Evoking moral community, fragmenting Muslim discourse: Sermon audio-recordings and the reconfiguration of public debate in Mali

Dorothea E. Schulz
(Indiana University)

Abstract

The article explores the processes that have allowed Islam to gain great appeal as a community-building idiom in Mali since the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1991. Drawing on the mediatic performances of the charismatic preacher Sharif Haidara, the article analyzes how new media technologies facilitate and play into Islam’s new prominence and how they influence the particular ways in which Islam is presented in the public sphere. It examines the particular ways audio recording technologies intervene in and complicate the terms of interaction between political regimes and their critics, and thus change the place of religion in postcolonial state politics. Rather than interpret this process as a “resurgence” and threat of religion to secular nation state politics, the article emphasizes the paradoxical effects “small”, decentralized media have on the constitution of moral community. Audio recordings enable the move to public prominence of a variety of interpreters of Islam who seek to articulate an Islamic normativity as the basis of the common good. Paradoxically, the same processes that enhance the possibilities of Muslims of various backgrounds and pedigree to participate in public debate simultaneously undermine their appeal to Islamic scholarly consensus. While these processes strengthen these Muslims’ possibilities to speak in public, they weaken their capacities to speak as the public, a claim that is pivotal to their quest for collective moral renewal.
Introduction: mediating moral communities

Similar to developments throughout the Muslim world in recent decades, there has been a marked upsurge of an infrastructure of Muslim proselytizing and activism in Mali’s public sphere. Some objectives formulated by Muslim activists date back to a long-standing Muslim reformist endeavor, yet only with political and economic neo-liberal reform since the mid-1980s has the moral idiom and institutional backdrop of Islamic renewal gained the poignancy it currently displays in the Malian public sphere. Partly under the effect of a rapidly pluralizing media landscape, the sites, forms and contents of public debate have been substantially transformed, in tandem with significant changes in the ways in which Muslim public reasoning is conducted.

A vivid illustration of these changes in Mali is the enormous success of the religious group or movement Ansar Dine (a Bamanized version of the Arabic Ansar-ud-Deen, the “followers of religion”) whose charismatic leader, Shaykh Cherif Ousmane Haidara, has managed since the mid-1980s, to disseminate his audio- and video-taped sermons to a rapidly growing constituency of “true supporters of Islam” (silame dina kanubagaw).


2 Alpha Konaré and his party ADEMA won the first democratic elections and were reelected in 1997. In June of 2002, Colonel Toumani Touré, the leader of the military putsch that overthrew President Traore’s single-party rule in 1991, was elected president.

3 Unless indicated otherwise, all foreign terms are rendered in Bamanakan, the lingua franca of southern Mali.

His followers, many of whom are from the urban, middle- and lower-middle classes, relate to him as their spiritual guide (*nyemògò*), thereby pointing to his spiritual intercession with God, similar to the role played by shaykhs and other “friends of God” (Arabic, *wali*). They stress their leader’s incorruptible denouncement of immoral politics and the edifying effects of the advice he broadcasts in countless audio-recorded sermons and radio programs. His Muslim opponents, in contrast, many of whom benefit from their long-standing closeness to Mali’s political regimes, denounce Haidara as a rabble-rousing upstart who lacks religious erudition. Until 2000, these opponents successfully blocked Haidara’s access to national media institutions. Yet his public criticism garnered him such popular support that his enemies, Muslim critics and government officials, finally gave in and accommodated him in these.

Haidara’s success in mobilizing popular support around a moralizing critique of the Muslim establishment and government highlights first, the central appeal of Islam as a community-building idiom in Mali’s public sphere; and second, how certain media technologies complicate the terms of interaction between political regimes and their critics, and transform the place of religion in postcolonial state politics. Rather than interpret this process as a “resurgence” and threat of religion to secular nation-state politics, I propose to discuss Islam’s heightened significance in controversies over the common good against the backdrop of recent shifts in the institutional and normative foundations of the public sphere.

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Similar to developments in other African countries, political and neo-liberal economic reform in Mali generates conditions that endow Muslim actors with the discursive competences and institutions necessary to intervene in public debate and to partake in the articulation of the normative foundations of the political community. New structures and connections emerge at the interface of state institutions and society, in tandem with new technologies of mediation and related forms of circulation.

This article focuses on the role certain media technologies play in these developments. How do new media technologies facilitate and play into Islam’s new prominence and how do they influence the particular ways in which Islam is presented in the public sphere?

To capture the empirical complexity of the public in Mali, I focus on a dimension of the public (Öffentlichkeit) that is encapsulated in Habermas’s analysis, yet has been lost in many recent attempts to amend his approach. In my reading, Öffentlichkeit refers to four distinct meanings that are not fully rendered in the English translation as “public (sphere)”: to a sphere of discursive exchange whose specific features are to be understood by reference to modern state institutions and the capitalist economy; to a Publikum, that is, an imaginary body of people

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that serves as audience; to “publicness” that is, a particular quality of discourse that distinguishes it from discourse effected in more intimate settings; and finally, to publicity, that is, a quality of speech or symbolic forms that results from and indicates their broader circulation throughout society.”

7 Following critiques of Habermas’s normative use of the concept, and also as a consequence of a reductive translation of the term Öffentlichkeit, some historical studies tend to conceive of it as a primarily spatial category. Similarly, several anthropological studies define the public (sphere) or public culture by contrasting it to discursive practices that take place in domestic or more intimate settings.9 Lost in

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7 While I agree with Hoexter at al and Salvatore and Eickelman’s emphasis on the need to historicize the public sphere in Muslim societies, I propose a different analytical perspective. I stress that Habermas’ interest in the link between shifts in the institutional arrangements of public communication and in their normative foundations, and his stress on the interrelatedness of these historical transformations yields important insights for a historical perspective on contemporary social dynamics in Mali. However, I disagree with Habermas’ assumption that modern politics are characterized by a secular public sphere and thus by the withdrawal of religion to the private realm. Also, rather than assuming the existence of a clearly bounded, homogeneous public sphere, I follow Calhoun in conceiving of public debate as taking place in multiple arenas structured by overlapping and shifting clusters of “discursive connections”. See Craig Calhoun, ‘Introduction’, in Calhoun (ed.), Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 37; also see Jürgen Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990 [1962]); Miriam Hoexter, Samuel N. Eisenstadt, Nehemia Levitzion (eds.), The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Armando Salvatore and Dale Eickelman, Public Islam and the Common Good (Leiden: Brill, 2004).


