

## ABSTRACT

*Between Deities and Men: A Few Untypical Remarks About the Anthropology of Possession Cults.* — This article is based on long field work among the Minyanka. Till recently, possession was a major fact of religious life among the Minyanka in Mali, who have various origins but fit into a vast cultural zone known as "Bamanaya". All cults are founded on fetish objects, which, crystallizing power relationships, only keep their power insofar as they are fed with the blood of sacrifices. Possession is never related to complaints. Nor does it seem related to a crisis, nor, for that matter, to a reaction against Islam. Instead, the possessed are the respected mediums of a deity. In this sense, a possession cult tends to be a "mediation cult" linked to the exercise of power.

*Mots-clés/Keywords :* Mali, cultes de possession, fétiche, pouvoir, religion, société/Mali, possession cults, fetish, power, religion, society.

Benjamin F. Soares

## The Prayer Economy in a Malian Town\*

In the late twentieth century, Nioro du Sahel, an economically marginal town in the West African state of Mali, has become an important regional pilgrimage center for Muslims. Each year, thousands of people, coming not only from Nioro's neighboring villages and towns but also from other parts of West Africa and beyond, travel to Nioro, to seek blessings, offer gifts, and pay homage to the town's most prominent religious leaders and their lineages. These religious leaders head the Sufi brotherhoods (Ar. *turuq*) that have long been the predominant institutional forms through which Islam is practiced in the region. And in Nioro, one finds the rather unusual situation where leaders of two of the region's most important rival Sufi brotherhoods—the Tijaniyya and the Hamawiyya—live in the same rather small town.<sup>1</sup>

After becoming part of Umar Tall's Islamic state in the mid-nineteenth century, Nioro quickly became a major political and religious center with an enduring legacy in the history of West Africa.<sup>2</sup> Though its economic role steadily declined as trans-Saharan trade waned and economic activity gravitated toward the west and the south during the colonial period, Nioro nonetheless remained an eminent religious center in French West Africa.<sup>3</sup> A number of factors have assured Nioro's status as an Islamic center into the post-independence period. The town has special importance as the home of many descendants of Umar Tall and his supporters. It is also here that a

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1. This contrasts with some other Muslim religious centers in West Africa such as Touba in Senegal.
2. On the Umarian jihad and state, see ROBINSON (1985).
3. Paul MARTY (1920: 210-211) described Nioro as 'le boulevard de l'islam noir dans la région du Haut-Sénégal' and 'le pôle de l'islam soudanais' from Saint-Louis to Niger.

new Sufi brotherhood emerged around Shaykh Hamallah early in this century, reinforcing yet also transforming Niore as a Muslim religious center.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the presence of the descendants of Tall and Hāmallah and their followers have helped to keep the influence of the Wahhabiyya or self-styled Ahl al-Sunna in the town's immediate vicinity negligible until very recently.<sup>5</sup>

Located in a relatively remote and inaccessible region of northwestern Mali, the effects of drought are today readily detectable on Niore's landscape. There is no great wealth extracted from the land here in the form of commodities nor is the vicinity terribly rich agriculturally. Throughout the region, the great majority has increasing difficulty meeting subsistence needs. Since early in the colonial period, the area has had high rates of labor migration to areas of greater economic activity.<sup>6</sup> In the post-independence era, the movement of persons from this area has only increased with continuing economic difficulties.

Nevertheless, that considerable wealth exists in Niore is obvious to any visitor. Outward displays of wealth and consumption abound, at least on the part of a small number of residents and visitors to the town. Most conspicuous perhaps are the numerous luxury cars seen throughout the town and the lavish homes illuminated at night by electricity from private generators. These commodities—cars and generators among others—and a considerable amount of other kinds of wealth in this town can be linked directly or indirectly to the town's most important religious leaders and, ultimately, to what I call the prayer economy.

