they want to be in the future, cause for an endless variety of bardic modalities that make a single definition of what a Mande bard is difficult, if not impossible. And even these personal modalities, or patterns of action, are not free of internal disparities and contradictions. It does indeed raise the question if my presumption that that the bards strive for ethical ‘coherence’ is even valid.

Tensions between tradition, Islam and modernity exist, but the relevance of these tensions is largely dependent on the experiences of the bards. In this sense the agency to reconcile tensions are intimately connected to consciousness or one’s scope of knowledge. It is in light of this finding that I have posited that one’s not-knowing has a liberating effect, whereas one’s knowing infuses the bard with a different kind of agency. Tradition, Islam and modernity are experienced in a variety of ways and thus impinge differently upon the bards. In all cases, however, there is a general awareness that contemporary bardic modalities differ significantly from pre-Islamic, premodern modalities. In order to justify these differences, I have posited that there are two main strategies that the bards engage in. The first is the act of historical manipulation, in which bards draw from the normative power of history in order to bring Mande culture and Islam together or to split them apart. The second is a form of utilitarianistic legitimisation which grounds the moral value of one’s deviation in the effects it

engenders in society. Of course, although presented separately in this thesis, combinations of these two strategies also exist.

What has become clear from my analysis is that the motivations and aspirations behind particular deviations are not clear-cut. In fact, it seems to me that a ‘correction’ or ‘repositioning’ is in order on my behalf. I still don’t agree with Ortner (2006) that agency encompasses the power to engage with the world as if it were a game, a conception that assumes a fundamental disconnection between the actor and his actions –as if at any moment, one is able to withdraw and recede into ‘actual reality’. I believe actors are inexorably linked to their life-world. However, although I firmly adhere to the idea that people are *naturally* drawn to ‘the good’, but not always sensitive to or willing to abide by this inner prompting, I have come to understand that this does not mean that we should exclude aspirations such as self-maximisation. Sacrifice, detachment and righteous behaviour aimed at advancing society and becoming pious, can go hand in hand with a desire for renown and wealth.

As such, marrying Mahmood’s (2005) concept of ethical formation and Ortner’s (2006) idea of the Self as a self-interested strategist, I propose to think of the bards as: agents who possess the creative ability to strategically harmonise ethical motivations, or the desire to contribute to the general good, with a longing for socioeconomic self-betterment, in such a way that a single pattern of action can simultaneously serve both kinds of motivation which ultimately contribute to each other’s realisation. In practical terms: The desire to spread a message of peace and a longing for fame, can be combined in such a way, that one’s positive message is received so well, that one becomes famous for it; in turn, one’s fame can also serve to spread the message. Instead of trying to determine what is driving the artist, fame or peace, I propose to take both motivations equally seriously.

My research has furthermore shown that one’s aspirations are not all born from ‘within’. Slightly re-aligning myself with Bourdieu’s (1972) theory of the habitus, structures seem to be able to make their way into the hearts and minds of subjects, where they are reborn as dreams of the future. Modern dreams, such as the one entertained by Jaliqebba Kouyate, to be ‘up there’ with world famous stars, or in the case of Alhaji Mbye, the insistent desire to be able to participate in discourses about history in modern spaces, or even Jainaba Mbye’s ambition to become the first female President, each of these aspirations have clearly emerged in the context of modernisation, and have become integrative elements of one’s agential drives. At the same time, in pursuit of their personal goals, the bards have demonstrated the capacity to engage the various structures in a strategic and selective manner. Playing ‘traditional’ songs in modern settings, in order to ‘have a chance’ at transcending one’s

traditions; ‘changing faces’ as one moves from the morning to the evening at naming ceremonies, in order to be respected in both Islamic and modern settings; adapting traditional musical techniques and configurations, in order to take ‘the traditional’ into the modern world; engaging modern media in the guise of a Professor, in order to insert the bardic voice in modern discourses.

All of these examples constitute manners of combining tradition with Islam and modernity, and it is through this process that diverse bardic modalities are carved. The strategies of historical manipulation and utilitarianistic legitimisation should in this light be seen as attempts to bring these bardic modalities back into the circle of the authentic. This circle, however, is not fixed and stringently defined. Rather, as bards deviate from their traditional roles, and then in their ingenious ways succeed in justifying them, they inevitably change the shape of that circle. Once the drumming of a *finoo* is accepted, through his manipulation of history, then indeed (for those present), a *finoo* has changed from an Islamic bard that does not touch instruments, to one that has been permitted to do so ever since the time of Muhammad. In fact, when taking into account that these processes of re-defining the bardic roles happen in different places amongst different audiences, one could argue that –just like with Islam and modernity- there are ‘multiple circles’ of authenticity. There is not one ‘true bardic role’, but a multitude of legitimate roles which come into existence through the agency of the bards.