this primarily spatial understanding is a dimension of the public that marks its distinctive location in contemporary nation-state politics: the potential of the public to construct itself as unitary entity, by fusing people into a new collectivity, and be represented as a body of people or “mass subject”.\textsuperscript{10} That is, the public sphere is characterized by its ability to transforms its participants into a collective subject, a “public”. Yet there exists a strong tension between the public’s capacity to invoke and temporarily represent the shared opinion of a constituency of readers or listeners on one side, and the particular identities that such a body of “the people” always entails, on the other.\textsuperscript{11} This discrepancy between an imaginary unified subject and the actual existence of particularistic positions gives the public an unstable, perplexing quality. I take this perplexing quality of the public (sphere) as a starting place to assess how new media technologies intervene in this inherent tension, and how the resulting dynamics affect the ways Islam figures in public debate and in controversies among Muslims. Which representatives of Islamic moral reform are capable of presenting their viewpoints as those of a broader constituency? How are their discursive capacities affected by their respective position vis-à-vis the state and by their access to new technologies of communication and representation? I focus on one particular media technology, audio broadcasting, to shed light on the ways aural media products affect the on-going restructuring of the public sphere, not only by facilitating the prominence of religion in it, but by shaping what is articulated as “religion” in public.

In Mali, struggles between Muslims of different backgrounds and pedigree frequently crystallize in controversies over issues of orthopraxy. These controversies reveal a diversity of positions that an analytical contrast between traditional authorities and “reformists” cannot

\textsuperscript{10} Mah, ‘Phantasies’, p.155.

\textsuperscript{11} Also see Michael Warner, ‘Publics and Counterpublics’, Public Culture, 14,1, 2002, pp. 49-90.
Because many interventions are publicized in print and on broadcast media, access to and skilful mastery of these media institutions are important in Muslims’ struggles over interpretive authority. Yet, I emphasize that Muslims’ chances to make their views of the relevance of Islam to collective well-being public are facilitated, yet not determined by a greater availability of mass media technologies and institutions. What I hope to show is that the adoption of new media technologies yields more paradoxical effects than is assumed by authors who emphasize their liberating and democratizing potential. I will argue that sermon audio-recordings, in their intertwining with institutions of religious socializing, restructure arenas of public deliberation in paradoxical ways. They foster new imaginations of moral community, yet write forth the tension between the centrifugal forces of difference and the appeal to a unified body of people.

My discussion is spurred by recent studies of Muslim public reasoning that move beyond a focus on doctrinal argument prevalent in much of the classical scholarship. I depart from these studies inasmuch as I analyze the specific role of mass media technologies in shaping and

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Restructuring public debate and Islam’s public significance.\footnote{14} Rather than simply assume that adoption of mass media explains the success of a new type of Muslim preachers, in Africa and elsewhere,\footnote{15} we should examine how particular technologies of “mediating religion”\footnote{16} and people’s engagement with them, affect the message that is publicized; how new styles and formats of persuasion are generated; and finally, how this process may reconfigure public debate by fostering imaginations of moral community, yet also new assertions of particularity and difference.\footnote{17} The task at hand is to account for the complex implications of a growing intertwining of Muslim public reasoning and specific media technologies, by departing from a focus on content and giving more attention to the material practices and social institutions in which the consumption of mass-mediated discursive forms is embedded.

**Islam’s public significance in Mali in historical perspective**

This section lends a historical perspective to the institutional and political dynamics which form the backdrop to the movement of Islamic moral


\footnote{15} For example, Benjamin Soares, ‘Islam and public piety in Mali’, in Armando Salvatore and Dale Eickelman (eds.), *Public Islam and the Common Good*, pp. 205-226 (Leiden: Brill, 2004); *Prayer Economy*, ch. 8.


renewal and to controversies among different Muslim leaders and interest
groups in Mali’s public sphere. Recent institutional changes, among
them political liberalization since the early 1990s, exacerbate long-
standing conflicts among Muslims of different political persuasions, by
generating new opportunities for competing assertions of the relevance
of Islamic norms to collective well-being. A closer analysis of Cherif
Haidara’s breathtaking success illustrates what is at stake in these
controversies.

Current attempts by Muslims to partake in their role as Muslims in
debates over matters of public interest perpetuate older trends towards
renewal (tajdid) formulated by Muslims throughout contemporary West
Africa. Starting in the late 1930s, a younger generation of Muslims
influenced by intellectual trends in the Arab-speaking world initiated a
range of reforms to respond to the new situation established under French
colonial rule. Many of these activists had studied at institutions of Islamic
learning in North Africa, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Influenced by the
reformist endeavor then shaping the intellectual atmosphere at these
places, they fought, upon their return to Mali, against what they
considered unlawful innovation (bid'a), that is, certain religious
conventions and beliefs associated with traditional religious
leadership. Some of their activities, such as the reform of the traditional

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19 e.g. Lansine Kaba, The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974); Launay, Beyond the Stream; Roman Loimeier, Islamic reform and political change in northern Nigeria (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997); Roman Loimeier, Säkularer Staat und islamische Gesellschaft: die Beziehungen zwischen Staat, Sufi-Bruderschaften und islamischer Reformbewegung in Senegal im 20. Jahrhundert (Muenster: Lit Verlag, 2001); Brenner, Controlling Knowledge, ch. 3-5; Soares, Prayer Economy, ch. 7.
quranic school system, had far-reaching effects particularly for adolescents and women, that is, for those segments of the population of the French Sudan who hitherto had been widely excluded from Arabic literacy and religious knowledge. In this fashion, the reformists contributed to an on-going process in which prior credentials and foundations of religious authority were destabilized.

Because of the strict implementation of laïcité under the first president of independent Mali, Modibo Keita, Muslim reformists who sought to shape collective life according to Islamic principles were widely marginalized. Starting in the 1980s, under Mali’s second single-party regime of President Moussa Traoré (1968-1991), Muslim activism gained a new momentum, with the help of funding channeled through a transnational daʿwa movement coordinated mostly in Saudi Arabia. Local recipients of these donations were intellectuals with business ties to this area of the Muslim world. They often received privileged treatment under President Traoré who, as a trade-off, maintained control over their financial resources and activities, for example by obliging them to join, together with representatives of established religious authorities, the newly created national Muslim association AMUPI in 1985.

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20 See Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*, ch. 4.5. About two per cent of the Malian population are Christians. Some statistics estimate that 95 per cent are Muslims, while some relate only 70 per cent (e.g. *Encyclopedia of Subsaharan Africa*, ed. John Middleton (New York: Scribner’s and Sons, 1997), p. 100). As Brenner points out, the diverse combinations of animistic and Islamic practices makes it impossible to distinguish between Muslims and non-believers. Brenner, *Constructing Muslim Identities*, p. 71.

