RITUAL, EMBODIMENT & AGENCY

Making Religion in Contemporary West Africa

Agnieszka Kedzierska Manzon

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For Dia and Yacouba, my guardian angels
For Eric, my life

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Overture

Who's Who in Bamako

The term *donso* (plural *donsow*) translates as hunter, but in Mande languages it refers not only or primarily to somebody killing game but also to a particular type of ritual specialist.[1] The *donsow* I meet in Bamako in March 2017 have come there to attend a music festival named after their iconic instrument, the *ngoni*. This "Donso Ngoni Festival" is the second iteration of the event, introduced in 2016, subsequent to the Rencontres des Chasseurs de l'Ouest Africain, organized by the Malian government in 2001 and 2005. As always, the best-known *donsow ngoni fola* or *sɛrɛwa*, as the singers are called, are invited to perform. These artists are members of the *donsoton*—the initiation society of the *donsow*—and hail from various regions of Mali. All three *donso* musical styles in Mali—Mandenka (or Malinké), Wossolonka, and that from Ségou—are represented. As the brochure for the event shows (Figures 1 and 2), each singer performs for about an hour.

Apart from an academic conference, held at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Bamako, the event takes place on a site known as one of the capital's cultural landmarks, in front

1. Mande languages are a subgroup of the Niger-Congo family that is made up of over forty languages, the most important normative variants of which are *Bamanan kan* (also known as Bambara), the vernacular language of Mali, as well as *Maninka* (which is also called Malinké), one of the main languages of Guinea, which is also spoken in southwest Mali, and *Soninké* (Sarakolé), which is spoken in Mali in the Kayes region bordering Senegal and Mauritania, as well as in these two countries.

L'association Djiguiya Blo, vous invite à la cérémonie d'ouverture
de la 2e Edition du festival Donso N'Goni,
qui aura lieu du 16 au 18 Mars 2017
au Palais de la culture Amadou Hampaté BAH
sous la haute présence de
Mme le Ministre de la culture Marraine de l'évènement.
Cérémonie d'ouverture Jeudi 16 mars 2017 à partir de 16 heures,
Venez voir le savoir faire des Chasseurs,
Chantres à travers le Chant, Danse, Magie.

Aw Dansoko, Aw Ni –Ko
Merci de votre Présence

PROGRAMME DU FESTIVAL DONSO NGONI du 16 au 18 Mars 2017 AU PALAIS DE LA CULTURE

	HEURES	
JEUDI 16 MARS 2017	15H – 15H30	Accueil et installation des invités
	15H30 – 16H	Mise en place terminée
	16H– 17H	Prestation d'Artistes chasseurs -Seydou Diakité -Tiécounta Camara - Barou Dramé
	17H – 17H10	Discours du Maire de la Commune V
	17H00 - 17H20	Discours de l'Association Djiguiya Blo (Secrétaire Général)
	17H20 – 17H30	Intervention du sponsor officiel
	17H30 – 17H 45	Intervention des Artistes chasseurs Donsogonifo
	17H 45 – 18H	Intervention des Chasseurs
	18H – 18HH 15	Prestation d'Artiste chasseur Bou Koné
	18H 15 – 18H30	Démonstrations magie (Komagnaka)
	18H-30- 18H50	Discours de Madame le Ministre de la Culture Marraine de l'évènement
	21H – 21H45	Prestation de l'Artiste Sambou Balla Bagayoko
	21H45 – 22H45	Prestation de l'Artiste Solomane Konaté
	22H45 – 00H	Prestation de l'Artiste Toba Seydou Traoré
	00H – 02H	Prestation de l'Artiste Yoro Sidibé
	02H – 02H45	Démonstrations magie (Komagnaka)

PROGRAMME DU FESTIVAL DONSO NGONI du 16 au 18 Mars 2017 AU PALAIS DE LA CULTURE

	HEURES	
VENDREDI 17 MARS 2017	10H -13H	Conférence débat dans l'amphi Aulamagna de la FLSL Thème: le rôle de la femme dans la confrerie des chasseurs Animée par Youma Wélé DIALLO Prestation d'Artiste chasseurs (Simby) (sambou Balla Bagayoko)
	16H15 -18H45	Conférence débat au Palais de la culture Thème: la forêt face aux exigences des besoins croissants de l'homme Conférencier : Tidiane SANGARE géographe aménagiste Directeur de la Société de Gestion des Concessions Forestières et Fauniques de TAM VOYAGES Prestation d'Artiste chasseurs Barou Dramé
	21H – 21H45	Prestation de l'Artiste Samaya Yacou
	21H45 – 22H45	Prestation de l'Artiste Abdoulaye Sacko (Ségoubloni)
	22H45 – 23H45	Prestation de l'Artiste Koniba Diarra
	23H 45– 02H00	Prestation de l'Artiste Madou Sangaré
	02H – 02H45	Démonstrations magie (Komagnaka)

PROGRAMME DU FESTIVAL DONSO NGONI du 16 au 18 Mars 2017 AU PALAIS DE LA CULTURE

	HEURES	
SAMEDI 18 MARS 2017	20H -21H	Conférence débat au Palais de la culture
	21H- 22H00	Prestation de l'Artiste Seydou Sangaré
	22H – 23H	Prestation de l'Artiste Abdoulaye Traoré
	23H – 00H	Prestation de l'Artiste Adama Bagayoko
	00H – 02H	Prestation de l'Artiste Sékouba Traoré
	02H – 02H45	Démonstrations magie (Komagnaka)

Figures 1 and 2. Festival booklet recto and verso, photo by author.

of the Palais de la Culture. The performance space is a large sandy square surrounded by rows of plastic chairs. After 4 p.m. every day during the festival, the square fills up, although the largest contingents of spectators usually arrive after dark, at around 9 p.m. or even at midnight, and sometimes stay until dawn. They include, of course, the *donsow* of Bamako, but above all they are made up of large numbers of city dwellers, men and women captivated by the spectacle before them. The organizers allocate seats to new arrivals according to their status and the number of chairs available. Chairs are sometimes in short supply because the festival is a great success every year. I make a note in my diary:

> There are lots of people. A few hundred of them, including the *donsow* in full outfits. The singers, many of whom are wearing red, are accompanied by both their apprentices and a griot,[2] who does not sing, but has the role of "warming up" with praise the people sung to. The praise is addressed to a few outstanding *donsow*, but more often to the great *basitigiw/bolitigiw* ["fetish masters"] and to the *jinatigiw*[3] [mediums of spirit possession] who make up the audience.

The singers perform in a preestablished order, but the content of their performances is not fixed in advance, nor are the persons to whom they sing: they select from an eclectic range of distinguished guests the ones they want to draw attention to. The festival enables all these personalities to dominate the public and media space, which they do to such a degree that one wonders who exactly is attracting more admiration: the singers performing in the middle of the square or the ritual experts whom the singers praise and invite to join them, each surrounded by their retinue. Some of these experts are young and flashy, while others are older and more discreet. They have been invited by the organizers, whose address book—which they were kind enough to make available to me—is quite impressive.

The organizers are members of a civic organization: the Djiguiya Blo (Vestibule of Hope) Association. Founded in 2015 by a few young enthusiasts with a love of music and the hunting tradition, Djiguiya Blo is managed, at this time in 2017, by a board of twenty-four people—civil servants, executives, entrepreneurs, and students, with an average age

2. A musician belonging to an endogamous caste. See Camara 1976, and Conrad and Frank 1995.
3. For both terms, see *supra* and the glossary.

of around thirty—and is headed by the lawyer and economist Seydou Konaré as its general secretary, and the sociologist Sékou Omar Tembely as its president. The association's activities in general, and the organization of the festival in particular, are supported by annual membership fees and funds raised from the sale of honorary memberships and sponsors' cards.[4] The association has a strong presence on social networks, online forums, and local radio stations, and has established numerous partnerships with local and international private business and organizations. The festival is also sponsored by the Minister of Culture, N'Diaye Ramatoulaye Diallo, who graciously makes the building and grounds managed by her ministry available. Official patrons include the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision du Mali and a number of Bamako's small and medium-sized enterprises.

Thanks to these partnerships, and unlike most cultural events that feature well-known artists, this festival is completely free. Its organizers want to "raise awareness" of the *donsow* tradition by "highlighting the cultural heritage of Mali and West Africa" and "making the festival a vehicle for cohesion and integration." Representatives of all Mali's *donsow* associations are invited to attend.[5] Delegations of *donsow* from neighboring countries also take part. Therefore, the event is of strong interest for an anthropologist working on the transformations in *donsow* tradition and, more generally, in ritual expertise that are currently taking place in West Africa. The participation of the *basitigiw/bolitigiw* and the *jinatigiw* in the *donsow* gathering bears witness to such transformations. On that subject, I note:

> It is interesting to see how the various ritual practices I have been studying separately for several years converge and interweave here. For ritual experts, this festival represents a perfect opportunity to put on a performance, be noticed and get some publicity. Far from just being a cultural event featuring hunters' music, the festival is in fact a kind of *Who's Who* of the milieu of religious specialists who are considered locally to be "traditional": that is, not directly affiliated with Islam.

4. Memberships were priced at 50,000 FCFA (the West African franc of the "Financial Community of Africa"); support cards at 5,000 FCFA (approximately 75 and 7.5 euros respectively).
5. For the history of Malian *donsow* associations, see Kedzierska Manzon 2014b: 71–80.

The Contemporary Mande Religious Landscape

The presence of Islam in West Africa dates back to the end of the eighth century (Conrad 2009), but was initially limited and affected only certain socio-professional categories. Mass Islamization took place during the colonial era and after independence (Soares 2005a, 2005b, 2007). As shown by some scholars (Colleyn 2005; Tal 2001), this long-standing, if limited, presence of Islam had some impact on many practices, such as geomancy or the activities of male initiation societies, for example, that may appear at first glance to be solidly rooted in tradition and free from any exogenous influences.

Young university-educated Bamakois referring to such practices in general use the term *laada*—custom, tradition, and usage—derived from the Arabic *adat*, meaning custom and tradition, and rule in Islamic jurisprudence. Foreign ethnologists have favored the terms *bamanaya* or *mandenkaya*, which can be translated as "the authentically Bamana[6] or Mande way of being" or, as Jean-Paul Colleyn (2001) has it, "art of living." Some local intellectuals who are behind the current revival of such "traditional practices" have proposed the term *maaya*,[7] which is a contraction of *mɔɔgoya*, literally "the way of being human," of being a person—perhaps an overly generic term. In addition to the more specific terms employed to speak about specific activities such as, for example, ritual baths, blood sacrifices, or sand divination, my rural interlocutors refer to the practices under question as a whole with the adjective *kaafir*, literally meaning pagan, miscreant, animist, or infidel (Dumestre 2011: 458).

This word comes from the Arabic *kafir* (*kafirin*, *kuffar*), which denotes originally and within Muslim doxa any religious practice, including Christianity, that is deemed to be idolatrous or imperfect (see Hawting 2009: 49). Unlike the case on the Swahili coast, for example, or in many other places where the term conserves its strong pejorative connotation, among the Mande today it is used as self-referential by many of my interlocutors speaking about their own activities. They mobilize this term to describe various practices that do not conform to Islam—including

6. The word *Bamana*, first used by Muslim Fulani to describe their pagan Mande neighbors, and which therefore refers to both ethnic and religious belonging, was then used in French in a slightly different phonetic version, Bambara, to name a subgroup of Mande people. For the history of the term, see Bazin 1985.
7. As in the name of the 3RNA-Maaya association (see chapter 6, below).

those that maintain a complex relationship with Islam—but above all those that are considered locally to be "traditional."

Why, then, not label such practices with the expression "traditional religion" or "African Traditional Religion" (ATR), consecrated in scholarly literature? A brief historical detour is needed here to point out the conceptual ramifications of this last denomination, which appeared in the 1950s when it replaced the previous expression "primitive religions," which had been widely used in academia, and by extension in everyday language, to refer to the ritual practices of non-European peoples (see Kibora and Langewiesche 2019; Parrinder 1954). As Marleen De Witte (2012) rightly points out, however, the notion of tradition is conceivable only when contrasted with that of modernity within the Western paradigm. Thus, the notion of "traditional religion" emerges within the same paradigm as a counterpoint to that of the so-called revealed, that is, monotheistic religions deemed modern and more evolved. This contrast only makes sense in the context of religious pluralism, and on the condition that the religious field is seen as being distinct from the economic, therapeutic, legal, political, artistic, and other fields—in other words, from the moment when religion is conceived as a separate sphere of experience and existence. Historically and until the recent transformations of the religious landscape which I tackle here, the Mande people have not considered "non-Islamic practices" as a separate religious field: these practices did not form a single, distinct, and fixed category with its own name. In fact, in Mande languages, apart from the terms *alasira* or *diinɛ*, which are reserved for Islam—in accordance with Arabic usage—there is no equivalent of the generic term "religion" (traditional or not). Nor is there the word "ritual" for that matter. In any case, as Guillaume Rozenberg (2011: 294) observes from his fieldwork in Myanmar, the word "ritual" "seems above all to be a category specific to anthropological thought, one that is determined by it and to a certain extent for it." The same holds for the word "religion," a category specific to the religious sciences which emerged in Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Therefore, if I describe the practices I study here as religious and ritual, it is not because my interlocutors necessarily describe them as such. It is because, in keeping with anthropological understanding of ritual and religion, I consider them as effective modes of action—or participation or commitment—that are out of step with the ordinary.[8]

8. For a definition of ritual as a mode of action of this type, see Albert 2009, Houseman 2011, Houseman and Severi 2009, as well as Bell 1992 and Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994.

These practices do not form a ritual system in the strict sense of a coherent, static, self-contained whole (see Smith 1979); rather, they are a heterogeneous, fluid, and dynamic constellation whose emergence as an autonomous sphere seems to me to be quite recent. I further argue that this sphere should be called "non-Islamic." I draw, while doing so, on Robert Launey and Benjamin Soares's (2009) work on the "Islamic sphere," where the authors describe a Muslim space distinct from both the state and particular groups' identity-related belongings, and with its own issues of power, legitimacy, and representativeness, which emerged during the colonial period in West Africa. One would expect that the formation of the "non-Islamic sphere" is less ancient than the formation of the Islamic sphere, in relation to which this new sphere takes its place. I suggest that this second formation followed not only the construction of the Islamic sphere but also the final disintegration of an older ritual system centered around the activities of male initiation societies and local or village-level collective celebrations,[9] a disintegration that occurred at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. As some authors have noted (Berger 2010, 2012; Koné 2012), it was during this period that these older religious institutional structures disappeared under the combined impact of state policies in favor of Islamization—whose mass campaigns intensified in the 1990s (see Soares 1996, 1997, 1999, 2005a and b)—and socioeconomic changes. At this time of the end of the Cold War and of single-party systems in Africa, neoliberal policies were weakening the fragile postcolonial state in this region, resulting in economic crises, impoverished populations, the growth of informal economies, increased international mobility and migration, and numerous armed conflicts and coups d'état, including in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Guinea. In Mali, the Tuareg rebellion divided the country in the early 1990s and then again in the 2000s, culminating in a lengthy civil war in 2012 leading to a restructuring of the religious field. This manifested itself on the one hand in an increased presence of Islam, particularly reformist Islam, in public space (Amselle 1999, 2017; Holder 2009; Soares 2005a), and on the other in a reconfiguration—which is the subject of my research—of practices that are *kaafir*. What must be emphasized is that this reconfiguration took place in a global context characterized by the increasing popularity of pan-Africanist, Afrocentric, and (more generally) Indigenist movements

9. For this older ritual Mande system see, for instance, Bazin 1988; Dieterlen 1960; Dieterlen and Cissé 1972; Zahan 1960.

(see Amselle 2010; Boukari-Yabara 2014; Capone 1999; Dozon 2015; Duchesne and Guedj 2005; Fauvelle-Aymar, Chrétien and Perrot 2010). I argue that this concurrence of things led to the emergence of a distinct domain and autonomous sphere that today many describe, in conformity with the colonial usage, as "traditional." Given that it results from the complex transformations of various practices locally considered as *kaafir*, which are in fact hybrid and constantly evolving, labeling this sphere "non-Islamic" instead of "traditional," and thus translating the Mande term in the most exact way, seems to me to be the best choice.

As noted above, the practices that make up this sphere today are more or less ancient or heterogeneous. In the rural areas where I began carrying out my doctoral research in the 2000s, and continued to work until recently, they are articulated around two major poles, between which there are bridges and which partially overlap. One pole revolves around the practices of the abovementioned *donsow*, and the other around the manipulation of the *basiw* or *boliw*,[10] which falls within the remit of the *basitigiw/bolitigiw*, the term my French-speaking interlocutors translate as "fetish masters."[11] Of course, both the *donsow* and the *basitigiw/bolitigiw*, whose presence I observed at the festival mentioned above, sometimes incorporate elements of Islam into their activities. Like that of other African "paganisms" (Augé 1982) or indigenous beliefs systems, their logic might be described as inclusive, to use Michael Lambek's term (2008: 124–25). An even more complex relationship with Islam

10. The two terms are regional variants. The former is used in the areas southwest of Bamako and in Guinea (Vydrine, personal communication; see also Colleyn 2009). Some attribute the term *boli* more specifically to artifacts associated with Ségou royalty (personal communication with Fodé Moussa Sidibé, March 2016).

11. Both *basiw* or *boliw* are translated by my French-speaking interlocutors as "*fétiche*." This word, which undoubtedly originally comes from the colonial vocabulary, is rooted in the metaphysics and episteme of the modern West, whose condescending attitude towards African religious practices it reflects, which makes its use problematic. However, the same problem arises with the use of other terms carried over from and anchored in the Western paradigm (spirit, god, altar, religion, cult, etc.). Like some of these terms, and certain material products of the West (cars, telephones, etc.), the term "fetish" has been appropriated in West Africa. It would seem paternalistic and inappropriate to criticize or conceal this appropriation, let alone to avoid it in ethnographic works, including my own.

characterizes *jinɛdɔn*,[12] a ritual practice of spirit possession, whose experts also appeared at the Donso Ngoni Festival and which has spread locally in recent years, particularly in urban areas.

It should be noted here that the practices of *donsow* known as *donsoya*, the manipulation of *basiw* known as *basitigiya*, and the *jinɛdɔn* dominate the contemporary Mande non-Islamic sphere; however, this sphere also comprises certain other practices: divination in its various forms, notably sand divination (*cɛndala*),[13] as well as a number of practices that involve the use of herbal remedies (*furatigiya*),[14] are very popular. In many cases, however, the specialists who carry these out are *donsow* or *basitigiw/bolitigiw*, and have several different labels attached to them. It is important, then, to acknowledge that the boundaries between the different types of ritual expertise are blurred and porous, even though the conference held alongside the festival emphasized that the confusion between *donsoya* and other "traditional" practices was undesirable. The level of intermingling and their shared influences are more significant than my analysis of them in three separate sections in this book might suggest. In fact, these practices feed off each other while at the same time are constantly evolving, as they always have. It should be stressed that they have never been either static or set in stone.

Although the formation of the non-Islamic sphere appears to be relatively recent, the practices that make it up have obviously been subject to earlier changes, as already indicated while speaking of the influence of Islam on Mande initiation societies and divination (Colleyn 2005; Tal 2001). Let me illustrate their transformations with a few more recent examples. I start with the recollections of an old *donso*, a chief, who was more than seventy years old at the time of my interview in the autumn of 2003. He told me that in the 1930s, during his father's lifetime, libations for the guardian figures of the hunters' society included an offering of an alcoholic beverage—*dɔlɔ*, millet beer—that was gradually replaced by water in the decades that followed. In the 1990s, according to this same chief, the words that accompanied these offerings were modified and the name of Allah was added to the beginning. Even more recently, funeral rites specific to hunters, which are known as *sinbonasi* (Kedzierska Manzon 2005), seem to have been revised, as Bourama Foutigui Coulibaly, the general secretary of one of Mali's largest *donsow* associations,

12. From *jinɛ*: spirit + *dɔn*: dance.
13. From *cɛn*: sand + *da*: to put, to lay down + *la*: agent.
14. From *fura*: plants + *tigi*: owner, someone who owns rights + *ya*: state suffix.

reported to me. He told me that in the spring of 2004, during a funeral ceremony he had attended in the Ségou region, the blood sacrifices had been abandoned at the request of the deceased's family, who feared being stigmatized by the practice, considered to be "idolatrous" (or *kaafir*) in a country in which Islam was becoming increasingly dominant.

A young rural *donsow* I met in the borderlands of Mali and Guinea explained to me that it is when you regularly go out in search of game that you cannot dispense with the blood sacrifices and rites honoring *donso-ton* guardian figures. Their relinquishment must therefore be considered alongside the abandonment of hunting practices themselves. In Mali, as in other West African countries (see Bassett 2003; Hellweg 2011), hunting has indeed been declining for several decades due mainly to the scarcity of game as a result of overexploitation and an unprecedented expansion of urban and semi-urban areas. Clearly, changes in lifestyles and habitats are not without their consequences for ritual procedures, some of which—notably those to be performed on the corpse of prey that has the potential to cause harm (see Kedzierska Manzon 2014b)—are naturally losing their relevance. These same changes in lifestyle also affect other ritual practices. For example, *namaya*—the Maninka equivalent of Bamana *ci-wara*, an agrarian rite that once accompanied collective work in the fields—has not been celebrated in rural areas of southwest Mali since the introduction of herbicides. Herbicides have made it possible to weed the fields without additional manpower, whereas thirty years ago, the youth of a village were requisitioned for the task, the occasion for *namaya*. Socioeconomic transformations—the same ones that are part of global dynamics that contribute to the emergence of the non-Islamic sphere—are translated in practical ways into daily and ritual life at a microlevel.

Contrary to what these examples might suggest, however, *kaafir*, or non-Islamic, practices at large have not in fact been losing ground in the last decades; they have been actually enjoying a certain renewal of interest, as the popular enthusiasm for the festival witnesses. One sees this elsewhere, too: a ceremony organized in an outlying neighborhood of Bamako by a women's cooperative that produces and sells dairy products is one good example. During my attendance in 2018, the ceremony was led by a group of griots, who were accompanied by balafons and percussion instruments, and not by singers playing the hunters' instrument, the *donso ngoni* seen in the festival. I could not make out a single *donso*, and yet I kept on hearing "*I dansɔgɔ! I ni ko*"—"To you who pierce the deep bush! You and the thing (of the hunt)!" In rural areas, greetings like these

were once reserved for men returning from the bush with big game, or for those who had distinguished themselves in the past by their substantial hunting spoils (Kedzierska Manzon 2009). How do we explain the fact that they were used at a ceremony organized on the initiative of a women's dairy cooperative? Should we think that they had become the way to address public figures to be honored, irrespective of their ritual skills, or that the word *donso* could now be attributed to any influential person? Admittedly, this word has always been polysemous and semantically somewhat indeterminate (see chapter 1, below), but not to that extent!

Along with words, things evolve. In March 2017, I noted:

> At *donsow* events ten years ago, you would see lots of artisanal rifles. I remember this well because their inexperienced owners often loaded them with too much gunpowder, and I was afraid of accidents. Today, you rarely see these guns. Fly whisks were made from the hair of wild animals, not domestic ones, as is often the case nowadays, particularly among *basitigiw* [fetish masters]. Those last ones frequented the *donsow* events and were praised by the singers, but this was not the case for the *jinatigiw* [experts of spirit possession] who, if they came, did not take center stage.

In fact, I have no memory of *jinɛdɔn* experts being present at *donsow* events in the Malian capital ten or fifteen years ago, and neither do my Malian collaborators, who often went to these ceremonies with me and whom I asked recently. If *jinatigiw* had been there, which I cannot rule out, it was without attracting attention. This is certainly not the case today: not only are the *jinatigiw*'s shimmering clothes visible from afar but they also receive the honors due to distinguished guests. For example, one evening at around 1 a.m. during the March 2017 festival, just as I was about to leave, my car was blocked for around ten minutes by a vehicle that had stopped right in the middle of the passageway. Its owner, a *jinatigi* called Lassi, was waiting in his vehicle with the engine running for the musicians to finish praising another person so that he could be suitably welcomed and make his "stage entrance." We were witnessing an unprecedented expansion of *jinɛdɔn*, whose reputation—which was initially very mixed, as we will see in greater detail later—has changed considerably.

What does not seem to change, on the other hand, is the need to resort to numerous ritual procedures to guard against all kinds of

misfortune and to ensure success in a world that is thought of as opaque and threatening. I have described this type of worldview elsewhere as the "episteme of doubt" (Kedzierska Manzon 2014b), borrowing Michel Foucault's (1966) concept of episteme, which he defined as the ways of thinking, speaking, and representing the world of a given culture at a given time. The episteme I observe in my research translates into a general uncertainty about the intentions and true identity of all beings. It is underpinned by the idea that—as Michael Lambek (2013: 852) puts it from his fieldwork in Mayotte—"persons are partially opaque to themselves; we cannot fully or consistently know or be accountable for ourselves." If we cannot know ourselves fully, we can know others even less. They present themselves to us as unpredictable, unreliable, and potentially dangerous. Traces of this episteme can be found in Mande oral tradition, notably in the Sunjata epic, the story of the founding of the first kingdom of Mali (see Innes 1974; Johnson and Bird 1992; Niané 1960; cf. Austen 1999 and Conrad 2004). Only a few short passages of this epic, which is several thousand verses long, feature battles between enemy armies. The bulk of the work is devoted to the story of confrontations between the sorcerer-king, the blacksmith Soumaoro Kanté, and the master hunter, the *donso* Sunjata Keïta, which lie outside our ordinary range of vision and involve the use of certain powerful substances, words, or things. The skills of the master hunter, the future emperor of Mali, ultimately prove superior and enable him to win the battle. Today's leaders and ordinary citizens alike also recognize the vital importance of such hidden skills and processes, which are viewed as being indispensable for achieving one's goals and countering the actions of potential antagonists. Being unseen, they remain uncertain for oneself and cast uncertainty on others—part of the episteme of doubt.

The episteme of doubt may seem to be an old phenomenon, but its scope has not diminished over time; on the contrary, it is expanding. This may appear paradoxical at first glance if we accept Max Weber's theory of the disenchantment of the world in favor of the empirical and rational. Yet this theory has since the 1990s rightly been called into question (see, for instance, for Africa, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999 and Dozon 2015, 2017; for a more general stance, Promey 2014). The phenomenon of the (re-)enchantment of the world—in a negative sense—that is under way today has been highlighted by analyses of the modernity of witchcraft in Africa, as well as by observations of its growing presence in postcolonial contexts (see, for example, Bernault 2019; Ceriana Mayneri 2014; Dozon 2017; Fancello 2015; Geschiere 1995, 2013; and Tonda 2005,

among many others). The phenomenon seems to be everywhere in Africa. We can only agree with Jean-Pierre Dozon when he suggests that this reenchantment should be seen in tandem with the heightened sense of discontinuity experienced by the continent's populations.[15] Many parts of Africa are reeling from financial crises and terrorist attacks against a backdrop of expanding social networks that blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, and an increasing discreditation of the political elites. It is hardly surprising, then, that the populations of the continent engage in a frantic and multifaceted search for solutions, and therefore in a resurgence of religion in many forms, whether Christian, Islamic, or "traditional"—or all of them at once.

I can give one example of such a search for solutions from my own work: a Bamako acquaintance who worked as a manager in a French institution told me about her cousin, a student of midwifery, who was suffering from headaches, losing her bearings, and even becoming paralyzed at times. The family suspected that an invisible agent was responsible for her problems and took her first to a specialist in Bamako, and then to another who was affiliated with Islam in Niamey, in Niger, before finally sending her to a boarding institution run by a third specialist in Tunisia, who identified her attacker as a "misguided" Muslim djinn, and treated her with herbal mixtures and prayers. Her trouble subsided, and she was able to complete her training as a midwife. Telling me her story, my acquaintance compared her cousin's treatment with that used by certain Pentecostal pastors to exorcize the possessed in their churches. "You must go to Nigeria to see," she said to me. Then she asked me, almost incredulously,

> Haven't you ever seen this?! It's the same thing. Only they don't say *jinɛ* or devil but demon. But the sick tremble, cry out, and throw themselves on the floor. They are treated and the spirits are asked to come forward. And there's big money involved.

It is hard not to acknowledge the aptness of the comparison. The expansion in several African countries of so-called Revivalist and neo-Pentecostal churches (see Augé et al. 2019: 143–50; De Witte 2005, 2011; Fancello 2006; Mary 2008, 2009; Meyer 2004, 2010; Miran-Guyon

15. Dozon argued this in a presentation to the Emma Gobin and Anne-Marie Losonczy seminar "Approches comparées du New Age" held at EPHE in Paris on January 26, 2020.

2015) does indeed seem to be analogous to that of Islam, especially its reformist versions (see Bourdarias 2009; Miran-Guyon 2015; Soares 2016). We have been witnessing for a while a proliferation of neo-Christianism, reformed Islam, and what may be seen as neo-traditional religions, all of which share a similar aesthetic and formal characteristics to some extent. While this expansion deserves a large-scale comparative study, within the limits of this book we will be examining the revival and transformations, among the Mande of West Africa, of practices seen as traditional, or *kaafir*: non-Islamic.

Ritual as a Mode of Engagement

Before laying out some key terms and the theoretical frame of this study, let me briefly explain the organization of this book and of its three parts, which I call "movements" as in a musical composition. The first of these movements is dedicated to a study of *donsow* practices. I interpret them using the metaphor of an asymmetrical and especially complex game of hide-and-seek in which the normally irreconcilable, oppositional roles of "seeker" and "sought" merge. The Second Movement examines the practices of the *basitigiw*, or fetish masters, for whom sacrifice is the basic modality of interaction with more-than-humans. The Third Movement describes the activities of the *jinɛdɔn*, a ritual practice of spirit possession involving two complementary modes of action: sacrifices and trances, which generally take place during dancing and often include an oracular stage.[16]

16. In the French original of this book and, more generally in French-language anthropology, the term "culte de possession" is used to speak about such a practice. This term has been consecrated by authors such as Michel Leiris (1934 and 1958), Jean Rouch ([1960] 1989), and Gilbert Rouget (1990). While it does not sound particularly disturbing for the contemporary French academic reader, it is obviously problematic and calls for a careful deconstruction since it is deeply rooted in the Christian modern episteme. For the problematization of this term, see the introduction by Cavaillé, Calavia Saez, and Kedzierska Manzon in Cavaillé and Kedzierska Manzon 2026, and the contribution of Michael Lambek to the same volume as well as the PhD thesis, in progress, of Camille Guibert working under my supervision at EPHE.

Each movement is constructed in broadly the same way: first, the general characteristics of the practices in question are presented, followed by an analysis of their material set-up, then an examination of the uses of the body on which the practices are based, and the changes to the sensorium that are specific to them are discussed. Certain key notions recur in each movement. I thus analyze the quality of presence of the ritual specialists in charge of these practices, how they do their staging, and finally the relationships between them and their more-than-human partners: all the elements which are a feature of their practices. Uniquely structured in each of the three sets of practices studied, these elements inform the construction of more-than-humans that each of them brings forth, and at the same time the construction of the experts who bring them to life.

In each of the three sets of practices I discuss, there is a complex relationship between human and more-than-human protagonists: this relationship is both external and internal to the human who engages in it. It is at once a relation of self to self, and of self to other. In the First Movement, I examine the relationship by using the concept of "ritual condensation," which was introduced by Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi ([1994] 2009) to describe the interactions of characters who simultaneously occupy roles within the ritual framework that appear at first sight to be antinomic. The same concept is also mobilized in the Second Movement, but it requires some further development in order to work: the interactions observed between the fetish masters and their fetishes are not merely antinomic or complex, like those between *donsow* and their prey in their game of hide-and-seek; they also turn out to be multidimensional, both bipolar (self/the other) and triangular (self/a third party/the other). In the Third Movement, the schema Houseman (2016) calls "ritual refraction" seems to me to be more appropriate for understanding the spirit possession whose masters simultaneously assume human and divine identities: they are at once extraordinary and ordinary. What the three sets of practices have in common is that they shift the conditions of intentionality of the people who implement them. These people attribute their (own) actions and decisions to certain third parties: bush beings, fetishes, or spirits incarnated in the bodies of their hosts. We will see that the obligatory passage through these third parties enables ritual specialists to become "virtuous subjects" (Lambek 2002). In every case, the underlying process consists in temporarily suspending their human selves and emphasizing an entity other than themselves—albeit in

their wake—whose power they appropriate in order to establish, and even increase, their own agency.[17]

These concrete practices offer potential ways of understanding a problem that has a considerably broad scope: the variable and varied modalities and mechanisms by which rituals contribute to the making of a religion and its agents, whom they help—as I will show—to deal with the episteme of doubt. However, it is not my intention here to delve into the historical, psychological, or social raisons d'être of this episteme, or to present a systematic study of the practices in question and their economic, political, and other ramifications. I believe I can refrain from doing so for two reasons. In the first place, I start out from the premise—widely accepted in the anthropology of religion—that it is difficult to understand the specificity of ritual and its internal dynamics by analyzing mainly what lies outside it. Secondly, many of my colleagues, both French- and English-speaking, who are interested in religion in contemporary Africa favor a sociological type of analysis which attends to these ramifications. I myself proposed this kind of analysis of the practice of *donsow* in my last book (Kedzierska Manzon 2014b). There is no point in repeating what I undertook in it or returning yet again to questions that have already been dealt with elsewhere and by others. To complement their work, I have opted for a different approach in this volume, inspired

17. The concept of agency, originating in action theory and also used in linguistics (see Duranti 2004) and psychology, especially the theory of mind (Tomasello 1999), has been popularized in cultural anthropology by Alfred Gell (1998). Gell considers artworks—but also other material artifacts such as landmines, assault rifles, cars or dolls—to be both indexes of the action of their users and, in turn, agents. Although he describes them as "person-like" (1998: 99) or quasi-person-like (1998: 133), he sees their agency as essentially derived: they are for him "secondary agents" that enable the "primary agents" to fully exercise their capacity for action. As carriers of such primary agents distribute personhood, so these artifacts mediate relations within the complex networks of which they are an integral part. A slightly different view of agency is offered by Bruno Latour (1991 and 2006) in his actor-network theory or ANT; for a summary of the existing approaches, see Albert and Kedzierska Manzon 2016. Here, as in my other publications, I use the concept, as largely accepted in anthropology today (see Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2011; Mannheim and Salas Carreño 2015), in the broad sense of capacity for action, since it allows one to go beyond object/subject or things/being dualism and question various ontological and experiential configurations.

by both Houseman-style interactionism (to which I referred above) and phenomenology, following Jean Bazin (1986), while also drawing on Michael Jackson's existential anthropology (1986, 1998). These methodological choices place me more or less in line with the currents of pragmatic anthropology—I pay attention to discourses and practices in context in order to infer conceptualizations or representations—and seem to me to be best suited to the objectives I have set myself: to improve our understanding of rituals as a particular mode of engagement which allows those who put them in place to act on the others and on themselves, to assert their subjectivity and agency, and to transform their own persona and the world in which they are imbedded.

How Do Rituals Work?

In order to understand the making of religion and its agents through rituals, I will look carefully at the material and corporeal dimension, an approach Marcel Mauss advocated over a century ago. Starting from the idea that the "body is man's first and most natural tool" (Mauss [1934] 1968: 372), Mauss recommended a systematic study of "techniques of the body": the culturally informed ways—specific to each people or human group—of moving, sitting, eating, sleeping, carrying weights, enjoying oneself (dancing, for example), and even praying and celebrating the gods. Far from defining culture—or religion—as a system of symbols to be looked at from an abstract point of view, he embedded it in the materiality of the flesh: as he put it, it is through bodily practices that collective and individual modes of thinking and acting are formed. To understand them holistically, he used the notion of habitus, by which he meant all the uses and arrangements of the body as they vary from one society to another ([1934] 1968: 368–69). This notion, which was subsequently developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1980), seemed to Mauss to be a helpful way of exploring the link between the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of the human being.

Around the same time, this link also caught the attention of a Russian theater director, Konstantin Stanislavski, who spoke out against the conventions of superficial, bombastic stagecraft that were typical of his era. In order to break away from the stereotyped, exaggerated postures and gestures used by actors, he developed a working method known as the "method of physical actions" (Stanislavski [1936] 1958, 1966). In order to build a role, he suggested that actors start out from the question

"what would I do in such circumstances?" rather than "what would I feel and how should I show it?" He encouraged actors to translate the internal logic of scenic actions or the dramatic plot into their bodies, believing that only attention to the smallest details of these actions could make them convincing. Thanks to his method, actors were to be able to experience emotions on stage because they could manipulate their psyche through their bodies.[18]

Stanislavski's method, which is currently taught in most Western drama schools, was taken up and developed further by Jerzy Grotowski in the second half of the twentieth century (see Grotowski 2012, 1995; Schechner and Wolford 1997). Like his illustrious Russian predecessor, the Polish theater theorist and director stressed the need for an actor to have a physical score; however, he doubted whether a perfect realization of such a score would be able to bring a performance to life on its own. From his point of view, a score could be useful not because it allowed a performer to embody a character but because it provided a canvas that enabled them to reveal themself, to make a "carnal confession" on stage (Grotowski 2012: 475). In order to support his collaborators in this process, Grotowski established a training program during the earliest period of his work consisting of physical exercises with tangible objectives such as expanding the performer's vocal range and breathing capacity.[19] However, this was also predominantly aimed at removing blockages, reconfiguring bodily resources, and breaking down the performer's habitus. Grotowski's basic assumption was that if the body is used in a certain way it may act as a kind of gateway and enable those who employ it in that way to go beyond the constraints of their society and themselves. It was this form of transcendence of limitations of all kinds that interested Grotowski: he was looking for emotional and physical states of

18. These emotions are those of both the character and the actor. More precisely, they are the emotions attributed to the character that the actor must ideally experience on stage to embody the character properly by actualizing his or her own personal emotional experiences that originally arose in circumstances somewhat similar to those in which the character finds him- or herself.
19. This phase of Grotowski's work is known as "theater of productions," and took place roughly between 1957 and 1969. This was followed by a second phase of "para-theater" or "participatory theater" between 1969 and 1983 (or even 1986), and then a final phase of "art as a vehicle" from 1986 until his death in 1999. For a chronology of Grotowski's work, see Schechner and Wolford 1997.

exceptional intensity (2012). In the second phase of his work, his interest in freeing the performers from conventions—social, spatial, individual, and physical—became even more intense (2012: 1076–81). At the end of his career, this led him to conceive of “art as a vehicle”: that is, as a way of transferring to some kind of elsewhere, whatever one might mean by the term (Grotowski 1995). Grotowski was aware that like the psycho-physical techniques on which it was based, this transference was happening in most societies within the ritual domain. He even described his own para-theatrical initiatives as “secular rituals” (2012: 905). He sought to develop alternative patterns of action through the exploration of specific body techniques. It is in this sense that he can be considered an heir to Mauss, whose work he knew well (Grotowski 2012: 968) and who, as we should recall, encouraged this type of exploration.

> I believe that underlying all our mystical states there are techniques of the body that have not been studied, and which were studied perfectly by China and India from very ancient times. This socio-psycho-biological study of mysticism must be carried out. I believe that there are inevitably biological means of entering into “communication with the God.” (Mauss [1934] 1968: 386)

Grotowski sought out these means in order to study them from a comparative perspective. The difference between him and Mauss lies in the fact that his approach was not (solely) theoretical: like Stanislavski before him, he was a practitioner, but unlike Stanislavski, who was interested in the everyday techniques of the body, Grotowski explored the ones that were out of step with our day-to-day existence. As did Eugenio Barba. After spending a year with Grotowski, the Italian director and theater theorist founded the Odin Teatret in Norway in 1964 and the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) in Denmark in 1974, where he eventually settled. In both, he focused on the body techniques typical of performance situations—the “extra-daily body techniques,” as he calls them (Barba and Savarese 1985). Barba set out to find their common parameters. Indeed, although several of the traditions he studied differ from each other from an aesthetic standpoint, he maintained that they all have one and the same objective. These “various codifications of the performer’s art were, above all, methods to break the automatisms of everyday life and to create equivalents to them” (1985: 15). For Barba, this dual process of breaking away from everyday life and learning alternative modes of action was essential. He did not see it as

an end in itself, however; he explored it—unlike Grotowski—in order to produce performances.

Why do I go back to the work of these avant-garde theater practitioners and theorists of the twentieth century with which I am familiar because of my multidisciplinary training and my own experience in the field of live performance?[20] I have found them to be invaluable for analyzing the uses of the body by the ritual specialists I study in Africa. My research reveals that these uses of the specialists' body contribute to their particular constructions of self. As I have suggested, such constructions are inseparable from the equally complex constructions of the more-than-humans (animals, things and beings of the bush, fetishes, and spirits) that these experts manage, which enable them to define themselves as experts. That the two constructions are inseparable rests upon the fairly widely shared assumption, of which Tim Ingold (2011, 2014) is one of the best-known proponents, that it is through interactions that humans and nonhumans mutually produce themselves. For my part, as already explained, I choose to focus on the material and/or somatic aspects of these interactions, which, I argue, are not without consequences for the results of this coproduction. It is to be able to understand these aspects better that I draw on Barba's and Grotowski's works. My analyses thus resonate with—but are distinct from—works on anthropology of the body, which have become increasingly numerous since the introduction of the paradigm of embodiment (see Csordas 1990; Jackson 1983; Lock 1993, to cite some pioneering works), and since the notion of agency became a common academic topic.

My work is intended to further expand on my previous publications on *donsow* (see Kedzierska Manzon 2005, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2014b and c, 2016a), while also entering into dialogue with the English-speaking authors who study their tradition—often in the peripheral religion of the Mande (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire)—and who partially overlook the French-language texts on the topic, including my own (see, for example, Hagberg 2004a and b; Hellweg 2004, 2009, 2011; and Konkouris 2013). It is also to complement or give nuance to the research of numerous scholars on *basiw*, and so many others who have examined

20. Between 1993 and 1995, I participated in workshops organized by theater groups founded by former disciples of Grotowski—Teatr Wegajty, Osrodek Praktyk Teatralnych Gardzienice, and Osrodek Pogranicze Sejny; and then, between 1995 and 1998, I was a member of Teatr Remus, directed by Katarzyna Kazimierczuk.

fetishes in general (see Bazin 1986 and 1996; Brett-Smith 1983, 1994, 1997; Colleyn 1987, 2001, 2004; as well as Coquet 1987; Graeber 2005; MacGaffey 1990; Pels 1998) as well as those interested in spirit possession (such as Boddy 1989; Gibbal 1982; Lambek 1982, 2000, 2002, 2013; Leiris 1958; and Masquelier 2001, 2002, 2008). Would these authors subscribe to the interpretation of ritual as a technique, or as a mode of embodied engagement consisting in the transfer of initiatives from ritual specialists to third-party agents—a transfer ultimately enabling these specialists to consolidate their own human power and become accomplished, respected subjects? It is not impossible. I do not find their writings, however, to give quite enough information on the role of the body in that process, or on its sensory and dispositive modalities. As for my own contribution, it aims not to define what ritual does—which several eminent researchers have done before me—but (more modestly) to define exactly *how* it does what it does.

How to Write about Rituals?

Because rituals are particular modes of action, I have chosen an equally particular mode of composition to reflect on them most accurately. It consists of a montage of various types of text. First, there are selected passages from my field notes and original or translated excerpts from interviews conducted in the field. To these I have added life stories or anecdotes that have been related to me; political and ritual speeches, some recorded and some reconstructed from memory; fragments of songs; incantations or ritual formulas that have been transcribed and translated; sayings everybody knows; summaries of oral literary works the performance of which I have attended or that have been published; and, last but not least, quotations from ethnographic sources and anthropological works. There are also the scenes which I paint in the present tense, as if I were suddenly transported, with the reader, back in time to a specific day, moment, ceremony, or situation of which I strive to provide the taste and the feeling through its detailed description. And finally, there is also the metadiscourse of my analysis that encompasses and frames the other types of text and the images that punctuate it and act as bearers of meaning in their own right.

In addition to situating me in my field, particularly through the excerpts from my field notes, the advantage of this collage is that it does not obscure the dynamic and heterogeneous aspect of the realities I

study and of the ritual practices I examine. They sometimes convey contradictory representations. I believe that a montage is a more appropriate way of presenting such contradictory accounts than a more conventional writing style because it draws the reader's attention to the varied nature of my sources and the diversity of my interlocutors, who come from a variety of social, economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. My research has extended over a relatively long period: I have been conducting it since 1995, through field trips lasting from a few weeks to several months to Odienné and the rural areas of northern Côte d'Ivoire for the first two years, and the villages of the border region of Mali and Guinea and in Bamako for the following ones. This fact quite naturally led me to meet such diverse interlocutors. Some have been city dwellers for several generations, some were newcomers to the city, and others lived in villages. Some had higher-education degrees, while others had no schooling at all. They were farmers, craftsmen, civil servants, shopkeepers, more or less well-to-do, old or young, men and women, and there was nothing that brought them together apart from their more or less advanced ritual expertise and their willingness to discuss it with me. I hope that the multiplicity of discursive genres in this book accurately reflects the polyphony of their voices and the complexity of their world, which is plural, if not baroque—to use Jean-Pierre Dozon's term (2015)—in tone. This world, which is a perfect example of the ambivalence of "enchanted (post)modernity" (see Dozon 2006), implies multiple frames of reference and the use of several languages (a version of French that is more or less close to the metropolitan standard, Bamanan kan, Maninka, Arabic in some cases, Soninke, Fulani, Dogon, and Bwa). This world is perpetually on the move, and consists in a tangle of perspectives and lifestyles it would be difficult to reconstruct in the classic type of monograph, which is supposedly suited to the study of a tribe with a limited number of members living in an isolated enclave. Today's Mali and other twenty-first-century African countries—where large, more or less cosmopolitan metropolises are not at all cut off from the rural areas that surround them, or from other continents—require a multidimensional or hybrid approach and descriptive strategy.

My writing strategy resonates not only with the subject and empirical basis of this study but also with the way I work in the field. I immerse myself body and soul in the (ritual) situations I study, and I take part directly in them so that I am able to understand how the protagonists talk and act—all the while asking questions, which can often be quite incisive. Indeed, it often happens that I pursue the same line of questioning

in a somewhat provocative manner, and invite my interlocutors to clarify their point of view or to illustrate it with examples to convey their experiences. With some of them, I engage in philosophical dialogues in which we lay bare our respective constructions of meaning, as it is important for me to understand theirs, to grasp their intimate life experiences and the logics that guide them. Ritual logics differ in certain respects from everyday logics, just as ritual uses of the body differ from those that are a part of everyday life. Barba (1985) uses the term "dilation" to speak about both body and mind functioning in a ritual context. In his view, the dilation of the body is, indeed, a corollary of the dilation of thought, which progresses according to unexpected associations of ideas brought together by the principle of montage and not by a linear, unidirectional logic. Given that this work is about ritual, and therefore about dilated logics and bodies, what more appropriate writing strategy could there be than my form of montage?

Although it is somewhat atypical, this writing strategy is not without precedent in anthropology—particularly in English. In using it, I am following in the footsteps of others—notably, Michael Taussig, Michael Lambek, and Michael Jackson—who quote their field notes and interviews substantially in their works, distinguishing them from the body of the text and blending them with different types of sources and multiple discursive genres into a captivating whole. Lambek and Jackson are important to me in more ways than one. I share with them not only a particular vision of ethnography but also a central interest in intersubjectivity. Like Lambek, I want to show how a relationship to certain more-than-humans enables the experts who are involved in their construction to transform themselves and become "virtuous subjects" (Lambek 2000). Like Jackson (1998), I deal with rituals as modes of engagement through which it is possible to appropriate the world, reinvent one's identity, reshape one's past, and gain control over one's life: in short, to become an agent. I hope that my study of the conversations with the experts I met in the field and of their bodies in action will help us to learn how to access freedom—both in Africa today and in other times and under other skies—freedom understood here as resting on "our capacity to contradict and convert, to annihilate through our actions and our imagination, the situations that seem to circumscribe, govern and define" (1998: 29).

FIRST MOVEMENT

Donsoya: Around the Hunt

CHAPTER 1

Donsow: Hunters, "Civilizing Heroes," and Ritual Experts

Mande Hunting Societies Past and Present

Bamako, May 2005. The city is teeming with men in multicolored and ocher cotton outfits: they are *donsow*. Some wear paramilitary-style camouflage pants and overalls in shades of green, yellow, and brown, which are fashionable these days because they are easier to make than cotton tunics (Figures 3 and 4).[1]

They complement them with Phrygian-style caps, small round headdresses adorned with antelope horns, and hats it is hard not to associate with western cowboys. Most of them carry fly whisks made from the hair of wild animals—warthogs in particular—and shotguns that load through the barrel. Many, especially the singers, attach mirrors, animal tails, cowrie shells, rectangular leather pouches containing powders and plant remedies, as well as hunting whistles and richly decorated knives to their clothing (Figures 5 and 6).

Some hide amulets in the shape of metal rings under the wide sleeves of their tunics. Others, although there are fewer of them, walk around with a snake around their arm or a hyena on a leash.

1. As in much of the world, clothing like this is not necessarily a sign of membership in militias or paramilitary forces.

Figure 3. Donso outfit: ocher cotton tunic with attached antelope horns, pants larger up and narrowing down, hunting bag, and Phrygian-style cap, Odienné, Côte d'Ivoire, April 2001. Photo by author.

Figure 4. Rural *donsow* in their cotton oar paramilitary-style tunics, blowing their whistles, near the village of Sélofara, Mali, April 2004. Photo by author.

The *donsow* are members of "hunting brotherhoods," as they are called in French (*confréries des chasseurs*) in official documents, following the academic tradition (Y. T. Cissé 1994). It is the expression used by Fodé Moussa Sidibé, then head of the unit of Mali's Ministry of Culture responsible for organizing the second Rencontres des Chasseurs de l'Ouest Africain. Like the first, which was organized by Sidibé in 2001 on the initiative of Alpha Oumar Konaré, Mali's then president, the festival attracted a large audience, as is always the case for events of this kind. Whether it be a music festival, a parade in conjunction with a national holiday, or a more or less private party held in a public space, large numbers of spectators always come to admire the hunters' dances and watch the "*démonstrations magiques*," as they are locally called, that accompany them. These demonstrations consist of tournaments of sleight of hand in which participants pull various small objects, including banknotes, out of hats and other unlikely places, eat fire, and pierce their cheeks with glowing embers with no trace of injury, among other displays. From Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire to Niamey in Niger—via Dakar in Senegal, Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, and Bamako, the Malian capital—the slender, brownish figures of the *donsow* are easily recognizable. Everywhere they arouse respect, sometimes fear, and always

Figure 5. Late *donsongoni fola* (player of the *donso* instrument) Dramane Coulibaly, near Odienné, Côte d'Ivoire, April 2001. Photo by author.

Figure 6. *Donsongoni fola* Yoro Sidibé, Bamako, May 2004. Photo by author.

admiration. The perseverance of their image among the public begs the question: what do the *donsow* stand for, and what do they embody? Who are they?

They are seen as living symbols of a glorious precolonial past, and the bearers of a more than one-thousand-year-old tradition. This is how Ahmed Touré, a descendant of the royal family of Odienné in northern Côte d'Ivoire, introduced them to me in July 1995 when, filled with wonder, I attended a *donsow* ceremony for the first time. Touré, who was educated at the University of Abidjan, proudly explained to me that the initiation society of the *donsow* had played a part in the genesis of the first West African states—notably the famous Mali Empire, which was founded in the thirteenth century. His words may have been taken from the book by Youssouf Tata Cissé (1994). Cissé, a Malian who pursued an academic career in France, cites Bala Jimba Jakité, an illustrious *donsow* bard, to assert that "Mande, which began with *donsoya* [the practice and ideology of the hunters], is now only held together by *donsoya*" (1994: 17). Then, drawing from the teachings of Wâ Kamissoko, a griot from a prestigious lineage, Cissé explains:

> The history of the Mali Empire begins with the hunters' brotherhood: like his father Fara Koro Maghan Konaté, Sounjata Keïta, the founder of the Mali Empire, was a hunter, and his comrades-in-arms

> were hunters. Moreover, in all areas of *kèya*—"masculinity"—bravery, knowledge, and patriotism, the hunter has always "filled the vessel in which he was placed." (Y. T. Cissé 1994: 17, my translation)

Ngossi Niagaté, then the "traditional chief" (*donsoba*) of Mali's most important *donsow* association, the Fédération Nationale des Chasseurs du Mali (the National Federation of Hunters of Mali: FNCM; see Kedzierska Manzon 2014b: 76–80), clearly shared the same view (Figure 7). In one of the interviews he was kind enough to grant me,[2] he explained that *donsow* have protected local populations against all dangers since the dawn of time—at the cost of their lives, if necessary. He assured me that "as long as there are trees and grains of sand, as long as there are guns and gunpowder, Mali will not be destroyed."

Another leader of the same association, Mohamed Coulibaly, seemed to be of the same opinion when he spoke on Malian television after the 2012 coup d'état, allegedly in the name of all his country's *donsow*. As he said at that time, they were at the government's disposal to support the armed combat in the north and defend their fellow citizens, true to the oath they had once sworn. In response, the representative of the military junta, Seydou Diakité, who was on the air at the same time, entrusted them with guarding their homeland, "eternal Mali."

This phrase refers, of course, to the first Mande state, the empire of Sunjata Keïta, whose symbolic—if not political—continuity the *donsow* are meant to ensure, according to their spokesmen. It was to this state that Coulibaly alluded on television, just as Niagaté did in our private conversation when he mentioned the oath of the *donsow*. The Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne referred to this oath in a completely different context (Amselle and Diagne 2018: 77–79) as did the Malian-born, US-based researcher Cherif Keita in a short film made for educational purposes.[3] Serious doubts remain about the form, and even the existence, of this oath, which was recently included by UNESCO in its list of intangible cultural heritage under the term "Mande Charter" (Kedzierska Manzon 2014b; Simonis 2015).

What is certain is that the roles played by *donsow* throughout history have been quite complex: they were used to secure villages but sometimes also to lay siege to them (see Cashion 1984; Saul 1998; for

2. Kita, Mali, June 2014.
3. *The Mande Hunters: Past and Present*, available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0XnosnFtlM.

Figure 7. The late Ngossi Niagaté, former *donsoba*/spiritual leader of FNCM. Photo taken by a professional photographer offered to me by Niagaté during our meeting in Kita in June 2014.

a summary, see Kedzierska Manzon 2014b). I will not go into the details of their past positions here; if I did, I would need to spend time on the precolonial Mande political structures, which have been masterfully studied by Jean Bazin (1982, 1988), as well as Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'bokolo (1985) and Jean-Loup Amselle (1990). Nor will I analyze the contemporary political commitments of the *donsow* or the heritagization, militarization, and politicization of their movements; for these, I refer interested readers to a large body of works (see, for example, Awenengo Dalberto and Banégas 2021; Bassett 2003, 2004; Ferme and Hoffman 2004; Hagberg 2004a and b, 2006; Hellweg 2004, 2009, 2011; Traoré 2004). I will just make the point that their presentation as an emblem of ancestral values is a key feature of the West African imaginary in general, and the Malian imaginary in particular. Today, their idealized image, which was indisputably constructed at the time of the "hardening of Mande identity" and the recent "return of the colonial unconscious," to use Amselle's terms (2020), is mobilized by various social actors (including ruling elites, the military, intellectuals, civil servants and merchants on their way up the social ladder, representatives of the diaspora and others). This image can be found in the proceedings of the symposium organized in conjunction with the first iteration of the Rencontres des Chasseurs de l'Ouest Africain, entitled "La chasse traditionnelle en Afrique de l'Ouest d'hier à aujourd'hui (Traditional Hunting in West Africa Yesterday and Today)," as this poem, which was included in the proceedings bears witness:

Being a Hunter!
Hunter of old times!
Civilizing hero
Roving warrior
Founder of cities, kingdoms and empires. Eminent male, bold and kind
Men of uncultivated spaces
Wise and knowing hidden and sacred things
Being a hunter in these times of today
These times of loss when everything crumbles and falls
Where game no longer roams the desolate bush
Where the earth pines for man
Where the heavens are short of water
And prodigious in devastating blasts
…

> To be a hunter is to adhere to an ideology
> It is choosing a way, a path
> Striving to accomplish it
> Strengthening your spiritual principles
> Pouring water to refresh ancestors' souls
> To be a hunter is to embark on a permanent quest for knowledge
> To forget what you are and become man's brother
> To give the best of yourself to your community.
> (Sidibé 2001: 326, my translation from French)

The author of this poetic address is none other than the organizer of the Rencontres, Fodé Moussa Sidibé, who is following in the scientific and ideological footsteps of his former teacher, the eminent scholar Youssouf Tata Cissé.

In his recent public statements, Sidibé has objected to the translation of the term *donso* as "hunter." This translation, which is common not only among ethnographers but also among individuals who make a claim to being *donsow*, is indeed problematic. While the word *donsow* does apply to those who might set out in pursuit of game, it refers just as much—or more so—to persons who have historically exercised both religious and coercive power by right, and who have skillfully adapted to new situations. With the end of single-party political systems and the advent of the neoliberal era in West Africa, their roles, which have always been multiple, have become even more diversified. The *donsow* have been gradually integrated into the market economy and employed as forest rangers or guards by private security companies in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Mali. They have transformed their local groups into auxiliary militias sometimes attached to, or sometimes opposing, government armies. The example of Côte d'Ivoire examined by Joseph Hellweg (2004, 2009, 2011) and more recently by Séverine Awenengo Dalberto and Richard Banégas (2021) illustrates this phenomenon. We also see large numbers of *donsow* everywhere becoming "new religious entrepreneurs," to use Benjamin Soares's apt term (2005a and b, 2007, 2016), offering their services for a fee to clients who in many cases are city dwellers. It must be acknowledged, then, that the meanings of the word *donso* are constantly evolving. They are all becoming increasingly complex, particularly because they encompass references to new occupations and detach themselves from the practice of hunting and the bush environment, which were once an essential element of the term (Kedzierska Manzon 2009). What seems to characterize it relatively persistently, or

even increasingly, is its ritual connotation, which is highlighted by Cissé at the beginning of his monograph.

> Although they have long been confronted with the ever-active and destructive influence of Islam on their culture, and have been subjected for a century to the reign of "French and Christian values of civilization", the Malinké and Bambara peoples and their related ethnic groups have not ceased their practice of a large number of rites that demonstrate the vitality of the old agrarian religion … Prominent among these rites are those celebrated by the ancient *donsoton*, the "hunters' society", which is a political and religious brotherhood.
> (Y. T. Cissé 1994: 15, my translation)

A more thorough discussion of this "brotherhood" or hunters' association *donsoton*, and of the way of integrating it, seems needed here before moving ahead.

Donsoton: Relating to Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn

To become a *donso*, which is a personal decision, an individual must choose a master who undertakes to tutor him and join the *donsoton*. My French-speaking interlocutors and researchers studying the *donsoya* all refer to this particular moment of joining as the "initiation." As the expression for it—Bamana/Maninka: *ka taa dankun na*, "to go to the *dankun*," or *ka taa kntonkunna*, "to go to the termite mound"—indicates, it entails going to the *donsow* place of worship. Let us use the example of my own "initiation,"[4] which was broadly similar to others I have seen

4. My initiation took place in Sélofara, the village I stayed in during my doctoral research, on December 14, 2003, not at my request but following a proposal from the *donsow* chief of the village or *donsoba*, Kama, with the agreement of other *donsow*. I can only speculate about the reasons that led them to make this proposal to me, but it did not come as a shock. The ritual enabled them to give my work a formal, official frame and from their point of view it formalized my—initially informal—position as a student-hunter who was looking to learn about *donsoya* and venturing into the bush regularly (see next chapter). It helped regularize this situation with an appropriate ritual. I assume that their decision was also partly driven by the rivalry between the *donsow* of this village, which was singularized by my presence, and other neighboring villages. It is unquestionably

or read about (Hellweg 2011; Kedzierska Manzon 2022b; Konkouris 2013), to see what is involved. This is what I wrote in my field journal:

> Dia [my future master, see next chapter] picks me up and we head for the *dankun*, picking leaves and branches along the way, which we place on the termite mound when we arrive. The village's elderly masters and a few younger *donsow* are already there. [The chief of the *donsow* of the village] Kama presides. He grabs the calabash containing the water with the red kola nuts in it. He puts the water in his mouth before spitting it out on the termite mound, and introduces me as someone who has requested a sacrifice and who wishes to join the *donsoton*, saying: "Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, here is your water from Agnès, who asks for your help."[5] Then he orders me to repeat his words as well as his actions, which I struggle to do, being unfamiliar with the spitting technique. He then throws two halved kola nuts into the air, but the halves clearly do not fall in the desired manner. Indeed, the old chief feels obliged to add that it is the first time he is about to initiate a woman, but that he'd heard of a few women being initiated elsewhere.

