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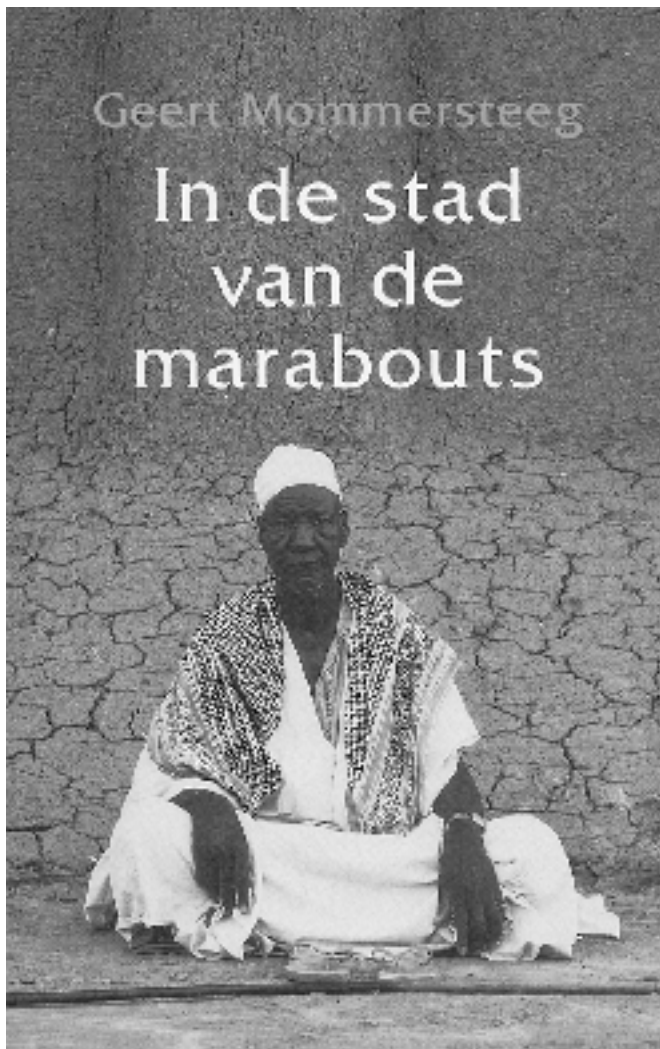
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West Africa

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'May God give him a long life. May God give force to his mother's milk. May God make him strong so he will join our ranks. May God let him lead the life of a Muslim. May God give him a good life when he will stay in our town and may He give him a good life when he will settle elsewhere.' When seven days old, a baby is blessed by a Qur'anic teacher. After he has first announced the name of the newborn child, the marabout asks God to give it a long life, health and strength.

The town in which an infant is welcomed in this way is the ancient town of Djenné, situated in the Inner Niger Delta in the republic of Mali. Djenné was once an important commercial centre. Although the town was never as famous as its 'sister', the legendary city of Timbuktoo, during its heyday in the 15th and 16th centuries Djenné played a important role in the trans-Saharan trade. It was here that the salt merchants from the desert in the North met the gold traders from the South. Islam was part of urban life in Djenné from an early date. When at the beginning of the 13th century, the 26th chief



of Djenné proclaimed his conversion to Islam, 4200 *ulama* were present, as written by the West African historian es-Sa'di in approximately 1650. Although the writer, himself once imam of the town, may have exaggerated, clearly Islam was significant in the city at that time, and it remains so today.

Djenné is now a small town with about 13,000 inhabitants of ethnically diverse origin – mostly Marka/Sonray, Fulani and Bozo. It is of only minor economic importance to the region. But Djenné's famous mosque (placed on UNESCO's world heritage list) and its many Qur'anic schools still reflect the glorious days of the past.

The town has some 35 schools for elementary Qur'anic education as well as a dozen schools for 'secondary' education where law, Arabic grammar, rhetoric and literature, theology, the traditions of the Prophet and Qur'anic exegesis are taught. Teachers at these schools are known as *alfa* (derived from the Arabic *al faqih*) in Songhay, or

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môdibo (from the Arabic *mu'addib*) in Fulfulde. Young children are entrusted to an *alfa* for instruction in reciting the Qur'an. Older students seek his guidance in their pursuit of Islamic knowledge. In French, the language of the former colonizer, the teachers are known as *marabout*, a term which is employed throughout Muslim West Africa.

Marabouts, as my research assistant Boubakar Kouroumanse once told me, 'teach how to follow God and marabouts know how to ask God'. In this concise way, he referred to the two kinds of knowledge marabouts possess. A distinction is made between so-called 'public' knowledge and 'secret' knowledge. Public knowledge is associated with the praxis of education at the Qur'anic schools and secret knowledge is applied in 'maraboutage' – the complex of magico-religious practices of which amulet production and divination are the most significant.¹

Marabouts and the individual's well-being

Marabouts play an important role in the life of the individual in Djenné. This becomes especially clear at the critical stages of life – birth, circumcision, marriage and death. At an infant's naming ceremony a marabout announces the child's name and blesses it. At the time of their circumcision, young boys are provided with amulets to protect themselves against evil and dangers. When the boys return to their families, after a fortnight of seclusion, a marabout pronounces benedictions for them. A marriage is contracted by a marabout and, finally, it is a marabout who leads the last prayers over a corpse and directs the reading of the Qur'an or the *Dala'il al Khairat* – a pangeyric in honour of Muhammad – at the condolence gatherings to facilitate the afterlife of the deceased.

