Islamic Pathways

Islamic youth associations and Muslim identity formation in Bamako, Mali

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May 2010
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Acknowledgements

During this research project I have been fortunate enough to receive the support and guidance of a range of people. Without their help this thesis would not have been possible.

First, I want to thank my father for his constant support throughout my studies. Especially during fieldwork the interest and encouragement from home meant a lot.

I want to express my gratitude to my friends and classmates in Leiden, Siri, Martina and Roos, who understood the struggles of research and shared in the pleasure of fieldwork in Africa. I also want to thank friends in Nijmegen who have been by my side during every phase of the project. I want to mention Rosalijne specifically for her encouragement during the writing process.

At the Africa Studies Centre in Leiden I want to thank Dr. Benjamin Soares and Dr. Mayke Kaag for their guidance and encouragement in this project, and for their useful comments on my work. All shortcomings in this thesis remain my own.

In Bamako I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Amadou Sow at l’Institut des Sciences Humaines for his encouragement in the field, and to Dr. Isaiie Dognon at the University of Bamako and Mr. Moussa Baba Sylla at l’ORTM for allowing me to make use of their connections. I want to thank Mahamadou F. Keita for helping me out with practical arrangements and for his impeccable translations. I am grateful to Assimou Traore at the University of Bamako for introducing me to Bamanankan.

Most importantly, I am grateful to my informants and friends in Mali who have shared their stories and welcomed me in their communities. While it is not possible to thank them all individually, I want to express my gratitude to Mohamed, Bakary, Afi, Oumou, Manda, Sori, Fabou and Nana for their friendship and their willingness to open up their networks.

I want to thank Salimata, Mariétou, Dramane and Tahirou for their daily companionship, which made my time in Mali even more enjoyable, and helped me get through the few difficult moments. Finally I want to express my deep gratitude to Brahima Camara, Amadou Traore, Mariam Sangare, and their families, for turning Bamako into a home, and for helping me find my way in the city, its culture, its language and its busy streets. *Aw ni ce.*
1. Introduction: The construction of new Muslim identities

*Islamic youth associations in Bamako, Mali*

In the early 1990s, after the coup of March 26, 1991 brought an end to 23 years of autocratic rule under general Moussa Traoré, Mali experienced political liberalization policies that opened up a vast new space for organizations, associations, unions and other official and unofficial nongovernmental groups to blossom (Sanankoua, 1991:1). Within this space Malians have created a flourishing environment of associational life. The numerous plaques and signs that enliven Bamako’s street scene do not only direct passers-by to shops, schools, medical services, government buildings and international NGO headquarters, they also point out the presence of numerous associations, unions and other kinds of civic organizations. These official and officious structures regroup and represent different groups of people with common interests: women, men, workers, farmers, the unemployed, students, youth, the elderly, the handicapped, Christians, Muslims and so forth.

This thesis is about young Muslim men and women in Bamako who have come together in Islamic youth associations. These associations are an important phenomenon to study in relation to modernity. The notion of modernity is an important but complicated one. As the term is often used, in academic literature and in the field, it is necessary to further investigate what modernity stands for in the framework of this thesis. Recent studies of modernity in Africa have moved away from classical modernization theory and its unilinear vision of ‘modernization’ in which all societies were perceived to be moving towards standards of modernity that were set in ‘the West’ (Geschiere, Meyer & Pels, 2009:1). Attempts to make room for cultural particularity with regard to the notion of modernity have led some authors to the exploration of the existence of ‘local’, ‘parallel’ or ‘multiple’
modernities (see Hefner, 1997, Larkin, 1997, Spitulnik 2002). Yet these relativistic notions have also been criticized, as they corner Africans again, this time in their own version of modernity (Geschiere, Meyer & Pels, 2009:1-2). Some scholars (see Englund & Leach, 2000) have argued to stay away from the notion of modernity altogether. However, as Geschiere, Meyer and Pels (2009:1) point out modernity has become part of the African vocabulary and can therefore not be easily brushed aside. Although clear-cut definitions are misleading, the notion of ‘modernity’ seems to refer to “a basic sense of living in a new time, implying an opposition between ‘us’ as radically divorced from ‘tradition’, and ‘others’ who are still backward or not yet developed” (ibid, 2009:2). In this view Islamic youth associations seem to be at the heart of several modern processes and developments. First, the existence of many of these associations in urban Mali today is the direct result of the political liberalization of the early 1990s. In addition, they benefit significantly from globalising forces such as mass media and communication technologies and have proliferated in urban environments.

While urbanisation is a process that accelerated within the colonial context, the influence of modern western notions has been particularly strong in the postcolonial period through development and aid programs. Between the early 1980s and late 1990s the Malian state-dominated economy has been liberalised under pressure from Western donors. Within this period four major Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP’s) were implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that aimed at privatisation and the liberalisation of trade. The results of these SAP’s have been mixed, even at a macro-level, and Mali remains one of the poorest countries in the world with western aid associations very present (Gutelius, 2007:59-60).

In spite of considerable western intervention and the promises of western modernity, most Malian youth have been forced into marginal social, economic and political roles. Most young women and men who have migrated to Africa’s cities have not been able to find employment in the civil service or to pursue a career in the business sector (Argenti, 2002:127-8). Like many youth in Africa, young Malians suffer from global disconnect (Ferguson, 2009:8-16), if they were ever connected at all. Anti-western sentiments fuelled by such disconnection, enhanced by the recent rhetoric of “war on terror” (Masquelier, 2007), have led Muslim youth in urban West Africa to identify with other possible sources of progress and modernity, suggesting the existence of multiple trajectories of modernity. Larkin and Meyer suggest that they therefore sometimes take on Islam as a “possibility [...] not only to disassociate themselves, albeit symbolically, from their extended family and generate new notions of the self, but also to present religion as an access point to global circuits” (Larkin & Meyer, 2006:309).

In this thesis I explore the role of Islamic youth associations in the lives of young men and women in Bamako and demonstrate how they can be an important force in the creation of new Muslim
identities, distancing young Muslim men and women from dominant religious practice and connecting them to new global circuits. Two issues from the literature have specifically encouraged me to dive into the world of Muslim youth in Mali. First, as Otayek and Soares (2007) point out, since the 1990s the character of a lot of the commentaries on Islam and reformism has been “superficial and alarmist, focusing almost exclusively on issues of international security” (Otayek & Soares, 2007:6), while in fact there is little substantial historical and sociological knowledge of Islam in contemporary Africa (ibid, 2007:7). Sufism is mostly presented as the peaceful, syncretic religion of the majority, which is being threatened by the marginal, yet upcoming forces of reformist Islam. In this view Sufism should be promoted and protected, in order for it to be able to function as a safeguard against Islamic radicalism (ibid, 2007:6-7). Through the investigation of Islamic youth associations in Mali I intend to contribute to a more balanced academic representation of so-called ‘reformist’ Islamic youth groups.

Second, as Kaag (2007) suggests in her study of Islamic NGOs in Chad: “studies of intervention and transnationalism in Africa have focused mainly on Western forms of intervention and have neglected the Islamic transnational influence on Sub-Saharan Africa” (Kaag, 2007:85). I would like to explore such transnational influence on specific groups of Muslim youth in Mali by looking at how these connections play a role in Islamic youth associations and, more importantly, what role global aspirations and international influences play in the daily lives of its members. It is important to point out though that Mali is not only part of the Muslim world, but also “a place where what purportedly lies outside of Islam –that is, the un-Islamic, or the non-Islamic (which is not to say western)- figures very prominently”(Soares, 2006:79). The ideology of Muslim youth associations is thus not only created in relation to the Muslim world, but also in relation to other global and local historical, cultural, economical and political factors.

I will thus approach the issue of the representation of so-called ‘reformist’ youth, as well as the issue of (Islamic) transnational influences from the perspective of youth who participate in Islamic youth associations. Proposing that these associations play a significant role in the construction of new religious identities among young men and women in Bamako, I aim to describe what these associations offer to youth and to what extent this causes an intergenerational break and/or a break with dominant religious practice. In addition, I intend to explore how global aspirations and influences play a role in the lives of the young Muslims involved. To clarify the main questions of the thesis I will first take a closer look to what I mean by Muslim identity formation and why Islamic youth associations might play a vital role in such processes. Next, I consider the anthropological study of Islam. Since this thesis focuses on a specific group of young Muslims, it builds on a considerable body of scholarly work on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. I will briefly explain the different
approaches in the sub-field of the anthropology of Islam and position my research in the ongoing debates. I will also describe the research setting and briefly explain the research methods employed in this project. Finally, I will provide an outline of the thesis.

1.1 Muslim identity formation and the role of associations

In his book on children and youth’s rights in Africa, Argenti (2002) suggests that sport, performance, education and religion are the principal non-militant ways of youth organisation. Organised religion in particular has had a vast impact on societies throughout Africa, providing a sense of belonging in a changing world (Argenti, 2002:138). Youth in Bamako live in an urban environment, the epitome of modernity, globalisation, individualisation and the loss of rural communal and ethnic identities. As LeBlanc (2006) argues in her work on Muslim youth in Bouaké, in these circumstances of reconfigured social connections, Islam can serve as a practical tool of unification:

« Le milieu urbain est marqué par une forte hétérogénéité sociale et culturelle, ce qui implique qu’un grand nombre d’individus, originaires d’endroits différents et possédant diverses pratique culturelles, ont besoin d’établir des rapports les uns avec les autres. En cela l’Islam, comme moyen d’identification collective et de revendication sociale, est beaucoup plus avantageux pour eux que les pratiques ethnoculturelles renvoyant au lieu d’origine ancestrale. » (LeBlanc, 2006:423)

In the urban context Islam can thus serve as an advantageous identity marker. As LeBlanc (2003:86) points out, some authors suggest that in time religious identities will replace the role of ethnic identities entirely (Amselle, 1996). This thesis intends to investigate the role of Islamic youth associations as Islam has become an advantageous identity marker in the urban environment. Since the notion of identity is central to this project, it is important to make explicit what is meant by the term.

In his paper on the construction of Muslim identities in Mali, Brenner (1993) considers identity as “a process of naming: naming of self, naming of others, naming by others” (Brenner, 1993:59). He emphasizes that identities are continually “constructed and reconstructed by self and/or others through continuing actions and discourse in a political context” (ibid, 1993:59). Both actions and discourse are religiously inspired, but are also motivated by social, political and economic incentives (ibid, 1993:59). The process of ‘naming’ of individuals and groups thus takes place within a broader socio-economic context. Therefore the exploration of the dynamics behind the labels people give to themselves and each other can provide insight into processes of social transformation. Brenner
considers the notion of identity as ‘naming’ principally out of pragmatic considerations. While the main principles of his argument are valuable, Brenner’s definition of identity is not satisfactory. I will, indeed, tackle the issue of labeling, but I will approach labeling as a part of the complex issue of identity and identification, rather than presenting it as a working definition of the concept of identity.

Social psychologist Oyserman (2004) looks at the concept of identity from a psychological perspective, focusing on personal rather than collective identities. Oyserman describes identity as that which comes up when we think about ourselves: “what we know or can know about ourselves” (Oyserman, 2004:5). Yet, what comes up when we think about ourselves changes from one situation to another. Identity is therefore situational (Eriksen, 2004:159), and dependent on changing internal and external stimulants. Ewing has developed a theory that builds on this premise. She describes that unconscious shifts take place in the daily experience of individuals: “The person will often be unaware of these shifts and inconsistencies and may experience wholeness and continuity despite their presence” (Ewing, 1990:251). Ewing argues that people organize their experiences through identification. As they keep only one frame of reference in mind in a given situation they experience wholeness and continuity. One can therefore think of Muslim identity as part of an array of identifications. I would like to suggest, however, that for young Muslims in Bamako Islam is one of the main frames of reference, a central point of identification that helps to provide a sense of wholeness and continuity. Here I follow LeBlanc (2006), who shows in her study of Muslim youth in Bouaké that: “l’Islam pénètre leur quotidienneté et agit comme point central de leur conception identitaire ; il forme les bases de leur organisation sociale et de leur sentiment d’appartenance” (LeBlanc, 2006:418).

As Argenti has pointed out, organized religion can provide a sense of belonging in a changing world. The concept of belonging is essential with regard to identity. Nevertheless “in turn identity is necessary for the reading of collectivities, for the identification of individuals as well as groups” (Bouman, 2003:20). Anthropologist Eriksen (2004:156-7) prefers to speak of identification instead of identity, since identities are dynamic and exist only in relation to others. We should therefore broaden Oyserman’s definition of identity (“what we know or can know about ourselves”) by including the role of ‘the other’.

Deliège (2007) connects the notion of identification to associational life. In this view, identity is a dynamic concept that is being shaped in relation to the other, but it also implies belonging to a certain group. Deliège describes this belonging as “moi qui devient nous” (Deliège, 2007:104). Associations are the realisation and materialisation of such an interpretation of identity formation, in this case on religious grounds. Identity formation is an active process, bringing about change,
transformation and social dynamics. One can thus understand associations as an expression of modernity, encouraging the creativity and initiative of its members, and thereby aiming to transform society (Deliège, 2007:104). The connection between identity formation and the concept of transformation has also been made by Amselle (1996) who describes the construction of identities as a system of transformations situated within a broader socio-political process.

An example of such transformation is given by LeBlanc as she shows how Muslim youth associations of Malian youth in Côte d’Ivoire often advocate modern notions of kinship by abandoning the practice of consanguine marriage. This development reflects a shift from an emphasis on the traditional importance of the extended family towards the promotion of the nuclear family (LeBlanc, 2003; 2005; 2006). As modernity and tradition are relational in the sense that one cannot exist without the other (Geschiere, Meyer, Pels, 2009), one would expect members of youth associations to identify themselves as modern in opposition to the ‘traditional other’. Hence, as said before, one’s own identity is always worked out with reference to the other, which almost imperatively leads to stereotyping (Brenner, 1993:75). Within the scope of this thesis, it is therefore important to be cautious of stereotypes that might be present in the field.

In conclusion, identification is a dynamic concept since it is situational and dependent on internal and external stimulants. According to Ewing (1990), to experience wholeness and continuity a person keeps one frame of reference in mind at all times, and shifts between different identities are gradual and not contradictory to the individual. If we connect this logic to the collective identities that are created by Islamic youth associations, associations can play a role in alleviating some of the challenges in a rapidly changing urban environment. They turn Islam into the main frame of reference and help to provide a sense of clarity to members confronted with conflicting identities, as they juggle their devotion to Islam with an urban intellectual lifestyle and the traditional values of their families. In this view Islamic youth associations provide members both with a sense of belonging, as well as a sense of direction that is based on ideas of what constitutes true Islamic practice, even if -as will become clear in this thesis- these ideas in practice are often subject to debate.

1.2 The study of Islam: the danger of dichotomies

In their work on religion in Africa, Van Beek and Blakely (1994) distinguish a prescriptive and an empirical definition of religion. Researchers who take a prescriptive definition of religion as their point of departure concentrate on top-down strategies, texts and religious professionals, while researchers who work with an empirical definition of religion focus on the practice of religion in daily
life (Van Beek & Blakely, 1994:10-1). While these two definitions of religion do meet and are interrelated, it will be most fruitful for the scope of this thesis to take on an empirical definition of religion.

The study of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa has been dominated by two misleading dichotomies. The first dichotomy consists of two different approaches to the study of Islam in local contexts. The second dichotomy separates Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa into two exclusive groups of Sufis and reformists. In this section I will explain these two dichotomies and orientate myself with regard to my position in the ongoing debates.

In his essay on the study of Islam in local contexts Eickelman (1982) gives an overview of the major trends that have appeared in the study of Islam in local contexts, and provides suggestions for new directions of research. He describes a dichotomy between, on the one hand, an approach based on orientalism, which looks for an a-historical Islamic essence and has been heavily critiqued for its neglect of historical and cultural factors, and on the other hand an opposite approach in which academics go as far as speaking of multiple ‘Islams’, emphasizing the multitude of forms of Islam and suggesting that all contexts produce legitimate forms of the same fundamental ‘unconscious’ Islamic principles. This approach, however, raises the same problems as those which led to the rejection of orientalism; Islam is again reduced to a number of fundamental principles (Eickelman, 1982:1). Moreover, it neglects the fact that it is likely that most Muslims consciously believe that the followers of their religion form a united global community. Suggesting otherwise might be deeply offensive to them (Soares, 2000: 279).

In the words of Eickelman (1982) the challenge to social scientists who study Islam is “to describe and analyze how the universalistic principles of Islam have been realized in various social and historical contexts without representing Islam as a seamless essence on the one hand or as a plastic congeries of beliefs and practices on the other” (Eickelman, 1982:1-2). In understanding Islam as a world religion it is thus most fruitful to look for a middle ground between the two approaches. This means that one must take a critical look at the use of terms that express basic dichotomies such as ‘orthodox’, ‘formal’, ‘normative’ and ‘official’ versus ‘popular’, ‘local’ and ‘informal’ (Holy, 1991, in Mommersteeg, 1996:12-3). The concepts in such a model are interwoven, and things that might be seen as ‘local’ or ‘un-Islamic’ might have a broad base in the whole of the Islamic world. Moreover, the use of such dichotomies, even if they claim to be merely descriptive and classifying, always entail subjective interpretations. Religious beliefs and practices are never intrinsically orthodox or unorthodox; they are always interpreted to be such from a certain point of view (Mommersteeg, 1996:13-4). This critique of the use of dichotomies in social science research on Islam does not mean, however, that they should be abandoned completely in the practice of fieldwork and analysis. As
Muslims themselves will make use of evaluative terms such as ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’, the terms are indispensible in understanding Islam in practice. It is up to the researcher, however, to present these terms within their context and to avoid theological discussions and value judgments (Mommersteeg, 1996:15).

The second dichotomy that I want to address concerning Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa is the one made between a reformist Muslim minority on the one hand, and a majority of Sufis connected to Sufi orders on the other. Recent policy documents based on scholarly works have identified this dichotomy, largely informed by a focus on issues regarding international security (Otayek & Soares, 2007:6). As mentioned earlier, Sufism is presented as the peaceful syncretic religion of the majority, which is being threatened by the marginal, yet increasing forces of reformist Islam. From this perspective, Sufism should be promoted and protected, in order to function as a safeguard against Islamic radicalism (ibid, 2007:6-7).

Such a view of African Muslims presents two important problems. First, there is no clear-cut definition of what it means to be a Sufi or a reformist. As shown by Soares (2007), Sufis in Sub-Saharan Africa are not one fixed category of Muslims who all adhere to certain Sufi orders. Historically, there has been great internal diversity and new ways of being Sufi continue to emerge (Soares, 2007:76-8). The same also applies to the other side of the dichotomy, as considerable differences exist between reformist groups and individuals.

If one is willing to overlook the limitations of both terms, one must still admit that African Muslims cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy. It is impossible to classify the millions of Muslims in the region according to these two terms. If Islamic reformism might be a rather marginal phenomenon in some parts of West Africa, the other Muslims cannot automatically be considered Sufis. Then how to characterize these ordinary African Muslims? To answer this question more research is needed indeed (Soares & Otayek, 2007:7).

To sum up, what do these two dichotomies and their critiques mean for this research project? First, it is important to seek the so-called middle ground between the determinism of orientalism and the extreme relativism of the ‘Islams’-approach. To do so, I will analyze gathered data on the Islamic discourse of my target group at the “intersection of the local, the supralocal and the translocal” (Soares, 2000:283). Locality in my case will not so much mean a demarcated geographical area, as well as a specific group of people. Second, I will not completely abandon the use of dichotomous terms as Muslims themselves might use them. I will, however, try to present such terminology as a part of the worldview of my informants and refrain from taking part in any theological discussion myself. As said before, the definition of religion within this project will thus be empirical rather than
prescriptive. Finally, I would like to emphasize that it is important not to define my informants by the terms ‘reformist’ or ‘modernist’, and to be open to different and new ways of Muslim identity formation.

1.3 In the field: Research setting and methodology

1.3.1 The field

This thesis is based on fieldwork that was conducted between late July 2008 and the beginning of January 2009 in Bamako, Mali’s capital and the country’s largest city with an estimated population of over a million. Bamako is Mali’s most important political, economic, cultural and educational centre. Moreover, as Soares points out: “Perhaps not surprisingly, the city has become a centre for Islamic religious activities. Mali’s reformist and modernist Muslims have their highest profile in Bamako and here they have built many schools, mosques and modern Islamic educational institutions” (Soares, 2007: 79). It is thus also in Bamako that most of Mali’s Islamic youth associations are active.

Bamako is a crowded and dispersed city. Yet in spite of its vastness, the costs attached to travel and the fact that Bamako’s traffic can be quite a challenge, people are generally rather mobile. As a result social networks can stretch out across the city, religious networks being no exception. My research activities were therefore not restricted to one neighborhood. My first interview took place a couple of blocks from where I lived. A former member of LIEEMA, a large Islamic student association, agreed to meet me in his house in the neighborhood of Lafiabougou, a five minute walk from my home in Hamdallaye ACI 2000. It was also one of my LIEEMA friends who took me along on her moto for an interview in Kati, a small town about fifteen kilometers from Bamako. This was one of the two visits I made outside of the city, and the furthest I travelled to meet an informant. The other time I crossed the border of the city I visited an Islamic women’s group in Sirakoro Negentanna, a small village a few kilometers from Bamako’s southern outskirts.

During fieldwork the boundaries of the city and its neighborhoods were not only crossed in the geographical sense of the word. As the world and networks of my informants opened up, their stories did not exclusively focus on their immediate surroundings such as their neighborhood or their city. Young men and women in Islamic youth associations in Bamako are part of broader spheres of influence and activity that transcend the boundaries of the city and involve them with the country, the sub region, the continent and the wider world. It should therefore be emphasized, as mentioned above, that even though this thesis is geographically limited to the region of Bamako, locality in this project does not so much refer to a geographical area, but rather to a specific group of people.
1.3.2 Informants

The focus of this project is on Islamic youth associations, and more specifically on the role of these associations in the construction of new Muslim identities among young Muslims in Bamako today. The group of informants at the heart of the research is therefore made up of leading figures and ‘regular’ members of Islamic youth associations. I selected my informants through the technique of snowball sampling, which means that I have made use of the networks of a few key informants in order to approach possible new informants. As the Malian Muslim community is highly interconnected this has proven to be fruitful technique. The downside to the use of snowball sampling, however, is the possibility of getting stuck in one corner of a community. In the middle of my period in the field I indeed felt like I had exhausted the networks of my informants, and that I kept stumbling on the same people and ideas. In order to diversify my data I decided to search for a new group of informants through contacts at the University of Bamako. By doing so I gained a better understanding of the diversity of the Malian Muslim community, the reasons of discontent between certain factions, and the long lasting quest for unity between Mali’s different Muslim adherences.

All in all, the fieldwork period can be roughly divided into three periods; first, the study of LIEEMA and the networks of its members, second, the exploration of UJMMA and its network, and finally, a period in which I gained a better understanding of the relations between different factions in the Malian Muslim community. Of course this division is very general, and it should be emphasized that connections and overlap between different associations and structures were a recurrent phenomenon throughout fieldwork.

As mentioned above, I established the first contacts in the field with the students of LIEEMA (Ligue Islamique des Élèves et Étudiantes du Mali) and its sister association les Amicales Anciens (also known as les deux A). Halfway through my fieldwork I got in touch with members of UJMMA (Union des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali). The majority of this thesis is based on contacts with these two large structures. Through the networks of informants I also got in touch with representatives of several other Islamic associations and institutions, such as AMJM (Association Malienne des Jeunes Musulmans), AISLAM (Association Islamique pour le salut), le Haut Conseil Islamique, Ansar Dine, Al-Muntada Al-Islami, UNAFEM (Union Nationale des Femmes Musulmanes), La Ligue des prédicatrices du Mali, Radio Dambe, members of the faculty of Arabic at the University of Bamako, and several imams. Not all of these informants were directly related to Islamic youth associations, yet they have been important in drawing out the (religious) context in which these associations operate, providing useful background information that enabled me to put the lives and stories of Muslim youth in a broader perspective.
While a diverse group of informants has been approached to get a better understanding of the Malian Muslim community, the focus of the research project has been on Muslim youth. As will become clear in succeeding chapters, what is classified as ‘youth’ – or ‘la jeunesse’ as it is referred to in Bamako – is not a fixed or homogeneous category, since its nature and roles are never constituted in a historical, social and political void. A valid definition of youth can therefore only be made within the local context. If we look at the case of Islamic youth associations in Bamako, it is difficult to come up with a clear-cut definition of youth based on age, as people ranging from their teens to their forties, and sometimes even their fifties participate in these associations. I therefore do not restrict my focus to a certain age group, and adopt a rather broad definition of youth as ‘those who are members of associations that define themselves as Islamic youth associations’. In chapter three I shall elaborate on the complexities of the issue of what constitutes the category of youth in the case of Islamic youth associations in Bamako.