21 Malian popular discourse labels them “Wahhabi”, a denomination that they adamantly contest and that fails to capture the heterogeneity of their positions and objectives. (Brenner, ‘Constructing Muslim Identities’, *pp. 76-78*). Among them are the (numerically and politically relatively weak) intégristes, who have close business connections with various Arab countries, and who, after 1991, sought in vain to create political parties in the first democratic elections (Dorothea Schulz, ‘Political Factions, Ideological Fictions. The Controversy over the Reform of Family Law in Democratic Mali’, *Islamic Law and Society*, 10, 1, 2003, pp.132ff). Although the intégristes claim to challenge secularist foundations of the state, they operate significantly within the institutional and discursive parameters thereof.
The overthrow of President Traoré in 1991 became a new milestone in Muslim activists’ move to public prominence. Constitutional and institutional reform and the diversification of the media landscape facilitated the mushrooming of Muslim organizational forms, among them numerous Muslim women’s associations, and two Islamic radio stations in Mali’s capital Bamako. These developments exacerbated the competition among traditional religious authorities and Muslims who belong to the younger generation of reformists and whose claims to leadership are based on new credentials, such as a Western school education and a greater proficiency in Arabic and media skills.

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These “younger” Muslim activists are most successful in mobilizing support for their Islamic renewal movement in urban areas where established lineages of religious specialists do not have a stronghold. Many common supporters of the Islamic movement lack the religious instruction necessary to formulate elaborate conceptions of Muslim religiosity, but participate in strictly gender-segregated learning circles to gain literacy in Arabic and learn about proper ritual conduct.27 Others do not join a learning group but still emphasize their support of those who seek to reform social life in conformity with Islamic norms of conduct. All of these supporters of Islamic moral renewal share an emphasis on pious conduct, on believers’ individual responsibility vis-à-vis God, and on the need to “build one’s own opinion” on matters of religion by listening to mass-mediated religious discourse or by engaging in religious learning. Proponents of Islamic renewal also share a disaffection with governmental politics and with the promises of democracy that have not borne out.28 Their publicly declared Muslim identity and expressive registers do not signal a return to an older, authentic faith but expose a modified conception of religiosity because they emphasize the importance of its “profession” to a wider public. Their Muslim identity is no longer tied to a professional and family background29 but becomes a matter of personal faith and conviction.

Representatives of established lineages of religious specialists, especially those who had a privileged position under former President Traoré, feel threatened by the rising influence of Muslim activists because one’s influence in the public arena depends importantly on the ability to entertain clientilist relations to state officials and party politicians, along with one’s membership in governmental structures, such as the AMUPI.


29 Launay, Beyond the Stream, ch.3, 4.
In other words, most Muslim interest groups are eager to partake in the structures of representation that the state controls because this enables them to participate in an officially sanctioned public debate. This situation is not unique to Mali, but characterizes Muslim public interventions throughout Africa.\textsuperscript{30}

Cherif Haidara’s movement \textit{Ansar Dine} presents in a nutshell not only the sensibilities that inform the broader movement towards Islamic moral renewal, but also the competition among Muslim leaders over access to state institutions and resources. This struggle over public representation is fraught with contradictions, some of which are illustrated by Haidara’s years-long attempt to gain access to national media. On the one hand, his appeal derives partly from his refusal to “meddle with politiki” that is, to ingratiate himself to politicians and Muslim authorities who have become free-riders of the government. On the other hand, similar to the dilemma faced by other Muslim activists, Haidara, in his endeavor to address a wide constituency of believers, cannot afford to operate fully outside the institutions of the state, particularly not outside state media.

For years, Haidara’s Muslim opponents, many of whom are represented in the AMUPI, successfully blocked Haidara’s attempts to preach on national media. Enraged by his derogatory remarks about their “hypocrisy” which, according to Haidara, was illustrated in their opportunistic stance vis-à-vis Mali’s political leadership, they denounced his sermons as inflammatory speech uniquely intended to cause disagreement and \textit{fitna} within Mali’s Muslim community. Haidara responded by circulating his opinions on video- and audio-taped sermons and by appearing regularly on local radio stations. His sustained attempts to appear on national media and his anger at his defeat,

demonstrate the key importance he attributes to having access to state institutions. In 2000, his opponents finally had to give in and admit him into the *Haut Conseil Islamique*, a newly created administrative structure. Their plight suggests that Haidara’s use of broadcast media that operate outside of state control gave him considerable strategic advantage because it allowed him to reach a more widely dispersed constituency than competing Muslim activists are able to address. He made up for his exclusion from a state-controlled arena of public debate by fostering a parallel sphere or cluster of discursive exchange.

Haidara’s ultimate success points to several changes some of which result from political liberalization. These changes restructure the conditions for participation in public debate and affect Muslim leaders and associations as much as other interest groups. Haidara’s popularity also sheds light on a political situation characterized by the failure of the state to capture the allegiance of its citizens to the nation. In an atmosphere of general disillusion with the failed promises of democracy, leaders who address the moral and material concerns of citizens by drawing on an alternative register of community building are likely to have greater chances of success. Haidara’s embattled career as a religious leader also suggests that the tension inherent in the public sphere between unifying claims and fragmenting discourse has been exacerbated by the recent institutional changes in the Malian political landscape.

One could explain Haidara’s ultimate victory over his Muslim competitors with his effective use of media products which allowed him to spread his critical message beyond the purview of the state. This interpretation, recently proposed in studies on the political implications of media and politics,

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31 As Haidara explained to me in 1998 and 2002, after trying in vain to be allowed to preach on national radio, he was finally invited to present his position in a pre-recorded televised debate with AMUPI members. But the video-taped controversy in which, according to Haidara, “at the end, they no longer knew how to counter my arguments” was never broadcast because, in Haidara’s words, “influential members of the AMUPI intervened.”

32 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Millenial Capitalism*
of “small media”, seems compelling at first: Haidara’s tapes sell more widely than those of other preachers, and even his most fervent critics admit to his great media savvy. Also, the fact that his preaching style is emulated by other preachers, even by those who are highly critical of his teachings, suggests that, in a politico-institutional setting that creates heightened competition among Muslim speakers, a preacher’s modes of delivery and dissemination are crucial to his political success. Yet, I suggest, the import of media technologies does not simply consist in their technical capacity to reach a broader audience. I will show that the media products Haidara employed are so significant because they refashion the interaction between preacher and audience, thereby giving rise to a new sense of religious community. The specific sensual experience afforded by audio-recorded sermons, and the material and institutional structures in which they operate, enable listeners to feel as members of a community extending beyond a physical and spatial immediacy.