Leaving aside the question of gender, which I analyze elsewhere (Kedzierska Manzon 2021a), let us continue the description:

> Eventually, the kolas fall in a way that shows that my sacrifice is accepted. Kama decides to proceed with the sacrifice of the chicken that had been bought earlier and brought for the occasion. My master, Dia, takes charge. The bird's blood drips on to the termite mound, and Kama tells Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn that it's "their blood."

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symptomatic of the current attempts to revalorize local traditions and of the ongoing renegotiations of both collective and individual identities that are taking place in Mali today (see the Coda).

5. Bourama Foutigui Coulibaly told me that the term Kɔntrɔn is made up of *k*ɔ: "behind" and *ntɔrɔn*: "hoof," in reference to the part of the animal that must be subjected to ritual treatment, in addition to its tail, to appease its vital forces after its death. Although this interpretation is plausible, it has not been confirmed by other people I have spoken to. It should be noted that this Kɔntrɔn, revered by *donsow*, and the *basi* Kɔntrɔn discussed later in the book are considered to be two distinct entities.

The positions the chicken took as it died were then interpreted. The first, I was told, was beneficial: the chicken lay on its back and covered itself with its wings. The second, with the chicken lying on its side with one leg in front of the other, its feathers ruffled, was also positive, and indicated that Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn would now protect me. This interpretation was reached on the same principles as those applied during sacrifices to the *basiw/boliw*, about which more in chapter 4.

> After the sacrifices, Kama tells me about the rules that need to be observed. In particular, he makes it clear that close relations with the wives of other *donsow* are forbidden to me. More generally, I'm supposed never to betray the *donsow*, on pain of being punished by Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn. I must abstain from all sexual relations during the coming night. The official part of the ceremony is over, my master fires a rifle into the air, we cover the termite mound, and the chicken meat is roasted and eaten on the spot. The whole ritual lasts about half an hour.

The simplicity of this ritual is disconcerting. While it is going on, little or nothing is said about the relations that are now supposed to tie the participants and/or recipients. Fortunately, on our return to the village, I am given a few details about the relationship between master (*karamɔgɔ*) and student (*kalanden*) that the initiation creates:

> If a student encounters a problem, such as systematically missing game, he comes to see his master, who must help him and give him remedies, if he has any. If a disagreement ever separates the student from another *donso*, the master must accompany him to the chief to settle the problem. The student must bring his master a piece of each large game animal he has killed—the "master's bone"—and sometimes other parts of the meat. With that, Dia asks me with a laugh what I plan to bring him, and when.

It is clear that through the sacrificial act, the initiation brings the new member into a vast community that includes his master, *karamɔgɔ*, the old hunters, starting with their chief(s) *donsoba(w)*, the younger hunters, *donso-kalandenw*, who have been initiated before him and are considered to be senior to him, and finally the presumed founders of the community in question: Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn. These two guardian figures of the *donsow* were presented to me in the field as the primordial couple—a married couple or a mother and son (see Kedzierska Manzon 2014b) —who

Figure 8. *Dankun: donsow* shrine near the village of Sélofara, December 2003. Photo by author.

established hunting and founded the hunters' initiation society. Hunters see them not as self-generated creatures from elsewhere but as deceased humans, a kind of ancestor, as this conversation, and other similar ones, reveal (my speech is in italics):

– The *donsow* are committed to Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn.
– *And are they spirits* [jinaw], *fetishes* [basiw], *humans* [mɔgɔw]*?*
– Dead humans [*mɔgɔw salen*].
– *But does that mean we can communicate with the dead?*
– Not directly, but we have an agreement with Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn.

This agreement is periodically updated at the *dankun*, the *donsow*'s place of ritual activity. It is said to be the grave of Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, and is represented by a termite mound, which is pulled up elsewhere in the bush and replanted at the crossroads near the village while incantations are uttered (see Kedzierska Manzon 2009, 2014b) (Figure 8).[6]

6. It is worth noting that termite mounds elicit particular attitudes and uses throughout Africa, and not just among the Mande. For some peoples, they are the ball-gods, as Dominique Zahan (1960: 233) called them, or, to borrow an apt phrase from Michèle Coquet (1994: 41), the "faceless gods."

It is on this termite mound covered with leaves that the sacrifices are placed. To be more precise, chewed kola nuts are spat out onto it and it is sprinkled with the blood of sacrificed fowl. It seems that in the past there was also a libation of millet beer but, because of the increased presence of Islam, this is no longer the case.

I raised the subject of the sacrifices with Chief Kama's deputy at the time, Falaye:

– *If Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn are humans, is it possible to see or hear them?*
– No.
– *And when you offer them sacrifices, how do you know they'll accept them?*
– If what you ask for comes true, you can see that the sacrifice has been accepted. You can tell it from the positions of the kola nuts and chickens.

The same procedure is used by all Mande ritual experts to determine the *basiw*'s attitude to the requests made of them (see the Second Movement). Let us focus on Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, whose human nature Falaye emphasized. During my interviews, I tried to gain a better understanding of their singular status:

– *And sacrifices are offered to other deceased* donsow*?*
– No.
– *Even the old masters second funerals are organized for?*[7]
– Not even to them.

As we can see, the status of Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn is not the same as for other departed *donsow*: sacrifices are made to them on the sites replicating their grave. These sacrifices are intended to establish or maintain a privileged relationship between these figures and the *donsow*, thereby confirming the cooperative relations among the *donsow* themselves. According to one of the Sélofara's *donsow*, Nimori, Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn can also act as judges for the *donsow*:

7. These are the funeral rites known as *sinbonasi*. See Kedzierska Manzon 2005.

– During initiations, Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn are asked for help.[8] If someone wishes you ill, and you don't hold a grudge against him, and you give him [hunting] meat, and he eats it [and continues to wish you ill], he will be punished by Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn … You are initiated to be protected by Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn in the bush, to be lucky, not to get hurt or killed by the animals …
– *So Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn protect the* donsow*?*
– Yes.
– *Also against other* donsow*?*
– If a *donso* hurts you on a regular basis and continues to do so, and you do nothing to him over time, Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn will step in eventually.

The view expressed here by Nimori is shared by others. Their relationship with Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn is clearly an asymmetrical one, however: one more of allegiance than alliance. Sacrifices are made regularly to confirm it, notably during the annual celebrations (*dankun sɔn*) that bring all the *donsow* together at the *dankun* at a given locality at the beginning of each lunar year. Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, who receive these sacrifices, are regarded as potential benefactors of all *donsow*, able to protect those who call on them. Like sacrifices made elsewhere to other more-than-humans, those for Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn serve to make them agents, according to a classic ritual pattern of exchange: *do ut des*.

Ritual Status of *Donsow*: Relating to More-Than-Humans in the Bush

As is clear from what precedes, the *donsow* are experts in the field of the religious practices that are often referred to locally as "traditional" (see, among others, Y. T. Cissé 1994; Derive and Dumestre 1999; Hagberg 2004a and b, 2006; Hellweg 2011), and which I have suggested labeling as "non-Islamic." They are members of an initiation society. Yet, I would argue that their ritual status does not rest solely or mainly on their relation to Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn but rather should be linked to the very nature of their primary activity: hunting, to its spatial framework and transgressive nature.

8. *ka magɛn*. This same verb is used to describe the terms of the relationship between humans and *basiw/boliw* (see Kedzierska Manzon 2018).

To substantiate this claim, let us begin by recalling that Mande oral literature situates the genesis of musical instruments, masks, and other ritual objects, as well as royal power, in the bush (Camara 1980, 2001; Y. T. Cissé 1994). The bush is an absolute reference point for all non-Islamic practices and the preferred setting for the performance of numerous rites (Bazin 1986; Brett-Smith 1994; Colleyn 2001; McNaughton 1988). It has an ambiguous reputation, however, because it is regarded as frightening, populated not only by wild beasts but also by other beings that may potentially be hostile towards humans. This is how Yacouba, the driver who took me from the airport to my hotel when I arrived in Mali for the first time in October 2003, introduced it. Along the way, Yacouba, whose prematurely deceased older brother was a great *donso*, taught me that those who venture into the bush are often prey to illusions. Attracted by lights that are in reality only the eyes of treacherous "bush spirits," *kungo fɛnw* (see chapter 3), these people risk becoming lost and losing their lives unless they possess the knowledge *donsow* usually have. No one ventures into the bush without preparing for it, as Sidi Mohammed Keïta, president of the FNCM at the time we spoke, confirmed to me a few days later.[9] He clarified that to become a *donso*, one must join the *donsow* society, and before that one must choose a master from whom to acquire the knowledge needed to hunt over the course of a long apprenticeship. He went on to explain:

– You can't be initiated. For one thing, you're a woman. You can't get to the bottom of the secrets of the hunt.
– *Aren't there any female hunters?*
– Among us, anyway, women are restricted to the kitchen. If women have to learn about fetishes and things like that, they do so discreetly at home, but they're not allowed to show it.
– *Why?*
– Oh, that! Back in the villages, if women do it, they do it discreetly.
– *And what would happen if a woman went into the bush to hunt?*
– First, she doesn't even have the courage to do it. Even in the Sigi story, the woman takes the rifle to kill the buffalo but then says it was her husband who killed it. You can't have the willpower and courage to go into the bush. You have to have "heart." If you were told right now to

9. Interview in Bamako, October 20, 2003. Sidi Mohammed Keïta is a civil servant and a city dweller. His French is impeccable and so we spoke in French.

> go hunting, to go into the bush, would you have the courage to do it? Even if you'd done an apprenticeship, you wouldn't have the courage to go there alone. Because the hunter is alone, and he can meet lions, spirits, all sorts of things he has to face.

Keïta's words suggest that the fact that women usually do not hunt is not so much a matter of a formal prohibition as it is of women's lack of disposition or capacity. The fact that the prohibition is not absolute was confirmed by my subsequent encounters with a few of the rare *donsoton* women and a conversation with another *donso*, as well as by my own subsequent initiation.[10] Yet, these few exceptions do not change the fact that in general women do not integrate into the *donsoton* and do not hunt. A few weeks after my conversation with M. Keïta, quoted here, a rural *donso* assured me that women in general did not feel able—in other words, they did not have the "courage" or a "hard [enough] heart" (*dusu gɛlɛn*)—to venture out into the bush, not least because they did not possess the essential knowledge, which men who were not *donsow* also lacked. Wives of *donsow* from the village I stayed in during my doctoral research told me the same at a group meeting: not being admitted to the secrets of the hunt through membership of the *donsoton*, they said they did not possess the skills to go hunting, which was a risky endeavor.[11] I was in fact warned before arriving in Mali that hunting is a dangerous enterprise that requires special knowledge or agency. It is what Drissa Koné, a native of the Odienné region, told me in Côte d'Ivoire in April 2001.

Drissa had further reasons for women's not participating. I had first met Drissa in 1995. A convert to Christianity and a full-fledged *donso* at the same time—which did not seem to pose any problems for him—he was then employed by the Odiennenka branch of the Peace Corps. He would later marry a Peace Corps volunteer and move to the United States. When we met for the second time in 2001, he gave me a few lessons on the subject of *donsoya*, and pointed out that women do not become *donsow* as "they can't destroy life because they give it." Indeed, as his words suggest, while the ritual status of the *donsow* is inseparable from the local perception of the space in which they carry out their activity, it is also rooted in its transgressive nature: hunting means taking

10. For a fuller discussion of this question and of the cases of women in the *donsoton*, see chapter 3, below, and Kedzierska Manzon 2021a.
11. I have reproduced their comments here, based on my field notes.

life. Among the Mande, the killing of animals, particularly during ritual sacrifice, is a male prerogative, and it is men who officiate in local rituals or at initiation ceremonies. The *donsow* are thus akin to these other ritual specialists, with whom they share the privilege of exercising the right of life or death over animals, both during ritual sacrifice and when on hunting trips. I will return to the transgressive dimension of their practice at the end of this part of the book, after first discussing the structure of this practice and its key elements, and, in the next chapter, its somatic basis.

The Structure and Key Elements of Hunting Practice

Here are a few excerpts from the field notes I wrote down the day after my first hunting expedition with Drissa, who, despite his initial reservations, becoming visibly tired of my incessant requests, in 2001 finally gave in and agreed to let me accompany him into the bush.

> Drissa picks me up around noon, and we leave to look for his friend in the village near Odienné where his parents still lived, which we reach by moped. Once there, the two men cut leaves from a plant and place them in a large calabash, then Drissa utters an incantation and spits on the calabash several times, adds water, and mixes it all together. They rub their hands, heads, and legs with this mixture. Earlier, in the courtyard of Drissa's property, they had sacrificed two white chickens, two white kola nuts, and milk to two male spirits, one of whom, according to what they told me, specialized in urban issues, and the other in matters relating to the bush. Apparently, the second spirit is not pleased to have been summoned like this right in the middle of the village. Offerings were usually made to it on an altar outside the village. Through the position on the ground of the kola nuts, the gift of which begins the sacrifice,[12] he warns us unhappily that our escapade will be fruitful but very tiring and that we'll need to walk a long way before finding any game.

It is not unusual for a hunting expedition to be preceded by preparations of this kind. They often take place in the woods, but they are an

12. For more on communication through oblatory materials, between divine and human, see Kedzierska Manzon (2018), the final chapter of this movement of the book, and the Second Movement of the book.

open secret: everyone is aware of the need for them, even if not everyone knows the details. These preparations are viewed as a de facto part of the hunting activity, as evidenced by the fact that Malian *donsow* staged them in a public demonstration to familiarize me with this activity. But let us return to my first trip into the bush:

> Finally, we leave the village at around 5 p.m. It's too late to take advantage of the infernal heat of the day to surprise animals sleeping in the shade of a bush or shrub, so we head for a suitable spot and plan a night hunt by the light of Drissa's and his companion's headlamps.

Later, in Mali, I would regularly witness this type of hunting, which I have described in detail elsewhere (Kedzierska Manzon 2014b: 47–55 and 150–52). But it was in Côte d'Ivoire in 2001 that I came across it for the first time. I observed:

> The hunter is, above all, one who walks. Who walks and looks … Last night, we walked about 20 kilometers, according to my estimates—I ask Drissa, who assures me that we walked for 40—over hilly terrain, full of hollows, covered with grass that impeded our progress. We moved forward, banging into branches on the trees and running into others that have fallen to the ground. When hunting, you have to walk quickly and carefully with a very light step to avoid twisting your ankle when you slip on a stone or a piece of wood. You sometimes have to lift your feet above your knees if there are a lot of obstacles on the ground, which is very tiring.

As I followed Drissa, I discovered for the first time just how much work the body does when you are hunting. You can spend several hours walking during a single trek. It all depends on luck, which certain specific procedures, including the preparations I have described above, are designed to bring about. The following episode confirms this:

> After a stop of about half an hour, we continue, walking in single file: Drissa in the lead, me second, and Mamadou bringing up the rear. After a few hours, we make another stop near a termite mound. We lie down. Drissa explains that he was expecting to find tracks of game where we've been, and that normally, after using the plants, we should know where to look for it and see it. Since we'd left straight away and [he] hadn't slept after "washing" himself with the herbal mixtures, he decides to take advantage of this short stop to do just

> that, hoping to have a premonitory dream. When he wakes up, we continue walking. Shortly afterwards, we come across an antelope.[13] Drissa catches sight of it, shows it to us, then stops us with a sharp gesture and approaches it on tiptoe.

This approach step is the quintessence of hunting, and I will discuss it in greater depth in the next chapter. As I contemplated it for the first time that night, I was left speechless. I then witnessed the killing of the animal:

> Drissa shoots and kills the antelope, then slits its throat (he explains that the inhabitants of his country, including the members of his family who will eat the meat, are Muslim).[14] The animal, once hit, moves for a long time, visibly surprised by death. It's uncanny to see the life slowly slipping out of its eyes.

A certain uncanniness is inherent in all killing, as Georges Bataille (1955) argues, as it is, no doubt, in birthing. In many societies, those who are empowered to manage life and death—as *donsow*, but also as the officiants who perform blood sacrifices or, on the other side of the spectrum and elsewhere in the world, midwives are—have the status of ritual experts (see Moisseeff 2016; Verdier 1979). But let us return to the hunting:

> When the antelope stops moving completely, we put it, cut into pieces, in a bag and carry on walking. After a while, we stop to rest again. The ground is wet here: it's been raining. We do not come across any more antelopes, but we see several genets, these wild cats clinging to tree branches like koalas. When Drissa tries to inspect as much of the space around him as possible with his headlamp, both horizontally and vertically, we see their eyes shining in the dark. Then we leave the bush and find ourselves on a plain. We stop. My companions fall asleep quickly, snoring loudly. I'm cold. After some hesitation, I wake them and we head back to the village … We eat what's left of last night's

13. My very limited knowledge of the local fauna at the time means that I cannot identify this animal. Most probably it was a crowned duiker.
14. In my experience, among the Mande, the throats of animals that have been shot are always slit, and a bit of blood allowed run out, to make their meat halal. In this respect, the behavior of Drissa matches the behavior of other hunters I have had a chance to accompany in the bush.

> dinner, then Drissa and Mamadou go to bed in their clothes while I wash quickly and change before lying down. When I awake at around 8 a.m., they're already up, and the meat has been divided into batches and distributed to the people who are entitled to it. A cup of coffee, some millet porridge and off we go, heading toward Odienné. When we arrive, we drop our share of the antelope off at Mamadou's father's house, and I head "home." I don't feel too tired, but my lower back hurts. According to Drissa, it's this part of the body that's put under the most strain when hunting. My legs are sore too, especially my feet, which have worked a lot. Finally, my eyes hurt. The effect of the dust, no doubt, and trying to see in the dark. Drissa tells me his head hurts from carrying the torch. I also remember that I had been thirsty all the time during the night, and I drank a liter of water. My companions, on the other hand, like camels, drank nothing but a small quantity of water they took from a backwater along the way. How do they put up with all this? Can they really rest and fall asleep anywhere without worrying about possible dangers? I admit that the tiredness sometimes becomes unbearable, insurmountable. Fifteen minutes' rest is enough to comfort a battered body. Hunters need to be strong and light.

They must also, of course, know how to use their weapons. In this regard, I noted:

> Before we set off into the bush, at the request of Drissa, who lends me his rifle, I practice shooting. Outside the village, I aim at a piece of paper tied to a tree. I take the stance Drissa shows me: left leg in front, right leg slightly behind, rifle against the shoulder, well supported, elbow almost at a right angle. Chin against the rifle. Inhale, pull, breathe. When you fire, you don't think, you let your body do it. Drissa explains that it's essential to stop breathing when you fire. But it's not enough. You also have to stop thinking, and become "empty."

I will discuss the question of mental "emptiness" later, as well as the body techniques on which hunting is based. Let us first return to the structure of the activity observed in rural areas in the early 2000s. The description I have presented here resonates strongly with other trips I wrote about in successive field diaries between 2003 and 2007, and also with accounts from friends and companions. In terms of its unfolding and sequences, my first venture into the bush in April 2001 resembles several others—a good fifty in all—that I was part of in areas on the border of Mali and Guinea.

To recapitulate briefly: hunting expeditions are in general preceded by certain preparations that sometimes include blood sacrifices. These preparations take place in the village or in the bush; they may even be done during an expedition if it proves unsuccessful for a long time. As far as the timing of these expeditions is concerned, the question is a complex one, as hunting trips can begin at different times of the day depending mainly on the season of the year. During the rainy season, they do commonly start in the evening, between nightfall and moonrise, to avoid any light that might illuminate the hunter and make them easily visible to the animals. Such nearby hunting, if I can phrase it this way, is often undertaken when the day is taken up with work in the fields, because all the rural *donsow* among whom I carried out my research are peasant farmers who mainly live off food crops (millet, rice, and maize), to which some add income from cash crops (cotton) or other activities (small-scale trade or crafts). Yet, in the dry season—particularly around the time of the annual hunting festivals I describe elsewhere[15]—hunter-farmers may spend several days in the bush exploring areas farther from their homes, as this is the low season for agriculture. Hunting does sometimes take place at night at this time of year, but it is mostly undertaken during the day and quite frequently, even several times a week. Finally, during the intermediate season, after work in the fields has been completed but before the temperatures rise to their April peak, hunting takes place once or twice a week during the day and at night.[16]

As we see, the time devoted to hunting varies with the season, as does the spatial range of trips. For example, we covered some twenty kilometers during my first expedition with Drissa seeking game, making a wide circle around our starting point. In my later experience, this is the typical range for a hunt that lasts all night or all day. Evening or morning hunts are shorter in duration, and involve shorter distances. Finally, I should make it clear that in a rural context, the itinerary also depends on the prey being hunted. Birds and small mammals are hunted on the outskirts of villages. To find larger game, it is necessary to go into the "deep bush" or "uncultivated bush" (*dan* or *wula*),[17] into areas that are not frequented by free-ranging livestock or villagers. To reach such

15. See the audiovisual appendix to my 2014 book *Chasseurs mandingues*.
16. During my first stay in the village, for example, I recorded some fifteen hunts by the same hunters over a period of two months.
17. For the etymology, affordances, and analysis of the many terms used to refer to the bush, see Kedzierska Manzon 2009, 2021a.

areas, you need to walk for at least half an hour or more depending on the characteristics of the terrain and the region in question. It is there, particularly around sources of water (rivers and ponds), that hunters look for animals. While the itineraries are often common to all hunters, every individual regularly returns to places where he has encountered prey in the past, and so everybody has his own mental map of the spots where game can be found. That being said, *donsow* sometimes join their friends from other localities to hunt with them. In this case, they are guided by their hosts. And indeed, hunting is often done in groups. It is not uncommon for a *donso* to decide to hunt with others or for an apprentice to follow his master into the bush, if the master is still active. The hunters on joint expeditions start together, in single file, and once they arrive at their desired location they separate. They choose a common general direction and proceed in this direction, each following their own path, sometimes in the company of their apprentice(s). Before going on their separate paths, they usually decide on a meeting point. They meet there if no one kills any game; if they hear one of their number firing, the others go to join him immediately. While hunting, they keep at a distance but within the range of the whistles they carry with them so they can alert their comrades in case of need, such as an accident, or if they find tracks of game.

In spite of its variable duration and spatial boundaries, rural hunting has a relatively fixed structure: it consists of a stable series of sequences that occur in the same order. My hunting trip with Drissa is a good illustration of this. Once the pre-hunting preparations have been completed, the expedition begins with a brisk, fairly orderly walk to the chosen location. This is followed by slower and more cautious progress in search of game. Once the game has been detected, the approach is transformed into a very light-footed walk that ends with immobility for a shot. If the prey is only wounded and flees, the hunter follows its tracks to attempt a second shot. If he happens to kill small mammals or birds along the way, he puts them in his bag and continues his search. When he kills larger prey—an antelope, for example, or a warthog butchered on the spot—he packs the meat in its skin so that it can be carried, and ends his hunt.

When large animals or animals with certain traits that are considered to be unusual—by the color of their coat or physical deformities, for example—are shot, a special ritual is performed that is intended to destroy, or at least weaken, the harmful forces that radiate from this kind of game—which is known as "black/dark game" (*sɔgɔ fin*). Otherwise, it could prove to be harmful to the hunter or the people who eat the meat.

Despite his best efforts and after spending several hours in the bush, the hunter sometimes returns empty-handed. The failure rate varies from one individual to another, of course. It also depends on the time of year, and the technique used—day hunting is considered to be easier—but it is far from insignificant. It would be hard for me to put a precise number on it, but many hunting expeditions I took part in ended unsuccessfully. Its high unpredictability together with its physically challenging character is a reason why hunting locally is viewed as a difficult occupation (*gɛlɛn*) and why numerous precautions are taken to ensure its success.

Before concluding this introductory description, I should stress again that hunting is on the decline in Mali, as it is elsewhere in West Africa, because of a scarcity of game and changes in agricultural methods and in habitat generally. The popularization of cash crops and the introduction of chemical fertilizers have modified the patterns of cooperation among peasant farmers, making the old religious institutions, agricultural and hunting alike, obsolete. Urban migrations have also had an impact on the environment. As evidenced by my interviews and according to Bourama Foutigui Coulibaly, the General Secretary of the FNCM, between 50 and 75 percent of *donsow* residing in Bamako no longer hunt—unlike their fathers, who, I was told, were able to hunt regularly in the wooded areas around the capital before it expanded and new roads were built. Nowadays, hunting on a regular basis is no longer possible for "urban" hunters either in Mali or in other West African countries. Those of the urban *donsow* who do hunt do so sporadically, organizing motorized expeditions the results of which are sometimes partly intended for sale. By and large, they do not join the *donsoton* and/or hunting associations in order to learn how to hunt; they do so for other reasons. I would argue that it enables them to become powerful and even extraordinary agents: *donsow*, whose tradition and society clearly represent, now as ever, a symbolic capital to be mobilized by individuals or collectives for identity, economic, or political purposes.

But how do *donsow* develop such an extraordinary agency, and what exactly does it entail? To provide some answers to these questions, in the two remaining chapters of the First Movement, I will look at the techniques of the body that are peculiar to hunting. As I will show, these techniques simultaneously reflect and generate a singular conceptualization of bush beings—wild animals and more-than-human creatures—that emerges during subsistence hunting. As we examine precisely how these creatures are constructed, we will also explore how the *donsow* construct themselves as a singular kind of ritual expert.

CHAPTER 2

Hunting as a Technique

"In the Bush, We Don't Act Like in the Village"

Kama Keïta (Figure 9), the chief of the *donsow* of the village where I stayed during my fieldwork in 2023, explained to me during one of our many conversations that when they go to the bush, hunters do not behave the same way as they do in the village.[1] Their physical comportment seemed crucial for their hunting success and even their identity as *donsow*. What kind of comportment is it exactly? I was told that when searching for game, you must glance rapidly everywhere, "to the right, to the left, up, down," scanning the entire area to detect the animal. It is impossible to decide where to look in advance: you need to be able to change the direction of your gaze instantly if something suspicious appears behind or to the side. It is also impossible to predetermine speed or other parameters of your progress: if prey flees, you run after it, and if a wild animal attacks, you dodge it by taking refuge in a tree. The ability to be constantly on the alert, ready to react, makes it possible to perceive sources of danger and avoid them, as well as to find prey and kill it. This predisposition to

1. These conversations took place in the chief's courtyard, which was also mine, as he was my host. They were initially recorded and then transcribed (or rather summarized) in my field notes, from which I have reconstructed them here. They always took place in the presence of Kama's son, Madi, a French-speaking former soldier in the Malian army, who assisted me during my visit, especially with the language.

Figure 9. *Donsoba* Kama Keïta, in front of his home, Sélofara, December 2003. Photo by author.

vigilance or the education of attention is a trait of the experienced hunter. This was Kama's view, shared by other *donsow* of the village, who numbered twenty-three when I arrived there in October 2003.

At the meeting the elderly chief organized to introduce me to the *donsow* (Figure 10), they all stressed that a hunter needs to be reactive and alert when out hunting, and to adapt his approach continuously. The *donsow* at another location that I visited a few weeks later had a similar message. They told me that hunters are accustomed to paying attention to what their senses tell them, and to constantly adapting their speed to what they see. This same observation was also offered in my many individual interviews conducted in the same period. One interview worthy of mention was with Yacouba Diarra (Figure 11), who was originally from the Kati region and who was married and had been living in the area since the 1980s.

Yacouba drew my attention to the fact that when you set off into the bush, you cannot ever know what you are going to find, or whether the animals you encounter will be "sleeping, walking, grazing …" It goes without saying that the hunter's approach and position depend on those of the game and its characteristics. There are a few basic principles, however. Whatever the type of animal, the hunter must always tread lightly: slower when tracking and faster when approaching, as the description of my first expedition in the previous chapter also suggests. When asked about this, Yacouba added that one always approached on tiptoe. He went on to explain:

– Every part of the body plays a role in hunting. The feet, the ears to detect noises, the hands to clear branches that get in our way and to chase away stinging insects, the back.
– *Really? The back too?*
– Yes, the back is very important. First of all, if you kill game, you carry it on your back … Besides, a hunter with a fragile back can't walk for long or stay out all night.
– *And then, if you go back to the village after the hunt, do you go to the fields?*
– Of course.
– *And when do you sleep?*
– The next night.
– *It must be tiring.*
– Hunting is tough.

Figure 10. This is a family picture: *donsow* at the *dankun* after my "initiation," near Sélofara, December 2003. Photo by author.

Figure 11. Yacouba Diarra showing me his artisanal rifle, Sélofara, November 2003. Photo by author.

My early hunting experiences confirm what I learned through my interviews: that hunting relies on a type of physical and cognitive behavior that might be described, without going into the details for now, as "special." To study its precise parameters, I chose to accompany *donsow* into the bush whenever possible. This is my account of my first escapade with Yacouba:

> We leave at around 10 p.m. and return empty-handed at about 1:30 a.m.
> Moonlight is not conducive to hunting because, as my companion explains, the animals can see us and the headlamp he is wearing does not light them up enough. We walk against the wind with a muffled stride as if in two stages: the foot first touches the ground lightly to feel for support before the weight of the body is placed on it. This way, if the support is not solid and you slip, you don't fall. The abdominal muscles seem to be very much needed for this type of walking. My companion's head and the light he wears on it move back and forth incessantly and quite rapidly. When approaching game, this continuous movement stops. At a particular moment, Yacouba sees something. Thinking it is a mammal, he stops, takes off his plastic sandals and moves forward nimbly, without the slightest noise, becoming almost imperceptible from a distance of some twenty meters. Unfortunately, his prey turns out to be no more than a small bird. Still, the approach is spectacular.

This special approach step, which I noticed on my first hunting expedition with Drissa, and which is on tiptoe, is, as I later learned, called *yɔliyɔli*, literally "walking with small steps," "walking softly and noiselessly" (Dumestre 2011: 1058). It is usually done in a standing position, but it can also be done on all fours or at a crawl if the circumstances require. It ends with a shot at the game animal, but that shot is not always successful. My notes, which were taken after another hunting trip with Yacouba, witness this:

> We set off at around 8 in the morning. We walk for an hour and a half, then take a short rest, and walk again until midday. Yacouba shows me several tracks: yesterday's of a small antelope, larger ones of warthogs digging holes for a game, and finally some hare feces and the bare trunk of a tree whose bark has obviously fed a few animals. At the entrance to the bush, he picks *toro* leaves,[2] which he chews

2. A sycamore fig (*Ficus sycomorus*), of the *Ficus* genus and the *Moraceae* family.

> and spits onto his rifle, coating it from the trigger to the barrel. He explains that it is unusual to resort to this procedure without later using one's weapon. Indeed, an opportunity presents itself soon after. Yacouba approaches and fires. His shot misses a small *minan* lying in the shade of a tree.[3] The animal is startled and quickly disappears behind the bushes. We chase it for a while, then get fed up and move on to other likely spots for game near waterholes. The temperatures during the day are high, so the animals choose these places to rest and quench their thirst.[4] But this time, there are none to be found. On the way back, Yacouba picks a few leaves for his baby, who is ill and has been awake all night.[5]

It seems likely to me that Yacouba's child's illness had had an impact on the unfavorable outcome of our expedition, as well as on his abilities on that day. However, the illness did not totally explain my companion's failure in his view, and a few days later he confessed to me that he was convinced that a malevolent person, a man jealous of his success, a neighbor unhappy with his presence, a member of his entourage who was feeling offended, with or without a reason—how can we know the identity of a hidden enemy in this oh so uncertain universe?—had "bound his luck."[6] The spirit of competition is an integral part of the Mande social fabric (see Bird and Kendall 1980; Hellweg 2001; McNaughton 1995; see discussion in Kedzierska Manzon 2014b: 102–22), and so from a local perspective his suspicions seem neither incongruous nor absurd. Yacouba asked for help from another village *donso* reputed to be able to "untie" an instance of "tied luck": Diakaridia Keïta (Figure 12). Before going any further, I must introduce him briefly, as he is key to my story.

Married with children, and around forty years old when our paths crossed in 2003, Diakaridia ran a small store selling a few basic products—among them, tea, sugar, matches, batteries, and candles. He was well known in Naréna district for his hunting and artistic talents—he has represented his locality several times at festivities and biennial dance

3. Guib harnaché (*Tragelaphus scriptus*), a harnessed bushbuck, *Tragelaphus* genus (Pallas 1766) and member of the *Bovidae* family.
4. In the dry season, temperatures exceed 40°C, while in the wet season they fluctuate between 30 and 35°C.
5. There was no dispensary or medical staff in the village at the time. Wild plant remedies were the most common therapeutic treatments available to local people, especially *donsow* and their families.
6. Literally *ka sìri*: "to tie, knot, bind" (see Dumestre 2011: 915).

Figure 12. Diakaridia Keïta: my master, my friend, my teacher, on a hunting trip near Sélofara, April 2004. Photo by author.

festivals organized by the Malian government. Proud of his origins, he explained to me that his father was a native of Tabou, near Sibi, the village of the "true" *donsow*.[7] At the first meeting organized for me by Kama, the chief, Diakaridia gave me a smile and invited me to come and have a chat at his home, an invitation I gladly accepted. Once we had gotten to know each other, he dropped by regularly to say hello, and sometimes brought me a few small birds or rodents to improve my somewhat monotonous diet. A little later, Chief Kama, to whom I had expressed my desire to learn the dance steps performed by the *donsow* during their ceremonies, appointed him as my instructor. To thank Diakaridia for his services, I offered to give him French lessons, a language he didn't speak at that time.

Our many exchanges, coupled with my prior theatrical training and my interest in the arts, later led me to become involved in organizing his European artistic tours. In Paris, Marseille, Warsaw, and Krakow, as part

7. Tabou is some forty kilometers west of Bamako.

of international theater festivals and in a number of well-known venues, Diakaridia gave solo performances of Mande hunters' dances and held workshops on them (Kedzierska Manzon 2011). Setting up these tours was not without its consequences, some of them unforeseeable. The position of my friend in his family and social group evolved (see Kedzierska Manzon 2014b: 20–26). Our project also changed the framework of my research: it confronted me with questions I would probably never have thought of, and enabled me to ask others it would have been impossible for me to formulate. I was forced to look into the relationship between dance, hunting, and ritual as I witnessed practices involving incantations, plant-based remedies, and blood sacrifices that punctuated Diakaridia's quest for "protection" as he undertook to skillfully carry out our project. This atypical, and in many ways experimental, project made it possible for me to observe Dia's (as his friends call him) reactions and the positions he adopted, in environments new to him, both in Bamako, where he had certainly been several times because his younger brother lives there but where he was still a stranger, and in Europe, where he had never previously set foot. Inevitably, his tours changed our relationship, as well as my relationship with the other *donsow* from the village who supported our project, who saw it as a way of showcasing their cultural heritage. Shortly after the project was launched, they invited me to join their association to seal our alliance once and for all, which is what prompted my initiation described in the previous chapter. Let us return here to our analysis of hunting techniques and the story of the miseries of Yacouba.

Dia had prescribed several ritual procedures for his unlucky "colleague," probably not broadly dissimilar to other similar procedures—generically referred to as *daliluw*—which I discuss towards the end of this chapter. Dia's reputation as an excellent hunter who rarely misses a shot was surely a major reason why he was sought after by Yacouba and no doubt many others.

Wanting a better understanding of Dia's effectiveness as a hunter, I asked to accompany my dance instructor into the bush. Here is my description of that first hunting trip:

> We set off at around 7 p.m. and walk very briskly. I struggle to keep up with him in the almost total darkness of the moonless night, but he realizes this and allows me to turn on my flashlight, which was off when we left the village so it wouldn't shine on him. In fact, this first preliminary stage is mainly used to move closer to the actual

> hunting ground (so the fact that Dia's silhouette appears in the light of my flashlight isn't too annoying). On our way, we come across a hare, which my companion kills. When we arrive at the chosen hunting spot, we move forward very cautiously, slowly, and gently. We put our feet down lightly by partly holding back the weight of our bodies. Dia kills a total of three hares and two genets. He shows them to me each time before he approaches them, and I never see them until he points them out. Only their shining eyes can be seen. I conclude from this that perhaps the bulk of a hunter's work lies not so much in walking as in looking. Walking carefully and lightly is only the first necessary step, but it's of no use if one can't see. I suppose that the hunter knows the shapes and colors, the visual signs that reveal the presence of animals, perfectly well. He knows how to recognize that the object he has seen is not a stone or a plant, but a motionless, hidden animal. When he is in search of game [during the night hunting], he makes lateral movements with his head that can be as much as 180 degrees. When a detected shape suggests the presence of potential prey, he shines his light in its direction and observes it, and puts his rifle in the firing position. Dia is quick and efficient. He always seems relaxed but ready to act. Once the animal has been shot, he cuts its throat with one of the two knives he always carries in the bush. After killing his second prey, he decides to get me more involved and asks me to hold its legs while he holds its head by the ears with his left hand and cuts its throat with his right. The animal isn't dead yet, so I can feel its body moving, with the last shivers running through it. This is how we proceed with the subsequent prey. The moon rises at about 9 p.m., and we return to the village happy. We share the spoils, Dia kindly offering me a hare and a genet.

There are several points in this description that merit our attention. First, the gazing technique; second, the ways game is recognized visually. Last but not least, the walking technique or gait. Accompanying Dia and his friends in the bush enabled me to gradually refine my understanding of this gait, as shown by another extract from my notes taken in February 2005:

> When hunting, you have to follow a very narrow path, if there is a path at all. To avoid obstacles, you lift your legs up high, which explains why they are tired, as is your back. It's as if the weight of the body were held in the sacro-pelvic area. Another feature of this gait is

that it's often necessary to stand on one leg for a relatively long time, while the other is already in the air. During the approach phase, this is done in slow motion, which makes me think of tai chi. It's very difficult to keep your balance under these conditions. Sometimes, only a very small part of the foot remains in contact with the ground, which you need to grab hold of so you don't slip when standing on round pebbles, for example.

As this shows, when in the field I was constantly asking myself how hunters manage to keep from slipping and falling while moving quickly and silently, not something that can be taken for granted. The way their feet work seems to be vital here, but the excerpt above also highlights the role played by the sacro-pelvic area of the spine, where the center of gravity seems to be located. I compared my observations and impressions with the opinion of the men involved, and Dia offered me some explanations:

– As you saw yesterday, a hunter can't see where he's walking. There may be rocks or tree branches on the ground. He has to retain his body weight and stay focused.
– *But how does he keep his balance? What part of his body remains motionless, and where is his center of gravity?*
– Here [my interlocutor points to his coccyx], in the lower abdomen and the hips.
– *That's where it sometimes hurts after hunting. Are these the parts of the body that do the work?*
– Yes, the kidneys, the lower back.
– *And do you have to wear light shoes when you're hunting?*
– Absolutely. Sometimes it's even better to take off your shoes.

[We might remember Yacouba Diarra taking off his shoes during a hunting trip described earlier.]

– *And do you ever take them off while you're approaching?*
– Yes, of course. Even yesterday, on the approach, I gave you my hunting bag so I'd have a lighter load.

I have to confess that I always wear heavy walking shoes in the bush—unlike *donsow*, who wear socks and thin plastic sandals like those in the photo (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Dia and his hunting companions in the bush in Guinea wearing usual hunters' gear: light plastic sandals, hats, artisanal rifles, April 2004. Photo by author.

This certainly makes them lighter, but it does little to protect their feet. Every *donso* wears these sandals in the bush even if some have other, sturdier footwear that would save them from scratches and some suffering. When I offered Dia boots similar to mine one day so that he would be more comfortable while out hunting, his reaction was mixed. Although he did not mind the gift, the idea of using boots like these for hunting seemed incongruous to him. He explained that because he used his feet when walking in the bush, he could not encase them in shoes that would prevent him from feeling the ground and, what is more, would make his walking movement less discreet.

Dia's remarks resonate with Tim Ingold's observations on the tactile perception of the environment by "shoeless" peoples: that is, a good number of non-European peoples who travel (and hunt) barefoot, or virtually barefoot. The British anthropologist compares them with "shoed" peoples, as he calls them:

> It is probably no accident, nevertheless, that the civilization that gave us the leather boot has also come up with the upholstered chair. Of course, human beings don't need to sit on chairs, any more than they need to clad their feet in boots and shoes. As the designer Ralph

> Caplan wryly remarks, "a chair is the first thing you need when you don't really need anything, and is therefore a peculiarly compelling symbol of civilization" (Caplan 1978: 18). Nothing however better illustrates the value placed upon a sedentary perception of the world, mediated by the allegedly superior senses of vision and hearing, and unimpeded by any haptic or kinesthetic sensation through the feet. Where the boot, in reducing the activity of walking to the activity of a stepping-machine, deprives wearers of the possibility of thinking with their feet, the chair enables sitters to think without involving the feet at all. Between them, the boot and the chair establish a technological foundation for the separation of thought from action and of mind from body—that is for the fundamental groundlessness so characteristic of modern metropolitan dwelling. (Ingold 2011: 39)

While "thinking with his feet," a *donso* is definitely not cut off from the milieu in which he moves, the West African savannah of gentle hills covered with small trees, bushes, and termite mounds. On the contrary, he merges with it and is virtually imperceptible from a distance of some twenty meters, melting into the brownish, ochre-and-yellow surroundings.[8] His gait is not automatic and yet it is not "natural," as the quotation from Ingold might suggest: it is learned, like all "techniques of the body" (Mauss [1934] 1968). When I went into the bush with Dia, I tried to adopt this gait—insofar as it was possible for one of the "shoed" people with feet enclosed in heavy boots—so as not to disturb him in the search of prey with the sound of my footsteps. This is how I realized that the hunting hexis is acquired gradually by repeated practice in a specific environment—in this case the bush, as the *donsow* confirmed during our many discussions.

This leads to the conclusion that their body techniques—motor, perceptive, and cognitive schemes of action—should be considered as specialized body techniques that are transmitted not during routine socialization but through specific training restricted to a particular context within a given social group. Theirs may be quite spectacular at times. As such, they can be likened to the techniques in performance situations that Eugenio Barba describes as "extra-daily" (Barba and Savarese 1985). According to Barba, extra-daily body techniques differ from those used in everyday life by the members of a society, without necessarily falling

8. For an illustration, see my film *Oiseau* (appendix to Kedzierska Manzon 2014b).

into the "acrobatic" register. Although they vary, Barba maintains that they all have many points in common—including, in particular, the precarious and altered maintenance of balance; the nonobservance of the common principle of economy of movement; and the modification of rhythm, amplitude, and speed. Barba, the founder of the International School of Theatre Anthropology, looks at several of the world's performative traditions in which such techniques are passed down and used—including Noh theater, Kathakali, and Balinese theater—and argues that these "various codifications of the actor's art are, above all, methods for breaking the automatisms of everyday life by inventing equivalences" (1985: 15). These traditions force their practitioners to break away from our bodily habits and adopt alternative psychomotor patterns—as does, we can add, hunting among the Mande.

Hunting as a "Vehicle": How to Be Present in the Bush

At the outset, note that this kind of de-automatization of psychosomatic behavior—or, if we prefer, the breakdown of the ordinary habitus (usually temporary)—often has a religious significance and occurs in a ritual context, as Alfred Gell observed in his study of the role of dance among the Muria (1980: 246). Barba's mentor Jerzy Grotowski was well aware of this (see the Overture). Unlike Barba, Grotowski did not view this breakdown as a means to an end, but rather as a goal in itself. To his mind, the techniques he and his colleagues studied from a practical standpoint—various "liberation techniques," as he calls them, used in the world's religious traditions (Grotowski 2012: 962–76)—are the "precise instruments of work" on "the body, heart, and head" of the performers, who mobilize them as a pathway to travel beyond the limits of the ordinary (Grotowski 1995: 184). This transfer, he argues, is the ultimate goal of "art as vehicle"—or ritual art—which the great theorist and practitioner contrasts with "art as presentation": theatrical art. He describes these two types of art, using the metaphor of the elevator:

> A performance is like a big elevator in which the actor is the operator. The spectators are in the elevator, and the performance transports them from one form of event to another. If the elevator works for the spectators, it means the montage is well done. Art as vehicle is like a very primitive elevator: it is some kind of basket pulled by a cord which the doer lifts himself …

> Many of the elements of the work are the same in all the performing arts, but it is precisely in this difference between the elevators (one elevator for the spectators and another primordial one for the *actuants*), and therefore in the difference between the montage in the eyes of the audience and the montage within the actuators, that the distinction between art as presentation and art as vehicle lies. In art as vehicle, the impact on the *actuant* is the result. (Grotowski 1995: 188, my translation)

According to Grotowski, although both types of art rely on the use of extra-daily body techniques, they differ in both the precise parameters and their purpose. "Art as presentation" brings a cohesive whole—a story—to life in the spectator's perception, not on stage or in the actor's experience. "Art as vehicle," on the other hand, contributes to transporting—and transforming—those who act (see Schechner 1985: 117–50). One is primarily a mode of representation while the other is a mode of action. This distinction resonates with some anthropological theories, which reject an interpretation of ritual based on the communication model and instead see it as a specific mode of action that can influence the identity of the ritual participants in one way or another (Bloch 1992; Houseman and Severi 2009; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Turner 1990). The fact that body techniques that can be classified as extra-daily are instrumental in this respect is emphasized by Gell, who states that if mobilized in a ritual context they often contribute to inducing "abnormal" mental states. In his view, therefore, it would be wrong to interpret them simply as full of symbolic messages—even though, like any extra-daily body techniques, they function as both "vehicle" and "sign of travel": "I think we should recognize that certain patterns of motor activity are capable, in and of themselves, of producing alterations in consciousness, as well as being signs that such an alteration in the normal state of consciousness has taken place" (Gell 1980: 234).

Let us now return to Mande hunting. We must acknowledge that, like ritual, it relies on extra-daily mobilizations of the body without being a mode of representation: it does not aim to secure the admiration of spectators (wild animals or other creatures of the bush), even though their presence in the background is not as insignificant as it may at first appear. As I will show in the next chapter, this presence in fact plays a part in the transformation and/or construction of *donsow* as such. Unlike Barba's actors and Muria ritual dancers, however, while in the bush they do not abide by a preestablished scenario other than the very general one

of killing a living creature and returning to the village with its flesh. It is impossible for them to determine the precise circumstances of the encounter with prey in advance, and the practical parameters of the movements they should make: the *donsow* I worked with were clear on this point. In this sense, hunting is more like musical improvisation than composition on the continuum posited by Ronald Grimes (2021: 31). In the bush, it is impossible to perform a physical score that has been learned previously. Acquiring hunting skills, therefore, consists not in learning a score but in assimilating certain principles of movement, or what I term certain "qualities of presence." These qualities of presence are constant—the hunter always walks cautiously and lightly, always covers the maximum perceptible space with his gaze, and controls his breathing—but the precise postures and gestures will vary from one expedition to the next, depending on a number of factors: the season, the time of day, the hunter's age, and the prey he encounters and its habits and habitat. The following extract from my notes illustrates the close interdependence of all these factors:

> After lunch, we set off on a moped in search of the plant [with therapeutic properties, which Dia had promised to bring to one of our Bamako acquaintances]. We take a narrow track through fields of yellow, rose-like flowers, the buds of the cotton plant. The tall grasses strike us as we pass. The much-desired plant grows at the edge of a muddy river surrounded by several nests. This noisy, gaudy place has nothing in common with the silent savannah of the night before. Birds sing, cackle, chirp, coo, and whistle. To approach them, you have to be even more cautious than during other hunts. It seems to me that it's mainly the hunter's sense of hearing that enables him to distinguish flying prey and locate it: the birds are almost imperceptible, their colors blending perfectly with the surrounding landscape. Likewise, the hunter does not betray his presence: Dia removes his hat, hides behind tall grass, crouches, kneels, and crawls.

In the birds' relatively open habitat, which is generally close to fields, the hunter's silhouette can be seen from a distance, so in order to move close to birds alert to the slightest warning signal the hunters adopt an especially cautious approach, using bushes, tall grass, or small trees to hide behind by moving flat on their bellies, on all fours, or bent over. Another account of my expeditions illustrates the need for the hunters to constantly adjust their movements to the environment in which they

move, to the precise circumstances of the encounter with the animal, and to the acuity of the senses:

> As soon as the moon goes down, at around midnight, we leave the village and walk for a good hour through the infrequent trees and termite mounds of the savannah before reaching a cooler, wetter area. The forest becomes denser, making progress more difficult. I feel as if I'm approaching some kind of watercourse, and in fact, we cross a small river shortly afterwards.

Thermal perception lets the hunters moving through the bush know how close they are to watercourses, cooler, or cultivated areas, which are warmer. I note:

> This bush is mysterious and disquieting, and full of odors. Branches cast unreal shadows in the torchlight, reminding me of the shapes in Dali's paintings. The ground is covered with rocks and holes, and strewn with dead leaves and toppled tree trunks. To find our way around and recognize obstacles in the dark, we use a kind of sixth sense.

Proprioception, which contributes to controlling the body in space, is fundamental during the hunting trips in the bush, as I observe also on another occasion:

> The grass, which is taller than Dia in places, scratches our skin. After two hours, a partridge appears in the beam of the flashlight a few meters from us, asleep on the ground. To my surprise and without saying a word, Dia passes me his rifle, instantly takes hold of a large stick, and approaches the bird with catlike steps. I'm speechless. I've never seen an approach like this. I feel as though I've been transported back through the centuries to the very origins of hunting. Light on his feet, on tiptoe, and without a sound, Dia, who is now a meter from the bird, brings it down with a sharp blow of his stick. If I hadn't seen it, I would never have believed it possible.

My companion was happy not only to have killed his prey but also to have saved a cartridge that would be used for other, larger game that it would be impossible to kill in another way. What presence of mind to have thought of exchanging his rifle for a stick found in the very moment. What a prudent approach to avoid waking the sleeping bird!

> Once the bird is in Dia's bag, we continue our hunt, and then, as the cold becomes unbearable, we decide to stop near a small abandoned hamlet. We light a fire made of grass to warm ourselves up. My hair is damp and my fingers are freezing: at certain times of the year—it's late December—the "deep bush," which is the furthest away from any dwellings but also the richest in game, can be surprisingly cold.

It is precisely this experience of going into and returning from the "deep bush" that defines the *donso*, who is traditionally greeted with the words "*I dansɔgɔ!*"—literally "O you who pierce the deep bush!" (see Overture, above; and Kedzierska Manzon 2009). In this hunting expedition, which brought my first mission to Mali to a close, I realized that "piercing the deep bush" can only be done with effort. In my field notes, I wrote:

> When we return at around 5 in the morning, I just have time to fold the night's dirty laundry, wash, bolt down a coffee and run to join Dia, who is waiting for the *sotrama* [minibus] to Bamako. Leaves are blowing in the wind, and there is dust everywhere. The sun is shining, but it's cool. The mountains behind the village are green and brown, and gray smoke rises to the sky. All around me, the people sit, talking about hunting. These images will be engraved in my memory forever.

This emotionally charged passage, made partly so by my impending return to France, illustrates the power of the bush to elicit strong feelings, to affect people who spend time there. Feared by non-*donsow*—I was warned not to venture there!—this unique space can also give pleasure, as the legend of the hunter king Damaly Kalatigi (N. Cissé 2001: 289–90) suggests. The legend explains the popular etymology of the word *donso*—"he who comes home" from the bush—and implies that those designated by it have a penchant for the wilderness and are happy to be out there. Indeed, I hear this enthusiasm in Dia's voice every time he tells me about his hunting adventures during the telephone conversations we have been sharing since the cellular network came to his village in around 2007–8. Other *donsow* from the same village I encountered during my fieldwork confirmed that the bush can seem attractive. For example, when I asked Fadjimba in 2003 why he had joined the *donsoton*, he replied:

- Because I loved hunting.
- *What did you like about hunting?*
- When you're hunting, you come across the animals and have to solve various problems, and that's what I like.
- *Do you like the bush?*
- Yes, I feel better in the bush than in the village.
- *Why?*
- We're not bothered.
- *And you don't mind being alone?*
- No. In the bush, the only thing that matters is what's in your mind,[9] what you're looking for.
- *Do you have "peace of mind"?*[10]
- Yes, that's right.
- *Can't you get it in the village?*
- Yes, but if you're used to the bush, you prefer the bush.
- *Even if you have to walk for long hours at night? You're not tired, you're not sleepy?*
- Yes, but I like going to the bush, because sometimes in the village your mind is troubled,[11] and in the bush you leave everything behind.

As we can see, for my interlocutor the hunting experience appears to be the corollary of a state that is not unlike that evoked by Drissa when he told me before our first expedition to stop being distracted. Namagan, another *donso* from Fadjimba's village, speaks of his experience in quite similar terms, claiming that he loves to be in the bush:

- *And you don't mind the solitude?*[12]
- No, on the contrary, I have "peace of mind."
- *And you don't have it in the village?*
- Yes, but it's not the same. In the bush it's better.

The village/bush contrast has been extensively addressed in Africanist literature (see, e.g., Cartry 1979; Dugast 2015a and b, 2016; Hamberger

9. Literally "the things that are in your belly," *kɔno kó*.
10. "*Hákili bá sìgi.*" For more on this, see the discussion towards the end of this chapter.
11. To be more precise, my interlocutor used the expression "*hákili jugu*," literally "bad mind."
12. *Kélenya*: "the fact of being there alone."

2012), so we will not return to it here, but perhaps at this point we need to add to the topic something that has been less covered: a short description of the particularity of the bush as a sensory setting.

Let us start by saying that pollution is common in contemporary African cities. In Bamako, a grayish shroud envelops the inhabitants, causing coughing, which they complain about. It is made up of dust, which is everywhere in a city where unpaved streets are not uncommon, but also, and above all, of exhaust fumes from two- and four-wheeled vehicles that often do not comply with the law, as well as of smoke from rotisseries, wood- and charcoal-burning stoves, and bags of garbage being burned in the open air.[13] This hard-to-breathe air is compounded by a noisy environment. A cacophony of horns mingles with the dull hum of car engines and the higher-pitched whir of motorcycles. Then there is the hubbub from the stores, whose managers have radio-cassette players so they can listen—and make passers-by listen—to their favorite hits. Halogen lamps set up in front of these stores cast a cold light over the sides of roads that have no streetlamps but are lit by the headlights of vehicles driving around.[14] When I returned to Bamako after extended stays in rural areas, I always found myself invaded by these lights, sounds, and smells, which I experienced as a sensory assault.

In the village, at the time of my doctoral research, one could hear the rain falling in the wet season and the grass of the surrounding savannah desiccating in the dry season, the whistling of the wind, the bleating of ewes and the mooing of cows, the cackling of poultry, bursts of laughter and crying, and sometimes shouting from a quarrel. Generators were relatively rare between 2003 and 2007, so things lit up at dusk with the shaky light of candles and flashlights. One could smell the rice or the *to*, which one eats with hands, sitting on wooden stools, plastic chairs, or mats on the ground.[15] Yet although it was less crowded than the city, the sensory environment of the village was not considered to be particularly soothing or calm by the people I spoke to. This is why they said they appreciated the opportunity to leave it behind when they headed off into the bush. Hunting allowed them to enter a world that varies according

13. As the local media have confirmed: http://www.maadou.org/pollution-de-lair-bamako-la-cote-dalerte/ (last accessed July 2022).
14. Several roadsides were subsequently landscaped—to the detriment of businesses that were destroyed—in anticipation of the 27th Africa-France summit in Bamako in January 2017.
15. *To* is a dish made from millet flour, usually served with a sauce.

to the season, the time of day, and the precise location, but which is nevertheless distinct from the everyday sensory environment, whether it be urban or rural.

In the bush, all the senses are awakened but not saturated—so in this case, to use the term proposed by Jean-Pierre Albert,[16] we might speak of "panesthesia." Albert uses this term to describe a simultaneous mobilization of several senses that is often observed in, but is not exclusive to, ritual settings. In the bush, the smell of the earth mingles with the scent of wild plants, which is more or less intense depending on the temperature: very high during daytime hunting and in the dry season, and lower at night in the rainy season and near streams or rocky cavities. In addition to thermal and olfactory perception, proprioception and touch play a primordial role. When on hunting trips, our feet feel the ground, checking the solidity of the support it offers. Struggling with the moist softness of spider webs that are sometimes woven in the middle of a path and with various flying insects, notably bumblebees, in the wet season, the body cuts its way through tall grasses and tree branches that give way reluctantly, not without leaving marks on the skin. The buzzing of the mosquitoes and gnats attracted by sweat, the rustle of the streams that can be seen in places, and the cries of the birds make up a background music that mingles with the hiss of the dry leaves that hinder our passage, the creaking of dead wood, and the clatter of the stones we bump into. The animals, for their part, remain silent, even though their presence may occasionally be betrayed by noises, which one needs to listen for.

What is worth emphasizing is that the unique quality of the bush as a sensory environment lies not only—or not mainly—in its intrinsic characteristics but also, and above all, in the way the hunters stamp their presence on it, as in the phrase *hákili bá sìgi* used by Fadjimba above, which I translated as "peace of mind" or which could be translated more accurately as "settled mind." This expression is made up of the words *hákili*, meaning "mind," "intelligence," "attention," and "discernment"; *bá*, meaning "essence" or "principle"; and the verb *sìgi*, meaning "to set" or "to sit." This is a way of focusing—in other words, an attentional regime—that consists in a heightened, but precise, goal-directed attention that makes it possible to select which of countless stimuli

16. Oral presentation by Albert at the research seminar of the project IDEX Synaesthesia, headed by Adeline Grand-Clément, held at the University Jean Jaurès in Toulouse in January 2017.

should be processed. It is adopted alongside the change in spatial setting—leaving the village—and particular mobilizations of the body. As *donso* Diankiné puts it: "As soon as you go into the bush, you become ready to act." In the opinion of the *donsow* I interviewed, this attentional regime, which corresponds to the "state of awareness" I have described elsewhere (Kedzierska Manzon 2014b: 170), is necessary for hunting and in particular for maintaining the body's equilibrium while moving through the bush. This balance is also referred to in the expression *hákili màa sìgi*, which is made up of almost the same words as *hákili bá sìgi*, with the difference being that *bá*, "essence," is replaced by *màa*, "person" (with regard to its physical makeup: the body). Clearly, the resemblance between these two expressions is no accident: bodily balance and awareness are seen as complementary or can even be one and the same thing. Dia said this unambiguously in one of our first conversations: "Awareness and balance are the same thing" (*Hákili bá sìgi ani hákili màa sìgi, o bɛ yè kélen yè*). In fact, it is impossible to turn or jump without losing one's balance if one's head is elsewhere, just as it is impossible with overstretched muscles or stiff knees. Awareness is even more important given that, as I have pointed out, one does not follow any preestablished physical score when out hunting: one must react quickly and appropriately to whatever comes one's way. Everything suggests, therefore, that a relative physical relaxation—a kind of relaxation under tension that anticipates action—is the somatic basis for this state of awareness, which ultimately proves to be as much a state of body as a state of mind.

This aligns with the practical research carried out by the performance arts experts I have cited above. Grotowski (1995: 189) assumes that the awareness of performers is not based on the discursive activity of the mind but on organic attention. Barba looks to actors' physiology for the keys to their bodily "pre-expressivity," as he terms the state of alertness and reactivity prior to any attempt at expression (see more on this in the Second Movement, below). In his view, bodily pre-expressivity is a corollary of the state of mental pre-expressivity, and corresponds to a form of cognitive functioning that does not involve normal linear reasoning (Barba 1985).