In light of this growing diversity, tradition, Islam and modernity, can be likened to strings on a kora. These ‘ethical strings’ are distinct, but the vibration of one affects another. They are not static, not only because they can be (re-)tuned by the musician, but also because over time their sound will inevitably change. Each of them has separate characteristics, but when played together, new melodies become possible and more importantly new harmonics will start to resonate that cannot possibly be produced by any string alone. Whilst indeed the bard has the agency to produce his own melodies, the strings will partially dictate his composition. In any case, what we can be certain of, is that this one kora, that represents social life, and these three strings, that represent tradition, Islam and modernity as ethical structures, do not produce *one bardic modality*. Rather, depending on the bard’s motivations, aspirations, knowledge and skill, he is able to creatively improvise his personal song. Moving. Legitimate. True. In its own right.

| APPENDIX

REFLECTION

One of the advantages of doing fieldwork in an unfamiliar society, is that, especially during the first encounters, the anthropologist picks up on those cultural manners and details that for a ‘native’ are no more than ordinary. This is well known. On the other hand, however, and this is obviously reflected in my thesis, ten weeks of fieldwork is not long enough to become sufficiently sensitised. This underdevelopment of (intuitive) knowledge on my part became apparent many times during my research. Whereas my informants were able to hear whether a *jali* was playing the kora well or not, or discern which ethnic group was celebrating, simply by listening to the style of drumming, I have not been able to develop such a sensitivity. Therefore, in retrospect, my intention to “...pay due attention to other factors in the field,” as I had written in the introduction in reference to the senses, might have been too ambitious.

The short duration of my fieldwork is also connected to another imbalance in my thesis, although, as I came to find out, this is also related to my identity. As has not been lost upon the reader, this imbalance refers to the relative underrepresentation of the *finoolu*, the Islamic bards. In fact, part of my research question with which I left to The Gambia was whether strategies of reconciliation differed between the *jalolu* and *finoolu*. As time passed by, however, it became obvious that the *finoolu* were much less accessible than the *jalolu* and that ten weeks of fieldwork was not enough to address this matter adequately. Only in the last two weeks did I finally manage to conduct one proper interview with a *finoo*. This victory is not so much the result of my own efforts, but can be attributed to Jali Alhaji Mbye whose reputation is such that he was able to arrange an interview with a *finoo*. And not just any *finoo*, but Finoo Mamadou Kamara, an 88-year old bard whose knowledge was immense. Unfortunately, many of the wonderful stories that Mamadou Kamara told me could not be integrated into this relatively short thesis.

On the one hand, my failure to gain access to a sufficient number of *finoolu* was connected to the duration of my stay. Alhaji Mbye even said that if we had met before and we had had more time, he would have taken me to a “*finoo* village” in the interior of The Gambia. On the other hand, I came to find out that that the fact that I was not a Muslim was

also a significant factor. As Mamadou Kamara explained to me, the *jalolu* mainly sing about non-Islamic topics and they are permitted to perform in front of a non-Islamic audience. In contrast, the *finoolu*'s main task is to strengthen the faith of Muslims. *Finoolu* must be Muslims themselves and they should in principle *only* perform for and share their knowledge with a Muslim audience.⁴⁵ Of course, this 'barrier' is not insurmountable. For example, the reason why Finoo Mamadou Kamara made an exception for me was because of his respect for Alhaji Mbye and more importantly for Alhaji Mbye's father.

Apart from using 'key informants' such as Alhaji Mbye to gain access to a *finoo*, this can also be achieved with the help of money. In fact, my first attempt to conduct an interview with a *finoo* made this apparent. Again, reminiscent of Sunjata Keita who had been paralysed since birth, this *finoo* named Finoo Muhammad Kamara was also paralysed. He was known to Jalikebba Kouyate, Jali Alhaji Mbye and Jaliba Kouyate as a 'strong personality' who regularly hired a taxi to bring him to the gate of their compounds, only to have them recompense his travelling costs and after having to listen to one of his praise-songs pay him a befitting amount. After elaborating upon the scope of his knowledge and promising me that he could answer all my questions, Muhammad Kamara told me that an interview would cost me a great deal of money. His first offer was one interview for no less than 23.000 Dalasi, which comes down to about 600 Euro.⁴⁶

Of course, I did not pursue his 'offer'. Nevertheless, this issue of money is worth examining a little further. Before heading out into the field, I was advised never to pay for an interview. This was not such an easy matter at all. Apart from obvious reasons such as poverty and the fact that I come from the 'wealthy West', there are two aspects that are particularly interesting to consider. The first aspect is that no matter how much I tried to explain what my research was about, most of the bards with whom I spoke could not get rid of the idea that I was essentially asking them to share their *historical knowledge*. Even when I expressly asked about contemporary times, often the answers I got were still in the past tense, dealing with pre-colonial events, usually in relation to the rise and fall of the Mande empire.