Recently, Murray Last (1988: 196 *sq.*) used this idea of prayer economy to describe the rather complex but pervasive practices in Kano in Northern Nigeria in which considerable sums of money are given to Muslim 'scholars' for prayers, blessings, and Islamic medicine. People make such transactions, he argues, in order to ensure political and financial success and/or to build a base for such success. As he points out, the oil boom of the 1970s made unprecedented levels of capital available for such transactions with profound effects on the Kano economy.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary Mali of course contrasts sharply with Nigeria. Differently situated within the world economy, Mali did not experience such levels of export-led economic growth and today remains a very poor country. But despite the obvious differences in national income and resources, similar religious practices by Muslims—the giving of gifts to religious leaders on a large scale—make it entirely appropriate to speak about a prayer economy in Niore. Indeed, it would be virtually impossible to understand contem-

4 TRAORÉ (1983) is the most comprehensive study of Hamallah and the Hamawiyya or 'Hamallahism' to date

5 On the Wahhabiyya in Mali, see AMSELLE (1985), BRENNER (1993a), HAMÈS (1980), KABA (1974), and TRIAUD (1988).

6 On the history of labor migration from this area, see MANCHUELLE (1987, 1989).

7 Some of the changes to the economy are discussed by LUBECK (1986).

porary Niore without an examination of this local and, in many senses, transregional economy, that links the town to the wider political economy.

This paper focuses on those most directly involved in the prayer economy in Niore, including the two religious leaders who have become major actors on a regional and sometimes international scale, and their numerous followers—elite and ordinary Muslims, both local and non-local—and discusses their relationships that set the context for the often large-scale gift transfers. I show how the prayer economy operates through the circulation of capital—economic, political, and spiritual or symbolic—which particular social actors are able to convert from one domain to another with the result that, in particular places, the economy, to use Geertz's language (1979), fuses economic and political elites of the town and beyond with religious leaders. As I will suggest, this feature of the prayer economy points to a significant shift in the organization of religious practice, a situation where ties between religious leaders and some followers are no longer mediated primarily through membership in a particular Sufi brotherhood but rather through access to some of the central tokens of value in the society. Such a shift helps to illuminate some of what might be called the cracks in the hegemony of the prayer economy discussed in the last part of the essay.

Before proceeding with an analysis of the prayer economy, I offer a caveat. Entirely reasonable objections can be raised to the conceptualization of religious practices and, in particular, Muslim religious practices within the frame of an economy. In this study, I want to suggest it is an economy of practice that is operative. I employ the concept of prayer economy as an analytical tool for understanding some—but by no means all—religious practices that are linked to the economy. Thus, what follows is necessarily a partial interpretation.

### Islam, Sufism and Saints

The prayer economy in Niore du Sahel can only be apprehended through the lens of locally and regionally salient conceptions of Islam. In Arabic the word Islam means submission to God. To be a Muslim in most contexts means submission to the will of God and adherence to His law (the Sharia), including the so-called five pillars of Islam. In the part of the Sahel with which this paper is concerned, the primary institutional forms of Islamic religious practice are the Sufi brotherhoods that are characterized by a hierarchical structure of authority. What this means in this context is that one is not only expected to submit to God and His law but one is also enjoined to follow a religious leader who acts as a spiritual guide for ordinary Muslims. And such a leader necessarily comes from within the Sufi brotherhood structure. Theoretically, then, all adults are expected to have a relationship with a religious leader.

Although there is a considerable range and diversity of Muslim religious

specialists in the region, certain ones clearly overshadow all others. Those seen as leaders become so by birth, achievement, or some combination of the two. Those leaders who attract many followers are thought to be extraordinary. And the truly exceptional are thought to be saints (*wali*). Muslim saints are usually men and occasionally women—living or deceased—said to be ‘friends of God’ having special power and/or knowledge emanating from God.<sup>8</sup> In this setting, people often equate power as it relates to their religious leaders with force in its spiritual and material senses, suggesting authority in its Weberian formulations (e.g. Weber 1947; cf. B. S. Turner 1974). Given the deference to others in a hierarchy leading ultimately to God, there is a sense that power emanates from God who favors certain persons, making them more knowledgeable and more powerful than others (cf. Denny 1988). For this reason, saints are usually highly respected, revered, as well as feared.<sup>9</sup> But, not, it should be noted, by everyone.