What might the mental "pre-expressivity" look like in the Mande hunting context? To try to answer this question, let us return to what Drissa said to me before taking me into the bush for the first time: he urged me to stop thinking, to create a void within myself. As witnessed by both his words and the adjective *míiribali*—literally "without

thought"[17]—used to describe the *donso* in Mande oral tradition, the presence that is conducive to hunting does indeed imply a certain emptiness (see also Camara 2001). Perhaps paradoxically, being aware means being present without acting, reflecting, or thinking about anything in particular, or concentrating on any given place or animal. In this way, when encountering prey, one may detect it wherever it appears and whatever it looks like. If I interpret their words correctly, this is what Namagan and Fadjimba were also suggesting to me when they assured me that when out hunting you need to have "peace of mind" or "settled mind." This, if I may use a metaphor from the world of computing, means literally being like a computer on standby, not busy with ordinary tasks but also not switched off. In our conversations, all the *donsow* insisted on the need to leave village life behind once in the bush and to ignore one's daily occupations, problems, and needs—all put on hold during the hunt, as are certain organic functions.

A few comments on these organic functions. As we have already seen, hunting often involves an important reduction in sleep time: we should recall Yacouba hunting at night and going out into the fields during the day. It also involves intermittent fasting. When you go into the bush, you do not take any snacks with you, which may lead to dehydration: *donsow* often drank nothing during our expeditions (for more on this, see Kedzierska Manzon 2022b). Hunters are exposed to extreme thermal conditions—especially during the dry season, when it is extremely hot during the day—that even the animals find hard to bear, which is why they become easy prey for humans as they lie in the shade near waterholes. As Diankiné aptly put it, "To practice hunting is to agree to endure thirst, hunger, and pain." Indeed, Mande oral tradition presents the *donso* as somebody who eats the remains of the previous day's meal—as Drissa and his companion did after the first hunting trip I took part in—and who exposes himself to fatigue and pain, not to mention sexual abstinence (Camara 2001; Coulibaly 1985; Hellweg 2011; Traoré 2000). My observations lead me to believe that these representations are a fairly accurate reflection of the psychosomatic experience of *donsow*, who set aside their organic needs and everyday preoccupations when they enter the bush and adopt a discreet and attentive presence essential to the success of their activity.

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17. As Karim Traoré pointed out during a discussion at the colloquium accompanying the first version of the Rencontres des Chasseurs de l'Ouest Africain. See also Koné 2001.

Daliluw: Acting on Oneself and the World

This quality of presence, which, as we have seen, rests on certain organic privations and the use of extra-daily bodily techniques, is supposed to be heightened by some procedures that *donsow* resort to, especially when faced with a problem or if they fail to "empty" their minds. Yacouba confronted this during the unsuccessful hunting trip I accompanied him on, while he was preoccupied with his child's health and missed his shot, blaming bad luck. This extract from my field notes describes a similar failure:

> We get up before 3 a.m., and start with a good half-hour's cycling. Dia carries me on the metal luggage rack, which is not very comfortable … To cross places where the road is too difficult, he stops, we get off and walk, and then we start again. We arrive at the hunting spot. Dia, I quickly notice, does not have "settled mind." His headlamp is mounted on the side of his head, on which the small camcorder rests, which makes him uncomfortable.[18] But this is not all: my friend seems preoccupied, which is incompatible with successful hunting. He knows it. He says there are people in the village who are against him, against our project [the tours and dance workshops]. These people, whom Dia believes are jealous of his growing fame and the benefits they think his foreign travels will bring him, clearly prevent him from devoting himself entirely to the pursuit of game. At one point, we spot a rabbit. Dia fires twice and misses, which is unusual for this excellent shot. We walk until dawn, pausing only for a moment before my companion utters a few short incantations.

It is not uncommon for *donsow* to turn to methods that are supposed to counteract the action of hidden enemies—as Dia did on this occasion, and as Yacouba did later on his advice—when they are having trouble finding or killing game—or in other words, when they are unable to "settle their mind." Like other people I met during my fieldwork, Dia believes that the world is teeming with enemies: he repeatedly advised me to be wary of the people around me, and insisted, "You can never know what others have in their hearts and whether they mean you no

18. In fact, the aim of the experiment Dia was kind enough to take part in, which was why a camcorder was on his head, was to test the modalities (directions, speed, and coordination) of gaze motions while hunting. The resulting recording opens the appendix to Kedzierska Manzon 2014b.

harm." This is an attitude that is widely shared, and which is not unlike that of the informants of Edward Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1972), who wrote one of the most famous works on witchcraft and its cognitive foundations. To describe this attitude, I coined the notion of the "episteme of doubt," to which I referred in the Overture (see also Kedzierska Manzon 2014b: 112–19 and chapter 4 of this book). As already pointed out, it implies not only doubts about others but also, even more radically, about oneself. For example, Dia confessed to me that he did not "know himself" well enough to be able to predict with any certainty all his future behavior or all his reactions to life's ups and downs. How, then, could he—or anybody else for that matter—expect others to be able to do so?

In a world which is unfathomable, and in which it is impossible to predict our own and others' actions, to protect themselves from the potential undesirable consequences of such actions my interlocutors resort to practices that bear the generic name *daliluw* or, in the areas where I carried out my research, *dabaliw*, which might be translated as "stratagem," "ruse," "spell," "curse," or "remedy" (Dumestre 2011: 189). These procedures are kept secret, and seen as able to affect the physical world (see McNaughton 1982). In addition to the manipulation of certain "fetishes," *basiw/boliw*, to which we will return in the next movement in the book, there may be "baths," as I propose to translate the word *koli*, which is derived from the verb *ka ko*, to "wash" or "clean," but also to "circumcise" or "excise" (Dumestre 2011: 522)—and, by extension, to "initiate into the spirit-possession rituals." These baths consist in rubbing the hands and face—and more rarely other parts of the body, notably the arms and legs, and rifles, which are seen as an extension of the hunting body—with leaves that are usually gathered in a particular way, without the use of the hands, by walking three times around a tree, at certain times of the night or day, or in special places. These leaves are chewed and spat out either into a container, where they are mixed with water before being applied to the body, as Drissa did before our first expedition, or directly onto the body and/or the weapon, as Dia did during one of our expeditions that I recorded and about which I also wrote:

> On the way back, Dia shows me two plants. The first, which is picked while pronouncing specific incantations, must be chewed and then spat out before coating the entire rifle with the mixture, from stock to barrel. The second is picked with the teeth, without using the hands, and then spat out onto the cartridges.

Diankiné once mentioned similar processes:

– *Do you use plants to "get lucky" when hunting?*
– Yes, thanks to my master [who taught me].
– *And how does it help?*
– If you coat the gun with the plants, you can see the hair of the animal you're about to kill.
– *And do you also use plants to treat illnesses?*
– Yes, sometimes.
– *And for shapeshifting, is it possible by using plants?*
– There's no single way to shapeshift.

More complex preparations may also be used to "wash" oneself. They are made in advance from leaves, bark, stems, roots, or other parts of plants that are then boiled, roasted, or dried, and reduced to a paste or ground.[19] Other substances are sometimes added to these plant mixtures, notably of animal origin. When, for example, I watched the preparation of *sóoro*, which is supposed to act as an antivenom, I learned that to make it, the roots of two shrubs are burned together with a *ɲama tutu* (Senegal coucal; see Vydrine 1999: 254), a small bird with brown plumage, a black crest, and a thick beak, whose body is hollowed out but not plucked.[20] The ashes are then ground to a fairly homogeneous black powder. This powder can be taken into the bush and used as needed: for example, to apply to snake bites. As we see, depending on the objective, the selected process, and the *donso*'s knowledge, a single barely chewed plant or mixtures of several highly processed ingredients are used as *dabaliw*.

This use usually involves incantations, *kilisiw* or *krisiw*, which are uttered either when the mixtures are made or, in the case of "baths" made from a mixture of chewed and spat-out leaves, when they are applied. I have proposed a syntactic, morphological, phonological, and lexicographical analysis of these incantations elsewhere, where I also gave examples that I transcribed and translated (see Kedzierska Manzon 2008, 2016a). What is important to emphasize here is that in the eyes of my interlocutors, the effectiveness of these short verbal forms seems to lie in

19. For the Mande, French, and Latin names of the plants used, see Kedzierska Manzon (2014b: 241).
20. This preparation took place under the aegis of Adama, my master's teacher, in November 2003. I asked Adama about the remedy in question after preparation had been completed.

the very act of uttering them while spitting. Yacouba, whom I asked how the incantations should be spoken, explained:

– You have to whisper them, because they're secret.
– *And couldn't you just say it in your head?*
– No, you have to spit. Besides, some people's saliva is more powerful than others'.
– *So is it the spit or the words that count?*
– Both together … First you have to say the right words, and then there's the saliva
– *So if I said the right words but didn't spit, it wouldn't work?*
– No.
– *But are the words heard by the plant they are uttered over and spat on?*
– They have to be recited over a plant, but how would you know if the plant can hear them …

I put the question to Adama, an eminent *donso* who is respected across the whole region and who lives some thirty kilometers away, when he was visiting Dia:

– *Can plants feel pain when you pick them?*
– Difficult to say. We pick them to prepare our remedies.
– *And when you pick them, don't you talk?*
– Yes.
– *And they can hear?* [I go back to the question I asked Yacouba]
– It doesn't really matter. You say what you have to say.
– *But if I speak, it's usually to make myself heard. So, if I go into the bush and talk while picking a plant, who am I talking to?*
– You have to say the incantation. But to know if the plant hears it … It doesn't speak, it doesn't move. You can't tell if it's thinking.
– *So it works even if the plant can't hear?*
– We don't try to have the words heard. We have to say them.
– *So what matters is that they are said, and not that they are heard?*
– Yes.

There was no hesitation on this point on Adama's part: I was slightly puzzled that the incantations were not spoken to anyone, and that does not detract from their effectiveness. This conclusion is surprising at first glance, but it fits with others one reaches when examining the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical composition of *krisiw*. Such examinations

suggest that the effectiveness of these formulas is not explained by their semantic value or a conventional association of the signifier and the signified but by their sound and, above all, by the mobilization of the body of the person uttering them (Kedzierska Manzon 2016a). It is this body—and sometimes its extension, the rifle—that is the object of manipulation and that needs to be "washed" with the help of mixtures of plants and with these words.

Although rudimentary in terms of gestures and body parts put in contact with plant mixtures, such "baths" help eliminate the *donso*'s odor, which might betray his presence. The *donsow* also try to reduce their olfactory footprint by never washing their hunting clothes with soap so that they will "smell" more of the bush than of the village. Like other procedures associated with hunting or that, according to my interlocutors, are actually a part of it, these sensory manipulations are clearly aimed at making a break from everyday life. They thus contribute to what I propose to see as a reconfiguration of both the physical and cognitive resources of the *donsow*-hunters.

Donsoya as an Extra-daily Mode of Action

It is time for a brief recap. The reconfiguration of psychosomatic resources that is specific to hunting relies on manipulations of the body through "baths": that is, by rubbing the skin with liquid blends of certain substances that are endowed with an agency, according to their users, and whose preparation includes these users' words and saliva. First and foremost, this reconfiguration involves the use of extra-daily bodily techniques and an attentional focus that might be described by the expression "a settled mind." It takes places in a sensory environment that is distinct from the everyday setting and results in a specific mode of presence, due both to its intensity or acuity and to its discreet nature. This mode of presence is something I will return to in the next chapter. Even if adopted intermittently, this mode of presence transforms those who go hunting, according to my observations and in the opinion of the persons involved, allowing them to act successfully in the bush and beyond. Hunting, as practiced by the *donsow*, seems therefore a technique in the Maussian sense of the word.

By "technique," Marcel Mauss means an effective way of acting on objects or subjects that is therefore not restricted to the purely material realm (Mauss [1904] 1968). Jean-Pierre Warnier (2009b) has suggested reviving this definition of technique and applying it to ritual, which he

sees more precisely as a "technique of the body"—to use Mauss's expression—that is simultaneously a "technique of the self," an expression of Michel Foucault's (1984). Warnier observes that if it is used repeatedly and sustainably by an individual and thus assimilated into his or her body schema or *Körperschema*, any technique of the body can be a technique of the self because it triggers the configuration of the subject. In light of what I have presented here, we may ask if it could be the case for hunting, as practiced among the Mande, given that this practice involves particular mobilizations of the body that by dint of repetition create a specific habitus and contribute to transforming and informing the feeling, mode of presence, self-image, social status, and identity of the *donsow*.

This point would appear to resonate with the work of Joseph Hellweg on hunters in Côte d'Ivoire (2009, 2011), but in actual fact our arguments only partially coincide.[21] Although Hellweg resorts, in his study of *donsoya*, to the Foucauldian notion of "technique of the self," as do I, he applies it in the first place to the ritual sacrifices: in his view an actualization of a mythical sacrifice.[22] Such ritual sacrifices are an integral part of *donsow* ritual activities. They are performed during the annual celebrations and, to start with, the ceremony that welcomes an individual into the *donsoton*. I provided a detailed description of my own initiation, similar to others I've attended or read about, in the previous chapter, showing that it rests on the classic schema of exchange, *do ut des*, between humans and more-than-humans regarded by these humans as potential benefactors.

In his discussion of *donsow* sacrifices—which he considers within a broader comparative horizon while briefly summarizing the most

21. Hellweg is not particularly interested in the specific use of the body on which hunting is based or in the spatial setting—the bush—or in the transgressive aspect of this activity (a killing)—all of which lie at the heart of my argument (see Kedzierska Manzon 2014a).
22. He presents this sacrifice as unique to *donsow*, yet, in all non-Islamic or "traditional" contexts, the same sacrificial scheme is used by all the ritual specialists to establish—or renew—an alliance between humans and more-than-humans, over and over again (Brett-Smith 1997; Colleyn 2009; Kedzierska Manzon 2016b, 2018). Could it be that he does not mention this fact because the association of the activities of *donsow* with those of other "traditional" ritual experts—and of ritual expertise with precolonial Mande power structure—is not, unlike the case in Mali, promoted in modern-day Côte d'Ivoire?

important anthropological theories of sacrifice, from Mauss and Hubert to Bloch, Evans-Pritchard, and Lienhardt—Hellweg (2011) concludes that they all agree that this rite should be viewed as a technique of the self. Alluring as it might sound to an anthropological ear, this proposition should be treated with caution. Foucault does not define "techniques of the self" in terms of their nature but rather in terms of their purpose. This means that the same activity—whether it be writing a letter, hunting, sacrificing a chicken, or performing any kind ritual—may or may not be such a "technique of self," depending on the context and the intentions of the individuals performing it. To be considered a technique of the self, an activity must testify to a particular relationship to the self or must serve to develop such a relationship: it must seek to establish the self as a moral subject (see Foucault 1984: 35) and must therefore be associated with a desire for greater self-knowledge. Nothing in Hellweg's description, in the existing literature, or my ethnographic experience proves that the *donsow* view the sacrifice they perform and, by extension, their practices as aiming essentially at acting on them so that they could all "know, control, perfect, experience, and transform themselves." In my interviews, in which the notion of knowledge—*lɔnko, lɔn, gundo*, and so forth—was very much present, as was clear in many quotations of my interviews, the emphasis has never been on the self-referential nature of this knowledge. That's not surprising: the episteme of doubt goes hand in hand with a certain opacity of self to self rather than increased self-knowledge—the opacity that the practice of the *donsoya* does little, in my opinion, to dispel.

Nor is there evidence that the ritual sacrifices of the *donsow*, performed annually or during the "initiations" of new members, have an ethical dimension for the *donsow*, given that notions of good and evil are viewed as relative and contextual among the Mande, as Patrick McNaughton masterfully demonstrates:

> Perhaps because of this relativism, or perhaps for some other reason entirely, issues of good and evil seem rarely to drive the Mande. A far greater driving force can be found in the entangled issues of means and power, which many scholars think hold the place that good and evil maintain in the West. (McNaughton 1995: 51)

I agree with this view, both in general terms and also when it comes to *donsow*. This is why I hesitate to look at their hunting practice in ethical terms. In line with McNaughton, I would prefer to associate it with

a quest for power (see Kedzierska Manzon 2021a). The same holds for their ritual sacrifice. Rather than interpreting it as an enactment of the *donsow* moral commitment to the wider village community, which according to Hellweg is symbolized by the materials used for the offering (chicken and kola nuts),[23] I have demonstrated that this sacrifice aims at establishing or renewing an alliance or allegiance between *donsow* and their guardian figures, from whom a favor and protection is being sought and power may be gained.

To sum up my argument, the *donsoya* at large, in light of my analysis, should be seen as an effective mode of action—and technique of the body—that might be described as extra-daily and that affects those who perform it. Even though that may not necessarily be its primary goal, it transforms those who engage it since it leads clearly to the reconfiguration of their physical and cognitive resources without necessarily being a technique of the self in the proper sense of the term—that is, a conscious and deliberate effort to gain self-knowledge and construct oneself as a moral subject.

23. Hellweg suggests that these materials index people other than the *donsow*. Yet, given that in rural areas the majority of *donsow* are farmers and participate in producing or exchanging poultry, kolas, and crops, why assume that such offerings refer to a moral contract between them and other members of their community, and not, according to the logic of substitution that is such a well-known aspect of sacrifice, a gift of something of oneself to the sacrifice's recipients?

CHAPTER 3

Animals, Spirits, and "Their" Humans

A Game of Hide-and-Seek

It is best to avoid wearing any brightly colored clothing that can be seen from a distance when out hunting: it may attract the attention of animals and reduce the hunter's chances of moving close to them. In order not to betray his presence, the hunter takes on an appearance that is a chromatic match to his environment, and conceals his scent and moves in a subdued manner, as discussed in the previous chapter. There, we saw how the extra-daily techniques of the body observed in a hunting context differ from those studied by Eugenio Barba in a performance context, where such techniques serve to capture the audience's attention. In the bush, on the other hand, they are designed to escape the gaze and more generally the senses of animals whose attention the hunter does not wish to attract and which would become his audience if he fails. He may have to crawl, kneel, crouch down, and so on to avoid being seen by them. As old Chief Kama explained to me, after the search phase, when the *donso* needs to look everywhere to detect the animal, he enters the approach stage, and may have to hold his breath when he is only a few meters from his prey to avoid being heard. It might be said, therefore, that hunting is like a particularly complex game of hide-and-seek, in which man and animal are involved, each participating as both "seeker" and "hider," thereby combining two different roles that are normally irreconcilable.

According to Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi ([1994] 2009), a combination or condensation of antithetical roles such as this is typical

of ritual, to which the *donsoya* has previously been likened because of its similar extra-daily somatic basis. We can now see that the hypothesized similarity between these two modes of action, ritual and hunting, is not restricted to the use of extra-daily bodily techniques: it is also based on the specific interactions taking place in both contexts, which have a paradoxical quality.

In order to better understand the nature of these interactions during the hunt, we should first note that the hunter and the prey are curiously similar when they are doing their best not to be seen, to avoid transforming their others from latent to actual spectators. They may have opposing interests, but they share the same logic: in the hunting context, they usually try their hardest not to be detected. My interlocutors expressly conceded that, like the humans who pursue them (*donsow*), the animals of the bush (*sogow*) intentionally try to conceal their presence by all means at their disposal. They readily acknowledged in our exchanges their prey's ability to act thoughtfully, and even cunningly. In the course of one of our conversations, Kama, as cautious as ever and therefore reluctant to make general statements on the subject of animal intelligence, told me that game animals feel fear and have a kind of memory that lets them recognize dangerous situations as such, thanks to signs they have noticed in the past and remember. Thus, having perceived the relationship between a certain type of noise that betrays a man's presence, for example, and the imminent danger associated with this presence, they flee when they hear that noise, which in Kama's view was proof of their reflexive capacity (*hákili*).[1] Yacouba Diarra was also sure that certain animals, like hartebeest, have this capacity. To substantiate his point of view, he mentioned the fact that these antelopes always move in groups, and that while some are grazing the others are watching over the group. He also added that when they lie down, they position themselves back to back to protect each other. He asked me if they would do this if they did not possess a certain intelligence (*hákili*).

Unable to answer that question, all I can say is that Yacouba, like Kama and many other rural *donsow*, has a practical appreciation of the problem. They base their conclusions about animals on observations of their behavior. By immersing themselves in the unique sensory environment of the bush, which demands a particular attentional regime, they learn about the habits and qualities of the beings they encounter

1. I discussed this term in chapter 2, above, in the analysis of the hunter's "settled mind."

there. Hunting forces them to enter into a relationship with these beings, which therefore become an integral part of the universe of those humans who "pay attention" to them, as Tim Ingold would say. For Ingold, and for Rane Willerslev in his study of the Indigenous peoples of Siberia, the practice of hunting as an experience of copresence enables the mutual recognition of subjectivities that are created through their reciprocal engagement (Ingold 2000; Willerslev 2004, 2007). Remembering the conversation, I once had at Berkeley with Eduardo Kohn, when he was about to finalize his article about dogs' dreams (Kohn 2007), I put this phenomenologically inspired approach to the test in the field by investigating the potential capacity of animals to dream—which my hunting companions believe they have, but which seems to me to be difficult to observe directly. I asked:

– *And what do they dream of?*

This is Yacouba Diarra's answer:

– Just like humans. For example, you dream of a plant you cut up, and which can be used for this or that. So, animals can also dream of a plant.

Other *donsow* confirmed to me that animals, or at least some animals, have knowledge (*lɔnniya* or *lɔnko*) of herbal medicine in particular. One of my contacts in Bamako explained that the animals have no one to look after them in the bush. Therefore, he said, they must be able to use plants themselves when they encounter a problem. Dia and his master, Adama, took the same view. Adama told me that of all the animals he has had the opportunity to kill—and it is an impressive list—the buffalo was the most fearsome. I asked him if he thought this was because the buffalo is particularly cunning. His answer was clear:

– Yes. When you follow its trail, it can go around you and surprise you by appearing behind you.
– *Does this mean it devises stratagems? Or uses plants?*
– That may be. It depends on whether the *donso* uses plants for protection.
– *So the buffalo sees the* donso *and says to itself, OK, I'm going to surprise him?*
– It won't do anything to you if you don't bother it.

– *So it decides whether or not to turn against you based on how you behave?*
– Yes.

In this conversation, Adam attributed a decision-making ability and certain character traits to the buffalo, and to some other animals. When asked about animals' communication skills, he explained:

– Buffalo are warned by a bird if a hunter is approaching. If the bird cries out, the buffalo knows there's danger.
– *And do they communicate with each other?*
– Yes, the big buffalo make noises. You can tell they're there. But you can't know what they're saying until you live with them.[2]
– *And can man communicate with a buffalo?*
– The buffalo is not afraid, even if it sees you in front of it, the buffalo is proud and won't move.
– *But is it possible to communicate with a buffalo in the same way as, say, a dog?*
– It's hard. But you can communicate like that with certain other wild animals, a small antelope for example. When it doesn't know you're following it, if you make a noise, it tries to find out what it is and comes towards you. Making this noise is a technique for catching it. (For a visual illustration of this, see Bonche and Kedzierska Manzon 2008.)

As this exchange testifies, old Adama, with his wealth of experience, sees hunting as a subtle game—the hide-and-seek metaphor comes to mind again—which pits man against sensitive, reasoning beings endowed with agency and their own character (the buffalo is proud, the little antelope is curious), and with abilities man would do well not to underestimate.

Right from the start of my apprenticeship, Dia also warned me of the dangers of underestimating animals, and drew my attention to the fact that some of them know ways of harming hunters or, at any rate, evading them. Solo's story is a good illustration of this. Dia introduced me to this talented *donso*, living in Kouyakouya in northern Guinea, in November 2003. I got to know him better in the spring of 2004, when I went hunting for a week with a small group of friends to which he belonged (see next chapter). I saw him a few more times during my subsequent stays

2. I find this way of putting things particularly interesting.

in the field. I then met him again in Bamako in March 2017. He had just come out of hospital, where he had spent several weeks after a hunting accident: his rifle had burst while it was loaded with bullets, which pierced his body. Dia explained that Solo had been following some porcupines and, after carelessly crossing their tracks, he had fallen on his gun, which malfunctioned. Dia added, as if it were self-evident, that one should never cross porcupine tracks because it would lead to a certain fall.[3] To prove his point, my friend showed me his right foot; the big toe was skinned and the nail was split in two. He told me that he had recently made the same mistake as Solo, with a similar result except that as his rifle was of a higher quality, it did not explode when Dia fell and the incident ended with a few superficial wounds. I then learned that this was not the first time porcupines had caused him trouble. I was astonished, and asked Dia what was so special about these fearsome little beasts. Our conversation took place in the car after leaving Solo. Yacouba, who was driving, interrupted us to note that porcupines are reputed to have gold in their bodies—he added that he had seen this gold on one occasion while hunting with his older brother—and to have extraordinary powers. Dia seemed to agree without adding any further comments.

Mande oral tradition abounds with examples of beasts that are endowed with such powers and, if needed, are able to undertake certain procedures that might be described as ritual. In addition to the use of the mixtures of plants I have mentioned previously, these include incantations and *basiw/boliw*. Thus, in the story of Boli-Nyanan transcribed and translated by Youssouf Tata Cissé (1994: 177–302), the hero confronts a solitary buffalo that has *basiw* and knotted cords on its horns to bring its adversaries bad luck (*siriku*). The motif of female animals that transform themselves into attractive human women and are sent to seduce the

3. It is worth explaining, perhaps, that actions involving animal tracks, which are spat on while incantations are uttered or sprinkled with selected mixtures of plants, are a part of the panoply of processes that *donsow* often resort to. Manipulating the tracks is supposed to bring the animal that has left them closer, or even make it retrace its steps. On the other hand, crossing invisible tracks during a spirit possession ceremony of *jinɛdɔn* (described in the Third Movement) while carrying certain ritual objects can, according to the masters, cause the death of any unwary person who does it. What is common to both situations is that the footprints, whether visible or not, refer to the one—human or animal—who made the journey. There is no reason to believe that this is not the case with porcupine tracks. Crossing them turns out to be fatal, according to Dia.

hunter and extract all his secrets is also widespread (Derive and Dumestre 1999: 60). It can be found, for example, in the story of the elephant Kowulen (M.-J. Derive 1978), as well as in the story of Manden Mori.

Manden Mori, an excellent hunter, was killing so many animals that they got together in desperation to decide how to rid themselves of him. They agreed that to do this they would need to find a way to discover the secret procedures (*daliluw/dabaliw*) that were ensuring his success; incantations and mixtures of plants were a part of them. So the most graceful females—red-sided duiker, crowned duiker, and oribi—turned themselves into women and made their way to the village. At the edge of a stream, they met the *donsow*, who were captivated by their beauty. But they only had eyes for Manden Mori, whom they seduced and married despite his elderly mother's warnings. They then insisted that their husband should share all his knowledge of hunting with them. Claiming to be bothered by his dogs, they also demanded that they be killed. After learning Manden Mori's secrets, they suggested that he visit his in-laws. When he was unarmed in the bush, they reverted to their animal forms and—joined by other animals—attacked him. There was no escaping them: they knew all his tricks. Manden Mori was totally helpless, but he found his hunting whistle in his pocket, put it in his mouth, and whistled. The sound alerted his mother, who resuscitated the dogs from their bones, which she had carefully preserved, so that they could come to his rescue. This is the story the old chief Kama told me during a conversation in which he stated that a *donso* can only trust himself. I was baffled. "But it's a story," I said when he had finished his tale. "There's a line between fiction and reality, isn't there?" "The village *donsow* don't think their wives are shapeshifted animals, do they?" I added. "But Manden Mori didn't think so either," replied Kama. If we leave aside implications about gender relations, which this anecdote sheds considerable light on, we should take note of the fact that for my interlocutor shapeshifting, especially when done by animals, was a phenomenon hard to pin down but by no means pure literary fiction.

The same is true of other *donsow* I interviewed. Sidi Mohammed Keïta, the former head of the FNCM, explained in 2003:

> In ancient times, the great hunters killed so much game that the game sometimes had to change itself into a human to get the hunter's secrets. So the hunter had to have something to protect himself. But that no longer happens. Old men no longer pass on their knowledge to their descendants for fear of being betrayed.

Bourama Foutigui Coulibaly, who heads the same association today, seems less pessimistic about shapeshifting today. He told me in 2019:

> If, for example, you’ve promised Yoro [Sidibé, a well-known *donson-gonifola*—that is, *donsow* singer][4] that you’ll bring him some meat in a week, and you go off into the bush, walk for a day, two days, three days, four days, and you don’t find anything, then, to succeed, you can turn into a hyena. A hyena runs faster than a human and further, so it’s easier for it to find game. So you look for game by being a hyena, and once you’ve found it, you can turn back into a human. But it’s complicated.

That shapeshifting is not easy is obvious, otherwise why wander about for four days in search of game before resorting to it? Shapeshifting involves the use of incantations and plant-based potions (“baths”), but like many other *donsow* my interlocutor claimed he was not familiar with its exact mechanisms. I will never know whether he really felt he did not know enough to answer my question or whether he was just withholding information: not everyone has access to this knowledge and, reputedly, those who have it are also supposed to keep it secret. In an interview, one village *donso*, Tiémogo, emphasized the usefulness of such knowledge:

> If you shoot an elephant, for example, it’s a ferocious beast, so if you wound it and don’t have the knowledge, it will kill you. If you know how, you can transform yourself [to escape him], so you can fire a second bullet.

Diankiné, from the same village, agreed:

> If you’re following an animal, you can make sure you disappear so that you can approach it with no problem, in which case it won’t see anyone even if it hears the sound of your footsteps.

4. The *donsow* promise to bring their singers, who are not griots and who must of necessity be initiated members of the *donsoton*, game if they “provoke” them by singing their praises. A failure to keep these promises translates into a loss of fame and shame, so everyone does their best to keep them, and generally no one promises anything unless they are sure of themselves and their abilities.

As this last remark suggests, the shapeshifting may not be entirely complete—the body cannot be seen, but the sounds of footsteps remain—and in actual fact it never is. And with good reason! It is more a manipulation of one's appearance than a real change that the (body of the) person undergoes. This is suggested by my conversation with Boubakar, with whom I shared my frustration at not being able to imagine that an animal or human body could disappear in the blink of an eye, or be transformed into water or stone. My interlocutor explained patiently:

– It's not really that we become water, but the animal doesn't see us as we are, but sees the water. If you shapeshift, I can pass you by without noticing you.
– *So it's about what you see that changes?*
– Yes. We use incantations and plants. It's a secret. It's what you see that's transformed. So you can decide to "create a darkness" between you and the other person, and if he passes, he doesn't see you. He sees something else instead. He doesn't see you as you are. This is done in the bush, when you need it, when you meet animals who have the knowledge and so you have to bring your own knowledge into play. That's why I joined *donsoton*, for the knowledge.
– *And animals, when they shapeshift, it's the same, it's deception?*
– It's as if they're hiding. You see a shrub but in fact it's the animal you're looking for, but it's impossible to make it out.

The "darkness" my interlocutor mentions refers to a *basi*, called Dibinin, literally "darkness-instrument-diminutive" (Dumestre 2011: 238)—which is intended to allow one to avoid being seen. The use of this *basi* supports the idea that shapeshifting is conceived above all as a decoy. Both animal and hunter are said to use it to conceal their presence by introducing an invisible curtain between the other and oneself, allowing them to appear in a form other than their own—a fly, a shrub, or water, for example. Shapeshifting might therefore be considered from this perspective to be an exercise in camouflage. Just as the *donso* clothes himself in colors adapted to the natural environment, or uses a muffled gait in search of his prey, or "washes with plants" to rid himself of his scent, he may resort to shapeshifting to blur or complexify his identity.[5]

5. My comments seem to resonate with the analysis of shapeshifting among the Kuranko, southern neighbors of the Mande, by Michael Jackson (1990). Jackson suggests that it should be viewed above all as a complex

As we can now see, this is a plural identity because during the game of hide-and-seek, he plays both the searcher and the searched: while he is tracking his future prey, the prey tries to detect his presence before being caught. Shapeshifting imposes an additional level of complication on this relational configuration: using it, the *donso* is simultaneously himself ("searcher") and another thing/being (the "searched") whose appearance he appropriates. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that turning to shapeshifting is seen as a delicate and potentially perilous undertaking, and not only among the Mande.

Blending into the environment, imitating it to the point of no longer being distinguishable from it, or slipping into someone else's skin so as to temporarily pass for them while at the same time remaining oneself is high-risk behavior: one can lose oneself in it and end up with a borrowed identity for ever (for examples of occasional accidents, see Kedzierska Manzon 2014c). Several authors who study hunting have discovered this elsewhere as well (see Stépanoff 2009; Willerslev 2004, 2007). Willerslev emphasizes the deception that underlies all hunting ventures: the protagonists are always trying to fool each other, and so he compares their relationship to that of somewhat dishonest lovers. The idea is not a new one: in 1955, Georges Bataille wrote:

> The relationship between hunter and prey is not unlike the one between the seducer and the woman he desires. Both sets of actors play their parts with equal hypocrisy—and the behavior of each helps in understanding the other. (Bataille 1955: 126)

While Bataille draws on the work of Évelyne Lot-Falck (1953), the ingenious idea of comparing hunting with seduction is his. This is how he develops it:

> We cannot, as I say, hope to determine whether Lascaux Man held towards the animals he fed upon the same attitude held by the Siberian or Navajo of today. But the quoted passages give us a closer view of the world where, clothed in an unimpaired dignity, the animal towers above scurrying, bustling humanity: at Lascaux, the animal ranks on the level of gods and kings. (Bataille 1955: 126)

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mode of experience of self, based on particular attentional and affective registers.

The passage from which this extract is taken is entitled, in the French original, "Les animaux et leurs hommes" (Animals and Their Men—not "Les hommes et leurs animaux" [Men and Their Animals]), a turn of phrase Bataille admits to borrowing from the poet Paul Éluard. I have paraphrased it in the title of this chapter to emphasize the complex and contradictory nature of the relationships that are established between humans and animals in a hunting context, relationships tinged with deception, of course, but also with fascination: let us not forget the story of Manden Mori!

It has to be said that, if hunting implies an experience of copresence that enables beings to build themselves *through* a mutual commitment, as Ingold suggests, it is a rather special type of commitment. While attentive towards others, all participants are hoping that these others do not do the same; the ideal outcome is not to be present in their view, or at least not to be present as oneself. To this end, the body is used in an extra-daily way, its appearance modified, and sometimes shapeshifting may occur, among other things. As a result, a complex identity is forged: one that appears to be indispensable for hunting. Bataille points to the construction of an identity of this kind during a hunt, and goes on to argue that the relationship between (hunting) humans and animals can be compared with the one between humans and divinities. This parallel can indeed be observed in my field, where trompe l'œil is seen as a way of being not only for animals but also for those "lesser gods"[6] known as *jinɛw* or *jinaw* (from the Arabic djinn), and for some as *kungo fɛnw*, "things/beings of the bush," which ethnography describes as "spirits."

"If You Don't Bother Them, They Won't Hurt You"

The way of relating to and thinking of spirits in rural areas analyzed here differs from that typical in the context of ritual spirit possession, which practice is currently spreading, particularly in urban areas, and which I examine in the Third Movement of this book. Those who partake in such practice call the spirits by their first names and speak of them with affection and tenderness, as if they were loved ones. It is hard to imagine a *donso* acting in this way. Apart from the generic terms used to describe

6. For the problematization and historical deconstruction of this colonial category, see Kedzierska Manzon 2021c.

them, I have never seen a *donso* call the spirits by their first names or speak of them with affection. And with good reason! In rural and hunting contexts, these are beings we *cannot see* (well) and that we *do not even try to see* (better), let alone call upon. They are beings who—to use the apt phrase of Michèle Cros, who works among the Lobi of neighboring Burkina Faso—"are not to be seen" (Cros 2017: 113), even though, if some accounts are to be believed, they do sometimes show themselves to humans.

Red lights may betray their presence, I was assured by Yacouba the driver when I first arrived in Mali. Later on, other well-meaning people warned me of the dangers these lights represent for unwary individuals who might approach them, fascinated by the glow and curious about their source. I discussed the matter with two *donsow* from Bamako before setting off to do my research in the countryside:

– There are spirits who come to accompany you with their lamps. Sometimes they project the light on to you, and when you see it, you turn around [and ask yourself]: who's that? Then they turn it off. If this continues, you have to turn off your lamp and wait, or even stop.
– *And they don't attack you?*
– No, it's to lead you astray.

A few weeks later, I asked a village *donso* the same question:

– *I've heard that sometimes in the bush you see red lights …*
– That's right.
– *And what are these lights?*
– There are two kinds. The first is dwarf spirits [*gɛrɛw*]. They're harmless. But the second kind are mean. If you can't take fear [i.e., if you don't know how to stay calm and deal with fear], you remain immobile, as if you were paralyzed and it [he/she] kills you, or you fall ill or go mad.
– *And what's the difference between the two [types of light]?*
– The dwarfs carry the flashlight on their heads [like hunters], so this light is lower.
– *And what do you do when you meet the mean one?*
– If you know how to neutralize it, you do.
– *But why do these beings hold a grudge against you?*
– Because, for some, a human is like game.

These exchanges will remind us that among the Mande, as among other people in Africa, more-than-humans dwelling in the bush—or the ones that are generally harmless, at least—do not allow themselves to be looked at, even if they sometimes attract the attention of humans (see Cartry 1979; Cros 2017, 2019; Dugast 2015a and b, 2016; Fournier 2016, 2018; Hamberger 2012). In the rural areas I studied, as among the Lobi in Burkina Faso, "no cult as such is devoted to them, but their presence is felt on a daily basis" (Cros 2017: 111). Cros explains that in her field, "any encounter with a spirit or spirits can quickly turn sour, and result in endless errancy" (2017: 111, my translation). Similar conclusions were reached by Klaus Hamberger (2012), who followed "the footsteps of bush spirits" in a comparative study, emphasizing their ability to turn perspectives upside down and blur landmarks. These observations are consistent with the opinion of *donsow*, who are content to have a rather vague and uncertain vision of such bush creatures and are in no hurry to make this vision any more precise because they know that an encounter with these creatures does not usually augur well. The outcomes are not always the same, however, and depend on the intentions and identities of the protagonists.

Before I go any further, I should point out that in West Africa in general, and among the Mande in particular, such beings are recognized as the true masters of the riches of the underground and wild animals. Some are said to live in villages, and others in towns or abroad, and like humans they are all mobile and therefore able to settle where it pleases them. They are everywhere, I am assured, including in Paris, where during one of his French tours Dia was approached backstage at the Mandapa cultural center by a compatriot who was living in the north of the French capital. She asked him to help her rid herself of their annoying presence, which she assumed he was able to do as an emeritus *donso* and therefore as a ritual expert.

Dia and Madi—Kama's son and my village host (*jatigi*)—who had joined me in Bamako to assist me during one of my most recent stays, explained that there are many varieties of the creatures under question. This resonates with what Boubacar, quoted above, said, and other *donsow* as well as early ethnographic sources confirm (see Henry 1908, 1910; Tauxier 1927). According to widely shared opinion, which Dia and Madi kindly summarized for my benefit, they may be black or white, large or small, and they differ from one another like a Peul from Macina and a Dogon from Bandiagara, or a Frenchman and a German. Some have their own name, apparently, but in general they are not distinguished as

individuals but as classes. Thus, we speak of *bìrisi* (from the Arabic for "devil," see Vydrine 1999: 141), *kungobaw*, or *jinɛw namara*, and of the stocky, hairy dwarfs known as *gɛrɛw* and/or *wɔkulonin* (Dumestre 2011: 1032; Henry 1908: 704). These dwarfs are reputed to be excellent hunters, and often appear in the guise of a small man with two or three heads or with his feet back to front. Others, such as the *kungobaw*, appear in the form of humans then suddenly burst into flames and disappear. Like the *gɛrɛw* and/or *wɔkulonin*, they seem to be associated with the bush, as their name, which means "bush-dwellers," suggests. However, it would be futile to draw rigid distinctions between them and other classes mentioned above, to divide the whole category of more-than-humans we are analyzing here into two neatly separated groups—*jinɛw* (spirits in general) and *kungo fɛnw* (bush spirits)—as did French missionary Abbé Henry at the beginning of the last century (Henry 1908: 703), or to attempt to construct a consistent typology for them by using the various terms applied as taxons. These terms usually come up in fairly speculative conversations—with ethnologists, for example—and not in accounts of personal experiences. When some of my rural interlocutors confess to having individual, visual, or other types of contact with more-than-humans, they refer to them elliptically and in a roundabout way, using words like "these," "them," "things, things" (*fɛnw, fɛnw*), which blurs the precise identity of the beings concerned and makes it impossible to know which class or group they belong to.

This vagueness is maintained, or even amplified, by the fact that these creatures are inclined to change their appearance frequently, as the diviner Sékou Doumbia confided to me in Odienné, Côte d'Ivoire, in 2001. He explained that when they were "looking for a quarrel," they "showed themselves"—to him, at any rate—in the guise of African women, or at other times as they wanted, including as men, women, or children, with long or short hair, black or white skin. Being unsurpassed experts at shapeshifting, spirits are visibly capable of appropriating multiple forms.

As Sékou's story implies, they sometimes even fall in love with someone, to whom they pass on the knowledge they possess without wanting anything in return or, more often, as part of an alliance they forge with this human. According to Sarah Brett-Smith (1994: 64–83), this type of alliance systematically links great Bamana sculptors—as ritual specialists—to these exceptional beings. It is hardly surprising, then, that people eager for knowledge and power sometimes seek them out, both among the Mande and elsewhere in Africa (see Jackson 1986: 51). I have been assured, however, that in rural areas it is rare to come across

them in the village and in broad daylight. It is in the bush, often beside certain trees or rocks (see Henry 1908: 704), and after nightfall as well as in dreams, that they communicate with their chosen ones, and with them alone. Diankiné told me that if they come to visit their humans late in the evening and are surprised by a third party, they never respond to anything the third party says to them. Boubacar also confirmed that they are selective about with whom they engage and in general are not very sociable:

– There are spirits [*jinaw*] who metamorphose to attend village ceremonies. A female spirit [*jinamuso*] once came to the festival here.
– *And how did you know she wasn't a human?*
– My grandmother had a reputation for being knowledgeable.
– *And how did she recognize it?*
– Normally, everyone in the village knows everyone else. So if a stranger arrives and nobody knows them, it's suspicious. And then if they move away and don't respond to greetings when you approach them, and then when the ceremony is over they don't even head toward the village but go toward the bush, then …
– *And why do spirits come to ceremonies?*
– To learn human secrets. Spirits come from the bush while *basiw* are in the village. But some spirits own *basiw* and can offer them to humans.

Let us leave the *basiw*, or "fetishes," to which the next part of this book is dedicated, aside for the moment. What is worth emphasizing here is that spirits can be the owners or masters (*tigiw*) of fetishes (*basiw*) just as wild animals (*sogow*) and humans (*mɔgɔw)* can. The conversation I have just quoted suggests that there is a certain equivalence among these three types of beings. They all have their own secrets and desires, and they all seem to be capable of forming relationships with other beings and even temporarily exchanging their respective places by shapeshifting. How, then, is it possible for us recognize at a glance that a human is a "real" human and not a shapeshifted game animal or bush creature, given that appearances are often deceptive and that the boundaries between the categories (between hunter and prey, between human and more-than-human, etc.) appear to be fluid?

That these boundaries are not considered to be rigid by the Mande is not only suggested by the transformations of *donsow* into water, trees, or wild beasts; of game into women; or of "bush spirits" into humans or snakes, recounted to me. The expression I render here as bush creatures,

"*kungo fɛnw*," also suggests this. It can be translated as: "things of the bush" or "beings of the bush," as the meaning of the term *fɛn* is grammatically, semantically, and ontologically undefined. We should note that the same word *fɛn* is also used to refer to *basiw*. An analysis of *basiw*'s ambivalent status—as neither things nor persons or both at once (see the Second Movement)—suggests that the two ontological categories are not watertight.

Further evidence of the difficulty of classifying things and beings accurately can be found in the ambiguity—or dual status—of snakes, especially pythons, which often appear in oral tradition as the guardians of villages. I noted this ambiguity in conversations with Dia and Madi, who within the space of just a few seconds passed from the image of the snake as an animal to the image of the snake as a spirit—recognizable by certain singular physical traits, including its bright eyes and silvery head. An earlier interview with Kama illustrates this same ambivalence:

– *Can you make an alliance with a snake?*
– With a snake-spirit [*jinasa*].[7]
– *And not all snakes are snake-spirits?*
– No. As a snake grows, if it lives a long time, it becomes one.

As we can see, for my interlocutors, the identity of beings is not necessarily defined once and for all at birth. An animal can become a spirit during the course of its lifetime—if it is a python that grows or one whose eyes take on a singular luster—just as it can transform into a human, if we recall what Kama said about the women of Manden Mori. Humans, in turn, can temporarily slip into the skins of animals. As for more-than-humans, it comes as no surprise that they reveal themselves in a form they choose—whether it be anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or hybrid. If, among the Mande, the identity of all beings is partially undefined, that of bush spirits proves to be particularly unstable and mutable. Is this because hunting makes them look and be experienced as such? This is likely. What is certain is that they do not lend themselves to being watched face-on, statically, when one comes across them suddenly while pursuing game. We must remember that unless we are intimate with them—and sometimes even if we are—they seem fleeting and

7. In the Muslim tradition, snakes are considered to be the preferred manifestations of the djinn.

ephemeral: we see them from afar, in motion, in the dark or in dreams—and in particular in emotional circumstances, like an apparition whose outlines we can only just make out or that emerges through the potentially dangerous beam of a flashlight.[8] It is hardly surprising, then, that, like their form, the identity of these elusive beings remains imprecise and vague—more so than those we come into contact with on a daily basis and in the village.

To illustrate this point, let us consider two stories my master told me. When he was a teenager while on a hunting expedition, the first one goes, Dia spotted a female spirit (*jinamuso*) sitting in a tree, wearing bright white clothes and nursing her baby.[9] He pointed her out to his hunting companion, and invited him to climb the tree and look at her closely. His companion was unable to see her, however, despite being shown where she was, and when he was back down on the ground he expressed doubts about Dia's sanity. I asked Dia if he had tried to approach the woman-spirit himself, or at least to speak to her. He replied that he had not: "I just looked at her." "Do you think she was dangerous?" I asked. "Well, she didn't talk to me," he observed cautiously. Nonetheless, he confessed to being gripped by fear when his comrade claimed that he could not see anything. When he reached the village, he cried in anguish and recounted his experience to his father—a skilled *donso*—who ordered him to avoid the area.

Let us now move on to the second story, which happened more recently. Dia was out hunting at night with an experienced friend and acknowledged master, Bou, whom we will meet again in the next part of the book. Dia was on lookout beside a porcupine burrow with his flashlight turned off when he saw a faint light. He thought it was Bou's until it changed direction and his companion, who was motionless and silent because he too was on lookout, switched on his own flashlight, at which point it became clear that he was not the source of the first light. After exchanging their impressions, the two friends concluded that a more-than human hunter, in this case probably a dwarf *gɛrɛ* producing the light, was ashamed of being surprised in this way and

8. Grégoire Schlemmer (2009) reaches a similar conclusion based on Nepalese Kulung materials.

9. Dia first told me about this quite briefly during his European tour in June 2004. I did not record it. He returned to it later on several occasions and in different circumstances. The recording from which I summarize this and the second story dates from March 2017, and was made in Bamako.

had moved away. Perhaps he had come to inspect the same burrows as them and realizing he was not alone had turned back, speculated Dia, who added, "If you don't bother them, if you don't do anything to them, normally they won't hurt you." "And can they help you if you have a problem in the bush?" I asked. My question surprised him: "Oh, no!" he replied. Yacouba, the driver, who was there during our conversation, interrupted us, saying that he would have asked the creature what it was doing there. Dia reacted guardedly. As well as being pointless—*kungo fɛnw*, like other spirits, are not very talkative, as we know—it seemed to him to be contrary to standards of proper conduct: why bother someone who is not doing us any harm and is not trying to attract our attention?

It must be emphasized that there is nothing exceptional about these two stories: several *donsow* have told me that they have crossed paths in the bush with more-than-humans at one time or another. My friends recently reminded me that I myself had come across one during a collective hunting trip.[10] I did not recall this encounter. "But you were there, don't you remember?" they asked me, incredulous at my apparent amnesia. They, on the other hand, remembered seeing lights from afar that betrayed the presence of bush spirits whom they did not attempt to disturb, in accordance with standards of proper conduct and decency.

It is as if from a local perspective, such "bush spirits or beings" were on a plane of existence that has always been distinct from the one occupied by humans, and should remain so. Maybe this is why they usually do not respond to what humans say to them. They are not truly invisible, it seems—Dia has seen some—but we cannot say that they are visible either. Perhaps, then, we should think of them as being "avisible." I have borrowed this neologism from Morten Axel Pedersen, who introduced it in his analysis of the experiences of Darkhan nomads in Mongolia (Pedersen 2013). These nomads seem to view the universe like Swiss cheese; not as a homogeneous whole but as a multitude of parallel worlds separated by gaps, voids, and paths. They believe that some of these worlds must be kept at a distance by making a sustained effort not to see what

10. The hunting party included Dia; his apprentice Nimori; and another of Dia's apprentices, Yacouba; as well as Yacouba the driver; and Vincent, a French friend who was living in Bamako. I didn't write my field notes immediately after this hunting trip, and when writing them I didn't mention seeing anything unusual or any more-than-humans.

might otherwise be seen. Contrary to what some believe—thinking, as some theorists do, that humans always strive to optimize the visibility of divine or spiritual entities—Pedersen's interlocutors refuse to perceive certain of the entities that populate their universe:

> This … entails a conceptualization of spirits as being neither visible nor invisible but avisible, in that they exist in a state of negative potentiality, which is equally opposed to the visible and invisible in the sense that the latter two states both are rendered possible by the same "void-like" ground, which is the avisible. In their avisible state, then, things are neither hidden nor apparent, nor virtual or actual, but something altogether different: void-like potentialities. (Pedersen 2013: 173)

The attitude of Mongolian nomads towards the spirits of the steppes is not unlike that of *donsow* towards spirits of the bush. In both cases, it is best not to see what catches the eye—at least not too closely—not to enter into visual contact, let alone verbal contact, with creatures whose lives seem to run parallel to those of humans. A collision between these two normally separate planes of existence is risky. My village interlocutors agreed that it was prudent not to provoke such a collision, and opted for avisibility, which could be defined as a form of interaction that presupposes a relative, but not total, invisibility.

Donso Agency: Hunting as a Mode of Involvement

In order to understand the construction of *donsow* as ritual experts, it may be useful to consider hunting as a peculiar mode of involvement or engagement. Let us recapitulate what has been said so far about their relation to more-than-humans they encounter in the course of their activity, analyzed here through the hide-and-seek metaphor. We have seen that bush spirits make their own contribution to this complex game, in which the players try to remain in a state of potentiality or avisibility for each other. In the end, avisibility turns out to be a generalized principle of interaction to which everyone who ventures into the bush adheres, albeit in different ways. As a generative principle, it engenders their respective, discrete modes of presence. Contrary to what Pedersen maintains—he adopts a critical position with regard to Ingold's "dwelling perspective" (also known as "dwelling ontology"; see Ingold 2000, 2011)—I would

see it not so much as a lack of engagement but rather as a singular mode of involvement that is, in fact, typical of hunting.

For Ingold, commitment is what underpins the texture of the world, what enables us to inhabit it. His theory is based on his study of the hunter-gatherer societies of the Far North, whose religious stance seems to him to be the corollary of their relationship with the environment:

> As indigenous people versed in the way of being that westerners call "animism" tell us, only a fool would presume to know what the world will bring. The wise man, or woman, looks, listens and waits for things to reveal themselves for what they are. Along these ways of perception lie experience, understandings and transformations of the self. Indeed, animism … is not really about ascribing intentionality to non-human entities … It is rather about attending to other beings, in perception and action, as they attend to you—or, in a word, about corresponding with them … As with animism in particular, so religion in general, I would argue, is about neither belief nor direct perception but mutual attention or correspondence. (Ingold 2014: 157–58)

Here, Ingold contrasts religion with ignorance, in the sense of a lack of commitment. In his view, commitment or involvement is a sine qua non of existence—whether for humans or animals, or for gods, spirits, devils, dragons, and so on (Ingold 2013): sharing the daily lives of other beings and remaining attentive to them makes it possible for all to shape others, and thus oneself. This perspective is close to that of Willerslev (2007), mentioned above, observing hunting in Siberia, for whom all beings are made through practical face-to-face encounters with others, each endowed with its own qualities and character. This idea is shared also by Bruce Mannheim and Guillermo Salas Carreño (2015) analyzing the relation to places among the Quechua of the Peruvian Andes:

> Humans emerge as persons—in a material as well as in a moral sense—through this web of social interactions with beings and entities, including places. By contributing to the material constitutions of human bodies, providing support where they live and work, and actively watching and judging human moral behavior, places participate in quotidian human existence. (Mannheim and Salas Carreño 2015: 60)

They then go on to explain:

> The assertion that Quechua people are animists must still identify the set of entities that they view as animated. After all, one does not feed just any place or any object or any being. If we reverse that argument and say that the named places with which Quechua interact have social agency and intentionality, for the very same reasons that any being with which one interacts—be it you or me or Maria next door has social agency and intentionality—then we identify the correct set of beings as agentive, including places such as streams, rocks, outcroppings, and mountains. Using Occam's razor, we would be forced to discard the animist account—which overgeneralizes the attribution of agency—in favor of one in which all attributions of agency are grounded in habitual social practices. Animacy and sentience, as social constructs in Quechua culture, are based not upon a set of abstract beliefs that attribute them randomly to some beings and not others, but rather upon practices of co-residence and the provisioning of food that are grounded in the quiddities of face-to-face interaction. (2015: 63)

There is no need to provide any more quotations: it is clear that these observations of agency apply outside the contexts studied by their authors. Among the Mande, the singular agency of *donsow*, spirits, and game animals is constructed through their interactions in the bush. A detailed examination of them shows that they inform the conceptualizations and behavior of all beings involved in hunting. Hunting appears, in light of my analysis, as a mode of commitment—and not as a complete absence of it—which forges the particularly complex and undefined identity of all beings which are involved in it. At the same time, it enables the *donsow* to become *donsow* in relation to both bush spirits and the prey animals their hunting activities also produce as such. These activities clearly contribute to the process of constructing the identity of the humans who take part in them, transforming them into hunting subjects: in other words, into individuals who are engaged in a curious hide-and-seek game in which the searched are simultaneously the searchers.

This is based on relationships that may seem to be asymmetrical at first glance but are, in fact, quite symmetrical. Let me explain. When we try to conceal our presence from other beings while remaining attentive to theirs—either out of caution or because we are trying to track them down—we are refusing to act according to the principle of reciprocity.

However, the fact that these other beings proceed in the same way, each for its own reasons, reestablishes this principle. The resulting relational configuration, which implies a way of interacting we discovered earlier through the concept of avisibility, is anything but simple, and the relationships among these beings are anything but sincere and unequivocal. This configuration is what makes the *donsow* into *donsow* and constructs their particular agency, which I would readily describe as extra-daily, to apply the expression used earlier to understand the body techniques typical of hunting. In light of my demonstration, therefore, hunting must be seen as a particular mode of action that entails a reconfiguration of the physical and cognitive resources of the individuals who practice it regularly.

But who are they exactly? Who are the *donsow*? This was the initial question this part of the book began with. One partial response to it is to say that they are subjects who have the capacity to assume roles that are usually antithetical and to maintain privileged relationships with avisible beings—bush spirits—and invisible ones: Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, the guardian figures of their society. These subjects, who are reputed to possess certain powers and knowledge, are able to discreetly and skillfully cross the boundaries between different planes of existence without becoming lost: they navigate between the world of humans, animals, and more-than-humans that inhabit the bush. They are masters of shapeshifting who also seem to be capable of moving between the village where some of them reside and the towns where their associations flourish, between tradition and modernity so often seen as antithetical but in fact intersecting very profoundly, as Jean-Pierre Dozon (2015) has emphasized.

This is further proven by the trajectories of the persons I have quoted and described here—including Drissa, my Ivorian friend and guide, who now lives with his wife in the United States; and Dia, my master from a small Malian village, whose European tours have brought us particularly close but who even before knowing me, as a great connoisseur of Senegal, where he lived for several years, and Côte d'Ivoire, where he worked intermittently as a goldminer at a different time, navigated among several spaces, countries, and perspectives. Although these two men's paths may seem to be somewhat atypical, we must acknowledge that in Africa today, villages are not isolated from the world that surrounds them or from the global world. Many rural *donsow*—those who still practice subsistence hunting—combine multiple experiences, occupations, and references. This being the case, it is impossible for me to give a full account of their unique, always singular self-constructions. My aim has

been different and more modest: I have tried to understand how hunting informs these self-constructions and enables the *donsow* to become ritual experts of a particular kind. My objective in the remainder of the book is to show how their constructions differ from those of other "traditional" ritual experts who are currently operating among the Mande, and whose agency can also be considered to be extra-daily.

SECOND MOVEMENT

Basitigiya: Caring for "Fetishes"

CHAPTER 4

"Fetishes": Those "Persons Who Are Not Persons"

First Encounters with Fetishes

It is April 2004. The dry season is in full swing and it is very hot, with temperatures easily reaching forty-five degrees Celsius in the shade. For a few days, I accompany my Malian hosts and some Guinean friends of theirs on a hunting trip. We stay in Kouyakouya, the village of Kassiri, Madou, and Solo, whose recent misadventures with porcupines I recounted above. We cover an average of between twenty and thirty kilometers a day. We usually split up into two groups and explore the areas around waterholes, which are quite scarce at this time of year, as well as other places that are likely to be rich in game. We spend a physically demanding week with few spoils, which my companions blame on people who have obviously "bound their luck," as we might recall someone once did to the unfortunate Yacouba Diarra.[1] My friends suspect that some of the *donsow* chiefs, who have given us permission to roam the bush within their hunting jurisdiction, are—invisibly—placing obstacles in our way out of simple jealousy, but also to preserve their hunting reserves.

1. When I ask them how to "bind the luck" of somebody, they claim ignorance; no one ever admitted possessing such a knowledge. It probably involves the use of incantations (*krisiw/kilisiw*), herbal mixtures (*furaw*), and *basiw*, as some of the comments I have gathered on other occasions suggest.

This situation is not without a precedent. A few years ago, a small group of Malian *donsow* living near the border went hunting in Guinea, where the bush is said to be more abundant due to its larger size, a local policy that protects wildlife more efficiently, and the smaller numbers of hunters. Although they followed the procedure that requires any stranger to take ten kola nuts to the *donsow* chiefs of the host locality and ask their permission before hunting, and although all the chiefs who were asked gave their permission, no one killed any game for eight days. It was only after they used an "antidote" on the ninth day that good fortune finally smiled on them: nine animals were killed that day.

This story suggests that despite the kinship ties among people living in villages on both sides of the border—for example, one of Dia's sisters is married to a Guinean, and several of my Malian acquaintances have wives from Guinea—there is a certain tension that characterizes the seemingly cordial relations between residents of the two countries. Although they speak a similar dialect of Maninka and share many social institutions, including the *donsoya*, recent history and their status as citizens of different postcolonial states visibly separate them. Neither matrimonial exchanges nor the trading of goods—the flow of which continues unabated—can change this reality, which translates into latent conflicts. These fuel suspicions and affect local attitudes, and lead everyone both to distrust others and to seek ritual ways of protecting themselves from them.

Returning to our hunting trip in 2004, my friends managed to kill two beautiful bushbucks at the end of the week. As they were about to butcher them, Solo and Kassiri joyfully pulled two objects out of their bags, one conical and the other oval and both of modest size. I was possibly the only one in the group not to know about these. It was to these objects that their owners or masters attributed their hunting success. Solo and Kassiri sprinkled them with blood of the bushbucks as they thanked them for their help. These powerful things were, respectively, the Kɔntrɔn or Kɔntɔrɔn, named as one of the two legendary founders of the *donsoton*, and the Dibinin, which I referred to above in my discussion of shapeshifting (Figure 14).