In practice, most of the youth I spoke with who were participating in Islamic youth associations were between the ages of eighteen and forty. The division between male and female informants was rather balanced, but leading figures (such as members of the boards of association) were almost exclusively male, while the ‘regular’ members I interviewed were principally female. This is mainly due to the fact that activities of Islamic youth associations are often gender segregated, which in practice made that I participated more with the female membership of a particular association. While I tried to include all layers of associations, in practice I interacted mainly with very active members, rather than with young men and women who drop in only occasionally. This was in a way inevitable, and it need not be an obstacle in the light of this research project. As active members make the greatest impact on an association, the association probably has the greatest impact on their lives as well. To protect the privacy of individual informants I have made use of pseudonyms in this thesis. Well-known, official figures in the Malian Muslim community are mentioned with their full names.

1.3.3 Methodology
The data on which this thesis is based have been collected through the research technique of participant observation and through formal semi-structured in-depth interviews (Bernard, 2002:203-5). The setting of these interviews depended on the wishes of the informants. Usually I visited the informants at their home or in the headquarters of the association they were a part of. In some cases informants came to meet me at my house, and a couple of interviews took place in the garden of the ENSUP (École Normale Supérieure), a quiet area during the summer holidays located on a central spot in Bamako. Most of the interviews were recorded with a digital recorder. In some cases informants did not want the conversation to be recorded. In those cases I made notes during the
interview that I would further develop shortly after the meeting. In one-on-one interviews I have not made use of an interpreter. A couple of informants, however, preferred to express themselves in Bambara. This only happened during group conversations and other persons present would interpret into French. In this case I would record the conversation to be able to check the Bambara and the translation afterwards. I also recorded the content of several seminars and meetings of associations. If these meetings were in Bamabara, the recordings have been translated into French by Mahamadou F. Keïta, a graduate in anthropology at the University of Bamako. In addition to interviews, I have also made use of some official documents of associations, such as charters and reports.

Formal interviews have provided an interesting body of information, but the research technique of participant observation has proven to be at least equally important in providing useful data. I learned a lot about the world of young Muslims in Bamako from daily life. Maneuvering through the city on foot or on the back of a friend’s motorcycle, spending hours on different family courtyards or partaking in Tabaski and Ramadan celebrations, chatting with informants in informal get-togethers or attending prayer in the mosque; all of these activities have been essential in the creation of trust relationships with informants and have contributed to a collection of field notes that has been indispensable in writing this thesis.

1.4 outline of the thesis

The thesis is divided into three parts. Chapters two (‘Navigating youth: challenges and chances in Bamako’) and three (‘The Islamic landscape of Bamako: Islamic youth associations in a broader perspective’) provide information about the context of Islamic youth associations, while chapter four (‘“Nous sommes pauvres”: Islam as an answer and a direction’) deals with the activities of associations as such and what these activities mean to young Muslims who take part in them. Chapters five (‘Men and women in Islamic youth associations: The abolition of the cellule féminine’) and six (‘Where ‘le Monde Musulman’ and ‘l’Occident’ come in: between transnational connections and local realities’) provide insight into some of the debates in the associations. In a way the sequence of the chapters follows my experience in the field, starting out with the exploration of the city and ending with specific debates surrounding Islamic youth associations and its members.

Chapter two focuses on the situation of youth in Bamako by exploring the different social fields in which youth operate. I will make use of the biographies and life histories of two of my main informants. The field of religion in general, and Islamic youth associations in particular, will be presented as a part of a greater pallet of choices and opportunities through which youth in Bamako navigate. As I argue, for the young men and women who become members of Islamic youth
associations religiosity is an important part of their identity, but an array of intellectual, economic and social forces are at play as well.

Chapter three introduces one of the fields in which the youth I studied navigate on a daily basis, the field that is central to my project; the Islamic landscape of Bamako. I will place Islamic youth associations in the broader national context, describing the liberalization policies of the 1990s and how these policies paved the way for the blossoming of Muslim associations within the urban setting. This rise in the public presence of Islam has rendered visible the fragmentation of the Malian community. This fragmentation is actively responded to nowadays by Malian Muslims. By documenting the creation of UJMMA (Union des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali), an umbrella organization of several youth associations, the fragmentation as well as the striving for unity will become clear.

Chapter four goes further into the roles and activities of Muslim youth associations, connecting them with the issues raised in chapters two and three. I explore why in the whole array of choices in Bamako young people feel attracted to Muslim associations. I argue that while the Islamization of society is part of the message of the associations, most problems and projects have a very practical nature. The term ‘poverty’ in the title of the chapter can be explained in two ways. Informants point out that they are poor in a material way, but what might be even more important is they are also poor in education and knowledge. I will describe how Muslim youth associations offer answers to the question of material poverty, explaining its existence within an Islamic framework and functioning as NGOs, launching and contributing to social projects. This is what connects the youth in Muslim youth associations to their environment, as they try to make an impact on society. Yet at the same time it is what disconnects them from their surroundings, as they respond to new developments through breaking with the religious practice of their parents, advocating increased piety and a turn to the intellectual foundations of Islam.

Chapter five provides a link between Chapters four and six, shifting from what is going on within these associations, which is in a way very focused on local circumstances, to the broader issues of transnationalism and international discourse. I bridge the gap between the two through a discussion of gender and gender roles. Some important debates I encountered in the field were related to the issue of gender. It is interesting to look at gender because it not only touches on practical issues, but it also reveals much about morality. One of the debates centered on the question how women and men should work together in general society and in Muslim youth associations for le travail Islamique. Within this debate the interaction of religious values, cultural standards and outside forces such as the hope to connect with a modern urban lifestyle were being played out.
Chapter six examines specific transnational influences. I explain how Islamic youth associations function as a threshold to the outside world. While I do not claim to provide insight into the full array of transnational contacts of UJMMA and LIEEMA, a description of my experiences in the field offers glimpses of the transnational influences that make their way to the members of Islamic youth associations. Furthermore, exploration of the notion of intégrisme will provide insight into the ambivalent relationship with both ‘the Muslim world’ and ‘the West’.

In the final chapter I shall draw some general conclusions based on the analysis of the previous chapters. I will link these conclusions to the initial research questions that were raised in the introduction.
2. Navigating youth: challenges and chances in Bamako

The stories of two young Islamic activists

«Les quatre roues du Mali aujourd’hui sont les jeunes [...]. Les quatre roues qui supportent le Mali et qui font le bouger. Si on y met de l’air, le Mali peut atteindre la destination qu’il désire.»

This thesis is about a specific group of youth in Bamako. It is based on their stories and their words. Yet it also deals with the world around them, posing the question how global and local aspirations and influences find their way to young Muslim men and women, and how they are appropriated. In their work on youth and social navigation Christiansen, Utas and Vigh (2006) define three approaches to the study of youth. Each approach has a particular view on the autonomy and agency of youth, but they initially differ in their answer to the question what it is we study when we are studying youth. In the social and cultural sciences the definition of youth traditionally stems from the idea that the period of adolescence is a universal biological fact. Although there is truth in the notion of a biologically defined period of adolescence in which psychosomatic changes take place, there are no actual physical or psychological thresholds that universally pinpoint the transition from childhood to adulthood. Therefore, a strict psychological developmental approach overlooks the fact that the definition and experience of youth vary in different social and cultural settings (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh, 2006:14).

The classical anthropological approach of life-stages proposes a definition of youth that tries to combine social and physical developmental thresholds. It defines youth for instance as the period in which a person is able to reproduce, but has not started his or her own family yet. Even though these life stages might often be in line with emic categories, they again pose the risk of pinning down people in categories, hereby overlooking questions of power, hierarchy and social status. As people play with the labels they put on themselves and that are being put on them, in order to be included or indeed to escape certain classifications, they maneuver through and between social categories, constantly reshaping them in the process. (Christiansen et al., 2006:14-5).
Over the last couple of decades a new approach of the study of youth developed in the social sciences in which youth are no longer placed in a framework of continuing life phases. Emphasis is placed instead on the study of youth and ‘youth culture’ in its own right. Youth culture in this respect is composed of the “the ideational systems of meaning and practices that young people, explicitly or implicitly, create as they interact with other youths locally and globally” (Christiansen et al., 2006:15). While a developmental or life-stages approach explains youth mainly through the workings of social, physical and psychological forces, a youth culture approach defines youth as a cultural entity with its own agency. This in turn poses the risk of overlooking the importance of outside forces. It seems therefore most fruitful to “focus on the intersection between agency and social forces” (Ibid., 2006:15-6) and explore “the practices through which [youth] culture is produced” (Bucholtz, 2002: 526).

Taking this into consideration, the question of the definition of ‘youth’ in the context of this research project remains. Since any given societal context brings about particular conditions that characterize one generation over another, the specifics of the situation, rather than biological or psychological factors, define what youth is. The position of youth is thus composed and shaped differently in different times and places (Christiansen et al., 2006, Bucholtz, 2002, Diouf, 2003). In principal the notion of youth in this thesis covers those who are part of an Islamic youth association. It is important to point out however that in the field the definition of youth changed from situation to situation, and that the boundaries of this emic category were often not uncontested. I will return to this issue in the next chapter. Ambivalences about who is part of les jeunes and who is not, and contestations over what it means to be un jeune illustrate the fluid nature of the term, and how its position is intrinsically tied to social processes. To get a better understanding of the complexity of the interplay between youth and their social surroundings, it is useful to explore the way young men and women maneuver through different social fields.

In this chapter the stories of two main informants will reveal the social landscape through which young men and women in Bamako navigate on a daily basis. This is in a way the story of every young person in Bamako today, as the hardships and opportunities of life in Bamako are applicable to youth beyond the two cases of this chapter. Whether literate or illiterate, all maneuver in a world in which access to employment and education limits possibilities. Whether a deeply devoted Muslim or a minority Christian, all live in a city where internet cafes pop up unstoppably and televisions and radios on the street show films, news and music from Africa and beyond. Yet the stories in this chapter are also very specific. What separates these cases from the masses and binds them together as being part of a uniform group in all its diversity is a devotion to religion. This devotion (amongst other things, as will be shown in following chapters) has attracted these two young residents of Bamako to an Islamic youth association. Yet as the stories of Hawa and Mandjou are the unique products of their personal traits and specific circumstances, they also comprise the general story they
share with their peers, those who are part of Islamic associations and those who are not. I have chosen to present two stories of relatively older members of an Islamic youth association, as they serve as examples to younger members. Even though Hawa and Mandjou are already in their thirties, which makes them perhaps less youthful in certain ways, their stories illustrate that the category of youth in Mali is quite flexible. I will return to this in the next chapter.

2.1 The story of Mandjou

The area of ACI 2000, named after the real estate company that develops it, is a relatively new part of Bamako. It is home to a strange mixture of large office buildings, small boutiques that sell living supplies or beauty products, NGO head quarters, upper class hotels, residential buildings that can house up to thirteen families, and spacious villas with guards in front of it. In between the buildings empty tracts of land are used in different ways. On some of them people have created small plots of agricultural land, on others boys come together to play football in the afternoon. A significant part of the vacant land, however, seems to remain unused. The ACI 2000 area is one of Mandjou’s favorite places to tour on his motorcycle. As we make our way on the wide boulevards of the neighborhood, Mandjou nods at big shiny buildings, unfinished skeletons of real estate projects and large tracts of empty grass land in the middle of the city. In a loud voice, to overcome the hailing noise of le moto, he comments on their value, the suspected owners and the opportunities they propose. As we drive past a piece of empty land in the heart of the neighborhood, he explains that it is one of the most expensive pieces of land in Bamako that he knows of, being worth over a million francs. When I inform if he is interested in the land Mandjou laughs. One day he will be able to pay such an amount. Now he is a jeune. He can only dream of it.

We are on our way to a business meeting in a shiny office in the middle of ACI 2000. Mandjou has taken care of the furnishing of a couple of conference rooms of a savings and credit federation. We have come to take care of some paper work, but Mandjou is looking out for new opportunities. He has set his mind on meeting one of the directors. Knocking on several doors and shaking numerous hands, we end up in the office of a friendly woman and introduce ourselves. The room is big and spotless, and full of personal touches. The woman points out a picture on the wall. It shows a young woman behind a typewriter in a simple office. She explains that the young woman in the picture was her, about thirty years ago, when she started working for the company.

The small talk continues for a while and the lady wants to know all about me and my research, but then Mandjou does what he does best which is networking and looking out for new opportunities. He introduces himself as a young starting business man who is trying to find orders for his agence immobiliere et commerce general, a business he started about six months earlier.
Emphasizing the difficulties of beginning a business, especially in these hard economic circumstances of global economic crisis, Mandjou offers his services to the lady. Even though the office is brand new and has just been furnished, he asks if she will keep him in mind. As the whole building has just been refurbished, the woman replies she does not need Mandjou’s services at the moment. She agrees with Mandjou that it are difficult times and business is slow. Therefore she does promise to remember him, emphasizing that she likes to help out young people whenever she can. They agree that she will contact him when she hears of a job that might suit him. Mandjou offers his number and they exchange business cards.

Mandjou, a starting business man in his mid-thirties, was one of my most dynamic informants. Profiting from his sociable personality, combined with an above average intelligence and a good work-ethic, he was busy building a wide network of people in many areas and domains of Bamako. He had just started his own business, an *agence immobiliere et commerce general*, for which he rented a small office opposite the cemetery of Lafiabougou, close to the ACI 2000 area. Initially it was just him and a secretary, but at the end of my fieldwork period Mandjou employed one of his friends, a former manager of a restaurant, to run errands for him, a sign that business was going relatively well. Next to his day job, Mandjou was involved in several other economic activities. He sometimes took on small jobs on the side as they would come along. He for instance took on a position as a poll-taker for an NGO project on sanitation. He was also the co-founder of a small agency set up to help students of the University of Bamako in the process of writing their thesis.

Making long hours, seven days a week Mandjou was somehow making his way up. In the context of Bamako, he had a privileged background in the sense that he had been able to go to school up to university, where he studied sociology, which is not a possibility for many Malian youth. However, his family background was rather humble. I met his father, a soft-spoken retired school teacher at ‘la grande famille,’ the compound on which Mandjou and his many siblings grew up in Hamdallaye, a vast crowded neighborhood of Bamako. Mandjou himself lived with his wife, a teacher, in a small house on the outskirts of Bamako. The couple did not have children. Mandjou explained that there would be enough to start a family after his business would be up and running. The living conditions in his house were quite reasonable for Malian standards, but it cannot be said that Mandjou was part of a privileged upper class.

Sometimes business would be slow and we would have time to sit in Mandjou’s office and discuss several topics. Most of the times, however, there were thing to do. I spent countless hours on the back of his motorcycle rushing through the different quarters of Bamako looking for new business locations, meeting with possible clients, visiting family members, hopping into offices to have documents signed, dropping by on conferences, taking a break to pray at a local mosque, and
bumping into friends along the way. Whether business would be going relatively well or if on occasions a bump in the road would appear, Mandjou would be receiving and making non-stop phone calls. Unlike most of my other informants, Mandjou always had credit. His beginning success had not come about without struggle though, and its continuation was still rather uncertain.

The struggle underneath Mandjou’s success sometimes came to the surface. One time his motorcycle got stolen, which was a grave setback as he was unable to finance a new one. He was forced to improvise on motorcycles from friends, and to spend a lot of time in his office, which significantly handicapped his mobility, the source of his opportunities. At times, a lack of credit could pose major problems in business deals. If Mandjou got hired to furnish an office building, he needed to buy the materials. Attaining credit to do so was never an easy task. Yet tying different strings together, asking people for favors, and creatively responding to setbacks, he somehow made his way through. This creativity in employing scarce resources mirrors the way many Malian youths make their living. Yet what struck with regard to Mandjou, is that he seemed determined not only to pull through, but to move up along the way. He shared this wish with many youths in Bamako, but unlike most others, Mandjou seemed to have a reasonable chance to realize it.

Mandjou clearly enjoyed networking and meeting different people, which is key in the Malian context in which connections are generally more important than a rich CV or diplomas. Networking is a basic need that can create vital opportunities for oneself and for friends and family members. For Mandjou it was also a way to become part of a community that transcends the boundaries of the city; a successful community of leaders on the intellectual, political and religious front. It was of utmost importance to him to be mobile and to stay connected. Mandjou was always impeccably dressed in a western fashion, wearing suits and shirts, and he had a great interest in modern communication technology such as his mobile phone and the internet connection he had at his office. These provided him with openings to the wider world, including a westernized youth culture of which he criticized its morality, but that he at times also embraced, showing me American films on his computer, and inviting me to a rap concert.

Although I often toured with Mandjou on his ventures in the economic and social field, my acquaintance with him was based on his activities in the religious domain. I met Mandjou because he was a prominent member of LIEEMA. LIEEMA, la ligue Islamique des élèves et étudiants du Mali, is a Muslim youth association that solely consists of students attending secondary education (lycée in French) or higher education (écoles superieures or university). The association was created in 1992 after a group of students at the faculty of medicine started praying together. The organization of collective prayer rapidly evolved to a structure comprised of students from different academic
2.1 LIEEMA’s headquarters in the neighborhood of Ouolofobougou

backgrounds, who felt common ground in their search for an intellectual approach of their religion. As the association crossed the boundaries of the medical faculty its initial name LIFA (Ligue Islamique Foi et Action) was changed into LIEEMA. While the association grew from a small group of medical students to an official nationwide association, it was decided that students had to be enthused about joining le travail Islamique before they enrolled in higher education. At this point committees of LIEEMA were started up at lycées throughout the country.

When members of LIEEMA graduate and cease to be students, they automatically become part of les amicales anciens (les deux A). Les deux A is in theory an independent sister association of LIEEMA, yet in practice the two associations work closely together. Mandjou had been active for LIEEMA since his student days at FLASH, the faculty of languages, arts and social sciences at the University of Bamako. He had continued after he graduated and took on a job in the office of a huissier de justice (a bailiff), and by now he had been the president of les deux A for a mandate of two years. Through his network Mandjou was able to get me in contact with many people who were of interest to my research, which made him a key informant, next to being a good friend.

Although Mandjou was first of all a devoted Muslim, his religious identity was quite complicated and his interests encompassed many faiths. He was for instance a regular attendant of meetings at the Centre Foi et Rencontre, a centre created by the catholic mission in Bamako, where Christians and Muslims meet and debate on all sorts of theological and secular topics. Furthermore, Mandjou once told me about his former vegetarian lifestyle, which he adopted for years as he had followed a Rastafarian way of life. The church of Scientology also had his interest. When I found a big book on
Scientology in his office and asked him: “Tu aimes Scientology?” he responded: “Non, je lis sur Scientology.” He also told me he had taken a course offered by the Unification Church, an originally Korean religious movement founded by Rev. Moon, of which Mandjou became an ambassador for peace. He later showed me a certificate in his living room to prove it.

Notwithstanding his interest in other religions and faiths, Mandjou emphasized that his main reference in life was Islam. He appreciated Islam as the religion of his family, even if they differed in their opinion of what constitutes right Islamic practice. Most of his sisters were for instance not veiled. Only one of them, also a member of LIEEMA, had adopted the veil. Moreover, Mandjou appreciated Islam as a world religion that had been revealed to the last prophet and incorporated all other great monotheistic religions. Mandjou explained that the other monotheistic religious traditions had been the result of genuine divine revelations as well, but its followers had gone astray when they refused to acknowledge the message of the last prophet. This I had heard before, and would hear many times more. But what was interesting about Mandjou was that his interest did not stop with Christianity and Judaism (and possibly Buddhism) as other monotheistic religious traditions, but that he read and knew about many other religions and faiths. For him this was not contradictory to Islam. According to Mandjou this was in fact what Islam teaches its followers; to learn and discover. Embracing this principle wholeheartedly, he understood it might not be as well received within the Islamic circles he moved in. When I asked him when he let go of his Rasta lifestyle, complete with dreads and vegetarianism, he explained that he quit when he became a prominent member of LIEEMA because: “Il y a des gens qui ne vont pas apprécier un président d’un association Islamique avec des dreads”.

Mandjou took his religion very serious, and was taken seriously himself within the Islamic community of Bamako. If Mandjou came up in meetings with other members of LIEEMA they would speak of him with great respect. When Bintou, a nineteen year old member of LIEEMA heard how I got introduced to the association, she immediately responded: “Ah Mandjou, c’est un grand militant.” It were not just the members of the student association who respected and appreciated Mandjou’s presence. I met for instance a couple of times with Oumar Farouk Diaby, an economist and islamologist who several members of LIEEMA called their mentor and a great intellectual (see chapter six). When Mr. Farouk Diaby found out I often toured Bamako with Mandjou he told me that I was lucky to have found such a dynamic young person to show me around and introduce me to different people in Mali’s Muslim community.

Mr. Farouk Diaby was right. What stood out about Mandjou and other prominent members of Muslim youth associations were their dynamic personalities and lifestyles. They were energetic and inventive in an often quite slow environment of bureaucracy, nepotism and unemployment.
They share this creativeness in making a living with many other young Malians, but for members of Islamic youth associations the goal was higher than making a living. There was a strong desire to lead a meaningful and morally justifiable life within a specific Islamic framework. In this respect, members of Islamic youth associations placed great emphasis on the intellectual dimensions of Islam. While the overwhelming majority of Malians is Muslim, Mandjou explained that people in general have limited profound religious knowledge and are therefore not equipped to practice Islam in a way that is truly consistent with the foundations of the religion. This absence of knowledge is the result of a lack of education, which in itself is the product of a whole array of poor economic and social circumstances. While, according to Mandjou, people cannot be blamed for their ignorance, they do have the responsibility to learn about their religion if given the chance, as it is an important perquisite for society to return to Islam and to lift the country from its present state of moral and economic poverty.

What is specifically interesting about the case of Mandjou is the way he positions himself under diverse circumstances. In the economic field he is the young inexperienced businessman, drawing on his youthful charm in order to interest people for his situation. The next moment he is an experienced leader of a religious association, directing not only himself but also others around him. He so to speak colors in his different hierarchical positions from situation to situation, hereby constantly redefining the specific notion of what it means to be ‘youth’. What is also interesting about Mandjou is his approach to the domain of religion. He is first and foremost a devoted Muslim, but his interests are broader. He is not just navigating between different social fields, constantly reshaping his position in the process; he also navigates within different domains of society, creating his own window of opportunity.

Although he is a unique and perhaps somewhat extreme example, Mandjou does stand for the inventiveness and activeness of (leading) members of youth associations, and also (perhaps to a lesser extent) the inventiveness of Malian youth. The importance of personal connections and having access to a broad and diverse social network are applicable to all young men and women in Bamako. Operating in different fields within society can offer different opportunities. These fields of action are not the same for all youth though. Family background and the level of education are for instance important factors that shape the landscape through which young people navigate. Additionally, there are obvious and more subtle differences between the two genders, especially with regard to Muslim youth. To get an insight into these divergences we turn from the story of Mandjou to the world of Hawa.
2.2 The story of Hawa

Hawa lives in a quiet neighborhood of scattered family compounds far from the city centre of Bamako. When I visit her at the house where she lives with her husband and children, she shows me the project she has been talking about for a while. In a corner of the courtyard she opens a door to a small depository. Inside there are no cooking pots or bags of rice, but about fifteen chickens waddle around two troughs. Immediately the smallest chick, which is about half the size of the others in the brood, catches my eye. Hawa explains that he is the same age as the others and that she has been feeding him the same food. Since he did not start growing as the others did, she called for the veterinarian who insisted that he is not sick and will just remain small. It will be the only chicken she will not sell in order to become a fried chicken at one of Bamako’s roti stands.

I am admiring a project of Hawa, a small business that will help her acquire the money to start up her dream, an NGO focusing on children. Hawa tells me she loves children, and that seeing the dire state of especially Bamako’s street children breaks her heart. She herself has three children, two boys and a girl, the youngest is nine months old and the eldest is five. As Hawa works on several activities besides her poultry business, the children stay home with the bon (the maid). In her busy schedule, Hawa tries to keep the Sundays free in order to spend time with them. It is difficult for Hawa to live far from Bamako’s city center as she has no motorcycle of her own. She has to rely on the sotarama, the battered green minibuses that provide public transportation in Bamako, and often walks great distances. Nevertheless, she emphasizes that she is very happy with her home. She explains that her children will not be exposed to bad influences when they grow up, as there is nothing to distract them in the quiet neighborhood. Hawa clarifies that she prefers them not playing with other kinds on the streets. She believes it is better for their education to stay in the house with the maid looking after them.