To understand how audio-recordings affect the ways in which Muslims currently intervene in public debate, we need to know more about the institutional foundations of the public sphere. Although these institutional foundations are structured by the logic of commodity circulation and consumption, this commercial dimension, and its implications for the nature of Muslim public reasoning has not yet


34 Many followers and fans describe Haidara’s speech as sharp, witty, and “hot” (that is, as moving people to action).
received much scholarly attention. I therefore start my investigation of mass-mediated religious discourse and its capacity to transform the dynamics of the public sphere by focusing on the institutional and market setting in which audio recordings exert their particular effects. In a second step, I examine the institutions of sociality and organizational structures through which sermon cassettes circulate. To complement existing scholarship on sermon content and of listeners’ views of the ethical relevance of sermon audition, I explore their more inexplicit practices of media engagement and circulation. My intention is to show how cassettes, by initiating novel “cultures of circulation”, contribute to emergent clusters of discursive exchange within the broader public sphere and thereby affect political debate as well as religious controversy, its forms and significance.

Arenas of mass-mediated religious reasoning
A growing number of Muslims in urban Mali highlight their individual responsibility in “moving closer to God”, leading a life in conformity with (what they consider) Islamic norms, and in inviting others to follow their call. This conviction, combined with their marked interest in education and personal enlightenment, leads believers to assume new

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35 But see Armando Salvatore, ‘Staging Virtue: The Disembodiment of Self-Correctness and the Making of Islam as Public Norm’, in Georg Stauth (ed.), Islam- Motor or Challenge of Modernity, pp. 87-120 (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1998); Jeremy Stolow, ‘Communicating Authority, Consuming Tradition: Jewish Orthodox Outreach Literature and its Reading Public’, in Meyer and Moors (eds.), Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere, pp. 73-90. Soares (Prayer Economy, pp. 170f) loosely refers to Muslim discursive forms as “commodities” yet refrains from discussing the analytical implications of this categorization. I will return to this point in footnote 53.


38 Schulz, ‘Islamic Revival’, ch. 7
roles in public debate and to push for greater public representation. Their endeavor to publicly articulate their ethical sensibilities is embedded in an expanding religious consumer culture spanning from mass-mediated religious programs to a variety of goods. The pervasive nature of religious media products in urban life transforms the conditions, social institutions and expressive registers of public debate. It introduces novel opportunities to gain prominence in Mali’s public sphere and to appeal to the public in its role as a common, morally evaluating “we”. How did these structural changes enable ‘Islam’ to become such a successful register of moral community making, and what role do religious media products in particular play in its success?

Similar to “live” preaching on Fridays and religious holidays, mass-mediated forms of Muslim public reasoning are informed by a historical trend toward the vernacularization of sermonizing. This process gained momentum since the late 1940s, when topics and styles of sermonizing changed with the new conditions and concerns triggered by colonial rule. New media technologies initially played a limited role in this process. In contrast to the on-going tradition of “live” sermonizing, radio-mediated forms of Muslim discourse constituted a public restricted mostly to the urban segments of the population and, in the case of print media, to the middle classes who could afford and read French newspapers. The situation changed in the 1980s, with the establishment of local relay stations of Malian national radio and the spread of audio recording technology and products, triggered by the massive import of well-priced tape recorders and radio posts from Southeast Asia.

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42 Until the mid-1980s, reception of national radio was by and large limited to the population in and near the urban centres of Mali’s south (Dorothea Schulz, *Perpetuating the Politics of Praise* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2001), ch. 5-7). In other regions of Mali, the reception of national radio was subject to considerable seasonal variation or, as in the north, impossible.
Until 1991, the year in which President Traore’s single-party rule was overthrown, these recordings were the principal medium for circulating sermons, music and oral tradition beyond the purview of the state. Since then, the mushrooming of local radio stations, among them two private Islamic radio stations in Bamako, has forced the Ministry of Communication to make major adjustments in broadcasting formats, styles, and policy of national radio, in response to the popularity of private radio stations’ interactive broadcasting styles. Local radio stations generally broadcast the sermons of various preachers against a fee, and thereby play a role in regulating the contents of, and access to, Muslim public debate.

Sermon cassettes (kaseti wajuli, literally, cassette preaching) support a Muslim public reasoning that is shaped by a broader culture of religious consumption. Sermon recordings are religious objects in a double sense.

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My argument is based on recordings of sermons by various preachers that were collected by Louis Brenner in the mid- and late 1980s. The stylistics of these sermons suggest that preachers were less experienced with this broadcast technology and its inherent opportunities for inter-medial references.

44 Some commodities are “religious” in the sense that consumers link them to the cultivation of religious virtue (such as the dress items worn by male and female supporters of Islamic moral reform), or associate them with practices of worship (such as prayer beads which are wrapped tightly around the right wrist and are carried along on believers’ daily excursions to the market). Their differentiated employment supports Starrett’s argument about the unstable “commodity” status of religious objects in Cairo (Gregory Starrett, ‘The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo’, *American Anthropologist*, 97, 1, 1995, p. 59; also see Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process’, in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things*, pp. 64-91. Other goods, such as amulets, become “religious” with the engraving of sacred verses or images (Constant Hamès, ‘Taktub ou la Magie de l’Écriture Islamique. Textes Soninké à Usage Magique’, *Arabica* 34, 1987, pp. 305-325; Louis Brenner, *Reflexions sur le savoir islamique en Afrique de l’Ouest* (Bordeaux: Centre d’études d’Afrique noire, 1985); Soares, *Prayer Economy*, ch. 4; also see Starrett, ‘Religious Commodities’, p.53).
They are related to worship and, as extended forms of Quran recitation and “re-citation”\textsuperscript{45}, materialize sacred speech. In the case of sermons delivered by preachers who are said to hold special qualities and divine blessings (\textit{baraka}), their aural mediation highlights charismatic qualities of the leader’s voice and exhibits his special “gift of grace”.\textsuperscript{46} Below, I will show that the commercial potential of these religious objects is realized in varying degrees, depending on the consumer’s identity and the modes of religious sociality in which they are employed. The commercial dimension of cassette sermons also unfolds along gender-specific lines.\textsuperscript{47}

In Mali, transnational circuits of commercialization have intensified in the era of neo-liberal reform, that is, since the mid-1980s, along with widening opportunities for low-cost travel to the sites of the \textit{hijz} and other areas of the Muslim world. The resulting “Islamic informal sector”\textsuperscript{48} thrives on the marketing of various high-prestige religious paraphernalia imported mostly from Morocco, Egypt, Saudia Arabia, and Southeast Asia. Among them are items made of brass, paper or hand-woven cloth for purposes of decoration; wall posters, huge billboards, bumper stickers, prayer beads, framed Quranic verses, and utensils specifically decorated and used for ritual purposes. These commodities contrast with locally produced, low-cost religious items by indexing the owner’s cosmopolitan outlook and claim to a universalist Muslim identity. Locally produced dress items and audio-recorded sermons in national languages,

\textsuperscript{45} Tayob, \textit{Islam in South Africa}.