Kɔntrɔn and Dibinin are *basiw* or *boliw*. These last two terms—one used mostly in the southwestern part of Mali and northern Guinea, and the other in the Ségou region of Mali—are both translated as "fetishes" by my interlocutors when they speak French. In anthropology, the use of this term, which was forged from the Portuguese *feitiço* in the context of colonial encounters, is problematic because it initially reflects contempt

Figure 14. Kɔntrɔn and Dibinin after receiving the sacrifices, on the hunting trip in Guinea near the Malian border, April 2004. Photo by author.

for or lack of comprehension of African religions on the part of the explorers who came into contact with them (see Pietz 1985, 1986, 1987; Pouillon 1970; Sansi Roca 2007, 2011).[2] From the point of view of these explorers and the West historically, these religions were founded on a dual error: on the one hand an overvaluation of something that has no value, and on the other a confusion, which Christian theology deems reprehensible, between the divine and its material figurations. Despite its initially pejorative connotations, however, the term “fetish” has taken root over time both in the West (where it now has meaning in Marxian social theory and in Freudian psychology, as well as in common speech) and south of the Sahara. My interlocutors in the field regularly use the word and, because I do not want to censor their linguistic choices, I also use it in my work. This does not prevent me from occasionally resorting to alternative expressions, like the one popularized by Jean-Paul Colleyn (1987) and Patrick McNaughton (1988)—“power objects”—which

2. In addition to these sources, there is a dizzying amount of literature on the “fetish problem.” The reader will find a bibliography and a brief survey in Kedzierska Manzon (2020, 2021b) and Albert and Kedzierska Manzon (2016).

emphasizes the involvement of *basiw/boliw* in the exercise of power. More frequently, when I am writing in French, I use the terms introduced by Jean Bazin (1986) —"choses-dieux" ("god-things"), or "choses divines" ("divine things")—which highlight the paradoxical status of such things, as does my proposed term "dieux-matière," which roughly translates as "divine matter" or "gods-that-are-matter" (Kedzierska Manzon 2021b).

The 2004 hunting trip was not the first time I came face-to-face with these gods. My master, Dia, had possessed some for quite some time, which I discovered by chance during a hunting trip I accompanied him on in December 2003. Yet my first encounter with a fetish took place during my second trip to Côte d'Ivoire, in April 2001. It was on this occasion, in Odienné, that the diviner Sékou Doumbia showed me one he had inherited from his grandfather: it was small, oval, brownish, clawed, and puzzling. Later, in Guinea and Mali between 2003 and 2019, I encountered others and established relationships with some fifteen of their masters, the *basitigiw/bolitigiw*—literally the "holders" or "managers" or "care-takers" of the *basiw/boliw*—some of whom lived in rural areas and others in Bamako, and most of whom had numerous clients. Before going any further on the reasons for their popularity, let us first return to what I have been calling the "episteme of doubt" in order to better grasp the ramifications and logics underlying the practice with *basiw/boliw* it engenders.

"You Can't Please Everyone": Return to the Episteme of Doubt

During the hunting trip I described above, my companions suspected that someone had prevented them from shooting (big) game by binding their luck. In their eyes, the failure of the hunt was proof that malicious individuals (*mɔgɔw jugu*) had interfered. To put an end to this, Solo and Kassiri enlisted the help of their respective *basiw*, who answered their call, as witnessed by the two bushbucks killed shortly afterwards.

In this case, as in others, the sacrifice and the recourse to *basiw* were prompted by an admittedly vague but no less compelling and wearisome suspicion in the face of misfortune or repeated mishaps. The suspicion of being the target of an invisible aggression drives those who feel they are being harmed to seek solutions that consist, broadly speaking, in procedures that resemble those supposedly used by their enemies. If the suspecting victims have *basiw/boliw*, it seems natural that they should turn to them, as Solo and Kassiri did. If they do not, they can contact

specialists who do. One of West Africa's greatest masters, Falaye from the village of Mansadou in northern Guinea, during an interview he granted me in Bamako in April 2004 explained:

> The reason I took the Kɔntrɔn was because I was afraid out in the bush. I was being chased by enemies and lions. My younger brother was transformed into a fawn [*wara*] while he was sitting down. I shot the fawn, and a bullet pierced his cheek. We took him to the hospital in Siguiri [back in human form; see chapter 3 on shapeshifting]. When he was discharged, we went to see the officer [of the gendarmerie], who asked for the reason behind our disagreements. We told him there was no disagreement. The officer asked if any of us were married. He wanted to find out who was to blame. But my brother wasn't angry with me at all, and told the commissioner "if you're going to prosecute, then prosecute both of us." So the commissioner dismissed the case.
> [So far, the police officer's approach seems to be rather formal].
> Then the superintendent said to me: "Falaye, you need to protect yourself against nasty people. I too once shot [what I thought was] a small animal, and it was my brother. It was because of the action of a [bad] person." So I went to see a specialist, who told me that if I went into the bush I would end up shooting a human and that I would meet the fawns, even if other people didn't see them.

Following the advice of the superintendent, Falaye decided to seek the specialist who would be able to solve his problems:

> A truck driver directed me to a diviner called Komagan, who lived in Kouyakouya and whom I consulted. He told me that for my problems to stop, I'd have to go to another village and look for a "thing" [*fɛ̃n*: here, another word for *basi*[3]]. As the Kanté are joking cousins of the Keïta (on joking relationships among the Mande, see Canut 2002; Canut and Smith 2006), he told me: "You Keïta love women too much, but the 'thing' you have to take doesn't work with women."[4] I told him I was fine with it. So he said, "The day you decide to look for it, come by my place and we'll go together." That's how we went to

3. The same word is used to refer to "bush spirits" (*kungo fɛ̃nw*) and spirits in general; see chapter 3.
4. In other words, its holder is formally forbidden from committing adultery, and he must demonstrate total sexual abstinence during certain periods.

> the village of Bafinkoba to see old Nansiriman.[5] Nansiriman told me that it would be difficult to make it on the spot because he had people waiting [to consult him]. But he told me: "Go and see Baladramissa Traoré [for me], and he'll make you the *basi* that will protect you from misfortune. I advise you not to go alone. Take your friend with you." So I asked Komagan to accompany me. First, he consulted his "sand" and only saw signs of spirits [*jinɛ*], which meant that the *basi* would be very powerful (for geomantic signs and the current system of divination in general, see Colleyn 2005). So we set a date, and when the day came, we set off … There were a lot of people around, but Baladramissa had been told of our arrival, and when we told him we were there on behalf of Master Nansiriman, he was pleased and said, "I'll receive you before anyone else." That's how I took the Kɔntrɔn, and I've never fallen victim to spells or bad luck since then.

This long autobiographical account, which was told to me by a specialist well known from Conakry to Abidjan and from Bamako to Paris, sheds light on the motivations of people who deal with fetishes, particularly in rural contexts—both those who contact experts and, above all, those who become experts. They are people—like Falaye or the police officer who put him on the right track—who are in search of luck, success, power, and, above all, protection. This can be a very laborious quest, and it can involve various costs and hardships, whether the strict management of sexual relations, the fatigue caused by multiple trips to be made, or the price paid for consultations with a variety of specialists, not to mention the cost of the *basiw* themselves and the sacrifices. Nevertheless, for those who undertake this quest, it is difficult to avoid. They do not think they really have any other choice if they want to improve their lot and avoid the dangers that await them.

This view is shared by Daouda Yattara, an expert, recently passed away, who owned several dozen *basiw/boliw*, and who was younger than Falaye but had an unrivaled reputation in the Malian capital. (Yattara figures in the following chapter, and is also mentioned in Bourdarias 2009; Kedzierska Manzon and Jouvelet 2006; and Soares 2016.). During a conversation we had in June 2014, Daouda explained to me that each *basi* imposes certain prohibitions (*tana*) on its master—including, in some cases, sexual abstinence for a week or forty days or, in rare cases, lifelong celibacy. This

5. Bafinkoba is a village in the Kankan region and Siguiri Prefecture in northern Guinea.

was later confirmed to me by other masters, including Moussa Sidibé Kɔntrɔn Bala. As for Daouda, who was unmarried and had no children, he stressed that it was not easy to comply with these prohibitions but that it was essential in order to have the strength (*fanga*)—that is, the powers—to act on the world and protect oneself. To convince me, he added:

– Where you come from, there's no malice, but where we come from, it's not easy …
– *There's a meanness among us too.*
– It's not the same thing. With you, there are guns and knives, but with us, it's not guns and knives, but there are “things” you can't see. People who don't have guns or knives, they can hurt you, they can make you sick. You'll be sick for months and months, or they'll make sure you have no children, or no money. That's the kind of wickedness we have in Africa.
– *And why?*
– We don't know. God made it that way.

Basiw/boliw functioning as both secret weapons and shields, enabling invisible attacks to be launched or dodged, is what Daouda was suggesting here and what I have continued to hear from Dia, other village *donsow*, and my host Madi, as well as many others among my Malian interlocutors. All of them agreed that it is necessary to guard against such attacks, and that there is every reason to be wary of our fellow human beings—family members, neighbors, and colleagues alike. This is what Sékou Doumbia, the Ivorian practitioner mentioned in the previous chapter, told me as well. When we met during my second stay in Odienné in 2001, he accused sorcerers of killing his wife; he too died shortly after my departure, I was told by our mutual acquaintances. Like Sékou and Dia, other well-intentioned friends and contacts have tirelessly warned me during my subsequent stays in Mali about people who may wish me harm but conceal it. My interlocutors felt that you can never be sure whether or not the people you meet have some kind of occult knowledge, or exactly what their intentions are. For example, when I asked Bourama Foutigui Coulibaly why he “cleanses” himself with plant concoctions before taking part in a *donsow* ceremony, he explained:

– You can't please everyone. There are a lot of people at these kinds of event. Here in Africa, there are always people who don't like you, who want to cause you problems, to hurt you.

- *And why?*
- Ah, it's selfishness or something. But it's how it is here. That's why you have to wash yourself with remedies [*furaw*]. Some people don't like you, or maybe they've got a new *basi* and want to try it out to see how well it works.
- *For revenge, for example?*
- Sometimes it's just about showing one's power.

As we can see, the world and people in it seem to be unfathomable for Bourama and my other interlocutors. Attempting a systematic analysis of the multiple, ever-changing factors that contribute to the formation of the episteme of doubt they share is beyond the scope of the anthropology of religion and my modest contribution to it. It is highly likely that the violence and arbitrariness of the colonial state played a role in the emergence of this episteme—or at least its perpetuation—as did the political instability of the precolonial era, during which numerous warrior states succeeded one another between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries when war was the way the state reproduced itself in this part of Africa (Bagayoko 1987; Bazin 1988, 1992; Person 1968–1975; Roberts 1980; Saul 1998). This episteme is clearly not a new phenomenon but an old one, as the Mande oral tradition also proves. Yet, the political and socioeconomic upheavals of the past two decades seem to have exacerbated some of its features. In increasingly unequal African societies, the rise in crime and impoverishment is forcing both rural and urban populations, who believe that they have been dispossessed amid other long-standing or new antagonisms, to find solutions to reverse power relations.

This episteme, whatever complex history and present generate it, translates into a particular kind of relational configuration. The metaphor of hide-and-seek, introduced in chapter 3, may prove useful in understanding it. Yet unlike the relational configuration analyzed in that chapter, in which latent, invisible, and generalized predation operates interspecifically—between *donsow*, spirits, and game—here, it operates within a single species: humans. In this case, what is more, this predation seems to be somewhat disconnected from practical imperatives: one does not kill to feed oneself or to fight off attacks by predators. The violence does not depend on immediate needs, but rather relates to the quest for prestige or power: as Bourama suggests, one expert may attack another just to see if his *basi* is working well. In this configuration, the interactions seem to be paradoxical and multidimensional. On the surface, they appear to be visible, cordial, and binary—for example, during

an encounter between two individuals who greet each other kindly in a public space. In reality, however, these interactions are, or can be, hostile and triangular if one of these two individuals turns out to be the perpetrator of an attack of which the other is the victim, and if *basiw* are involved as third parties: as weapons or shields.

"It's Our Bible and Our Koran"

In the configuration of relationships I have just described, the threat is worrisome and omnipresent, and so it makes very good sense to seek protection. This is what my master encouraged me to do just a few weeks after I arrived in Mali for the first time, when he advised me to place myself under the tutelage of a *basi* made by Falaye, the great master who acquired one after shooting his brother. And this is what I did in mid-December 2003. The ceremony took place in the bush near the village where Dia lived and I resided during my doctoral research. Before I describe the ceremony, however, a brief aside on the spatial organization of local ritual activities is called for.

Like all the other local ritual sites—with the obvious exception of the mosque, which was built right in the middle of the village and faces east towards Mecca—this dedicated to the Kɔntron is to the west of the village in the space between it and the "deep bush." Here, in addition to the site of Kɔntron, are the ritual sites of the *donsoton* (the *dankun*; see chapter 1)—and that of the female fertility cult, Moriba Yassa. To the best of my knowledge, this spatial arrangement is standard and common to other villages in the same area; it was preserved after the village was moved.

Let us now return to the ceremony for the *basi* Kɔntron, which was in many respects similar to my "initiation" into the *donsoton*, which happened at around the same time. Briefly, it consisted in an offering of kola nuts, and then chickens. At the ritual site outside the village, I joined Falaye's apprentice Komagan, the village's other *kɔntrontigi*; Moro; Dia; and my host Madi, who, as I learned on this occasion, was among those "entrusted" to the Kɔntron. The place was covered in feathers, the residue of past sacrifices, and was marked by stones of varying sizes placed on the ground in a clearing. We gathered branches on the way, which we then placed on these stones. A goatskin hung from the tree branch over them. Komagan and Moro put down on the stones seven *basiw*: simple horns, and horns decorated with cowries, rings, and balls.

Komagan presented the *basiw* with "my" kolas and "my" chickens,[6] and asked them to guarantee my safety wherever I may be. The speech uttered before the actual sacrifice is known as *basitigikan*, literally the "language" or "voice" of the fetish masters. Here are some examples from it:

Kɔ́ntrɔrɔn Madi Jifɔ́nka
ì n' ì bádenw bɛ́ɛ n'ɔ̀lu yè
Tɔgɔfɛbila, Soroden, Kungeden ani Tinkɛnba
Áw yè syɛ́w, wɔ̀ro, jí, bà, ani kɔ̀bitulu
Né tɛ́ ɲì lɔ́n, né tɛ́ júgu lɔ́n
Ká hína n'à bàraji tá kà sé kàramɔgɔ Nansiriman mà
Ká hína n'à bàraji tá kà sé kàramɔgɔ Mansaman mà
Tabakɔdɔ Konjan
Ká hína n'à bàraji tá kà sé kàramɔgɔ Nbajala Musa ma
Kà kàramɔgɔ Falaye láhɔrɔma déli
Kà kàramɔgɔ Kɛba láhɔrɔma déli

Kɔntrɔn of Madi of Jifonka[7]
you and all your siblings[8] here
Tɔgɔfɛbila, Soroden, Kungeden, and Tinkɛnba
Here are your chickens, kolas, water, goat, and Kobi oil[9]
I know neither good nor evil[10]
Have mercy by the grace of master Nansiriman
Have mercy by the grace of master Mansaman
Konjan of Tabakɔdɔ[11]
Have mercy by the grace of master Musa, son of Nbajala
You must plead to master Falaye to benefit from his graces.
You must plead to master Kɛba to benefit from his graces.

As we can see, after the initial invocation of the gathered *basiw*, who are addressed by their own names, the names of their masters are listed: Falaye, the enunciator's master; Nansiriman, Falaye's master; Mansaman; and other locally renowned specialists—sometimes situated by

6. That is, the kolas and chickens I had bought for the occasion.
7. The name of a locality.
8. In the original, literally "children of the same mother."
9. From the bitter oil tree: *Carapa procera* (Dumestre 2011: 524).
10. Here meaning "I'm unable to tell friend from foe."
11. The name of a locality.

their place of residence, which sets them apart from their homonyms. Each time, their benevolence is implored and their memory greeted. The speaker then describes the offerings verbally:

Kɔ́ntrɔrɔn wùlen áw kà jí yè nìn yè
Aw wòro yè nìn yè ani jèli mà kò syɛ́

Red Kɔntrɔn, here's your water
Here are your kolas and also the chicken blood for you to "bathe" in.

The reason the *basi* is being appealed to is then given:

Ká tà áw kà bàkɔrɔn kà:
Ká mɔ̀gɔ júgu kɛ́lɛ:
ká jína júgu kɛ́lɛ:
ká fàama júgu kɛ́lɛ
ká fàntan júgu kɛ́lɛ
ká sà júgu kɛ́lɛ
ká dàbari júgu kɛ́lɛ
ká ɲánina júgu kɛ́lɛ:
né y'ì tà mùn kàn mà?
ká né nakánda
ká n mùso lákanda
ká n dénw lákanda
ká kàrifan dénw lákanda
k'ù kísi súkɛ ni súmuso mà
Né tɛ́ ɲì lɔ́n, né tɛ́ júgu lɔ́n
dɔ́ k'ì dɔ́n, dɔ́ k'ì ɲálakala
né yè dɔ́nna, é kì ɲálakala
é lè ŋá [yà] kó lá
é le túlo kó lá
ká kùru ládɛ n mà
mín yè ɲì kùru dí
ká kùru gɛ́nsɛn n mà
mín yè júgu kùru dí …
sàn lɔ́n kòma káro lɔ́n kòma komo
sàn díara dà, sùnsun b'ì dén
sàn mán díya sùnsun b'ì dén

take your goat
to fight bad people

to fight the malevolent spirits
to fight [those who are] mean [and] powerful
to fight [those who are] mean [and] miserable
to fight the bad snakes
to fight ritual procedures[12]
to fight those with the evil eye
why did I take you?
to protect myself
to protect my wife
to protect our children
to protect the children of others
so that you may preserve them from male and female sorcerers
I know neither good nor evil
one knows and the other sees better
me, I know, and you, you truly see
you see what matters
it's you who can hear
surround me[13]
with the company of those who love me
keep away from me
those who are bad company …
you who know years and months
if the year is good, the persimmon will bear fruit
if the year is bad, the persimmon will bear fruit[14]

As we see, Komagan is asking his Kɔntrɔn and the other *basiw* present to protect him from all forms of invisible aggression and to protect his family and clients—the "children of others." His speech is syntactically parallel and rhythmic, it is full of alliteration, wordplay, and rhetorical figures, and includes a number of poetic images. At the same time, it remains anchored in its enunciative context in mentioning several names—those of the *basiw* and their masters in particular—and through its conversational structure. The speaker addresses his Kɔntrɔn in the second person ("take your goat"), using second-person personal

12. See chapter 2, section: "*Daliluw*: Acting on Oneself and the World."
13. In the original, literally "make a gathering (around me)."
14. I would like to thank Madi Kama and Dia Keïta for their help in transcribing and translating this speech.

pronouns and possessive adjectives (“here’s your water / Here are your kolas”).

In formal terms, this speech differs little from others I recorded later. I have presented transcribed and translated examples and an in-depth analysis elsewhere (Kedzierska Manzon 2018). That publication also provides a more detailed interpretation of the position of the kola nuts, which are split into halves and thrown into the air after the enunciation, as well as the reading of the position of the chickens that are immolated during the sacrifice that follows. These positions inform the specialists about the *basiw*’s response to the request made to them, and foreshadow the success or failure of the undertaking they asked for help in accomplishing. To understand this answer, another excerpt from my field notes may prove useful. Let us return to the ceremony described above:

> Komagan sprinkles them [the *basiw*] with oil from the kobi tree and water from a calabash containing red kolas that have been cut in half. It’s explained to me that bad spells burn and that this water soothes the burns. He then throws the kolas, whose halves fall to the ground on their round sides—*sigilen*—which is a good sign. Then he repeats his action. He then crunches one of the nuts belonging to the *basiw*, chews it up and spits it back at them, arms folded, holding his ears and emitting a sort of growl.

Each *basi* has its own “manner,” as I will learn: in other words, this type of gesture and sound behavior is specific to Kɔntrɔn.

> Then it’s the turn of the chickens. Komagan takes the first one, slits its throat over the *basiw* so that its blood flows over them, then throws it upwards. The chicken fights death for a long time. Eventually, it expires in the distance in a somewhat twisted position. The same procedure is followed with the second chicken: Komagan slits its throat and throws it into the air. The victim falls onto its back, covering itself with its wings. It’s a sign that I’ll be “covered,” and therefore protected by Kɔntrɔn. Then the chicken jerks again. According to Komagan and Moro, the second chicken’s final position confirms the message conveyed by the first: in short, the fetish is going to fight for me, so I’ll be lucky—which, the two officiants testify, is proved by the ruffled feathers on the neck of this second victim.

Let us move on to the sacrifice by Dia, who has been under Kɔntrɔn’s tutelage for over ten years. Komagan threw the kolas, which fell in the

right position: the sacrifice had been accepted. Dia was offering it to ensure that his European tour (mentioned in chapter 2) would go off without a hitch. On this occasion, my friend, who enjoyed the overall "protection" of the Kɔntrɔn, was seeking its help in carrying out a specific project, and the position of the kolas told him of the likelihood of a successful completion. Madi also made a practical request: apparently, someone in Bamako had promised him money and he wanted to know whether this person would keep his promise in a short time. This was the reason for his sacrifice.

I was surprised to find out only at that point that both Dia and Madi were long-time adepts of Kɔntrɔn, which I had not noticed even though I spent a considerable time in the bush and in the village with Dia and had been living at Madi's home for several weeks. It prompted me to wonder how many villagers, some of whom were among my close acquaintances, were adepts of Kɔntrɔn and other *basiw* or at least had sought their assistance from time to time. I asked Komagan a few days later. He first told me that he had been "working" with his Kɔntrɔn for nine years. I had learned at the sacrifice that Dia had been doing it for ten years. Komagan explained that their situations were not the same because Dia did not have a Kɔntrɔn, but had simply sought the Kɔntrɔn's help. Madi, who was present during our conversation, added, "Dia is young and active, and he can arouse jealousy. All the young people in the village who are dynamic and move around a lot 'cover' themselves with Kɔntrɔn." Yet, Komagan insisted that of those who had attended the small ceremony, only he and Moro held Kɔntrɔn; he also told me that there were a total of seven masters of this *basi* in the village. I made sure I had understood correctly:

– *But there are also those who have "confided" in Kɔntrɔn, without taking it, aren't there? Can you tell me their names?*
– Oh my goodness … There are too many of them.

Madi interrupted:

– Even our family. We paid for a goat, two chickens, and kolas so that Kɔntrɔn would protect our whole family, from the old chief Kama to the youngest baby. And on top of that, I made my sacrifices individually. There are many other families in the village who have done the same. Those who have called on Kɔntrɔn are more numerous in the village than those who have not.

Because of the secrecy surrounding these practices, I have no statistics to check whether this statement is true, but I also have no reason to question it or to suppose that Madi and Dia's village is unique or exceptional in this respect. This gives us an idea of the proportion of the local population engaged in *basiw/boliw*-centered practices. I turned to Komagan and asked him:

– *So women can also ask the* basiw *for help?*
– If a woman wants to make money thanks to her relationship with a man, she brings two chickens in the man's name … But women can't touch some of them. They can only be "protected."
– *But they can see them all the same …?*
– See, yes, well, it depends on which ones. Everyone can see Kɔntrɔn, except the Kouyaté.[15] The Kouyaté can see him, but not at the moment of sacrifice, when blood is shed. That would blind them.

As is clear from the above, the type of relationship to Kɔntrɔn and other *basiw*—or the degree of ritual expertise—varies according to the gender, social status, age, needs, and motivations of each individual or family. While some seek their help to settle a particular matter on an ad hoc basis, others want to be "covered" for the long term. The latter return periodically to make sacrifices and sometimes make specific requests, as Dia and Madi did at the ceremony I have described. Others, like Falaye and Daouda, become masters. The divine things in their care have an impact on their bodies and intimate relations, transforming them into ritual experts whom many people consult. This is because in the local episteme of doubt, it is only by using a variety of procedures—including manipulation of *basiw*—that individual success may be guaranteed. Daouda Yattara told me in March 2016, after describing some of the modes of their use, "Muslims have Mecca, you trust the Bible, we trust fetishes. Each to his own. For us, this is our Bible and our Koran."

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15. The Kouyaté are one of the griot or *jɛliw* families. The singular ritual status of these "people of the word"—endogamous musicians and singers who are responsible for singing the praises of nobles and leading all public ceremonies—is attested to in the context of other practices, including the ritual activity of the Komo initiation society (see Camara 1976; Conrad and Frank 1995; Hoffman 2000; Jansen 2000).

Things-Beings that Act

Are these divine things worthy of the trust my interlocutors place in them? What exactly makes them so effective? How are they conceived? Do they have their own intentionality? I explored these questions with Komagan, whom I asked whether *basiw* have consciousness (*hákili*).[16] He replied:

> They are made to fight enemies. If they had no discernment, how would they be able to know how to fight them? You need to have it so you can first recognize that a particular person is an enemy, and then know how to act against them.

Dia and Madi seemed to take a slightly different view. They conceded that *basiw* have the capacity to act but not necessarily to think. Our conversation, from which I will now quote long extracts, opened with a discussion on the reflexive capacities of plants. Madi stated cautiously:

– [Madi] There are trees to which sacrifices are offered and which can accept or refuse them. In other words, they have a will. That doesn't mean they have consciousness.
– [Dia] The trees' answers are given by the kolas and the chickens. You ask for something, and if the kola nut falls well, we know that the tree accepts and that our wish will come true. This does not prove that the tree has consciousness.
– [Me] *But who gives off these signs?* [I'm having a bit of trouble getting used to the idea of signs being produced without a sender]
– [Dia] The person who brings kolas and chickens. We throw the kolas and sacrifice the chickens. If you love a stool, it has no awareness. You come, you sacrifice, it's you who formulates the question, and it's from [the position on the ground] of the kolas and chickens that you get your answer.
– [Madi] So you come along and say, for example, that you'd like to become a gendarme, and to see if it's possible, you make a sacrifice. So you say "If I can become a gendarme, let the kola nut fall like this."

16. As mentioned above, this word can be translated as "mind," "discernment," "intelligence," or "memory," among other things.

- [Me] *But then if the answer comes to me from kolas and chicken, why do I have to throw them while I'm addressing something? Couldn't I do it without?*
- [Dia] Some trees are the seats of spirits [*jinaw*]. If you adore a tree where a spirit sits, that spirit can help you.
- [Me] *So it's the spirit who does it?*
- [Dia and Madi] Yes.
- [Me] *OK, but if we're facing a "spirit-less" tree, what's the point of throwing the kolas and slitting the chickens' throats?*
- [Dia] Even if there is no spirit, if you love something, if you give it what it needs, it will become your *basi*.

For my interlocutors, a sacrifice can turn a tree into a divine thing, creating the ritual object as such. It is as if the ritual practice could endow it with agency. Their perspective seems to be close to that of the British anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998). He proposes, and other authors cited in the First Movement agree, that all agency, both human and more-than-human, is constructed through (inter)action. If we subscribe to this point of view, it is hardly surprising that the agency of fetishes is considered by the specialists who handle them to be a consequence of this manipulation. But is sacrifice enough to produce *basiw* as agents? Should we concede—as Gell, borrowing the categories from Charles Peirce, puts it—that it makes them "indexes of human action," whose agency paradoxically exceeds that of the humans who fabricate and manipulate them? Might any object be endowed with agency through its manipulation? I try to find out what my interlocutors think about this issue:

- [Me] *Could it be any object? An old backpack, for example?*
- [Madi] Why not? You take a chicken, the red kolas … From then on, it will no longer be a backpack. You'll see the answer through the kolas.
- [Me] *Can I try?*
- [Madi] If you like. You're the one who doesn't have *basiw*, we do … But if you take one, you mustn't forget it. You mustn't take it and then remember taking it ten days later. You mustn't neglect it.
- [Me] *And if I take it and then throw it away, what will happen?*
- [Madi] Nothing, because nobody gave it to you.

As some authors have shown (Colleyn 1987, 2004; Jonckers 1993; Kedzierska Manzon 2013), and as the excerpt from the *basitigikan*

speech I quoted above testifies, the acquisition of a *basi/boli* brings its handler into a network that includes his master, his master's master(s), his other apprentices, and his clients. Anchoring oneself within this network visibly affects the power of the things that establish it. I continue my exploration of their conceptualization:

- [Me] *If I adore a thing, if it has no consciousness, how can it answer me?*
- [Madi] Although a stool doesn't have it, doesn't respond [in words], and doesn't breathe, although it's a thing, once it's been "watered" [with blood], it counts for you …
- [Dia] So kolas and chickens are its consciousness.

My interlocutors have returned to sacrifice once again.

- [Me] *But who or what does the position of the kolas and chickens depend on?*
- [Dia] On the *basi*. All *basiw* are made from well-chosen plants that are picked in a certain way—while certain words are spoken—and with a certain intention. But above all, you have to cherish them. If you cherish this thing, you ask it for something, and it's up to it to accept or refuse.

In addition to the ritual activity, which includes both the fabrication process and the sacrifice, it seems that the commitment of a person who enters into a relationship with these singular things is a part of the construction of their agency. This resonates with the local interpretation of this relationship as being similar to a love affair or a matrimonial union. I test its limits:

- [Me] *If I cherish a person, she may cherish me too. But even if I treat my moped with all the affection in the world, it's not going to help repair the exhaust pipe if it's broken! My affection for things could never be reciprocal.*
- [Madi] It's hard for you [Europeans] to understand. But here, when young people go to work, they carry *basiw* with them to avoid accidents, so that nobody gets hurt. … The *basiw* are made in a special way. When they're finished, we take the kolas and chickens and say something like: "There you are. I'm going to call you Moussa. Moussa, I made you so that you could come to my aid, so that I could

marry this woman [for example]. That's why I made you. From this day on, I will sacrifice for you. From this day on, I will come to you and tell you everything I need. If you're able to meet my needs, I'll throw the kolas. If the kolas fall in the right position, I'll know you've accepted."

For my interlocutors, the fetish's ability to communicate, which manifests itself in a ritual context, proves its agency. This was not an easy thing for me to understand.

– [Me] *But how can a thing respond to us and act accordingly?! If I talk to my camcorder, if it has a faulty part, for example, it won't work even if I offer it kolas and chickens or promise sacrifices. Similarly, if I say to this thermos: "Here, you, I'd like to have 3,000 euros tomorrow and I'll offer you a sheep," I bet that even if the kola nut were to fall as it should, I wouldn't have 3,000 euros tomorrow.*

Curiously, my example takes us back to the beginning of our conversation:

– [Madi] But every *basi* is made from plants. We make it and use it to carry out our projects. We know if it can be done from the position of the kolas. If there's an obstacle, the kola nut will never fall right; you can spend all day throwing it … That's how we do it.

As we see, my friends' reasoning is somewhat circular: they insist that *basiw* are made from active (and acting) materials—from plants (see Kedzierska Manzon 2021b), which makes them agents. Blood sacrifices are made to these agents. These sacrifices, during which *basiw* are verbally addressed and asked to communicate, are the ultimate proof of their agency, thus attesting to the fact that their fabrication was conducted properly. The self-referentiality of the ritual processes at play here—and of the discourse on it addressed to an anthropologist—is patently obvious. Regardless, there is every reason to believe that *basiw/boliw* function in the experience of their masters as agents, even if these masters have trouble explaining the precise modalities of their action. This conclusion stems not only from the conversation I have just quoted, but also from others I mentioned earlier: with Daouda, who trusts his fetishes, and with Falaye, whose Kɔntrɔn allowed him to solve his problems. When we spoke in Bamako in April 2004, Falaye explained to me:

– If you do what's forbidden, it [*basi*] can become angry.[17] And do harm.
– *But if it can become angry, does that mean it has consciousness?*
– Kɔntrɔn shares the spirit of the person working with it, of its holder.

On this point, to which I will return later, Falaye seems to agree with Dia and Madi:

– *And it can have an independent will? Make decisions on its own? When it becomes angry?*
– Yes, it can. It depends on how it's made. If there's something it doesn't like, it can decide to act on its own.

During my most recent trip in 2019, I learned from Moussa Sidibé Kɔntrɔn Bala, close to Falaye's eldest son, that Falaye's Kɔntrɔn one day apparently became angry with his master, who paid for it with his life. After asking it to punish the person who had stolen his horse with death, Falaye then tried to stop its action when he learned that the culprit was none other than his favorite son-in-law. However, it was too late to redirect Kɔntrɔn, which then on its own initiative turned against Falaye himself and caused his sudden death. I will certainly never know how. During our conversation in 2004, I asked Falaye how exactly Kɔntrɔn could act:

– It shapeshifts,[18] but you can't tell because you can't see it transforming unless you're a witch [*subaga*].
– *But what does it change into?*
– You can't know if you're not a witch.
– *So you don't even know what your Kɔntrɔn is turning into?!* [Laughter from some of the apprentices present]
– People say that the Kɔntrɔn can transform into a *donso* or a military man carrying a rifle.

Another day at his home in Mansadou, Falaye told me that in his dreams, his *basi* appeared to him in female form. The *basiw* of Zumana

17. *Ka dimi*, in the original language, which translates as "to become angry," "to lose one's temper," but also "to suffer" and, as a noun, "anger," "animosity," or "resentment."
18. *Ka yɛlɛma*: literally "to transform," "to metamorphose," "to modify," "to change" (Dumestre 2011: 1048).

Sidibé from Bamako, known as Jinaden Zumana—literally "Zumana, the child of spirits"—looked more like wild beasts. I asked him why they take on this appearance:

– If they come like this, it's to do harm. Maybe they're angry about something …
– *And as donsow; they also come as donsow?*
– Yes, as donsow and as dogs too.
– *And when the* basi *goes to fight the enemies, it transforms into a lion, into* donso, *etc., or is it only in dreams?*
– Yes, it transforms …
– *And as a woman?*
– It depends on the *basiw*, some come as women …
– *What about yours? More like animals?*
– Yes. As soon as they start fighting, you'll see dogs or other animals.

I will return to the heterogeneous and changing conceptualizations of *basiw* in the next chapter. Here, I want to stress that the discourse on their transformations contributes to the construction of their agency. Although their acknowledged ability to change their appearance or state is beyond common mortals' understanding, it represents further confirmation of this agency.

The following anecdote also shows that people who hold fetishes view them as agents. During a telephone conversation with Dia in the late 2000s, I asked for news of Komagan. Dia told me that Komagan no longer had his *basi*. I was startled: is the relationship between a *basitigi* and his *basi* not a lifelong agreement? No one had told me of any cases of "separations" before, and there are no examples of them in ethnographies. Noting my astonishment, Dia explained without the slightest embarrassment that because our friend was no longer able to satisfy the demands of his divine thing, he had asked it whether he could hand it over to another master. Kɔntrɔn had replied in the usual way by the position of kola nuts and chickens on the ground. It visibly agreed to be transferred to a colleague of Komagan, in exchange for the sacrifice of a goat.

All these examples clearly show that *basiw/boliw* are considered to be capable of refusing or accepting requests, and yet they are described as "things"—*fɛnw*—or, more precisely, as "things-beings." Let us remember that the word *fɛn* is semantically and ontologically indeterminate, and can be translated in both these ways (see chapter 3). In the case of

basiw/boliw, the things-beings in question are peculiar and unlike any others; everyone agrees on this. I recently asked Dia for clarification:

– *Is a* basi *a person [*mɔgɔ*]? Or is it a thing [*fɛn*]?*
– [Yacouba, the driver, intervenes in French] It's an object.
– "Fɛn*?*"
– [Yacouba] "*Fɛn*."
– [Dia, in French, after some reflection] It's not a person, but it is a person.

Dia's is a beautiful way of putting it, which is why I have paraphrased it in the title of this chapter. It captures the paradoxical status of *basiw/boliw* which are neither objects nor subjects, or both at once. These object-subjects or things-beings are made primarily from plants, and according to several of my interlocutors—including Dia, Madi, and Falaye—they lack an independent intentionality or mind. Their agency only works in conjunction with that of other actants, to use Bruno Latour's (1991) term, such as the experts who handle them or the material set-up of sacrifice—kolas and animal victims—which enable these divine things to express themselves. Together with these other actants or actors, they make up collectives that, to paraphrase an expression of Jean-Pierre Warnier (1999), might be described as "men-*cum*-fetishes-*cum*-offerings." These collectives or networks are made up of ritual specialists who integrate more-than-human agents into their psychophysical schemes and of these more-than-human agents.

The Making of *Basiw* as Agents

Before I conclude this chapter, let us take a look at the material makeup of these peculiar agents. Their size and shape vary considerably. Some—such as Kɔntrɔn and Dibinin, described earlier and belonging to Solo and Kassiri, but also Tɔgɔfɛbila;[19] Sɔnsan

19. Jean-Marie Gibbal (1982: 172–73) mentions this name—which he spells "Togofobali" and translates as "he whose name is not spoken"—as that of a spirit that is worshipped as part of the spirit-possession cult. However, I never heard of such a spirit in the course of my enquiries among the adepts and officiants of this cult (see the Third Movement for the names or pantheon of spirits). Is it de facto an artifact that is sometimes held by

Figure 15. Sini-ka-jan of Daouda Yattara, Bamako, June 2014. Photo by author.

Sɔrɔ;[20] and, nowadays at least, Komo[21]—are transportable and relatively light. Others, like Jafɛren, are not. Some are horns filled with various substances, but there are also clay rings, cones, or balls, and even giant mounds like Sini-ka-jan[22] (Figure 15), none of them iconic or representing any given and easily identified shape. The clay pots and calabashes that contain mainly vegetable mixtures are also aniconic (Figure 16). Even though these are too heavy to be moved easily, they are often partially mobile. Certain masters have installations of numerous individual

the cult's leaders, but sometimes also by other specialists? This cannot be ruled out.

20. Literally "hare" + "tree" (for *sóoro*, see Vydrine 1999: 301), this is a cone-shaped artifact consisting of a horn filled with an active ingredient made from a black plant powder and the head of a hare, hence its name.
21. In the ethnographic literature, this is associated with the Komo or Koma initiation society, yet today, this *basi* is currently held individually by certain specialists such as Daouda or Waraba, whom I present in chapter 6.
22. A word-for-word translation is "tomorrow is a long way off": the *basi* in question is supposed to act quickly.

Figure 16. *Basiw* in the form of pots and jars, at M. Doumbia, Tabou near Sibi, December 2019. Photo by author.

basiw/boliw, comprising several fairly voluminous elements, all placed side-by-side on the same horizontal plane taking up several square meters (Figure 17). Wooden masks or statuettes, sometimes covered with cowries or feathers, can also be part of these collections.

My intention is not to make an inventory of their possible shapes and appearance but to stress that such divine things are quite difficult to define visually, as evidenced by the photographs published by professional photographers Catherine De Clippel and Agnès Pataux (see Colleyn and De Clippel 2007; Pataux 2010).

The materials that make them up are also hard to define. Like other *daliluw*—the mixtures employed in ritual bathing or ingesting—used by the *donsow* (see chapter 2), *basiw* are mostly made from plants, as Dia and Madi clearly stated above and as other interlocutors have confirmed.[23] The "science of trees"—*jirilɔn* or *jiridɔn*, to use McNaughton's

23. Often relatively rare plants that have been carefully selected and prepared at set times (a chosen day of the week, at night, at dawn, etc.) with the help of incantations and the blood of sacrificial animals.

Figure 17. Assemblage of many divine things, at Moussa Sidibé Kontron Bala, Bamako, December 2019. Photo by author.

(1982) translation of the term—is a highly valued area of knowledge among the Mande, so it is not surprising that various leaves, barks, and roots made into a powder or ointment figure among the key ingredients of things that are locally considered to be powerful. Other elements can also be added: minerals, metals, animal body parts (beaks, feathers, hair, claws, or skin), glass beads, and handicrafts. Compositions vary depending not only on the identity of the maker but also on the subcategory of divine things to which *basi* belong. Thus, in addition to selected plants, Kɔntrɔn *basiw* contain a necklace of red beads, according to Komagan, who further explained that Tɔgɔfɛbila *basiw* also consist of gold powder, silver powder, and black powder, as well as bits of cotton stained with menstrual blood and pieces of shroud from a corpse (see also Brett-Smith 1983).

What must be emphasized is that despite the diverse nature of their components, *basiw* all share one common feature: a rough, porous, uneven surface made up of the blood that has been sprinkled on them during sacrifices and then coagulated. Blood sacrifices are always preceded by offerings of other substances: kola nuts, of course; sometimes tobacco

or oil from the kobi tree; and always water in which the kolas, hot peppers, or small *basiw* will be immersed, or alcoholic beverages in some cases (millet beer or, in urban settings, imported beer or wine). As for sacrificial animals, in addition to poultry they include mammals, which are immolated in order of size/potency: goats, sheep, cows, possibly oxen, and, finally, dogs. Other characteristics are far from insignificant. Some situations call for the sacrifice of male, and others of female, animals. Sometimes, chickens with black or light feathers, or red, spotted, or ash blonde poultry are needed—with long or short legs, or with an imposing crest. The logic behind these choices is too complex for me to analyze here, but is not unlike that studied by Michel Cartry (1976, 1978, 1981) among the Lobi in Burkina Faso. The choice of color and length of coat of sacrificial goats, sheep, and cattle are also carefully made in order for the sacrifice to be accepted. Yet, it is also always possible to find a substitute for the ideal victims: for example, if the client cannot afford to offer a sheep, he may, at least initially, replace this four-legged animal with two two-legged chickens with similar chromatic characteristics.

Sacrifices of mammals generally take place in the master's compound or in the bush, in an area set aside for the purpose. Chickens, on the other hand, have their throats slit in the "consultation space" and are then thrown into the surrounding yard, where they struggle before dying. The length of the procedure obviously depends on the number and size of the victims, which are correlated to the particular requirements of the *basiw* and which vary according to the demands and situation of the consulting person. This emerged from a conversation with Dia about the practice of his friend Bou, which I will introduce in greater detail at the end of this part of the book. Dia explained, "If you want to find gold, for example [the region has gold and several artisanal mines], you come to Bou, you pay four oxen, four goats, four chickens, four kolas, and four portions of tobacco."

I was surprised by the volume of the offerings demanded of a simple gold prospector in search of good fortune, and asked:

– *And have you seen people pay that?*
– Yes, several times.
– *And they found gold?*
– Yes, lots of it.
– *Do you know them?*

My friend nodded, and told me the story of a Fulani man who came to Bou's house one New Year's Eve to offer him 100,000 West African

francs (FCFA)—equivalent to around 185 euros and an astronomical sum for many inhabitants of Mali, where the minimum wage is one of the lowest in Africa, around 40,000 FCFA (75 euros). According to Dia, the expense turned out to be a shrewd investment since the Fulani man had found gold after the sacrifices Bou had made on his behalf, and came back because he wanted to make sure he would be able to find even more. Reportedly, Bou told him: "Keep the money until the work is finished."

As all this shows, seeking help from *basiw* can often prove extremely costly. The sums involved would support a family in a rural setting for several days given local prices: at the time of writing, a kilogram of rice costs between 300 and 500 FCFA, a kilogram of semolina around 400 FCFA, a 50-kilogram bag of sugar 25,000 FCFA, and a chicken around 3,000 FCFA. These prices are rising constantly in the current context of unresolved conflict in the north, political instability following the coup d'état, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. What remains constant is that the help of *basiw* and the ritual experts who handle them is expensive. The cost is even higher if the hoped-for result is considered to be particularly lucrative and more difficult to obtain.

Yet, as we have seen, many clients are prepared to pay an exorbitant price in a country that has been plunged into a deep economic crisis.[24] Dia claims that on one occasion, as the person making sacrifices for Bou and as his assistant, he slaughtered over forty chickens in a single day. In September 2004, I attended an annual sacrifice at the home of Seydou Diakité, also known as Waraba Tiatio (whom we will meet again at the end of this movement) during which, in addition to several dozen chickens, some goats and a cow were slaughtered. I am told, though I can't verify it, that similar quantities of animals were slaughtered in the 2000s during the annual festivals that bring together in his village all the people for whom Falaye has made the Kɔntrɔn. Nevertheless, hecatombs like these are quite exceptional and take place at particular times. Individual sacrifices rarely reach these volumes, although the example of the gold-prospecting Fulani man shows it is not out of the question. Some

24. On a personal note, in March 2017, while I was in the middle of writing my "Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches" (HDR), a kind of second dissertation necessary to supervise PhD students, I asked Bou to help me. He prescribed a sacrifice of four goats, four chickens, four kola nuts, and four portions of tobacco—equivalent to a total of around 200 euros, a not insignificant sum even in France. The sacrifice took place shortly afterwards. I defended my HDR without a hitch.

Bamakois masters are even reputed not to take on any business worth less than 1,000 euros. As Moussa Kɔntrɔn Bala observed in March 2019 on the subject of Daouda Yattara, "When we send him money by Western Union or MoneyGram, if it's less than 600,000 FCFA [the equivalent of just over 1,000 euros], he doesn't even react." It seems that Daouda's services had been more affordable in the past (see Kedzierska Manzon and Jouvelet 2006; Soares 2016). The price rises testify to their ever-increasing renown, and suggest that the deeper Mali sinks into crisis the more impoverished populations are seeking out specialists who offer solutions, thereby driving up the rates.

Let us recap what has been said about the sacrifice procedure and its results. This procedure always includes certain fixed sequences: once the motivations of the client—the reasons for the sacrifice—have been stated, it begins with a speech called a *basitigikan*. The use of kola nuts at the end of the speech serves to check whether the sacrifice will be accepted, and whether the *basiw* who receive it are able to solve the problem that has been submitted to them. Poultry sacrifices and the trajectory and quality of the movements of the sacrificed birds and their interpretation follow. What needs to be emphasized is that sacrifices are not so much—or not only—a means of communication between humans and more-than-humans. They are also, and above all, a mode of making these more-than-humans—in this case, divine things. The act of sacrificing to them, or "watering" them as it is called in Mande languages, serves to constantly make the fetishes grow, producing these "gods under the process of construction," to use David Graeber's (2005) expression. Instead of viewing an engagement with these gods as proof of ignorance, Graeber sees it as evidence of the inventiveness of peoples who manage social relations and put new arrangements in place through the manipulation of such material creations whose artificial nature they acknowledge. My research shows that such gods "form constantly" alongside the relational networks they establish. They are, as Michèle Coquet (1987: 134) writes, based on *bwaba* examples, "caught up in a constant process of accumulation." Among the Mande, as elsewhere in Africa, they are eternally incomplete and indeterminate (see Bazin 1996 and Kedzierska Manzon 2016b).

These gods' construction must be completed by the words spoken to them, which helps define their particular agency. The mode of enunciation of the *basitigikan*—its prosody, rhythm, and tempo; its rhetoric; use of assonance, alliteration, and figures of speech; and its syntax—are among the formal characteristics that distinguish it from ordinary speech (for

transcribed and translated examples of *basitigikan*, see Kedzierska Manzon 2018). The “language of fetish-masters” is characterized by grammatical, syntactic, and semantic indeterminacy, and serves to highlight the exceptional qualities (bravery, power, loyalty, diligence, endurance, the ability to see, etc.) of the *basiw*. In my view, its morphological and stylistic aspects translate into a certain semantic opacity. Conversely, its dialogical structure, which we have seen in the extract above, anchors it in its concrete context of enunciation, establishing the “common ground” (see Hanks 2009) between humans and more-than-humans during the ritual. Its antinomic qualities help produce *basiw* that are tangible and close to humans, yet still exceptional agents. By showing that they are able to accept or reject offerings and communicate decisions to “their humans,” they prove not only their capacity to take decisions but also their agency—as in the case, for example, when the *basi* lets Madi know whether the person he is doing business with will keep his promises, or when it tells Dia if his tour of France will go smoothly.

To conclude, my analysis of sacrificial practice of the ritual experts caring for the *basiw* and of the local discourse about it supports the interpretation of African fetishes as subject-objects or paradoxical, divine things with a blurred ontological status proposed by many authors (see Augé 1988; Bazin 1996; Colleyn 2010; MacGaffey 1990, 2000; and Taliani 2016, among others). While supporting their argument, my work offers a deeper understanding of how fetishes become such agents that are both extraordinary and close to humans: agents who, when asked by their masters (*basitigiw*) making regular offerings to them and seeking their advice, assist these masters and their clients with living in a world that is seen as opaque, unfathomable, and threatening.

CHAPTER 5

From Self to Other and/or from Self to Self: "Fetishes" and their Masters

Basiw and the Senses

To better understand the ways *basiw* act, we need to examine further their material aspect and the sensory framework within which they are manipulated. These strange things—which I have described as "uncanny" (Kedzierska Manzon 2013)—have partly soft surfaces and somewhat indeterminate shapes. They usually remain in semi-darkness. Indeed, the ritual spaces where they are stored are always unlit, small, and filled to capacity. When one enters them barefoot, one quickly realizes that moving around without stepping on some of these things requires a great deal of skill. There is a constant risk of bumping into *basiw*, but no one really wants even to brush up against them.

Their visual aspect is disturbing, even when not at sacrifices and more so during them. The sacrifices mean killing, which is a transgression even though, like the one carried out by the *donsow*, they are legitimized by tradition. Their olfactory aspect is also troubling. This is how I described it after one of my visits to Daouda Yattara:

> Daouda tells me to sit right in the middle. The strong aroma of the plants hits me and makes my head spin. During the sacrifice, in addition to the kolas—which do not have much of a smell, by the

way—and the blood, I smell the beer (Guinness) my host pours over his fetishes and the smell of poultry moving in the dust.

The smell of kolas, poultry, and blood is present in all ritual spaces with *basiw*. There are often flies around, which are particularly plentiful during sacrifices—especially when blood is being spilled—prompting me to write in my field notes:

> As much as I love fieldwork, I wouldn't go so far as to claim that I enjoyed being sprayed from head to toe with blood [spurting from the slaughtered animal] during today's sacrifice. Or being surrounded by flies, as always happens in these situations. Sacrifices are truly a sensory challenge, as much for the sacrificer, I suppose, as for those with him: the client and the people who came along.

The only other place I have seen such swarms of flies is around butchers' stalls in local open-air markets. As in the sacrificial context, these buzzing clouds are attracted there by organic matter that is decomposing, which happens quite rapidly in the Sahelian climate. The average annual temperature in Bamako is 28°C, and it regularly rises to 40°C in the dry season. The ritual spaces are designed for practices that are considered to be secret and needing to be sheltered from prying and sometimes malevolent eyes. They are thus rarely ventilated, and their small windows let in very little fresh air. As a result, they are stifling and odors linger. During my trip in March 2018, I discuss this with Dia:

– *In the space where the* basiw *are, there's often a lot of blood.*
– Yes.
– *And so there are flies and there's a strong smell.*
– Mmm …
– *Does it have to be this way?*
– Yes.
– *And isn't it tiring for the master?*
– It's tiring.
– *For example, if you go to sacrifice in the morning, before breakfast, doesn't it make you nauseous?*
– It does.

Even though sometimes discomfited by the odors that are a part of his practice, the *basitigi* plays an active role in producing them—in

particular, by proceeding with the libations and slaughtering of animals while uttering the *basitigikan*. As we have noted, this verbal address differs from ordinary speech in its melody, rhythm, and distinctive sonority, but also because of a certain semantic opacity. To those who are unfamiliar with it, it probably resembles a kind of noise rather than language. Like the visual, olfactory, and tactile aspects of *basitigiya,* it is confusing for the unfamiliar. It likely retains a certain strangeness even for those who are used to it. I would argue that, like other sensorial aspects of the practice, it helps induce an extra-daily multisensory experience. I recently asked Dia:

– *And why are* basiw *always weird? It's not an animal, you can't tell what it is.*
– Well, it's complicated. It's a big thing.
– *And doesn't it seem confusing to you to address something that doesn't look like anything, that smells strong, that you don't know what it is?*
– No. If this thing agrees to fix the problems. And mine and Bou's don't move.

In fact, some *basiw* are said to move after sacrifices, which no doubt adds to the uncanniness of these things-beings that are both inanimate and alive, and inert but quite unexpectedly moving.[1] Zumana, a well-known Bamako master mentioned above, explained this to me when I asked him why he had embarked on a practice he found to be tiring:

– Because *basiw* can solve a lot of problems.
– *And are they pleasant to work with? Aren't they weird? They don't look like anything*.
– They're weird. There are *basiw* here that can even move if they receive the sacrifice.
– *And that's not scary?*
– Yes, it's scary. And if you touch it, it sticks. I have to say: "You have to let Agnès go," otherwise you'll be stuck until tomorrow [he laughs].

1. Others—like Muso Kɔrɔ, in particular—are expected to respond verbally to people who come to them with requests (see Leiris 1934: 54). American researcher David Conrad confirmed this during our conversation in Bamako in June 2014.

My interlocutor agrees that these divine things are strange and unsettling, and he even seems to bring additional examples to illustrate it, as if their modus operandi was to puzzle those who ask them for help, as if nothing less could be expected of them. What effect do they have on their masters?

- *And you're not afraid?*
- No. Because if I was afraid, how would I work [with them]? If you take a *basi* to help people … [you can't be afraid of it]. We take *basiw* who do mean things, if someone comes and doesn't believe, we can show them …
- *So, you don't regret taking on all these* basiw*?* [My interlocutor has quite a large collection]
- No.
- *And you're thinking of taking on more?*
- If I find others I don't have here, I'll bring them in.

Clearly, despite their weird shapes and the fear they can inspire, my interlocutor values his fetishes and is even ready to get new ones. What kinds of sensations does their manipulation inspire? Here is what Zumana told me:

- *Is it pleasant to pour the libation on the* basiw*?*
- Pleasant in what way?
- *For example, if I eat chocolate, I can say it's pleasant,*[2] *that I like it.*
- OK. Let's say for example that I'm going to town and I've just done the sacrifices. I say, "Before I come back, I need to earn 200,000 FCFA, and if I do, I'll come back and sacrifice again." Then I leave. If I earn [this money], I come back and sacrifice. And then, every time, when I leave, I come to sacrifice … That's nice, isn't it?

As we can see, for Zumana, and for Dia too, it is not so much the manipulation of the *basiw* as its results that are agreeable. The manipulation itself is hardly considered to be enjoyable, and I have never heard anyone describe it as such. The specialists see it more as a demanding task but one you cannot refuse to take on if you want to achieve your goals, as is also suggested in my conversation with Bou:

2. The *Bamana* word we used here is *di*, meaning "good," "beautiful," or "nice," "pleasant."

– *Isn't the "work"*[3] *with the* basiw *tiring?*
– It depends on how you do it. If you only do it for the money, anyhow, it's not too tiring. But if you're really doing it to help people, it's very tiring. You don't sleep, you don't eat, you don't have time, you're busy. Every time someone comes to you with a problem you try to solve it. You're never at peace.

I will return to Bou's and the other masters' work ethic later, but let me first conclude my analysis of the sensory framework of their practice, saturated by olfactory and tactile stimuli and visually destabilizing. This framework seems oppressive to participants: even specialists who are accustomed to it do not appear to be totally immune to the trouble. Entering a dark ritual space full of uncanny smells and materials in which partially unintelligible words are spoken does arouse in everyone—albeit to varying degrees—a feeling of uneasiness mixed with fascination: the divine things inside are supposed to solve so many problems!

It is not unreasonable to suggest that these divine things affect the humans who approach them in a similar way to corpses, which, according to Marika Moisseeff (2016), provoke a gut feeling: an uncontrollable, visceral reaction of a rare intensity. Moisseeff compares the agency of a corpse with that of certain ritual objects of the Australian Aranda: the *churinga*. The same may be said of *basiw*. Like a corpse, *basiw* are "atrociously material," to use Moisseeff's well-chosen term. Like corpses, they smell. This is the smell of the putrifaction of organic matter decomposing while coagulating to compose the divine things' surface. A blend of solid and liquid matter, these things relate to the process of birth, growth, and decay, to life and death simultaneously (see also Kedzierska Manzon 2021b). They remain there, still, but at the same time they act, blurring the boundaries between object and subject, thing and being. They have a "sensory power" and embody radical otherness. Their presence is awesome and mighty, as is that of the humans—their masters—who must stand up to them, confronting them in a tense, testing, flesh-against-flesh meeting that demands strength, resistance, and an exceptional quality of presence.

3. *Baara* in the original. Many local ritual specialists use this word to describe what they do (see also the Third Movement).

Object-Subjects versus Subject-Objects

Neither the *basitigi*'s body nor the way he speaks—the timbre of his voice and its volume, modulation, intonation, and so on—are left to chance during the performance of the *basitigikan*. Just as in any other performance situation, in this case the enunciator has to control his breathing and attitude. The main "spectators" at this performance are the *basiw*. A number of humans may be present as well: the client who requested the sacrifice and their relatives, and the *basitigi*'s pupils. This audience can be reduced to just one when the master consults for himself and addresses a single *basi*. Even in this case, the performance does not lack a scenic dimension. Its physical and vocal scores are not completely fixed in advance, although they do conform to a general model, as do performances by *jeliw*.[4] In March 2016, Daouda Yattara expressly compared the two types of performance, explaining that the master "flatters" his fetishes in the same way that griots flatter the nobles whose praises they sing.[5] To this end, he uses a melodious tone, adopting a voice that is slightly high-pitched and yet not shrill. There is no pause between the long, rhythmic sequences, which he delivers rapidly and in a single breath. The gaze he directs towards the "divine things" is stern, his back is rigid, and a certain strength emanates from his silhouette. I have always been struck by the extraordinary poise of the great fetish masters. The pictures that I have taken offer an imperfect glimpse; the works of the professional photographers Benoît Jouvelet (see Kedzierska Manzon and Jouvelet 2006) and Agnès Pataux (2010) capture it better.

This poise of fetish masters both inside and outside the ritual context might be described as a quality of presence reminiscent of the stage presence of great actors. Eugenio Barba argues:

> Certain Oriental and Occidental performers possess a quality of presence which immediately strikes the spectator and engages his

4. Among the Mande, this term refers to individuals (men and women) belonging to an endogamous group of musicians/genealogists (*jeliw*), who, like blacksmiths or shoemakers, are considered to be artisans: the *ɲamakala*. Their role is defined in relation to that of the *hɔrɔn*, the nobles, and the *jɔn*, the slaves, who traditionally made up Mande society (see Camara 1976; Conrad and Frank 1995). For differences between the performances of griots and fetish masters, see the analysis in Kedzierska Manzon 2018.
5. In Bamana, he used the verb *ka balima*, meaning "to flatter someone by praising their ancestors" (Dumestre 2011: 79).

> attention. This occurs even when these performers are giving a cold, technical demonstration. For a long time I thought that this was because of a particular technique, a particular power which the performer possessed, acquired through years and years of experience and work. But what we call technique is in fact a particular use of the body. (Barba and Savarese 1991: 9)

Barba considers this use of the body to be extra-daily. According to him, the concept (introduced above) applies to performance situations, although not exclusively, and denotes certain mobilizations of the body that differ from daily life. Extra-daily body uses are aimed at breaking away from the automatisms of ordinary life, and they make the performer's presence particularly palpable and salient. A similar quality of presence characterizes, according to my observations, fetish masters. The ritual they engage in might be viewed as a "performance situation." Such a situation, here as in the cases elsewhere studied by Barba, rests on a singular way of moving and positioning oneself in space-time that catches the eye immediately, even though it does not necessarily imply the staging of a scenario. Indeed, like Asian actors during technical demonstrations whom Barba describes, the fetish master plays no role during a sacrifice and embodies no character, except perhaps his own. Barba would no doubt describe his conduct as "pre-expressive" rather than expressive. He characterizes "pre-expressivity" in this way:

> When a Noh actor leaves the stage because to all extents and purposes the performance is over, he has a singular habit: he moves very slowly, as if his exit was an integral part of the performance. He is no longer in character, because the character's action is finished, but neither is he in his daily reality. He is in an intermediate state. In a certain way, he is performing his own absence. (Barba and Savarese 1991: 195)

I would think that for his part, the fetish master plays his own presence: that of a powerful man who becomes such through performances that transform him into a ritual expert. What might the reactions of the people who watch his performance be? Barba observes:

> The performer's pre-expressive state can correspond to a particular state of the spectator's way of seeing which, like a kind of immediate reaction, precedes all cultural interpretation.