I met Hawa because, like Mandjou, she is a member of Les deux A. Unlike Mandjou, Hawa’s devotion to Islam was immediately feasible through her appearance, as she wore a black niqab (see chapter 5) when I met her, showing nothing but her eyes. She would often pull up the piece of cloth, that hid her face and was attached by a string on the back of her head, in conversation, showing an open, sociable, yet serious and hard working woman in the beginning of her thirties. After attaining a degree in education at the University of Bamako, Hawa had become a school teacher at one of Bamako’s public schools. She was teaching a class of over sixty young children when I met her; a difficult task which she emphasized was not her true ambition. Whenever she could, she combined this job with internships in order to attain her dream of becoming involved in the NGO world.

Even though it was hard to find a job outside of education because of her veiled appearance, Hawa found an intern position at an NGO working on agriculture, public health, nutrition, water and
sanitation while I was around. The internship was only for three months, but it proved to be incompatible with her teaching job. After a few weeks she quit her job at school and decided to focus on the NGO and her *roti* business. On the couple of occasions that I went to see Hawa at her office at the NGO she told me how much she loved the job, and I could feel her enthusiasm as she introduced me to her co-workers and told me about the projects she was involved in, in and around Bamako.

Her busy life filled with work, family and projects on the side, combined with the difficulty of the logistics of getting from one place to the other, made that Hawa was not able to put as much time into her work for LIEEMA as she would like to. She had been active for *le travail Islamique* since her time at the lycée. She had held different positions within LIEEMA and *les deux A*, and was now responsible for the annual seminars for married women. She took this job highly serious, like she took none of her activities lightly. Time and again, Hawa stressed the importance of women in society and their leading role in Islamic issues. She compared women to the media, transmitting the values of Islam to their children and in that way safeguarding Islam as the foundation of society. Given this important role she envisioned women to participate in everyday life and to raise their voices in ongoing debates, while taking into consideration the restrictions Islam places on women vis-à-vis men.

Hawa often stressed the difficulty for women in engaging in an active role within Islamic associations, as their duties with regard to their families, their education and their jobs consume a lot of time. Moreover, women often instigate controversy when they adopt the veil, not in the least with regard to their family members, who in most cases are not veiled. Hawa, born in Burkina Faso to Malian parents, came from a religious family that mostly supported her. But the complete adaptation of what she considered proper Islamic practice had become easier, in the sense that she was supported in her values, when she met and married her husband during her time at university.

The Islamic values that motivated Hawa in many, if not all aspects of her life were inspired by a range of different people and groups. Before she became a member of LIEEMA, Hawa had been active in three neighborhood based Islamic associations in Sikasso, but when she moved to Bamako to attend lycée she got introduced to LIEEMA, of which she had been a member since 1996. It was LIEEMA that offered many of Hawa’s sources of inspiration and Islamic guidance. She appreciated how the association stressed the global nature of Islam. LIEEMA, as a student association, puts emphasis on education in its broadest sense. This specifically appealed to Hawa. She learned about issues that were directly and indirectly related to her religion through the contact with fellow members, and an array of mostly Islamic intellectuals that sympathized with the young men and women of LIEEMA. Most of these were Malian, or they traveled from other West African countries, yet occasionally there would be a speaker from North Africa, the Middle East or Europe.
Besides the likeminded and thought provoking people Hawa met through LIEEMA, she also took inspiration from her relatives. Her grandmother, parents and cousins had been active in Islamic associations for years. They all played a role in the involvement of Hawa in the religious sphere, but she was particularly inspired by her aunt, Mariam Coulibaly, who she wanted me to meet. She explained to me that her aunt was one of her guides in life in general and in her religion, which in Hawa’s view are two overlapping notions. She introduced her to me as the presenter of a program directed at Muslim women at *Radio Dambe*, a national private Islamic radio station based in Bamako.

I went over to Mme Coulibaly’s house in the quiet neighborhood of Daoudabougou with Hawa and a friend of mine. When she was Hawa’s age, Mme Coulibaly had studied Arabic in Bamako and Egypt. A prominent shelf of Arabic books in her living room illustrated her knowledge of the language. When I asked her about her work at *Radio Dambe* she spoke of it as a side job to her main activity. Mariam Coulibaly was a founding member of *la ligue des prédicatrices du Mali*, a league of female Islamic preachers. Besides doing social work, the main role of the organization is to offer religious education to mostly female audiences. Her knowledge of the Arabic language, her role as a female Muslim preacher and her activities at *Radio Dambe* granted Mme Coulibaly the status of a religious authority. When a friend of mine heard I was going to meet her, she insisted on coming along.

When we picked up Hawa to head over to Daoudabougou, my friend pulled out a piece of paper that she said had been given to her by another friend. She was set on letting Mariam Coulibaly read it, as it consisted of geometric figures with Arabic script in them, a language she did not master herself.
She knew it had something to do with religion, but was also aware of its ambivalent nature as she excused herself time and again for bringing it along. When she examined the paper, Hawa expressed her suspicion of it. She explained that usually not the names of Allah, but the names of Jinns get passed along in this manner. But Hawa did not want to comment on it further as she did not know what it was exactly.

When we arrived at Mme Coulibaly’s family compound my friend showed her the paper. It was clear that Mme Coulibaly did not like its content. She advised to throw it away and to let go of any affiliation with its producer. The three women then got into a discussion on the state of Islam in Malian society. Hawa explained that there are a lot of marabouts who deceive people and ask a lot of money for amulets, such as the one my friend had brought along, but that they come from the devil. She then turned to me personally, pointing out that she identifies this as the key problem of Malian society; people say they are Muslims, but they have no accurate knowledge. They believe amulets are condoned by their religion, or even that it is a part of Islam. They do not know that the Prophet is against fetishes, and has upright forbidden them. It is LIEMMA’s objective to fight this ignorance, and it has become one of Hawa’s personal goals. Hawa therefore took her role as my guide into the Islamic world of Bamako very seriously. She sincerely wanted me to learn about Islam, always making sure that I was meeting the right people.

Just before I left the field Hawa came to see me. Her internship had ended, but she was not planning on going back to her teaching job. Something had changed. She had plans to expand her poultry business and to become a business woman, while looking out for chances to start a career in the NGO world. It was not just her job that had changed though. She came to visit me not on foot but on her brand new moto. In addition to this, she had recently started taking driving lessons. A driver’s license would enable her to do more NGO work, including projects outside of Bamako. These developments increased her mobility tremendously.

But there was more to it. When I met Hawa she was wearing the all black niqab, showing nothing but her eyes. When I left Bamako six months later she wore a modest but colored ensemble, and had started wearing the hijab, a black veil which showed her face. She had adopted this dress style during her internship for the NGO, a job she was really happy with. Many times she emphasized how comfortable she was at the office with her co-workers, how much she learned, and how many new terrains she was able to enter through her new position. Through her job her mobility grew. She became more mobile in a very practical way, as she was able to purchase a motorcycle. But even if it was for a relatively short period of time, her new position had also impacted her social mobility. In Malian circumstances, where the job market is rather limited, and contracts usually only last for a couple of month, this opportunity affected Hawa profoundly. On the one hand she dreamed of
starting an NGO and she relished the experience of working for one, on the other hand she spoke of certain mistrust to the *niqab* in some areas of the job market (I will return to this issue in chapter five). She stressed that her habit to veil herself had never been a problem at this particular office, but she also felt that at times she had to prove herself more than unveiled women. This is not to say that Hawa adopted the *hijab* instead of the *niqab* in order to fit in, or to ‘play by the rules’, nor did it take away from her religious identity. It was rather a sign that she was comfortable in her new role, while Islam remained the main frame of reference in her life.

**2.3 Navigating through different fields**

Even though the cases of Mandjou and Hawa are personal stories, they offer insight into issues that concern Malian youth in general, and members of Muslim youth associations in specific. While Hawa and Mandjou are two hardworking and relatively successful young Malians, they also encounter certain struggles that point out the realities of being young in Bamako today. The reality of daily life for most young men and women in Bamako is that expectations and opportunities often do not match, resulting in a usually quite creative quest of overcoming challenges and a search for chances in different fields. Christiansen, Utas & Vigh (2006) make use of the notion of ‘youthscapes’ to describe the fields through which youth navigate, cautioning that “the pictures that the metaphor of scapes conveys – a solid surface of enactment- do not always fit the often volatile or fluid political structurations, communities and societies within which we are researching youth on the African continent” (Christiansen et al., 2006:9). As I give a short overview of the different ‘scapes’ that can be derived from the stories of Mandjou and Hawa, we should therefore keep in mind that analytical demarcations often do not do justice to the dynamics of reality in which boundaries between different fields constantly shift and overlap.

The first domain through which Mandjou and Hawa maneuver, is the field of economic activity and opportunity, a field that has been greatly affected by the liberalization of Malian’s state-dominated economy through the implementation of four Structural Adjustment Programs by the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 1990s, that aimed at the privatization and liberalization of trade. As said in the introduction, the results of the SAP’s were mixed, and Mali remains one of the poorest countries in the world (Gutelius, 2007:59-60). During my time in the field the global financial crisis of 2008 dominated the news, also in Bamako. The consequences for my informants were not always completely clear yet, but Mandjou explained that the economic situation in Bamako was getting more difficult indeed and that business was going slow.
The challenge of making a living is a basic struggle for many, if not all Malian youth. While statistics reveal that youth form the majority of Bamako’s population, in practice they are a minority in terms of access to first employment and in terms of attaining credit to start a business (Traoré, 2007:20). The poor economic outlook which frustrates opportunities for employment is felt hard amongst youth. In the book *Bamako generation vingt ans*, which describes the important issues and challenges concerning contemporary Bamakois youth, employment, or rather unemployment, is presented as “préoccupation nº 1 des jeunes bamakois” (de Noray & Maiga, 2002:8). While Mandjou and Hawa both completed the highest level of education possible within the borders of Mali, they are by far not certain of a stable job.

While Mandjou and Hawa were both employed at the time I met them, they indeed encountered the same difficulties as many Malian youth. Since temporary contracts that last no more than several months seem to be the norm, Hawa had not been able to find a stable job that can provide her with a sufficient income. The exception was her job at school, which was in the field of civil service and provided a stable income. However, even teachers tend to get hired on temporary contracts, in addition to being notoriously underpaid. The difficulty of attaining credit is the main obstacle to the possibility of entrepreneurial activities. It kept Hawa from taking her poultry business to the next level and starting her NGO, while it also remained a recurring problem for Mandjou and his starting business.

The stories of Hawa and Nana illustrate the struggle of youth in an economically challenging environment. It is very difficult for young Malians to make the leap from small jobs and temporary contracts to the positions that offer a stable income. They are forced to be inventive and keep generating multiple sources of (possible) income. This is even more essential when we take into account that young Malians are part of larger extended families in which relatives stick together and depend on each other’s income. This dependency works both ways though. As expenses of relatives are often a part of their responsibility, Mandjou and Hawa can also call on family members to help them out in case of need.

The problems surrounding employment amongst youth are a reflection of the problematic state of the domain of education in Mali. The public schooling system suffers from a lack of funds, which influences the quality of education significantly. Hawa’s case illustrated that classes are often overcrowded, and teachers are underpaid. These problems do not only affect Mali’s system of primary education, it also has consequences for institutions of higher education (see chapter four). As Roy (2004) pointed out in his work on Islamic transnationalism, networks of private *médérasas* are a “pervasive [phenomenon] in Muslim countries where there is a crisis amongst state educational networks” (Roy, 2004:160). In Mali enrolment in private Islamic *médérasas* increased especially after
the oil boom of 1973, as the riches of Middle Eastern countries started to make their way into Mali through transnational Islamic aid organizations (Brenner, 2001:197-8).

This process of Islamization, especially in the urban space (Brenner, 2001:197), has continued after the liberalization policies of the 1990s. *Da’wa*\(^\text{7}\) organizations, that maintain close ties with Arab and Islamic countries, and mix educational, proselytizing and sometimes political activities, are active in Mali. The leaders of these organizations are often public Muslim figures, who strengthen a new public presence of Islam, as they “merge different educational experiences within and outside their countries” (Reichmuth, 2000:433).

LIEEMA could be seen as such a *da´wa* organization, but given the educational background of its members it holds a somewhat exceptional position within the range of Islamic associations that are active in Bamako. Members of the association are all students attending secondary education (*lycée* in French) or higher education (*écoles superieures* or university). These are francophone institutions, as opposed to the Islamic *médersas* in which the Arabic language is dominant. Therefore, both Mandjou and Hawa received a French education, which connects them to a world of scientific intellectualism, which is often portrayed as being part of the Western establishment. However, they also stand in contact with Arabic educated peers and mentors through their network of Islamic associations and institutions. Overall, the influences of friends and family can be quite diverse. Important people to my informants were for example the Egyptian educated aunt of Hawa, or Farouk Diaby, Mandjou’s mentor, who had traveled in the US extensively as the imam to the American Malian Muslim community.

Their network of peers also connects them to an urban youth culture that through the mediation of radio, television and the internet provides images and ideas from Africa and beyond. Although there is an overarching concern about morality, which pushes most members of Islamic youth associations away from what these media offer, there is also a dozing curiosity. From the cases of Mandjou and Hawa we see that the interest and room for exploration of Mandjou seems to be greater than Hawa’s. This could be a result of the more sheltered position of women, yet at times it was suggested by female as well as male informants, that women tend to be stronger in their religious devotion and are therefore stricter in their adherence to Islamic principles. For both men and women, the idea of taking in as much information as possible seems to be an Islamic principle, as well as a tool in a constant quest for social and economic mobility. Their connection to an urban youth culture has great influences on the role of the family as well, as young men and women in Bamako are more and more focused on social networks outside of the traditional extended family.
In the last decades the local-level kin-based systems of past generations have been subject to major transformation in the African urban context. This process has changed the roles of young people considerably and irrevocably (Argenti, 2002:124). The course of the lives of Hawa and Mandjou illustrates the changing composition and role of the family in Bamako. In the urban space, families do not employ their own children (Brand, 2000:45) which increases the importance of education and apprenticeship. Both Mandjou and Hawa have degrees in higher education, which has delayed their age of marriage. Even though Hawa has married during her time as a student at the University of Bamako, she married and gave birth at a relatively higher age. Although this means that young people generally live within their extended families for a longer amount of time than before, Brand (2000) observes the loosening of intergenerational relations. The traditional obligation to hand over any earnings to the head of the household becomes more and more contested. Young men and women try to keep part of their earnings, if they have some. As men are sometimes able to rent a room away from the family compound, girls invest these (small) amounts for instance in their social networks (ibid, 2000:45-7). Due to these developments young men and women in Bamako are more and more able to build up social networks outside of the family.

It is important to point out, however, that while the role of the extended family is subject to change in the urban environment, the ties with the extended family remain important. The importance of this relationship lies not only in the economic solidarity mentioned before, but also in an ongoing connection to the moral and religious values of the extended family. The importance of family stems largely from its significance on a cultural and social level, yet the high status of the family and family relations also has religious roots. In most cases the seed of religious activity lies
within the family. Although some practices of family members are seen as un-Islamic, it is indeed in the context of the family that most Malians’ initial contact with Islam and its morality takes place.

Sometimes members of Islamic youth associations are the only members of their family who have embraced religion in the particular way they did, yet at times they also have sources of inspiration within their family. The case of Hawa and her aunt shows how the idea of an inadequate practice of Islam is often projected on society as a whole, and not so much on individual family members. Yet even if the latter is the case, this does not take away from the influence of family and their (religious) practices on a daily basis. The (symbolic) break with parent’s generation (Larkin & Meyer, 2006:309) is thus not as clear cut as some commentaries seem to suggest. The importance of religion does fit in with the unraveling of traditional familial relations, as it leads to the creation of new social spaces, on the streets and in bars and clubs (de Noray & Maïga, 2002:25-34), as well as a blooming associative life, offering recreation as well as political and economic opportunities (ibid, 2002:37-47).

As mentioned in the introduction, Islamic youth associations are part of this blooming associative life, in which young men and women in Bamako break traditional kin-based and gerontocratic hierarchies (LeBlanc, 2006) through the advocacy of a shift in religious practice. The greater goal of these associations, ‘le travail Islamique’ in the words of its members, is directed at ignorance in Malian society about proper Islamic practice. Yet, as can be derived from the stories of Mandjou and Hawa, the question of religion seems more complicated than that. On the individual level nuances have to be kept in mind, such as Mandjou’s openness to other religions, and Hawa’s embrace of rather than breaking away from her family’s religious practices. The ideas young Muslims in Islamic youth associations have about what constitutes proper Islamic practice will be further explored in successive chapters.

2.4 Concluding remarks

The cases of Hawa and Mandjou illustrate that Muslim youth take on shifting hierarchical positions as they move through different social fields. These positions are ascribed, as they result from a specific social, political and economic context, yet young men and women also make use of these positions and influence them along the way. This way they are able to create opportunities in a world in which they are often confronted with great economic and social challenges. The significance of the dynamics between youths and their surroundings underlines the importance of adopting a dualist perspective approach considering “the social and experiential aspects of youth as inseparable, paying attention to both the meaning that young people create as well as locating them within the social landscape they seek to move in” (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh, 2006:11). This dialectic approach should be applied on the level of the association as well. As Islamic youth associations are part of broader
society they not only impose certain images and ideologies on the world around them, but they draw inspiration from it as well. To get a better understanding of the interplay between Islamic youth associations and their surroundings, the next chapter will take a closer look at the Malian Muslim community and its specific historical context.
3. The Islamic landscape of Bamako

Islamic youth associations in a broader perspective

« Unissez-vous par le lien de Dieu et ne vous divisez point... »
The Quran: surah II, verse 103

Chapter two presented the different social fields through which young men and women in Bamako navigate on a daily basis, focusing on the dynamics between youth and their surroundings. In this chapter I will focus on the domain of religion. I will argue that the Islamic landscape of Bamako is an interwoven social field of its own through which individuals navigate, creating their own pallet of activity and affiliation in the process. As will become clear in this chapter, the religious domain is fragmented in nature, but there has been a recent quest for unity amongst Islamic youth associations through the creation of l’Union des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali (UJMMA) in September 2007. UJMMA’s quest for unification of Islamic youth stands in a longer history of attempts to unify the Malian Muslim community for different (political) reasons. To understand the developments with regard to Islamic youth associations in Bamako nowadays, I will therefore place them in the broader socio-political history of the Malian Muslim community.

The chapter is divided in two parts. As said in the introduction, the construction of identities can be described as a system of transformations situated within a broader socio-political process (Amselle, 1996). The first part of the chapter will therefore present the socio-political history of Mali’s Islamic landscape. I will give a brief overview of colonial and postcolonial policies on Muslims, and describe how Malian Muslim identities have been shaped throughout time within. I will demonstrate the emergence of a long-lasting and often misleading dichotomy between ‘traditionalist’ and ‘reformist’ Muslims that has informed colonial and postcolonial public policy, and that has been subject to academic debate. I will show that the dichotomy does not do justice to the complex and heterogeneous history of Islam in West Africa, yet the conceptual perspective of a ‘traditional’ and a ‘reformist’ Islam is still used in present Malian debate, which illustrates that present debates in the Malian Muslim community are still highly influenced by developments in the colonial period.
The second part of the chapter will focus on recent attempts to unify the Malian Muslim community. The intensification of the public sphere, through the liberalization policies of the 1990s and the rise of new communication technologies, has brought to light the fragmented nature of the Malian Muslim landscape. These developments have instigated new initiatives to overcome previous divisions which can be placed in a long history of attempted unification. In this chapter I will describe the case of UJMMA, a recent initiative that intends to unify Malian Muslim youth associations specifically. I will analyze what unites and divides young Muslims in Islamic youth associations, and how this relates to the history of the Muslim community in Mali. Finally, I will briefly characterize the Islamic youth associations I studied. In spite of internal differences between Islamic youth associations, there is a strong sense of community amongst these associations and their members based on common goals and activities.

3.1 The Islamic landscape of Mali in a historical perspective

Islam has been present in the area of present-day Mali for over a millennium. The religion found its way to the region through Islamic traders and travelers from the so-called ‘heartlands of Islam’ around the turn of the 8th century, but it was an elite religion offering trade opportunities and conversions generally took place out of political considerations. It was not until the French colonial period that Islam became the largest religion of Mali (Hanson, 1995:101-2). It is thus during this period that the face of Islam as the main religion of Mali has been shaped. French colonial attitudes towards Islam were initially mostly informed by hostility. This likely had its roots in the struggle against the Roman Catholic Church in the homeland, a struggle that was being extended to the colonial territories. In spite of this overall hostility, the French started out with a rather benevolent attitude towards Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, as they viewed it less savage than traditional African religious practices (Triaud, 2000:170-1).

The Algerian model, which was based on a system of Islamic brotherhoods, was transferred to West Africa by the French colonial authorities. In this model a distinction was made between loyal brotherhoods that would get the authorities’ full support, and disloyal ones that were generally repressed (Cruise O’Brien, 1988:20-27). In the literature these brotherhoods are generally referred to as Sufi orders. However, one can be connected to a brotherhood without being Sufi. In general, the term Sufi applies to those who devote themselves to prayer and mystical practices (Soares, 2005:258). The two most notable Sufi brotherhoods in the Malian context are the Qadiriyya, transformed in the eighteenth century by Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti from a private form of devotional mysticism to a communal form of Sufism that emphasized membership in identifiable groups (Brenner, 1993:62), and the Tijaniyya, largely proselytized in West Africa in the nineteenth century through al-Hajj ‘Umar Tall (ibid, 1993:63).
As said, numerous groups and individuals in present day Mali converted to Islam during the colonial period. Soares (2007) points out that being Muslim often implied some kind of affiliation with a Sufi brotherhood. Therefore membership of Sufi brotherhoods spread amongst ordinary Muslims during colonial rule. Before this period Sufi brotherhoods were exclusively made up of elite Muslim scholars, and membership of a Sufi brotherhood had mostly been a private matter (Soares, 2007:78). However, membership of a Sufi order never became as widespread in Mali as it did in for example Senegal, which is the reason why organized Sufi orders have never been able to play a significant role in Mali’s political culture (ibid, 2007:78).

In the beginning of the 20th century, in the wake of the First World War, French attitudes towards Islam changed as distrust grew between the colonial power and its Muslim subjects (Triaud, 2000:170-4). As the authorities feared that pan-Islamic alliances could threaten the stability of the empire, Islam got increasingly considered as a force that had to be controlled. Consequently, in order to resist the threat of a strong *Umma*, emphasis was placed on the promotion of ethnic particularism (Cooper, 2005:16) and the notion of a specific African Islam: *l’Islam noir*. Against this background *la Politique Musulmane*, a special policy directed towards Islam and its followers, was developed (Soares, 2005:52-3). Part of *la Politique Musulmane* were special policies with regard to Islamic specialists, as the focus of the colonial powers shifted from brotherhoods to *marabouts*, religious specialists who are very active in West Africa (Triaud, 2000:174-5). A working relationship developed between the colonial power and the Muslim establishment, consisting of religious specialists who had the support of the authorities. As a result, the French often became involved in religious matters, in spite of the empire’s principle of *laïcité* (Soares, 2005: 59-60).

Within the Malian context, it is not surprising that the colonial authorities turned their attention from Sufi brotherhoods to *marabouts*. As said before, formal affiliation with a Sufi brotherhood was not very prevalent in Mali, and these orders never became important political actors (Soares, 2007:78). However, as Soares (2007) points out “certain practices closely tied to Sufism, Sufi orders and their leaders, including the veneration of certain persons with reputations as saints and the use of the esoteric sciences (‘marabouts’ and ‘maraboutage’ in the French colonial lexicon) remain central to what it means to be Muslim for many Malian Muslims” (Soares, 2007:79). Historically, people’s religious identities were based on membership of certain hereditary social and economic categories. These hereditary categories also determined whether people referred to themselves as Muslims, and in what way they practiced Islam. *Marabouts* were those who came from lineages that specialized in religious activity (Soares, 2005:25-6). The importance of this kind of religious figures, who get associated with “elaborate discourses about esoteric knowledge, secrets
and miracles” (Soares, 2007:79) is one the most significant influences of Sufism on past and present-day Mali.

During World War I most West African Muslims sided with the French. In the inter bellum period Muslims were therefore no longer considered a threat by the colonial administration. For the French it was now merely a matter of reducing the significance of Islam. An atmosphere of compromise and cooperation between the Muslim establishment and the French, at times interrupted by incidents of mistrust, prevented Islamic leadership from exceeding the control of the French (Triaud, 2000:175-6).

French colonial presence had generated an enormous new level of mobility for the people of West Africa. Enormous improvements in the region’s infrastructure facilitated unprecedented possibilities for travel. With the growing mobility of people, the traveling of news and ideas increased as well. These developments were beneficial to Islam and led to many new converts (Cruise O’Brien, 1988:14, Soares, 2004:208). The increased mobility would significantly shape the final phase of French colonization, with the “horizon of decolonization” (Triaud, 2000:176) in full view. The theory of l’Islam noir intensified, leading to the repression of followers of Muslim reformers who had studied in the Middle East and whose call for a purification of the Islamic community became more and more influential (ibid, 2000:176-7). In principal these reformists opposed the way Islam had been practiced in Mali historically. Their criticism was mainly directed at the Sufi brotherhoods, marabouts and the use of esoteric practices, as they sought to bring Islam in West Africa in line with what they perceived to be ‘correct’ Islamic practice. What constitutes ‘correct’ Islamic practices is usually inspired by the so-called heartlands of Islam in the Arab Middle East (Soares, 2005:181).