In Nioro, the two most celebrated religious leaders resident in the town come from lineages of religious specialists. And many of their respective followers consider them to be saints. The first, Muhammadu, is from a lineage that traces descent from the prophet Muhammad. His father, Shaykh Hamallah (c. 1883-1943), was the founder of the Hamawiyya Sufi brotherhood, a branch of the Tijaniyya. Proclaimed by his followers to be a *qutb* (‘pole’), the highest ranking saint of his time, Hamallah died in exile in France. Muhammadu is the widely recognized leader of the Hamawiyya and, therefore, at the pinnacle of this Sufi hierarchical structure. His followers extol him for what they call his prodigious powers. The second and considerably older of the two is Cerno Hady Tall, a direct descendant of Umar Tall, the leader of the nineteenth century jihad. Among the most prominent of Umar Tall’s descendants in western Mali, Hady is a renowned leader of the Tijaniyya in the broader region. His reputation for prodigious powers is also widespread.

That sainthood is not open to just anyone, not even to other religious leaders, cannot be emphasized enough. Others who might actually develop reputations as minor religious personalities in Nioro must necessarily submit to the authority of one of the main religious leaders. The latter live surrounded by their numerous followers, including minor religious leaders, and operate large Sufi centers where people gather for prayers, instruction, and guidance. Whatever differences there might be between the two leaders in status, reputation and even their followings, their authority is unquestionably based in large part on descent from the two principal nineteenth and early twentieth century Muslim religious figures associated with the town. In the post-independence period, they have been involved

8. In this essay, I use the ambiguous word power as it relates to religious leaders, following West Africans’ usage.

9. On this subject for neighboring Songhay in the past, see HUNWICK (1996).

in similar ways in the prayer economy and have become among its most important actors.<sup>10</sup>

### Saints, Followers, and Gifts

The establishment of a relationship with a Muslim religious leader, even a one-time visit (*ziyara*), may have many layers of meaning. An individual actor—a man or a woman—may have complex motives and interests in cultivating a relationship with a saint, and the maintenance of such a relationship cannot be reduced to rationally maximizing behavior (cf. Cruise O’Brien 1971, 1975). In fact, because people are expected to have a religious guide, a relationship with a religious leader is often considered a pious act or an attempt to adhere to conventions of proper Muslim behavior (cf. Gellner 1969).

In Nioro, as members of lineages with historical ties to either religious leader’s lineage, many people usually take their relationships with one of the religious leaders for granted, even if such relationships are not enacted mechanically. Indeed, although there are those who might be said to have been born followers of a certain leader, in practice, one finds considerable variation in the nature of their interactions with religious leaders and in style of religiosity, dependent upon a number of factors, including—but not limited to—age, education, social status, and individual temperament.<sup>11</sup> While some might actually become formally initiated into one of the two Sufi brotherhoods in the town, for many, relationships to a religious leader are premised more on nominal membership and attachment to a brotherhood and/or its titular head. Over time, individuals, groups of people and, on occasion, entire communities may renew, strengthen, downplay or actually sever ties with a religious leader (Villalon 1995), for a whole host of reasons.

Despite the existence of inherited and nominal ties, followers—individuals and groups of people—may often have reasons of a very pragmatic or instrumental nature for interacting with a particular religious leader. The two religious leaders assume or are called upon by their followers to assume a number of important roles, most notably, as mediators in dispute resolution and as providers of relief for the indigent. In addition, individuals often cultivate a relationship with a particular religious leader with the intention or hope of having personal concerns or interests addressed by the religious leader whom they assume has considerable power. On the one hand, followers with primarily spiritual goals in mind might seek instruction from a religious leader that leads to advancement within the Sufi initiatic structure.

10. The differences between the two religious leaders are important though not for the analysis of the prayer economy that follows.