> In the performer, pre-expressivity precedes the desire to express; similarly, in the spectator, one finds a "physiological response" which is independent of culture, feelings or state of mind at that particular moment of seeing. (Barba and Savarese 1991: 203)

I would argue that fetish masters as performers impact the people who witness their performances in a visceral or physiological way, much like the fetishes themselves do. How do they establish this quality of presence, and how do their bodies become "pre-expressive"?

According to Barba, two very different ways of acting are generally adopted to achieve "pre-expressivity":

> Either through a dilatation in space, which amplifies the dynamics of movement, or through the oppositions an actor creates within his body, which dilate its intensity, so to speak. In the former case, the expansion in space of actions that follows precise orbits going beyond the everyday destroys the body's everyday automatisms. In the latter case, by inventing an obstacle for himself, the actor holds back the action instead of letting it go: it is a matter of dilating the tensions of the effort required to control them, of creating a different quality of energy in the actor that are visible even in situations of immobility. (Barba and Savarese 1985: 25, my translation)

Unlike an adept of spirit possession who performs dance steps of his or her spirit, or a *donso* who roams through the bush, the *basitigi* falls within the second category mentioned by Barba: he does not spread out in space, and he does not make any large movement. His gestures are minimalist and reduced to an extreme. His performance is no less remarkable, though: it catches attention. Knowing that he is being watched, the *basitigi* is on his guard not only during this performance but also at other moments when he steps into the spotlight—on the dance floor, for example, where singers invite him by playing a specific tune called *koma fɔli* or *fida fɔli*. You can see an example in the appendix to my book *Chasseurs mandingues: Violence, pouvoir et religion en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Kedzierska Manzon 2014b): the master Falaye moves forward slowly, his arms raised above his head, supported by his pupils and supporters, his eyes slightly lowered, his gaze focused, and his entire body stretched to the extreme. Among the Mande, power demands bodily restraint, gestural minimalism, and a strict mastery of one's bodily expression (Kedzierska Manzon 2001). The *basitigiw* are the epitome of

this embodiment of power. They behave as if their bodies were the receptacles of a particularly precious liquid that must not be shaken abruptly. A parallel with the "pot-king" studied by Jean-Pierre Warnier (2009a) among Bamenda in Cameroon comes to mind. Like this king, a *basitigi* seeks to conserve his resources when he makes public appearances, when he can easily become the target of invisible attacks because, as I noted earlier, "you can't please everyone." This is also why he needs to be on his guard when he is dealing with his divine things—which is a perilous undertaking, as Master Falaye's tragic end teaches us. In every case, a *basitigi* must keep his potential intact and not waste it or make it inactive by bringing the vessel that contains it—his body—into contact with other bodies. He must be especially restrained around female bodies—as Falaye, Daouda, and other masters told me, insisting on more or less severe limitations on their sexual lives, particularly during ritual periods. Contact with menstruating or pregnant women may also be defiling, as Moussa Coulibaly, a Guinean fetish master visiting Bamako in October 2003, explained to me:

> It's not because a woman's skin destroys them [the *basiw*], but you can meet a woman who may have just slept with a man, you don't know, yet your *basi* doesn't like it. Or this woman may be dirty, and if you touch her and then your *basiw*, they're ruined. That's why you have to avoid women. Especially women who are menstruating, because that's when they're said to be impure.

Bourama Foutigui Coulibaly, who was present during this conversation, added, "And it's the same for a pregnant woman. If she touches them, it can cause a miscarriage. Pregnancy is *dabali*."

As previously explained (see chapter 2), the terms *dabali* (pl. *dabaliw*)/ *dalilu* (pl. *daliluw)* refer to various ritual procedures that allow one to act on oneself and the world. Although we do not know exactly how, for example, a "ritual bath" protects a *donso* in the bush against bush spirits, we see the results of it. These secret procedures are used to guard against any misfortune not only by ritual experts but also by lay people. Manipulation of *basiw* is *dabali*, and, interestingly, so is pregnancy, according to Coulibaly, who clearly sees pregnancy more as a mode of action than a physiological state. From his perspective, pregnancy acts on those who find themselves in direct contact with the pregnant female body, which transforms itself from within, as it does during menstruation. The same capacity for action is also recognized for all liquids that bear witness

to organic transformations, which must therefore be treated with the utmost care. Especially strong are semen, vaginal secretions, and blood from menstruation or delivery, and also human blood that is intentionally spilled in war or a murder.

Other materials that are perhaps less "strong" but not devoid of agency can sometimes have an undesirable effect on the *basitigi*'s body, as well as on the divine things he manipulates. Active and endowed with potential, both must be preserved. It is therefore advisable to abstain from putting them in contact with other powerful matters and bodies. Thus, my master's friend Bou, by his own admission, never consumes tobacco, alcohol, or other stimulants, and avoids illicit sexual relations.

- *Do the* basitigiw *need to respect certain prohibitions [*tana*], for example, avoiding drinking certain beverages or avoiding intercourse with women?*
- That's right. There are rules to be respected. They affect not only *basitigiw*, but all ritual experts [*soma*] who practice *bamanaya/mandenkaya*.
- *And what are these rules?*
- I can tell you ten things, like ten fingers on a hand, that I've never done. In fact, I could list twenty. These prohibitions, these things [*fɛnw*], are like fetishes [*basiw*]. They solve problems.

If pregnancy can be compared with certain ritual procedures and seen as a particular mode of action (or inaction), then it is hardly surprising that other modes of action (or inaction) such as avoiding any physical contact with certain active materials can also be seen as *daliluw*: means of influencing the world. Curiously, Bou describes not only the prohibited materials but also the very act of avoiding them by using the word *fɛnw*: things/beings. "And what things are we talking about?" I ask him, and he explains:

> The first thing is that the women who come for a consultation are generally married, but they come for help with their personal affairs and often don't have the money to pay. So when their problem has been solved, they bring a little money, but they also say: "Master, do with me what you please." But I don't do that. I don't need any women other than my wives. Secondly, there are women who come and ask me to get a rich man for them, and they say they'll pay when they have pennies. But when they come, they have no money. So they say, "Do what you want with me." But I don't touch those women. And then

> when the *basitigiw* are doing work that’s intended to cause harm [to kill or make someone seriously ill], they drink alcohol to get drunk, so they don’t remember afterwards, so they can sleep peacefully. But I’ve never drunk alcohol in my life, not since I was born. I also don’t drink tea and I don’t smoke cigarettes. That’s five things. We’ll stop there.

What is worth attention here is that, according to Bou, pollution is not simply caused by physical contact with certain materials. It also depends on the relational context of the contact: polluting substances are especially dangerous if they are spilled in the context of socially reprehensible relationships with wanton or adulterous women. Falaye told me something similar, adding that a true master must also refrain from lying to his clients, to whom he may be tempted to make false promises looking for material gain. Integrity, as I propose to translate the word used by Falaye—*wakaliya*[6]—is, in his view, one of the essential qualities of a *basitigi*. The word might perhaps be related to the ancient Greek notion of *hagneia*, which referred to the state of physical and moral purity required of a ritual expert in order to preside over or participate in religious rites.[7] Even though Bou might be an extreme case, the idea that *basitigiya* involves several physical constraints seems to be widely shared. This is why I have called it ascetic in the past (Kedzierska Manzon 2015). However, it differs from the ascetic attitude of, let us say, mystical Christian saints since it doesn’t involve a claim to redemption and eschatology (Albert 1997). Although it rests on the negation of the values of the flesh, its aims and consequences are both practical: it enables a *basitigi* to gain control over his more-than-human partners, and avoid making them ineffective or turning their forces against him. In this case avoidance, considered as a form of action, contributes to the creation of a particular quality of presence of *basitigi*, a presence we may describe, after Barba, as pre-expressive—that is, highly intense. This quality of presence enables the great masters to face the mighty, “atrociously material” presence of their divine things.

6. From Arabic, literally “the state of one who keeps his word” (Dumestre 2011: 1015).
7. It should be noted that being pure in this sense can sometimes mean being physically dirty, like the master who never washed himself with soap and water so as not to diminish the effectiveness of the ritual baths he used in abundance, and who therefore traveled around preceded by a strong odor.

Here we have these "power objects" confronted within the ritual context by "power bodies" capable of measuring themselves against them: bodies fully engaged in a strange relationship with these objects, ready to change places or even merge with them, as this conversation with Bou suggests:

– If a *basi* needs water or blood, he can let it be known at any time. It's like a mobile phone. Every mobile has a number, and every *basi* has its way of communicating with the *basitigi*. But not every *basitigi* knows this way. There are those who grew up in the practice and those who just went looking for *basiw* from others. It's like car manufacturers and car users. Those who make them and those who drive them don't have the same skills. Several *basiw* can work together, but each in its own way, each finding [its] own footing. If you put the left shoe on the right foot, you won't get good results.
– *But could you give me an example of how* basiw *communicate? How can a* basi *make it known that it needs something?*
– For example, if your *basi* is powerful and wants to tell you that it needs water, you don't have any saliva, it becomes dry, your salivary gland doesn't produce any more, you can't swallow, as if you had angina. That's one way. Or you can't close your eyes, as if they were congested, as if there were dust or something in them.
– *And does that also mean it's thirsty?*
– Yes, but it depends on the *basi*, there are some that do it that way and others that don't.

The fetish and its master are more closely linked than they appear to be at first glance. When one of them is thirsty, the other feels it in his own body. These bodies therefore do not seem to be *contiguous* but rather *continuous*, as if they were two sides of a coin, as if their respective places were interchangeable. Sarah Brett-Smith (1994: 63–64) came to a similar conclusion describing the Bamana sculptors she studied as akin to the ritual objects they make. We have seen that the bodies of *basitigiw* gradually become similar to the powerful *basiw* they handle. While *basiw* gradually emancipate themselves from their thingness, becoming subjects in the course of sacrificial practice, their masters, by submitting themselves to the authority of their *basiw* and abdicating their own, go in the opposite direction: they become like pots or giant vessels full of potency, they turn into fetishes. It is hard to say who is acting and who is being acted on in this tangle of things and beings—or things-beings—involving object-subjects who confront subject-objects.

Unlike the process described by Simona Taliani (2016) in Italy, where immigrant Nigerian women are reduced to objects even as artifacts consecrated in rituals back home gain autonomy and identity, the *basitigi* and *basiw* do not rob each other of power and agency. In both cases, there is a tangle of things and beings, a transformation of things into beings and beings into things. But among the Mande, the process is one of (mutual) subjectivation, and not subjugation to the end of objectification. *Basitigiya* as practice enables certain men to accumulate power, to establish vast interpersonal networks, and to acquire a certain level of fame. It changes social relationships and power relations in favor of all the involved humans and more-than-humans.

Wife, Dog, Vehicle, Telephone, Plants: From Self to Other and/or from Self to Self

How do humans and more-than-humans involved in *basitigiya* relate? How to conceive of their mutual engagement? Jean-Paul Colleyn, whose field sites are close to mine, compares the relationships between divine things and ritual experts in their charge to those of spouses. He observes:

> Relations with the powers worshipped by initiation societies are tinged with sexuality. Anyone who wishes to found an initiation society (*jo*) and acquire *boliw* must choose a trusted intermediary and initiate a procedure modeled on the marriage proposal … Metaphorically speaking, an entity such as the Komo, the Kono, the Ciwara, or the Nya is "a woman you marry" even though they are given very masculine nicknames in other contexts. The "witness to the marriage" (*furu jatigi*) introduces the request to the cult leader chosen by the sponsor and asks him for a "daughter of his *jo*." The priest who receives the request also chooses a witness, and the two intermediaries negotiate the dowry (*laada-fen, furu-nafolo, furu fen*) for the *boliw* and the masks, magic recipes (*daliluw*), plants, and powders needed to maintain the *boliw* … Marriage with the "fetish" has a political dimension because, as with matrimonial exchanges, it creates a network of allies. (Colleyn 2009: 741, my translation)

Colleyn is writing about male initiation societies, which are no longer present in my field area nor among the Mande more generally (see the Overture). Aside from this difference, our ethnographic materials

resonate. When I asked Komagan how he acquired his Kɔntrɔn, he explained that he had gone to Falaye's house with ten kola nuts—a gift which is considered there to be the first step in any matrimonial proposal—to collect the "young woman" (*dɔgɔ muso*), whom he took to his house after paying the "dowry." A well-known specialist from Bamako, Seydou Diakité, alias Waraba Tiatio, used similar terms, speaking of his fetishes as feminine presences who kept a close eye on his every move. Other masters, including Dia, insisted that a *basitigi* must to consult his *basiw* before contracting (another) marriage.[8] The celibacy requirements some masters follow also support the idea that unions with divine things are similar to marriages. What is more, these things usually appear in their masters' dreams in a female form—as Daouda, Falaye, and many other specialists have confirmed.

But *basiw* may take on other appearances as well, especially of animals, as Zumana told me. Does this mean they are as wild beasts in one way or another, or that the relationship between them and their masters could be likened to that between hunters and wild animals? This is not entirely out of the question, as my interview with Zumana suggests:

– *And if you don't pour the liquid on it [the* basi*], it may be displeased?*
– No, but it won't work if you ask it for something.
– *But if you don't sacrifice, won't it ever turn on you and hurt you?*
– Yes, it will. If you take a dog, if you don't feed it, what's it going to do? It'll bite you.

In Zumana's opinion, like a hungry dog that can be trained but never fully controlled, a fetish may be dangerous. However, its master should not fear it, as that would prevent him from "working" with it. As we have seen, Zumana is not afraid of his fetishes. Like any *basitigi* worthy of the name, he must remain brave and not allow himself to be carried away by the flood of destabilizing multimodal sensations associated with his practice. He must learn to control and care for the "things-beings" he is engaged to, to tame them while at the same time taming the fear they may arouse.

8. This is a polygynous environment in which multiple marriages are traditionally allowed. In practice, in rural areas, most men have between two and three wives.

The relationship between them and their masters is complicated. At first glance, it links two autonomous agents, one of which—the fetish—is superior to the other—the human. This is what Dia tells me:

> The other day, a woman came in sick. She was really sick and wanted me to heal her. I took the kola and said: "I can't cure her; it's you, Kɔntrɔn, who can. If she's going to be all right [that is, if you agree to help her], let me know with the kolas." Well, I threw the kolas, so I could tell the woman whether it was yes or no. But you need the plants. So I asked Kɔntrɔn to [make me] dream to see which plant to use. Yet there are *kɔntrɔntigi* who will make the sacrifice and everything, and then lie down and nothing will come out of it.

My friend does not consider that he has special powers or abilities—"I can't cure her"—except that, and this is not the case for everyone, he can activate certain things (here: Kɔntrɔn) that are endowed with extraordinary power—able, among other things, to heal, kill, and bring wealth. Dia and other experts present these things, and not humans, as agents. As agents, they are also addressed in ritual speech (*basitigikan*), as we have seen. The experts who talk to them and handle them take on the role of intermediaries, of subordinates of these acting things, and yet at the same time they appear as their masters or managers (*tigiw*)—altogether a paradox. In reality, the transfer of agency—from them to their fetishes—is not complete, as the same conversation with Dia makes clear. At another point, my master explained to me that while every *basi* has its own requirements in terms of sacrifices, its master can intercede with it if, out of friendship or pity, he wants to help a client who cannot afford to satisfy these requirements. He stressed that it is the fetish master's call. "But is it still the *basi* who solves the problem?" I asked. "Yes, of course," Dia replied.

These examples support my argument that *basiw* agency is fundamentally interactional, but it also invites nuance to that interpretation. Rather than a joint action by a collective of human and more-than-human actors-actants, or by a couple made up of a superior divine partner and an inferior human partner, they show that the power relationship in question is constantly being renegotiated from the start and that humans are not necessarily the subordinate in this relationship. Earlier, I compared the performances of *basitigikan* and of *jeliw*. Both performances are essentially a form of manipulation, understood here as an influence exercised by a subject over an object of their action—be it a person, a

tool, or a natural element—whose state, position, and so forth the subject seeks to modify. It goes without saying that fetishes are objects of action by their masters. The following exchange with Zumana, whom I asked why sacrifices are offered to fetishes, suggests as much:

– That's what it [the *basi*] wants.
– *Is it asking?*
– Yes, it is asking.
– *What if you don't sprinkle it [sacrificial blood]?*
– It's like taking your car out. If you haven't put petrol in it, is it going to get you home?

In the space of a few seconds, Zumana, who earlier compared his *basiw* with hungry dogs, moves from an image of a fetish-subject who "wants" to be sprinkled with blood to that of the fetish-object—the fetish-tool, or more precisely the fetish-vehicle—which this blood-essence allows to work. The image of the *basi*-vehicle is also used by Bou, who tells me:

– The car can go right, it can go left, but it's the driver who drives it, who steers it.
– *So the* basitigi *is like that driver? He decides where to go?*

Bou answers in the affirmative. Later, he uses the metaphor of the mobile phone:

– A *basi* is like a cellphone. When you offer it kolas, chicken blood, and tobacco, it's like topping up a prepaid phone card. Once you've topped it up, it stays in your pocket. It doesn't move, but it works. It's with the blood of goats or chickens, etc. that we make the *basiw* work.
– *But how? If they don't move, how do they work?*
– OK, you can see the blood you're pouring on them, but you can't see the thing that's inside them. That's what works. The life of the slaughtered animals is in their blood.[9] And then, when you slit their throat, you specify why you're doing it: to harm someone, to banish them, or

9. For "life," Bou here uses the term *ni*: literally "soul," "life blood," "life" (see Dumestre 2011: 753).

to marry a woman or a man, make a fortune, etc. The *basi* needs to know this. So it needs life and an intention.[10]

– *But if I call Yacouba on my phone and tell him to come, he's the one who comes and I'm the one who tells him to come. And with the* basi, *the master asks him to settle this or that matter, but who settles it?*
– It's the thing [*fɛn*] inside it.

Dia later explained to me that Bou was referring to plants. As I saw during one of my subsequent trips, Bou's consultation space is actually built around a living tree. The tree's branches protrude through the partly open roof, while its lower parts are completely covered with a thick crust of coagulated blood that also contains other materials: porcupine quills, scraps of paper with the names of people who have asked for help (including me), cowrie shells, jugs filled with various mixtures, a dead mouse, and so on. These diverse materials are transformed through the sacrifices poured on them, which turn them into an amalgam that is constantly growing and changing, with the plant at its center.

Even if Bou's ritual space is quite unique, linking the agency of the *basiw* to trees (*jiriw*) or plants (*furuw*) is not. The idea that the fetishes are plants or, more accurately, *pharmaka* is widely shared in Africa (see, for a synthesis, Kedzierska Manzon 2021b, and for specific examples: Bernault 2019; Ceriana Mayneri 2010, 2014; Coquet 1987; Fournier 2018; MacGaffey 1990, 2000; Surgy 1993). To understand the complex logic behind their manipulation, some of which we encountered in chapter 4, I ask Bou:

– *But then why use the* basi *and not this thing inside directly?*
– Well, it's as if instead of topping up your phone's prepaid card, you take the card and talk to the card itself [he laughs]. It's like taking a kola, and saying "Hello, kola? I need this and that done" [he laughs]. Do you understand? [he laughs]

I am not sure I do. It is hard for me to understand how the fetish works. Another metaphor comes to mind that I think Bou would approve of. We could compare the *basi* with a computer, which needs electricity, a processor, and software in order to function: this is where sacrifices come in. There is no doubt that my interlocutors see fetishes as

10. *Sɔnnɛmɛ*, literally "that which comes from the heart" (see Dumestre 2011: 933).

fairly sophisticated tools/agents like computers. Another image Dia used supports this parallel. When I asked my master about the consequences of not complying with the prohibitions specific to each *basi*, he gave me the example of water wetting a notebook. Like a wet notebook—or computer, for that matter—a *basi* that a master does not take proper care of will no longer be of any use. Dia quickly added that the offended *basi* can refuse to deal with the problems it is asked to resolve.

As we can see, there is a dual logic underlying Dia's words and those of other masters who describe their divine things as both agents endowed with intentionality—who become angry, accept or reject requests, express their needs, and so on—and as the instruments of their own action—like a notebook, a telephone, or a car—or even as both simultaneously, which in their eyes may perhaps be the same ontologically, given the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the category of thing (*fɛn*), discussed earlier. One way to understand their perspective might be to draw on Alfred Gell (1998) and say that fetishes are endowed with a secondary agency that should be viewed as a relay of primary human agency. But we might also try to explain the ambiguity of the discourse that surrounds them by the modification of the local religious landscape. The "tools" metaphor—and the view of fetishes as objects which allow communication with and action of certain invisible agents—was frequent in my recent conversations, which took place at a time when Islam was gaining an increasingly important place in the public space and when practices that had been considered to be traditional were undergoing transformation (see the Overture, and Bourdarias 2009; Soares 2016; Soares and Otayek 2009). Their mutations have undoubtedly had an influence on how *basiw* are conceptualized. Some of my educated, urban interlocutors described them to me not as autonomous entities or things-beings but rather as objects behind which, or within which, invisible agents known to the Muslim religion lurk. This was, for example, the point of view of Modibo—an employee of Malian television—for whom the force of all fetishes is in reality a borrowed one: it is that of djinns and Satan. However, Islam is not a new element of the local religious landscape. Indeed, Mande society has been Islamized for several centuries; knowledge of its precepts is widespread. Many ritual experts who nevertheless consider themselves to be "traditional" are familiar with it, as we will see in the next chapter. Under these circumstances, it is hard to estimate the precise impact of Islam on their practice, or to comment on how its current changes reflect the transformations of the practices and conceptualization of *basiw*. What I can say is that in my interviews,

both old and new, their masters do not regularly interpret them based on what we might call an animist grid: they do not associate these divine things with other more-than-human agents such as spirits or djinns. Dia was adamant about the nonsystematic nature of this association. Unlike Modibo, who works in television, and no doubt many other city dwellers, he told me that *basiw* are not objects invested by certain invisible beings that are external to them. Rather, from a truly "fetishist" perspective (see Pels 1998), they seem to be an acting extension of the humans who form a lasting relationship with these extraordinary things-beings. His perspective is broadly shared by other specialists with whom I have come into contact and who would no doubt agree with Dia that *basiw* are persons that are not persons.

Should we conclude that the relationship between these specialists and these things is a relationship between two persons? Yes and no. The metaphors of marriage or taming (of an animal) are both useful and inadequate to define it. This is why my interlocutors multiply images and comparisons that are sometimes contradictory but when taken together enable us to understand this relationship better. As Marc Augé (1988) noted based on ethnographic data from Benin, such a relationship is simultaneously the relationship of self to other and of self to self, both internal and external to the subject who establishes it. We can compare it with attunement—borrowing the term from medicine, where it refers to the process of harmonization and mutual influence that is characteristic of the relationship between an infant and its mother. In this relationship, both the mother and her baby become attuned by interacting. Attunement serves to consolidate their affective bonds through sharing a sensory experience. At the same time, it enables each of them to assert themselves in relation to the other. It is a kind of improvisation for two, and plays an essential role in shaping the baby's subjectivity and agency. It also influences the mother's subjectivity and agency. We could assume the same mechanism is at play in the relationship between *basiw* and their masters, both shaped through their mutual engagement.

CHAPTER 6

Old Masters and New Religious Entrepreneurs: Male Ritual Agency Today

We have seen in the last two chapters that both the divine things and the humans who care for them become powerful agents through their mutual engagement, a complex and ambiguous relationship. What kind of subjects does this relationship shape? This question echoes the question asked at the end of the First Movement while trying to understand how hunting enables the *donsow* to construct themselves as ritual experts of a particular kind. In this second movement, the objective has been to see what kind of ritual experts *bastigiya* as a practice produces. As in the case of *donsow*, it is risky and difficult to generalize in respect to the *basitigiw* constructions of self, and impossible to give a full account of the personal journey of each master I have encountered in the field. Yet, presenting at least some of them in more detail may prove useful to better grasp both their singular ways of becoming who they are and more general features of their agency. Changing characteristics of their practice and its place within the local religious landscape play a critical role in the formation of the Mande non-Islamic sphere.

Their agency, it must be emphasized, is conceived locally as exclusively or essentially masculine. "You take Kɔntrɔn to become a man," Falaye told me in Bamako in April 2004. "So women can't take it?" "No," he confirmed. This rule applies to many other *basiw*, whose handlers must not come into contact with menstrual blood or pregnancy. Thus, approaching *basiw* is no easy matter for a woman of childbearing age.

But is the circulation of substance the only reason why women are generally not allowed to handle them? Certain divine things—including Komo, for example—cannot be touched, or even seen, by women at all, pregnant or menstruating or not. More generally, anything that has to do with such things is considered to be "a man's business," as Jean-Paul Colleyn (2009) points out. The handling of fetishes is therefore the privileged pathway to masculine fulfillment. From a local perspective, in fact, masculinity (*cɛya* or *kɛya*) and ritual expertise (*bamanaya* or *mandenkaya*), of which *donsoya* and *basitigiya* are a part, seem to be intrinsically linked (see Y. T. Cissé 1994). This is so even if some divine things like *filanin* (twins)—two wooden statuettes, one male and the other female—or the *sisinin*, a *basi* carried by the twins and shaped like a small horn, can be held by women. Women can also, I have been told, acquire *basiw* called Tɔgɔfɛbila or Jafɛren. One Jafɛren, for example, is in the possession of a certain Jafɛren Nunténé,[1] who lives in Sibiribougou, on the outskirts of Bamako.[2] Daouda also told me that some of his students were women. Whatever the case may be, women caring for divine things are extremely rare to the point that everyone talks about them, as was the case with Nunténé.

When I raised the question of women's ritual expertise in the field, I found myself referred mainly to healers (*furatigiw*) who treat childhood or reproductive illnesses with plant mixtures and incantations.[3] While they are no doubt effective in their area of expertise, these women say they do not perform blood sacrifices and do not compare themselves—in terms of either their client profile, the panoply of ailments they treat, or their remuneration—with the highly authoritative, feared, and respected male specialists: members of extensive interpersonal networks and, in some cases, public personalities in the fullest sense of the term. Consulted frequently by a broad range of clients to heal and protect them from misfortune—and also from harm from others such as sorcerers, presumed enemies, and persons ill-disposed towards them—the male experts achieve their goals through their relationships with certain divine things. Women specialists on the other hand, no matter how

1. Nunténé is a female first name that is fairly widespread locally.
2. Although I did not have the opportunity to meet her, several of my acquaintances were aware of her existence.
3. The status quo is slightly different in the rural areas, where some women may also specialize in divination with cowrie shells or "working with spirits."

powerful they may be, usually do not handle *basiw*—at least, in the rural and traditional contexts.[4]

Female ritual expertise will be the subject of the Third Movement of this book; let us concentrate here on the male experts, starting with one of the oldest and most respected masters of West Africa, recently passed away: Falaye Keïta, whose story of misfortunes, at a young age and before he acquired his Kɔntrɔn, I shared in chapter 4. A perfect actualization of the ideal of the "old-style" master, Falaye was always reserved and discreet, avoiding flashy clothes and ostentatious signs of wealth. When he was not traveling to visit his many pupils and clients, he lived in a small village, almost a hamlet, in the Guinean bush, despite his wide fame. Some of his disciples lived similarly modest lifestyles in surrounding villages, such as Komagan, who introduced me to Kɔntrɔn. Like other rural *basitigiw,* when he was younger, Falaye helped cultivate his family's fields of millet, maize, and rice and devoted his spare time to hunting. A respected family man, he had several children, including a son who took up his ritual practice.[5] Falaye was humble and modest, sober in both his appearance and manner of expression. His tone of voice and speech were notably controlled, and he never boasted about his own merits, skills, or powers.

The same cannot be said of the late Seydou Diakité, who was known as Waraba Tiatio, literally "the one who catches lions (alive)." He was in his early sixties when our paths first crossed in 2004. A rather corpulent and energetic man, he received his clients in a huge compound he had built in Yirimadio, on the outskirts of Bamako, consisting of several huts and adorned at its entrance with imposing statues of lions. Waraba had six telephones: two landlines, two mobile phones, and two satellite phones. Such a number of phones, including satellite ones, was extremely rare in Mali at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and still is. But Waraba was a public, political figure and, as he told me, a close friend of

4. For a more systematic comparison between male and female ritual expertise among the Mande, see the synthesis and my analysis in Kedzierska Manzon 2021a.
5. This son lives in his natal village and, from what I have been able to establish, subscribes to the same "ethos of discretion" that characterized his father, even though he travels regularly to the Malian capital, where he takes part in ritual ceremonies as part of the activities of one of the associations that have proliferated in recent years (the Union Nationale des Doma du Mali).

former Malian presidents Moussa Traoré and Amadou Toumani Touré, as well as French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi, whose portrait decorated the wall of his personal bathroom where his fetishes were also kept. He had other *basiw* stored in his bedroom cupboards and in the courtyard of his house, in the middle of which was a low hill made up of a termite mound, a two-hundred-year-old Khaya tree, and stones from seven different rivers and seven different hills—not to mention over three hundred species of plants. During one of our conversations, Waraba assured me that he had killed more than twenty-three lions, several hippos, roan and kob antelopes, and even elephants. Then he added, in a slightly provocative tone, "I'm not a crook. I'm the most dangerous, the most reckless, I'm very good and very bad, in the extreme. I like trouble, I don't like peace … I'm a nasty, hot-headed man. I love blood." I could never imagine Falaye saying such things, or dressing all in red like Waraba. However, before donning the colorful finery of a traditional expert, Waraba had worn a Muslim headdress and white *boubou* (a kind of poncho), outward signs of adherence to Islam. I discovered this in photos I saw, taken several years apart. When I asked him about his relationship with Islam, Waraba confided: "I have only one path to follow. I don't pray or fast, but I've been to Mecca a dozen times. I believe in Allah, but I don't have the time. I know how to say no when I have to and yes when I have to." It is hard to know exactly what factors and circumstances prompted him to turn to "tradition," but his move was part of—or just preceded—a more general "back-to-the-roots" movement in which other experts have also participated.

Bou Bagayoko, a "traditional fetish-master," as he describes himself—whom I have mentioned several times—is a part of this "back-to-the-roots" movement (Figure 18). It would be difficult to guess, seeing him today, that Bou was educated in a Koranic school, first in his native village a few dozen kilometers west of Bamako and then in the Malian capital. He is the youngest son of Fodé Bagayoko, a complex figure who, despite having completed a pilgrimage to Mecca, is known from Côte d'Ivoire to Burkina, and from Senegal to Guinea, as an "old-fashioned" *basitigi* and *donso*. He is said to be highly respected by former Malian president Ibrahim Boubakar Keïta. During celebrations organized by the Association Nationale des Chasseurs du Mandé, of which he is the ritual leader, he was visited by numerous delegations from neighboring countries. Some of Bou's knowledge comes from his father, but he mostly "works" with a quadripartite *basi*—*Sabu ɲuman daga*, literally the "jugs for a good cause"—brought for him by Fodé from the Siguiri region of

Figure 18. *Basitigi* Boubakar Bagayoko, at his consultation camp in Sambada, March 2018. Photo by author.

Guinea. (This is the *basi* described in the previous chapter, forming an amalgam with a tree at the center of his ritual hut.)

When I met Bou through Dia in 2017, business was good for him: he owned five cars and employed a full-time driver. At his professional

Figure 19. Sign at the entrance of the consultation space at Bou Bagayoko's ritual compound in Sambada, March 2018. Photos by author.

compound in Sambada, near Sibi (Figure 19), where he receives his clients and where he has erected a cement statue of his famous father, he has built a water tower and grows maize, onions, oranges, yams, and other crops. Bou has a small herd of cows, several chickens, some guinea

fowl, and a large pig farm that is his pride and joy. Although he no longer goes out into the fields, he remains close to the world of agriculture and the bush: he is also an accomplished *donso* who sometimes hunts in the company of my master, Dia. Married and the father of a small family, Bou has recently taken a fourth wife, who, unlike the previous three, is Ivorian. He has organized a small English course for his and his apprentices' children taught by a visiting Gambian friend. He is always welcoming, modest and smiling, and is endowed with great intelligence. He patiently spends several hours answering my questions when we meet during my subsequent trips. The way he expresses himself, which is rich with metaphors and imagery, makes our conversations particularly lovely and stimulating. Bou often makes his points by using parables and paradoxical statements to pique the curiosity of his interlocutor and prompt a request for clarification. Even in an informal conversation, he remains in his role as a master. While he is generally magnanimous with his students—as well as with the visiting anthropologist—he is no less impressive, as can be seen from the following account of our first two meetings.

The first took place during a *donsow* event organized by a channel of the Office de Radiodiffusion—Télévision du Mali (ORTM) in front of the Hôtel Amitié in Bamako city center. Bou arrived aboard a military-style four-wheeler vehicle accompanied by twenty of his students, all dressed in paramilitary outfits, who followed him in a second four-wheeler or on motorcycles. Several dead antelopes, four live snakes, and two porcupines on leashes completed the procession. Bou himself was wearing a long boubou decorated with cowrie shells, and showed great poise and a remarkable stage presence. When he came to talk to me at the place where I was staying in Bamako a few days later, he was less elaborately dressed but still accompanied by a few students. It was then that he explained to me that he was very attached to his culture and critical of the modern age, which, in his view, is characterized by individualism: "everyone only thinks of oneself and does everything for money and not in the general interest." To his mind, this is due to the combined influence of capitalism and Islam, which prevents Africans from following the path of their ancestors. Bou added that even after several years at Koranic school, he still remained nothing more than an imitator trying to appropriate an imported tradition, whereas, as a *basitigi*, he has been fulfilling himself and remained faithful to the ancestral heritage of which he was so proud.

This same sense of pride characterized late Daouda Yattara (Figure 20), whom many people see as the forerunner—or even the founder—of the

Figure 20. Daouda Yattara with my friend and master, Dia, in front of his compound on the outskirts of Bamako, March 2016. Photo by author.

traditionalist momentum and revival that lies behind the formation of what I have called the non-Islamic sphere. Known for the vehemence of his anti-Islamic comments, Daouda admitted to me that he "doesn't like long beards"—an expression that refers to followers of reformist and

Figure 21. Daouda Yattara as Satan, inscription on the wall of his consultation space, Bamako, June 2014. Photo by author.

radical Islam—yet that at the same time he helped the most destitute prepare for the Tabaski festival.[6] He was always provocative: he referred publicly to himself as Satan—as evidenced by his portrait on the wall of one of his ritual spaces (Figure 21), which he compares with Islamic holy places, as can be seen from the inscription "La Mecque de Daouda Yatarra" (Figure 22) on one of them—the one with a vodou imported from Benin.

In March 2017, I spotted a huge black pig in front of his compound, a very rare thing in a country where pork is not eaten. The pig was still there when I returned in December 2019. Like the ritual use of alcohol—Guinness, the strong smell of which struck me during the sacrifices I described in the previous chapter—the inscriptions I mentioned above and the steadily increasing number of his fetishes, it contributed to the construction of Daouda's image as a "*soma* [traditional expert]

6. This is what Eid el-Kebir is called in many West and Central African countries.

Figure 22. "The Mecca of Daouda Yattara," inscription on the wall of the building containing Daouda's vodou, June 2014. Photo by author.

who is proud to be one."[7] Daouda had been a victim of his own success, and had limited the scope of his practice in his last years to the most difficult and best-paid cases. That is, before he was imprisoned in March 2021 following charges of complicity in a murder. It was his second time in prison, as he had already spent some time behind bars fifteen years earlier. This time, his friends and disciples filed a petition to liberate him. Shortly after coming back home, he suddenly died in September 2024.[8] By all accounts, he had many enemies. Daouda kept his distance from Islam, especially Salafism, but was also critical of the West, and yet he never hesitated to use certain symbols of modernity usually associated with the West to highlight his prosperous financial situation and high social status (see Bourdarias 2009; Soares 2016). In front of his premises, there were always a few vehicles—including a four-wheel drive—alongside

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7. Quoted in the article "Je n'ai pas de relations particulières avec Amadou Haya Sanogo" in the newspaper *Le Malien*, April 7, 2014 (no. 1554), p. 7.
8. For the media coverage, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QJN0y52UDc.

old-fashioned signs of wealth: a herd of cattle and goats. The entrance to the premises was decorated with a giant statue of a black-and-white eagle. His practice is apparently continued by one of his nephews, who presents himself as Daouda Junior.

Another of Daouda's nephews, Alou Coulibaly, known as Falaje Papus,[9] is also a renewed specialist working in Bamako. Having benefited from his uncle's largesse, the story goes, this successful businessman is a public figure working for charities, notably through the foundation Fon Ji he created in memory of his mother—and Daouda's sister. Papus told me when we met in March 2018 that he is a direct descendant of the former kings of Ségou (Figure 23), in particular Biton Coulibaly. He sought public recognition of his royal status by joining the Forum of Traditional Leaders and Sovereigns of Africa and being officially crowned by His Majesty King Tchiffi Zié Jean Gervais, the association's permanent secretary-general.

Papus is one of a new type of specialist: fully integrated into the market economy and transnational networks, proud of their African heritage, familiar with new communication technologies, and present on social networks, as illustrated by images he and other masters post online. Another member of this generation of specialists is Moussa Sidibé Kontron Bala from Yanfolila (Figure 24), a former rapper and member of the CIDEN group who performed in Angers in 2005 alongside Black Dynasty, a famous group from the West Coast of the United States. Now a professor of psychology and pedagogy at the Institut de formation des Maîtres Djimé Diallo in Kangaba, Moussa explained to me in impeccable French that after being a follower of Islam and, more briefly, Christianity, and having found no answers to his problems in these imported religions, he decided to return to fetishes.

9. It is of no little interest to note that his chosen first name, Papus, refers to the figure of Papus, an occultist, Freemason of the Grand Lodge de France (there is a lodge that bears his name), and one of the founders of Martinism. He seems to be unaware of it. The links between Western occultism (from the eighteenth to the twentieth century) and the new African religious movements have been the subject of analyses, notably in seminars held in 2020–21, the results of which were published in the 2022 *Annuaire de l'EPHE*. Without being able to know the exact relationship between this specialists's family and Freemasons, we can only emphasize that the African Papus seems to adhere to the humanitarian morality preached in the lodges.

Figure 23. His royal highness, King Faladie Papus. Image posted by himself on Facebook, August 2020.

Figure 24. Moussa Sidibé Kontron Bala in front of his *basiw*, Bamako, March 2019. Photo by author.

At the time of our interview, Moussa's collection of fetishes numbered seventy specimens, some of which came from quite a distance away—from Benin, for example. Friendly and smiling—a joker even—Moussa is the "*basitigi* cool" par excellence. We can call him this by paraphrasing the term "Sufi cool" used by Benjamin Soares to talk about certain young Malian Sufis.[10] I asked Moussa about his somewhat atypical biography:

– *Doesn't it bother you to be* kaafiri*? You have known Islam and Christianity …*
– I still have my Bible and my Koran in French and other religious books, but when you read them, you see that they're all lies, made up to embellish things. Personally, I think there may be a paradise, but

10. During his presentation at my seminar entitled "Retour aux sources. Nouvelles formes de ritualisation et d'expertise rituelle en Afrique et ailleurs" on December 2, 2020. The expression was originally coined by Roxanne Varzi (2006) to describe certain young religious leaders in contemporary Iran.

you can't get there by praying. You have to be good. Even if you don't pray. It's not because you make offerings to fetishes, that you become a bad person. You wouldn't spend your life helping people [as fetish masters supposedly do] if you were bad. When someone comes along and says: "I need to see if I can marry this woman, or this man" or "I'm going to Spain or the United States and I need a visa," or "I'd like to join the civil service. What should I do?" or "Ah, there's an evil spirit in our house and we need to chase it away. I've been the victim of a bad spell and the sorcerers want to eat me." God can't do everything. You need someone who can take care of it … What they say [Muslims and Christians] is wrong. You have to be good; if you're good, you'll go to heaven, period.

– *And is it written down somewhere? Or is it an oral teaching from the elders?*
– Here, transmissions are oral. That can't change here. It changes with the *voduistes*[11] because they've made it a religion in its own right. Here it's not a religion because the people who practice it are despised. There are some people who practice it and hide because they don't want others to know. Even if you write a book about your research into our [non-Islamic] practices, would it be acknowledged? Who will buy it?

Obviously, Moussa didn't have in mind the possible international scholarly readers of this book but rather its likely hostile reception in Mali, suggesting that my research into the formation of the non-Islamic sphere and the revival of Mande "traditional religions" will not please everyone locally. It is true that efforts to institutionalize and popularize such "traditional" religions have sometimes provoked mixed reactions in the past there, as demonstrated by the story of Sidiki Traoré, known as Yaoundé. A teacher by training, like Moussa, Sidiki founded a school of sand divination in Bamako in the late 1990s aimed primarily at civil servants and offering weekend courses. The adventure soon came to an end: he fell seriously ill and remains partially paralyzed to this day. Moussa, who told me his story with a desolate air, attributed his illness to the hostility of the representatives of Islam, who reject practices they consider to be *kaafir*. But he also blamed the ritual experts (*somaw* and

11. The French term used here by Moussa to refer to the practitioners of Vodun in Benin who openly claim their affiliation with the "traditional religion."

domaw), who are themselves opposed to the democratization of such practices. He explained to me, "They put a curse on him, because the Bambara didn't like him teaching divination at a school, because for them this is knowledge that must remain hidden."[12] It must be said that the locally established episteme of doubt hardly seems to be compatible with the idea of the widespread dissemination of potentially dangerous ritual procedures and knowledge such as *daliluw*. It is not surprising, then, that specialists who publicly assert their attachment to tradition and work to promote or popularize its elements are often met with a reserved welcome, including from their colleagues, who wish to preserve secrecy.

Yet, attitudes towards non-Islamic practices have been changing since the beginning on the twenty-first century and, especially, in the 2010s. Indeed, in addition to the media success of the Donso Ngoni Festival, the popularity of young fetish masters is constantly growing and their numbers are always increasing. I see it in the field, and my contacts confirm it. As early as 2004, for example, Waraba told me, "Before, there were no more than ten of us in Bamako to make sacrifices to fetishes. Now there are plenty." Many of them live and work in the neighborhoods on the outskirts of Bamako—in the suburban districts of Sébeninkoro, Djikoroni Para, Lafiabougou, and Falaje—as I have observed in the field and as has been noted by scholars (Bourdarias 2009; Kedzierska Manzon and Jouvelet 2006; Soares 2016).

The phenomenon has become even more widespread in recent years, as Moussa Sidibé Kɔntrɔn Bala pointed out during a conversation in 2019. These specialists are connected, and often on Facebook. They are extremely mobile, often traveling between Abidjan and Dakar, and sometimes to Ouagadougou and provincial Burkinabe, Malian and Ivorian towns as well; some even go to Europe. Of course, the great masters of the past had transnational networks as well, but what seems to distinguish this new generation of fetish masters is not so much their hyper-connectedness as their full, unashamed embrace of practices they themselves present as ancestral and to which they integrate new technologies. They are also highly critical of imported religions, notably Islam, even though they incorporate elements of it and de facto define themselves in relation to it. Let us not forget that Daouda calls himself Satan

12. Bambara is used in a slightly pejorative sense here to mean uneducated peasants versed in non-Islamic practices. It refers to both ethnic and religious affiliations (see Bazin 1985).

and that Bou consumes no alcohol, tobacco, or stimulants. These younger masters do not ignore the precepts of Islam—or Western culture, for that matter—but they do claim to reject them. This could be seen as an attempt to reverse the stigma attached to religious practices that have long been considered to be primitive by the socioeconomic elites who more or less adhere to an evolutionary interpretative frame.

The rebellious or anti-conformist attitude the new generation of fetish masters has adopted towards these elites is undoubtedly part of a broader "back-to-the roots" trend that can be observed in Africa and its diasporas today (Capone 1999; De Witte 2012; Duchesne 2000; Duchesne and Guedj 2005; Kedzierska Manzon 2022, 2023; see also Dozon 2015). In Mali, this trend is also reflected in the creation of the 3RNA-Maaya association—the Rassemblement pour la réhabilitation de la religion négro-africaine—which then split in two: 3RNA-Maaya and Maaya Blon (see the Coda to this book). The leaders of these associations promote a homogeneous, nonhistorical vision of Africa, which they call Kamita and which they link to an ancient Egypt they conceive as Black, in the footsteps of Cheick Anta Diop and other proponents of Afrocentrism. In the workshops they organize and in their publications (see for example Fakoly 2003, 2005, 2018; Sidibé 2017), they encourage their compatriots to "reconnect" with their origins so they can "liberate" themselves from all harmful foreign influences, whether in the form of monotheistic religions or a colonial and postcolonial version of capitalism. Their activities, which are contributing to the reconfiguration of the local religious landscape, are not without a political dimension. In a post written in 2016, in conjunction with former President Ibrahim Boubacar's calls for prayers for national reconciliation, the leaders of 3RNA-Maaya deplored the lack of interest in African religious practices shown by political elites.[13] Similarly, a member of the association, Fodé Moussa Sidibé, the former organizer of Rencontres des Chasseurs de l'Ouest Africain, invited the government in an open letter to reconsider its position on religion.[14] This has now been done. The appointment in 2019 of the late Ngossi Niagaté, the former spiritual leader of the Fédération Nationale des Chasseurs du Mali as a Living Human Treasure of Mali and the creation in June 2020 of the High Council of the Cult, which was

13. Information available online at https://afrocentricity.info/files/2013/09/site-web-de-3RNA-Maaya.pdf.

14. Available online at http://www.maliweb.net/lettres-ouvertes/religion-et-culte-dr-fode-moussa-sidibe-demande-lequite-175754.html.

initially supposed to be called the High Animist Council, with a *donso* (Hamdallaye Issa Sangaré) at its head, bear witness to this. Set up on the model of the Islamic High Council, which has been in existence since 2002, this new body was intended to represent the interests and needs of the ritual experts who identify themselves as traditional, and who are grouped together in a multitude of different associations.[15]

Members of such associations are fully integrated into the market economy, politically active, and familiar with new communications technologies, which serve them not only to establish impressive transnational networks but also to construct their professional personas. They do so in an aesthetic that might be described as ostentatious or even baroque. Waraba is undoubtedly a precursor, but the terms characterize the appearance and conduct of most of the younger generation of *basitigiw*, who create the image of a public figure for themselves by developing a particularly polished and consistent style. This aesthetic presupposes a particular relationship with image and the use of the attributes of modernity. I analyze it in greater depth in the final part of this book, which is devoted to another type of "new religious entrepreneur" proliferating in Mali today: the officiants of *jinɛdɔn* and masters—or rather, mistresses—of spirit possession.

Let us here conclude the analysis of the construction of agency on the part of male ritual experts engaged in the practice of *basitigiya*. This practice always follows the same basic pattern, which in all rural and urban settings consists in blood sacrifices made to certain quite strange "things-beings." The structure and stylistic or poetic features of the speech addressed to these things—the *basitigikan*—remain constant over the years, independent of the context, as indicated by a comparison of my field recordings from Bamako and rural areas between 2004 and 2018. The powerful things in question are supposed to respond to this speech through the position of kolas and chickens. I have shown that the sacrificial blood and speech contribute to the production of the flesh and also the agency of these things. The ritual practice establishes them as agents with a paradoxical status of "persons who are not persons" and

15. In addition to four *donsow* associations (see Kedzierska Manzon 2014a), we should mention the Union Nationale des Doma du Mali; the Domajiguitugu Association of Mali; the Association des Doma du Mali; and several associations of traditional practitioners, traditional healers, and phytotherapists, not forgetting the cultural association I mentioned in the Overture, the Djiguiya Blo.

who remain in an ambivalent and complex relationship with their masters, with whom they jointly act. Despite the relative unchangeability of this process, the construction of the masters as a particular kind of ritual expert varies, as evidenced by the diversity of the portraits I have just painted. What does not change is that the relationship that links *basitigiw* to their *basiw* seems to be both external and internal to the subjects that maintain it. This relationship and the practice that establishes it affect the bodies of these experts, transforming them into subject-objects during the ritual performances but also beyond them. To be more precise, these performances operate the dilation of ritual context and at the same time the boundary between the person of these experts and their professional role or persona. Both become blurred, as we have seen in the cases of Daouda and Waraba.

Clearly, the singular ways in which these specialists construct their selves depend on multiple factors, such as their family, origins, their educational background, where they live, and their particular life story, not forgetting the sociopolitical context in Mali and across the world. I do not want to claim that the way they make themselves is based solely on their ritual activities or on their particular relationship with their *basiw*, their masters, and their clients. As in the case of the *donsow* I analyzed in the first part of the book, my aim here was not to describe their constructions of self exhaustively and in all its (and their) diversity, but to understand how ritual practices shape them, enabling these ritual experts to establish themselves as a particular type of non-Islamic religious specialist and as "virtuous subjects" (Lambek 2000).

THIRD MOVEMENT

Jinɛdɔn: Spirits at Play

CHAPTER 7

"My She-Devil Loves a Good Vibe": Urban Spirits and Their Masters

An Encounter with the Mistress of Spirits

Let us now turn to another type of "new religious entrepreneur": officiants of spirit possession,[1] proliferating in Bamako today as they are in other African metropolises. One of the best-known specialists in the Malian capital, Assitan Sanogo, aka Jaba-Sitan, is a prosperous woman (Figure 25). Her house in the suburban district of Sébeninkoro, where several other ritual experts have also taken up residence (see chapter 6), has been expanding constantly for several years. Its high white-stone walls, balustrades, terraces, and some of the elements of its meticulous décor stand in stark contrast to the local architecture. The house is

1. As explained earlier, in French-speaking sources, historically but also today, such practices are described in terms of a "culte de possession," an expression coined by the early ethnographers—such as Michel Leiris (1934, 1958), Jean Rouch ([1960] 1989) and Gilbert Rouget (1990)—and deeply rooted in the early modern Christian episteme (Cavaillé and Kedzierska Manzon 2026). As rightly pointed out in his doctoral thesis by Camille Guibert, the apparition and the popularization of this expression is closely linked to the emergence of capitalism and to the slave trade. As Guibert observes, it is not surprising that the possibility of action is denied to the recalcitrant labor forces involved in the triangular trade and presented as passive objects of action of others, as possessed.

Figure 25. *Jinatigi* Assitan Sanogo, alias Jaba-Sitan. Photo by professional photographer which Assitan kindly offered me during one of our meetings in Bamako.

teeming with people: clients, dependents, apprentices, and so on. A photograph of the owner in a calendar displayed on the wall wishes everyone a Happy New Year. Distinguished guests are welcomed into a comfortable reception room with soft red sofas, a flat-screen satellite television, and powerful fans. The mistress of the house—and of the spirits—is in her forties when I meet her in June 2014 and seems to be full of life. I note,

> Assitan is round, energetic, and talkative. She seems open and curious … She is clearly a wealthy, powerful, self-confident, resourceful, intelligent woman who feels good about herself. Her house is modern and comfortable. When I arrive, a man is mopping the floor while three plump women sit quietly on the chairs … Our hostess has an air-conditioned four-wheel drive automobile, and every Friday, as she herself points out, she distributes money to local children. She is the center of a small world that she maintains.

Assitan rules this world with aplomb and a firm hand. Married to a civil servant and the mother of five children—including a daughter, the eldest of the siblings, who studied management in the United States—she confided in me during one of our meetings that her life has not always been so happy. Born in Abidjan to parents from the Sikasso region of Mali who moved several times, she had problems during and after her third pregnancy. On the day the baby was named, she fainted and lay unconscious for several hours. She was treated with traditional remedies,[2] and then went to spend her postpartum retirement at her grandmother's, where her illness worsened still further. She was then committed to a psychiatric hospital for six months, where after unsuccessful therapy an orderly suggested that her family should consult a spirit master or an expert of possession.

The practice in question is known as *jinɛdɔn*, literally "spirit dances"; or *jinɛton*, "spirit society"; or *jinɛtulon*, "spirit festivals or ceremonies";[3] or, finally, *jidunun*, "water drums," a term that refers to the gourds that are

2. The use of plant concoctions administered and prepared by women is the first recourse for infants' and women's illnesses, according to a survey I conducted among female healers (*furatigiw*) in June 2014 and other testimonies.
3. It should be noted that among the Songhay the term used to refer to spirit-possession ceremonies translates also as "entertainment" or "game" (see Henley 2006: 735).

turned over onto other gourds filled with water and are used as drums during these ceremonies. As these names indicate, the practice is aimed at *jinɛw* or *jinaw*,[4] with whom the reader is already familiar. Adepts consider that *jinɛw*, if their desires are not recognized and satisfied, temporarily invest their bodies, causing trouble.

The first academic accounts among the Mande of ritual practices of this kind date back to the 1930s (Leiris 1934: 93–94), although Arab sources and travelers who visited western Sahara and Mande-speaking areas in the nineteenth century mention spirit possession probably linked to it (see Soares 1999). However, those brief reports do not provide details on the organization of ceremonies or the modalities of the rituals. The only monograph devoted to *jinɛdɔn*, which was based on studies carried out in Bamako and the Malian region neighboring Senegal in the 1970s, is the work of Jean-Marie Gibbal (1982), who explains,

> *Jinè-Don* is a spirit-possession cult dedicated to several families of spirits. Under the influence of Islam, people refer to them as *Jinè*, and in French as "diables," with a pejorative connotation. They are, in fact, spiritual entities that can be both beneficial and evil, depending on the circumstances, and are reminiscent of inferior divinities close to men that populate the space in which society exists. I think calling them "spirits" is more appropriate. These spirits make up a hierarchical whole, with their young, their elderly, their power-holders, and their servants. Each spirit is endowed with a distinct personality and specific behavior that make it immediately identifiable when it descends on one of the faithful, because the manifestation of its existence is in the form of a possessive trance in which the initiate embodies the personality of its master. (Gibbal 1982: 160, my translation)

Like Michel Leiris (1934: 94) before him, Gibbal notes that the followers are recruited from people who have been sick, which confirms the biographical accounts I have collected. As for Assitan, the spirit master she consulted, following the advice from the hospital staff, had been miraculously alerted to her arrival even before she crossed the threshold. This master confirmed that her problems were caused by her special relationship with a spirit. Thanks to his care, the patient's condition

4. Michel Leiris (1934: 93–94) mentioned the term *dyidé* (*jiden*: water child?) to describe these creatures or demons, as he calls them. However, it is a word I have never heard used in the field.

improved. She took up her normal occupations again while also remaining an integral part of the practice, of which she would later become a mistress. As this example shows, *jinɛdɔn* reproduces the classic pattern of "cults of affliction" identified by Victor Turner (1968), which people join in the midst of a life crisis. This pattern seems to be shared in other spirit-possession-related practices in contemporary Africa. The adepts pass from the status of a hostage—suffering the spontaneous and disruptive presence of spirits against their will—to that of a "host," to use Adeline Masquelier's (2002) apt formula. The passage from "possession as a pathology" to ritual possession (Zempleni 1987) is narrated through a story of affliction and calling.

It also can run along family lines. Several adepts told me that members of their family from their grandparents' generation had been "chosen" by spirits (see also Gibbal 1982: 229–30). As for Assitan, she confided that even as a child she was visited by snakes—creatures of ambiguous status—and that as a young adult, she had practiced cowrie divination under the guidance of spirits who revealed the rules in her dreams. She assured me that a similar intimate link exists between the spirits and her second daughter. The same narrative model combining the logic of affliction, calling, and heredity was used by other adepts.

In practice, people join *jinɛdɔn* through one of two similar scenarios: either, as in Assitan's case, through illness or following a trance that is suddenly triggered while attending a ceremony. In this latter case, the person who has fallen into a trance is questioned in order to identify the spirit responsible for his or her condition. Once the spirit's name has been revealed, the person is considered to be afflicted and follows the same path as someone made sick by a spirit. Special baths, sacrifice, and a ritual of possession are performed to establish a conjugal relationship with the spirit. The newly initiated human then becomes the pupil (*kalanden*) of the spirit master who performed the initiation and who remains his or her master (*karamɔgɔ*) thereafter. The apprentice who proves to be gifted may, if they so wish once the apprenticeship has been completed, be entrusted by the master with the ritual materials, which enables them to set up on their own, as Assitan did.

As Assitan, with her long nails and majestic makeup, was telling me her story at our first meeting, she offered me a cool soft drink and then suggested driving me to Ntomikorobougou, a suburb adjacent to a hill to the north of Bamako where she has built a compound in a fairly isolated spot for ritual ceremonies. In her car, she turned the music up loud, declaring,

"My she-devil loves a vibe," and sketching out a few dance moves as she drove.[5] She explained that her spirit, Jaba—or her main spirit, to be precise, as I learned that she has four of them—was a coquette who loved to party and had a penchant for perfumes, shiny lipstick, and other beauty products in glittering colors, as well as for gold jewelry of a certain size. It is worth noting Jaba's resemblance to the well-known spiritual figure of Mami Wata, often depicted as a mermaid, who loves music and gold jewelry like bracelets and pendants, as well as fashion accessories—sunglasses, perfumes, and other "beautiful things" (see Drewal 1988: 175–76, as well as Jewsiewicki 1996, 2003; Rush 2009, among others). Like Mami Wata, who may be generous if satisfied but also dangerous, Jaba helps humans in many different areas and sorts out the various matrimonial problems of her clients, who want to find a husband or have numerous offspring, especially when Assitan asks her to. Sometimes, she takes the form of a Khasonké woman.[6] She is ravishing and seductive, but also capricious and sometimes violent—no doubt like her mistress, who described her to me. Indeed, it is hard not to think that they somehow found each other. Identifying with a spirit, a situation that is quite common in *jinɛdɔn* and other similar practices involving possession (see Masquelier 2008), seems to me to reach extreme heights in Assitan's case. We will come back to it after presenting the spatial and material aspects of *jinɛdɔn*.

The Spatial Framework and Material Aspects of *Jinɛdɔn*

When I arrived with Assitan at her ritual compound, I saw that it was made up of several huts of varying sizes, and covered about four thousand square meters. She proudly showed me her (living) snakes and her white horse adorned with stars. She also pointed out an imposing statue that looked like a mermaid: this was the celebrated Jaba (Figure 26). In addition to the well-known images of Mami Wata (or Mamy Watta)

5. The word *jinɛ* is sometimes translated by French-speaking people in West Africa as "diable/diablesse," and it was this term that Assitan used at this moment. Her spirits are numerous. In order of age, and in her own words: Jaba; her brother, Suleïman, whom Jaba accompanies when he goes hunting and off to war; grandfather of Jaba and Suleïman, Tamba, the war chief; and finally, an old aquatic spirit (Jitigi), for the pantheon (see chapter 9).
6. A subgroup of the Mande people who live mainly on the border between Mali and Senegal.

Figure 26. Jaba at Assitan Sanogo's ritual compound, Bamako, June 2014. Photo by author.

that circulate in West Africa (and beyond), Assitan's statue reminds me, because of its concrete makeup and shape, of the statue of "the governor" in the *hauka* religious practice as shown in *Les Maîtres Fous* (*The Mad Masters*: an ethnographic film by Jean Rouch).

On the hillside within the premises is situated Assitan's sanctuary, where her ritual tools, the *minanw*, are kept. Among these, during my successive visits, I noticed a mound known as a *benbe* or *banbe*—literally a "foundation," "bed," or "platform" made of banco (Vydrine 1999: 86)[7]—reminiscent of miniature mosques or the mounds of earth the neighboring Bwaba people use as primary and undifferentiated forms of the divine (Coquet 1994: 42). The *benbe* was complemented by a small gourd wrapped in a white cloth decorated with cowries, the *kusa*.[8]

In addition to these fairly standard ritual tools (see Gibbal 1982: 211–15), because of the identity of her spirits, Assitan's arsenal also includes the mirror of Jaba the coquette, the rifle of Suleïman the *donso*, and several scepters in the shape of tridents—*tamaw*, literally "spears"—which are insignia of Tamba or Temba, the military spirit, and which again are found as accessories in some of the practices surrounding Mami Wata (see Drewal 1988). On the ground, she stocks several large clay pots containing brownish-colored herbal concoctions used for curative and initiatory purposes. Each of these blends is different from the rest and makes it possible to resolve a different type of problem. Their recipes are secret, but they can be commonly found in *jinɛdɔn* shrines, though varying in number according to the officiant's qualifications.