The French were the first to label these reformists as Wahhabi (Brenner, 1993:65, Soares, 2005:181). The term Wahhabiyat generally refers to the doctrine that has been adopted by the house of Saud, the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, and that is based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd’ al-Wahhab. These teachings “emphasize the oneness of God and the need to extirpate un-Islamic practices” (Soares, 2005:181). However, even if Salafi doctrine has been an important influence on reformist groups in Mali, simply referring to them as Wahhabi does not do justice to their heterogeneous nature (ibid, 2005:181).

The French contrasted ‘Wahhabis’ to what they called ‘traditionalist’ Islam, which included “Sufism; the bulk of religious custom associated with rites of passage such as weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals; and particularly the practices of maraboutage” (Brenner, 1993:65). As said, the French conception of traditionalist Muslims does not do justice to the complex and heterogeneous history of West African Sufism. Furthermore, it might lead to confusion with other connotations of the term tradition in public discourse (ibid, 1993:65). Interestingly enough reformists often called themselves ‘Sunni’, which means that they refer to themselves as traditionalists,
following the *Sunna*\(^{11}\), the tradition of the prophet. Despite the fact that the terms ‘Wahhabi’ and ‘traditionalist’ come from a French conceptual perspective and are somewhat misleading, they are still used in present Malian debate, which reflects that present debates in the Malian Muslim community are still highly influenced by developments in the colonial period (Brenner, 1993:65-6, Soares, 2005: 181).

After independence in 1960, the principle of *laïcité* was taken over by the independent Malian state, and in continuity with colonial history, Islam and Muslims were seen as one of the greatest threats to governance (Soares, 2006: 83). Immediately after independence, Modibo Keita, the first president of the independent state, attacked all associations who were considered dangerous, including Muslim reformist groups, and put them under state control (Kaba, 2000:193). The fear of Islamic reformist ideas and the potential danger of international Islamic political influence seemed to be an exact copy of French colonial discourse. The marginalization of Islam and Islamic associations can therefore be seen in line with Cooper’s observation that “the closing off of public debate and political action in so many newly independent African states cannot simply be attributed to a legacy of authoritarianism from colonial rule, but also to its opposite –to direct experience with the mobilization of civil society, which however partial it had been, was enough to challenge states with many more resources than the new ones in Africa” (Cooper, 2005: 21).

In spite of the initial marginalization of Islam in the early post-colonial period, a working-relationship between the Muslim community and the authorities continued to exist. Under the autocratic rule of Moussa Traoré, after the overthrow of Keita in 1968, Islam was reinforced as a unifying force in Malian society, for example through the establishment of AMUPI (*Association Malienne pour l’Unité et le Progrès de l’Islam*), a national Muslim umbrella organization that was meant to play a role in the construction of a national Muslim identity (Brenner, 1993:72). To create an image of Muslim unity, different factions in the Malian Muslim community were awarded a role in the organization, but AMUPI was not able to focus on the actual problems that Malian Muslims faced. As Brenner (2001) points out:

“AMUPI’s contribution to unity was to be in the resolution of disputes, and especially in diminishing conflictual relations between Wahhabis and traditionalists, although these in reality were only symptoms of much deeper social divisions within the society which derived from differences in wealth, schooling and social status. One political function of AMUPI was arguably to divert attention from these more profound problems by highlighting Wahhabi – traditionalist conflict. Similarly, AMUPI spokesmen could speak about ‘progress’, which fully conformed with the many developmentalist programs in which the government was engaged.
They could not talk about ‘politics’, however, as the Statuts clearly stated.” (Brenner, 2001:204)

While AMUPI, the sole legal representative of Islam in Mali, was battling internal divisions, some Muslims organized themselves in underground groups. Mohamed Kimbiri, the present director of Islamic radio station Radio Dambe, but also member of the board of l’Association Islamique pour le Salut (AISLAM) described the beginning of this association as such:

“I am one of the creators of the association. I am a founding member. Well, we created the association in secret. In fact, this was under the former regime [M. Kimbiri refers to the regime of Moussa Traore]. Under the former regime, there was only one official association, l’AMUPI. There was not a unified diversity of associations. So, we created this association and for five years we worked in obscurity, in secret. This was before the political turn-around. At the time of the turn-around we were already well implemented in society. This was after March 21, 1991. Before that time we were illegal [....] “12

AISLAM’s problems with the authorities derive from the fact that the association is Sunni in orientation. However, “from the perspective of the Traore regime, “tradition” continued to be equated with passivity and was therefore to be encouraged” (Brenner, 1993:66-7). After Moussa Traore was removed from power by Amadou Toumani Touré, AISLAM was the first association to be licensed and listed at the ministry of interior affairs on June 5, 1991. In 1991, the first year after the start of the liberalization policies, sixteen associations registered. The basis for these associations had been laid in previous years by different factions within AMUPI and in groups that somehow worked their way around the monopoly of AMUPI.

The high hopes of Malian independence in 1960 were soon replaced by disappointment. Postcolonial Mali was governed by a hierarchical clientelist system which led to social segregation, political disillusionment and economic destitution (Brenner, 2000:173). In this context ties with oil-rich nations in the Middle East made it possible for some Malian Muslims to broaden their clientelist networks and become part of new flows of resources and wealth. These new international links influenced Malian society as a whole, including the spheres of Islam and Islamic education. The monopoly of the position of secular French language schools was put under pressure by the fast growth of médersas, as the islamization of especially the urban space took a spin. These developments were made possible by the “laisser faire, laisser passer” approach to Islamic affairs
that Moussa Traoré developed. The financial opportunities of the oil boom were beneficial to this political attitude (Brenner, 2000:197-208).

After the coup of 1991 overthrew the autocratic rule of Traoré, the political attitude towards Islam in Mali has been twofold. On the one hand Islam is still seen as a threat to government, but religion has also become an indispensable component of political power. As a result some high ranking officials in democratic Mali maintain close ties with religious leaders (Soares, 2006:83). These ties are beneficial for both sides. It is crucial for *ulama* in African countries to “be strong supporters of the status quo, because it allows them to be integrally involved in the running of affairs of Muslims in their state through their control of national Muslim organizations” (Haynes, 1995:93).

For politicians the benefit lies in the control they gain over Muslim leaders who can present a threat to governance. Moreover, the importance of spirituality in African politics is often misunderstood in the West. In order to rule, African leaders need to have power in this world as well as in the invisible world. To achieve the latter they have to rely on religious clerics to a certain degree (Ellis & ter Haar, 1998:187-93). Ever since independence every single Malian regime has thus associated itself with Islam in some way (Soares, 2006:82). Moreover, the Malian state, in contrast with its secular character has made genuine interventions within religious areas (ibid, 2006:82-3). A significant example of the close involvement of the state with the religious realm is the creation of the High Islamic Council (ibid, 2006:83), a case which will be described more closely further on in this chapter.

In this context religion and democracy seem to be well adapted to each other. Politicians associate themselves with Islam both to reduce the risk of the Muslim leadership becoming too powerful, and to give an important form of spiritual legitimacy to their own leadership. Religious leaders, on the other hand, are able to maintain their power within the Muslim community and generally shun the field of politics. If they are present in political debate they mostly take on a moderating and unifying role (Harmon, 2005:24). Most Islamic groups in Mali have indeed remained rather marginal within the political sphere, since they have no convincing political program. Their call for Islamization is thus not so much a strategy to take over the state, but rather an affirmation of a Muslim identity (Otabek & Soares, 2007:14). The fact that these groups are quite marginal does not mean that they do not participate in politics at all. Muslim associations allow for marginalized social groups such as women and youth to articulate and establish themselves, hereby allowing them to partake in political debates and arenas which are otherwise often closed off to them (ibid, 2007:12).
3.2 Liberalization and modernization: the fragmented nature of the Islamic community

It is impossible to give an exact number of active Islamic associations in Mali as a whole, or in Bamako in specific. At the ministry of interior affairs (le ministère de l’Administration Territoriale et des Collectivités Locales) a list of registered Islamic associations (Liste des associations Islamiques Déclarées) can be found, listing 106 associations that have been created between 1967 and 2000, of which many have been disbanded or have dissolved into other structures. Before the coup of March 1991 a number of seven associations have been registered, two more have been listed as being ‘suspendu’ (license suspended) and one is labeled as ‘rejet’ (license rejected). The other associations on the list date from the period after Mali’s political democratization. L’AMUPI, the umbrella organization founded under the autocratic rule of Moussa Traore, is number five on the list, It’s date of reference is May 27, 1980 and the Grande Mosquée in Bamako is listed as the association’s headquarters. The list provides the names of leading figures (nom du responsable) of nearly all the registered associations, as well as the location of its headquarters (adresse siège social). However, as the list is not up-to-date, the names and addresses are old and mostly invalid at present, which reduces its value as an overview of the world of Islamic associations in Bamako today.

There is no central list of associations that have been founded since the year 2000. The lack of any systematic administration is a result of the intensification of the policy of decentralization. The intention of this policy has been to safeguard national unity after the 1996 peace agreement with Tuareg rebels in the north (Benthall, 2006:19, Gutelius, 2007:62) through the organization of communal elections, which took place in May and June of 1999, and the creation of le Haut conseil des collectivités territoriales in 2002. These developments affected the registration of associations as well. The ministry of interior affairs is no longer the official authority to grant licenses to association, and to award associations the legal right to undertake activities under loi N° 04-038 du 5 août 2004 relative aux associations. This task has been handed down to the governors of the eight regions of Mali and the district of Bamako. It is therefore impossible to give an exact number of associations that have been active since Mali’s political liberalization, but it can be assumed that dozens of new associations have been created.

The formation of a great number of Muslim associations underlines the heterogeneity of the Malian Muslim community. Tensions between different Muslim factions complicated AMUPI’s role as the sole representative of the Muslim community from its beginning (Brenner, 2001:202), and the existence of clandestine groups such as AISLAM suggests that this heterogeneity has always been characteristic to Mali’s Islamic landscape. Yet as a result of relatively recent policies of political liberalization that gave room to freedom of speech as well as the freedom of association, the diverse nature of Mali’s Muslim community has become visible like never before.
An important change generated by Mali’s political liberalization since 1991 is the opening up of the public sphere as a result of increased freedom of expression and association (Soares, 2005, 2004, Brenner, 1993:74). In this context a new type of Islamic actor, who merge their political ambition with an openly asserted Muslim identity, has been attracting growing attention (Schulz, 2007-1, Soares, 2005, 2004). One of the most notable personalities is Sharif Haidara, the leader of Ansar Dine, a very popular Muslim movement. Haidara makes use of the new public sphere that has been created through the newly acquired freedom of press and association, and the upcoming of new communication technologies and mass media. The sites and forms of public debate with regard to religion have been broadened particularly through small media, such as cassette sermons, with which Sharif Haidara has had great success (Soares, 2004:218-20, 2005:234, Schulz, 2003, 2007-1, 2007-2).

The effects of this flourishing partly mass-mediated Islamic consumer culture on Mali’s public sphere are dual and contradictory. On the one hand it facilitates new forms of community and religious unity. Islamic ideas have become more easily accessible, contributing to a “supralocal sense of shared Muslim identity” (Soares, 2004:217, 2005:238-43) which leads to calls for the standardization of Islamic practices throughout the Muslim community (Soares, 2004:217). It is important to point out Soares’ observation that in general ‘reformists’ and ‘traditionalists’ are unified in their belief that standardization of Islamic practices is necessary. They usually agree on issues concerning public ritual practice such as regular prayer. Moreover, a shared criticism of the secularism of the Malian state often creates common ground between different factions in the Muslim community (ibid, 2004:216, 2005: 238-41).

This notwithstanding, Mali’s new public sphere also brings divisive differences between Malian Muslims to the surface. As Schulz argues in her work on Sharif Haidara and Ansar Dine: “While these processes strengthen [...] Muslim [leaders’] possibilities to speak in public, they weaken their capacities to speak as the public, a claim that is pivotal to their quest for collective renewal” (Schulz, 2007-2:58-9). As mentioned before, Muslim associations do not form a genuine threat to the Malian state, but they do take part in the “reconfiguration of public debate” (ibid, 2007-2) which has brought to light the fragmented nature of the Malian Muslim community. It is liable that this fragmentation is caused by genuine differences in ideology, as well as contestation over religious authority and power. I will address these divisive issues further on in this chapter.

3.3 The pursuit of unity: the creation of the Haut Conseil Islamique

The fragmentation of the Muslim landscape which has become ever more visible through processes connected to the political liberalization of the last two decades, has not stayed unnoticed by actors on the ground. The lack of a uniform voice amongst Mali’s rapidly increasing number of Islamic
associations posed problems from the beginning of the period of democratization and liberalization. By the year 2000 at least 106 associations had applied for a license. The absence of a central Muslim authority created difficulties with regard to the coordination of these associations and with regard to the communication between Islamic associations and the authorities. This made it difficult to tackle some main problems within the community, such as the setting of dates of important Islamic holidays, the organization of the Hajj¹⁴ and the supervision and coordination of preaching, especially on upcoming private Muslim mediums, such as radio Dambe. As the unprecedented liberties of the 1990s led to a new space in which preachers could preach more or less freely, the expression of Muslim identities diversified. This diversification was a welcome breath of fresh air indeed, but it also brought along a level of chaos that authorities and prominent figures in the Muslim community considered unwanted. One of the first responses to these issues was the creation of the Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali (HCI).

In September 2000 the ministry of interior affairs organized a ‘journée de reflexion’ (day of reflection) at the Grand Hôtel in Bamako. Representatives of the ministry, officials from the eight regions of Mali and the district of Bamako, and members of the largest Islamic associations of the country came together to reflect on the problems the Muslim community faced. The resolution the participants proposed was the creation of the Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali (the High Islamic Council of Mali). In January 2002 its constitutive congress was held under ‘patronage’ of Alpha Oumar Konaré, the president of the republic (Doumbia, 2008), at which issues such as the setting of the Islamic holidays, the organization of the Hajj and the supervision of preachers were discussed. In the liberalized public space of Mali, the authorities seem to try to regain some control over Islamic leadership through their promotion of the HCI as a single representative of Islam in Mali (Soares, 2006:82-3). The fact that the ministry of interior affairs initiated an initial ‘journée de reflexion’ and that the constitutive congress of the CHI was held under ‘patronage’ of the president of the republic, could indeed be interpreted as evidence that the Malian authorities are actively promoting the HCI. In principle the HCI is an autonomous structure, yet the course of the creation of the HCI allowed the authorities to bestow an official sense of authority on a selected elite of Muslim leaders in a setting that they had great control over.

The HCI started off with the participation of five large Islamic associations; AMUPI (the association that had been created under the rule of Moussa Traore and had long been the single representative of Islam in Mali), LIMAMA (the league of Malian Imams and Ulama), La Ligue Malienne des Predicateurs Islamique (the Malian League of Islamic preachers, an association with a Saudi connotation), CAIM (Coördination des Associations Islamique du Mali) and UNAFEM (l’Union Nationale des femmes Musulmanes). Since its constitutive congress in 2002 many more Islamic
associations have joined the HCI. In theory all Islamic associations in Mali adhere to the HCI as it is the only interface between the public authorities and the Malian Muslim community that has been recognized by the state. This means that any association that refuses to work with the HCI has no official voice with regard to the public authorities.

Maintaining unity within the HCI and speaking for all Malian Muslims is not an easy task. Mr. Mamadou Diamoutani, secretary general of the HCI explained: “It is not easy. We cannot give allusions to all adherences. Sunis, Tijaniyya... everyone is involved. Even the Shi’a has adherents in Mali. It’s not possible to please everyone at all times. But we joke around,” we challenge each other.” According to Mr. Diamoutani the vast majority of Malian Muslims is represented by the HCI. He emphasized the relatively flexible approach of the HCI with regard to the different voices within the Malian Muslim community, which makes that any discord does not immediately pose a real threat to the organization. During my fieldwork I nevertheless sporadically encountered stories of discontent with the HCI. Sheikh Soufi Bilal, for example, the leader of la Communauté Malienne des Sufis (CMS) expressed his discontent with the HCI. Sheikh Bilal is a charismatic, relatively young self-described Sufi religious specialist, who has managed to attract a great following by organizing large public gatherings for the birthday of the Prophet Mohamed, and through the publication of pamphlets and books dealing with Sufism and ritual practice (Soares, 2007). Sheikh Bilal’s organization was a part of the HCI and of UJMMA (l’Union des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali). I was invited by some of his followers to meet with their leader at a meeting at UJMMA’s headquarters.

I met Sheikh Bilal after he led Friday’s prayers in front of a large crowd at his house in Bamako. He addressed the audience in a lively sermon that was often interrupted by general sounds of approval. In the sermon he criticized the HCI for their involvement with Saudi organizations (see chapter six). When I inquired about the issue later on, Sheikh Bilal emphasized that his organization traditionally had good relationships with the HCI. Yet, as he witnessed an increasing Saudi influence Sheikh Bilal felt like he needed to speak up. According to him Saudi organizations were often intolerant towards Sufi ritual practice. He expressed his concerns about the issue in a meeting with the board of the HCI at the ministry. He did not intend to act in a more radical way though: “The HCI is an autonomous organization. They are independent. Me too, I am autonomous, independent. I stay at my place. I work in my place. But I have always said that this [Saudi involvement with the HCI] does not work.” The discontent of Sheikh Bilal is an illustration of the fact that not all associations and Islamic groups feel at ease in the HCI. For Sheikh Bilal this was not a reason to break with the HCI altogether, but
there are indeed Muslims groups that are not represented by the HCI. Moreover, the positions that the HCI takes on in public debate do not necessarily reflect the perspectives of all associations and individuals that are affiliated with the HCI.

As the HCI concerns itself with the Muslim community as a whole, young Muslims have recently risen up separately. Their intention is to unite themselves with a particular emphasis on the issues of youth, taking into account their specific points of view and making use of their own decision making powers. The attempts at unification of Muslim youth are not completely isolated from the efforts of the HCI, as members of the HCI are actively involved, the most notable example being Moussa Ba who is secrétaire à la jeunesse at the HCI and one of UJMMA’s vice presidents. The formation of l’Union des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali (UJMMA), an umbrella organization of Muslim youth movements and associations, was still in its beginning stages when I was in the field. After its constitutive congress that took place in September 2007 the members of the union were working on the organization’s program of activities (projet de programme d’activités).

3.4 The quest for unification of Malian Muslim youth: the creation of UJMMA

The creation of UJMMA was not the first attempt to create unity amongst youth in different Muslim associations. Similar efforts had been made some years earlier. The people behind the creation of UJMMA were already involved in such an endeavor at the time of the 2002 presidential elections that took place in April and May. The structure that was formed then was called le Collectif des Associations des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali. Most people that were involved in this initiative had
met at meetings of the HCI. The organization supported the candidature of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, the former prime minister who was running for his party the ‘Rally for Mali’ (*Rassemblement pour le Mali*). Members of UJMM describe Keïta as an Islamic candidate. At the Friday prayers of April 26 2002 various calls for the application and observance of Islamic law in Mali included an appeal to the Muslim community to vote for Keïta (le Vine, 2007:88-9). Keïta did not manage to make it through to the second round of the elections, but their involvement in the field of politics had already negatively affected *le Collectif des Associations des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali*. Although some of its initial members, like Mohamed Macki Ba, the current president of UJMM and Moussa Ba, *secrétaire à la jeunesse* at the HCI and current vice-president of UJMM, deny that it was an objective of the organization to be active in the fields of politics, many young Muslims who were involved distanced themselves from the structure, mostly out of mistrust of its (political) ambitions.

As they had become subject to mistrust, the Muslim activists involved in the formation of *le Collectif des Associations des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali* decided to abolish the organization, after which some of its members regrouped with the intention of starting up a new structure. Mohamed Macki Ba, the current president of UJMM, was amongst these people. Initially all the licensed Islamic youth associations were approached, as well as representatives of Islamic movements that consist (at least in part) of young people. *La Communauté Malienne des Sufis (CMS)* is an example of such a movement. The CMS is an organization that lacks the bureaucratic structure of an association but it has an official charter and adherents. UJMM thus takes on a broad definition of Islamic youth associations. Islamic associations that have youths amongst their members but that are not specifically directed at youth, and non-Islamic actors that deal with issues regarding youth were asked to join as well.

Although UJMM has been active since 2007 and its roots can be traced back to at least 2002, the definitive status of the union is by no means certain. During fieldwork there were various Islamic youth associations that had not (yet) made the decision to join the union. Many associations chose to wait until things would be clearer with regard to the objectives and priorities of the union, who exactly would finance the structure and which young Muslims would become its leaders. At the level of the HCI however, representatives stated that it would be good to get towards some sort of federation of youth associations. *Secrétaire à la Jeunesse* Moussa Ba explained he was not sure whether UJMM would be the definitive structure, but that the HCI was working with UJMM to persuade others to take part in the federation.

The necessity of a structure that unified Malian Muslim youth was emphasized repeatedly by various members of UJMM. Yet why exactly would it be necessary for youth to set up such a
federation apart from the work of the HCI? To answer this question it is important to analyze what divides Muslim youth in different Islamic youth associations and what they have in common.

3.5 Divergences and common ground amongst Islamic youth associations

UJMMA is a large structure that stretches out over the whole of Mali. Organizing meetings between members from different regions can be quite a challenge given the long distances that people from the regions have to cross to get to the headquarters of the union in Bamako. A journey from the far end of the country can take up to days, an investment in terms of time and money that is not always possible for everyone to make. Consequently at a conference of UJMMA that was set up to discuss the creation of a joint program of activities only the representatives of the six communes of Bamako were present. The delegates from other parts of the country had not been able to make the journey. The moderator of the conference explained that other duties had restricted many members from coming. He mentioned activities such as school and agricultural work, but also the pilgrimage to Mecca, which was taking place at the time of the conference.

So far, contact between members of UJMMA across the different regions of Mali had been limited to telephone conversations. It was therefore quite something in itself that all the delegates from Bamako were gathered at the Centre Culturel Islamique Hamdallaye, a large complex comprised of a great mosque and conference rooms at the edge of the neighborhood of Hamdallaye. The center was a regular meeting point for different Islamic associations I worked with. Besides representatives from the different communes of Bamako and representatives from the cellule féminine, a separate structure solely dedicated to the women of UJMMA, representatives of supporting structures, such as the HCI and the imam of the grande mosquée of Bamako were present as well. At the beginning of the conference, the vice-president of the union, Hamsa Maïga, explained the main objectives of UJMMA to its members on behalf of the board:

“The objective of UJMMA is to create harmony between the members of the association so that they will never be divided, and to bring them together in one entity, so that they will have the same program and will operate similarly to realize our objectives. Our aim is to avoid discontent amongst our members, and to offer joint and coherent activities so that what one association has done will not be repeated by another. This, in my opinion, will express the progress of the association; that people know what the others are doing throughout Mali. The objective is also to promote a perfect collaboration of the members in order to eradicate deceptions, suspicions and misunderstandings, so that we can join hands for the success of the association. If we accept each other’s ideas and traditions, fight the divisions between our members and respect each other, we will be powerful. Thank God
that different religious groups that never used to accept each other came together today. We have succeeded in bringing together different groups within the association. Even if small disagreements are not completely behind us, young people work well together in a spirit of collaboration, and we assume that we shall end all difficulties and disagreements in the future.”

Ideas of harmony and assembly to overcome difficulties and end disagreements are very broad and insubstantial indeed. Perhaps exactly because of their indistinct nature, these ideas are widely shared in the Muslim community and have trickled down into all echelons of UJMMA. In more informal meetings with members of the cellule féminine of UJMMA, for example, the objectives of UJMMA were also described in quite general terms. Aïcha, a member of Sheikh Bilal’s Communauté Malienne des Sufis and the secretary of women’s affairs at the national bureau of UJMMA explained the aim of UJMMA as follows: “UJMMA works towards the realization of unity in the Muslim community; this means a peaceful society and a peaceful world.” In line with the suggestion of Hamsa Maïga in his speech, these high ideals are turned into something more concrete through, for example, making sure that the same activities are not organized twice by different associations. This kind of cooperation could also potentially tackle the practical difficulty of the mobilization of funds, as the financing of activities poses problems to almost all Islamic associations.