\textsuperscript{46} Schulz, ‘Charisma Revisited’; ‘Islamic Revival’, ch. 8.

\textsuperscript{47} The cassette sermons of female leaders differ from taped sermons of male preachers in that only some of them are produced for sale. One reason for this gender-specific difference is that until recently, it was inappropriate for women to deliver sermons in public. Women beyond menopause were encouraged to offer moral advice to younger women but only in specifically designated areas outside the mosque or within the courtyard (see Bintou Sanankoua, ‘Les Associations Féminines Musulmanes à Bamako’, Bintou Sanankoua and Louis Brenner (eds.), \textit{L’enseignement islamique au Mali}, pp. 105-125 (Bamako: Jamana, 1991).

in contrast, bear a local imprint. The sermon tapes are comparatively cheap and accessible to people without literacy skills and religious training, and figure among the most widely consumed religious commodities.

The expanding market of religious commodities allows believers to enlarge the spectrum of spiritual experiences and to integrate them into their daily, mundane activities. Because some of the religious objects are held to have special, protective or spiritually enhancing qualities\(^{49}\), they enable their users to acquire, experience and express religious merit. In short, religious commodities offer opportunities for spiritual experience in everyday life, and simultaneously create the need to do so.\(^{50}\) This trend is evident in the ways many supporters of Islamic moral renewal comment on the inundation of daily life with religious media and objects. Their comments reveal a deep ambivalence towards the thriving of a religious consumer culture\(^{51}\), and believers’ awareness of the obligation to realize their faith in daily practices and settings not directly related to ritual and worship.

Moreover, religious commodities allow believers to view themselves as members of a morally evaluating public or “moral community”. The effects of a proliferating, partly mass-mediated Islamic consumer culture on Mali’s public sphere is, I will argue, twofold and paradoxical. Religious consumption facilitates the spread of Islamic norms of conduct into arenas that Mali’s post-independent regimes sought to define as “secular”. It facilitates new forms of community, yet also generates sites for the

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\(^{49}\) Schulz, ‘Islamic Revival’, ch. 8, 9.

\(^{50}\) Starrett argues that under neo-liberal economic conditions, the Egyptian economy creates consumers of religious commodities in two ways. The expansion of a religious market creates the possibilities and a need to express one’s religious identity by consuming religious commodities. Secondly, the expansion of a commodity industry creates a consumer culture in which the widening gap between rich and poor is expressed through the acquisition of goods. This in turn creates a need to purchase protective religious commodities that will fend off the envy of others. Starrett, ‘Religious Commodities’.

\(^{51}\) Dorothea Schulz, ‘Morality, Community’.
expression of religious/moral difference within the public sphere, and thus renders the latter’s segmentation more manifest than before.

The moral economy of cassette sermons
The immersion of various objects of Muslim piety in an urban consumer culture has been instrumental to the emergence of new clusters of discursive exchange that restructure Mali’s public sphere from within. To understand the nature of this restructuring process and the role of sermon recordings in it, we need to know more about the dynamics of cassette circulation and the social formations or “interpretive communities” it generates.52 Here, I will draw out the complexities inherent in the commodity nature of sermon tapes.53 I argue that even if the commercial dimension of sermon recordings is instable, their immersion into a religious consumer culture is conducive to the move of Islam to greater prominence in public debate.

Sermon recordings form part of a culture of moralizing that spans such diverse settings as religious ceremonies and learning circles of members of the Islamic renewal movement. Although it lies in the

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53 My analysis of the commodity character of sermon recordings contrasts with Soares’s (Prayer Economy, ch.6) treatment of the concept of commodity. Soares refers to a range of services offered by religious leaders in Nioro as “commodities”. Yet, it remains unclear in what sense people conceive of them as commodities if, as Soares points out, they refer to some of them as “gifts”. This tension calls for an analysis of emic accounts of the transformation of services which were conventionally represented as “disinterested gifts” into commodities, a transformation that is not limited to services of religious patronage. Dorothea Schulz, ‘Morals of Praise: Broadcast Media and the Commoditization of Jeli Praise Performances in Mali’, Research in Economic Anthropology, 19, 1998, pp.117-133; also see Appadurai, Social Life of Things, Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, ‘Introduction’, in J. Parry, and M. Bloch (eds.), Money and the Morality of Exchange, pp. 1-32 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
responsibility of the Ministry for Internal Affairs to authorize the circulation of individual cassettes, in practice, officials are unable to exert full control. Most of the sermonizing is done by men but there are a growing number of women, mostly the leaders of Muslim women’s neighborhood associations, who engage in this form of public deliberation. Cassette preachers come from all walks of life and display various degrees of erudition and rhetorical skills. The recording and broadcasting of sermons constitutes but one entry point into public moral deliberation. Preachers who can afford it pay local radio stations to broadcast their sermons because this allows them to reach a wider audience covering a semi-urban radius of up to 30 miles.

Sermon tapes made for sale are subject to market fluctuations of supply and demand, similar to other religious goods, such as dress and decorative items. Their prices and sales rates shift over the course of a year. Most sermons are sold immediately before and during the fasting month. The low-tech and low-finance character of sermon tapes makes their production attractive for people with no starting capital. As religious goods, they bear no risk of unprofitable overproduction; once a master copy exists, reproductions are made on demand.

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54 These leaders represent an older generation of women supportive of Islamic moral renewal who have considerable informal influence in urban neighbourhoods. Their sermon recordings circulate among their followers and, in some cases, are broadcast on local radio in Bamako. These leaders are in competition with a few younger women who, trained in Arabic and religious sciences in countries of the Maghreb, have recently been allowed to lecture on national media.

55 Dorothea Schulz, ‘In pursuit of publicity’, pp. pp. 170ff. ; also see Davis, ‘Preaching’, ch. 2, 3. Depending on a preacher’s popularity, broadcasting an hour of his sermonizing costs between 500 and 750 FCFA (1000 FCFA= 1,50 Euro).