Each concoction imposes certain prohibitions (*tana*), much as do the mixtures that make up the *basiw/boliw*. Like the *basiw/boliw*, the pots also receive sacrifices (some of them blood). At Assitan's premises, they are complemented by the classic-looking *basiw*—aniconic and brownish in color, with a soft, slimy surface—which, according to my and Gibbal's (1982: 318–26) observations, are common among *jinɛdɔn* officiants. These *basiw/boliw* vary in shape and size. Some are very imposing and are made of animal skulls with cowrie shells and other components that are hard to identify. Others are more modest, the size of a hand, conical,

7. Banco is a kind of mud traditionally used in the Sahel to build houses and larger buildings such as mosques.
8. Dumestre (2011: 613) translates this word as "stomach," which, by extension, might mean "gourd." Gibbal provides further details on the contents of the gourd: it contains twelve pebbles, each representing a lineage of spirits, wrapped in a white cotton cloth. As for the term itself, which he assumes to be of Soninke origin drawing on the works of Charles Monteil and Claude Meillasoux, he provides two possible initial meanings: 1) a section of the Soninke people; 2) a battalion of slaves in the army of Ancient Ghana (1982: 212–13).

ovoid, shaped like horns filled with various substances, or like balls obtained by combining several materials. All of them are covered with a thick crust of coagulated blood, like the *basiw/boliw* analyzed in the Second Movement of the book. Assitan presented them to me as non-Islamic or "traditional" equivalents of *benbe*, the mosque-like mound. According to her, while the *benbe* is related to the "marabout spirits" (*jinɛw moriw*), its clay or vegetal equivalents belong to the non-Muslim spirits (*jinɛw kafiri*), which are also called pagan spirits (*jinɛw bamana*). While the spirits in the first group are happy with libations made of milk, honey, perfumes, and groundnut butter, those in the second demand blood. Most of the material elements associated with this second group of spirits, which also include the Tamba scepters I mentioned above, are movable, and can therefore be transported if necessary. At Assitan's premises, they are regularly moved to an area that is fairly well protected from view, where a second *banbe* has been erected and where the weekly ceremonies are sometimes held (Figure 27).

At other practitioners' ritual sites, I have seen similar artifacts placed in a calabash covered with a white cloth and carried to the center of the ritual space at the time of sacrifices. In my experience, this space always consists of a square or rectangular dance floor surrounded by chairs or mats which are transported there before ceremonies, in addition to the shrines.

A Baroque Tonality

At our first meeting, Assitan told me that on the occasion of the annual ceremony known as *sanyɛlɛma*—literally "the new year" (Dumestre 2011: 867)—which takes place by the river at the beginning of each year of the local calendar, she sacrifices a great deal—sometimes even four cows, ten rams, and numerous fowls. I saw for myself at her new-year ceremony in March 2017 how significant these sacrifices can be. Indeed, I was both impressed and uneasy at such a display of wealth, thinking of the "logic of the potlatch" described by Marcel Mauss ([1925] 1968). Assitan's lavish distribution of money and food to the poor in her neighborhood also brings to mind this logic. She did not fail to mention, as well, that she owns a great deal of real estate: a luxurious house in Bamako, a large area dedicated to ritual activities, another similar plot in Kita, and a number of rental villas in the capital. She is the owner of several vehicles, including a four-wheel drive, and every time I visit her, she

Figure 27. A second *benbe* with some ritual items resembling *basiw* at Assitan's compound, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by author.

happily offers me refreshing canned—and therefore expensive—drinks while discussing her daughter's studies in the United States, which she has financed. I cannot know where her money comes from, and I cannot comment on whether everything she says is true, but I have no doubt

that her words convey a self-image that she wants to promote, and as a result they contribute to the construction of her agency as an influential person and ritual expert.

A tendency towards a somewhat ostentatious display of wealth is not unusual among the Bamakois ritual specialists from the new generation, the fetish masters such as Daouda, Papus, and Zumana. Why in the context of the spirit-possession cult does it surprise me so much? The reasons may be aesthetic. Let us take a closer look at Assitan's choice of accessories and clothing, which is shared by many practitioners of *jinɛdɔn*. In addition to sweet perfumes and pronounced makeup, the aesthetic is all about flashy jewelry and shiny fabrics (Figure 28).

The ritual objects and other aspects of the décor of her compound, from the starry horse to the enormous statue of Jaba in the courtyard, are equally impressive for their strong visual impact. The curious mixture of modernity (TV screens, smartphones, and luxury vehicles) and material references to African tradition (*basiw*, *donsow* costumes, scepters, and tridents), as well as the style of dress and apparent wealth of the officiants, suggest an aesthetic that might be described as baroque.

Jean-Pierre Dozon (2015) uses the adjective "baroque" to refer to the copresence of opposites and to an accumulation of heterogeneous and apparently incompatible elements. The baroque aesthetic can be associated with a postmodernity of which, Dozon argues, Africa might well be the chosen land or even the place of genesis (2015: 111–13 and *passim*). Indeed, I see this baroque tonality as a distinctive feature not only of *jinɛdɔn* but of African spirit-possession practices in general, practices which are inherently hybrid and relatively recent. These practices were among the first contexts in which this baroque aesthetic prevailed before it spread to other forms of ritualization emerging in colonial and postcolonial Africa. It can be found, too, among modern African prophets (see Dozon 1995) and "Rasta Sufis" (see Soares 2005b, 2007, 2016), as well as among the leaders of the charismatic churches that have proliferated on the continent since the 1990s (Meyer 2004, 2010). And as we have seen, it is also now shared by fetish masters as well as by other "new religious entrepreneurs" who claim to be traditional (see Chidester 2005; De Witte 2005). It appears to be especially appreciated by leaders and adepts of the *jinɛdɔn* adorned, during the ceremonies but often even outside of them, with sizable jewels and dressed in glittering, often motley, eye-catching outfits.

Figure 28. Assitan attending a ceremony in a beautiful silky dress and shiny jewelry, Bamako, June 2014. Photo by author.

Jinɛdɔn Ceremonies: A First Glimpse

This baroque tonality is inseparable from the ritual practices of *jinɛdɔn*. Here are my observations of a ceremony organized in June 2014 by *jinatigi* Fanta Coulibaly, a friend of Assitan:

> The ceremony takes place in the quite chic Hippodrome neighborhood, just a few kilometers from where I'm staying. There are between 120 and 140 people in the audience. Most of them are women. They are very well dressed and hardly dance at all. There is a small orchestra consisting of a large drum, a smaller *djembe*-type drum, and above all *tamani*: underarm drums that are played with a stick and known as "talking drums." Then, of course, there are the gourds turned over onto a container filled with water, the famous *jidunun* water drums that gave Gibbal's book its title. Unlike other percussion instruments used in the same setting, they are played by women. Some of the songs are apparently sung by female griots.

I later learned that although griots take part in *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies, they are frequently led by performers known as *kumarɛ* who specialize in this kind of event.[9] Often, but not always, this role is performed by rather effeminate-looking and richly dressed young men (see below). The composition of the orchestra varies from ceremony to ceremony and from one moment in a ceremony to the next. It usually includes flutes and string instruments (guitars, harps, and lutes) in addition to percussion instruments (Figure 29).[10]

Let us return to the June 2014 ceremony:

> Our *jinatigi* [Assitan, whom I'm accompanying] looks great. I literally hide in her shadow, and she has photographs taken of both of us. During the ceremony, a few possessions happen, and the hostess and her assistants ensure that everything runs smoothly. The first of these possessions is violent. It takes place in the middle of the crowd and is announced by a shrill scream. The possessed girl rolls on the floor. She is calmed down and taken to Assitan's master, to whom I will be introduced a little later. This master, Mawo, is quite tall and strong,

9. I have found no trace of the name *kumarɛ* in the existing sources. I was unable to establish the etymology or meaning of the word, which does not appear to be of Mande origin. The term *xùmàaré* exists in Soninke, but it describes a bird (the crowned crane), and in Fulfulde (*kumareewal*), but this does nothing to shed light on its use in the *jinɛdɔn* context. I would like to thank Valentin Vydrine and Gérard Galtier for their respective insights into this term in these two languages.
10. I was later told that the *jidunun* are the bare minimum required for a spirit ceremony.

Figure 29. A *jinɛdɔn* orchestra, Bamako, March 2016. Photo by author.

and smiles. In fact, all the officiants here seem to like each other: they hug, kiss, and show each other affection.

I will return later to the particular, affective tone of the *jinɛdɔn*. This is my first glimpse of it:

> The strong scent of incense and the sweet smell of perfumes, which everyone uses in abundance, are everywhere. To enter under the tarpaulins around the central space, which is dusty because it's bare earth, you have to take off your shoes. Before you dance, you must present your "hands clasped behind your back" to your master as a sign of respect. Dances do not always end in a trance, of course … Two young women are suddenly "caught." One of them practically falls on top of me, and immediately ends up on the floor. Then a man goes into a rather orderly controlled trance, so much so that I wonder if he is actually possessed, but his gaze sometimes wanders off into the distance … I learn that his spirit is called Hudé. The spirit of Assitan's master is called Boré, alias Borojan, a *donso*, as she explains. Several times, we hear songs invoking Jaba, her spirit. When she leaves, the griots ask if Jaba is leaving them, indicating a

> certain closeness between the spirit and "its human"—at least, in this case. Like Assitan, the women around the dance floor, most of whom are quite plump, are all dressed up, and wear makeup, flashy jewelry, shiny fabrics, and fake nails. They often have wigs and sometimes henna-colored hands and feet. I see very few infants or babies.

The virtual absence of children in the audience is surprising: in my experience, the most diverse types of festivity in Mali and in Africa in general are attended by a good number of babies (carried on their mothers' backs), especially if they attract a large female audience. Perhaps their absence is due to the late hour, as the typical rhythm of Bamako society is generally based around early morning wake-ups. The *jinatigiw*, on the other hand, cannot generally be reached before ten in the morning. And with good reason! They do not get up early because they are busy at night, living in a sort of parallel rhythm. The ceremonies are sometimes spread over several days, as was the one I have just described.

I arrived at the ceremony site on the second day about the same time as Assitan. She was dressed as a *donso*, in a *bogolan* tunic in shades of brown reminiscent of a hunter's garb (see Figure 25). I would discover later that all the costumes worn by adepts consist of a tunic—a kind of poncho—worn over a naked body (apart from underwear) and tied around the waist with a rope. These costumes and their accessories—hats, scepters, mirrors, and fly whisks—make a somewhat approximate reference to the identity and characteristics of the spirits embodied by the possessed adept. The *donso* spirits, for example, wear the *bogolan* tunic but not the woven cotton blouse and pants that hunters actually do (see chapter 1). The adepts have a fly whisk that is not made of wild animal hair, as are those of the *donso.* In the next chapter, we will see what the raison d'être of such "authentic fakes" is.

At the June ceremony, after the sacrifices of kola nuts and poultry have been performed in the middle of the ceremonial space, a number of trances are triggered, including an oracular one:

> A possessed woman, who in my opinion is "half-caught," approaches me and forces me to come to the center of the dance floor, and then performs the greeting gestures for Assitan, who is not in a trance and sits me on her lap. The possessed-spirit is talkative and launches into a tirade, and then questions me: she asks me if I intend to travel and if I had a lot of money in the past that I no longer have. She also asks me about my family situation.

The oracles uttered to *jinɛdɔn* adepts in these situations consist of similar questions followed by instructions that must be obeyed. The possessed-spirit orders me to sacrifice seven oxen so that my problems (but which ones?) can be resolved. Finally, she leaves me, and with Assitan's permission I can return to my seat. Then there is a rather abrupt change of scenery: all the costumed ritual leaders leave. I don't know where they go.

Since the main protagonists have gone somewhere backstage, I take the opportunity to observe the secondary roles and the spectators:

> A trance breaks out in the audience; it's the same girl as yesterday. Someone tries to calm her down … Many of the men present look quite effeminate. The women, on the other hand, seem quite (too?) feminine. That said, some are possessed by rather violent male spirits. The transition between trance and a state of consciousness that is considered to be normal seems fluid. Often, after a fairly brutal "catching," the possessed person appears relatively lucid. Can it be that the training the adepts undergo consists in knowing how to position oneself in this in-between state? The possessed woman who had grabbed hold of me earlier gave me the impression of being quite awake, even though her cheeks were trembling.

This last question is one that often is asked of possession experiences. That this woman propelled me into the ritual space, into which no one else was invited, leads me to assume that she/her spirit was not unaware of my special status—among the humans!—as a white-skinned foreigner, and that it was an act of seduction or intimidation on her/her spirit's part. What is more, I was not taken to just any officiant, and not even to the most senior one—Assitan's master was present—but to the *jinatigi* with whom I had arrived the previous day, when the possessed woman was not in trance. Could her spirit remember what she saw the day before? I was told that the opposite is not possible: humans do not remember what they do and say when they are in a trance, since the words and gestures are not their own but those of the spirits who invest them. Indeed, amnesia is a universal feature of possession trance around the world. It is proof of the sincerity of the possessed and by the same token of the presence of the beings who are supposed to be temporarily appropriating their bodies. However, having attended the ceremony I have described here, and others, I have my doubts as to whether this amnesia is always total and whether the individuals who have been caught are entirely unaware of their actions. It seems to me that the modification of consciousness they undergo (or do not undergo) is variable and hard to

define (my observations are reminiscent of those of Jean-Marie Gibbal [1982: 304–9] and of Michel Leiris [1934]).

My Ambiguous Position

My place among the adepts is also hard to define and ambivalent, as seen in the interaction just described. A few words about my special status are needed here. From our first conversations, I addressed Assitan as "mistress" (*karamɔgɔ*) and recognized her authority. But this did not mark me out as a full-fledged member of her group: other people not part of the *jinɛdɔn* also sometimes address her in this way. It is more significant that since March 2015 (and after the 2014 event I just described), she has taught me and expected me to greet her with the gestures that are usually reserved for disciples. What is more, she called me "student" (*kalanden*) even though I did not undergo the initiation procedure Assitan and other officiants suggested I should undergo (see Kedzierska Manzon 2021c). As I explained to one of her apprentices in March 2017, I am in some ways a student since I learn from Assitan.

At the same time … I am not a student like all the others. First of all, it was not health problems or misfortune that led me to attend the *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies: there is no affliction narrative bringing me into the practices, or known family heritage. Assitan is fully aware of the unusual nature of my interest in her ritual activities and the equally unusual status it gives me among adherents. For one thing, I did not have to buy any of the three ceremonial outfits—one for each day—that her (other) students had to buy for the new-year ceremonies of March 2017. All three outfits are particularly opulent, cut from luxurious fabrics—shiny *bazin*[11] or cloth embroidered with gold threads—and consequently quite expensive. On my own initiative, I decided to buy one of the three fabrics and have an outfit sewn for me for a total price of 10,000 FCFA, or around 15 euros. Other students did not have this choice: when three such outfits and other expenses relating to the ceremony (the compulsory membership fee, the purchase of sacrificial eggs, transport costs, etc.) are added up, the total amount is far from being negligible from a local point of view.

11. A hand-dyed cotton fabric; a damask textile, which is a shiny and quite expensive kind of fabric used for these ceremonial and festive outfits.

At that 2017 ceremony, Assitan introduced me to the audience as her disciple, adding that I had initiated the event when I called her from France a month earlier asking her to clarify the dates. This kind of initiative is not typically a student's role, however. In public, I thanked the *jinatigi* for being kind enough to decide the dates so far in advance at my request. It was clear from the outset that the priestess recognized the uniqueness of our relationship, and accepted that I could not fully take on the role of the adepts who are normally under her tutelage.

The ambiguity of my position in the *jinɛdɔn* is also obvious if we consider the place, in the literal sense of the word, that I was assigned at this annual ceremony. I was alternately seated next to other students—"you're a student, aren't you?" La, in charge of logistics that day, said—and then next to the masters attending the ceremony—"you're a personality …," La argued after being told that I was writing books. And then sometimes I was seated right next to Assitan, if she so wished. I was both a stranger and her confidant in the eyes of others as well as her own, clearly part of her retinue, captivated by the splendor of the spectacles she allowed me to witness.

And I have never seen anything like these spectacles in Mali or any other country in West Africa, which I have been travelling to since 1995. Dia, my *donso* master, and Yacouba, my driver—both my loyal companions—have been equally taken aback. If they accompanied me to the ceremonies, it was for complex reasons and not because of their admiration or interest in the *jinɛdɔn*. Given the security problems and corollary mobility restrictions for French researchers since 2014, in Bamako I was always traveling in a vehicle, and therefore in Yacouba's company. As for Dia, as my master and as an old friend, he felt responsible for my safety and always assisted me with my research. Since 2014, therefore, for better or for worse, we have been working as a trio, which has had many very positive aspects and perhaps some downsides. My companions' observations have complemented mine and helped me to see a more general picture and to situate the studied practices within the larger local context. Yet, as certain aspects of these practices—the lavish style of dress or the unmanly appearance of the male practitioners, for example—unsettled my friends a little, they made a number of remarks to me during our journeys and meals, remarks that have certainly influenced my perception of *jinɛdɔn*.

For Dia and Yacouba, it was not self-evident that *jinɛw*—creatures who are not especially sociable by nature and who, it is said, dislike the noise and smells of the city—can be called by their first names to regularly

manifest during urban ceremonies. Dia was particularly disconcerted by this. His discomfort comes as no surprise. A distinguished *donso* with an impenetrable face, a farmer who still lives in a rural environment, a native of the region where the cradle of Mande civilization is said to be located, and a Keïta from a noble family that everyone associates with the glorious past of that civilization, here he was discreetly observing ostentatious-looking women, some of whom called out possessed-spirits: “O you, the great *donso*, oh you, the soothsayer, oh you, Keïta!”[12] The incongruity of a situation like this was striking, and very informative for me. It made me realize that exuberant performances of the *jinɛdɔn* did not resonate with the old-fashioned experts’ sensibility or, more generally, the sober aesthetics of the *donsoton*. These aesthetics—I must add given my long association with *donsow* and my lengthy, close relationship with Dia—in all likelihood to some extent also shaped my own responses to *jinɛdɔn*, which explains perhaps my initial and somehow persisting perplexity in the midst of celebrations.

On the Margins Spatially, Historically, and Socially

Are *jinɛdɔn* aesthetics, with their distinctive baroque tonality, the only reason why its adepts enjoy—or have enjoyed until recently, at any rate—a mixed reputation among local populations? Before delving more deeply into this aesthetics, let me turn to the circumstances under which I first heard about the practice. It was in September 2004: a fellow anthropologist who was studying same-sex sexual practices in Africa mentioned *jinɛdɔn* in one of our conversations. He told me that the practice was alive and well in the Malian capital, even though thirty years had passed since Gibbal’s work and nothing had been published on the subject in the meantime. He then asked me to accompany him to the home of one of his research participants, an adept. I would later discover that many adepts dressed and behaved in a way that suggested unconventional gender construction and sexual practices.

People following such practices are locally known as *cɛtɛmusotɛ*, literally “neither man nor woman,” or are referred to by the Wolof expression *góor-jigéen*, “man-woman” (see Broqua 2012: 118). In the context of

12. “*E donso(ba)! I soma! I Keïta!*” This is a classic way of addressing those possessed by the *kaafiri* or *donsow* spirits, and can therefore be heard quite regularly during ceremonies.

Bamako and other African cities, they usually follow concealment tactics rather than an outright break with the dominant norm, as Christophe Broqua observes:

> For many men who practice homosexuality in Bamako, the idea of coming out, as defined by its most recent meaning, makes no sense. In fact, this desire to make things known runs absolutely contrary to the principle of discretion, and even the blurring of the tracks, with regard to one's intimate life that generally guides the way everyone in Bamako behaves. This does not mean that the "desire to know" does not exist there, but it does mean that it cannot be satisfied by the same techniques used in France or the United States. Unlike faith-based Christian practices, which seek to loosen tongues, Bamako's Muslim context encourages silence. In the context of the prohibitions of Islam in matters of homosexuality, as in the case of other proscribed behaviors, lies are an inexhaustible resource. (Broqua 2010: 51, my translation)

In another article, the same author explains:

> The principle of the "double life" prevails among people engaged in homosexual practices, firstly because homosexual practices are often transitory, and secondly—and above all—because they are almost always carried out alongside heterosexual practices or unions. Here, conforming to heterosexual conjugality is not just a social obligation that is hard to escape: it is also a means of engaging in homosexuality without being overly burdened by the negative judgments and suspicions to which single people are generally subject after a certain age. Heterosexual practice is a crucial condition for the possibility of homosexual practice. (Broqua 2012: 121, my translation)

Under these circumstances, how can we be sure what the sexual orientation of *jinɛdɔn* adepts or leaders is? All we can say is that *jinɛdɔn* is known to recruit its adherents among people who do not conform to the heterosexual model, or at least this is how several acquaintances in Bamako described it to me. Their view is the same as Gibbal's, who stated bluntly:

> In Bamako, the *Jinè-Don* attract homosexuals, who group together around one of them. The women are often single, widowed, abandoned, or divorced. The popular interpretation is that it is normal for

> them to live alone because their spirit prevents them from settling down with a man. A high proportion of them are prostitutes, especially in Bamako. All these people hang out a lot in bars. Drunkenness is spreading, as is alcoholism. This development led the adepts of Kayes (see below) to describe the Bamako congregation as a collection of "faggots, whores, and drunkards." (Gibbal 1982: 292, my translation)

For Gibbal, what he wrote about was a recent development—a degeneration—undergone by a ritual practice that was originally from the north of the country when it established itself in the south. The overrepresentation of women in its ranks was also, for him, a recent development. When I ask Assitan and other female officiants about this, they tell me that both sexes act as experts in equal numbers, which my experience does not contradict. However, among the group of apprentices and clients these proportions change. My friend who works for ORTM, mentioned in chapter 6, and who spoke of *basiw* as "men's business," presented *jinɛdɔn* to me as "women's business"—as did other Bamakois. Many also believed that the participants feed drug-trafficking networks.

Drug trafficking does exist in this part of West Africa, and it has been on the increase since the attempted secession of northern Mali and the coup that followed it.[13] However, there is no proof that it involves *jinɛdɔn* practitioners more than other people. What is certain is that these practitioners are frequently suspected of profiting from the drug trade and are more generally perceived as particularly prone to debauchery.

According to Gibbal (1982: 5), their bad reputation is due above all to their low social standing and precarious situation as migrants cut off from their original family groups and poorly integrated into the economic fabric of the capital. Their practice is marginalized socially, and therefore also geographically. Gibbal observed that the spaces where their ritual activities took place were often "either on the outskirts of towns or in places within the perimeter of a town but marginalized by what happens there, such as clandestine drinking establishments; courtyards where prostitution goes on; or better still, places that fulfill both these functions at the same time" (Gibbal 1982: 291, my translation).

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13. Reported in the International Crisis Group's *Africa Report* 267 of December 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali.

Geographical marginalization persists to this day, as evidenced by my research. Which confirms that *jinɛdɔn* leaders—like other "new religious entrepreneurs"—practice and take up residence in outlying neighborhoods (see also Bourdarias 2009).

Gibbal (1982: 169–71) argues that *jinɛdɔn* occupies a spatially and socially peripheral position because it is an imported ritual practice. It began in the territory of the ancient kingdom of Kaarta, which roughly corresponds to the administrative region of Kayes in northwest Mali. This region was traversed by numerous caravans in the nineteenth century, and was a hub of the slave trade. The border town of Kayes was created in colonial times as a railway station on the route between Dakar and Bamako, and became a veritable crossroads for the transit of both people and goods (Lombard 2008). Today, Kayes and the whole region remain one of those most impacted by international migration.

Kayes is where Assitan's master comes from, as do some of the other *jinatigiw* and their apprentices I had a chance to meet. Métou, a friend from Kayes, assured me that, as she recalls it, *jinɛdɔn* were very active there in the 1970s, and even earlier. She confessed that when she was a little girl of around ten, she often went to attend the ceremonies with her classmates. These festivities were not confined to the outskirts of respectable areas, as would later seem to be the case in Bamako. My friend also told me that spectators like her who came to admire the dances avoided sharing the meals served there, as it was said that those who tasted them risked later succumbing to the spirits and therefore become integrated into the groups of adepts.[14] The ceremonies are still celebrated in the Kayes region.[15] *Jinɛdɔn* is very present as well in Kita, which Assitan visits regularly. This town is also located in the territory of the ancient kingdom of Kaarta. The theory that this area is where the spirit-possession practice in its present form comes from seems fairly plausible. It is further confirmed by the use of the Soninke language, which is spoken around Kayes, by some of the singers who performed at the ceremony I described earlier. Also, as I mentioned, one of the forms adopted by the Jaba spirit is a Khassonké woman, an ethnic group that has a strong

14. This was confirmed by my driver, Yacouba, who has always refused the meals served at Ntomikorobougou during ceremonies, claiming not to be hungry or that he does not like the food. Dia, who is quite confident in his own knowledge and respectful of the local rules of politeness, did not hesitate to eat them.
15. Gérard Galtier, personal communication.

presence in that region. However, Madame Cissé, one of the officiants I met at Assitan's, originally from the Timbuktu region and initiated in Mopti in northeastern Mali, told me that she had been practicing *jinɛdɔn* for over forty years. This suggests that it has also been present for a long time in her native region, whose capital, like Kayes, was a hub of the slave trade and part of the earlier trans-Saharan trade networks.

The origins of *jinɛdɔn* are difficult to reconstruct with certainty, but it clearly embodies otherness everywhere and always. Furthermore, according to various sources—my own, those cited by Gibbal, and those accessed by Laurent Berger (2010)—it is a fairly recent phenomenon among Mande-speaking people. This is also confirmed by the fact that it has never been practiced—and still is not—in the Mande heartland in the rural areas to the southwest of Bamako towards the Guinean border, or even on the other side of it. During my doctoral and subsequent research in these areas, I found no trace of it; no one ever spoke to me about it. My master, Dia, and my local host, Madi—the son of Kama, the old chief of the *donsow*—as well as other people living there I have interviewed more recently are firm on this point. We might also note that the ritual use of perfumes, milk, and honey during *jinɛdɔn* activities is a further argument that it is a recent import: to my knowledge, while no Mande ritual practice mobilizes these substances, their use has been attested to in other spirit-possession practices observed in Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Boddy 1989; Drewal 1988; Masquelier 2002; Rouch [1960] 1989; Zempleni 1987, among others).[16]

Jinɛdɔn is currently gaining ground. This is the opinion of my friend who works in television as well as of many others I spoke with, including several women. For example, Diénieba, a manager at a French institution in Bamako, observed that its practice is well established in the neighborhoods on the banks of the Niger, where sacrifices are regularly performed in full view of passers-by. She explained to me that "desperate" people, as she described them—women who cannot find husbands; artists who are not being recognized; or simply people who have no resources, whose numbers are growing—were turning to the *jinɛdɔn* more and more. In her view, "it's all about the money." She linked the increase in the numbers of *jinatigiw* followers and clients to the local economic situation, which, at the time we spoke and still today, has been worsening. This situation multiplies the uncertainties and "discontinuities" of daily life,

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16. Drewal (1988) sees these materials as the apotheosis of the European lifestyle (see the discussion in chapter 9).

and amplifies the extent of the episteme of doubt, which is becoming more pronounced every day for a variety of reasons. As I have noted, this is reflected in a frantic search for solutions, and thus contributes to the proliferation of ritual experts of all kinds as well as to the resurgence of religions in all their forms—especially, but not exclusively, those that are considered to be traditional.

In March 2016, Fodé Moussa Sidibé told me that one of his students was dedicating her dissertation to the *jinɛdɔn*, which had not been much researched. Like everyone else I asked about it, Sidibé noted the spectacular expansion of the phenomenon in the capital and elsewhere since the 1990s. My driver, Yacouba, assured me that he had recently seen a *jinɛdɔn* ceremony taking place in Ségou, where he had been on a professional trip. The *jinatigi* who passed on his knowledge to Maman Temba, whom we will meet later in this chapter, is also from Ségou. But the Ségou region is far from being the only one involved. Laurent Berger (2010, 2012) and Benjamin Soares (1997, 1999) observed the presence of *jinɛdɔn* in Bélédougou, which is between the Ségou and Kayes regions to the north of Bamako, as early as the 1990s, or even earlier.

This strong and growing presence is the result of the Islamization campaigns that have been ongoing since the 1980s, which, in addition to strengthening the position of Islam and furthering the construction of the Islamic sphere, have had the effect of dismantling the well-known Mande men's initiation societies studied by colonial ethnography: the *jow*, such as Kono, Komo, Ntomo, Nama, or Koré, to list the most important (see Colleyn 2001; Dieterlen 1960; Dieterlen and Cissé 1972; McNaughton 1988; Zahan 1960, for main references). The growth of *jinɛdɔn* has coincided with the final dismantling of these mandatory male initiatory societies, which had previously been a powerful presence in this area. The resulting unprecedented transformations in the local religious field has led, I have argued, to the formation of the non-Islamic sphere as a sphere—an autonomous and discreet part of this field, of which *jinɛdɔn* is one of the elements.

Berger shows how in Bélédougou at the turn of the 2000s, this initially "peripheral cult,"[17] which was new to the area, was co-opted for political purposes by women from well-established lineages with

17. Peripheral in the sense that it is not involved in the exercise of political power and recruits its followers from the margins and lower strata of society. Berger refers to the classification proposed by I. M. Lewis (Berger 2010: 144–47).

extensive relational networks. He argues that *jinɛdɔn* not only filled the void left by the retreat of other ritual practices but also enabled a new type of religious specialist to take center stage—a female one, previously absent from the ritual landscape. I will return to the question of gender later, but first we need to look at the relationship between *jinɛdɔn* and Islam, which is more complex than may appear from the preceding text.

Possession, Islam, and Modernity

In fact, the *jinɛdɔn* experts and adepts readily integrate elements of Islam into their practice, whether in terms of prayers, clothing, or the identity of the spirits linked to possession. As in the *zar* or *hauka* religious practices (Boddy 1989; Henley 2006), some of the spirits in the *jinɛdɔn* are presented as pious Muslims or even as Muslim scholars—*jinɛmoriw*, literally “the spirits marabouts,” to which specific material supports, in particular the *benbe*, are dedicated. When entering the shrines where these spirits reside, the Arabic greeting “*Salam aleykum*” should be uttered, as Assitan instructed me. During my visit to another *jinatigi*, the musicians performed the *Shahada*, the Muslim profession of faith,[18] which, I was told, served to greet these Muslim spirits. In my experience, all the *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies performed in Bamako these days stop at Muslim prayer times to allow the faithful—both humans and spirits—to venerate their Creator. Berger and Gibbal mention similar accommodations, ranging from halting ritual activities in the month of Ramadan (because “the spirits follow Lent [*sic*]”) to the frequent profession of Muslim faith by followers and the orientation of ritual spaces in relation to Mecca (see Gibbal 1982: 286–89). While attending ceremonies, I also noted that, unlike Gibbal’s descriptions in the 1980s, many of the participants did not drink alcohol—at least not in public. According to Assitan, if they do consume alcohol, it is when they are “caught” by pagan spirits, who sometimes ask for it. Then, the person regurgitates it as soon as she or he returns to her/his normal state. As Assitan explained this to me, she emphasized the compatibility between *jinɛdɔn* and Islam. Her point of view is widely shared by others, as Soares has pointed out (Soares 1997: 275; 1999: 230–31). However, he describes a tension between mostly female practitioners and the male Muslim authorities, who condemn

18. “I testify that there is no god except Allah and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”

the practice as idolatrous—*kaafir*, or non-Islamic. The opinion of people outside the adepts' group who are not Muslim experts is more nuanced. While some are very reticent about the practice (Soares 1999), others are less so.

Mande people have had long exposure to Islam, so a short reminder regarding spirits' conceptualization in Islamic tradition seems useful here. The Koran and hadiths attest to the existence of djinn, and describe them as being organized into tribes, frequenting certain places, capable of moving very fast, flying, and feeding on odors—and therefore fond of perfumes, incense, and fumigations. These beings excel in the art of metamorphosis; by following specific procedures they can take on the appearance they wish, often feminine, without actually changing their body structure (Lory 2018). We could consider them as avisible, to use the term introduced in chapter 3, since they can be seen by some humans in some circumstances, but not all and always, so their appearance is subject to change. The rural Mande I know view these "avisible" beings as acting independently of the humans with whom they have relationships, generally against the human's will.

Such beings are known to harm people who come across them accidentally by making them ill, but it is not because they penetrate the bodies of these humans, as in the *jinɛdɔn* practice (see Berger 2010, 2012). The idea of penetration can, however, be found in Islamic mystical thought, which holds that it is possible for djinns not only to acquire a body that is denser than their own (which is made of fire) in order to have sexual relations with humans but also to take possession of humans on the inside (Lory 2011). This gives some support to the idea of the *jinɛdɔn*'s Islamic roots, as does the fact that in some Muslim countries some djinns receive collective worship. This is the case with the *jinniyya* Aïcha Qandisha, also called Lalla Aïcha, who is reputed to be fierce, dangerous, and powerful, and at the same time seductive, and who could be compared with Jaba. Without being able to trace the—probably indirect—links between the cult of Aïcha and the *jinɛdɔn*, it seems quite likely that, as with the cult, the latter is heavily dependent on Islam.

This is not to say that rituals involving trance did not exist in this region of West Africa before the arrival of Islam. It is simply a question of acknowledging that in their present form, these rituals are intrinsically linked to Islam, both conceptually and organizationally. As Soares observes, the *jinɛdɔn* is similar to Sufi brotherhoods at an organizational level: like them, it is structured around the figure of a leader surrounded by pupils and clients in search of healing, prosperity, and protection

(Soares 1999: 230). As he shows for Bélédougou, adepts are recruited only from among Muslims (Soares 1997: 274). Thus, rather than seeing *jinɛdɔn* as an animist residue resisting Islam in a few isolated enclaves, as Gibbal (1982) does, we should follow Berger (2010) in recognizing that, like many other African spirit-possession practices, it has developed precisely thanks to the presence of Islam.

Janice Boddy (1989) suggests tracing the origins of these practices in general, and of *zar* in particular, to Muslim Persia, from where they spread to East Africa (already partly Islamized) in the nineteenth century—that is, in the wake of colonial conquest and European progress within predominantly Muslim zones. A little later—in the course of the twentieth century—their presence was noted in North and sub-Saharan Africa, where they became established thanks to the movement of pilgrims to and from Mecca. It therefore comes as no surprise that accounts of the genesis of the *hauka* rituals in West Africa refer to Mecca (Henley 2006; Rouch [1960] 1989). With this in mind, we should not view these rituals and other similar ones involving spirit possession as archaic, or pre-Islamic, but as relatively recent forms of ritualization that emerged with modernity at the time of the intermingling of cultures and/or the colonial encounter.

It is also notable that in the pantheons, so to speak, of these practices, we find spirits who present as colonial officers and personnel such as soldiers, army commanders, doctors, pilots, or train drivers, and even Catholic priests or masters of martial arts. These pantheons are flexible and in a constant state of evolution, just like the ritual practices themselves. They are clearly not rooted exclusively in one tradition. Their character seems synoptic and hybrid. So too is the non-Islamic sphere that I am studying, which is a composite and heterogeneous whole. If, despite *jinɛdɔn*'s complex and deep connection to Islam, I situate it within this sphere, it is because some of my interlocutors and many Muslim authorities, who see it as *kaafiri*, do and because it cannot be reduced to a regular and standard practice of Islam.

"Work" and "Play": The Structure of *Jinɛdɔn*

Like other similar practices involving spirit possession—such as, for example, *ndep* (Zempleni 1987)—*jinɛdɔn* has a bipartite structure and is made up of two phases that follow each other cyclically. I propose to subsume these phases into the formula that serves as the title of this

section. To understand this structure, I will use the example of a ceremony orchestrated in March 2017 by Maman Temba, who is originally from Abidjan but often travels to Bamako where she has pupils. In 2018, she bought a plot of land there and built a ritual compound and a very comfortable home in the Faladié neighborhood. She also travels regularly to Ouagadougou, where other disciples and some of her clients live. She was about thirty when I met her in 2017, quite tall with a balanced build: a beautiful woman, and a kind one, as everyone agreed (Figure 30).

Maman Temba is the daughter of Zanga Bamba, a well-known Ivorian *donso*, and the mother of two older daughters and a smaller baby from her second union. She was divorced when I first met her, but she remarried in 2019. In her story, the logics of affliction, choice, and inheritance within her lineage intertwine, as in Assitan's. I learned that the failure of a soap business she was trying to set up prompted her to consult ritual specialists, who put her on the right path—the one she needed to take to fulfill her destiny. This is how she turned to the "work" of spirits.[19] She was able to obtain ritual tools from two *jinatigiw* she trained with as an apprentice, one in Bamako and the other in Ségou. Her *donso* father also passed his knowledge of plants on to her and gave her the statuettes of the "twin spirits" (*filanin*) her great-grandmother, who was obviously a ritual expert, had previously held. Maman Temba then established herself as a healer and *jinatigi* on her own, quickly achieving a certain level of success, as her frequent business trips seem to attest.

A few days after our first meeting, Maman Temba invited me to attend a ceremony at the home of one of her students, Daro Keïta, in a very peripheral neighborhood of Bamako called Taliko 2, on the outskirts of Lafiabougou. This is how it went:

> We arrive at around 10:30. In the room used as a shrine, which you enter with your shoes off, Maman Temba sits down in front of her *minanw*, or ritual tools. She first throws two kolas into the air, and then prepares the offering of sugar, honey, water, two types of perfume, and milk. She also mixes the milk with millet porridge—*dɛgɛ*—and everyone [her students, the clients behind these sacrifices, the anthropologist, and her companions] takes a spoonful before the

19. She uses the term *baara*, which means "work," "occupation," "practice" (including ritual practice) (Dumestre 2011: 63). This term is readily used by other religious specialists—including, for example, Bou and Zumana (see chapters 5 and 6).

Figure 30. *Jinatigi* Maman Temba, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by author.

rest is offered to the spirits.[20] Then she greets the spirits by putting her hands behind her back.[21]

Once all the preparations have been made, the actual sacrifice begins with the throwing of the kola nuts into the air: their position on the ground makes it possible to check whether the sacrifices will be accepted. This is also how sacrifices to the *basiw* and those made by the *donsow* to Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn begin. The sacrifices performed by *jinɛdɔn* leaders are no exception in this respect; however, they differ since *jinatigiw* use certain vegetable (sugar, peanut paste) and animal (honey, milk) materials that are not customarily used in other Mande ritual practices. Using them makes the ritual longer, as I describe below:

> The client, who is seated in the corner, holds the chickens in his hands. The officiant brings him each offering: kola, honey, milk, chickens, to which he whispers his wishes and problems, and then leads him to her *minanw* in the shape of wooden, small-sized statues. She then uncovers the pots containing the plant mixtures and pours a little of the sacrificial concoction made of sugar, milk, honey, kolas, porridge, and perfumes over them and all the other *minanw*. The ritual also includes dates, eggs, and candies. It is only after this long preamble that the ceremony moves on to the blood sacrifices, which take place in the courtyard where the first two chickens, a cow, a sheep, and then the rest of the chickens are immolated in order. The blood of the mammals is (partially) collected in calabashes, which Maman Temba immediately brings inside to sprinkle on her *minanw*. The animals are butchered on the spot and cut into pieces, and the meat is immediately deposited in the sanctuary.

Given the length of this initial phase, the blood sacrifice takes place in the heat of the day, under the sun, between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. The

20. In the past, the sharing and public consumption of porridge was a ritual of alliance or, more precisely, of allegiance from the vanquished to the victors. In this case, performed by the officiant distributing the porridge, it is an act of alliance or allegiance by the cult followers (and the other people present) to the spirits.
21. This gesture of respect, which in this case is made with one hand as the officiant holds the offering with the other, is very common among adepts, not only during sacrifices but also during the ceremonies, when pupils perform this gesture towards their masters.

jinatigi’s hands are covered in blood, and her *bogolan* poncho is also stained. She is barefoot. Once the sacrifice is over, it’s time to begin the consultation. She invites us to rest on the veranda until she has finished with the clients who requested the sacrifice. It’s then that we learn that the neighbors, who have been disturbed by the noise, have come to complain, and want to prevent the event from continuing. The *jinatigi*, Maman Temba, negotiates with them.

Because several percussion instruments are used, as I described above, *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies are loud. What is more, they often last for several hours—if not days. This explains at least in part why isolated areas as far away from other dwellings as possible are generally chosen as ritual locations, which accentuates the *jinɛdɔn*’s position on the margins of the social space. Despite these precautions, however, it is not uncommon for neighbors to disapprove of these events and sometimes even to call in the authorities to stop them. This is what happened shortly after Assitan moved to Ntomikorobougou. Following a complaint from local residents, she had to suspend her activities for several months, as she explained to me. In the meantime, she continued them in Kita but, at the time of our conversation, the matter had still not been fully resolved.

To return to the ceremony in Lafiabougou, Maman Temba’s student, who owned the place, received clients there but did not organize ceremonies that involved music. Faced with the disgruntled neighbors, Maman Temba nevertheless insisted that once the sacrifices had been made there was no turning back, as once her spirits had drunk blood they loved to play. She reassured the neighbors that it was an exceptional situation and promised that it would not be repeated any time soon, and on this condition the event was allowed to continue. This is how I describe it in my field notes:

> In addition to the *jidunun*, the orchestra [seated in the courtyard but opposite the place where the sacrifices took place] consists of a balafon, a *djembe*, and *tamani*. Maman Temba’s student is “caught” first, sweating profusely and her foot stiffens … After a dance sequence, she utters a few oracular speeches in a low voice. Meanwhile, another woman has been caught … Maman Temba, who is sitting to my left, trembles, then half closes her eyes, which stay like this for the duration of her possession. She dances and groans a little, then comes to greet my master Dia, who is sitting on my right. She bows deeply to him to acknowledge his authority as a *donso* and show her respect. She shakes my hand. She then does some rapid rolls and carries a

> few people on her back, one after the other, including me. It's quite a strange sensation. She's very strong physically. She's a very convincing and talented performer, in the proper sense of the term: the one who can perform physical and vocal actions. I had already been able to see this during the sacrificial sequence, when she addressed the spirits with a poise comparable to that of some of the great fetish masters. During the rest of the ceremony, she experiences moments of trance of varying depth, intensity, and control. She performs military salutes, like the guard you see in *Les Maîtres Fous*, and takes some steps on tiptoe … Another woman becomes possessed; her gestures, too, resemble those in *Les Maîtres Fous*. She suddenly stops on one leg, with the other bent at the knee and her foot touching her other knee. She too performs a military salute.

Before I analyze the gestures and movements of the possessed-spirits and the physical symptoms of a trance, let us recap what has been said so far. As the ceremony I have described here illustrates, the *jinɛdɔn* rests on two complementary modes of action: sacrifice on the one hand, and dancing and trances on the other. Andras Zempleni argues that these two modes of action can be considered to be equivalent. He shows that in the *ndep* he studies in Senegal, the animal victims are replaced by "sacrificial beings": humans who offer their own bodies to the spirits (Zempleni 1987).

These two modes of action are perceived as distinct in my field, however, and do not occur simultaneously. The way they develop varies from one ceremony to another, or more precisely from one type of ceremony to another. Where sacrifices are made at the request of a client, as in the case I have just described, the dancing follows the sacrifice. During annual ceremonies that last for several days—such as the one organized by Assitan's colleague in Hippodrome described at the beginning of this chapter, or the one organized by Assitan that I analyze in the following chapter—the sacrifices interrupt the dance sequences since they take place on the final day, and are therefore preceded and followed by festivities. As for the weekly ceremonies, if no clients are present, the sacrificial sequence can be dispensed with altogether. Weekly ceremonies may consist solely of dances and trances, some of which are oracular, or may combine the two modes of action one after the other, starting with the sacrifices.

The sacrifices are taken very seriously by the specialists, who regard them as their "work" in the fullest sense of the word. They are remunerated

for this work if it is done for the benefit of people outside the group of the adepts, the clients who also pay for the sacrificial items, which entail considerable expense: the price of a cow is close to 500,000 FCFA (almost 1,000 euros) today and still rising; depending on its size, color, and other characteristics, a sheep costs currently around 100,000 FCFA, and sometimes more. The price of chickens also varies according to their characteristics, which, as in the case of sacrifices for the *basiw*, have a certain importance, as their plumage must match the spirits' requirements. But it is above all the number of chickens (there are usually more than two) that makes the expense significant. Sacrifices always begin with offerings of kolas. Although they are always led by the *jinatigiw* who are the experts, the role of sacrificer is often, although not systematically, given to a male student—even though I have also seen *jinatigiw* women take charge of them, as in the case just described. The offerings are always accompanied by a discourse that, based on my observations and an initial analysis of the recordings I have at my disposal,[22] follows the same form as the one addressed to *basiw*. As in the case of the sacrifices intended for the *basiw* or those for Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, the sacrifices accompanied by ritual speech in the *jinɛdɔn* make it possible to establish their recipients—here, the *jinaw*—as extraordinary agents who are attentive to their servants.

The major difference between the sacrifices in *jinɛdɔn* and those constitutive of *donsoya* and *basitigiya* lies not in the general scheme, which starts always and in all three cases by the kola consultation and finishes by blood sacrifice, but rather in the choice of intermediate or supplementary offerings. Unlike the *basiw* or Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, the *jinaw* are also given liquids or powders. This choice of sacrificial materials, far from being insignificant, reflects their conceptualization. Unlike the *basiw*, on whom blood is poured to enable them to grow, *jinɛw* are not caught up in a continuous formation process: there is no need to fabricate their flesh because they temporarily seize the bodies of their adepts to manifest. Sacrifices are thus not intended to build them materially but to construct their singular identity, according to the common *do-ut-des* logic.

Let us therefore leave the sacrifices aside—as we can see, the basic mechanism at work is common to all the practices we have studied and that have already been analyzed—and focus on the dances and festivals

22. In this case, I recorded and partially transcribed and translated a sacrificial speech by Maman Temba and another delivered in 2016 by Assitan's pupil Fifi Doumbia.

that are the hallmark of the *jinɛdɔn* to which, as we remember, they give its name [dances of the spirits]. These dances and festivities are, we have seen, extremely spectacular, and include orchestras made up of several instrumentalists and singers who specialize in this type of event. They entail considerable fatigue and expense for the adepts, who have to pay the musicians and buy the costumes and other festive items worn for these occasions. According to these adepts, however, it is hard to avoid organizing these festivities. Remember Maman Temba's response to the neighbors who demanded a halt to the ceremony: she told them that once they had drunk the sacrificial blood and been called by the offerings, the spirits had to be given the opportunity to manifest themselves among the humans. When I asked her about this on another occasion, she explained:

– When you make sacrifices, the spirits want to come down. When we're happy, we celebrate, and so do they when they're happy.
– *Do they like it?*
– Yes, they like it.

Clearly, like Assitan's Jaba, Maman Temba's spirits love to celebrate, to "enjoy the vibe." I will now go on to analyze their festivities so we will be able to understand how they enable their construction and, at the same time, that of their humans.

CHAPTER 8

The Technology of Possession

What Pleases Spirits (and Their Humans)

Every Monday and Thursday evening at Assitan's, people sing and dance to the spirits.[1] A group gathers, large or small, of students and clients as well as occasional sympathizers: young women who live in the neighborhood, friends of practitioners, teenage girls attracted by the dances, and so on. Some come to talk to the mistress of the place or to perform the sacrifices prescribed for them. Others want to question the *jinɛw* that are incarnate in a few disciples during these weekly rendezvous. In March 2016, I noted:

> In the courtyard, there are about twenty rather young women and, on a bench installed on the "hut side," there are three or four older, rotund, richly dressed "matrons," likely *jinatigiw* on their own.[2] I recognize one I saw [a year earlier] at [the ceremony in] the Hippodrome neighborhood. No men. Then the first man arrives, dressed in

1. The days of the spirits in the *jinɛdɔn* are the same as for the Senegalese *ndep* studied by Andras Zempleni (1987).
2. The property is organized into two large areas: 1) the "hut side," at one end of which is the shrine and, at the other, a large air-conditioned building with a sitting room and bathroom reserved for Assitan; and 2) the "ceremonial side," where a large space for dancing is laid out with the place where the orchestra usually sits at the end.

a rather flashy yellow and purple two-piece boubou. The women who are seated are all more dressed up than the others, wearing sequined or tight-fitting multicolored dresses, large brightly colored scarves … often wigs with straight European-style hair or long blond braids. Lots of gold. Brooches, bracelets, necklaces, pendants of heavy artificial pearls and large diamonds. Permanent glued nails, eyelashes, bold makeup.

At the major annual festivals, adepts match the decorations, which maintain the same stylistic register (Figure 31). At Assitan's celebration in 2017, for example, streamers, stars, and shiny multicolored paper and plastic balls hung from the ceiling and on the floor was a large flat-screen television showing images filmed on the spot in real time, as is the custom in African charismatic churches.[3]

Figure 31. Baroque aesthetics of the *jinɛdɔn* decor, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by author, Bamako, March 2017.

3. It would undoubtedly be interesting to make a more systematic comparison of the aesthetics of the *jinɛdɔn* and the Pentecostal style, as analyzed by Birgit Meyer in Ghana (Meyer 2004).

Other images, uploaded by officiants, are often accompanied by emojis: small animals winking or waving, all seeming out of keeping with the serious, even violent content of photographs of animal sacrifices or bodies in trance posted on Facebook. The images with emojis that the experts publish on social media may seem somehow puzzling yet they are in the same stylistic register as the ritual decor, costumes, and accessories. In other words, they are part of an aesthetics which could be described as baroque, contrived, or a bit over-the top, to borrow the terms from Michael Houseman's article on the distinctive aesthetics of New Age and neo-pagan practices (Houseman 2016), which I read shortly before my field trip. In this article, Houseman examines the functions of such aesthetics. He argues that unlike more classical rituals, these alternative spiritual practices do not involve "ritual condensation," which by "underpinning the simultaneous realization of antithetical relations, produces complex, concentrated actions whose nature remains difficult to define" (2016: 227) and which, as I show, also characterizes *donsow* practice. Houseman suggests that, on the other hand, the New Age and contemporary pagan rituals rest on "ritual refraction," which consists in the simultaneous actualization of antinomic identities and the establishment of "complex, enlarged agents whose nature is difficult to grasp: (ritual) subjects that are exceptional, extraordinary and ordinary at the same time" (2016: 228). As Houseman demonstrates, the construction of these subjects relies on the complexification of their dispositions through a particular baroque or contrived aesthetic that helps them maintain a reflexive posture and a critical distance from their own performance. The *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies I attended perhaps involve a similar process. Would their aesthetic—which, according to the adepts, is much appreciated by the spirits: Jaba loves gaudy makeup, pale pink or dazzling lipsticks, and big gold jewels—contribute to setting up this refraction process?

To explore this hypothesis, the first question to ask is whether this aesthetic, which I describe as baroque in tone, is perceived in this way at a local level. To answer, let me begin with another excerpt from my field notes:

> I don't know what the women I am observing think, but for Dia, Yacouba, and many other Malian friends with whom I discuss it, this aesthetic and the participants' attire undoubtedly show a taste that runs contrary to the canons of modesty.

Modesty (*sutura*) is an important notion in Mali and among the Mande, where women—and men, for that matter—are expected to preserve

their decency by remaining faithful to the "ethos of discretion," as Julie Castro (2012) aptly calls it. A lack of restraint—whether in speech, gesture, or appearance—is not valued. It is seen as the prerogative of people who "know no shame": griots and the descendants of slaves (Derive 1987), and, we might add, prostitutes and other groups who defy the dominant norm in matters of sexuality (Broqua 2012; Castro 2012). However, this lack of restraint does characterize the members of *jinɛdɔn*, whose dress and behavior can hardly be described as discreet, and whose emotional tone also merits closer inspection.

During ceremonies, they may go within just a few minutes from a radiant, proud, and somewhat seductive smile to confusion and a lost and surprised expression. I make a note in my notebook: "At times sweat, at times extreme joy." On one occasion, I write about one of Assitan's students:

> The woman they sit me next to [facing the *benbe* and Assitan] looks really unhappy. She goes into a trance with difficulty. When she is finally totally "taken," she stands up and lets out a scream … She remains possessed for a good hour. At times, she dances energetically and joyfully, but most of the time she just sits there, as if stunned … She seems to be suffering; she cries and then becomes agitated. She is taken to Assitan, who gives her a sort of massage and whispers an incantation over her body. The woman calms down but still seems upset … Food is served. When I return, she is no longer embodying spirits.

Later, I complete my notes:

> After the break [about three hours later], the woman who was possessed at the beginning of the evening is back to normal, smiles more, sings, is flirtatious, and sings well. The mood swings of participants are disconcerting [to me].

The exceptional emotional lability the possessed-spirits display makes as much of an impression on me as the intensity of the emotions that course through them. They make me think of Arnaud Halloy's studies (2012, 2013, 2015). In one of his articles on the Brazilian candomblé, he notes that the trances—or more precisely the second phase of the trance, once the moment of "catching" by *orixas*, or, to use his terminology, "irradiation," has passed—are characterized by a particular emotional tonality linked to the personality of the deities who are considered to be

responsible (2013: 42). In his view, this tonality differs from everyday emotional tonality in that it uses a fairly limited range of emotions with particularly prominent contrasts, which come in very quick succession: the *orixas*—the incarnate deities—thus fluctuate abruptly between joy and anger, and between satisfaction and frustration. These emotions are particularly intense, and they are ostentatiously staged. I see a similar fluctuation and ostentation in the *jinɛdɔn*. Like the Xangô devotees, the practitioners of *jinɛdɔn* often switch from the most intense joy to the deepest anger or dismay in no time at all, and vice versa.

It is significant that in *jinɛdɔn*, neither the intensity nor the emotional lability are distinctive of ritual context alone. The contrived, ostentatious, and particularly emotionally intense nature of the adepts' behavior during ceremonies is definitely striking, but displays of emotion are not limited to when they embody their spirits. Both Assitan's and Maman Temba's apprentices are very attached to their teachers, at least in appearance, addressing them daily in affectionate terms (such as "darling") both in physical spaces and online, on Facebook. I remember one of Assitan's students, a woman named La, greeting her master in her compound with great tenderness, resting her head on her lap and holding her hand for practically the whole of their conversation (which lasted for a good half hour). Physical contact between people of the same sex is not considered to be inappropriate in itself, but it usually happens between relatively young people. In the context of *jinɛdɔn*, however, I regularly saw such displays of affection towards Assitan from her apprentices, or from certain teachers towards others: they touched each others' hands, faces, and so on. Occasionally, I saw overt expressions of discontent or anger—for example, when Assitan pushed away apprentices who had not followed her instructions. Such public displays of emotion, both positive and negative, seem to be excessive in the predominant context of the "ethic of discretion." So too are certain other types of behavior: the loud laughter provoked by unsophisticated jokes (about "big butts," for example) or exaggerated demonstrations of joy following a favorable oracle, not to mention the coquettish way of moving on the dance floor or the suggestive glances or broad smiles that may abruptly disappear as if swept away by some dark thought, a sudden doubt or sorrow, and then reappear almost immediately. Thus, I would argue that behavior during a trance is not a break from the everyday but part of a continuum. Like their behavior when possessed, the conduct of adepts even when they are not has an affective coloring at a particular level of saturation that depends on the degree of its ritualization. This particular emotional coloring or tonality,

which finds its most accomplished expression during a trance might also be described as baroque, like *jinɛdɔn* aesthetics that echo it. This baroque coloration or aesthetic style seems to be a distinctive feature of *jinɛdɔn* and perhaps of other African practices of spirit-possession (see Boddy 1989; Lambek 2002; Leiris 1958; Masquelier 2002).

I introduced the term "baroque" as borrowed from Jean-Pierre Dozon (2017) in the preceding chapter. It refers—and I agree with Gilles Deleuze (1988) on this point—to a modus operandi that is inevitably "folded" in on itself; that possesses an excessive, theatricalized, contrived quality. It also presupposes a certain degree of self-reflexivity, as Houseman (2016) has postulated. This excessive, theatricalized, or contrived quality characterizes, as we have seen, the conduct of adepts of *jinɛdɔn*, whose behavior at once reminds one of a play, intentionally staged, and yet is taken seriously at the same time, in ritual contexts and outside them. There is a well-known Mande proverb that goes "play and seriousness are two different things."[4] In *jinɛdɔn*, the boundaries between the two are somewhat blurred, as if it were a question of "putting fantasy into practice," to paraphrase Michael Lambek (2002) on the subject of possession in Mayotte.

"Authentic Fakes"

The question of "fantasy in practice" merits closer inspection. Let us first return to the visual aspect of the *jinɛdɔn* and my notes:

> When embodying spirits, the adepts are dressed in these spirits' costumes, but as a general rule, only a few rather basic accessories are involved: those who have been taken by the *donsow* spirit are not given a full *donso* outfit, but simply a brownish *bogolan* poncho. Occasionally, a duster brush in a synthetic material in a variety of colors is used as a flywhisk.

It seems unlikely that a *donso*, especially in a rural context, or even an old-fashioned fetish master would appear at any ceremony dressed up like this, with a synthetic duster in place of a ritual fly whisk. In *jinɛdɔn*,

4. *Tulon ani sɛbɛ tɛ kelen*, contrasting the term *tulon*—"party," "fun," "game"—with the term *sɛbɛ*: "seriousness"; "work"; and, as an adjective, "serious," "genuine."

on the other hand, everything is both "staged" and "authentic," "fake" and "real": the eyelashes and fingernails of the adepts, the feelings they express towards each other, and the costumes of the spirits they embody. With the exception of a few elements described above, such as the mounds of raw earth or clay and the plant-based balls that function as *basiw*, the entire material set-up of the *jinɛdɔn* is actually composed by *copies* that evoke in a stereotyped way what they are supposed to represent. As we have seen, for example, the brushes made of synthetic bristles or hair from domestic animals and the brown *bogolan* tunics stand for the ritual power of the *donsow* and other "traditional" ritual experts. The scepters—Tamba's *tamaw*—symbolize the power of warlords. The blue and brown *bazin* loincloths known as "Jaba's loincloths" and the bright white dresses function as emblems of fertile, young, radiant femininity.[5] I was once wearing a gown like this, sewn by a Bamako tailor from fabric chosen by Assitan for her annual ceremony, when I ran into the (long-standing expatriate) residents and (Malian) domestic staff of the house where I was staying; they all exclaimed, "Ah, are you going to a wedding?" This anecdote confirms that for outsiders and insiders of the *jinɛdɔn* alike, these clothes and other accessories refer back to certain easily identifiable symbolic registers. Yet they do so in a rather crude way, based on evocation or quotation rather than a full or accurate identification. For example, no one can fail to see that the multicolored synthetic duster is not the fly whisk of a venerable *donso* master, that the scepters adorned with a few cowries did not belong to the kings of yesteryear, or that the handbags and sunglasses worn by the officiants are not authentic Christian Dior or Chanel. This also applies to the acoustics, as my notes taken after one of the ceremonies testify:

> Some possessions today did not occur during the dances but when *a cappella* songs were sung by the griot. Some of these songs are part of the musical corpus of hunting or initiation societies, as far as I

5. The colors that are usually associated with Jaba are black and gold, as those worn by Assitan and her retinue on the first day of her New Year's ceremony. I suppose we might trace the origin of the hues used by some of the female spirits of the *hausa* and other Songhay spirit-possession practices, dressed in black loincloths. The use of *tamani* drums could probably also be associated with these practices (see Rouch [1960] 1989). However, it is not my intention to look for possible connections like these in this study beyond what is obvious to the adepts themselves.