Yet there is more that brings young Muslims together, beyond practical problems like funding and the idealistic ideas of religious unity. According to UJMMA young Muslims need to be mobilized in order to better address specific problems that Malian youth faces. Some of the issues that were mentioned by members of UJMMA are related to their religion, such as the issue of Islamic terrorism, an issue that indirectly affects Muslim youth in Bamako even if they might have very little if indeed anything to do with it (see chapter six). Other issues merely have a social and/or economic character. Some of them affect all Malian youth, such as the troubles in the education system or the economic crisis and its consequence of high youth unemployment. Other problems play a role only on a smaller scale, such as the issue of (illegal) migration to Europe.

Young Muslims are not simply bound together by the problems they face. They also distinguish themselves from previous generations through their approach of these issues and in the solutions they propose. As the world around them has rapidly changed, especially the last two decades, they benefit significantly from globalising forces such as mass media and communication technologies that have specifically proliferated in the urban environment. The changing opportunities of Bamako and the world beyond have had a tremendous impact on intergenerational relations in the Muslim community. Mohamed Macki Ba, the president of UJMMA, even speaks of a generational conflict:
“The spirit that lights up these young people is different from those of our grandparents, if not our parents who are in their sixties. We do not share the same objectives; we do not work in the same spirit. Our realities are different. That is why it is necessary that we understand each other...that we explain ourselves, and that we work together. [...] The elderly who are here now, their understanding is different. They understand the preceding state of Islam, which is not the same reality as those of our generation. [...] This is caused by democratization, and the fact that young people today are also better educated. Some of them have left this place, some of them have traveled. They have had other experiences. So, previous generations who have not had the same experience, they do not have the same approach. There is a difference in approach.”20

Generational conflict in this sense does not necessarily lead to irreconcilable differences between generations, yet there are clear differences in experience and approach that can instigate clashes. In general, there is great respect for the role of the previous generations within the Muslim community. Especially with regard to religious issues age can be an important marker of wisdom, as wealth in years allows for the possession of wealth in knowledge through study and experience. Youth however possess a new kind of wisdom, which is worldliness.

The traveling of people and ideas, especially within the religious realm, is nothing new. Malian society and Islam in Mali have been greatly influenced by the history of mobility in West Africa. Connections with Europe, but also with North Africa and the Middle East go way back. Reese (2004) demonstrates that the multidirectional interconnectedness between African _ulama_ and the wider _Umma_ has existed for centuries (Reese, 2004:7). These connections have been able to continue even during colonial times. Yet the world has become considerably smaller, as new media and communication technologies have opened up global fields of interaction that reach beyond the borders of the country, the region and the _Umma_. Mohamed Macki Ba described current members of Islamic youth associations as being more world-wise than previous generations, as today’s youth has access to an unprecedented wealth of information and connections. According to Mr. Ba these influences affect the worldview of young Muslims, which often leads to differences in opinion with members of previous generations on certain issues. An interesting example is the role of women in public life (see chapter five).

Mr. Ba pointed out that Muslims of all generations should be working together, and that preceding principles and structures should not be completely abandoned. He did however voice the overarching idea -an idea that also lives amongst older members of Islamic associations- that youth are more dynamic and can therefore make a significant contribution to _le travail Islamique_: “Every
association has its elders, but youth is the most important. They have the time and the energy. It is necessary that we work together to realize something for Islam.”

According to Mohamed Macki Ba previous generations should step back to allow young Muslims to organize themselves and to bring the Islamic community forward. Mr. Ba also applied this logic to his own future. The current leader of UJMMA explained that he intends to step back and make room for the next generation when UJMMA becomes a stable structure: “We make use of our time, afterwards we will step back. That is why we want everything to be written down accurately; so that we can hand over the structure in a good state to the future generations.”

According to UJMMA’s leadership reactions from the leading figures of most youth associations that were approached were positive. Some were not immediately persuaded to join the union, however, mostly out of mistrust of UJMMA’s intentions. At a meeting between UJMMA representatives from the six communes of Bamako the hesitations and mistrust that lived amongst some Islamic youth associations were discussed. As UJMMA became active in areas that had been monopolized by local actors on the neighborhood-level, such as the organization of lectures and communal prayer, certain (religious) leaders felt threatened and had expressed doubts about the objectives of the union. These kinds of suspicions have not been restricted to the level of the neighborhood; some large, nationwide Islamic youth associations were also hesitant to join. Despite UJMMA’s positive portrayal of the unification of all Islamic youth associations, the union thus faces serious obstacles.
The question of the representation of Muslim youth is one of the issues that keep certain associations from joining UJEMMA. People in their forties, sometimes even their fifties, participate in conferences and other activities of UJEMMA. The issue of age does not only play a role at the level of regular members; it extends itself to the board of the organization. Sharif Haidara, the charismatic leader of Ansar Dine, is vice-president of UJEMMA. His association is a large movement that includes men and women of all age groups and can therefore hardly be called a youth association. UJEMMA has no fixed age limits in its charter; all movements and associations that have youth amongst their members can join. This position is contested by some Islamic youth associations.

According to Moussa Ba, secretary of youth affairs at the HCI, the African Union has defined youth from age eighteen to age thirty-five. Mali has officially taken over this categorization, even if Malian general opinion often classifies men and women from age eighteen to people in their forties as youth. Given my experiences in the field, it is hard to determine exact ages that pinpoint the category of youth. Gender, class, education, employment and marital status all play a role. A married woman of thirty-three might not be seen as youth, while an unmarried man of forty is still un jeune. The definition of youth also changes in different contexts. A leader of an Islamic association who is in his thirties can call teenage members of his association les jeunes, while he himself might be called un jeune by an imam who is in his fifties. Although the African Union’s classification from age eighteen to thirty-five is thus a bit too strict, people passed their mid forties are usually not perceived as youth.

The discussion concerning UJEMMA, however, seems to focus not so much on the exact question of age, but rather on the fact that the union does not solely consist of Islamic youth associations. The involvement of UJEMMA with Islamic actors that do not exclusively represent the point of view of young Muslims, such as Sharif Haidara’s Ansar Dine, keeps some youth associations from joining UJEMMA, as it is not clear to them what UJJMA represents, and if they join, who they will be represented by.

Tied to the issue of the representation of Muslim youth is the matter of cooperation between UJEMMA and some non-Islamic partners. A telling example is the partnership between UJEMMA and the N’Ko movement. N’Ko\textsuperscript{23} is the name of an alphabet developed in 1949 by Souleymane Kante as a writing system for all West African Mande languages (Amselle, 2003, Oyler, 2005). Bambara, the language of the largest ethnic group of southern Mali and Bamako’s most important lingua franca, is one of 46 largely mutual understandable Mande languages (Oyler, 2005:21). The N’Ko movement lobbies for the official use of the Mande language, and the N’Ko alphabet. The movement was described by one of my informants as a mouvement identitaire that fights the dominance of western
languages such as French and English, as, according to N’Ko, they are not able to express Mande culture in a truthful way.

The promotion of N’Ko is played out on different terrains, the domain of religion being one of them. UJMMA’s president Mohamed Macki Ba explained the partnership with N’Ko as a chance to document and spread religious knowledge in a language that most of UJMMA’s members understand. From its beginning religious texts have been of great importance to the N’ko movement. Its founder, Souleymane Kante, believed that Islam constituted the highest form of knowledge and translated the Quran and other religious texts into N’ko so that a wider audience would have direct access to sources of religious knowledge. Kante reportedly argued that the Quran, even if it is the literal word of God, was written down by men and could therefore be translated into N’ko (Oyler, 2005:92-3).

Although leaders of UJMMA explain that they only work with N’Ko in the field of literacy and education, and that the partnership has been clearly demarcated, the ties with N’Ko are not unchallenged. The hostile attitude of the movement towards especially western cultural influences presents a problem to some who have roots in the French education system. Moreover, the most important language for Muslims is Arabic, as this is the language in which the Quran was originally revealed to the prophet. For Muslims some understanding of classical Arabic is necessary to perform obligatory prayers and to be able to recite the Quran. Arabic language classes are thus part of all associations’ activities (see chapter four). In her study of young Malian Muslims in Côte d’Ivoire, Leblanc (2006) defines the central position of the Arabic language as an expression of the ideal of unity and universality of the Umma. In this view the application of “true” Islamic precepts through a return to the original Quranic text and the words of the Prophet can break ethnic as well as sectarian boundaries. Numerous informants explained they would prefer emphasis on the Arabic language within UJMMA over its ties with the N’Ko movement.

Besides contestations over who exactly should be involved with UJMMA and who should not, there were also other factors that made some hesitant to join UJMMA. Not all Islamic youth associations agreed with the priorities of the union. In practice, UJMMA organizes and coordinates activities such as conferences, prayer services, Quran lessons and small social activities such as the cleaning of mosques and neighborhoods or the distribution of alms to the poor. As these activities could be taken care of by associations that work on the neighborhood level, some have a greater vision for UJMMA. Moussa Ba, secretary of youth affairs at the HCI, explained for instance that he would prefer UJMMA to work on greater national and international issues. He gave the example of setting up health care structures, or taking a lead in wider debates such as the issue of Islamic radicalization. UJMMA could take a leading role in facilitating these debates, and according to Mr Ba, the union
should also not hesitate to take a stand with regard to important issues: “Daily life should be in the hands of the associations in the neighborhoods. We have to deal with the greater issues.” Mr. Ba admitted that it will indeed be more difficult for different Islamic youth associations to work together on complicated issues, yet he emphasized that a greater effort should be made.

A final issue that made some Islamic youth associations hesitant to join UJMMA is the question of financing. When asked about UJMMA, Demba Ndaw, the president of LIEEMA, reacted in a rather disapproving manner. He explained that he had heard that UJMMA is financed by Libyans: “Nous ne sommes pas fou. Nous ne travaillons pas avec tout le monde. Ce sont les hommes de Khadafi.” The rumors of Libya’s involvement with UJMMA quite possibly have to do with the fact that UJMMA’s president Mohamed Macki Ba is a member of the conseil d’administration of l’Association Mondial de l’appel islamique, an international da’wa organization that has its headquarters in Tripoli. Moreover, the board of UJMMA has made several trips to Libya on the invitation of general Khadafi (see chapter six) which implies that there are ties between UJMMA and the Libyan government. However, Moussa Ba, secretary of youth affairs at the HCI, did not believe that Libyans funded UJMMA, as he knew that UJMMA faces great financial difficulties. Nevertheless, the Libyan connection of UJMMA has made LIEEMA wary of the union’s intentions. Most Islamic youth associations prefer to be financially independent, or at least not to be closely associated with outside sources, to preserve an image of independence and to avoid the negative connotations that these connections might bring along. Khadafi’s reputation in Bamako has been negatively influenced by stories of human rights abuse in Libya, and the dubious role of Khadafi in Malian internal affairs, most notably his alleged involvement with Tuareg rebels in the north of the country (see chapter six).

3.6 A world of abbreviations: The Islamic landscape as an interwoven social field

LIEEMA and AMJM (Association Malienne des Jeunes Musulmans), two of the main Islamic youth associations I worked with, were not official members of UJMMA. When asked about the refusal of the two associations to join the union, the president of UJMMA denied that there were problems. According to him the two associations were indeed part of the organization. This seems to be contradictory to the statements of LIEEMA’s president mentioned above. This notwithstanding, Mr. Ba’s response to my question about the refusal of LIEEMA and AMJM to join UJMMA cannot simply be dismissed as a blatant lie or a way to keep up appearances. These kinds of considerations might have played a role indeed, but the reply was in fact more truthful than it appears to be at first sight. According to MR. Ba, UJMMA had set up meetings with AMJM when the union was still in its beginning stages. AMJM was in fact the first association that had been approached. While AMJM chose not to join the union, some of its members did stay connected to UJMMA. The same is true for
the case of LIEEMA. Whereas the official position of LIEEMA is that they are not a part of UJMMA, some of LIEEMA’s members do not join the association’s official line. The president of UJMMA explained that an ex-president of LIEEMA functions as treasurer for UJMMA, while a member of LIEEMA’s comité des sages regularly meets with UJMMA’s board.

The contacts between members of AMJM and LIEEMA with UJMMA were perfectly in line with many other experiences I had in the field. I would meet AMJM members at conferences of UJMMA, Ansar Dine members would tell me they were part of LIEEMA, and LIEEMA girls would invite me to activities of AISLAM. The Islamic landscape in this respect is an interwoven social field on its own; a world of concise abbreviations through which individuals navigate, creating their own pallet of activity and affiliation in the process. Especially on the level of regular members who are not active on the board of any association, but who just join in some activities, the overlap can be very great indeed. The existence of oppositions between certain factions within the Muslim community thus does not mean that there is no contact or cooperation at all. Officially there is no affiliation between UJMMA on the one hand and LIEEMA and AMJM on the other, yet individual members are at liberty to attend meetings of all three organizations. Therefore a constant exchange of ideas takes place through the contact between members of different associations, besides the frequent official and unofficial meetings between its leading figures.

If individual members of Islamic youth associations do participate in activities of different associations, this does not mean that there are no boundaries at all. Different associations regroup different groups of youth and tend to different needs. Especially the members of LIEEMA could be quite weary of other associations. Maïmouna, a female member of the student’s association explained the difference between LIEEMA and other associations: “We are very different from other associations. Take for example an association like Ansar Dine that revolves around just one person: Sharif. To me that is sectarianism. LIEEMA incorporates everyone: Sufis, Sunnites, Tijaniyya. Everyone.” Some associations are thus specifically directed at a certain Islamic tradition; others like AMJM and LIEEMA are open to Muslims of all traditions.

There are differences between AMJM and LIEEMA as well. One of the most important differences can be observed in the background of the members of the two associations. Maïmouna also spoke of these differences: “AMJM also has students amongst its members, but the association is very different from us. Their president is an executive at Sotelma [Mali’s telephone company]. He is married and has many children. There is no one like that in the National Bureau of LIEEMA. They work on another level.”

As LIEEMA solely consists of students the association does not have the same financial means as an association like AMJM that has many working class members. Moreover, the level of education
of LIEEMA members differs significantly from other associations. LIEEMA is an association of French speaking students, while AMJM regroups youth of all echelons of society. Some of them have been trained in French, some have had an Arabic education, and others have not received any formal education. As the educational background of Muslim youth varies, the messages these young people receive vary as well, which often leads to differences in their views on Islamic issues.

As Brenner (1993) suggested in the case of AMUPI, conflictual relations between ‘traditionalists’ and ‘reformists’ were no more than “symptoms of much deeper social divisions within the society which derived from differences in wealth, schooling and social status” (Brenner, 1993:204). I argue that the same is true in the case of Islamic youth associations today, and in the case of UJMMA in specific. Different associations were mostly divided along lines of education, language and professional status. These divisions are not unsurpassable. Individual members of associations take part in activities from different associations and can be creative in combining diverse messages and opportunities. On the more official level of the boards of Islamic youth associations overlap and partnerships between different associations are not uncommon as well.

In the next chapter I will further explore the aims and activities of Islamic youth associations, including AMJM, LIEEMA and UJMMA. In spite of the oppositions and divisions mentioned above, they are very similar in their goals and day to day activities. All associations typically stand in a modernist or reformist tradition, seeking the development of the Malian Muslim community through moral purification, education and a return to what they consider ‘correct’ Islamic practice. I will present a more nuanced and detailed picture of these objectives.

3.7 Concluding remarks
This chapter has provided a brief and general overview of the socio-political history of Mali’s Islamic community. While in the early colonial period Muslim identities were generally connected to Sufi ritual practice, since the middle of the 20th century reformist ideas that generally find their origins in the Middle East have found their way to West Africa. Both colonial and postcolonial public policy on Muslims have been informed by the supposed opposition between these Sufi and reformist Muslims, and the dichotomy continues to influence public debate in Mali today. Yet, as argued in this chapter, the simplistic opposition between Sufi traditionalists on the one hand, and reformist on the other, does not do justice to the complex history of the Malian Muslim community and the heterogeneity of Mali’s Muslim traditions.

Since the relatively recent liberalization policies of the 1990s, this heterogeneity has become more visible than ever, which has led to new attempts at unification of the Malian Muslim community, including the creation of UJMMA, an initiative to unify Islamic youth associations. It is important to point out that these attempts stand in a long history of efforts to unify the Malian
Muslim community. In this chapter we have seen that the divisions between Islamic youth associations that complicate the work of UJMMA are not very different from the historical divisions in the Malian Muslim community. As Brenner (1993) already suggested in the case of AMUPI, these oppositions reflect underlying social class divisions (Brenner, 1993:204).

As we have seen, the complex and diverse nature of Mali’s Islamic landscape does not have to stand in the way of cooperation between different factions in the Malian Muslim community. Partnerships are very common between all kinds of groups and individuals. The Malian Muslim community is thus an interconnected social field through which young Muslims navigate, creating their own pallet of activity and affiliation. In the next chapter I will take a closer look as to what Islamic youth associations offer to their members on a day to day basis.
4. “Nous sommes pauvres.”

Islam as an answer and a direction

« Le temps appartient à Allah et il est important de lui en donner un peu au moins » 27

In chapter two the different social fields through which young people in Bamako navigate were drawn out, suggesting that the religious sphere is part of a wider array of social domains that can pose challenges and offer opportunities. In chapter three the historical and present situation of the field of religion in Bamako were discussed, describing the networks of Islamic associations in Mali’s capital. As chapter three mostly emphasized Islamic leadership and organizational aspects, in this chapter we return to the navigating youth of chapter two, exploring the way young men and women maneuver through the Islamic landscape of Bamako on a day to day basis. To understand what Islamic youth associations offer to its members, a description will be given of the activities of Islamic youth associations. Through the exploration of their activities the appeal of these associations to its members can be better understood, as le travail Islamique offers opportunities that impact not just their own lives, they also enables young Muslims to make an impact on the world around them.

It has to be kept in mind that analytical demarcations between different social fields often do not do justice to the dynamics of reality in which boundaries between them continuously shift and in which different domains regularly overlap. This applies to the demarcation of a specific field of Islamic youth associations as well. It is therefore important to return to the dialectic approach proposed in chapter two which described “the social and experiential aspects of youth as inseparable, paying attention to both the meaning that young people create as well as locating them within the social landscape they seek to move in” (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh, 2006:11).This dialectic approach has consequences on the level of the association too. As said in chapter two, associations not only impose certain images and ideologies on the world around them, but they draw inspiration from broader society as well.
In this chapter a general description of the activities of the Islamic youth associations I worked with will be given. These activities can be classified into roughly four (often interrelated) categories that together make up le travail Islamique. Even though associations are active in many fields, emphasis is placed on religious and non-religious education. I will present the idea that lives amongst many young Muslims in Bamako that intellectual poverty, moral poverty and economic poverty are related, and will subsequently explore the relationship between the notions of progress and purification. Attention will also be given to the question of the mobilization of youth. How do young Muslims become part of an association and in what way do they usually get involved in its activities? Throughout my fieldwork I encountered some problems regarding the mobilization of young Muslims. These difficulties will be specifically addressed. Moreover, it is important to describe how associations create a group identity, and the dialectic relationship between the personal and the communal in this respect. I will argue that Islamic youth associations place emphasis on the performance of identities. To emphasize the importance of the role of personal stories within the collective structures of associations, the story of a specific member will serve as an introduction to the further exploration of the themes in this chapter. The story of Bintou offers a direct insight into the main issues that many members of Islamic youth associations are occupied with on a day to day basis.

4.1 The hardships of life in Mali and the answers of Islam: exploring the issue of poverty with Bintou

At the end of LIEEMA’s 2008 national congress, after two long days of going over documents and heated debates about critical issues in the association, the moderator took the floor. The congress ended on a serious yet cheerful note. ORTM, Mali’s national broadcast organization, filmed the ending ceremony; the moderator’s table on the stage, that was empty for the two days of the congress except for the papers of the men sitting behind it, had been decorated with a pot of flowers and a colorful table cloth. After a short discussion during the break for lunch and prayer, a commission of wise men had named the new presidents of LIEEMA, Les deux A and the Conseil Administratif. Ousmane, a modest but very active member had been named president of the association. The honor that he had been chosen combined with the enormity of the task ahead overwhelmed him. He was very emotional when he received the Quran, given to all newly appointed presidents by Radio Dambe director Mohamed Kimbiri, who came in at the end of the day, along with the cameras of ORTM to film the closing ceremony.

After these formal moments, the moderator reflected on the two days of the congress, an interlude to communal closing prayers. He thanked everyone for the fruitful days and wished the
new leaders wisdom and courage in their new roles. He expressed his hope that the problems that LIEEMA runs into, and that were discussed during the congress, would be overcome in the two years of the coming mandate, emphasizing that failure is not an option; the work of LIEEMA, le travail Islamique, is too important. At this point he became very emotional and could not hold back his tears. He excused himself for the public display of his emotions, but emphasized the importance of the work of LIEEMA, especially in Mali and especially in these times:

“Our country is poor. We are one of the poorest nations in the world today. Our children are dying. Our children are hungry. We have many problems. It is absolutely necessary that we get to work. We, the young, the students, we have to work so that we will move forward. It is absolutely necessary in this world today. For Mali. For our country.”

As the moderator spoke the whispering and walking around, which had been an ongoing part of the atmosphere at the congress, came to an end. When a young member recited the Quran for the closing prayer, the feeling of necessity in the room was almost tangible: now is the time, our country is in danger, we need to get to work.

The subject of poverty had been raised in one way or another in almost all conversations I had with young Muslims involved in Islamic youth associations. It is a pressing issue that the majority of Malians struggle with on a daily basis. The young people I spoke with searched for explanations, and came up with possible solutions within the framework of Islam. The issue of poverty was also a returning question for Bintou, a young member of LIEEMA. Ever since she heard that I was interested in Islam and had come to Mali to dive into the world of Islamic youth associations in Bamako, she was set on introducing me to the right people who could guide my research into the right direction: “I know people. We are going to look up associations for you. They will give you all the information you need. These people know a lot about religion.” I asked Bintou to introduce me to some of her friends of LIEEMA, which she promised to do, but she was sure that they would not know as much about religious matters as the man she wanted me to meet. I agreed to go with her to Ismaïl Traore, the president of the committee of AISLAM (Association Islamique pour le Salut) of the neighborhood of Hamdallaye. He was one of the frères who, according to Bintou, had a lot of knowledge on important issues. A few weeks after I first met Bintou I met up with her again in front of a pharmacy at the Route de Lafiabougou.

Before we met up with Mr. Traore, Bintou asked me if I wanted to visit her family’s compound that is also situated on the route de Lafiabougou. I was indeed very interested in meeting her family, so we made our way past the crowded road, through fumes of gasoline and the sounds of
honking and growling engines. The route de Lafiabougou is not only a busy road in terms of traffic, the sidewalks are packed as well with commuters trying to stop taxis or sotaramas and stalls were people sell food, cigarettes and phone credit. The road marks the border of Hamdallaye. It separates the crowded and poorer part of the neighborhood from the richer ACI 2000 area. On both sides of the road the streets are wide and unpaved, with large holes filling up with water in the rainy season. On both sides people sit on the side of the streets, selling, waiting or sleeping. On both sides grins come together to discuss and laugh, and on both sides children are playing as goats and cows walk by. Yet there’s a marked difference between the two areas, most strikingly in the size and the quality of its buildings. Bintou’s family lives on the poorer side of the road in a typical Bamako compound. Several bed/living rooms face towards a large squared courtyard where most of the daily activities take place. At any given moment women are doing laundry, washing rice or preparing the family meal in large cooking pots. Bintou lived on the compound with her grandmother, some of her aunts and uncles and other relatives. Her parents lived in Sikasso, the capital of Mali’s most southern région administrative, about 375 kilometers from Bamako. Bintou moved from her parent’s house in Sikasso to Bamako two years before in order to continue her education. When I met her she was a student at the faculty of economics at the University of Bamako. Having just rounded up her first year, she dreamt of a job in management.

In one of the rooms in the compound I met with Bintou’s grandmother and a great aunt. They were sitting on the floor of a modest living room. The furnishing consisted of two chairs, an old television on a small table and ripped up carpet, the typical large family photos and a poster of Mecca hung on the wall. After I greeted the pair of elderly ladies, Bintou introduced me to women of the next generation. The rooms of Bintou’s aunts were considerably better equipped than the one of her grandmother, with large beds, a stereo set and a fridge. None of Bintou’s female relatives had adopted the veil, most of them wore traditional Malian clothes, but some of her younger relatives wore rather revealing Western style clothes. On the courtyard I met some of her male relatives, including one of her uncles. After an exchange of greetings he informed what had brought me to Mali. When I told him about my research topic, he seemed pleased: “Ah, ça c’est bien. Il faut chercher à comprendre la religion. C’est très, très important.”