56 In 2006, prices for sermon tapes ranged between 750 and 1250 FCFA.

57 Some listeners make recordings of “live” preaching sessions for, as they put it, their own enlightenment. Because those who attend the preaching session usually know each other, it is practically impossible for someone to make and sell sermon recordings while preserving his anonymity. The personal ties between preachers and their followers thus exert control not over the recording process but over the sale of tapes.
Producers, suppliers and shop owners tend to entertain a relationship of clientage to the preacher whose sermons they commercialize along local and transnational networks.\textsuperscript{58} The interweaving of religious patronage, sermonizing and enterprise makes the commercial production of sermon tapes a perfectly legitimate activity. Neither preachers nor followers feel that a believer’s interest in making a living from selling sermons invalidates his true devotion to the cause of Islam. Supporters of the moral reform movement consider the purchase and lending of tapes as two similarly valuable acts and building blocs of \textit{dawa} that is, the “invitation” extended to others to “move closer to God”\textsuperscript{59}. Many followers of Haidara, for instance, denounce as “asocial” people who make and sell their own recordings of Haidara’s sermons, and thus reduce the profit margin of the young men who are recognized by Haidara as legitimate vendors of his tapes. Critics do not denounce the selling of sermon tapes \textit{per se}, but the “immoral” duplication of tapes as an attack on young men’s attempts to make a “decent” living. Clearly, to many supporters of Islamic moral renewal, the commodity character of sermon recordings does not obviate their moral value in propelling fellow Muslims into ethical action. The fact that they view fluctuations in the price of individual tapes as commonsensical shows that they take no issue with their working as commodities and their immersion into a market of mass-mediated products.

However, sermon tapes cannot be equated with other commodities. What I suggest is that, similar to what Starrett observed in Egypt, cassette sermons and other objects of religious consumption may move in and out of their commodity status\textsuperscript{60} or may bear different tinges of a commodity depending on the forms of sociality and relationships of religious patronage within which they are consumed and which they structure. Several reasons lead me to emphasize the “special” volatile

\textsuperscript{58} Davis, ‘Preaching’, ch. 4

\textsuperscript{59} To borrow a tape from a vendor (to surreptitiously reduplicate it) would imply a lack of “compassion” and support for this person and his attempt to make a living in conformity with Islamic norms.

\textsuperscript{60} Starrett, ‘Religious Commodities’.
commodity character of cassette sermons. As I mentioned before, some sermon recordings are not sold on the market, such as those of certain female leaders.\textsuperscript{61} In contrast to the vested interest of cassette producers and vendors in making a profit and in putting a stop to the reduplication of sermon tapes outside their clientalist network, preachers do little to regulate the recording and distribution process. Partly, this is because they welcome as broad a dissemination of their message as possible. They compete with other Muslim leaders and preachers over a following and social standing, rather than over immediate financial gain.\textsuperscript{62} A widespread reach of their teachings will add to their reputation and following, which in turn augments their success in a national arena.

To the followers of individual preachers, sermon tapes have both a morally edifying and a commodified dimension. Whenever a tape is used for moral exhortation and circulate along relations of exchange, their commodity nature is downplayed. But because sermon cassettes embody the financial and moral “support” offered to producers and vendors by fellow believers, their commodity dimension is never fully lost. Preachers and acolytes do not perceive the shifting edifying and commercial connotations of sermon tapes as an inherent tension or contradiction. Rather, they view the commodity character of sermon tapes as contributing to the bonds among supporters of Islamic moral renewal.\textsuperscript{63}

But not all Muslims in Mali view the commercial dimension of sermon tapes with such sympathetic eyes. The volatile commodity nature of sermon tapes, their oscillation between various roles and effects, generates ambivalence brought to the open in debates on the moral “character” of sermon tapes. Members of the AMUPI steering committee and other established Muslim authorities, for instance, denounce the spread of what they call “freelance preaching” on audio- and video tapes. They contrast the “strife-instigating” character of sermon tapes and its orientation towards “entertainment” (\textit{tlon, baro}) to the “consensus-creating”, educational intent (\textit{ladili}) of “traditional”

\textsuperscript{61} These women are reluctant to spread their moralizing beyond a circle of close followers, most often because they fear the criticism of other proponents of the movement.
\textsuperscript{62} See Villalon, \textit{Islamic society}, ch. 4, 5.
preaching, and warn that the entertaining elements of a preacher’s “forceful speech” will displace a sermon’s edifying effect. These complaints echo a tendency among Malians from different walks of life to denounce the commodification of oral tradition and to view an oral genre’s exchange value as antithetical to its ethical (use) value. Muslim critics of the mushrooming sermon tape industry associate the commodity nature of these sermons with an emptying out of “authentic” intent. As we have seen, many members of the Islamic renewal movement do not share this view. I would argue that the neat contrast critics establish between the ethical value of “traditional” sermonizing and the “venal” character of mass-mediated sermons, helps them to unambiguously categorize the latter whose commodity status is in reality more volatile and hazy.

Yet, I suggest, there is more to Muslim authorities’ denouncement of the intertwining of Muslim public reasoning and a commercial entertainment culture. Their criticisms reveal two concerns relating to the proliferation of mass-mediated religious discourse. First, members of the religious establishment resent that decentralized media products feed into the destabilization of traditional religious authority, by extending the field of religious debate to individuals without

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63 By emphasizing the (volatile) commodity dimension of sermon tapes, I differ from Launay (Spirit Media) and Hirschkind (‘Civic Virtue’; *Ethical Soundscape*, ch. 3, 4) who argue that sermon tapes are not commodities in the proper sense because they are made by listeners only for their own immediate benefit. The reasons for the discrepancy between my interpretation and theirs are, I suggest, twofold. One is that our analyses refer to different regional and cultural settings and historical periods. The second relates to our divergent analytical interests. Launay discusses sermon cassettes in Northern Ivory Coast in the 1980s when sermon recordings were to a lesser degree integrated into a religious consumer culture. Hirschkind’s study of the “ethics of cassette listening” among male consumers in Cairo refers to a cultural context in which the disciplinary traditions of Islam enter into an entirely different relationship with the forces of consumer culture. My analysis focuses less on believers’ explicit reflections on the ethics of tape sermon audition, but on their more inexplicit practices of media engagement and circulation.