11. Space limitations prevent me from addressing these here.

On the other hand, reasons for individuals to interact with a religious leader that are of a more this-worldly nature include the pursuit of wealth, power, social prestige, progeny, and good health.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most salient features of saint-follower relationships is the giving of gifts. The word gift most accurately captures the local idiom for describing the transfer of objects from followers to saints. In the town's vernaculars, *hadaya* (a loan word from the Arabic *hadiyya*, pl. *hadaya*) is used exclusively for those things given to elevated religious leaders.<sup>13</sup> The centrality of gifts and gift-giving to the relationships between religious leaders and followers can be related to conceptions of Islam and proper Muslim behavior, as well as to regionally specific conceptions of power. In Islam, Muslims are not only encouraged but commanded to give, especially charity, to others. The standard Maliki legal text used in West Africa states unequivocally that things transferred 'in view of a reward in another world' are not to be considered gifts but rather alms (Ruxton 1916: 263). Be that as it may, by giving gifts to others, people are generally seeking to assure their place in the next world, but they frequently wish to obtain merit and God's blessings in the world in which they are living as well. In Nioro, the merit that people state that they hope to obtain in giving gifts to their religious leaders is bound up with notions of *baraji*, which translates somewhat loosely from the region's vernaculars as 'divine recompense'.<sup>14</sup> Upon receipt of gifts, the religious leader gives blessings—in the local vernaculars *duwa* (another loan from Arabic)—in conformity with the Sunna of the prophet Muhammad as recounted in the various collections of Hadith.

Many claim that all that the religious leaders of Nioro have—wealth, numerous followers, as well as the intangible knowledge and power associated with Islamic mystical practice—is a gift from God.<sup>15</sup> They, the ordinary followers, in turn, pay homage to the religious leaders in part through gift-giving to them, because, by being blessed and favored, they are foremost in the hierarchy of authority before God. What one finds then is

12. This statement is based on interviews and conversations with a wide range of Muslim religious specialists, their followers, and critics.
13. This word is used in Bambara, Hassaniyya, Pular/Fulfulde, and Soninke. It is similarly used elsewhere in West Africa, see STEWART (1973). Religious leaders in Nioro are often the recipients of other things loosely categorizable within the rubric of gifts such as charity or 'sacrifices' (*sadaqa*) and even alms-taxes (*zakat*). I do not address the role they play in the prayer economy other than to note that they are ostensibly for redistribution according to the precepts of Islamic law. The subject of such ritual sacrifice has recently been described by COMBS-SCHILLING (1989) for Morocco in rather essentialist terms which are critiqued explicitly by BOWEN (1992) and somewhat more implicitly by LAUNAY (1992).
14. In Bamana, Pular/Fulfulde, and Soninke; cf. BAILLEUL (1981); BOMOU & SCHERRER (n.d.); DNAFLA (1993); and TAINE-CHEIKH (1990). The word seems to be derived from the Arabic *bara'a* meaning 'exculpation or settlement [of debt]'. See DELAFOSSE (1955).
15. In this context, either one of the more conventional words for gift in the region's vernaculars (e.g. *dokkal* in Pular/Fulfulde) or a word with the sense of blessing (e.g. *baraka*) is used rather than *hadaya*.

not unlike the situation described by Ibn Khaldun (1967: 304) in which persons with a reputation for piety are frequently the recipients of gifts because 'the great mass believes that when they give them presents, they serve God'. In a sense, the transfers of such gifts are the exchange of economic capital by followers for the spiritual or symbolic capital that religious leaders possess.

While one can say that people believe it is basically good, morally correct, and even potentially meritorious to give such gifts, there is a strong sense of obligation that permeates more fully the practice of gift-giving by ordinary followers. Many feel compelled to give gifts to a religious leader, especially at certain times of the year. For example, at the yearly visits in Nioro, each religious leader formally receives visitors who come in delegations from villages and/or lineages. People line up by the hundreds to greet the religious leader and to give him gifts. While the experience of those involved might not be akin to the 'communitas' described by Victor Turner (1973) in which individuals are essentially equals, in these visits they are engaging in what might be characterized as 'ritual communication' (Van der Veer 1994). That is, these followers are expressing their identities as followers of one of the religious leaders and/or as members of a Sufi brotherhood, and, in doing so, they have access to the symbolic capital which they receive in the form of blessings and/or merit in exchange for their gifts.