The individual's well-being, however, is not only taken care of at the critical stages of life. In everyday existence, marabouts also render a variety of services to ensure a person's health, to offer security and to guarantee spiritual and material welfare. By means of divination, supererogatory prayers and amulet production they may contact and employ the hidden powers of the supernatural world for the benefit of their clients.

The following fieldwork experience was a revelatory incident in this context. During one of our weekly visits to a marabout, I was asked to read a letter for him. He handed me the letter, which he had received that day, and I began to read the short French text. Each time when I had read a couple of words I took a short pause to allow Boubakar to translate into Songhay. The letter was sent by a man from Bamako (the capital of Mali) and contained a request for the marabout's help in obtaining a job at a certain company. The man literally asked the marabout to 'pray' for him to get the job. When I read this aloud, Boubakar,

slightly hesitating, translated the French *prier* with the Songhay *dyingar*; the verb which stands for performing the *salât*. At that moment the *marabout* burst out laughing and said: '*Dyingar? Gara* I suppose he means!'

Gara is the Songhay term for what is called in Arabic *du'â*: a 'prayer of request' or 'personal invocation'. The difference between *dyingar* and *gara* is essential. As a follow-up to the incident in which the marabout juxtaposed the two terms, Boubakar and I (first together and later on with some marabouts) elaborately discussed the issue. In these discussions, more than once reference was made to the Qur'anic verse 'Call upon Me and I will answer' (40:62) or to the *hadith* 'Petitions are the weapons of the believer'. Given these sayings, so my interlocutors argued, it is possible to attain certain things by asking God for them.

Blessings, amulets and divination

Blessings pervade social life in Djenné. Unremittingly, God is asked to take care of His servants. 'May God save us.' 'May God protect you during your trip.' 'May God approve it.' 'May God give you strength.' 'May God protect our town.' These and numerous other benedictions can be heard during special occasions as well as in everyday life. Everyone can call upon God and everyone's request may be granted by Him.

God, however, has many names by which He can be invoked and some of these are more powerful than others. Making a particular request to God using a powerful name will bring about a quick and certain result. Moreover, everywhere in His Holy Qur'an, God has spoken powerful words. If employed properly, the inherent powers of these words can be used for all kinds of purposes. Dissolved in a potion of 'holy water' or written in an amulet, the powers ascribed to Qur'anic words can be applied for different curative, protective or causative purposes. Yet, neither the special names and the specific Qur'anic passages, nor the often intricate techniques to apply them are common knowledge. These are the secrets in which the marabouts are specialized. This knowledge enables them to ask God to render a trader successful in his business, to provide a woman with a long desired child, to cure someone from a disease or to let a woman fall in love with a man who has his eye on her.

In West Africa, the legitimacy of amulets is a matter of debate, as elsewhere in the Islamic world. According to orthodox opinions – in particular the Wahhabiyya – magical practices corrupt the Islamic religion. The true believer has to refrain from them. However, when amulets are defined as 'requests to God', justification for them can be found in the Qur'an and in the sayings of the Prophet. Thus the activities of the marabouts in this field acquire a religious basis.

Regarding the practice of divination, whose status is comparable to that of amulets in terms of ambivalence, the following may be noted. When a marabout examines the 'situation' of a client, the outcome of the divination frequently includes instructions for the client to give away a specific present in order to favour the outcome of his or her affair. In this sense, the act of charity, which is in and of itself religious and meritorious, is of an unequivocal purposive character. 'Giving' goes explicitly together with 'asking'. Not only the receiver of the gift will bless the generous giver so that God may recompense him or her, but also the marabout will, subsequent to the divination, write an amulet to ask God to approve the specific request of his client.

In Djenné, the marabouts' knowledge covers the entire realm of well-being. The various features of the human plight, from existential problems to the uncertainties of daily life, are dealt with. Their knowledge concerns as much the religious rules the believer has to follow in order to be rewarded in the afterlife as it does the ways in which prosperity can be obtained in the here and now. ♦

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Notes

1. In the second half of the eighties and the early nineties I conducted anthropological fieldwork among the marabouts of Djenné. See my PhD thesis *Het domein van de marabout. Koranleraren en magisch-religieuze specialisten in Djenné, Mali* (Proefschrift Universiteit Utrecht) Thesis Publishers, Amsterdam 1996. A popular version appeared as *In de stad van de marabouts*, Prometheus, Amsterdam 1998. A French translation of the latter is anticipated.