64 Schulz, *Politics of Praise*, ch. 4, 6.
conventional credentials of religious leadership. Second, their criticisms reveal an awareness that sermon tapes have both unifying and fragmenting effects for Muslim public reasoning. Sermon tapes allow the dissemination of a preacher’s moral call to a wider constituency and bolster his public standing. At the same time, they generate opportunities for the expression of difference and disagreement, and thereby undermine leaders’ claims to speak on behalf of a unified Muslim community. By instantiating and disseminating preachers’ individual interpretations and proselytizing styles, they bring out particularistic Muslim standpoints, and therefore reinforce the centrifugal tensions inherent in public debate. Muslim critics’ reservations about sermon recordings thus relate to the paradoxical or “janus-faced” quality of sermon tapes: their potential to invoke and temporarily embody moral community, and their simultaneous undermining of the moral consensus to which they appeal.

**Cassette audiences as moral communities**

Earlier in this article, I discussed the social and political conditions that enable sermon audio-recordings to unfold their centrifugal powers by facilitating the articulation of difference and particularity within the Muslim community. Let us, then, take a closer look at the integrative capacities of sermon tape recordings. To understand their potential to foster new discursive communities, I focus on the social relations in which these communities are anchored, and through which the moral vocation of sermon tapes, as means and emblems of mutual support, are realized. I explore what the social and discursive practices generated in this process and how they affect established conventions of public debate. Inspired by Lee and LiPuma’s insistence on the connection between the circulation of cultural forms and the moral meanings actors attribute to them, I show that listeners’ emphasis on the edifying effect of sermon tapes is closely related to the material and social modalities of cassette circulation.66

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65 See Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media.*

66 Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, ‘Cultures of Circulation’.
Although sermon tapes are individually purchased and owned, their use and circulation is deeply infused with notions of sociability. The shops (singular, butiki) at which the sermons of particular leaders are reproduced and sold constitute informal meeting places where believers pass on important insider information, and engage in joint tape consumption. Shops run by Haidara’s supporters often serve as “movie theatres” where the local Ansar Dine community gathers to screen Sharif Haidara’s video-recorded public appearances. His followers’ spontaneous engagements with his mass-mediated performances (such as stressing their being “touched” by his word or video-mediated image, and prostrating themselves before and reaching out to the video-screen) illustrate that they partake in his special blessings in much the same way they do during Haidara’s “live” performances. Sermon tapes, by virtue of their mass-mediated and reproducible nature, reproduce and enhance the forms and “spirit” of religious socializing in several respects. A sense of commensality and solidarity is built around the joint consumption of a tape recording. Moreover, whenever followers of a particular leader come together, their social act of listening indexes the relationship of intimacy and identification that individual acolytes

67 Similar events were reported by Kim Davis during her field work on Ansar Dine group activities in Segu (Kim Davis, personal communication, Montreal, May 2001).


69 These forms of veneration are not limited to media engagements (see Soares Prayer Economy, ch. 3,5). Ansar Dine members, for instance, engage in very similar ways with other material tokens of their attachment to their leader. Posters, stickers, and dress items that depict their spiritual guide and his family offer them the opportunity to transform their emotional identification, and their spiritual attachment and devotion into an extension of their embodied practices of veneration, Schulz, ‘Islamic Revival’, ch. 8.
establish to their “teacher.” To these believers, the primary significance of the recordings is not their potential to evade state control, but their capacity to convey their leader’s immaterial, spiritual qualities and to pull listeners into a shared realm of experience.

That audio recordings are conducive to, even if not decisive for, emergent forms of sociability is evident in the tape-exchange among members of “Muslim women’s groups” (sing., *silame musow ton*). Members who participate in the circulation or, as they call it, in the “lending” of tapes acutely memorize the owner, current and past users of individual cassettes. Lending periods range from two weeks to several months. Tape circulation evolves through a sequential chain of users and establishes an extended temporal and social relationship of shared consumption among the different members of a women’s group. Tapes are not the only objects that follow and reproduce these trajectories of bonding. Various goods, such as certain dress items, household goods, booklets and religious paraphernalia similarly circulate through these female networks of “lending”. Yet it is sermon tapes which women expressly link to “mutual understanding” and “empathy” (*badenya*). “Tape relations” thus establish and simultaneously index the moral and emotional nature of group membership. This insight contrasts with Habermas’s view of the degrading effects of commercial, mass-mediated culture on public debate. Even if the partly commercial use of sermon tapes leads to the fragmentation of the public as a common body by furthering the assertion of particular identities and interpretations, it also sustains a sense of commonality and sharing among people who come together as members of a particular interpretive community within the public sphere.

Most women who belong to a Muslim women’s neighbourhood group listen regularly to sermon tapes recordings during their weekly group gatherings and informal visits to fellow members. Women’s individual consumption of tapes is generally confined to the compound because women rarely own the tape recorders on which they play the sermon tapes and thus cannot carry them outside the courtyard, as many men do. Male listeners use sermon tapes in similar ways, for instance in order to initiate debates during their learning sessions or during their daily socializing (“grin”, see Brenner forthcoming). Yet, to a greater extent than women, men tend to listen to sermon tapes individually as well, during car and bus trips, at the market and in shops.
Audio recordings mediate and foster sociability in still other ways. Their sheer materiality, their existence as visible, palpable and aesthetic objects, enables them to (re)fashion believers’ modes of relating to each other and their imaginations of moral community. Covers of sermon tapes give many hints about their origins and previous users. Those produced at a “recording studio” associated with an association or particular preacher (by far the least share of sermon tapes) are usually decorated with a cover illustration, such as the preacher’s picture on the casing. Yet on most recordings, only the date and place of the sermon’s delivery is written and, in the case of popular tapes, the sermon’s central topic. Cassette sermons delivered by preachers well-known for their erudition and rhetorical skills, sometimes gain such a notoriety that they carry specific names and are attributed an individual personality, on the basis of the preacher’s identity, his credentials and social standing, and the sermon’s topic.

In addition to these “impersonating” decorations, tapes work as repositories of previous users and their traces, such as scratches and particular colors of dust. Some believers aptly decipher earlier consumers by these physical marks, and spontaneously comment on the reverence (or carelessness) with which the object has been treated. Earlier stations in a tape’s movement are also conveyed in the remarks some users scribble on the tape covers to indicate what sections they found important or where on the tape a particular (usually hotly debated) passage can be found. Tapes thus materialize the moral quest of fellow believers in multiple ways. The aural imprint of a preacher’s authorship and the traces of the tape’s owner and users endow the tapes with a double “spirit of the gift”.\(^{71}\) They embody not only a sense of solidarity and mutual support, but carry with them the preacher’s pious disposition. These at once moral, social and material dimensions of sermon circulation form part of the institutional foundations of cassette audiences which, in their role as clusters of discursive exchange, shape the public sphere by fragmenting it, yet also by fostering new liaisons and circuits of exchange.