But in addition to such communal interactions, certain followers may have other, more particularistic reasons to solicit one of the religious leaders. At the disposal of the religious leaders is a wide variety of Islamic esoteric sciences, including, among other things, petitionary prayers, *khalwa* ('mystical retreat'), *riyada* ('spiritual exercises'), and amulets that they or their associates can deploy on behalf of supplicants in order to obtain all the things, such as wealth, that they might desire. And these sciences are almost invariably deployed in exchange for large gifts.

In Nioro, one finds not only a wide variety of persons—both local and non-local—who visit and give gifts to the prominent religious leaders, but also a considerable range in the value of gifts. Without discussing young girls 'given' for marriage, or boys and girls 'given' for domestic service, such gifts can range from the very modest—a few measures of grain or a single coin—to the munificent—large sums of cash and commodities such as new cars. Thus, those things considered gifts (*hadaya*) include some of the most important material tokens of value in the wider society. In this context, no clear break exists between gifts and commodities (Appadurai 1986; cf. Gregory 1982), many commodities and 'luxury' goods being given as gifts. Here, as in other places in the Islamic world, a gift is expected to be commensurate with the prestige and status of both the religious leader and the giver, as well as with the nature of a giver's request.<sup>16</sup> Thus, an extrav-

16. EICKELMAN (1976: 178). Some evidence suggests that gift-giving by certain high status followers is part of the quest for what BOURDIEU (1984) calls social 'distinction' in the European context and similar to the 'tournaments of value' described by APPADURAI (1986).

agent gift generally indexes a major intervention via the esoteric sciences on behalf of a wealthy giver.

Despite minor differences in the engagement of the two religious leaders in the economy, their interactions with their followers are similarly patterned. They basically live off the gifts from their followers, frequently channeling the money into other economic activities. The ultimate effect is that these religious leaders are able to accumulate considerable wealth much like their historical predecessors discussed by Ibn Khaldun (1967: 305). Known for their generosity, the religious leaders also redistribute a portion of the gifts as alms to the poor and/or as support for their large entourages.

### Elite Followers and Religious Practice

Some of the considerable wealth one finds in Nioro does come from some of its inhabitants. Indeed, a sizeable amount of the wealth of the two religious leaders in Nioro is traceable to ordinary non-elite followers living in and around the town. Nioro is also the birthplace and home of many prosperous merchants and traders, some of whom have built considerable fortunes in the post-independence period. A number of these enterprising individuals and families are based in Nioro, in other Malian towns and cities, in neighboring countries, and as far away as Gabon and North America. Some of the most financially successful among them have longstanding ties with the town's religious leaders.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the ordinary local Muslims and the more well-heeled merchants, the religious leaders attract other prominent followers, many of whom are affluent by any standards. People from across francophone West Africa visit and make gifts to the two religious leaders in Nioro. Such visitors include high-ranking civil servants, very influential political appointees, and religious leaders. And the relations between Nioro's religious leaders and heads of state are almost legendary.<sup>18</sup> Such high-status followers—heads of state, merchants, government ministers, and their kin—give large and expensive gifts, while many others of similar means and status who are unable or unwilling to go openly to Nioro send gifts on their behalf. Association with such high-status people undoubtedly enhances the reputations of the saints, though too close association with figures of power, especially political power,

17. This generalization needs some qualification. Some Wahhabis who are merchants living elsewhere in Mali do come from Nioro. Paradoxically enough, some prominent Wahhabis—usually known as anti-Sufis—are known for their large and overt gifts to some of Mali's Sufi religious leaders in Nioro and elsewhere. In Nioro, unlike other places in Mali, there is not a separate Wahhabi mosque.

18. For instance, Muhammadu was close to Mali's president Moussa Traore. For his part, Cerno Hady is close to the immediate family of Bongo of Gabon. These relations are discussed briefly by DIALLO (1988).

carries potential dangers.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, this is not a situation in which the role of Islam is that of a counter-society movement or a refuge for the weak (cf. Coulon 1988).