> can tell, and as Dia confirms later.[6] Except that at the ceremony we both attended today, it is not a masked Komo in a fiber outfit who's being called on to dance, but a woman with heavy makeup on her face who throws herself on the floor, screams, and then finally talks about sorcerers [as the Komo would have done].[7] She is dressed in a *bogolan* poncho as is a man possessed by a spirit standing before her, a *donso*, to whom the griot sings "*sinbon korima gɛrɛ nɔgɔ t'a*."[8] Clearly, the *jinɛdɔn* recycles several elements that are locally considered to be indigenous or traditional, while democratizing them and making them accessible to women at the same time.

I had the opportunity to observe a similar borrowing of songs at Maman Temba's compound in Faladié. The musicians—who accompanied themselves on the *donso ngoni*, the hunter's harp—and who were there when I visited in March 2018, first performed a few easily recognizable songs from the hunters' musical tradition. Then they suddenly intoned the Muslim profession of faith, the *Shahada*, which they chanted for a good five minutes, accelerating the tempo, before returning to the hunting repertoire after a short instrumental intermezzo.

Whether borrowed from the acoustic, visual, or gestural sphere, the elements in question function as citations, a way to refer to other contexts. For example, the songs of the *donsow* do not invite the members of the *donsoton*, who are accustomed to chasing game, to take to the dance floor. Dia and other *donsow* who may be present at certain ceremonies would remain seated when these songs are sung. Similarly, the Komo song does not invite masked dancers to come forward, and nor does the declaimed profession of faith invite marabouts to join in. As with the wedding dress, which does not make a bride, or the warlord's scepter, which is not worn by someone with military power, these songs are put at the disposal of persons who do not normally have the right to use

6. As far as the hunting songs are concerned, I recognize them because I have heard them several times in the course of my research on *donsoya*. I am less familiar with the songs of men's initiation societies, although I have recorded a few examples.
7. Komo, or Koma, is one of the best-known and best-described Mande initiation societies. In the past, induction into it took place at the time of a boy's passage to adulthood. One of its main functions was to combat malevolent sorcerers (see Brett-Smith 1997; Colleyn 2001; Conrad 2010; McNaughton 1988).
8. This is a hunting song I know very well. I have several recordings of it.

them.[9] Like many visual and material elements, these acoustic items function as symbols of the worlds to which they refer without claiming to fully belong to them. A certain appropriation of these worlds takes place by means of a manipulation of somewhat approximate and fanciful "copies" of "originals" that come from elsewhere.

Umberto Eco identifies the use of such copies, which are made to appear (almost) real, as one of the distinguishing features of postmodernity, which he believes is based precisely on a constant recourse to what he calls "the authentic fake," examples of which abound on the West Coast of the United States or in Las Vegas (Eco 1986). Not only do we find highly successful duplicates of the world's most spectacular and famous landmarks there but we find them all together at the same time, surrounded by theaters, restaurants, and stores: it is all there. And there is even more. Eco identifies the desire to have more and more, the thirst for opulence, as another essential feature of postmodernity (in its North American manifestation). David Chidester's book uses Eco's concept in his study of contemporary global religious transformations, of which one chapter analyzes the extraordinary career of self-proclaimed Zulu shaman Credo Mutwa (see Chidester 2005), while Paul Stoller (2002: 64–88) opts for a notion of simulacra borrowed from Jean Baudrillard in his analysis of the Kwanzaa festival celebrated by Black and Afro-centric communities in the United States. In all these cases, as with *jinɛdɔn*, the thirst for opulence drives a frenzied imitation of other cultural and ritual contexts, and implies the manipulation of simulacra, or, in Chidester's and Eco's terminology, "authentic fakes." This manipulation should be taken very seriously: it aims at blurring the boundaries between what is real and what is fake—thus, the fakes may actually become authentic. At least, this is what Eco says on the subject:

> Constructing a full-scale model of the Oval Office (using the same materials, the same colors, but with everything obviously more polished, shinier, protected against deterioration), means that for historical information to be absorbed, it has to assume the aspect of a reincarnation … The "completely real" becomes identified with "completely fake." Absolute unreality is offered as real presence. The aim of the reconstructed Oval Office is to supply a "sign" that will then be forgotten as such: the sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction

9. Such as *sɛrewa* or *donsongoni fola* for hunting songs, *jeliman* for Komo songs, and so on.

> of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing but its plaster cast. Its double, in other words. (Eco 1986: 7)

A similar mechanism is at play in the spirit possessions I am studying, in which the copies become real. The fact that these copies are approximate and somewhat fanciful is not insignificant here. On the contrary, if we follow Houseman's line of thought, their quirky nature and the fact that they refer (vaguely) to certain originals instead of imitating them faithfully contribute to the construction of the particular, refracted identity of the practitioners who use them. This is true whether it is done in the context of the Western neo-pagan ceremonies analyzed by Houseman, the global neoshamanism discussed by Chidester, the virtual religions of the Internet, or the neo-pagan "fakelore" in Hungary, Estonia, the Andes, and elsewhere (on the question of "fake" and "authenticity," see also the edited volume from Hau Books: Copeman and da Col 2018)—not forgetting the *bwiti* and the De Gaulle rituals in Gabon (see Bonhomme 2008, 2010), or, last but not least, *jinɛdɔn*.

Like Houseman, but from a different viewpoint, Michael Taussig (1993: 52–58), who has studied the "copies that are not copies" in various postcolonial and colonial contexts, especially in South America, suggests that the "mimetic imperfection" of these copies has a function. He argues that using them makes it possible to acquire power over what they represent—or rather what they refer to—more effectively than if these copies were more like the "originals." Indeed, as Eco explains, such almost-real doubles no longer appeal to our desire for the original but replace it. Using a duplicate allows us to appropriate the universe to which it refers by making it accessible to people who would not normally have access to it, in *jinɛdɔn* as in other similar practices such as *hauka* (Henley 2006), *bori* (Masquelier 2002), and those of mediums in Mayotte and Madagascar (Lambek 2002). It therefore allows change, a general reconfiguration of power relations through ritual practices which would not be allowed by the more-faithful copies lacking the transformational character or quality. Before analyzing this reconfiguration in the next chapter, let us turn to the mobilizations of the body and senses on which it rests.

The Body under Strain, or How One Embodies Spirits

We have now attended to the visual aspects of *jinɛdɔn* celebrations—glittering, colorful, and overdone—and, to a lesser degree, to their tactile

aspect. Let us now return to their acoustics. The songs from a variety of traditions are, as already explained, accompanied by instruments, including numerous percussion instruments. There is, therefore, considerable volume that is often increased even more by amplifiers adjusted to allow the back rows of spectators to hear everything. I have no technical means of measuring sound levels in the field: suffice it to say that it is impossible to hear a cellphone or have a normal conversation from tens of meters away. This explains the complaints from neighbors during the ceremony at Maman Temba's pupil's property, and at other times. At Assitan's annual ceremony in March 2017, which went on for three days, I regularly took pills for headaches and wrote in my field notes, "Bewitching music, but so loud!" To the music are added the shrill cries of people falling into a trance, the grunts of the spirits and their prophecies, and the hubbub from the audience's chatter during the pauses when the music stops. My field notes witness this acoustic overload:

> The courtyard is extremely noisy, full of women laughing, shouting, and talking, and girls in party clothes who also shout, and sometimes cry. There are well over a hundred and fifty people crammed into a space measuring twenty meters by ten, and almost none of them are silent.

The ceremonies are not just overloaded acoustically; smells also flood the arena. The sweet aromas of the perfumes that are used in abundance and sometimes sprinkled on the adepts embodying spirits—especially those caught by Jaba the coquette—are layered onto the scent of the incense being burned in clay pots placed on the dance floor and in the sanctuary enclosures. The incense is a mixture of fragrant plants and vulture feathers, which Maman Temba tells me attract spirits. Near the sacrificial space near the dance floor and in the sanctuary, there is also a smell of decaying organic matter:

> When I approach the *minanw* after the ceremony to take a closer look, I realize that there is a smell that is undetectable from a spectator's position but perfectly perceptible from the officiant's one. It is an aroma of broken eggs, honey, blood, and rotting meat, not forgetting perfumes!

The smell of decay is mainly present in the vicinity of the ritual tools and in the sacrificial area, but it is not totally absent from the dance floor

itself, where there may be a broken egg (said to attract spirits) and offerings of fruit which spoil quickly in the heat. The smell of putrefaction may also come from the libations—honey, milk, and bouilli—and the blood of the animals immolated there during the annual festivals. At other times, the dominant smell is that of sweat—one of the physical symptoms of a trance—trickling down the foreheads and running down the bodies of adepts who are performing a technically demanding activity, be it dancing or immolating animals in temperatures of up to forty degrees Celsius in the shade.

And so there is a thermal dimension to the *jinɛdɔn* celebrations. During the sacrifices preceding the ceremony I have described above, my phone, which I was using to film a video, alerted me that it needed to be switched off because the temperature was too high. At the same time, Maman Temba continued her activities unperturbed:

> The fact that her activity is quite physical is clear to me during the sacrifices, when she slits the throats of all the animals herself until she is literally covered in spurting blood, and then when she goes back and forth multiple times [between the place of sacrifice and the shrine] with a large calabash full of blood with which she sprinkles her *minanw*.[10] When she says that what she does is work, it should be taken at face value.

It should also be noted that:

> Sacrifices of large mammals are different from those of chickens in sensory terms: several people are needed to keep the animal, whose blood is spilling, immobilized. Then there's the noise, as the throat is slit and air passes through the incision. This noise can go on for several seconds.

As for the temperature, the entire ceremonial sites, which are usually covered by cloth or plastic tarpaulins and surrounded by a compact circle of participants, overflow with heat. It is often hard to breathe and the muffled vibrations of the large drums, which are mainly felt in the stomach and reverberate right through the body, make it even harder. The

10. Mande women do not usually perform the roles of sacrificers. However, *jinatigiw* are an obvious exception to this rule. For a discussion of their singular gender construction, see Kedzierska Manzon 2021a.

annual ceremonies take place in the middle of the dry season, during the hottest part of the year—March or April in the Western calendar—and last for several days and nights with relatively short breaks for prayers, meals, and rest.[11] It is obvious that those who take part—who are deprived of sleep and exposed to extreme thermal, acoustic, and more general sensory conditions—are extremely tired. And we should not forget the obligatory early-morning trip to the river, where some of the annual sacrifices take place. My notes provide an overview of one such trip:

> When we leave at around 11 p.m., the ceremony is still under way, even though several adepts are on the point of leaving. The ones who live in Bamako haven't come far for the celebration, of course. We're told to be back at 4 o'clock. So be it … When we arrive shortly before 4, almost everyone is asleep, Sitan in her "apartments," some of her students in other huts, everyone where they can. I find Ibrahim [see later in this chapter] and Fakoroba [Assitan's first apprentice] next to the dance floor. "You're here early," they tell me. I go back to the car where Dia and Yacouba are dozing … At about 5 a.m., the household suddenly becomes animated, and then everything happens very quickly. I'm asked if we can take Assitan, who visibly doesn't feel like driving, and put a cow in the back of our pickup.

The site of the sacrifices is near Kati, a good half-hour's drive away. It's a small pond, and a bit smelly. We go down to the bank in the dark, then everyone sits on the ground (Assitan on a little stool brought along for the purpose). The musicians take their places behind us: a large *tamani*, two *djembes*, Nana Diabaté the griotte, and one of the *kumarɛ*. There are about thirty of us in all. The ceremony begins when Fakoroba plants the seven scepters (*tamaw*) before Assitan. A mixture of kolas, sugar, milk, peanut paste, and eggs is then prepared in a calabash. The sacrifice that follows is similar to the one I described towards the end of the previous chapter, except that the offerings are more substantial. Libations precede the immolation of the animals—chickens, guinea fowl, and a cow Fakoroba takes charge of—and the offering of eggs thrown directly into the pond. The sacrifice lasts for just under an hour, and morning

11. This is the busiest ritual period due to the end of one year and the beginning of the new year, the date of which changes because it is based on the lunar calendar. This is when all the important annual rituals for both *donsow* and *basitigiw/bolitigiw* take place.

comes in the meantime. Assitan stands up and performs a few dance steps, her arms raised to the sky. The students imitate her. Then she answers a phone call. Finally, everyone salutes the pond spirits by touching the earth with their fingers before setting off again. On the way back, I note:

> Dia and Yacouba are tired, and I fall asleep. Assitan looks exhausted. What's more, she's sick [which she hadn't been two days previously]. She coughs a lot, and she's losing her voice, which is a little inconvenient since she's going to be hosting the ceremony for another day and giving a lot of speeches. I promise to fetch her some medicine from the pharmacy and advise her to rest. We leave her in Ntomikorobougou after 8 a.m. I doubt she'll be able to go to bed.

Even though the weekly ceremonies do not last several days, they are not relaxing and the officiants who perform them often complain of sleep deprivation and fatigue. This fatigue is caused not only by the frequency and duration of the celebrations but also by the uses of the body they entail, first and foremost the dancing.

The dancing that begins the ceremonies is collective and consists in a "lap around the dance floor" taken at a slow pace. Like all the other dances, it is performed barefoot. It is made up of fairly slow, swaying movements: one leg is put forward, and then the other joins it, and the trunk and arms swing on a lateral axis, often with a large scarf between the hands that sways along the body. This step usually ends with the dancers dispersing, each returning to their place except for two or three who stand facing the orchestra and continue dancing without moving their feet, all the while making more rapid and spread-out movements. These include successive extensions of the arms on a vertical axis from front to back. The gestures are very broad and rapid, and quite jerky. They remind me of the flapping wings of huge birds that spread and then fold, but only on one side at a time. The legs do not move, and neither do the hips. Thus, the bodies look as if they are divided into two sections: the upper part moves around while the lower part is frozen to the ground.

The movement at this point involves stretching the spine, and the body in general, extensively along the axes running through the right arm, the trunk, and the left leg, and then the left arm, the trunk, and the right leg. It must be tiring, and extremely painful for the neck and back. The cervical vertebrae are used a great deal in a dance of this kind, in which the head can sway up and down very considerably. It acts as an

extension of the spine, and does not appear to be truly autonomous: it does not move in the lateral axis, but rather follows the line of the back, sometimes leaning forward at a slight angle and sometimes raised. The pectoral muscles also seem to be working hard. The motor impulses from the sacro-pelvic region reverberate violently throughout the body, making it open and close in on itself at breathtaking speed, as if curtseying very rapidly to the orchestra.

One of the most spectacular variations of this dance is the prerogative of the young, effeminate singers: the so-called *kumarɛ* (see chapter 7). Their movements are more marked and assertive than those of other dancers. They are more geometrical, and the result is a jerky and highly suggestive swaying of the pelvis, performed either standing or lying down. It is hard not to associate this movement with sexual intercourse. These sequences arouse the audience's enthusiasm—as does the entire performance of the *kumarɛ*, who show great flexibility and a control over their bodies that is reminiscent of contortionists.

Most of the adepts do not go to such extremes, but when they dance they test their bodies severely with rotations and stretches of their upper limbs and trunk, which are absolutely impossible for me to reproduce and which I struggle to grasp fully, as my notes testify:

> Assitan invites me to follow her onto the dance floor and shows me how it's done. I have to say that I find it very difficult to imitate her movements: I'm not sure what to do with my hips. What is certain is that neither the pelvis nor the upper body is immobile, as they are in *donsow* dances, but nor does the pelvis undulate as in many South American dances such as the salsa or rumba. The upper body moves an enormous amount.

The parallels with the Muria ritual dances analyzed by Alfred Gell (1980) are striking. He shows how fatigue coupled with an overload of sound and excessive breathing plays a part in triggering trances. Of course, both among the Muria and in the *jinɛdɔn*, the relationship between dance and the trance is a complex one. But it is hard not to agree with Gell when he argues that when these movements take place over a long period or repeatedly they can induce a special mental state.[12] This is true even though trances are sometimes triggered during sacrifices or

12. See the discussion of the impact of extra-daily body techniques according to Gell in chapter 2.

among the persons who are seated, and even though the adepts, and the masters to an even greater extent, do not always fall into trance as soon as they begin to dance. When interviewed, they did not define the relationship between dance and trance as a causal one in the strict sense of the term. They did, however, emphasize that the spirits love to celebrate, that they are divinities who love play, to paraphrase the title of Gell's 1980 article, "Gods at Play." Once they are satisfied with their sacrifices, and when honored with music, they happily descend on "their humans." A *tamani* player, Youssouf Sissoko, also known as *jeli* Batou, whom I met once at Assitan's house, confirmed what Maman Temba told me on another occasion. Youssouf, a percussionist and very knowledgeable about *jinɛdɔn*, explained to me that music and dance "embellish" the ceremonies and are intended to please both humans and their spiritual allies. Assitan added at another time that, like anyone else, these allies appreciate being praised in song. While she also noted that they may visit humans outside of any musical interlude if they so wish, they often do so while music is playing. My observations in March 2017 provide an example of how some of those humans may try to avoid embodying the spirits, as I note with respect to one student who resists by not dancing:

> With a gesture, Assitan sends all her pupils (including me) on to the dance floor. Most of them quickly go into a trance. Fifi doesn't seem to want to continue dancing, however, and sits down quickly as soon as Assitan stops looking at her. If you dance, especially if you dance hard, you're calling the spirits, letting them know you're ready for them. She is not, clearly.

The idea that music and dance can help trigger a trance is hardly revolutionary; several authors who have studied spirit possession agree on this (see, for example, Rouget 1990). There is no reason to suppose that the ritual practices I encounter in my field differ in this respect. Like sensory saturation and fatigue, dancing contributes to inducing a trance. And attempts at avoiding it, as Fifi tried to make, confirm this. I have seen other pupils, too, try to stop, without attracting attention, when they were feeling vulnerable (at least, this is how it seemed to me). These attempts are generally unsuccessful because of the reactions of other pupils and masters, who push the "deserters" to carry on: the ultimate aim of *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies, of course, is to bring the spirits down among the humans!

"When You Tremble, You Don't Feel It": Divinities in Their Raw State?

How exactly does the presence of spirits in the bodies of their servants manifest itself? We need to distinguish between the moment of the onset of the trance, which is generally quite violent; the moment when the trance ends, which is very brief; and the more or less lengthy period of the full trance, in which certain words may be uttered by experts or those on the way to attaining that status.

Our starting point is translating the substantive of the Mande verb *ka minɛ*, the "catch." This moment is sometimes accompanied by tears. The woman I observed in March 2016, whom I described in my notes as looking "really unhappy," is not exceptional in this respect. Assitan confirmed to me that crying is one of the warning signs of a trance, as Gibbal (1982: 73) also reports. However, Ibrahim, whose story I will tell later, told me that because his spirit is a *donso* he does not cry, and he suggested that only the chosen ones of Jaba—a female—are likely to. It is far more common when caught by a spirit to let out a shrill cry, a cry that may be repeated at irregular intervals. Breathing becomes rapid. Sometimes, the air passing over the vocal chords causes them to vibrate, producing a muffled sound—a sort of monotonous panting that may be accompanied by violent movements of the chest, as if the spirit-possessed were about to vomit, and by a rather mechanical and vertical agitation of the cervical and facial muscles that seems to be disconnected from other movements of the body, as if these muscles have suddenly become autonomous. Assitan's facial muscle play is exceptional; not everyone displays her spectacular jaw movements, but in general, triggered by the trance, people open and close their jaws in a sort of strange yawn.

The repeated opening of the lips appears to be automatic and involuntary, and may lead to profuse salivation reminiscent of what we see in Jean Rouch's film *Les Maîtres Fous.* I saw at the ceremonies I went to one more somatic symptom of trance immortalized in the same film: the widening of the eyes. In some cases, they roll back completely at the moment of the catch and often remain half-closed or closed for the entire duration of the trance. The lost gaze of a possessed-spirit is quite different from the lucid gaze of a human in the normal state of awareness, capable of changing focus and direction. When descending into the body of a servant, the spirit sometimes stares intently at some mysterious point, as at one ceremony where a young caught woman looked at me closely and yet could not see me.

A tensing of the face to a greater or lesser degree always goes hand in hand with that of the rest of the body, which stiffens and stretches,

assuming unaccustomed positions (Figures 32 and 33). It becomes contorted, its muscles painfully taut—particularly in the thighs and calves.

The feet, which are another key element in the somatic signature of a trance, may form a right angle or, alternately, completely extend the line of the legs. If they tighten up when a person is standing, it can cause a sudden fall or at least a temporary loss of balance (Figure 34).

Figure 32. Unaccustomed positions of the body and of the feet, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by the author.

Figure 33. Unaccustomed positions of the body and of the feet, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by the author.

Figure 34. Loss of balance, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by author.

If the muscular tension is prolonged, it can lead to a hopping gait involving abrupt, uncoordinated movements. Falling can be avoided by finding a random means of support: a pole, other dancers who are not in a trance and who are assisting the possessed-spirit, or nearby members of the audience on whose knees one can land. When I asked Maman Temba why one foot of many of the possessed was often rooted to the spot, she explained, "it's the spirit that can block your foot like that."

Not content with throwing them off balance and making them drool, the spirits, visibly not totally at ease in a human body or not content with their allies' attitudes, also make them sweat: as we have seen, above, sweating is one of the signs of a trance. Above all, however, the spirits make their servants tremble from the beginning of the trance to the end: they vibrate and shiver. The trunk is shaken by waves that begin in the lower abdomen, cross the chest, and end at the shoulder blades or the neck, or even at the top of the skull. These vibrations can be prolonged in movements of the shoulders—which rise and then fall again, turning in circles—without necessarily extending to the arms. It is difficult to capture this vibration in writing, or even in a still photograph, but it is clearly discernible in the videos I have recorded.[13] From a certain point of view, it is a particularly fast version of the basic dance movement of rapid opening and closing of the body, similar to deep curtsies. But in a trance, this is internalized or condensed: it affects a very large number of muscles in the abdomen and torso without translating into extensions of the arms.

As we can see, the body in trance is often doubly spread out—dilated in space through movement, as is the body of the hunter, and dilated internally by the intensity of the inner muscle tensions, as is the body of the fetish master. Thus, aside from the unusual visual appearance, the body in trance differs from the body in daily life especially because of this internal vibration that accompanies and results from the motor impulses running through it. These impulses, as far as one can tell watching them from outside, are very strong although condensed, and generated in the sacro-pelvic area. They pass along the spinal column like waves—their progress is constant, but they manifest themselves in each part of the body in a jerky fashion. They may sometimes reach as far as the lower or upper limbs. While the positions and steps of people in trance vary

13. See the video on the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme channel on Canal-U: https://www.canal-u.tv/chaines/fmsh/ceremonie-du-nouvel-an-chez-assitan-bamako-mars-2017.

from ceremony to ceremony and from individual to individual, or from one spirit-possession practice to another, the quality of these impulses and the movements they give rise to distinguish them from other types of (ritual) motility.

Gell reached similar conclusions in the study I have cited above. His catalogue of the physical symptoms of a trance is very similar to the one I have just posed: changes in ordinary postures and muscle tone, yawning, profuse salivation, widening of the eyes, screaming, grunting, panting, extreme tension, rigidity in the neck and the whole body, falls caused by this rigidity, and above all trembling, shaking, and even convulsions (Gell 1980: 234). Gell observes that rigidity leads to trembling, which in turn provokes attempts to control this trembling, which only reinforce it since they involve more tension and rigidity (1980: 236). As a result, the trembling increases and the possessed persons feel that they no longer have any control over their body, various parts of which seem to have taken on a life of their own and resemble not integrated parts of an organism so much as foreign, autonomous objects at the mercy of the divinities. Gell then asks, in a provocative tone, "For what else *is* the divinity but a certain trembling, a certain vertiginous intoxication?" (1980: 239, emphasis in original).

This idea has been taken up by Laurent Berger in his study of the *jinɛdɔn*. He points out how novices' obligation to maintain a particularly uncomfortable position for a significant period of time during their initiation results in muscular tension and uncontrollable tremors. This enables the initiators to make them—and everyone present—infer that their bodies are being agitated by an external force (Berger 2012: 174–75). Their involuntary movements lead everybody to think that a nonhuman agency is involved. Berger concludes that from the adepts' point of view, possessive trance is based on a "transfer of agency"—a notion he borrows from Emma Cohen (2008). Berger argues that this transfer, which I analyze in greater depth in the next chapter, plays an essential role in the transformation of the pathogenic model of possession into a religious model, thereby enabling the passage from "possession as a sickness" to "possession as a ritual," to use the dichotomy suggested by Andras Zempleni (1987) in his study of the Senegalese *ndep*.

Let us observe here that the trance clothes *jinɛdɔn* and other similar practices involving spirit possession with an aura of authenticity while sanctioning the authority of the masters through ritual performances involving other-than-human agency in the human bodies. In addition to the trembling, certain motor behavior including rolling, jumping,

and carrying sometimes quite heavy people on the back are signs of the presence of spirits. Like the somatic trance symptoms I have described, they testify to the public and adepts that those who show them are truly caught—in other words, that they are no longer (simply) human—because they have an extraordinary and unusual strength, agility, or flexibility. Maman Temba's answers to me exemplify this:

– *Why do people often tremble when they're caught?*
– Spirits often come with strength. But when you tremble, you don't feel it.
– *Nothing? And when you jump?*
– You're not the one jumping. Why would you feel [something]?

If it is not me who is jumping, but someone else who has temporarily taken over my body, it follows that I feel nothing because I am not actually involved in the action. If we start out from the idea that it is a spirit acting through the human, it makes no sense to take any interest in the lived experience of the human subject, who is now absent. Yet this logic has its limits. Its relationship with ritual practice seems to be more complex than my interlocutors are willing to admit:

– *But if you hurt yourself when you're taken, do you feel it?*
– It can happen [that you hurt yourself] if you have done something you shouldn't have. When the spirit comes down, it makes you pay … by making you do [painful] things … Otherwise would you have jumped like that yourself?

In Maman Temba's view, the jumping or rolling is proof of the authenticity of the trance: otherwise, what normal person would willingly engage in such peculiar exercises, especially those that might hurt the body? If you roll around on the ground or gambol like a young mare, you are not yourself—a respectable, reasonable adult who should behave in a more dignified, calmer manner. Her logic is compelling. These jumps and antics are testament to the fact that it is no longer the human who is acting before the astonished eyes of the audience. The same could be said about the somatic symptoms of a trance: painful muscular tensions, uncontrollable trembling that one assumes cannot be consciously provoked, and usually unintentional organic reactions such as salivation, the secretion of sweat, and so on are proof that the more-than-human agency is at work, taking over the body of a human host. These bodily

phenomena and acrobatic demonstrations play an undeniable role in a shift in the conditions of intentionality that is a feature of possession; they contribute to the construction of the agency of spirits as internalized but distinct from the humans who host them. Gell reaches a similar conclusion, stressing the fact that trance affects the sense of self and the ordinary structures of intentionality (Gell 1980: 239). He argues that "where there arises a gap between intention and experience, a dislocation of input-output relations in consciousness, we are in the presence of the divinity in its raw state" (1980: 238).

Mastering Trance: Getting into Shape

If the divine is present in its raw state during the first phase of trance, the trembling, the rolled-back eyes, the stiffened muscles, and so on are a prelude to its culmination, during which, if I might put it this way, the divinities manifest themselves in their mature and complete state. Before this happens, the possessed-spirits attract attention through their "pre-expressive" behavior, to use Eugenio Barba's term (see Barba and Savarese 1985). They are spectacular without acting, without staging a story or playing any role, like the Asian actors Barba describes giving technical demonstrations of their craft, or like the fetish masters to whom I have compared these actors (see chapter 5). When they are caught, the adepts operate as a sort of "gaze-trap," a term used by Gell (1998) for ritual artifacts that seek to capture the attention just as hunting traps capture game. The possessed are also "thought traps" in the sense in which Pierre Smith (1979) uses the term, meaning that they are paradoxical, unsettling, and hard to pin down, and so provoking puzzlement. They remain pre-expressive for a variable length of time that is closely correlated with their degree of ritual expertise.

The intensity of their trance also varies. According to my observations, the most violent catches are of persons who have not been initiated. The internal impulses and jolts that affect them are often so strong that they lead to an extreme tension resulting in total immobility: a freezing or total blockage of the body,[14] which is then thrown to the ground. Here

14. I wonder whether the same mechanism may be found in patients with brain disorders, in particular akinesia in Parkinson's disease—the subject of Oliver Sacks's book *Awakenings* and the film of the same name.

is one example I observed on the second day of the annual ceremony at Assitan's in 2017:

> A very violent trance begins behind me: a young girl is clutching two small bottles of ice-cold soft drink. She's shaking severely, her eyes are closed, and the companions around her are a little surprised. One of the adepts comes up to her to see what's going on and offers to take the girl to the *jinatigiw*. This doesn't happen, at least not right away, and she carries on screaming and even falls stiffly to the floor, where she remains for a while. Finally, she is taken to *jinatigiw*, along with another girl in a similar state. Assitan and her entourage question them to find out the names of their spirits. These girls would later join their practice.

The adepts who are not in a trance play an important role: they watch over the backstage area, the stage, and the audience, to ensure that the ceremony runs smoothly. It is they who alternately—as people fall into a trance—support the possessed, wipe their sweaty or drool-covered faces, or stop them when they risk colliding with metal poles or other obstacles in the ceremonial space and protect them from other possible injury. Accidents are particularly common among the uninitiated or relatively new students because when the spirits, capricious as they are, take hold of masters or practitioners with some experience, the latter seem to temper their wanderings, allow gestures which are more fluid, and provoke tensing of the bodies that is less extreme. The violence of the trances I witnessed seemed therefore to depend on the level of seniority in the practice. I admired Jaba-Assitan, who was, fittingly, caught at the start of the annual ceremony she organized, which allowed her (and her spirits) to greet the assembled audience. I similarly admired Maman Temba as she calmly addressed my friend and master Dia during the first minutes of her trance at her student's ceremony. Generally speaking, when in a trance, experts seem to be less agitated than beginners, and their catching is usually much shorter and more limited. It does not necessarily involve all the somatic symptoms I have listed above. Once again, Gell makes the same observation about the Muria:

> What is notable, however, is the extent to which it is the young, inexperienced mediums who manifest the most extreme behavioral aberration and who appear the most dissociated, while the older, more experienced and indeed more important mediums frequently seem to be enacting a trance rather than undergoing one. (Gell 1980: 236)

Among the Mande and in African spirit-possession practices more generally, once the moment of catching has passed, the specialists and even their more advanced pupils always adopt conventionalized gestures which in the context of *jinɛdɔn* are not so much dance steps as a series of stereotyped movements. Based on several ceremonies I observed, I describe them thus:

> First, one greets one's *karamɔgɔ* [initiation master] by prostrating oneself [that is, kneeling or lying flat on one's stomach] and then by presenting oneself from behind, hands clasped behind the back. Occasionally, because it is blind or not yet fully incarnated, the spirit makes a mistake and heads for another person to whom it pays its respects. It is then guided until this error is corrected.

It is worth noting that this same gesture of obedience—which the spirit-possessed must make first to their master, if they are present—is then repeated, if necessary, to other persons in authority: the master's colleagues if they are attending the ceremony, or other specialists in the audience. Sometimes, the front rows of spectators, which consist of adepts and fellow pupils, are also greeted, with less respect: their hands are shaken.

Once these greetings are over, the gestures of the embodied spirit are performed. Jaba, for example, wiggles her breasts, shaking them as she smiles and glances around. As her dance step is often lateral, it is not unlikely that it resembles what Janice Boddy (1989) calls "the pigeon dance" in her study of the *zar* in Sudan. This is how I described it after being invited by Assitan to follow her on the dance floor and imitate her movements:

> The first step consists of waving the arms as if one were imitating a "snake" or a "spiral." The move starts from the wrists and ends with a decisive forward gesture of the hands, as if pointing. In another step, the arms and forearms are raised horizontally to chest height, as if holding mirrors. What's striking is that these steps are designed to please: they are the attitudes of a seductive woman who uses a variety of facial expressions (rolling her eyes and casting enticing glances) and often adopts an angled posture, with one shoulder forward as in a tango to provoke her partner. It is less a dance than a kind of mime, a role-playing.

As for Tamba the warlord, he takes his choreography from the army: he makes a military salute (Figure 35), and, like the *hauka* adepts filmed

Figure 35. Military salute of the Tamba spirit, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by author.

by Rouch and the *zar* followers depicted by Boddy, some of his adepts stand on one leg with the other in the air forming a triangle, the foot resting on the knee of the first leg. They move with a decidedly military parade step, which Rouch associates in the film with the British Army's slow march and which Boddy (1989: 126–27) compares with the gait of members of the Desert Corps. This rather mechanical gait reminds me of both Mr. Locomotive's way of walking in *Les Maîtres Fous* and the movements of the "hyena" character Rouch filmed on another occasion.[15]

I see in the field other elements of trance that are portrayed in Rouch's documentaries, such as the "I hear" and "I see" gestures, which consist of pointing to the ear or eyes to highlight one's ability (or inability, if the spirit is slow to come) to receive verbal and visual messages. It is possible that the same bodily repertoire is shared across the Sahel, to a certain extent.

Yet, *jinɛdɔn* possesses its own gestural singularity. One movement I have never encountered in the documents on spirit possession in this

15. In his film *Tambours d'Avant*, which he made in Hausa country in southern Niger in 1971.

region, and which therefore seems specific to the *jinɛdɔn*, is a gesture typical of the *donsow* spirits (Borojan and Soleïman) that mimics the shooting position, with one hand resting on the trigger of an imaginary rifle and the other pointing at the target with the fingers, as if it were becoming the point of the barrel.[16] There is another embodied reference to the Mande tradition, more precisely to the male initiation societies: the reproduction of the Komo gesture by some of the possessed, including women (Figures 36 and 37).

It is important to add a few words about oracular trances. Berger argues that this kind of trance proves the accuracy of his theory and confirms that spirit possession's basic mechanism is the transfer of agency (Berger 2012). Yet, in my opinion, this is not so much proof that such a transfer has occurred as a means of operating it. Let me explain: the type of oracular trance I witnessed in the field may occur both among masters and experienced adepts. Their prophecies are recorded on smartphones or transcribed in abbreviated form by those around them in notebooks provided for the purpose. According to Maman Temba,

> When the *jina* comes, there's someone with a notebook to write everything down. Each person's name is written down and their sacrifice is noted on the side. If the spirit says their sacrifice must be made in the bush, we write it down; if it says it must be made at the river, we write it down; if it must be made at home, we write it down. The people next to you, so the person next to you, will look for it and write everything down.

Oracular diagnoses are accompanied by instructions that need to be followed. They may be free of charge when they are addressed to *jinɛdɔn* adepts or paid for when they are addressed to clients who request them, in which case they often end with instructions for fairly substantial sacrifices that must be made. We might recall the ceremony in Hippodrome, during which one of the spirits ordered me to sacrifice seven oxen to solve my problems. For pupils, on the other hand, oracles tend to provide advice on how to behave in the face of difficulties, as in these examples:

16. I thank Deborah Durham for attracting my attention to the fact that this gesture is or was historically performed by certain South African healers in the ZZC churches (Zion Initiated Churches; previously, Zion Independent Churches). The question definitely merits more detailed analysis.

"You're thinking about your child a lot and it's preventing you from looking after your business properly, so you're seeing a woman to see if she can help you, but you've got to let it go, it won't get you anywhere," or "You've got a little underwear loincloth but you're not wearing it, that's why you're having no luck. You've got to wear it."

Figure 36. *Donso* gestural signature, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by author.

Figure 37. Komo gestural signature, Bamako, March 2018. Photo by author.

Finally, it can be good news announced by the spirits to one of their protégés:

> "You'll find a husband this year," or "You'll never go hungry again in your life."[17]

What is interesting is perhaps less the content of these messages than their form. Regularly punctuated by exclamations, onomatopoeias, long silences, and grunts, they are rather elliptical. They are spoken in a nasal voice, and are often difficult to understand: they are articulated less clearly than in everyday speech, more choppily, oscillating between murmurs and cries. Sometimes the ends of words are inaudible and syllables are "chewed up." The recording of the oracle spoken to me by Maman Temba when she was caught by one of her *jinɛw*—presented to me as a peasant woman, Bamana Muso, in the original (for more detail on Bamana Muso, see chapter 9)—supports such conclusions. A comparison of the

17. Examples taken from my notes, which I have freely translated.

prosody, melody, and tempo of this oracle with those that typify Maman Temba's normal speech—which I recorded a few times during our interviews—suggests that oracular trance relies on a special mode of enunciation. Other recordings of oracles (those that took place at Assitan's compound during her weekly ceremonies, for example) suggest that the speakers often accentuate the natural melody of the Mande languages, which are tonal. That results in a kind of psalmody with a quite jerky rising and falling cadence. In these recordings, I found the same nasalization and fluctuations between a cry and a murmur I noted in Maman Temba's oracle. Although I have not conducted a systematic study, it is clear from the outset that these oral forms differ from ordinary speech both acoustically and stylistically.[18] Their formal features and the way they are enunciated differentiate them from everyday speech, as do other types of religious language used among the Mande (Kedzierska Manzon 2016a). Because of their strange and unusual sound and syntax, they do not seem to match human communication patterns and thus can be attributed to more-than-human agents.

While the displacement of agency remains the basic mechanism of possession here, it happens through the use of language as the oracles are uttered and not so much by mobilization of the whole body, as is the case during the catch phase of trance. Somatically, the oracular trance is more akin to the waking state: the spirit-possessed stands planted on two feet, often with one leg in front of the other, and remains upright. The body is not shaken by intense impulses, even though it may sometimes tremble slightly. Muscular tension diminishes and the involuntary movements of the jaw cease, enabling the speech to be articulated. The possessed-spirits struggle to make themselves understood, and so before each sentence they draw a breath and get into position, aware of the public nature of their performance and the fact that there are many people hanging on their every word. They need to control their body and its internal pulsations, to move from an imbalance to the stylistic and bodily form that is expected of powerful spirits. Their posture is that of an orator (Figure 38).

Thus, from a physical standpoint, apart from the distinctive way of speaking and the half-closed eyes, a person in an oracular trance often

18. These recordings, of which I have many, are difficult to use as they are often barely audible against the constant, deafening background music—especially when I am at a fair distance from the people who are uttering these sometimes quite short oracles.

Figure 38. When the spirits speak: the posture of an orator, Bamako, December 2019. Photo by author.

gives no impression of being possessed. A notable state of awareness is involved: when Fakoroba, who had been possessed by Soleïman, was speaking to his mistress Assitan and her telephone began to ring, he stopped talking so that she could answer the call, and then resumed once the conversation was over. During the same ceremony, Fakoroba gave Assitan instructions to be passed on to a third party by telephone, speaking one phrase at a time and waiting for her to repeat it to the person on the phone. As these two examples show, spirits-possessed enunciating oracles often remain at least partially aware of what is going on around them. The choice of people they address is not left to chance either. For example, when one of the students fell into a trance during Assitan's annual celebration, she conversed with her master and this master's master. When Assitan did, she—being a good hostess—addressed the entire assembly at the same ceremony. An expert-spirit might also choose the distinguished guests as her interlocutors, as Maman Temba did at Lafiabougou when she had a conversation with my master, Dia.

As a general rule, the way experts-spirits conduct themselves—simultaneously controlled and on display—seems more theatrical than is

the case with beginners or outsiders. The slightly louder timbre of their voices, the exclamations that punctuate their speeches that are perceptible to everyone, the insistence with which these experts look at their interlocutors or reproduce the iconic gestures of their spirits from time to time—all these behaviors fit in perfectly with the *jinɛdɔn* contrived and baroque aesthetic. Although this aesthetic is less accentuated during the catching or trance of students at the start of their training, it is brought fully to bear in the specialists' trances. In the next chapter, I discuss the function of this as I critically examine the concept of the transfer of agency. Let us first conclude the analysis of the somatic basis of possession by taking a (very) brief look at its final phase.

The end of a trance is usually characterized by powerful tensing of the muscles—especially in the back, which arches to an extreme. With their arms raised above their head and their head thrown back, the possessed-spirits' body takes the shape of a reverse "C." Because they are unable to keep their balance or support their weight, these bodies become inert as if neither a human nor a more-than-human agent were controlling them, and sometimes fall to the ground or, at the very least, doze off for a brief moment. With the spirit gone, the surprised human seems dazed, tired, and achy, as if waking up after a fitful sleep.

"It's Frightening": Experiencing Spirits

What does one experience in this state and its aftermath? My observations indicate that trance is a tiring and disconcerting experience. Youssouf Sissoko, alias *jeli* Batou, attends many ceremonies as a *jinɛdɔn* musician. He explained to me, when I asked him about the characteristics of the post-trance state, that after embodying spirits "you are not in good shape" and that people suffer from headaches. Maman Temba confirmed this, although she added some nuance by pointing out that the state depends on the personality of who is responsible for it. Some spirits seem to be more indulgent towards their humans than others, and some can even hurt their human hosts:

– There are spirits who, when they leave, it hurts. I told you I had a spirit who comes every year, once a year. When it comes, it's violent. When it leaves, I'm tired. But I wash with a medicine.[19]

19. This is an herbal concoction that she prepares herself.

– *Where does it hurt?*
– Everywhere.

We talk about it again at another time:

– *And when the spirits leave, you're tired?*
– Yes. But some, when they leave, they take all the tiredness with them. But some spirits, if they don't like you, they tire you out.
– *And when the spirit is gone, what do you feel like? Hot, cold, thirsty?*
– It depends on the spirit. There are some [spirits], when they leave, you can't walk. Tamba is like that. His foot hurts. When he leaves, your foot hurts … Do you see? Your foot hurts.

The annual ceremony at Assitan's compound, which I attended shortly after this conversation, gave me an opportunity to see this particular scenario. On the first day of the ceremony, one of Assitan's pupils, who had been caught by Tamba, distinguished herself by acute tension in her foot. She lost her balance as if she had been trapped on the ground by this foot, jumping on one leg and hopping about. While her trance did not have an oracular phase, it was intense and quite spectacular. The next day, I saw the same girl, no longer possessed, limping, but I am sure she had not been limping the day before she embodied her spirit. On the third day of the ceremony, I found her in great shape and her foot was clearly not hurting any longer. Are these annoyances the reason why adepts sometimes seem to want to evade a trance, and use avoidance tactics to do so? Recall, Fifi shortened her dance on the second day of the annual ceremony, and other pupils of Assitan also seemed to act the same way and tried to stop when they felt vulnerable, even though their fellow students—and especially their teacher—were urging them to persevere. Here is another example:

> Fakoroba is once again about to be caught: this is at least the fourth time since the ceremony began. Assitan urges him to dance and accompanies him, and the two of them, eyes closed, seem to let themselves go. Or, to be more precise, she leads him, and once he's going, she withdraws discreetly.

This time, however, Fakoroba stiffens an arm while dancing, holding it close to his body instead of stretching it as far as it would go, as he should have. The way he performs his steps is therefore not perfect.

Perhaps thanks to this subterfuge he does not fall into a trance, and after carrying on for a short while he returns to his place—albeit hesitantly. But the most blatant demonstration of avoidance I ever witnessed was by Assitan's youngest son, at the time still in primary school. When I arrived on the second day of the ceremony, I found him eating with his mother in her personal hut. A little later, when the music started up again, I saw Assitan send him out onto the dance floor with a firm gesture. The boy shook his head and begged, cried, and clung on to Fakoroba, whose lap he was sitting on, and finally got his way.

This and other examples I have mentioned suggest that embodying spirits is not necessarily a pleasant experience for those who undergo it. Testimonials about its potentially unpleasant aftereffects—exhaustion, headaches or foot aches, and other aches and pains—support this hypothesis. But these have more to do with the post-trance state than with the trance itself. How are spirits experienced from the inside? This is a hard question to answer because of the amnesia, which even though it may not be total is still supposed to be: no one says anything about their experience of being possessed because they are unable to remember it, or so they claim. One of the few testimonials available to me that makes it possible to have an idea of the experience came from Ibrahim, one of Assitan's pupils. Because of the unique nature of this testimony, I am going to quote a long extract from it.[20] The conversation opened with a question about the personality of my interlocutor's spirit:

– *And what does it like, your spirit, what's it like?*
– Ah, I can't really know, my *karamɔgɔ* [master] knows. When it comes, it's not me. I'm unconscious.
– *And how does it feel when it comes? What does it do?*
– Well, when it's gone, you're tired, and your body aches. You can't stand up straight. There's a general tiredness from head to toe.
– *Are you hot?*
– At least you're not cold. You're always thirsty, you want to drink water. And every joint hurts.
– *So that's afterwards. And when it arrives?*

20. This conversation took place in March 2016 at Assitan's compound, where Ibrahim was living at the time. It was in French, which my interlocutor, who has a master's degree from the University of Bamako, speaks very well. I recorded it.

– You become a little irritated, and you don't see people, or if you do, you don't [recognize them]. You see your *karamɔgɔ* and you don't recognize her. You fall into unconsciousness.
– *But on a physical level, do you get the shivers or the shakes, for example?*
– Yes, you shake, and you want to throw up too. And when it leaves, you're tired from head to foot. Apart from that, I don't know anything.
– *And when it approaches, can you feel it approaching?*
– Yes, you're not unconscious. Often, you even see it, it talks to you. It comes, it's a hunter,[21] and it says: "I'm here, I'm going to catch you." Because there are "working" days, you see, like us, we work on Mondays, so on Mondays, I see him,[22] but it's a bit hard to explain. Because when you're in an unconscious state, you can't know anything. It's the people next to you who can tell you.
– *So it comes every Monday?*
– Every Monday, it comes. This is an agreement between my *karamɔgɔ* and the *jinɛ*.
– *I see. And is it the same for the other pupils?*
– No, but we work Mondays, and Assitan also works on Thursdays. But the spirit doesn't come every Monday, you see. If it can't come, it [lets you] know the time before that it won't be there the following Monday.
– *Ah. But if you're tired afterwards, as you say, and beforehand you feel like throwing up, can't you try to avoid it?*
– Avoid it?! [he laughs] It's my destiny. I can't avoid it. And it's an agreement between us and the *jinɛw*. We work together. Wherever you are in the world, if it's your day, it comes, if it's a Monday, even if you're in Paris.
– *And when it comes, do you see a light or is it quite dark?*
– Well, it's often dark, because when you lose consciousness, you don't see anything, you don't know anything.
– *And that's not frightening?*

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21. As I mentioned earlier, Ibrahim is a chosen one of the Soleïman spirit, who is considered to be *donso* and pagan.
22. Ibrahim is referring here to the weekly Monday ceremonies, which he leads, as I noted in March 2016 when this interview took place. A year later, I was no longer able to find Ibrahim in Ntomokorobougou every Monday, although he was present at the time of the big annual ceremony and was still living at Assitan's house. I deduced from this that his arrangement with his spirit—their contract, in other words—had evolved.

– Yes, it's frightening.
– *Even if you're used to it?*
– Even if you're used to it.

This testimony helps us understand that embodying spirits is unpleasant in many ways, if we consider the nausea, the tiredness, the loss of muscle tone, the darkness into which one plunges, or the fear it causes. In the next chapter, I will try to shed some light on the logic underlying the practice and experience of those who submit themselves to it regularly, given that in *jinɛdɔn*—as in other such practices—ignoring the spirits leads usually to illness, failures, and misery.

CHAPTER 9

Blurred Boundaries and (Postmodern) Construction of Self

Transfer of Agency: Mechanisms and Functions

When I met Ibrahim in 2017, he had been living with Assitan for several years. Why was he training with her? Before we had the conversation about his experience of being possessed that I quoted at the end of the last chapter, he explained to me how he arrived at the home of the woman who became like an adoptive mother to him:

> The family brought me in unconscious. I was even tied up. I was on medication for a year, and now I'm cured.[1] Now I work with Assitan and the *jinɛw*. I got married and finished my studies at the university.

Ibrahim's story is not exceptional: several other adepts of *jinɛdɔn*, starting with Assitan herself as we have seen, claim that before integrating it they suffered from behavioral disorders that were severe enough for them to have been hospitalized or considered dangerous by those around them. I asked Ibrahim for details:

1. These are the concoctions and other plant-based products prepared by Assitan, which are known locally as *furaw*: "leaves, remedies, medicines." For an analysis of the term, see Kedzierska Manzon 2021b.

– *How did your illness begin?*
– When I was at university, in my freshman year, I'd often get headaches or I'd fall [into a trance] … But we didn't know what it was when it started, until the spirit spoke, [and then] one of my uncles said he knew a *jinatigi* called Assitan. So, I came here, and I was on medication for a year, and now I'm fine.
– *And did you go to the doctor or to the hospital?*
– To the hospital, but they didn't find a cure for my illness. They themselves told me it was *jinɛw*.
– *Did they say that?*
– They did a scan and told me there was nothing [abnormal] in my head. I often had no issues during the day. It was at night that it would begin.

In this case, as in others I have mentioned, the story of affliction supports the idea that a more-than-human agency is responsible for the situation: the sick person and would-be adept is suffering from an illness whose physical causes cannot be identified, and so it can only be attributed to an invisible cause.

I explored Ibrahim's medical history:

– *And were there people in your family who were affected by spirits?*
– Yes, there were some in the family, even my mother. But in her case, it didn't manifest itself.
– *So how did you know if it wasn't declared?*
– She saw them in her dreams, and was often ill. But she is a Muslim and she doesn't want to do the "*jina* work." My father is a marabout, a great marabout.
– *Does he treat people?*
– Yes, but not so much djinn illnesses. He reads the Koran to calm them down.
– *So when he saw you were ill, did he try to treat you?*
– Yes, but it didn't work. It's as if it were my destiny, this work [*baara*].

Here, the story of affliction is transformed into a story of calling, in the classic way I have described in my presentation of Assitan and Maman Temba.

– *But now you're cured. Are you going to carry on treating people by working with the* jinɛw*?*
– Well, that all depends on the *jinɛw* …

My interlocutor persists with the logic that we identified previously as a "transfer of agency." We should note that this logic, common to all the *jinatigiw* I met, is not dissimilar to the logic that underlies the relationship between *basiw* and *basitigiw*. In both types of ritual practice, the adept does not assume any special power or agency; instead, he or she explains that certain powers act through him/her. In all the contexts I study—in Africa, anyway—humans do not decide of their own free will what remedies to administer to a patient, or what their future will be. All the Mande specialists I met in the field assured me that they simply followed their more-than-human allies' wishes. To return to Ibrahim, he pointed out in answer to my question that he had completed his studies in the social sciences and he added, about his work at Assitan's:

> It's about helping people. Like a diviner, whom people come to see when they want to solve their problems with money or women, or whatever. The *jinɛ* will see if you can find money or a woman, if he can heal you if you're sick, find out why you're sick or have problems. He'll tell you to make sacrifices, but if you can't, there are no solutions for you.

As we have seen, the remedies prescribed by spirits through oracles usually consist of sacrifices of varying degrees of importance, often coupled with the use of herbal mixtures. In this respect, these remedies resemble those administered to their clients by many other non-Islamic specialists, such as Falaye, Daouda, or Bou. As for the specialists who identify as Muslim experts, like Ibrahim's father, they sometimes use herbs but focus their treatment on reading the Koran. Let us return to this father, in the same interview:

– *And your father, is he happy?*
– Yes, like I'm cured now. Because for more than a year, I didn't do anything, I didn't even go to university any more. It was like I was crazy, I'd run, I'd go there, I [didn't] sleep, I'd scream, I didn't recognize people, I couldn't even talk like this, like here with you.

One might read in this story of affliction an attempt at emancipation or at taking the initiative with regard to the father, a great marabout, on the part of the son, who is now a *jinɛdɔn* officiant in training. This has prompted me to wonder about the social ramifications of spirit possession. What is at stake here, aside from its therapeutic dimensions?

How often does a crisis that is recognized as prompted by spirits feed on more or less latent generational or gender conflicts among members of the same household, who then draw from a religious idiom to express it? What does recourse to this idiom tell us about the distribution of agency within such a household? May it be helpful to renegotiate this distribution, to resolve the latent or emerging conflicts—or, at the very least, appease them? These questions resonate with others asked by researchers who study the contemporary use of the idiom of fetishism and witchcraft elsewhere in Africa (see Augé 1988; Beneduce and Taliani 2006; Ceriana Mayneri 2012, 2014; Fancello 2015; Geschiere 2013; Taliani 2012, 2016).

To begin to answer these questions, let us observe that the logic of displacement of the agency that underpins the spirit possession can be used to justify possible deviations in the sick person's conduct from the (initial or customary) expectations of the kin and friends. This has been observed in other places in Africa by Michael Lambek (2000), Adeline Masquelier (2002), and Éric de Rosny (2011). We could think that if the patient were to speak in their own name, they would be considered to be insane or acting inappropriately—whereas by using the voice of invisible entities they can transgress otherwise inviolable rules, thereby expanding their margins for maneuver. It is indeed hard to hold a person accountable for their words and deeds if they are being acted upon by an "other." Once recognized as chosen by spirits, adepts of *jinɛdɔn* can behave in ways that are normally forbidden, or at least that they could ill afford to adopt, such as consuming alcohol, which some spirits are said to enjoy, or assuming the opposite sex's style and habitus during possession. And then there is the not inconsiderable—not to say outrageous—amounts of money spent on beauty products for some. The often quite radical change in their lifestyle which the initiation into *jinɛdɔn* prompts allows the adepts to deviate from a biographical trajectory based on their status and/or origins. Freed to some extent from their social persona, they find themselves obliged to forge a new one—which they do, as I will show, not only by interacting with other adepts and experts but also, and above all, with certain more-than-humans which they embody and thus call into being, and who legitimize their new identity in everyone's eyes, including their own.

One Big "Family": Who Are the Spirits?

Let us take a closer look at these more-than-humans and the ways humans engage with them. In rural areas, people believe it is possible to

come across them—see them—which will be reported as "*n/a ye jina ye*": "I saw/he or she saw a spirit."[2] The use of the verb referring to the visual contact and the exteriority of what is perceived by the senses is important here, as is the fact that such reports are always in the past tense. No one in the village imagines being caught, or seized (*minɛ*) by spirits, who are supposed to frighten humans who see them from outside, and do not, as in the *jinɛdɔn* context, let them inside their bodies regularly. If the spirits are potentially harmful, they keep their distance from humans. This conceptualization of spirits as agents external to humans is widely shared among the Mande. A recent conversation with Yacouba the driver, living in Bamako, suggests as much. Yacouba came to pick me up to take me to an appointment one morning during my last stay in Mali, and complained that he had not slept well. He blamed the heat. I suggested that he move his mattress to the courtyard of his home the next night to take advantage of the nighttime drop in temperature. He told me that his house was on the route used by spirits to reach the river, so he could not follow my advice. Yacouba is rebellious by nature, and he admitted that he had once tried to sleep in the courtyard and had woken up with a weight on his chest, as if a being had landed on it, and he could not breathe. That spirits cross people's courtyards and paths on their way to the river was confirmed to me by fervent Muslims, and by Assitan, who gave me a warning: meeting spirits on the move, even if you do not see them, can drive you mad. She added that we should limit our outings at twilight, when these beings are often on the prowl. Unfortunately, crossing their tracks at any other time can also prove fatal, which is why, she explained, it is best to avoid the places they frequent to receive sacrifices: near the river, or certain ponds, and the woods.

This last remark is a good example of what brings Assitan's perspective close to that of my other interlocutors. Like many of them, she considers spirits as potentially harmful agents, which is consistent with both their classical Muslim conceptualizations (Lory 2011, 2018) and the view of them widespread in today's Mali. The difference between this last view and the one adopted by the practitioners of *jinɛdɔn* lies in the fact that the latter see the spirits—to which no collective worship was traditionally devoted in West Africa (for a summary, see Cros 2017; Kedzierska Manzon 2021b)—as potential allies, to whom they address words and

2. I would like to thank Dia and my host in the village, Madi Kama, for providing me with decisive clarifications on this point during my stay in March 2016.

offerings in sacrificial settings and whom they collectively welcome into their own bodies in a ritual context. It is hard to imagine that urban dwellers of Bamako and other Malian towns not involved in *jinɛdɔn*, let alone village *donsow* or *basitigiw*, would call on the spirits to manifest themselves in this way, in an embodied form. They are unlikely to acknowledge their qualities mentioned in the songs sung on the occasion of *jinɛdɔn* celebrations, which describe spirits as listening to humans (as they are greeted by the words "*Jaba, i ni ce*," "Jaba, be greeted") and ready to come when called upon ("*Ne ye Hude weele*," "I call on [spirit's name]," for example). In these ritual verbal forms and in the discourses of *jinɛdɔn* practitioners, they are portrayed as able to express themselves verbally through the mouths of their allies in an oracular trance but also in other ways, as this extract from my interview with Maman Temba suggests:

– *Can you dream of spirits?*
– Often. When I'm lying in bed, I see the client coming and the problems this person is coming with. Before they arrive, the spirit may come to me and say, "You've got to do this, you've got to do that."
– *But how does it come, how does it speak? In Bamana?*
– Yes, like we talk.
– *And you see it?*
– You and I are chatting right now, so the spirit can take on your appearance and we'll chat, "Are you OK?" and so on. But there's a way of knowing.
– *How?*
– We talk, then you leave, then you come back, you greet me again, and I say: "But you've just left me. Why did you come back?" "But I didn't come before …" [you answer]. So you can know it was a spirit.
– *And it can be any person: a man, a woman?*
– When a spirit comes, it can come as it pleases.
– *And it is not frightening?*
– Frightening? You're not going to do the work of the spirits if it scares you.[3] For me, the place I work is here, where I sleep.

As we see, in the opinion of Maman Temba—and, I should add, other *jinatigiw*—spirits are not like fleeting apparitions one encounters in

3. This is reminiscent of what Zumana said, in the second movement of this book, who explained to me that even if the *basiw* cause concern, their master cannot be afraid of them if he is going to work with them.

the bush, but familiar if strange presences that can take many forms and with which one works. Even if they come from elsewhere, they are not destined to remain permanently separated from humans. The way to engage with them is not by avoiding them but by forming alliances.

What kind of agency does this method of engagement construct and what does it tell us about the humans involved? It goes without saying that it is a different kind of agency from that of *kungo fɛnw*, constructed through the complex game of hide-and-seek I described in the First Movement. It also differs from that of *basiw*, which we examined in the Second Movement, even though the relationship between the human masters and their more-than-human partners in both practices consists in alliances. But whereas in the case of *basitigiya* a tense flesh-against-flesh confrontation pits the fetish-objects-subjects (whose presence is heavy and "atrociously material") against the specialists (whose presence is equally charged and full), among the *jinɛdɔn* the humans and their more-than-human partners seem to be in carnal synergy. Might we describe their relationship, like that between *basiw* and the *basitigiw*, as both a relationship of self to the other and of self to self? With this question in mind, let us first look at the "pantheon" of the *jinɛdɔn* (but for a critical revision of the notion of the pantheon, see Schlemmer 2017).

This pantheon is made up of groups that operate as collectives—marabout-spirits (*jinɛw moriw*), artisan-spirits (*jinɛw nyamakalaw*), slave-spirits (*jina jɔn*), and (officiant) pagan-spirits or non-Islamic spirits (*jinɛw kafiri*)—whose hierarchy reflects the way Mande society is organized (see Conrad and Frank 1995). Certain key characters—not to say archetypes—can also be distinguished, each with their own name and all with ties of kinship. They are part of a family unit: a "house" (*bonda*) or a "nation" (*jamana*), a kind of clan known as the Narɛna,[4] whose founding ancestors are presented to me as odd, old creatures who live in the water. Later came the younger generations living on land, including Sory Hima—a Muslim scholar—who is said to be the grandfather of Tamba, the jealous and demanding warlord or soldier (who is, incidentally, White: *tubabu*). Tamba is the father of Borojan the *donso*, with whom he does not get on well; he is violent (*farin*), and has killed several of his children. Jaba Sitan, who is also sometimes called Jorobo and who

4. Jean-Marie Gibbal (1982: 169–93) writes of a world or society of spirits. Perhaps, translating Narɛna as "clan" is more apt, however, as it clearly refers to a group of people who are supposed to have common ancestors and preserve ties of kinship.

is described as being noble and generous but also violent, managed to escape her father's wrath. She is a huntress and expert in non-Islamic ritual practices. She is a sister of Soleïman the soothsayer (*soma*): a *donso* of the Keïta lineage, a bachelor who "loves blood." Sometimes, there is another son of Tamba, Ba Hudɛ, who was presented to me as the father of Soleïman and Jaba. In any case, these last two spirits are particularly close to one other. Finally, there is the youngest generation, whose members include everyone's messenger, Kaba Denguele, the son of a human, and Sidiki, a child spirit with a sweet tooth for candy and chewing gum.