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Mediating spiritual experience

So far, I argued that sermon tapes which circulate along networks of lending not only help spread a particular message. In their capacity to materially impersonate the preacher and fellow users, they draw listeners into a realm of shared moral concern and emotional identification. Left out in the analysis was the sensual experience of listening as it is generated by audio recording technology.

Brian Larkin has recently suggested that individual media technologies, by allowing for a specific materiality of consumption practices, generate particular processes of mediation and of religious experience.72 I argue elsewhere that audio recording technology, by virtue of the sensual and aesthetic experience it generates, fosters particular receptive processes and forms of discursive community.73 These communities are linked to certain formats and styles of public intervention all of which feed into the reconfiguration of the contents and sites of public debate.

I now turn to the perceptual processes underlying Haidara’s evocations of moral community, to assess how audio recording technology might affect public debate and of the place of religion in it. My analysis focuses on the ways followers of Haidara and other supporters of Islamic moral reform comment on and conceive of their sermon audition practices.

Although those who regularly listen to sermon tapes disagree about the proper use and format of sermons, most listeners emphasize the edifying effects of sermon tapes.74 Particularly striking in their accounts is how much they highlight the ability of a preacher’s voice to, literally, propel them into moral action. They clearly identify a particular emotive

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73 Schulz, ‘Islamic Revival’, ch.8,9.

potential in aurally mediated experiences. To put it differently, they give audio recordings, as products of a technology that privileges the audible over the visible, a very special place in their ethical self-making endeavor. Why is this so? What form of sensual experience is generated by audio recording technology and how does it shape the kind of religious cognition and emotionality listeners may experience? 75

Aural media, among them audio tapes and radio broadcasts, make possible a hearing experience that is at once public and intimate in nature and allows preachers to create a particular sense of moral community. The way in which Haidara establishes an imaginary dialogue with listeners, visible and invisible, illustrates this point. Live recordings of Haidara’s sermons, delivered during visits to towns in southern Mali and northern Ivory Coast, are full of references to the mass-mediated setting and inter-textual76 character of his teachings.77 His sermons entail a meta-commentary on the mass-mediated form of his exhortation and on the virtual nature of his community of followers who are bound together by jointly engaging with their leader’s speech.78 Haidara’s performative creation of an audience which persists through time but is refracted across space echoes conventional forms of sermonizing.79 Here, too, listeners’ feelings of belonging crystallize in a sense of shared moral standards. Yet audio recording technology highlights the sensual experience of being “drawn together” into a community of conviction.


76 Similar to television series, Haidara often starts a sermon with a topic he already discussed in another locality. On other occasions, he refers to previous statements made outside of a formal preaching session.

77 Haidara casually mentions that earlier recordings of his sermons would allow his followers to “update” themselves about his most recent teachings before attending to his public preaching session.

78 Schulz, ‘Morality, Community’.

79 Schulz, Politics of Praise, ch. 6.
by channeling attention on the preacher’s personal qualities as they are embodied in his voice.

There thus exists a complex intertwining of the socially situated, discursive and material practices that allow particular discursive communities, such as Haidara’s “community of true believers”, to come into being. Haidara’s emotionally charged evocation of a moral community is vital to his success, yet his efficacy also depends importantly on various material and social practices that render the sensual perception of his discursive interventions meaningful. Essential to the emergence of a mass-mediated “community of true believers” are the emotionality of media practices and their capacity to foster spiritual experience, not only cognitive appreciation of sermon content. This multi-layered matrix of emotional and sensual experiences, and social and material practices that relate to individual media technologies provide the backdrop against which the Malian public, as a sphere of discourse and as an imagined body of like-minded people, is constantly evoked and reconfigured.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that the intertwining of recent social and political processes, among them the strengthening of a movement of Islamic moral renewal, the proliferation of media technologies, and the spread of consumer culture, has increased the appeal of Islam as a community-building idiom in Mali’s public arenas. Rather than simply indicating a movement of Islam to greater public prominence or to the “empowerment” of religious forces that threaten secular state politics, these transformations entail a reconfiguration of the institutional structure, contents and forms of public debate.

My guiding concern was to ascertain how new technologies of mediating religious experience affect the dynamics of the public which is always characterized by a tension between the centrifugal forces of difference, disagreement and segmentation on one side, and the appeal of and to a unified body of “the” people on the other. I focused on the social life of audio-recorded sermons to show how they, in their
interlocking with material practices and social institutional changes, have facilitated the emergence of new discursive communities within Mali’s public sphere since the on-set of neo-liberal political and economic reform. I sought to understand how audio-recording technology, propelled by the dynamics of commodification and consumption, contributes to reconfigurations of the relationship among religious actors, for instance by unsettling established religious authority.

Over the past two decades, sermon audio-recordings, in conjunction with changing economic, discursive and material parameters in which they are embedded, have facilitated the emergence of new clusters of religious discursive exchange that restructure the public sphere from within, and thereby affect the terms on which Islam (pre)occupies public debate and imagination. Sermon recordings are not solely responsible for these changes yet they play a specific role in producing moral community – and asserting difference— in the public sphere. Similar to other media whose production and consumption cannot be centrally controlled, they have enabled the move to public prominence of a variety of “interpreters of Islam” who seek to articulate an Islamic normativity as the basis of the common good. The at once integrating and fragmenting potential of audio recordings play an equivocal role in this process. Paradoxically, the same processes that enhance the possibilities of Muslims of various backgrounds and pedigree to participate in public debate simultaneously undermine their appeal to Islamic scholarly consensus (ijma). While these processes strengthen these Muslims’ possibilities to speak in public, they weaken their capacities to speak as the public, a claim that is pivotal to their quest for collective moral renewal.

Clearly, it would be misleading to assume that (mass) media technologies or media products per se reconfigure public debate, for instance by giving rise to new interpretive communities. As I demonstrated, supporters of particular religious interpretations emerge as communities — or “poles” of dissent — around multiple material and social practices not all of which are directly related to media engagements.

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This insight could motivate anthropologists of the “public life of Islam” to pay closer attention to the material technologies and social institutions constitutive of Muslim public reasoning, in contemporary Africa and elsewhere. This perspective would generate new insight into the ways various, mediated and unmediated, discursive practices and artifacts constitute listeners as religious subjects who can be summoned in the name of a moral public.81

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