The relationships which provide the context of such gift-giving are subject to some constraints. Since travel to Nioro is more difficult than to many other areas of Mali, it takes considerable expenditure to reach the town. It is clearly the economic resources and greater 'leisure' time that many successful merchants, civil servants and politicians have which gives them greater mobility to initiate or renew and maintain ties with the celebrated religious leaders in Nioro. There is regular commercial airline service between Bamako, the capital of Mali, and Nioro, and many, if not the majority, of the passengers on the flights between the two towns are followers and/or kin of the two religious leaders.

In general, not only do the more affluent who are not resident in the town have greater mobility to see the religious leaders, but also these people have greater access to these leaders as a direct result of the size and value of their gifts and/or their high status. Thus, those with access to or even at times control of some of the society's central tokens of value—cash and commodities—also have greater access to the religious leaders and their spiritual capital. There seems to be a process whereby commercial and bureaucratic elites are joined or fused with religious leaders, as Geertz (1979) identified in Sefrou in Morocco. Somewhat crudely stated, the transfer of money and/or gifts in Nioro helps ultimately to reproduce these elites. But, even more than the simple reproduction of elites, this points to an important shift in the way in which religious practice is organized at least for some, mostly, elite followers of the religious leaders. In contrast to those ordinary Muslim followers whose relationships with either religious leader are premised on at least nominal membership in one of the two Sufi brotherhoods, the relationships of these elites is largely mediated by way of access to political and economic forms of capital.

### The Prayer Economy and the Fragility of its Hegemony

Thus far, I have attempted to identify some of the features of the prayer economy as it operates in the town. Because of their descent and reputations, the two most prominent religious leaders are the most important loci of symbolic capital in Nioro. In general, followers—elite and non-elite—interact with one of the religious leaders in order to have access to their symbolic capital. Although ordinary non-elite followers might not have

19. It is important to note that a religious leader may refuse a gift, an act that might constitute a form of public or semi-public admonishment. For a historical perspective on some of the issues related to Muslim religious leaders and power, see BRENNER (1993b).

direct access to the religious leaders, they are able to have at least symbolic access to them through their gifts. This is precisely what happens with the communal gift-giving during the yearly visits. In interacting with the religious leader, followers express an overall group identity as they communicate to themselves and to others as pious Muslims submitting to a leader whom they believe to be close to God. Additionally, individuals or groups of people may also benefit materially through the networks of redistribution or the intervention of the religious leader as mediator, though these might ultimately be of less importance than the group identity expressed.

As for the elite followers, a fair number of affluent people, both local and non-local, have greater access to Nioro's religious leaders. Although an important part of their interest in establishing a relationship with one of these religious leaders may be related to acts of piety, not unrelated are the many diverse personal goals for which the symbolic capital of the religious leader is sought. The giving of gifts of greater value, which political and economic power allows, serves ultimately to confer additional power on these elite followers. In a sense, they are able to convert one form of capital (political, economic) into another (spiritual/symbolic). And in turn, there is usually the hope that this spiritual capital will be transformed into additional political and economic power or resources. This is not to suggest that all people are in any way completely assured of the efficacy of their leaders' spiritual capital. Uncertainty at least in this world is an ever present factor for a good many people. For the religious leaders, the process is slightly different. Through the exchange of gifts for blessings, prayers, and the employment of their knowledge of the Islamic esoteric sciences, their spiritual capital is converted into additional economic and political power and resources.

As I have tried to suggest, one of the most important features of the prayer economy is that ties between elite social actors and the religious leaders are mediated through access to some of the central tokens of value in the society. Although the preceding discussion seems to suggest that this points to the hegemony of the prayer economy, I want to argue instead that it illuminates some of the cracks in this hegemony.<sup>20</sup>

For many years, a persistent anti-Sufi discourse associated with the Wahhabiyya, not to mention Malian secularists, has come mainly from outside Nioro. This discourse, often rather vocal at times, calls directly into question the kinds of roles that religious leaders like those in Nioro assume, challenging their elevated status and frequently criticizing some of their and their followers practices, including the large-scale gift-giving.<sup>21</sup> This is what might be called the external critique that many people in Nioro, the religious leaders included, have tried to counter in part through their opposition to the

20. My use of the concept hegemony follows Raymond WILLIAMS's reading of Gramsci (1977).

21. The actions of some of those associated with such critiques are not unambiguous. See fn 17 *supra*.

establishment of Wahhabi institutions (mosques and schools) in Nioro and its environs.