Bintou’s family was Muslim, but Bintou herself was not so sure if they really could be called as such. According to her they did not properly follow the rules of Islam. Bintou started following the rules of Islam since she had joined LIEEMA three years before. She came into contact with a committee of the association while attending secondary education in Sikasso. The changes in her lifestyle were gradual -“tu ne changes pas d’un jour à l’autre”-, but they had a considerable impact on her everyday life. Even though she had prayed before, if not regularly, she considered herself a true Muslim only since a couple of years. Bintou told me about her life before she became serious
about her religion. She had had many friends with whom she undertook many things that she considered to be in opposition to the Islamic principles she valued so much at the time that I met with her; she talked with boys, hung out on the streets and went out dancing. It is hard to imagine the pious girl of today in a short skirt and with long locks of braided hair. There is a stark contrast with the long black *niqab* she wore when I met her, which covers all but her eyes. Given the changes in her lifestyle Bintou explained that it was not always easy to see her old friends nowadays, but she emphasized that she had not cut them out of her life completely:

“I have friends who do not wear the veil. I have not let go of them. They are human beings. Well, it is Allah who made me a Muslim. It did not happen out of my own will. It is Allah who did it. So, I told my friends that I hope that Allah will give it to them as well. And...we still do everything together, we can stroll around, we can chat, we can study together. But when they do something that Allah does not like, I say “This is where I draw the line”. I do not take part in it. They thought that I would let go of them though, my friends who do not wear the veil. But it is not like that. [...] They criticize me. We do not follow the same path, the same righteous path. But it is not me who has decided this. It is Allah who has decided. And I hope that Allah will do the same for you, as he did for me. But I say: put yourself at ease. Whether you wear short skirts, or dresses, I am at ease with everyone. I do not judge anyone.”

Bintou was *secrétaire à l’information* of the *cellule féminine* of LIEEMA. It is a position for one year, and at the time we met Bintou’s time was almost up. It is a demanding position that consists of letting as many members as possible know about upcoming activities. It is not always easy to reach members in the vast and crowded city of Bamako. This is exactly the reason why Bintou took her job very seriously. As members are often occupied with their studies or with family-related issues, they do not always have much time for LIEEMA. According to Bintou it is a matter of making time for *le travail Islamique*, something which every true LIEEMA activist should be willing to do, as they will be rewarded in the future for the time they put into their religious activities today. Bintou went to great lengths to encourage her fellow members to participate in LIEEMA activities:

“I do it over the phone, by motorbike, by taxi, sometimes on foot. I bring the news to activists and non-activists. I buy 5000 francs CFA in phone credit and I use all that just calling people. It is LIEEMA’s money. But when they do not give me the money I walk. I have to inform the members if there is a lecture for instance, or a seminar. I have to ask the members to come. And I have to insist that they should not come late. In Africa, everyone is late. I do not like seeing Muslims who are late. They have to come on time. It is not a problem if you cannot make it because you have an exam, or you do not have the means to come, or if you are sick.
But you are not a good member if you just refuse to come. You are not a good activist. If members do not come, other members will be discouraged. So it is my role to do everything possible to get members to come to activities. I can spend all day going around calling on people. In Africa we walk a lot. Have you noticed? In Africa we walk a lot. It is not easy.  

The walk through Hamdallaye to Ismail Traore, the president of Hamdallaye’s AISLAM committee took about forty minutes. We stopped at several compounds along the way to greet friends of Bintou. We made the tour in the afternoon and the burning sun was quite hot. Bintou excused herself for the conditions she and her family live in. She underlined how poor Africans are, walking in the burning sun on an uneven sandy road. Every now and then she grabbed my arm, pulling me away whilst pointing at a hole in the road or a pile of garbage: “La rue en Hollande est comme ça?”

I had met Bintou a couple of weeks earlier to talk about her role in LIIEEMA. When we were finished she started to talk about the circumstances of Malian Muslims. The question of poverty was on her mind a lot. She was looking for answers:

“We, the Muslims in Africa, are poor. We are working. The Muslims here, they work very hard. But our riches are very few. I do not know...we do not have anything. We do everything, but we have nothing. I do not know. It is bad luck. That is it. We are working just like the people who are not following the same path [of Islam], but they are rich. We are working like them, but they have it all. I have never understood why that is. I have thought about it many times. I have looked for an explanation. But I do not know why. I do not have an answer. It is an ordeal though. It is an ordeal for us. Every day...looking for a job, looking for something to eat, looking for money for school. Have you seen the people here? Have you seen it? They walk in the sun. Even if it is far, they walk. They walk from here all the way to the other side of the river [the Niger, dividing Bamako in two]. It is not easy. But I do not have an answer. Perhaps non-Muslims are thieves. Maybe they steal. They have taken everything, even the part that is not theirs. Maybe they do not have...they do not fear God. They do not think about God. Maybe that is the explanation.

But us Muslims, we are poor. If you go to the market. Have you been there? If you go there, you see that everyone is selling. Everyone has something to sell. But who are the buyers? Who could buy all that? You see? That is what brings along poverty. Even the government is very poor. Really very poor. They do not have the means to help the people. They do not do anything. And it is also like that elsewhere. Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Burkina Faso. The problem of Africa is that we do not organize ourselves well.”
While Bintou was very engaged with the question of poverty, she could not quite find the answers. She did point out that LIEEMA was working on social issues a lot, and that there were some frères who knew more about this. She believed Ismail Traore might be able to explain things to me as well. AISLAM’s headquarter is situated in ‘la source’ (the source) a ‘jardin des enfants’ (kindergarten) in the middle of Hamdallaye. When we arrived it was the end of the school day and some women in niqab stood at the gate to pick up their children. From the small courtyard we could see the two classrooms. One room was packed with toddlers, the other one was empty. We headed over to the principal’s office. This is the workplace of Mr. Traore in his function as director of the school, as well as his position of president of the Hamdallaye committee of AISLAM.

In addition to her membership of LIEEMA, Bintou was also a member of AISLAM, but she did not participate in its activities much. It had been as while since she was at la source, but Mr. Traore recognized her immediately. When he understood what my research was about, he talked about the beginning of his association. He had teamed up with a couple of friends in Hamdallaye when he was a student at the end of the 1980s, as they wanted to create a place where people could gather and share knowledge. Main activities of the association were Arabic courses in order for members to be able to consult primary Islamic sources, yet attention was also given to English and French literacy, as knowledge in Islam encompasses all possible sources, Islamic and non-Islamic. In search for a way to get better structured the small association that had been set up by a group of friends decided to become part of the national association of AISLAM. When he finished his studies in education sciences, Mr. Traore became the director of the jardin des enfants the committee of AISLAM resides in today.

After the explanation of the history of the committee, Mr. Traore reflected on the meaning of Islam. He touched upon the issue of poverty, its social function and the individual responsibilities that Muslims have vis-à-vis God and society:

“Islam means submission to God. There are two aspects to this submission. First, there is voluntary submission, like fasting, veiling oneself, or prayer. To do these things one needs a certain acceptance. They are not forced. Second, there is a form of submission that happens outside of us; like the fact that you breathe, or the fact that you have to go to the bathroom, or even the fact of your birth. You did not choose to be born.

You will be judged by the voluntary aspects. This is God’s compassion. So whether you are rich or poor is equal to God. Both sides are valuable. If there were no poor; who would work for whom? In this world there are masters and subordinates. The same goes for health. Both sides are valuable. If you are sick you see the worth of your health. My ordeal is my blessing. God has created us. God will judge us, even if you are not a Muslim. He judges us by our deeds.
Think about the blessings that you have had. A blind person cannot see. You can see. A deaf person cannot hear. You can hear. It is a blessing. You have the intelligence to understand things. You understand what I tell you. You speak a lot of languages; you understand French, English, which is the language of the Netherlands? You understand Dutch. You have the means to move around. There are people who do not have the means, or who are handicapped. You can eat. There are people who do not have anything to eat. These are all blessings. You have abilities. But how have you used your blessings? What have you done with your abilities? God judges us on that.”

During my fieldwork this was a common explanation for the existence of social inequality; poverty functions as an incentive to do the kind of work that no one would be willing to do if all members of society were economic equals. The existence of social inequality in this view warrants a stable supply of labor that sustains the economic and social mechanisms of society. Yet there is not only an active role for the poor, wealthy members of society also have a responsibility in the creation and sustainment of an effective and just society. Each individual member has to make use of his or her financial and intellectual resources. According to Mr. Traore an optimal society will emerge, if these resources are applied in accordance with Islamic principles:

“So, if we talk of a fight against poverty, we talk of Islam, we talk of Zakat33. If we fully apply it, the system of Islam has the power to eradicate poverty. So if you are rich I do not speak of little alms like the one you hand out on the streets. It means giving significant amounts of money. It has all been written down. It is obligatory to give a certain percentage of your income. So, if everyone would act according to these rules, poverty would be dealt with in two or three years. Well, that term even, it is a useless term. Since it is not possible to eradicate poverty, we should speak of a fight against wealth. Poverty has its function, just like wealth has its function. But there are limits. We, we are striving for a fair society. That is all.”34

According to Mr. Traoré the concurrent existence of both poverty and wealth thus guarantees the functioning of society. Some need to be masters in order for subordinates to be motivated to do work that no one would do otherwise. Wealth and affluence are an integral part of society. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with striving for material riches, nor is it considered inappropriate to show your wealth in public. Showing economic success rather strengthens someone’s authority. Wealth is a part of life: there will always be people who are more affluent than others. As long as a certain amount of income is given to the poor, material successes will not be held against someone. It will rather provide considerable social status.
Within the Malian context striving for material success is mostly a matter of guaranteeing basic costs such as nutrition, housing, education fees and medical expenses. This is also the case for most Islamic youth. Yet, the Muslim community also has amongst its members some of Mali’s most affluent citizens. Leading religious figures often also have had considerable business successes and are generally quite wealthy men. Some sheikhs drive through the poor neighborhoods of their followers in one of their Hummers, an ultimate symbol of American capitalism and militarism. Moreover, the presidents of most Islamic associations have at least two wives, a sign of material prosperity. A good example is el Hadjj Mahamadou Haidara, a young imam I met in Hamdallaye, the neighborhood where Bintou lives and where ‘la source’ is situated. Mr. Haidara lives with his four wives in a four story home in the middle of Hamdallaye. He lives next to the mosque that was built by his father, his predecessor as imam of the quarter. The other legacy of his father is located a couple of blocks away, a one minute ride in Mr. Haidara’s car. It consists of five mud constructions, swirling with over two hundred boys in between the ages of seven and twenty. The conditions in this Quranic school are not of high standards, but the fact that Haidara’s family has been able to construct it is a sign of his financial prosperity.

A friend who accompanied me explained that Mr. Haidara is a very wealthy and widely respected man. When I informed in what way he earned his fortune, it turned out to be not exactly clear. Imams officially do not earn stable wages through their clerical activities. They live from people’s donations, which can be monetary or in kind. Yet this source of income has not laid the foundation for Mr. Haidara’s position today. He and his father have also been successful businessmen. Their successes have paid off in a nice house which houses Mr. Haidara’s large family, his two trips to Mecca and his new car. Furthermore, they have provided the necessary funds to construct a mosque and to open a Quranic school. The respect that Mr. Haidara gets from fellow Muslims is based on both conditions; he has been able to make a good life for himself, and he has made use of his blessings to give back to the Muslim community.

The same logic plays a role within Islamic youth associations. A telling example is Abdoulaye Camara, the president of l’Association Malienne des Jeunes Musulmans, one of Mali’s largest Islamic associations. Besides being a leading figure in the Muslim community, he holds an executive position at SOTELMA, Mali’s telephone company, and has married two wives at a relatively young age. People I met with always spoke of him with high regard. This admiration was based on the effort he puts in AMIJM, but references were always made to his high economic status as well. The importance of material success is not restricted to clerics and leading figures in associations as they serve as examples to their followers. Business savvy and striving for economic prosperity are considered to be excellent qualities to be blessed with. Yet, how someone makes use of these qualities in order to
serve society is of pivotal importance, as he or she will be judged by this not just today, but also in the hereafter.

While Bintou was looking for an explanation of Mali’s poverty level in the exploitative relationship between non-Muslims and Muslims, Ismaïl Traore pointed out the inequality within the Muslim community itself. He identified the problem of excessive wealth versus extreme poverty in Islamic terms, and offered solutions through the principles of Islam, most notably through the Zakat, the distribution of alms to the poor. These alms are part of the tangible activities of Islamic youth associations. Yet the activities of Islamic youth associations go beyond financial and other kinds of material donations. This is why the moderator at LIEEMA’s congress became emotional. He observed the dire state of the country and saw a big role for his association. His the answer to the challenges of Mali lies in the joint use of the abilities of LIEEMA’s members in the name of Islam; if Malians would follow the rules of Islam the country would be functioning better, relations of people in day to day life would be better, excessive poverty would be banned and inequality would be restricted to acceptable limits.

Through the story of Bintou we see how these kinds of ideas trickle down through the community. While Bintou struggled with the question of poverty, she did not have the theological knowledge to come up with answers that she considered to be acceptable. Access to this kind of knowledge is provided through the networks that Islamic youth associations offer, and its circulation takes place at formal occasions such as seminars and conferences, but also in informal meetings, such as the visit Bintou and I made to Ismaïl Traore. When we walked back, Bintou and I talked about the conversation we had with him. I told her that I thought it had been very enlightening. Bintou heartily agreed, pointing out that Mr. Traore had studied extensively and that there is a lot one can learn from people like him. As she was looking for answers with regard to the issue of poverty, Bintou found both theological and practical solutions within the associative community that could help her in her daily life. To get a better understanding of the scope of what Islamic youth associations offer practically to its members on day to day basis, let us turn to the activities that associations organize and that young Muslims like Bintou take part in.

4.2 The activities of Islamic youth associations on a day to day basis
In her study of young Muslims in Bouaké, Côte d’Ivoire, LeBlanc (2006) suggest that Islamic youth associations break traditional gerontocratic and kin-based hierarchies, and open up new economic and social networks to their members, which offer them with otherwise unattainable opportunities and resources. As suggested by Traore (2007:20) in his work on youth movements in Mali, youth associations in Mali have proven to be inventive in addressing pressing problems, such as high youth
unemployment. In the case of Islamic youth associations this usually does not translate into access to concrete jobs, but associations can offer important tools such as educational facilities and other social services that can be quite difficult to access through official state institutions. Most importantly Islamic youth associations offer the opportunity to broaden one’s network beyond the traditional circles of the extended family.

Social networks are one of the most important resources within the Malian context, where the people you know are for example often more important than the education you have received. These networks can prove to be useful practical resources in all sorts of domains, yet their importance transcends the level of practicality. In a changing world Islamic youth associations mostly offer a sense of belonging, helping youth to navigate through a rapidly changing urban environment. We will return to the question whether this implicates a clear break with previous generations and mainstream Malian society. Evidence in chapter two suggested that the break might not be as clear cut as Larkin and Meyer (2006) imply. What is clear, however, is that the problems and challenges that youth in Bamako face today call for new answers. Islamic youth associations present young Muslims with answers that are in concordance with both the challenges of modernity and their religious beliefs.

As argued by LeBlanc (2006:423) Islam can serve as an advantageous identity marker in a heterogeneous urban environment in which people from different ethno-cultural backgrounds need to find ways to relate to each other. Islamic youth associations are tight-knit social networks in which brotherhood and sisterhood are emphasized at all times. The bonds between members are close to those between family members. Members call each other frère and sœur (brother and sister) and important leading figures, such as imams, are often referred to as being comme mon père (like my father). It is common in Mali to refer to others in kinship terms, even if the person in question is not an actual relative. The tradition is a reflection of the importance of social networks. These networks are not made up of loose affiliations, but they have been regulated historically through specific rules that are often formulated in kinship terms. The history of Malian family names is an interesting example in this respect. Nearly all Malian family names can be traced back to epic tales, whose storylines influence the relationships and behaviour between different Malian families today. The system of cousinage (see chapter three) is based on these mythical stories. The idea of relatedness between people of different families has thus been a continuous feature of Malian culture. The use of kinship terms between people who are not necessarily related in Islamic youth associations fits perfectly into this.

This notwithstanding, the use of frère and sœur within Muslim youth associations has meaning beyond the specific Malian tradition. It also reflects the idea of being different from the rest.
of society. This idea of separation and alienation ties young Muslims in Islamic youth associations together. They are different from many of friends and most people in society around them. Moreover, they have often also chosen a distinctively different path from most of their family members. Islamic youth associations offer a second new network of family members, in which the terms frère and soeur reflect a deep bond that is based on a shared devotion to Islam. The idea of being an Islamic family is not only reflected in the kinship terms that are used. It materializes in the importance of friendship and sharing. Even though most associations are rather hierarchical, and there is always a level of separation between men and women (see chapter five), there is a strong feeling of Muslim solidarity. People live together, which means that they share in each other’s good fortune and try to stick up for each other when someone is in need.

Many of the young men and women in Islamic youth association spoke of the difficulties they had with their families when they decided to devote themselves to their religion and join an association, and how the support of the other members of the association helped them in persisting in their choice. Mahamadou, an active LIEEMA member in his mid twenties who often hung out at the association’s headquarters if he was not busy with his activities as a student at the faculty of medicine at the University of Bamako, explained for example:

“It is not that easy, there are often clashes. Your opinions are different from those of people in your environment. But if you have the strength you have to continue your march. Associational life also gives the courage to continue. If you have a problem, you bring it along and hand it over to your friends, and you will find that they will help you. You will find that they have gone through the same ordeals that you are facing. So, someone can explain everything to you, make it understandable, and you too will persevere. [...] If we take the case of parents, for example. There are parents who do not understand very much. They do not understand the fact that a young person will devote himself exclusively to spiritual activities. So what position should you take with regard to those parents? If you have the association to help you, you will have the strength to persevere and to talk with your parents.”

The recurring issue of relatives being suspicious of the influence of Islamic youth associations is an example of how young Muslims can share their problems on a practical level. They get together formally and informally with fellow members. These meetings mostly take place at the headquarters of an association. There are usually people hanging out at the headquarters at all times, but most associations have official weekly or bimonthly meetings in which the board of the association or another specific committee gets together. In this case the meeting is more formal and meant to discuss issues concerning the management of the association and its activities. There are also more informal regular get-togethers in which regular members come to share what is on their mind.
Aminata, a member of the cellule féminine of UJMMA who had a background in working with Ansar Dine, the large association around Sharif Haidara, took me for instance to the headquarters of a small association of women that was situated in Sirakoro Negentanna, a village on the outskirts of Bamako in which most women receive little education. Most of the association’s members were mothers and wives who struggle with the day to day problems of life in Mali: nutrition, sanitation, education for the children, and making ends meet. The women of the association come together every week to learn about religious issues and, perhaps more importantly, to provide each other with a social safety net. Each meeting starts with the announcement of the list of members to see if everyone is present. If someone is not there, the women inform as to why she has not been able to make it and if there is something going on that might be of relevance to the other members. Then the women can present their problems. The issues that the women raise are mostly of a practical nature, such as a sick family member who needs medical attention or technical troubles with the pipeline that provides the water supply of a household. Together the women look for solutions. Even if they cannot be found immediately, the women have had the chance to express their worries and there is always the possibility that a solution will come along in the future. Through their membership of the Islamic association the women of Sirakoro Negentanna have thus become part of an Islamic community that offers them a greater network of support and opportunity.

The tight-knit networks that are created through Islamic youth association play a significant role in the lives of its members, and usually transcend the meetings and activities of the association. Outside of the headquarters and official activities of the association members share close friendships as well. I encountered a good example of such a friendship in the dorm of the economic faculty of the University of Bamako. At a congress of LIEEMA that was held at the faculty, some female LIEEMA members who shared a room in the dormitory invited me to their place. The small space consisted of six bunk beds, a small closet, a table, and a shower that also functioned as toilet. One of the girls was preparing dinner, rice with fish sauce, in a small cooking pot on a small gas burner under the table. She explained that there was a cafeteria on campus, but that the girls usually cooked themselves as it saved them a lot of money. The girls, who were all veiled with some wearing the niqab, took me back to their room before prayer. In the room they took off their veil and performed the ablution in the small sink next to the shower. Afterwards they took turns praying in a corner of the crowded room, while the other girls talked and laughed.

Djeneba, one of the girls who was in her third years of study at the faculty of economics and had lived in the room for about a year, told me that it had been the ‘LIEEMA room’ for quite some time. There were some other LIEEMA girls in the dormitory, but this was the only room that was exclusively occupied by members. As a result the room had become a meeting point for les soeurs.
Djeneba explained how they helped each other in their studies and with practical matters in the absence of their parents. The room also provided her with a place where she could be comfortable in her devotion to Islam, as the other girls understood the importance she attached to prayer and religious observance in general. The close group of friends strengthened each other in their devotion to Islam within the crowded and eclectic environment of the dormitory. The dormitory houses young men and women from throughout the country. As the small rooms house up to six students, the immense complex is a crowded and loud place in which young people from different backgrounds, with different ambitions and ideals try to find their way.

Membership of an Islamic youth association is thus based on the sharing of a common identity, which produces close friendship between members and creates new social safety nets. These identities are being created, shaped and strengthened through the official activities of associations. According to a rapport on LIEEMA’s financial situation “the efficiency and the vigor of an association can be measured by the choice, the relevance and the durability of its activities.”36 These activities offer associations the opportunity to present a certain religious discourse, while it offers members the chance to meet like minded people. The activities of Islamic youth associations can be roughly divided into four categories in which all associations are more or less active. These categories are often not clearly demarcated, as they are interwoven and activities can fall into two or more categories. The upcoming categorization is based, however, on classifications that are used in the field, made explicit in documents regarding the activities of Islamic youth associations and in conversations with members.

4.2.1 Religious activities

One of the priorities of Islamic youth associations consists of organizing activities in the religious sphere. In fact all activities that are organized by Islamic youth associations have been inspired by Islam. Most members of Islamic youth associations, whether leading figures or regular members who participate in activities every now and then, explained that Islam touches all domains of society and that Islamic associations should therefore be active in many fields. Mohamed Macki Ba, the president of UJMMA, was quick to correct me when I interpreted the aim of the organization as the development of youth, an interpretation that was based on the broad array of social-economic activities and ambitions of the union: “Most importantly we are here to work for Islam. We are here for the youth as well, but we are here for our religion first. [...] Islam touches all domains of a society. It is impossible to make distinctions between Islam and other domains.”37
While it is important to keep in mind that all activities of Islamic youth associations are inspired by Islam, in practice religious activities do form a separate category. They are usually described separately in associations’ official program of activities, and individual members specifically refer to a cluster of activities as religious when asked about the activities that their association organizes.

Then what do these religious activities consist of? In the Projet de Programme d’activités of UJMMA the category includes for instance: readings in the Quran, lectures on the national, regional and neighborhood level, a yearly get-together of all structures of UJMMA, the establishment of an award of encouragement for an Islamic association, participation in the organization of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and religious competitions, whether on the radio or in written media. During fieldwork many of these intended activities were not yet being organized, and the activities that were being organized had not developed into their full potential yet. This notwithstanding, the list gives a general idea of the kind of religious activities Islamic youth associations organize. Religious activities consist mostly of communal prayer, reading of the Quran and the organization of lectures on religious topics. Associations also facilitate practical arrangements regarding Islamic holidays, and religious obligations such as Ramadan, the zakat, or the pilgrimage to Mecca.
During the month of Ramadan, for example, collective *ruptures du jeûne* (breaking of the fast) were organized, consisting of communal prayer and a meal. These communal prayers take place all around Bamako. People gather at sunset to break the fast and pray together on the streets. One night in August I broke the fast with the *sœurs* and *frères* of LIEEMA at the headquarters of the association in Ouolofobougou. In the afternoon a group of female members had come together to prepare a meal. On the roof of the building they peeled beans and washed rice as they engaged in small talk. At the hour of the breaking of the fast a light brew of sugar and rice and a sip of water prepared the stomach for the meal that was served after communal prayer in the conference room. After dinner an experienced member of *les deux A* talked about the issue of engagement to *le travail Islamique*, which was a returning topic within LIEEMA.

It is important to point out that although distinctions between different fields of activities are made; in practice it is often hard to make clear demarcations between the field of religion and the other three domains in which Islamic youth associations are active. Activities can include components of the different domains that are identified in this chapter. The communal breaking of the fast for instance has not only a religious, but also a social and an educational dimension. First, members of LIEEMA emphasized its religious meaning, as they enhanced their relationship with God through the practice of fasting and prayer. Second, it was a social event in which friendship ties between members were created and nurtured. Third, the *ruptures du jeûne* included the educational dimension that is always present in religious activities.