The spirits can also be divided according to the offerings associated with them: while the (expert) pagan spirits like Jaba, and all the powerful spirits by extension, demand blood sacrifices, the Muslims and children are content with perfumes, fruit, candies, and sweet floral fragrances. As is true of many other spirit-possession practices (see Bastide 1958; Boddy 1989; Masquelier 2002; Rouch [1960] 1989; Zempleni 1987, among others), oblatory provisions that fall within the sweet category function—and may be interpreted, if we follow Henry Drewal (1988)—as the apotheosis of the European lifestyle. Conversely, the apotheosis of the African rural lifestyle is illustrated by the character of Bamana Muso—literally "Bamana woman" or "peasant woman"—whom I have seen once in action at Maman Temba's. Bamana Muso rejects all signs of modernity that rely on the use of electricity—such as telephones, fans, and lamps—and demands traditional millet-based alcohol (*dɔlɔ*) and peasant dishes, including the millet-based *to*.

I confess that I was unable to obtain any further information about Bamana Muso's kinship position, or about many other ties of blood and marriage within the Narɛna nation: the adepts in training say that they are not aware of them, and the experienced *jinatigiw* seem to care relatively little. Both Maman Temba and Assitan invoked a lack of time as an excuse for not giving me the complete and complex genealogy of the spirits. They said that they have not fully mastered it, and referred me to their own masters. The inconsistencies and gaps surrounding the composition of the "great house" of spirits suggest, however, that the spirits may be less autonomous than claimed by the practitioners, who speak of them most of the time as if they were subjects in their own right, independent from one another. In reality, as this brief summary of the fragments of stories I have been offered suggests, they are somewhat incomplete and vague personages rather than persons in the full sense of the word with complete family networks and personalities of their own. Although they are presented as being autonomous and integrated into a

fixed social, familial, and cosmic structure, spirits are more like fractions of people, or what anthropologists have called distributed persons (see Gell 1998, Strathern 1998), who together make up a dynamic, unclear constellation that is always open and permanently forming—indeed, like the *basiw*—because new characters can be integrated into it.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the family of spirits I reconstruct here is somewhat different from the constellation Jean-Marie Gibbal (1982: 169–93) observed and described in the 1970s. Today, clearly, the *kaafiri* (or non-Islamic) spirits occupy center stage, to judge by the abundance of references to them and the frequency with which they are incarnated. Indeed, it is they who regularly visit their humans and they are the ones we meet on the dance floor. Although these spirits, with the exception of Tamba, are not of European origin—quite the opposite—they resemble the White "force spirits" Jean Rouch ([1960] 1989) describes in the *hauka* and are often very violent and temperamental. However, unlike the spirits of the *hauka*, who are associated with Western modernity, *jinɛw kaafiri* in the *jinɛdɔn* are perceived as being linked to the bush. It is hard not to notice the discreet irony of this situation: while the number of ritual experts who actually perform their activities in the bush is shrinking,[5] the spirits associated with the bush and often portrayed as non-Islamic experts are proliferating.

And so, what are the relations among the spirits? Despite the mutual respect and the age-based hierarchy that governs their "family," it appears to be full of jealousy and rivalry—as emerges from my conversation with Maman Temba:

– *If two spirits want to come down at the same time, can there be a fight between them?*
– They'll tire you out if they want to catch you at the same time. But you choose the songs, and you call the first spirit [in Maman Temba's own case, this is Tamba]. Or if he's late, you play the music of his grandmother Hiju, or his grandson Soleïman, [then] he'll come quickly, because he's jealous. And if you want him to leave, you play his father's music, so he'll leave you.
– *Why?*

5. Whether these be the masters of initiation societies carrying out their activities in sacred groves, the *somaw* and *basitigiw* who make their artifacts in the bush, or the *donsow* who go there to hunt and forage for medicinal plants.

– If you want him to leave, you tell musicians to play this music, and as soon as he hears it, he leaves, because they respect each other too much [so the younger spirit gives up his place to the older one].

In another conversation, Maman Temba explained that spirits can be jealous not only of their fellow spirits but also, and above all, of the human companions of their human partners. Assitan and Maman Temba agreed on the need for a *jinatigi* to ask the permission of his or her spirits—following the same procedure as that used by *basitigiw* for *basiw* in the same situation—before establishing a serious relationship with someone.

The Blurred Boundaries of Self

Intimate, even sometimes excessively so, and in many ways burdensome, what are the relationships that specialists have with the spirits? Are these relationships between superior and inferior partners? As Maman Temba's words suggest, they are less static than it might first seem. In our conversation above, we see that by manipulating the acoustic plane of the ceremonies the *jinatigiw* influence the arrivals and departures of the spirits, whom they nevertheless represent as only doing what they want. What a subtle subterfuge this is: attracting a spirit who is slow to appear by making him jealous of his grandson, and then urging him to leave by inviting his father, to whom he must give way out of respect! Behind these stratagems lies the idea that it is not only possible but even desirable to (partially) control spirits, whose agency therefore seems to be a little confined. At the same time, the adepts I spoke with present this agency as exceeding their own by ascribing a passive role to themselves, much as fetish masters do in speaking of their fetishes (see chapter 5). If we listen to them, it is not they who act but their spirit allies who choose certain humans over others and agree or disagree to help them in various areas. We can recall the story of Ibrahim, who does not know what he will do in the future and who emphasizes that it will depend on what his spirits have in store for him. As for Maman Temba, she had to give up her soap business and take on ritual work to satisfy her spirits. And let us not forget Assitan, who shows her gratitude to Jaba for her success and who in one of our very first interviews stressed that "it's the spirits who decide who becomes a master," to whom they transmit the necessary knowledge through dreams. It is

with this spirit-given knowledge that these masters can heal, and "help people with various enterprises: students to pass their exams or women to find themselves a husband, for example." In any case, if my interlocutors did not believe that the spirits could solve their problems, they would not offer sacrifices to them and would pay no attention to the oracles communicated during ceremonies. These oracles are carefully listened to. It is clear that among the *jinɛdɔn*, spirits are accorded greater powers and knowledge than humans, and are regarded as the source of both misfortune and good fortune, as powerful and quite capricious, and sometimes as malicious. Maman Temba assured me, for example, that they can cause her to make mistakes during sacrifices. And they are also stubborn, according to her:

– *Can it happen that they [the spirits] don't want to leave?*
– Yes, often.
– *And there's nothing you can do?*
– There are spirits who can be made to leave. An adept sits down next to them and asks them to leave. If they're Muslims, they'll leave. But if it's Soleïman, if he's told to leave, he's [definitely] not going to, and nor will Bamana Muso.
– *Oh, so they're stubborn? Do they like causing annoyance?*
– Yes, since they came themselves, you didn't ask them [so it's not up to you to ask them to leave].

Assitan confirmed that it was quite common for spirits not to want to leave. When I met with her the day after one of the celebrations, she was complaining that she had had to stay up late into the night to talk to them.

– They didn't want to leave [she sighs].
– *I see! And how often does that happen?*
– Oh yes, often [plaintively].
– *And you can't wash with herbs or use other suitable remedies to make them leave?*

To my surprise, Assitan asserts, "If I tell them to leave, they leave. I am their mistress [*karamɔgɔ*]."

There is a certain inconsistency in her statements that does not seem to strike her, as I observe in my notebook after writing a summary of our conversation:

> On the one hand, she [Assitan] seems to be saying that she has to put up with the presence of the *jinɛw* at her side, a presence that is oh so tiring, sometimes a real burden. On the other hand, she's proud to be able to take on her role as a master, leading these more-than-human brats, these very demanding and temperamental creatures. *Karamɔgɔ* basically means "one who teaches ([ka] *kalan*) people (*mɔgɔw*)" [see Dumestre 2011: 491]. Here, it's all about managing and mothering the spirits who speak through the adepts with tremendous mood swings and who give the impression of being somewhat off balance, easily unsettled and yet unsettling at the same time.

It was no coincidence that I used the term "brats" in this extract. At several moments, the atmosphere in the ritual space reminded me of a kindergarten playground. The great emotional instability of the spirit-possessed I mentioned in the previous chapter is not unlike that of small children. They are capricious, insistent, noisy, and absorbed in their game, but they still recognize the authority of their masters. For example, they always fulfill their duty to greet their masters respectfully—the famous "hands to the backs" as soon as they descend on to the dance floor. During particularly violent trances, they may even throw themselves onto their stomachs or knees in front of the masters. That the spirits hold the *jinatigiw* in high esteem is also suggested by the story of one of the patients I met in Ntomikorobougou in March 2016. This woman, who was a childhood friend of Assitan, had been spotted a few months earlier wandering the streets of a working-class neighborhood delirious and screaming. When Assitan found out, she decided to treat her. In order to be able to take her to her compound, she set off to find reinforcements who would make it possible to overpower her future patient. To her surprise, however, when the woman saw her, she said, "Come, take me [to your compound]. You are a master [*karamɔgɔ*], you don't need to tie me up [I will obey you]." It is hard not to conclude from this story and others that while there is an asymmetrical relationship between spirits and humans, it is the humans—or the masters at any rate—who have the upper hand. The balance of power, which is paradoxical in many ways, seems to lean in their favor. This is also clear from my conversation with Assitan when I asked her if spirits could manifest themselves at any time, which she confirmed. This worried me, as I had made a few trips by car with her driving and was due to make more:

– *But then if they "descend" while you're driving … what do you do?*
– But they don't "descend" when you're driving.

– *Do they know when to come?*
– They want you to be happy.
– *And when they approach? Can you say: "Now's not a good time, come back tomorrow"?*
– Yes, if I tell her [Jaba], she'll listen to me.
– *You, but not everyone can tell her, I guess.*
– Only masters, *jinɛw* only listen to masters.

Clearly, masters need to … well, master the behavior of spirits, including "their own." Remarkably, these masters rarely embody their spirits during ceremonies, unlike the adepts in training, and, when they do, it comes at just the right moment. Assitan is not usually possessed during ordinary ceremonies—I have never seen it happen—when she is supervising her disciples, some of whom, like Ibrahim, have weekly meetings with their spirits. As for the major ceremonies, her trances are fairly brief. During the March 2017 new-year ceremony, for example, Assitan was caught by spirits three times for very short periods. During her first possession at the start of the ceremony, wearing spirit garb, she gestured greetings and benedictions to the orchestra and audience, including her own students and other invited masters, who then paid their respects. She then immediately emerged from her trance. During the second catch a little later the same day, Assitan welcomed the participants in Jaba's name. On the third day, in front of her full audience, she greeted everyone and made some positive predictions. As for Assitan's fellow *jinatigiw* present at the ceremony, I only found one case of possession—after the sacrifices on the last day. It was mainly the trainees who embodied spirits during the three-day ceremony. One of these trances deserves a closer look for what it reveals of the relationship between spirits and humans.

That day, the last day of this annual ceremony, I returned to Ntomikorobougou in the afternoon with the sore-throat medicine I had promised to bring Assitan, who, let's remember, had been suffering since the early morning (see the description of the sacrifice on the riverbank in chapter 8). At my arrival, the ceremony was already well under way, with several people on the dance floor. I looked for the *jinatigi*, to whom I wanted to give the medicine as soon as possible. I was told to go to the *benbe* on the other side of the compound, where I found Assitan and her master, Mawo, as well as a middle-aged woman wearing a *bogolan* tunic who had been caught by Borojan, as Assitan explained. This is the situation:

> Assitan and Mawo are facing the ritual tools while having a meeting with Borojan, embodied by a woman who addresses them respectfully as "my father/my fathers" [*n'fa(w)*] and is standing up, while they are sitting drinking bottled water with an almost jaded air. This lasts for a good half an hour, during which the spirit-possessed mainly talks about a betrayal that is brewing within the two masters' entourages. They don't look surprised or worried, but rather vaguely interested. They talk quietly.

The spatial positioning of the three protagonists is telling: the humans sitting comfortably quenching their thirst, and the spirit standing despite the heat, as if it were the humans who hold the reins in their mutual relationship. These particular humans—the masters—are familiar with the spirits and able to manage their comings and goings, satisfy their desires, make them cooperate, and bend them to their will. They visibly share in the extraordinary power of the creatures they manage. They can place this power at the service of their pupils and clients, and yet they refuse to acknowledge it explicitly—willingly resorting to the logic of the transfer of agency. It now seems clear that they actually apply two contradictory logics simultaneously: on the one hand the logic of transfer or displacement ("it's not me who's acting, it's a spirit who's taking hold of me"), and on the other the logic of "authority" or "control" ("I'm the master, so it's me who gives instructions to the spirits").

The agency of these masters is, in fact, not simply erased and replaced by that of the spirits whom they embody, even if this is how they talk about it when they assure me that their spirits are the ones acting and influencing their lives, their choices, and their future. In reality, in a kind of ricochet effect, the agency of these masters, who displace it or pretend to abdicate it, comes back to them in an amplified form. Through ritual practice, therefore, they become different, more powerful, more respected, capable of mastering or governing themselves and others, both human and more-than-human. The delegation or negation of their agency enables them to acquire a new and better one. They are transformed from initially incomplete subjects who are defective in some way—powerless and helpless in the face of the world—into multiple subjects that are fragmented, perhaps, and distributed, but nevertheless able to act in the world. Ritual practice leads *jinɛdɔn* adepts to assert themselves—taking an identity as a spirit first, of course—and thus to gain self-confidence. I realized this during my field trip in December 2019, when I observed a student at Assitan's compound who was caught. As is always the case

with oracular trances, he adopted the typical posture: standing up with one leg firmly planted and the other a little bit behind, he took a deep breath, cleared his throat and spoke quite loudly. Everyone listened, and he provided the recipe for the herbal mixture to be used on one of the sick people who were there. The silence of the audience, who were hanging on his every word, made him feel listened to and important as long as he respected the formal expectations, bending to the rules of the game and adopting the required attitude and language. Through repetitive public ritual performances, the practice allows adepts to slowly learn how to control their body and speech. This truly transforms them: from the persons who initially had problems or issues with mastering their own fate and body, they become confident individuals who are ready to place themselves center stage, the "virtuous subjects."

I have borrowed this last expression from Lambek using Aristotle to attend to spirit possession in Mayotte. While Lambek acknowledges that possession is an initial denial of agency, he shows that it represents a means of empowerment or reappropriation of agency available to people who might be considered subaltern. Paradoxically, subjection to a divine or ancestral figure gives them the opportunity to express themselves, even if it happens by appropriating the voice of a third party, and this leads to a sense of empowerment (Lambek 2013: 846). By experiencing themselves as a powerful and accomplished other in the context of ritual, these people become so—forging a different, more complex, identity and, I would add, habitus.

That this identity is actually complex or, to use Michael Houseman's (2016) categorization, dilated is suggested by the example of Maman Temba, who by her own admission is not initiated into *donsoton* and yet regularly performs sacrifices at the *donsow* place of worship. This is because, as she explained to me, some of her spirits are *donsow*. She borrows her sobriquet, her professional name—the one that appears on her own business card—from another spirit, Tamba or Temba, the warrior and father of a spirit *donso* (Figure 39).

As for Assitan, who is quarrelsome both when she is in her daily life and when caught by Jaba, she is always attracted by sweet perfumes, brightly colored cosmetics, and shiny fabrics, and is always splendid and coquettish. How can we not confuse her with her spirit, with whom she shares so many traits and whom she embodies so well even without being possessed? Everyone, starting with the griots who perform at the ceremonies, calls her Jaba-Sitan, a name that also appears on the calendar with her portrait on it, that hangs in the hut where she

Figure 39. Business card of Maman Temba, Bamako, March 2017. Photo by author.

sleeps in Ntomikorobougou and on the vans she rented to take adepts to the site of the annual sacrifices in 2017. It would be hard to find more striking illustrations of the fusion occurring between a human and spirit or spirits in the context of the *jinɛdɔn*, defined in the first place as distributed or fractal persons and whom we can see now as both partaking in and encompassing their human hosts. The boundaries between hosts and the spirits are porous and permeable, and their relationship, like that between a *basi* and its holder or master (*basitigi*), is both interpersonal and infrapersonal. In this respect, my experiences with *jinɛdɔn* echo observations and the work of Lambek or Masquelier and others on African spirit-possession practices more generally. In her study of *bori* in Niger, Masquelier describes the slow transformation of the adepts, who are initially hostages and ultimately hosts to their spirits. She concludes:

> Possession, as a lifelong exercise though which mediums learn to become "naturally" attuned to the demands of their spirits, is about negotiating and embracing otherness to such an extent that one becomes increasingly spirit-like while remaining essentially human. (Masquelier 2008: 55)

Assitan, Maman Temba, and many other experts I meet in the field excel in this exercise of attuning and constantly negotiating between their multiple identities. In this light, the ritual possession practices among the Mande—and, no doubt, elsewhere in Africa—seem to rely on the blurring of boundaries between self and other.

What is interesting is that as a result, the boundaries between the trance and what does not appear to be trance seem to be equally porous. I have stressed on more than one occasion that in *jinɛdɔn*, after the quite violent moment of the catch, the spirit-possessed often look relatively lucid and behave in a way that suggests a certain degree of awareness. They interact with those around them, say what they are expected to say, and seem to recognize the identities of the people around them, like the *jinatigi* in Hippodrome who propelled me to the middle of the ritual space and then took me over to bow to Assitan, with whom she—as a human—had no doubt seen me arrive the day before. Or like Fakoroba, Ibrahim, Fifi, and other students of Assitan, whose behavior when embodying their spirits—a few standard phrases accompanied by the iconic gestures performed without any great impetus or enthusiasm—seems to be quite controlled. As for Maman Temba, while caught by Bamana Muso she asked me—and not Dia, who was beside me, or one of the other persons in the room—if I ever ate the traditional *tô* dish. It would not make sense to ask a Malian this question, so why did Bamana Muso ask the anthropologist? When someone in the audience pointed out to Maman Temba–Bamana Muso that I belonged to the *donsow* society, she replied, "But I know better than you!" Of course, the knowledge held by spirits is supposed to be superior to that of humans, but it is also to be noted that the *jinatigi* who was chatting with me already knew my story before even embodying Bamana Muso. How can we separate, in her case and in others, their knowledge and agency from those of their spirit(s), judge whether or not these spirits have totally displaced their human selves at any given moment, or to what extent they merge? Are such distinctions relevant from a local perspective? It does not seem so.

If what is at stake in *jinɛdɔn*—as in *bori, ndep, zar, or hauka*—is the development of a solid relationship between an adept and a spiritual entity, whose agency this adept produces though the ritual practice and with which she or he identifies deeply, then it seems incongruous to question the precise level of this identification at any given moment. It appears to be irrelevant to ask what stage an adept is at while they are seeking to enable their spirit—a spirit not in fact totally alien to them and who participates in their ritual self—to manifest itself. This is why the officiants do not seem to distinguish between the various possible ways in which this identification can be experienced: I have never seen them accuse anyone of simulating. It is undoubtedly all about coping effectively, and to varying degrees, with different facets or simultaneous presences—as Lambek sums up so well:

> In the end, what happens to experienced spirit mediums is that the host is partially present as her spirit speaks and the spirit is partially present in the life of the host. This is neither full dissociation nor full integration. It is an ironic, possibly playful, possibly resigned recognition of the continuous presence of multiple but not fully discontinuous persons. It is a way one can live with oneself. (Lambek 2013: 852)

Living with Oneself as Best One Can: Between a Convoluted Past and an Uncertain Future

How can we best live with ourselves? To this end, *jinɛdɔn* officiants blur the boundaries not only between trance and wakefulness, and between self and other, but also between the ritual space and the private space—or, more accurately, between their persona and their person. Indeed, all *jinatigiw* receive clients at home day and night, or in other places if they are traveling, and are regularly visited in dreams by their spirits. Like other specialists I have studied in this book, they constantly maintain a certain self-image that is difficult to keep up and, I suppose, psychologically costly. It is an image that is carefully staged, even in everyday settings: an image of self as a chief and manager, a public figure, opulent and unquestionably successful. Assitan explained this to me in no uncertain terms during one of our first meetings:

– Not everyone is cut out to be a *jinatigi*, just as not everyone is cut out to be President of the Republic … You have to know how to treat people with medicine, how to find husbands [for those who don't have one], how to help …
– *So what are the qualities to have and the prohibitions to respect?*
– There are places you shouldn't go, nightclubs and all that, bad places. You can go to a party—a christening or a wedding—but you have to respect yourself,[6] because you're not just anybody.
– *So you can't go to certain places?*
– No, and then there's so much work, you have to do the work first, so you don't even have the time to go and have fun.

6. *I ka yere bonoya* in the original.

Mama Temba also takes her professional commitments very seriously:

> The work of the spirits, ah, that's tiring. But you mustn't think about it. If you see me working, you won't say I look tired … I like the work of spirits. When I'm working, I don't like to be disturbed or talked to. It's work, and I don't joke about it.

Ibrahim does not joke either about the work with the spirits he performs every Monday with no complaints. I suppose describing his ritual activities as work allows him, as it does other specialists, to emphasize the significance of these activities and thus to highlight the importance of the persons who are performing them, such as himself. This contributes to the construction of his persona as a professional, a manager of the invisible, a subject whose qualifications and seriousness cannot be questioned. Assitan comments, "If you claim that you are able to satisfy people's needs, they have to see that yours are satisfied; you can't work to make them rich if you have nothing." This at least partly explains the ostentation with which she flaunts her possessions and her insistence on her "resources." Perhaps her benevolent attitude towards me is also to some extent related to the professional image she wishes to maintain. Having a foreigner from afar as a client, or even as a student—a flesh-and-blood image of the world of international travel, new technologies, and the Western consumer products to which so many *jinɛdɔn* adepts aspire—is this not the best marketing strategy? Does it not help to construct the extraordinary identity and agency of an expert who is apparently so widely recognized, even in France?

This agency is complex. I note at one point:

> Our *jinatigi* is certainly regal: as she points out, Jaba is a noblewoman, a queen. Nevertheless, she is a woman who has suffered a great deal, a woman who has become wealthy, to be sure, but who is still in search of recognition, complaining, for example, that she is too fat, asking me if her ceremonies are beautiful.

We should remember the complaints of Assitan's neighbors in Ntomikorobougou, who were unhappy about her ritual compound being built there, and the lawsuit that has since been brought against her by the inhabitants. Let us also not forget the not always kind words that can be heard about her, and the difficulties that are undoubtedly her lot in a country that has been plunged into a deepening political and economic

crisis, and where upward social mobility is no easy matter for people who lack a formal education and come from modest origins. Her case is by no means unique, as the *jinɛdɔn* adepts are often recruited from among people in difficulty or with an unconventional sexual orientation. On the margins of one particular ceremony, I was struck by a certain tension between the aspirations of these adepts and their situation:

> These women with whom I hung out at ceremonies are all quite round. Today, one of them split the taut fabric of her dress as she sat down. Many others have stretch marks on their arms, legs, and chests, which is undoubtedly due to being overweight. Several seem to use poor quality cosmetics to whiten their skin, as witnessed by the discoloration they then cover up with makeup: the light pink powder they smear on their cheeks, the black henna lines around their eyes, and the eyebrows plucked in narrow semicircles all testify to an effort to make themselves beautiful.

At another point, I write:

> These perfumed, richly dressed, makeup-wearing ladies with their nail polish—it's like a kind of dream; their quest is for a better world, for happiness, but it's all about an artifice, as everyone seems to be aware.

Is it truly possible, in the realm of the authentic fake, to mistake the blue, yellow, and purple synthetic dusting brush for the ritual fly whisk of a respectable *donso*, or the Jaba loincloth worn by a corpulent, middle-aged woman for the wedding gear of a young bride? This question takes us back to the aesthetics of the *jinɛdɔn*, one of its defining features. Following Houseman's (2016) analyses, I have suggested that this aesthetic—which I have described as contrived and over the top, and which seems to me to be similar to the one seen in many New Age practices—embraces a particular mode of self-construction. This self-construction involves "ritual refraction," which consists in the simultaneous actualization of ordinary and extraordinary identities and the production of dilated ritual subjects. It seems clear now that *jinɛdɔn* adepts are this kind of subject. At once humans and more-than-humans, successful professionals and (former) invalids and sick people, respected yet stigmatized, wealthy but in search of prosperity, powerful and powerless at the same time, they assume the role of both "patients" as Alfred Gell

(1998) defines the term, who are subject to the will of the spirits, and agents or even masters, who influence the course of the world. Simultaneously ritual experts and "sacrificial beings," to use Andras Zempleni's (1987) apt phrase about the *ndep* adepts in Senegal, through trance they repeatedly experience a sort of death, which is very frightening—but there is no other way out, as Ibrahim asserted. They are consecrated, albeit not in the same way as a priest is, periodically offering their bodies to an other, to whom they surrender their subjectivity (Zempleni 1987: 313). Yet in so doing they gain their subjectivity—subjection is a means of the subjectivation here—as well as the ability to act on themselves and other beings, whether human or not. Masquelier, whom I quoted above, and Lambek, who argues that "the medium allows herself to be subjected by the ancestor, but equally to be empowered and enlightened, to become a subject" (2000: 12), reach similar conclusions regarding the mechanisms of spirit possession. As in the context studied by Lambek, in my field, spirit possession enables adepts to reconfigure and assimilate the (often) painful experiences of the past, whether individual or collective. In the cases with which I am familiar, the individual past is one of miscarriages, infant deaths, divorces, family conflicts, and marginalization linked to sexual orientation or alienation due to migration. The collective past is the ancient past of slavery, Arab conquests, and colonization, which turned African societies upside down, reflections of which we find in the characters of the spirits: think of the corporal on guard duty, the captain, the governor, the White soldier, and the Muslim scholar—not forgetting the prosperous, sterile femme fatale with her pale face and golden hair. Yet there is also the more recent past of Mali's civil war, terrorist attacks, repeated coups d'état, everyday food shortages, and the dysfunction and corruption of the elites at the top. The *jinɛdɔn* conjures up the ghosts of this three-level past so that it can reestablish the long term. Like other contemporary non-Islamic experts whose practices I have discussed in this book, its leaders mobilize images of religious specialists of yesteryear, and through them the image of the mythical and glorious empire of Sunjata and the precolonial era, seen as the Golden Age.

Spirit possession, and ritual practice in general, is thus a "historically situated action," to use another term of Lambek's (2000: 10). It cannot be reduced to its psychological dimension alone, but nor can it be fully understood as a form of political or infrapolitical resistance: it is a way of making history (with and without a capital "H"!). It offers adepts of *jinɛdɔn* and other similar ritual practices the opportunity to imagine and

experiment with alternative realities, and to appropriate alterity.[7] This is what Roberto Beneduce and Simona Taliani underline in their study of Mami Wata:

> In the cult of Mami Wata the bond between the possessed and the spirit is accompanied not only by the promises of well-being and health, or of the gift of being able to heal, but also by images of wealth, and by the dream of a luxurious life. These images are allegories of a foreign power, of the power of the colonies and of the Whites … a notion of power emerges closely connected to the capacity to incorporate and tame these "emblems of alterity" which are symbols and goods of the West (light skin, smooth hair, sunglasses, cellular phones) … In this context, power is conceived as the capacity to move across different worlds and territories, to cross visible and invisible frontiers, to capture an alterity in order to restrain, incorporate and exhibit it. (Beneduce and Taliani 2006: 434)

I would tend to think that the conceptualization of power as the ability to cross boundaries with ease is common to all the practices I have examined in this book. As far as the *jinɛdɔn* is concerned, the frequent use of skin-whitening products, wigs with blond tresses or smooth hair, high-heeled shoes, and smartphones, as well as tridents and *donsow* fly whisks, can be viewed as an attempt to appropriate a powerful otherness by performances involving its attributes. The distinctive aesthetic of the *jinɛdɔn* is part of—and thus explained by—the logic of the conquest of power, be it the power of the West, Islam, or precolonial Africa.

7. For this reason, I think it is possible to draw a parallel between African spirit-possession celebrations and the New York drag queen "balls" of the 1980s, the images of which are conveyed by documentaries such as *Paris Is Burning* by Jennie Livingston. At these "balls," elements that allude to other cultural universes are ostentatiously staged by characters who transgress ordinary gender constructs. Some commentators, including Judith Butler (2005, 2009), who based her gender theory on observing these "balls," see them as subversive, while others see them as a frustrated imitation of dominant models by subalterns. The controversies around these highly ritualized practices are reminiscent of those that surround African spirit possession (see Henley 2006 for a summary). I would like to thank Camille Guibert, who wrote an article on these Parisian balls (see Guibert 2023) and who is working on his doctoral thesis on vodun in Benin under my supervision, for our stimulating discussions on these topics.

Is this conquest of power real or illusory? Does the ritual practice in question help regain some agency or provide a simulacrum? The only way for me to answer these thorny questions is by endorsing Michael Jackson's more general observations:

> When reduced to the status of an object or panicked by encountering an unresponsive other, a person acts as if agency and consciousness were somehow still present. There is something outrageous about the situation that robs us of the power to act, speak, know, choose, and make a difference. So we imagine choosing and lacerate ourselves with the guilt that we chose badly or missed our chance. Even in the most desperate, humbling and overwhelming situation, people seek imperatively to wrest back control, to reassert the right to govern their own life, to be complicit in their own fate. (Jackson 1998: 30)

For Jackson, who in this passage looks at play as a mode of action that enables us to regain control, or at least a sense of control, we do not need to transform the situation in which we find ourselves, just our definition of that situation. In other words, it is sometimes enough to position ourselves *as if* we had a choice and the decision was ours in order to effectively appropriate other choices and exercise our agency through what Jackson calls the "existential stratagem." There can be no doubt that this stratagem is essential for *jinɛdɔn* adepts and experts.

These experts are mostly women. This is an unprecedented situation because, as noted above, with a few exceptions, historically women did not perform ritual functions among the Mande, and in rural contexts they still do not. This is why the first two parts of this book deal exclusively with men. Even in the case of spirit possession as practiced in the past among the Mande—I am thinking here of the Nya initiation society (Colleyn 1996)—it is men who occupy the role of officiants. Men also take on this role in all initiation societies: Komo, N'tomo, Koré, Ci-wara, Namaya, and *donsoton*.[8] In rural areas, women usually fulfill themselves as subjects in ways that are based more on relating to other humans—men and children—than to more-than-humans (see Kedzierska Manzon 2021a).

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8. Except, perhaps, for the one that embraces ritual clowns, the status of which is currently evolving, and which is mainly based in the Ségou region. Its members are currently organizing themselves into civil associations, like the *donsow*, and their activities are increasingly taking on a playful and/or therapeutic dimension (Tal Tamari, personal communication).

The situation is not dramatically different in the contemporary urban context. Within the *jinɛdɔn*, however, some alternatives emerge: here, as we have seen, women are in charge of all ritual procedures including those that are normally reserved to males, such as blood sacrifices. As Laurent Berger notes working in Bélédougou (2010), they acquire the status of experts and sometimes dominate the ritual scene outright. Once again, it is tempting to make a comparison with Mami Wata. By studying the extensive female presence in its ranks—this "problem with women" as Beneduce and Taliani (2006) call it, referring implicitly to Marilyn Strathern (1988)—the Italian researchers suggest that the practice calls into question the category of person and thus provokes an upheaval of all the categories without necessarily leading to their lasting redefinition. There are significant differences between the context in which I work and the one they study; however, the expansion of the *jinɛdɔn*, like the proliferation of Mami Wata-related possession and practices, must be seen in connection with the current changes in the place of women within the African religious, economic, and social landscape. Is it necessary to highlight the scale of this change? Based on my own observations, it would be more appropriate to see the practices that bear witness to it not as a head-on rejection but as an ongoing renegotiation of preexisting power relations, at a personal rather than collective level. For Assitan, Maman Temba, Ibrahim, Fifi, and many others, it is not a question of revolutionizing the world but of finding a satisfactory modus vivendi within it for themselves.

How, then, to live best with oneself and others? The answer I learned in the field would be: it is by reconfiguring one's agency by means of constructing a different self which is opulent, powerful, and extraordinary, even if this self is still human and uncertain at the same time. This construction is achieved through ritual practice, which enables the practitioners—and their more-than-human partners—to establish themselves as constellations with blurred boundaries. It is accompanied by a quest for power that is miraculous in some respects: it is not a quest for ordinary control, health, or prosperity but for a kind of power and pleasure that are out of the ordinary and yet presented as being within reach. Like the Mami Wata-related practices, the *jinɛdɔn* seems to legitimize an individual quest for such boundless wealth and joy, the appropriation of which relies on the use of simulacra that are not exact, faithful copies of the originals they index, and which are put on stage in an offbeat, ostentatious, and baroque ritual performance.

Coda

The time has now come to end our journey through the contemporary Mande religious landscape. Three sets of practices that make up its recently formed "non-Islamic sphere" have been examined here. Although these three sets of practices are based on extra-daily mobilizations of the body—as are all religious practices across the world—they differ from one another, as we have seen, in their technical parameters and sensory framework, and in the ways the agency of the specialists who perform them and of the more-than-humans they bring to life are constructed.

Donsoya involves a particular walking technique, in which the feet and spine play an important role; a gazing technique which I identified as visual scanning; and a regime of attention that is referred to locally as a "settled mind" and which constitutes a state of awareness. *Donsoya* also involves certain manipulations of the body (notably "ritual baths"). This body—the hunting body—evolves in an environment that is rich in stimuli but not saturated. It is in constant movement, with a precarious equilibrium, and its use is characterized by "dilation in space," to use Eugenio Barba's (1985) term. There is no fixed, predefined physical or vocal score, however. The way a *donso* conducts himself is not the enactment of such a score or scenario but the enactment of certain principles that entail a specific quality of presence. This quality of presence is not unlike that of a performer who is ready to act but is not yet playing a role, the presence Barba considers to be "pre-expressive": it attracts attention without expressing any particular story or character. Like his potential prey and other creatures that dwell in the bush—the *kungo fɛnw* (bush spirits)—the *donso* is "avisible": he avoids all visual (and

even more, verbal) contact with other beings without being invisible per se.

In *jinɛdɔn* and *basitigiya*, the essential thing is, by contrast, to make oneself seen, to attract the attention of others through one's outfits, accessories, and singularly ostentatious behavior. Yet where an adept of spirit possession is constantly on the move, the fetish master remains still and gives poetic accounts of the adventures of his fetishes, whom he describes as being in action—attacking his or his clients' enemies. As he performs sacrifices and utters a melodious, rapidly spoken ritual speech while staying in a particularly testing and destabilizing sensory setting, he controls his body carefully: his posture, his gestures, his voice, and his breathing. He holds back his energy. This form of energy retention and bodily control is undoubtedly also a feature of the *donso*, but unlike the *donso*, who moves through the bush in search of game, the *basitigi* remains in place as if frozen. His vocal score is not fully fixed in advance but it is always made up of the same sequences, which are performed in the same order—with each sacrifice representing their actualization, which is at once unique and conforming. His presence, like those of the divine things he confronts, is impressive—unlike that of the *donso*, whose presence is discreet. As we have seen, the *donso* pretends to be absent while the *basitigi* strives to make the religious expert, who is none other than himself, fully present. He is not pre-expressive as he plays a role: the role of the "powerful man" is what he becomes through his ritual practice.

The *jinatigiw*, on the other hand, embody personages that are assumed to be something other than themselves—spirits, who take over the bodies of "their humans" in a setting that is saturated on a visual, acoustic, olfactory, and tactile level. Spirits manifest their presence through a number of symptoms that afflict their humans, including tears, sweating, and salivation, widening of the eyes, muscular tension and trembling, nausea, and intense freezing of the face. Once the moment of catching has passed, the possessed-spirits follow short, semi-fixed, physical and vocal scores: they use emblematic gestures and utter fairly standardized oracular formulas. Like *donsow*, they expand in space—except during oracular trances—but unlike *donsow*, who try to be everywhere and nowhere, and to make their bodies transparent while remaining present and in control of the situation at the same time, devotees of the *jinɛdɔn* seemingly lose control. Their human selves are said to be absent while their bodies remain in full view. While a *donso*'s presence is light and quiet, a *basitigi*'s is heavy. The presence of *jinɛdɔn* adepts embodying their spirits is, above all, theatricalized and "expressive."

All these practices, each in its own way, aim at and enable the construction of the agency and subjectivity of the specialists who engage in them. We have seen that the apparent lack of self-control revealed by the somatic symptoms of trance experienced during *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies is relative and postulated rather than actual. This is suggested by the examples I have given, which highlight the ability of renowned *jinatigiw* to control their spirits and their trance, trigger it if need be, give it the desired (oracular) form, or bring it to an end. At least for experienced specialists, the distinction between their human selves and the spirits they embody seems to be relative.

Such blurring of the boundaries between self and other, which is especially palpable in *jinɛdɔn*, seems to be a feature of the two other practices—albeit to varying degrees. In all of them, the more-than-human that is constructed in a ritual context turns out on close inspection not to be totally separate from the expert who constructs it; it is their flip side, in fact. This is clearly the case in both the *jinɛdɔn*, as I have explained above, and in *basitigiya*, in which the *basi* participates in the *basitigi*'s subjectivity and in which they combine to form an acting whole. As for the *donsoya*, each of the beings that take part in the game of hide-and-seek that is the hunt, whether they want to or not, is simultaneously the searcher and the searched, the self and the other. Thus, in the three sets of practices concerned—whether their identity is diffracted, dilated, or multiple—the specialists and the more-than-humans produced in the practices in question maintain complex relationships.

To describe these relationships, in the First Movement of the book I invoked the idea of "ritual condensation," the concept developed by Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi ([1994] 2009). This condensation consists in the particular interactions between ritual participants who occupy roles simultaneously that are a priori antinomic (mother and son, son-in-law and father-in-law, etc.), which makes their relationships paradoxical. The manipulation of *basiw* I examined in the Second Movement implies a condensation that operates as a spiral, so to speak, with multidimensional interactions: binary (me–the other) and triangular (me–a third agent–the other). These relationships are at once cordial and hostile, deployed at the visible and invisible levels. Finally, in the Third Movement, the *jinɛdɔn* members assume human and divine identities simultaneously and are dilated subjects who are at once extraordinary and ordinary, according to the pattern Houseman (2016) describes as "ritual refraction." Each of these practices is underpinned by a precise interactional model: predation limited to a particular space and context in the

case of the *donsoya*, generalized predation in the case of the *basitigiya*, and kinship in the case of the *jinɛdɔn*.

What these practices have in common is that they all involve—albeit in varying ways, of course—a shift in the conditions of intentionality of the practitioners. These practitioners first need to deprive themselves of their own agency, as if they were delegating or abdicating it on behalf of certain third parties—animals and *kungo fɛnw*, *basiw*, and *jinɛw*—in order to regain it, as if it were only by going through these third parties that they could exert a power over others and themselves. By emphasizing the limits of their own authority and agency while acknowledging the authority of more-than-human others, they construct both these others and their own personas as religious specialists. Yet these personas are in fact inseparable from their human selves.

The mechanism underlying this construction is the same in all the cases studied: one places one's self temporarily and/or putatively in the position of an absence while merging with or yielding one's body to certain more-than-humans in order to appropriate their agency, and in so doing become a different, complex, amplified subject. This construction always involves a reference to parallel planes of existence populated by beings whose agency seems to be intrinsically contextual and who remain forever incomplete. They are produced in and by ritual practices as fundamentally indeterminate, but they differ from one practice to the next. The ritual interactions that bring them into existence and the extra-daily mobilizations of the body on which their production rests are also different. The relationship with them has a lasting impact on the self-relationship and world-relationship of the experts who confront them and make them manifest. This is as true in my field as it undoubtedly is elsewhere: there is nothing unique about the basic mechanism I have highlighted here. Men—and women—everywhere need more-than-humans in order to become themselves: to construct themselves as subjects, to exercise their agency, to expand their margins of freedom, and thus, through religious practice, "to contradict and convert, to annihilate" the situations that seem to "circumscribe, govern, and define" them (Jackson 1998: 29).

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I will end this book as I began it, with a scene. When I returned for the last time in December 2019, the situation in Mali was difficult and anti-French sentiment was strong—as witnessed, for example, by the

critical speech about France posted on social networks by the well-known singer Salif Keïta. I was delighted to meet up with my friends and some of my long-time acquaintances again. One of them, Bourama Foutigui Coulibaly, the then and current Secretary-General of the National Federation of Hunters of Mali (FNCM), invited me to take part in an event organized by his association. The event was called *dankun sela*, or *dankun son*. This expression describes the ritual of renewal of the alliance between members of the *donsoton* and their guardian figures Saanɛ and Kɔntrɔn, as described in chapter 1.[1] It is normally celebrated once a year, in the dry season, and therefore in March/April, at a village level. The event organized by the FNCM and scheduled to take place in December, on the other hand, was supposed to bring together representatives of *donsow* from several Malian municipalities and regions and even from neighboring countries, meeting around what the organizers described as the "national altar." The brochure in French was prepared for fund-raising purposes. I will quote here some lengthy excerpts from it, as it seems to me so worthy of attention. It opened with a brief history of Mali written in a style that is no doubt intentionally formal:

> Mali is a country whose identity and statehood have been established for hundreds of years. If we, the peoples of Mali, "were here when others were not," it is thanks to the great achievements of our ancestors, who were builders of empires, kingdoms, principalities, towns, and villages. All researchers, foreign and Malian alike, are unanimous in recognizing that it was a body of valiant men who were at the forefront of these thousand-year-old achievements. This was the ancient Donsow Brotherhood … Throughout history, *donsow* have been regarded as official guardians of the "temple of our cardinal civilizational values." And so, whenever the foundations of the homeland have been threatened, and whenever there have been more questions than answers about the proper state of our nation, the surest bulwark has been the Donsow Brotherhood.

The historical role of the *donsow* was far more complex than the representatives of their contemporary associations care to admit (Kedzierska Manzon 2014). What is interesting here is not so much the idealized image of the *donsow* as the nationalistic rhetoric that links the religious

1. Where I refer to it as *dankun sɔn*; here, I have taken it from an official booklet, in which the term is written with the use of French spelling.

sphere (non-Islamic) to the proper state of the "Malian nation," a nation sorely tested in recent years. The authors of the brochure doubtless include Fodé Moussa Sidibé, who played a pivotal role in the organization of many *donsow* events in the past and is currently an important member of the Maaya Blon association (see chapter 6). In the brochure, they focus on various aspects of the Malian crisis, including, in their view:

- A planned, progressive liquidation of our black and Malian identity;
- The decay of the values of African civilization;
- A dramatic loss of points of reference at all levels and in all social strata;
- Our country's notorious inability to imagine a destiny other than that induced and promoted by foreigners and their spirituality;
- The gradual disintegration of the social fabric, where the current values and points of reference are breaking down the family unit, the bedrock of social cohesion;
- The dehumanization of the Malian social being.

They then write:

> The *donsow* of Mali, who are aware of what they were and what they still are today, cannot but regret this situation. However, without ever giving up, they decided to show their commitment to making their contribution solemnly and publicly. This is why, on the initiative of the FNCM and in partnership with other hunters' associations and Soma's association, the Donsow of Mali are organizing Le Dankun Sela International du Mali in the Tienfala forest from December 13 to 15, 2019.

There is no doubt that the event is part of the vast "back-to-the-roots" movement (see Sidibé 2020) that draws its inspiration from the writings of Cheick Anta Diop and other Afrocentric intellectuals. The formulas used—"decay of the values of African civilization," "our country's notorious inability to imagine a destiny other than that induced and promoted by foreigners and their spirituality"—bear witness to this. It states later on that the event will include "a ritual of libation, sacrifice, and prayers to the Master Creator of the Universe," to the "guardian Divinities," and to the "deserving ancestors of all faiths and beliefs." It is hard not to be puzzled by several of the terms used—including those quoted here, which I believe I came across for the first time in December 2019 and had

not seen before during my twenty years of fieldwork among the Mande. The same applies to other expressions used in the brochure, including "egregores" and "cosmic energy."[2] The brochure states that this cosmic energy is "necessary for vows to be fulfilled" and will be raised through the sacrifices, which "will serve to make the Dankun powerful" and will be followed by a "funeral wake of the *donsow*" aimed at refreshing "the souls of the civilian and military victims of the conflict." Other objectives of the celebration included the following:

- Commemorating and celebrating the work of Deserving ancestors;
- Cleansing the land of Mali, which has been defiled since 2012 [the year of the coup d'état];
- Giving national and international visibility to our endogenous cults and rituals;
- Affirming our belonging to the authentic, age-old Malian culture;
- Promoting the effective recognition of endogenous cults as the foundation of our identity as Black people of Africa and the world.

Once again, the implicit references to Afrocentric authors are evident in this text, which is full of formulations with pan-African overtones, which were previously rare in Mali, like "Promoting the effective recognition of endogenous cults as the foundation of our identity as Black people of Africa and the world."

To achieve the objectives they listed, the organizers planned to bring together almost one thousand participants over the course of two days at a location some thirty kilometers northeast of Bamako, away from houses and tarmac roads but within easy reach for people with means of transport, and in the heart of a forest. I arrived on day one at around 11 a.m., accompanied, as usual on my most recent trips, by my master Dia, my host Madi Kama, and my driver Yacouba. Two representatives of the Djiguiya Blo association (see the Overture) arrived at the same time. There were not many participants there, far fewer than the thousand that had been announced. Their appearance varied: I was able to recognize some *donsow* in their typical cotton tunics, but there was also a variety of other costumes: *somaw* and *basitigiw*, often dressed in red, and soldiers, or in any event individuals in military garb, and a few officials—especially representatives of the local government. There were

2. Terms used by psychics and in esoteric tradition to describe a being sustained by collective beliefs and emotions. See below.

no women. I was not given permission to approach the place where "it was happening" despite my explanations that I had been invited by the organizers, which my local collaborators confirmed. My presence was visibly a problem. In any event, the two members of the Djiguiya Blo association were also made to keep their distance. The atmosphere seemed tense. I waited patiently for Bourama and the *donsow* chiefs to be informed of our arrival. At the microphone, the organizers of the event informed those present that the homeland needed sacrifices, and then announced that a hole would be dug in the earth on the hillside to "bury the enemies of Mali." Shortly afterwards, a group of the *donsow* masters headed for the site to perform this ritual, which I had never seen before and whose creative and innovative character was quite evident to my local collaborators.

We left without waiting for the event to end at the express request of my local collaborators, who were a little worried about my safety. It did not seem unlikely to them that as a Frenchwoman I might be on Mali's list of enemies to be "buried" in the eyes of the men gathered there, who made plenty of derogatory remarks about me in Bamana. Above all, Dia and Madi Kama were very uncomfortable. They were surprised by the event itself, which they had attended to accompany me in my research, and by the welcome we had received. Admittedly, the Donso Ngoni festival I described in the Overture, which they also attended with me, was an equally new development in comparison to the more classic *donsow* gatherings they were familiar with. Unlike the Dankun Sela International, however, the Donso Ngoni festival was highly inclusive, and its less directly political message had no nationalist overtones. As for the Dankun Sela, it was a gathering of several dozen *donsow* outside of a domestic space into which no women were admitted, but where several uninitiated men—soldiers and representatives of the authorities—were present. This may seem surprising if one considers the rules that apply in rural contexts to the *donsow* celebrations we have encountered in this book. Moreover, there was no trace of game slaughtered for the occasion, or even of dried or smoked meat, and there were none of the circles that are usually formed by the participants, who were divided here into several small groups. This also confused my companions—as did the belligerent tone of the speeches, which were not merely reassuring and made no mention of the protective historical role of the *donsow* as emphasized in the brochure. We were far from the attentive, discreet presence that characterizes *donsow* in rural and hunting contexts, in which they rarely seek to put themselves on display or to become (more) visible. The event

I have described as we bring our journey to an end does not fit into this "traditional" context or the past that it seeks to actualize and promote. On the contrary, it participates in a reconfiguration of the religious field in which practices that are presented as "ancestral" and falling within the "non-Islamic" sphere—the emergence of which as an autonomous field is only recent—are playing an increasingly important role.

Without downplaying the specific nature of the Malian context—in which, as Jean-Loup Amselle (2018) argues, we can see a hardening of the Mande identity that began with the publication of the French version of the Sunjata epic and the Kurukan Fuga Charter (1960)[3]—it should be noted that there is nothing exceptional about this development. In Africa and its diasporas, "back-to-the-roots" movements are proliferating (see Amselle 2010; Boukari-Yabara 2014; De Witte 2012; Duchesne 2000; Duchesne and Guedj 2005; Guedj 2010; Fauvelle-Aymar, Chrétien and Perrot 2010; Joly 2014, for example, and for the primary sources and documentation Doumbi Fakoly 2018; Introvigne and Soryte 2024; Omotunde 2010; and Sidibé 2020). Although they seek to set themselves apart from the West, these movements are familiar with European esoteric traditions, as witnessed by the numerous elements they share with it in the wake of Cheikh Anta Diop (see Chidester 2015; Howe 1998; Kedzierska Manzon forthcoming; Lefkowitz 2010). From it, most definitely, come certain words—such as "egregore" or "cosmic energy"—as well as references to Hermes Trismegistus or other figures of the "magi" (see Sidibé 2020) popular among the members of Maaya Blon and 3RNA Maaya (Figure 40), from which Maaya Blon seceded during 2010. As I show elsewhere (Kedzierska Manzon forthcoming), these "back-to-the-roots" currents may be seen as akin to New Age understood here *senso lato* as a particular form of ritualization. I argue that we should therefore see them as a kind of African New Age, and

3. The charter is presented by certain Malian intellectuals as a transcription of the oral sermon made by Mande *donsow* at the creation of the first Mande state by Sunjata Keïta in the thirteenth century and transmitted through the centuries in an oral form. It is considered in contemporary pan-African and Afrocentric circles to be the first democratic constitution of Mali. Part of UNESCO's intangible heritage, its historical authenticity (at least in its present form) is highly problematic; see Simonis 2015. Despite my efforts in the field, even when enquiring within the family of Wa Kamissoko, co-author with Youssouf Tata Cissé of the last published French version (Y. T. Cissé and Kamissoko 2007), I was unable to find specialists or griots able to recite the charter.

Figure 40. Website of the 3RNA-Maaya, the first Kemit association in Mali.

interpret them in connection with the rise of ethnic paganisms elsewhere (see Aitamurto and Simpson 2014; Delaplace 2021; Harvey 1997; Laruelle 2012; Molinié 2012, 2018; Strmiska 2005; Owen and Pucca 2024, and Teisehoffer 2022 for examples). What is undeniable is that they merit a systematic analysis from a comparative perspective, which I have already begun,[4] and which the description of the Dankun Sela here is simply intended to announce.

4. This is part of the research I am debating with my students and colleagues in my research seminar at the EPHE, in particular my lectures for the 2020–21 year entitled "Retour aux sources? Nouvelles formes de ritualisation et d'expertise rituelle en Afrique et ailleurs" and for the 2021–22 year entitled "Retour aux sources? Le New Age au Sud dans une perspective globale ou le néopaganisme en question," as well as the seminars in 2024–25, "New Age, paganismes et nouvelles formes de ritualisation en contextes postcoloniaux," and 2025–26, "New Age et/ou Tradition. Pratiques de soin holistiques en Afrique et ailleurs." See the edited bibliography in Kedzierska Manzon 2022 and 2023; see also: Kedzierska Manzon forthcoming.

Glossary

baara: literally work, occupation, practice, a term used by religious experts to describe their ritual activities.

bamana: first used by Muslim Fulani to describe their pagan Mande neighbors, and which therefore refers to both ethnic and religious belonging; the term was then used in French in a slightly different phonetic version, Bambara, to denote a subgroup of Mande people.

bamanaya: literally a way of being *bamana*; a term used by come scholars as a generic name of the so-called traditional or non-Islamic or pagan religious practices among the Mande people; see also: *mandenkaya*.

basi, plural *basiw*: a term which French-speaking research participants translate as "fétiche(s)"; fetish, power object, divine thing, also remedy, medication, to heal (verb), blood, bitter (adj.), bad (adj.), amulet, poison, brownish-yellow or reddish-brown color, shrub, an object-subject or thing-being to whom speech is addressed and ritual sacrifices offered; see also: *boli*.

basitigi, plural *basitigiw*: from *basi*, divine thing + *tigi*, owner, manager, master: a term which French-speaking research participants translate as "féticheur" and which denotes the ritual expert in charge of *basiw*.

basitigikan: from *basitigi*, master of the fetishes + *kan*, voice, words, speech: the ritual speech uttered by the ritual experts at the beginning of sacrifices for *basiw*, composed of a complex address, description of

the sacrifices, and binary question to which *basiw* are invited to answer through the position on the ground of sacrificial items (kola nuts and poultry).

bogolan: a traditional Mande cotton mud-cloth with geometric patterns, associated with Mande history and culture and today used for the garments of non-Islamic ritual experts.

boli, plural, *boliw*; see also *basi*: the two terms are regional variants, the later used in the areas southwest of Bamako and in Guinea whereas the former term is used near Segou. Some associate the term *boli* more specifically with Segou royalty.

bolitigi, plural *bolitigiw*: from *boli*, divine thing + *tigi*, owner, manager, master: ritual expert in charge of *boliw*; see also: *basitigi*.

dabaliw or *daliluw*: ritual procedures used by many non-Islamic ritual experts, which are kept secret and seen as able to affect the physical world; the terms also translate as stratagem, ruse, way of doing, knowledge, secret, power, spell, curse, or remedy (Dumestre 2011). In addition to the manipulation of *basiw/boliw*, they may consist in ritual baths or cleansing, use of herbal and other remedies, *furaw*, and incantations *krisiw/kilisiw*.

dankun: *donsow*'s place of worship, situated at the crossroads near the village, where a termite mound is transported and planted, on which the sacrifices are performed, is also where the new members of the *donsoton* are integrated into the group composed of young and experienced *donsow* and the founders-guardians of their organization whose tomb the termite mound represents.

doma, plural *domaw*: an expert (in secret or traditional knowledge), seer, soothsayer, a non-Islamic specialist; see also *basitigi*.

donso, plural *donsow*: usually translated as "hunter," a term which in fact denotes a member of *donsoton*: a society, membership of which is based on free will and implies a ritual initiation; *donsow* were historically responsible not only for bringing game home but also for the security and protection of the village against visible and invisible dangers.

donsoba¸ plural *donsobaw*: elder of *donsow* or chief of *donsow*.

donsoya: from *donso*, hunter, ritual expert + *ya*, suffix of state: practice and ideology of *donsow*.

fɛn, plural *fɛnw*: thing, being.

fura, plural *furaw*; regional variant in southwest Mali, *fida*: literally green leaves; by extension remedy, medication; also the festivity ending the circumcision retreat (see Dumestre 2011: 348).

furatigi, plural *furatigiw*: from *fura*, remedy, medication + *tigi*, owner, manager, master: healer who provides patients with herbal remedies, a non-Islamic religious specialist.

jeli, plural *jeliw*: a musician or singer belonging to an endogamous caste (see Camara 1976; Conrad and Franck 1995).

jidunun: from *ji*, water + *dunun*, drum: a drum composed of the calabash turned over onto a basin of water, which is the most important instrument used during the ceremonies of *jinɛdɔn*.

jina/jinɛ, plural *jinaw/jinɛw*: spirit, from Arabic djinn.

jinatigi, plural *jinatigiw*: from *jina*, spirit + *tigi*, owner, manager, master: an officiant of *jinɛdɔn*, a ritual expert in the domain of non-Islamic practice and spirit-possession.

jinɛdɔn: from *jinɛ*, spirit + *dɔn*, dance: generic name for the ritual practice of spirit possession which in its current form is quite recent in Mali; emerging with the colonization and spread of Islam, the practice originates probably from northeastern regions of Mali and is currently expanding, especially in urban contexts; see also: *jinɛton*.

jinɛton: from *jinɛ*, spirit + *ton*, association or society: generic name for the ritual practice of spirit possession, see also: *jinɛdɔn*.

kaafiri: non-Islamic, pagan, idolatrous, animist, or infidel, from Arabic *kafir* (*kafirin*, *kuffar*), which denotes originally and within Muslim doxa any religious practice, including Christianity, that is deemed to be idolatrous or imperfect (see Hawting 2009: 49).

karamɔgɔ: from *karan*, to teach + *mɔgɔ*, person, human: a master (also schoolmaster), a teacher; today, an honorific way of addressing all the ritual experts.

karanden or *kalanden*: from *kalan* or *karan*, to teach, to learn + *den,* child: a student (in the school), an apprentice (of an artisan), a disciple; in religious contexts used to denote persons still in the process of learning from a master such as experienced *donsoba*, *basitigi* or *jinatigi*.

kilisiw/krisiw: incantations, spells, verbal formulas, used by non-Islamic ritual experts such as *donsow* and *furatigiw* in order to heal, ensure luck, prevent misfortune, protect from accident.

Kɔntrɔn: guardian figure of the *donsow*.

kɔntrɔntigi: from *Kɔntrɔn*, guardian figure + *tigi*, master, owner, manager: the specialist caring for *Kɔntrɔn*.

koli: ritual bath, cleansing; substantive from the verb*[ka] ko*, [to] clean, wash, bath, by extension to circumcise or excise (Dumestre 2011: 522); also, initiation procedure in *jinɛton*; such baths usually consist in rubbing of the hands and face—and more rarely other parts of the body, notably the arms and legs, or the full naked body, with leaves that are usually gathered in a particular way, or with herbal concoctions, or with mixtures prepared from various organic elements.

kumarɛ: a performer singing at the spirit-possession ceremonies of the *jinɛdɔn*, a role usually reserved for young and effeminate men.

kungo fɛnw: from *kungo*, bush + *fɛn*, thing, being: bush spirits or bush creatures, usually rather elusive and difficult to see but who can sometimes visit the village at certain times and whom the *donsow* may encounter or hear while on a hunting trip.

lɔnko: from *[ka] lɔn/dɔn*, [to] know +*ko*, thing, question: knowledge of herbal medicine and more generally of secret/ritual procedures known as *daliluw/dabaliw*; also said: *lɔnniya*: from knowledge + *ya* suffix.

mandenkaya: literally: a state or way of being Mande, formed from the radical *mande* and suffix of state, *ya*; a term used to denote non-Islamic ritual practices of Mande people; see also *bamanaya*.

minanw: tools, recipients, affairs, in religious context: ritual tools and accessories.

[*ka*] *minɛ*: to catch, to seize, to take, to hold, the sexual relation (noun); the verb used by *jinɛdɔn* adepts and experts to describe the action of the *jinaw* when incarnating in their humans' bodies.

mɔgɔ, plural *mɔgɔw*: person, human being, people.

mɔgɔya: from *mɔgɔ*, person, human + *ya*, suffix of state: humanity, the way of being human, the state of being an accomplished or mature person, personhood, a term used by certain traditionalists to speak about indigenous Mande religious practices.

mori, plural *moriw*: marabout, an expert in Islamic religion.

ngoni: a traditional West African string instrument of which a specific type—*donso ngoni*—is used by *donsow* musicians: *donso ngoni fola*.

[ka] sɔn: [to] sacrifice, offer, water [plants]; as substantive, s*ɔnni*: ritual sacrifice.

soma, plural *somaw*: an expert in non-Islamic ritual practices (healer, diviner, experienced *donso* or *basitigi*, who knows the *daliluw/dabaliw*), from Soninke, an elder brother (Vydrine 1999: 300).

tama, plural *tamaw*: spear, in ritual context an accessory associated with precolonial African kingship, used during the ceremonies of the *jinɛdɔn*.

tamani: a small drum played during the *jinɛdɔn* ceremonies, known as a talking drum.

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