At the same time, some rather pointed internal critiques also exist. In recent years, the change in religious practice discussed in this paper has been questioned by a number of ordinary followers in Nioro. Many complain that they too have serious problems—individual and communal—that need addressing, but they, unlike the more affluent, are unable to have direct access to the religious leaders. In some instances, individuals and groups have sharply curtailed their transfers of gifts, stating quite explicitly that they think that their interests have been slighted in favor of those who happen to give gifts of much greater value to the religious leaders. Some make what is perhaps an even more trenchant critique in asserting that the religious leaders of Nioro, their piety notwithstanding, cannot possibly be saints because true saints are concerned with the next world and have no need for such lavish homes, cars, and ostentation.<sup>22</sup> And, finally, association with regimes that have been overthrown or have faltered in recent years cannot fail to bring into question for at least some people the efficacy of the symbolic capital of such religious leaders.

While it is not possible to declare that the Wahhabis are in any way directly responsible for such critiques within Nioro, their presence, even at a distance, has undoubtedly had some influence on the discourse on religious practice. Taken together, all of these critiques—internal and external, implicit or otherwise—have the potential to disrupt the operation and reproduction of the prayer economy. In short, they point to cracks in the hegemony of the prayer economy, showing just how fragile this hegemony is.

Northwestern University  
Department of Anthropology, Evanston.

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22. For the Tijani discourse on religious leaders and material wealth, the most relevant text for this context is perhaps Umar Tall's book, *al-Rimah*. See HUNWICK (1993).



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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the prayer economy in a Malian town, the rather complex but pervasive practices in which gifts are given to certain Muslim religious leaders on a large scale. It focuses on the celebrated leaders of two Sufi brotherhoods, their numerous followers, and their relationships that set the context for the gift transfers. It shows how

the prayer economy operates through the circulation of capital—economic, political, and spiritual or symbolic—which social actors convert from one domain to another, with the result that in particular places, the economy fuses economic and political elites with the religious leaders. This feature of the prayer economy marks a significant shift in the organization of religious practice, a situation where ties between religious leaders and some, mostly elite followers are no longer mediated primarily through membership in a particular Sufi brotherhood but rather through access to some of the central tokens of value in the society. Such a shift also points to the fragility of the hegemony of the prayer economy that is discussed in the last part of the essay.

## RÉSUMÉ

*L'économie de la prière dans une ville malienne.* — Cet article examine le rôle de l'« économie de la prière » dans une ville malienne, c'est-à-dire la gamme de pratiques à la fois complexes et répandues grâce auxquelles des présents sont offerts en abondance à des chefs religieux musulmans. Il est consacré à l'étude des chefs renommés de deux confréries sufi, de leurs nombreux disciples et des relations qui définissent le champ de ces transferts de dons. Il montre que l'« économie de la prière » fonctionne grâce à la circulation intense de capital — économique, politique et symbolique — que les acteurs sociaux convertiraient d'un domaine à l'autre et qui conjoint, en certains lieux, les intérêts des élites économiques et politiques avec ceux des chefs religieux. Les caractéristiques de l'économie de la prière représentent un changement important de l'organisation de la pratique religieuse, situation dans laquelle les relations entre les leaders religieux et les clients des autres élites ne sont plus médiatisées par l'appartenance à une confrérie sufi particulière mais par le recours à des symboles vitaux pour la société. Un tel glissement met aussi en lumière la fragilité de la domination de l'économie de la prière, aspect qui est analysé dans la dernière partie de l'article.

Keywords/Mots clés: Mali/Mali, Islam/Islam, political economy/économie politique, exchange/échange.