**4.2.2 Educational activities**

The second field is that of educational activities; a domain that is tightly knit to the religious field, but that does not exclusively focuses on the theological and spiritual domain. In fact, much emphasis is placed on other types of education. All informants emphasized the importance that Islam attaches to the strengthening of knowledge in all possible domains. One of the most important types of Islamic education are the Arabic language courses that are offered by all Islamic youth associations I visited. When I visited the *cellule féminine* of AMJM for example, in the headquarters of AMJM’s committee in the neighborhood of Magnambougou, the women were just gathering for their weekly Arabic lesson. About twenty women had come together in the small communal room. The Arabic alphabet was written on a blackboard on the wall. During the lesson the women recited the Quran for about an hour as a female teacher took the lead.

Like other Islamic youth associations, LIEEMA also offers Arabic lessons. There is a slight difference though between LIEEMA and other associations with regard to the issue of language. LIEEMA, as a student association, places great emphasis on the importance of scientific knowledge and the adoption of a modern and global attitude. In line with these ambitions, greater practical
importance is often given to French, and even English, as languages of science and international communication. The significance of western languages for LIEEMA shows for example in the Friday prayers that were organized by the association on a weekly basis in the Centre Culturel Islamique Hamdallaye. Mandjou, the president of les deux A, was particularly proud of the fact that the imam’s sermon was given in French, as opposed to Bambara. To Mandjou the use of the French language reflects LIEEMA’s global and intellectual attitude:

“Every Friday we organize sermons in French, completely in French. We are the first to organize these kinds of sermons and the people really appreciate it. We are students, intellectuals, so we invite great intellectuals to speak. Like last Friday, Farouk Diaby spoke. He is a great economist and a great theologian. He talked about the elections in the United States, about the candidates and things like that. He explained the consequences of this election for the African world. It is clear that developments in the United States influence Africa as well. We are not isolated here, so we have to take an interest in the whole world.”

The fact that LIEEMA attaches great value to the use of French does not imply that the Arabic language has inferior status within the association, or that members of LIEEMA are not focused as much on developments within the Islamic world. It rather suggests the need to keep up with the West as an additional window of opportunity. The issue of language will be further explored in chapter six.

One of the main educational occupations of Islamic youth associations, besides language classes is the organization of seminars and roundtables on numerous subjects. In UJMMA’s program of activities a list of examples of themes is given that gives insight in the great variety of topics for these kinds of meetings. A distinction can be made between three types of themes. First, an inventory of Islamic topics is given, such as the issue of da’wa, fasting, Islamic traditions and the unity of Muslims. Second, there are themes that have to do with the organization of the association and the issue of the mobilization of its members. Topics that are mentioned are for instance communication and debating techniques and the elaboration of a program of activities. Third, more general themes that are not related to Islam or the association are suggested, such as citizenship, professional education, humanism, introduction to information technology and basic hygiene.

Most associations organize large seminars on the national level once a year. These seminars are almost exclusively focused on topics related to Islam. LIEEMA, for example, organizes one national seminar a year on varying locations which is called SENAFI (Séminaire Nationale du Formation Islamique). Seminars are also organized on the regional level, they are called SEREFI.
Séminaire Regionale du Formation Islamique) and are organized in the cities of Kayes, Ségou, Mopti, Sikasso and the district of Bamako. Most seminars can be attended by both men and women. Some topics however are restricted to seminars that are held exclusively for women. Hawa, the resourceful businesswomen of chapter two, organized seminars for the married women of LIEEMA and les deux A. These seminars are meant to train women in family management and conjugal relations within an Islamic framework, and deal with issues such as sexuality, children, or required behavior towards the husband and in-laws. As these issues are supposed to be restricted to married life, unmarried women are not expected to attend these seminars.

Large national and regional seminars are thus meant to educate members on Islamic values and practices, to teach them to live their lives according to Islamic prescripts and, as often pointed out by LIEEMA women, to provide them with theological knowledge that lies at the basis of the Islamic lifestyle that Islamic youth associations promote. Besides seminars on theological issues, such as the life of the prophet or the interpretation of surahs from the Quran, Islamic youth associations also organize conferences and seminars on topics that are not necessarily Islamic, such as traffic safety, desertification, or the fight against poverty. Yet in this case a theological dimension is always present.

At a conference on the issue of corruption for example, that was organized as part of a series of lectures during the Ramadan, two speakers were invited. The first speaker was a journalist of a national magazine who had done extensive research on corruption in Mali. He gave a general overview of the causes, consequences and possible solutions to the problem. Then, an imam was invited to speak on the position of Islam with regard to corruption. He first explained references to corruption and economic misconduct in the Holy Scriptures and brought up examples of corruption directed at and committed by Muslims. Then he called on his listeners to fight corruption in the name of Islam. After the words of both speakers, the audience was allowed to give comments and ask questions. Most of the audience’s questions and remarks had a religious dimension, focusing on the question how it is possible that Muslims can display rejectable behavior such as corruption. At the end of the conference the moderator recapped the points that had been made during the meeting and concluded that Muslims should be critical of each other in order to solve the issue of corruption. He pointed out that nine out of ten civil servants is Muslim, which means that the Muslim community is part of the problem. Therefore Muslims should hold each other accountable for their actions. According to the moderator organizing conferences on the topic throughout the country could gradually involve the Muslim community in the process of eradicating corruption.
Even though the audience at conferences exists almost exclusively of members of the associations that organize them, they are often indeed directed at broader society. The aim of these meetings is to inform Malians on important topics, and, by doing so, to contribute to the development of the country. An Islamic vision on social and economic issues is thus directed to a broader audience that, as the majority of the Malian population is Muslim, mostly consists of fellow Muslims.

In order to bring their message to the masses Islamic associations make use of different channels. LIEEMA and AMJM worked for instance with radio Dambe, a private Islamic radio station led by Mr. Mohamed Kimbiri, the press secretary of AISLAM (l’Association Islamique pour le Salut, see chapter three). As he takes in firm positions in public debate, Mr. Kimbiri is not an uncontroversial figure. Mr. Kimbiri regularly publishes articles in daily newspapers, and is actively involved in various campaigns of AISLAM. Mr. Kimbiri was, for instance, a prominent figure in AISLAM campaigns against a ban on female circumcision (Soares, 2006:89). During fieldwork Mr. Kimbiri was campaigning against the abolition of the death penalty. Mr. Kimbiri’s outspoken public persona, along with the fact that he is a product of francophone education and not familiar with the Arabic language, made that radio Dambe did not appeal to all Islamic youth associations. In fact, UJMMA was planning on creating its own independent radio channel. Besides making use of the radio, associations often also invite journalists of non-religious papers and magazines, and at times ORTM, the national television and radio broadcaster of Mali, would cover a conference or a seminar.
4.3 and 4.4 Social activities of Islamic youth associations on different scales: a trash can that says ‘don de UJMMA’ (gift of UJMMA) in Tombouctou, and AMJM’s medical center facing the market of Magnambougou, Bamako.

4.2.3 Social/humanitarian activities

A third kind of activities that Islamic youth associations take on are social/humanitarian activities, which are of a very practical and often material nature. The story of Bintou illustrated the central importance of the issue of poverty to Malian society. The dire economic state of the country and the consequential poverty in which most Malians live leads to problems in all domains of society, from corruption to ecological degradation, from education to medical care and so on. Through their membership of an Islamic youth association young Muslims not only try to improve their own lives, the associations also offer the possibility of making a direct and concrete contribution to the development of Mali. Caring for those in need is an integral part of Islam, the Zakat being one of its five pillars. Activities that Islamic youth associations undertake can range from small projects such as cleaning up the neighborhood and placing trash cans in the streets, to complicated and costly ventures such as the building and maintaining of a medical center that offers inexpensive medical services to those who would otherwise have no access to them.

AMJM for instance had set up a centre de santé facing the market of Magnambougou, housing both the medical center and the headquarters of the AMJM committee of the neighborhood. AMJM is a relatively large association with a lot of members amongst the working class, its president being an executive at a telecommunications company. Like les deux A, which consists solely of more highly educated people, the members of AMJM are better able to provide funds than an association such as LIEEMA, which exists solely of students. Les deux A currently remains too small to set up large projects, but the association is growing in size and there are certainly ambitions to become a player in the field of development. As les deux A is an association that originated as a students association, it is not surprising that it mostly focused on educational projects, such as a mentorship program covering the tuition fees of about a hundred poor school
children. The students of LIEEMA are not able to bring in the financial means to participate in such a project but this does not mean they are not active on the humanitarian level. During Islamic holidays, such as Tabaski, the Festival of sacrifice, they distribute clothing and food to poor families. There are also more personal ways of assisting those in need that are part of the activities of Islamic youth associations, such as visiting the sick or paying respect to the dead and offering consolation to the deceased’s loved ones at funeral services.

This is in line with the observation of Moussa Ba the secrétaire à la jeunesse of the Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali (HCI) and vice-president of UJMMA, who described simpler activities, that are relatively easy to organize and do not necessarily require substantial funds, as the core business of Islamic youth associations. Larger projects, such as the setting up of large medical services and educational structures, or the coordination of nationwide programs to raise consciousness on important topics such as HIV or environmental protection, should be in the hands of larger coordinating organizations, such as UJMMA, UNAFEM (Union Nationale des Associations des Femmes Musulmanes) the national umbrella organization of Islamic women’s associations, or the HCI itself. They are stronger in raising funds, as most associations are not capable of doing so on their own, and they may be able to work together with NGOs from North Africa and the Middle East but also from Western countries. These kinds of partnerships already take place, but it is often difficult for an Islamic association to work with Western NGOs (in chapter six a closer look will be given to this issue). The collaboration between Islamic associations and humanitarian organizations suggest a certain overlap between the two types of organizations. While Islamic associations are involved in humanitarian activities, they are distinctively different, however, from purely humanitarian organizations in their aims and activities. As we have seen, the range of activities of Islamic youth associations is much broader than humanitarian work.

4.2.4 Leisure activities

While the main activities of Islamic youth associations take place in the field of religion, education and socio-economic development, a small part of associations’ activities is devoted to leisure. These type activities vary from a social gathering such as LIEEMA’s cooking courses to the organization of athletic tournaments. Leisure activities are secondary to the activities described above. Friendship and informal contacts between members are of major importance in Islamic youth associations, but the creation of a sociable environment is essentially a condition to pursue more serious goals. Members of Islamic youth associations value le travail Islamique highly. Bintou’s story and the emotional language of the moderator at LIEEMA’s national congress who emphasized the need for Muslims in a poor nation such as Mali to unite and get to work, reflect the belief of young Muslims in the necessity of their religious activities. In addition the message of Islamic youth associations has to
be spread in broader society in order to mobilize as many people as possible. This explains the openness of each of the associations I visited. The most important message of Islamic youth associations is the importance of knowledge in the broadest sense of the term. I now want to take a closer look at this emphasis on education, its importance to Malian youth within their specific historical context, and the suggested links between intellectual, moral and material poverty.

4. 3 A quest for knowledge and morality: development through education and purification

In spite of scientific and technical progress, today’s world is built on an economy that knows no faith or law. Destabilization of the sociopolitical environment elicits tragic events such as war, famine, illnesses etc.

Mankind progressively loses its cultural heritage and its moral and spiritual values.

This situation is actually the result of a spiritual void created and maintained by a materialist civilization. This is why we witness a revival of interest in spiritual and religious values all around the world. (LIEEMA, Projet de statuts et reglement interieur 2008-2010, p.2)

The quotation above is taken from a document presented and discussed at LIEEMA’s national congress of December 2008. In the report a special committee analyzes the main challenges the association faces and suggests changes in LIEEMA’s charter to tackle the issues. The opening words of the report provide inside into a delicate issue that young Muslims in Bamako have to balance. Members of Islamic youth associations are generally set on contributing to the socio-economic development of their country, which is also one of the two official objectives of LIEEMA. As illustrated in Bintou’s story, poverty is a daily lived reality for nearly all Malians, including the young Muslims in Islamic youth associations. The Malian situation is often contrasted with the Western world, as a community of rich and powerful nations. This image spreads via the media, popular music and film culture, but also through the presence of an extensive NGO community that includes many Western based and/or funded development programs.

In spite of this mirroring of the Western world, there is also the idea that development has to be met on Mali’s own terms. In the case of Islamic youth associations this means the adoption of proper Islamic conduct and a purification of mainstream Malian Islamic practices that members of associations often qualify as un-Islamic. Although ideas of Islamic purification have been present in the region for centuries, their coexistence with the ideology of progress is a relatively recent phenomenon. The ideology of ‘progress’ entered Africa in the 20th century along with the expansion of the world capitalist system (Brenner, 1993:76). While ‘progress’ meant becoming more like the
French in colonial times, in the postcolonial era the notion has been inserted in the ideology of ‘development’. The notion of progress was never a theme in 19th century writings of Muslims in the area, as they focused on purity and the link with the past and the founders of Islam (Brenner, 1993: 76). Yet as Brenner points out: “today, many Muslims still speak about such “purity”, but many are also concerned about “progress”, and they participate in the discourse which centers on Mali’s own version of development ideology “(ibid, 1993:76-7). Then how do young Muslims relate progress and purification, and what does the idea of progress entail exactly in the case of Islamic youth associations?

As also comes through in the quotation above, informants were generally concerned about the materialist dimension of political and economic liberalization. The suggested moral and spiritual void that results from this materialism implicates that progress is a delicate, sometimes even dangerous issue. Within the framework of Islamic youth association young Muslims have access to religious specialists who can offer guidance. Mr. Maïga, one of the founders of AMJM and head of the department of Arabic at the University of Bamako, explained the importance of guidance to young Muslims as follows:

“Today associations have a role in education and the raising of awareness in general. We have to inform youth about the consequences of certain kinds of behavior. Take for example the influence of television. Have you seen the soap series Barbara? It is a show that comes from the West, is it not? Well, you have seen it? The characters in that show have a morality that is not acceptable in a Muslim context. Barbara, for example, says that the father of her son is Paco, but in reality it is Octavio. This kind of behavior is not suitable for Muslims. […] So, young people here see this and think that it is reality. They have to understand that it is not the work of the West or of America. The creators of this show are part of an enterprise that only wants to earn money. But this does not mean that we cannot exchange with the West. We can learn a lot from the West, especially with regard to science. This is not in opposition with our social values. This is the problem of globalization. We have to help our young people with the interpretation of globalization: how to live in a globalized world?”

What emerges from Mr. Maïga’s words is that the opening up of the world through globalization is not a bad thing in itself, as long as a distinction is made as to what is morally acceptable within a Muslim framework and what is not. According to Mr. Maïga young Muslims have to be warned about the dangers of capitalism and materialism, such as morally reprehensible things like soap operas. Through the religious education young Muslims receive in Islamic youth associations they learn to interpret a modern phenomenon like popular culture within an Islamic framework. This does not
imply however, that all Western influences should be rejected; the modern sciences for instance could help Mali in its quest for development.

All of my informants emphasized the importance of study and intellectual exchange, not just with regard to their personal development, but also with regard to the development of society around them. At the same time many young Muslims are looking for protection from the dangers and temptations that contacts with the outside world bring along. Islamic youth associations can help balancing what is acceptable and what is not. A delicate issue for example is the participation of women in social life, and how women and men should relate to each other at school and in the workplace (see chapter five). In practice, the interpretation of what is acceptable can be very pragmatic and can change from situation to situation. Moreover, different members of different associations might think and act in a different way regarding certain issues. Nevertheless, morality is the highest good for young Muslim. The guidance of Islamic youth associations allows young Muslims in Bamako today to live their lives in a way that they perceive to be morally sound. In the process they educate and better not only themselves, but they to contribute to the development of the country as well.

The concept of moral purification does not solely apply to issues concerning the relatively recent political and economical liberalization in Mali; it is also directed at religion itself. Bintou, the young secrétaire à l’information of the cellule féminine of LIEEMA who was introduced at the beginning of this chapter, explained for example that her family members and her old friends do not obey all Islamic precepts and are therefore not true Muslims. She referred for instance to the revealing dress style of women and to the fact that her friends listen to music and go out dancing. Yet the criticism of young Muslims such as Bintou towards their fellow Malian Muslims also includes the religious domain, aiming at the purification of Islam from certain practices that have been part of the religious life of Malian Muslims for centuries, such as the consultation of marabouts, a specific kind of West African Islamic religious specialists. In his study on maraboutage in Djenne, Mommersteeg (1996) draws out a continuum with the marabout as a classical Islamic scholar, and the notion of the marabout as a specialist in esoteric practices as two extremes on each side. Most marabouts are active in both fields and can be placed somewhere in between the two extremes (Mommersteeg, 1996:28-31).

References to marabouts and their liable practices were often made in conversations with members of Islamic youth associations. One of my informants whose family name is Kante, was once jokingly referred to as le roi des fétiches, the fetish king. When I introduced him to a friend as a leading figure of an Islamic youth association, she laughed and asked how le roi des fétiches could be leading an Islamic association. The association of the name Kante with fetish practices comes from the epic tale of Sundiata, the founder of the kingdom of Mali. In the epic tale Sumanoro Kante, the
cruel sorcerer king of Sosso, is one of Sundiata’s greatest enemies (Amselle, 2001:147-8). Nearly all Malian family names (jамu in Bambara) can be traced to these kinds of epic tales. The family name Kante is part of the caste of blacksmiths, that traditionally has marginal status with regard to Islamic matters (ibid, 2001:147-9). Even if the caste system has lost much of its relevance in present day Bamako, references to the epic tales in which they originate regulate the relationships and behavior between different families up to today. At the time the joke about the roi de féti che was made everyone laughed along, including the descendent of the Kante family who had become a leading figure of an Islamic youth association. When I asked him about it later on, he was very serious in explaining me that he has nothing to do with fetishes: “Yes, this is the past, but now there are no more fetishes, no more gris-gris, nothing. Our beliefs are healthy and clear.”

While maraboutage was a thing of the past for the members of Islamic youth associations, they did tell me stories of its influence on the people around them. One of my female informants told me for instance about a young girl whose parents wanted her to marry a man she did not want to marry. To avoid the marriage the girl visited a marabout who indicated he could help her in exchange for money, gold and clothes. The girl gave the marabout all she had and after a while her parents proposed she married someone else. According to Hawa, who told me the story, this was part of a natural process; if a daughter really does not want to marry a certain man the parents will eventually start looking for another candidate. But the young girl believed in the marabout and continued to go to him whenever she had a problem in her marriage. When she ran out of money to pay the marabout for his services, she asked a friend for something she could give the marabout. The friend refused as she believed the marabou was an imposter. She called on the police, who questioned the marabout. He then admitted that he had deceived the young girl.

The notion of the marabout as an imposter is present in most stories that I was told, but the person who seeks a marabout’s advice is usually also held responsible and is judged as such. A rumor I heard about a leading figure in the Muslim community is telling in this respect. The story was that a woman who was having marital problems was told by a marabout to undress in a public place. The Muslim leader in question was present when she did, and reprimanded the woman by whipping her with a branch. Although it is not certain if this actually happened, the story made an impression on people, making them understand the severity of the marabout’s as well as the woman’s actions. Whether stories about marabouts are truthful or not, they reflect the ideas young Muslims have about maraboutage and its corrupting influence on society. Hawa, who told me the story about the young girl who visited a marabout to avoid marrying against her will, explained:

“It has nothing to do with Islam. There are marabouts who ask a lot of money, but this is the work of the devil. It is a problem. People do not have enough knowledge and believe this is
Islam. They do not know that the prophet himself was against the use of fetishes. He forbade it. But the people do not know. It is not their fault. We cannot judge them. They are not educated. They have no profound knowledge of their religion.”

Hawa identifies the lack of knowledge of what is proper Islamic conduct as one of the fundamental problems of Malian society. Her membership of LIEMA has provided her with religious knowledge that has allowed her to adopt what she considers to be truly Islamic practices. The adoption of this lifestyle has provided her with peace of mind. This was confirmed in conversations with other members of Islamic youth associations about what Islam and their membership of an Islamic association means to them; it provides them with answers in a changing and often confusing world.

The idea of finding peace of mind through the adoption of a true Islamic lifestyle was connected to the socio-economic development of Mali as a whole by Fatim, a young woman who became involved with LIEMA during law school. At the moment we met she was unemployed and she devoted her time to taking care of her two small children and filling the position of vice-president of les deux A.

During our conversation she reflected on the notion of development:

“What is development? First I have 500 francs CFA and then I have 1 000 francs CFA. Am I developed? There are NGOs who come with a fortune, a lot of money, but the most important thing is peace of mind. Is your mind at ease? Maybe you will have difficulties here, but if you do the right thing Allah will not let you down. You will have your reward. Maybe here, maybe in the hereafter. You may face difficulties here, but there is no suffering over there.”

With her emphasis on peace of mind and the eventual rewards that the adaptation of proper Islamic conduct will offer, Fatim points out that Islamic youth associations do not only provide answers to questions regarding social injustice, but that Islam can also provide acceptance to difficult situations if there are no straightforward working solutions. In the end it is not important in which circumstances one lives on this earth. If you suffer here but you follow Islamic precepts, you will be rewarded later on. This does not take away from ideas about progress and the drive of young people in their quest to go forward; it just makes the challenges that life in Bamako can raise easier to bear.

The way in which the education and guidance that associations offer can help individual members is best explained through the words of Ousmane, a soft-spoken, hardworking and intelligent medical student who was elected the new president of LIEMA at the national congress of 2008. When I spoke with him he was not yet elected president, but he was already a very active member in his
position as *secrétaire aux affaires culturelles*. Ousmane was present at the associations’ headquarters almost on a daily basis. He had been a member of LIEEMA ever since he attended *lycée*, and explained the way the association educated him throughout the last ten years as follows:

“Religious life consists primarily of education, and thank God I have been profiting a lot from my religion. I have also had an education in my family, but this education has been completed. It has been reinforced by the Islamic education I received through the association. The association is like a torch in a great darkness. It allows you to see where to place your feet...on a religious level, to accept each and everything. How to focus on things that will not discourage you, but that will give you strength. The association is like a source of strength. If someone else finds himself in the darkness you have to offer him a chance, you have to recruit him. If you have this source, this will allow you every single time to reinforce your strength and you can continue your march with the torch. This is why you have to study.”

Ousmane thus attaches great value to study, comparing the Islamic education he received in the association to a torch which allows him to find his way in the world. The importance of the association with regard to study was an important issue to many informants. One of the main problems that members of all Islamic youth associations experience is the initial rejection of the association by their relatives, most notably their parents. One of the main concerns of parents is the fear that their children will devote all of their time to their religious activities and as a consequence will not sufficiently dedicate themselves to their education. My informants emphasized however that the opposite is true; Islamic youth associations encourage them to finish school, as Islam teaches its followers to learn about as much topics as possible and Islamic youth associations offer courses and seminars on all sorts of topics, religious and secular.

4.4 Problems in the Malian education system and the response of Islamic youth associations

Moussa Ba, *sécretaire à la jeunesse* at the *Haut Conseil Islamique*, categorized the members of Islamic youth associations into three groups: those who have a background of francophone secular education, those who have been educated in Arabic Islamic educational institutions, and those who did not receive an education at all. LIEEMA and its sister association *les deux A* consisted exclusively of students of secular francophone educational institutions. Most other associations had a more diverse following. The educational background of its members has an influence on the priorities of Islamic youth associations, which was one of the difficulties in creating unity amongst all Muslim youth associations. Discord with regard to language and education issues were for instance reasons
for LIEEMA not to join UJMMA (see chapter three). LIEEMA’s vision on the education that should be provided by Islamic youth associations is largely inspired by the educational background of its leadership and its members. They refer to themselves as intellectuals, placing great emphasis on the production and circulation of scientific knowledge. According to LIEEMA’s leadership English and French are important languages of communication for intellectuals in today’s world. They do not necessarily mean to dismiss the importance of the Arabic language for the broader Muslim community, yet LIEEMA does not place great emphasis on use of the language beyond the religious domain.

Associations that include young uneducated or arabophone Muslims, have other priorities than the francophone students of LIEEMA. In its projet de programme d’activités, UJMMA calls, for instance, for the introduction of religious education at public schools. What is more interesting and controversial though is that the union also calls for the revalorization of the national languages (see chapter three). While LIEEMA agrees on the importance of the Arabic language and religious education, the emphasis that UJMMA places on the national languages implies that the union speaks indeed to a different audience. A revalorization of the national languages would be most beneficial to young men and women who have been trained in Arabic or who have not been educated at all. Both groups are not of special interest to LIEEMA.

Another example that illustrates in what way the objectives of the secular students of LIEEMA and other young Muslims diverge, is the ambition of UJMMA to create a university structure for Quranic students. The goal of the project is to make all associations work together to create a structure for an Islamic university that would offer young Muslims the chance to receive a high-level Islamic education in Mali. Funds for scholarships would be raised within the Muslim community. In spite of the fact that the project was in its early stages and that its realization was far from certain at the time of fieldwork, it does illustrate the difference in approach between LIEEMA and UJMMA; a difference that is mostly informed by the varying educational background of its respective members.