Instead of perceiving this as problematic, it actually revealed much about how bards reasoned about contemporary events. Nonetheless, and this is the second aspect, because (in their view) I was asking them for their historical knowledge –the sharing of which is their profession- it would have been highly inappropriate not to give them some form of recompense. For a first interview, although it was never asked, a *kurusongo* (a small sum of money) of about five Euro was in order. For a second interview, a *silafando* (a small gift, such

⁴⁵ Interview, Finoo Mamadou Kamara, 3 April 2012, Bakoteh

⁴⁶ Meeting with Finoo Muhammad Kamara, 20 February 2012, Brikama

as sugar or tea) was appreciated. As advised, I usually gave these gifts with the clear message that I was not ‘paying’ them, but that I was merely showing my appreciation and respect. Then again, we can call it we want. Whether it was in the form of tea, sugar, gasoline or taxi fare, in budgetary terms, interviews cost money. Having said this, it is appropriate that I nuance this. In terms of time, patience, energy and attention, the generosity on the part of my informants, particularly Jalikebba Kouyate and Jali Alhaji Mbye, was such that it is impossible for me to thank them adequately.

A final issue that I would like to reflect upon, quite in line with the topic of my research, has to do with knowledge and ethics. It has been acknowledged in anthropology, for quite some time now, particularly by feminists and postmodernists, that one’s own body and identity in the field have a definite bearing on the knowledge we gain, both in terms of access and with regard to the unavoidable influence we have on the subjects we study. This has rendered it mandatory for anthropologists to reflect upon this issue. More pressing, however, is the question how we as researchers, coming from a different cultural background, should relate to our research subjects in terms of sharing our knowledge and views of certain practices that we encounter.

In general, as anthropologists to be, we are taught to approach the field in a relativistic manner and to guard against ethnocentrism. While I agree that maintaining a degree of detachment coupled with empathy, humility and respect is in order when doing fieldwork, there were a few situations in which I felt that a different approach was more ethically sound. This was not really an issue during interviews or even with regard to the bards per se, but rather during my conversations and associations with my friends from society at large. For example, one evening a dear friend of mine told me that he was thinking about having his seven year old daughter circumcised. What is the anthropologist to do? Surely, one way could be to leave it to the Other’s own conscience. We could find some justification for this in anthropological literature that seeks to emphasise that ‘We’ do not fully understand these practices and should not impose our ‘Western’ standards upon someone else. Surely, with regard to some practices this might be true. However, in this particular situation and noticing my friend’s doubts about the matter I decided to present him with an alternative view.

I told him that whilst traditions are valuable, we should also, as it is written in the Qur’an, not follow our forefathers blindly. Human beings progress, both materially and spiritually. Thus some practices of the past might not be necessary in this day and age. For example, during the fasting period our bodies tell us to eat. Nevertheless, we have that spiritual capacity to transcend these instincts and choose not to eat. In the same manner, we

should not take for granted that women can only be 'restrained' if they are circumcised (this is the basic reason why circumcision is seen as a necessity). Instead, I proposed the idea to him, that if he raises his daughter well, to be a chaste, faithful and dignified woman, then surely circumcision would not be necessary, because if she is spiritually strong she will be able to restrain herself.

This is just one example of a situation in which I felt that hiding behind relativism was inappropriate. Of course, there is a difference between imposing one's view and engaging in a dialogue. However, the point that I am trying to make and something that I became confirmed in during my fieldwork is the following: It is true that our primary goal with going to the field is to learn from others and by delving into another culture to gain a better understanding of human reality. At the same time, however, I feel that as anthropologists we should not be fearful of the inevitable changes that come about through our interactions with our research subjects.

We, ourselves, change. In the field, on a personal level, I gained a deeper understanding of what it is to be hospitable and generous; what the advantages and disadvantages are of a communal culture in which sharing is a central principle; that 'formal education' is only one side of the coin that contributes to our development, but that spiritual insight and 'acting from the heart' are of equal value; that everyday objects and circumstances that we might take for granted in the West, are truly out of reach for some people, and that joy can come from things intangible; and also that, although we live so far away from each other, our lives affect each other's on many levels, and we should feel a mutual responsibility for each other's well-being. I don't know if my friends also learnt from me. But I do hope that through our interactions they have also come to new insights, new motivations and a renewed energy to reshape their lives and continue to carve their own personal modalities in the world.

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