In spite of these differences between Islamic youth associations, all associations underline the importance of education. As Brenner (2001) points out ever, since colonial times West African Muslims have placed emphasis on schools and education as schools offered a place for the preservation of religious knowledge. In spite of heavy restrictions and the monopoly position of the French secular schooling system, Islamic médersas were founded by African Muslims since the 1940s. On the one hand this was a reaction to the French schooling system; on the other hand it was an essential sign of the growing mobility of people and ideas, especially between West Africa and the Middle East (Brenner, 2001:40-1, 83). After independence the new ruling elite was a product of the secular French schooling system, which meant that Islam and Islamic education became virtually
invisible in official policy (Brenner, 2001:171). Enrolment in private Islamic médersas increased nonetheless, mainly due to the financial support of these institutions from the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries after the oil boom of 1973. The monopoly of the position of French language schools was put under pressure by the fast growth of the médersas (ibid., 2001:197-8). This process of Islamization in the domain of education has continued after the liberalization policies of the 1990s.

The financial support from the Middle East has not prevented the Islamic schooling system from problems. During my fieldwork I attended a national forum on Quranic schools, organized by the HCI and co-financed by the American embassy, at which the problematic situation of students of Quranic schools was discussed. The following week I visited the Quranic school of el Hadji Mahamadou Haidara, the imam in Hamdallaye, Bintou’s neighborhood, whose father had been able to open a Quranic school as a result of his business success. Mr. Haidara has two hundred boys under his care from age seven to age twenty, who live in five small mud buildings in his Quranic school. They are supposed to take care of their own nutrition and go around the streets begging. The begging Quranic students are seen as beneficiary to the community as they provide people the opportunity to fulfill their Islamic duty of giving alms to the poor. Yet these boys also maneuver through a tough and often unsafe social environment which makes it hard to focus on their studies. The plight of Quranic students has become a point of interest for several NGOs and the Haut Conseil Islamique, which was why the national forum on the topic was set up. Not all types of Islamic education require a lifestyle like those of Mr. Haidara’s students, and at times Quranic education allows for students to continue their studies abroad. Yet the financial support of Islamic education from Middle Eastern countries after the oil boom does not mean that Islamic schools are necessarily wealthy institutions. Nevertheless enrolment is increasing and following a religious education provides students with social status.

The francophone public schooling system suffers equally from a lack of funds, which influences the quality of education significantly. During my fieldwork I often heard stories about problems at public primary schools as well as in institutions of higher education, resulting primarily from an excess of bureaucracy and a lack of sufficient funds at the ministry of education. One of the main issues was the ongoing presence of corruption in the education system in which teachers take bribes in exchange for higher grades. The problem stems from the fact that teachers are notoriously underpaid. When I was in the field in September, the month in which classes usually start, the teachers at the écoles supérieures and the University of Bamako were on strike as they had not been paid for the corrections of last year’s examinations. In the month of October it was still not certain when the teachers would get back to work. Another major issue was the limited numbers of teachers and classrooms. Public primary schools can have up to a hundred students in one class, which
inevitably influences the quality of education in a negative way. The dire state of public education has the severest repercussions for poorer children, since most parents who have the means send their children to private schools. As the authorities do not have the financial means to tackle these problems, the Islamic community tries to step in. Les deux A, an association of merely higher educated young Muslims, paid the tuition fees for a hundred disadvantaged kids.

As said before, the varying educational background of its members has its influence on different associations. Some are calling for the revalorization of Islamic educational institutions; others focus on secular education. The emphasis on education, however, is a consistent feature of Islamic youth associations. Associations are important places for the preservation and sharing of religious knowledge, but they also offer non-religious education. This means that all sorts of classes are provided by Islamic associations to enhance the quality of education of its members and to provide them with opportunities for their future. This is done out of Islamic ideals, but also out of pragmatic considerations. As Mr. Maıga, one of the founders of AMJM and head of the department of Arabic at the University of Bamako, said: “It is a matter of globalization. We have to develop. People need work, they have to be practical.” Islamic youth associations thus allow for their members to be practical and pursue the education they need. This is part of their religious ideals, as Islam teaches the importance of education, but it also has to do with the fact that, as we have seen in chapter two, most of its members are young and ambitious.

4. 5 Linking personal piety to the development of society

As said before, Islamic youth associations are social networks based on strong bonds between its members. Through associational life young Muslims create a common identity that is based on religious values and materializes in the activities described above. This implies that religious practices are social in nature. Yet in its essence the religious and spiritual experiences that attract young Muslims to Islamic youth associations are very personal. Central to this experience is the personal relationship between the individual and God. While in the Malian context Muslim faith and practice were traditionally closely related to family and professional identity (Schulz, 2008:28-9), young Muslims describe their religious devotion as a personal submission to God.

The story of Bintou illustrates the individual nature of the religious experience. Bintou explained that God brought her to what she considers to be true Islamic practice. She questioned if her family members could be called Muslims as they have not turned to the proper Islamic practices that she has embraced, but she emphasized that she cannot judge others for their choices, as these matters are between the individual and God. Her religious identity is thus removed from her family identity, as she does not see her family members and her friends who are not part of an Islamic
youth association as true Muslims. Bintou is quite radical in the characterization of her family and friends. Not every young Muslim would go as far as denying that their families are in fact Muslims, but most informants agreed with the idea that many Malian Muslims do not live according to Islamic precepts. The fact that young Muslims have devoted themselves to ‘true’ Islam should thus be describes as a personal choice, as most young Muslims have not been brought up with what they consider true Islamic precepts. These personal convictions become communal through the association. If the family no longer is the main frame of reference with regard to religion, Islamic youth associations step in, teaching its members how to be true Muslims, offering intellectual and practical stimulus.

The personal devotion of young Muslims also gets channeled into social action through Islamic youth associations. As we have seen in this chapter, the activities of Islamic youth associations are often concerned with broader society. In general, they propagate personal and societal development through the adaptation of proper Islamic practice, education and moral purification. As pointed out in the introduction, one’s own identity is always worked out with reference to ‘the other’ (Brenner, 1993:75). Masquelier (1996: 222-44) describes the process of the construction of an opponent, or ‘the other’, in the case of the Izala movement in Niger, through the dispute between the ‘fundamentalist’ Izala and ‘mainstream’ Muslims. Even though the use of the terms ‘fundamentalist’ Muslims and ‘mainstream’ Islam is in a way quite problematic (I will return to this issue chapter six), it is important to point out that in the case of Islamic youth associations, like in the case of the Izala, ‘the other’ is not composed of other cults or other religions, but that ‘the other’ mainly refers to other Muslims.

Boubacar, a member of the board of UJMMA, explained for example that he would not be opposed to working together with Christians, as long as they were sincere practitioners. In this logic the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is not drawn between Muslims and non-Muslims, but rather between those who follow the right practices of a religion, and those who do not. Boubacar’s stance is remarkably inclusive, and his remarks do not take way from the fact that Christians are also part of ‘the other’. Boubacar’s case, however, does point out the importance attributed to rightful religious practice. At times distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ based on ideas about what constitutes true Islamic practice were even made between Islamic youth associations. This was especially common in the case of LIEEMA. Members often emphasized the opposition between LIEEMA and other associations, accusing other associations of sectarianism, which in their view was not in line with Islam.

The relationship between young Muslims involved in Islamic youth associations and ‘the other’ is thus twofold. First, it consists of separating oneself, at least symbolically, from Malian Muslims who
do not follow true Islam. Second, it includes the obligation to save others from their ignorance and show them the right way to go. Thus even if religious convictions are very personal, practicing Islam has a great social component, both within the ‘own’ group as well as towards ‘the other’. The responsibility towards the other is primarily based on the fact that social justice is perceived to be a part of Islam. In line with Schulz’s observations amongst female supporters of Islamic moral renewal in San, a town in Southeaster Mali, Islamic youth associations put emphasis on “the social responsibility of individual believers, a responsibility that translates into the obligation to invite others to ‘embark in the path of God’” (Schulz, 2008:28).

Part of this invitation to other Muslims is the public performance of piety (Schulz, 2008: 30-1). It is not my intention to follow strict instrumentalist arguments of piety that presuppose “that piety practices are linked to identity politics or to economic, social, or political gain, arguments that are rooted in part in an unwillingness to view practices as a form of agency in and of themselves” (Deeb, 2009:113), yet on the other hand we cannot completely detach piety “from other daily practices, from politics, and from complex social environments and relationships” (ibid, 2009:113-4). Ahmed (2008) points out that since the 1980s forms of performance have developed into central expressions of Islamic revivalism in Sub-Saharan Africa. The aim of this public enactment of piety is to make a mark on the public sphere, to stress the strength of the group and to draw other Muslims to the movement (Ahmed, 2008:viii).

The notion of performance can be applied to Islamic youth associations as they publicize their message in various ways. Important visual markers of piety with great social and communicative significance are of course dress and public ritual worship in collective prayer. Furthermore, the message of Islamic youth associations is spread through lectures and seminars that are open to the public and are often broadcasted in the media, and via humanitarian action that brings the association’s activities to the people on the streets. It is important to point out that the emphasis of Islamic practice in Islamic youth associations is thus put on action. This seems to be somewhat contradictory to the call of Muslim youth for an intellectual understanding of Islam. This understanding, however, is perceived to be empty without the employment of the correct Islamic practices. The component of performance is thus vital to young Muslims in Islamic youth associations to distance themselves from other Muslims, who in their view do not have a true understanding of Islam, as well as to communicate their message and persuade others to join in.

Central to the message of Islamic youth associations is the notion of morality, a notion that, as said above, has to be translated into actions. These actions are often of a worldly nature, such as humanitarian work, but it also involves acts that are restricted to the religious domain, such as the correct employment of Islamic ritual practices. Members of Islamic youth associations disapprove of
the merging of Islamic rituals with un-Islamic elements. Examples that I encountered in the field are for instance the condemnation of the use of drums and dancing at traditional Malian wedding ceremonies, or controversies about the position of the hands during prayer. In her work on young members of the Tabligh Jama’at, an Islamic missionary movement that strictly observes the fundamentals of the faith, in The Gambia, Janson (2005) connects intergenerational conflict that centers around life-course rituals to Launay’s observation that “controversies about ritual are in principal arguments about morality- i.e., about how one should act as a ‘true Muslim’ (Janson, 2005: 575-6). In this light, the controversies about ritual practice that I encountered in the field underline the importance of morality in the case of Islamic youth associations in Bamako. The central aim of this emphasis on morality of Islamic youth associations is to make an impact on the social, economic, and intellectual situation of the Muslim community. As we have seen in this chapter, the social preoccupation of young Muslims in Bamako has to do with the dire socio-economic state of the country. Connecting this socio-economic state to moral issues, Islamic youth associations present a path to its members that offers answers as to why the situation is the way it is, whilst suggesting a new direction.

4.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter described the activities of Islamic youth associations on a day to day basis. Associations are active in four domains: the religious domain, the domain of education, the humanitarian domain and the domain of leisure. While such a categorization is based on classifications that are made in the field, it is important to point out that these categories in practice are often not clearly demarcated, as they are interwoven and activities can fall into two or more categories.

The activities of Islamic youth associations offer new answers and directions to young Muslims in a heterogeneous and ever-changing urban environment. One of the most important preoccupations of young Muslims are the difficult socio-economic circumstances they have to deal with. Through the story of Bintou it becomes clear how Islam can offer answers to the question of poverty and provide Malian Muslims with morally sound solutions. Morality is an important notion with regard to Islamic youth associations. The fact that most Malian Muslims employ so-called ‘un-Islamic’, and therefore immoral practices, is perceived to be a barrier to the development of society. The well-being of society is one of the most important aims of Islamic youth associations, which underlines the importance of the social responsibilities of its members. Education and purification are key in safeguarding the well-being of the Malian Muslim community and the country as a whole. Therefore, these two notions lie at the heart of the activities of Islamic youth associations.

While this chapter was focused on the day-to-day activities of Islamic youth associations and its members, the next chapter will shift from what is going on within these associations, which is in a
way very focused on local circumstances, to the broader issues of transnationalism and international discourse by looking at debates about gender roles. It is interesting to look at gender because it not only touches on practical issues, but it also reveals much about morality, which is a key notion to young Muslims in Bamako today.
5. Women and men in Islamic youth associations

The abolition of the Cellule Féminine

In this chapter I will shift attention from what is going on within Islamic youth associations, which is mostly focused on local issues, to the broader questions regarding transnationalism and international discourse that will be dealt with in chapter six. I will bridge the gap between the two through the exploration of gender roles. Although this chapter focuses mostly on women, it is important to point out that the notion of gender is incomplete without men. Femininity is constructed in relation to masculinity and vice versa. In the case of Islamic youth associations there is often a clear distinction between the female and the male domain. At times this distinction is materialized in the existence of a separate unit that is run by and for the female members of the association. In her work on women’s religious learning groups in Mali Schulz (2008) points out that women play a prominent role in Islamic renewal. However, as will be explained in this chapter, the role of women in the Malian Muslim community is complex and often not uncontested.

Some important debates I encountered in the field were related to the issue of gender, and more specifically the relation between men and women in Islamic youth associations. In this chapter the case of LIEEMA will be presented as an example of such a debate. The debate centered around the question if there is such a thing as a ‘travail islamique féminine’, and if there is, what the specific role of women should be within Islamic youth associations. The debate raises interesting questions with regard to feminine and masculine roles and the relationship between the two, but it also brings to the surface the way young Muslims in Bamako are juggling their religious beliefs with an urban intellectual Bamakoise lifestyle and the traditional Malian values of their families.

In this chapter I will first describe the setting of the debate, which took place at LIEEMA’s national congress. Then, I will go into the content of the debate itself. The debate dealt with the functioning of a separate unit for the female members of LIEEMA. I will take a closer look as to why
the women might need such a separate unit and why the existence of this unit, the *cellule féminine*, turned out to be problematic to some. Finally, I will explore the insight that both the content and the course of the debate offers into the issue of gender roles and power in different domains, focusing on the complexities of the changing role of women through their membership of an Islamic youth association. I will argue that patriarchal norms are not necessarily challenged through gender debates in Islamic youth associations, but that the role of women and the relationship between men and women are rather redefined within an existing framework of power relations between men and women.

5.1 **LIEEMA’s national congress: the abolition of the *cellule féminine***

LIEEMA organizes its national congress every two years. Members from throughout the country gather in Bamako to evaluate the mandate of the board of the association, *le Bureau Executif National* (BEN). The leaders of the association, who have been elected at the previous national congress, defend their work and answer questions of LIEEMA members. At the end of the congress a committee of experienced members, *le comité des sages*, elects three new presidents who will lead the association the coming two years.

First, *le comité des sages* appoints the president of *Les deux A* (*les Amicales Anciens*). When members of LIEEMA end their studies they automatically become a member of *les deux A*. The idea behind the creation of this organization is that former members stay committed to the work of LIEEMA for the rest of their lives, and that they can provide the students of LIEEMA with theological knowledge, practical advice, financial aid etc. After he has been elected, the president of *les deux A* appoints the members of his bureau himself. Next to the president of *les deux A*, *le comité des sages* appoints the president of *le Conseil Administratif* (CA). *Le Conseil Administratif* is made up out of members (mostly *anciens*) who have previously been a part of the *Bureau executif National* and who understand the reality of the work of the BEN. The members of the CA are meant to advise the BEN. As in the case of *les deux A*, further members of the CA are appointed by its newly elected president.

The most important moment of the days of congress is the election of the new president of *le Bureau Exécutif National* (BEN), who will function as the president of LIEEMA. The president is always an active student and is, like the president of *les deux A* and the *Conseil Administratif*, always male. The newly elected president of the BEN appoints the other fifteen members of his bureau. Some of my informants called the BEN the “*Bureau des hommes*”, but even if they are a minority, the BEN also has female members, most notably *la secrétaire à la mobilisation féminine*. Besides appointing his bureau, the newly elected president of the BEN also chooses the president of the
cellule féminine, a semi-autonomous structure solely comprised of women and exclusively focused on les soeurs, the female members of LIEEMA. As the president of the cellule féminine is not elected she does not have to answer to the national congress. Only the three presidents of les deux A, the Conseil Administratif and the Bureau Exécutif National speak on behalf of the board. The three men sit separately on the side in the front of the congress room, facing the moderator and his secretary on stage as well as the audience. The three presidents get specific speaking time during the congress and are also invited to respond to questions from the audience. While the election of the three new presidents is the highlight of the congress, the discussions that take place during the two days are also very significant. Through the evaluation of the last two years, and the debates that develop as a result of these reflections, the central issues in the association come to the surface. When I visited LIEEMA’s national congress of December 2008 two main debates came up.

On the second day of the congress I returned to the classroom at the faculty of economics where LIEEMA’s national conference was held. I was early and there were hardly any women, but some men were waiting for the start of the congress at the parking spot for the motorcycles. Some recognized me from earlier meetings or from the first day of the congress when I got introduced by the president of LIEEMA. After I greeted the men, I went inside and found a place on the right side of the room that had been reserved for the female members of LIEEMA. There were not as many people as on the first day of the congress, but throughout the opening ceremony people kept trickling in. During the day there were about thirty women and two hundred men present. There was no fixed number of people in the room; as the conference went on people walked in and out.
The day started with recitation of the Quran by the secretary of the conference after which the schedule for the day was presented. There was also attention for the situation in the Palestinian territories. Violence had erupted and the mediator of the congress asked the participants to pray for their Muslim brothers and sisters, martyrs in this conflict. Then the president of the Senegalese Islamic student association, l’Association des élèves et étudiants Musulmans du Sénégal (AEEMS) was introduced. The president of Étudiants Musulmans de France (EMF), the French counterpart of LIEEMA, was amongst the crowd as well. He flew in from France to initiate a partnership between the two associations and handed out fancy flyers of his association. L’EMF, created in 1989, is a national association that is active in university cities throughout France. The association has close ties with L’Union des Organisations Islamique du France (UOF) (Roy, 2004:213), an umbrella association of over two hundred Islamic associations that was established in 1983, and that has close ties with the Muslim brotherhood (ibid, 2004:106). In an article in French newspaper le Figaro (Gabizon, 2002), the then president of EMF claims that there are no hierarchical links between his association and UOF, but that they do support UOF’s vision of a “un islam contextualisé, c’est-à-dire européen” (ibid, 2002). He also mentions that EMF receives funding of about ten thousand Euros a year from Saudi Arabia, which he describes as a “somme modeste” for which the Saudi’s do not require anything in return (I will return to this issue in chapter six). It is not clear on exactly who’s initiative EMF was present at the congress, but given LIEEMA’s tight financial situation it is likely that the expenses of flying in EMF’s president had been covered by the French.

During the congress several committees presented the audience with the evaluation of the last two years of LIEEMA. One committee worked for instance on the issue of the mobilization of members, another on the state of education in the association, and a third presented a financial report. One of the members of each committee presented a document on their work. The first document that was presented on the second day of the congress was called ‘Projet de statuts et reglements interieur’. The text proposed changes to the charter of the association that would enhance the efficiency of LIEEMA and le travail Islamique. After a detailed presentation of the suggested improvements the audience could ask questions and bring up points for debate. Out of a long line of speakers two main debates came up. Both debates were heated and all participants spoke frankly; no one was spared, no matter one’s place in the hierarchy of the association. The speakers were primarily male, and most of them were anciens.

The first debate focused on the role of ‘les anciens’, the former members of LIEEMA who automatically become a member of les deux A after they end their studies. While LIEEMA and les
deux A are two separate associations, with different charters and a different leadership, in practice both organizations are closely interwoven. The advising role of the Conseil Administratif is not the only way in which anciens are involved in day to day affairs of LIEEMA. Anciens are amongst the most active and influential members of the association. In this respect, the fact that most of the speakers at the national congress were anciens is very telling. Many LIEEMA members questioned, however, whether the anciens should perform such a prominent role in the associations, and whether LIEEMA should not be exclusively focused on students. Members of les deux A are relatively young themselves, since the association has been created only recently. Yet in time the average age of its members will increase, and most members of les deux A will no longer be suitable representatives for the interests of students and youth in general. On the other hand LIEEMA depends very much on the anciens, financially and in terms of practical experience. In the debate at the national congress the president of the CA pointed out that the involvement of anciens in the association provides a certain continuity which safeguards the stability of the association. He proposed that les deux A should remain involved with the work of LIEEMA, but that clearer lines between the two structures needed to be set out. While general opinion in the audience supported these ideas, no clear decisions were made and the debate ended more or less inconclusive.

The second debate that developed was focused on the relation between women and men in LIEEMA, and the existence of the semi-independent cellule féminine. The debate on the functioning of the cellule féminine took a turn when several members, including Fatim, a female member of les deux A,
proposed the abolition of the *cellule*. The idea behind the proposition was that women and men can work together in the activities of the association such as education, social work and *da’wa*. This would be beneficial to the female members of LIEEMA who were regarded by both sexes to be generally less competent than the men, due to a lack of training and experience. Moreover, the presidents of the Islamic student associations of both Senegal and France stated that no such separation exists within their associations. The president of the French association brought the issue down to a key question: “*Quels sont les actions Musulmanes aujourd’hui spécifique aux sœurs?* “ (Which are Muslim activities today that are specifically for women?). In his view there were none.

A male representative of a LIEEMA section in Mopti complained about the level of work of female members in a very frank way stating that: “*les sœurs ne peuvent même pas déposer une tasse*” (“the women cannot even place a cup correctly”). Although the women agreed with the fact that they were less experienced than the men, they were offended by some of the blunt remarks that were made. The president of the *cellule féminine* whispered that they needed to talk back: “*Ils sont en train de nous infantiliser*”. The members of the *cellule*, who sat in the female section on the right of the room, felt like they were slowly losing control of the situation, but only the vice-president of the *cellule* spoke. She argued that the *cellule féminine* should not cease to exist because the women of LIEEMA are not ready to work alongside the men as they need more training. Moreover, she insisted that there are specific female issues that can only be addressed by women themselves. She also pointed out that there are several women’s associations, including Islamic ones that focus specifically on these issues.

Then the president of *les deux A* took the floor. He explained that in his view there was no need for women and men to work apart. As the *cellule féminine* suffered from problems in engagement and female mobilization, working together with the men could enhance the quality of the work of the women. Moreover, he argued that it is not an Islamic prescript to separate men and women when it comes to religious activities, as long as certain boundaries are respected. He then proposed to officially abolish the *cellule féminine*. In spite of disapproving sounds from the side of the women, the proposition to abolish the *cellule féminine* was taken over by the moderator. The procedure for any proposition to be accepted by the congress is short and simple. The moderator calls “*Takbir*” and the crowd responds with a collective “*Allahu Akbar*”. This happened two times and the decision to abolish the *cellule féminine* was made.

At this point the women realized it was official and the president of the *cellule* wanted to speak, but it was too late. The moderator argued that she could not take the floor anymore because everyone involved already had a chance to speak and the congress had taken its decision. He insisted that the decision was final, and congress had to move on. The women were shocked and felt like they had not been part of the decision-making process. As some of the women felt that they could not let
this pass, they decided to make a statement. After a short time of deliberation the women collectively got up and left the room. The men looked in surprise at the women leaving, as the next point on the agenda was being discussed on stage.

Outside of the conference room the women tried to regroup to discuss what happened inside, but some of the men, including the president of LIEEMA, followed them. A heated debate in a mixture of Bambara and French (inside the working language was French) between the women and men unfolded in which one of the men presented himself as a mediator. As the group of women separated themselves, the man followed them. The women asked him to leave because they wanted to speak amongst themselves, yet he appointed himself the moderator of the women’s debate and gave them turns to speak. The women expressed their concerns and indicated that they wanted the president of the cellule féminine to speak inside. The main concerns of the women had already been addressed by the vice-president inside the conference room. They feared that the female voice would disappear from LIEEMA, and they insisted that there are specific female issues that should be handled exclusively by women. The man who had presented himself as moderator went back to the group of men with the request that the president of the cellule féminine could speak. After the women deliberated by themselves for a little while, they decided to go back in.

In the conference room the debate went on as if nothing happened. When I returned inside, I also noticed that some of the women, about five out of thirty, did not go outside. Some of the women who remained inside were not present when the women took the decision to go outside, others, like Fatim, agreed with the decision of the congress to abolish the cellule féminine. Then Salimata, the president of the cellule féminine got a final chance to speak, but now she refused: “Ça va, c’est bon”. The men tried to persuade her, emphasizing that this was her last chance. But still she did not speak. She whispered to the women around her that the members in favor of the proposition would eventually change their minds. The issue of the cellule féminine was then dropped, and the congress moved on to the next issue. After an existence of nine years the cellule féminine of LIEEMA was officially abolished.

5.2. Challenges of young women in Islamic youth associations:

Female participation and the role of family

What is interesting about the case of LIEEMA’s cellule féminine is that the decision is made that there is no distinction between men and women when it comes to le travail Islamique and that the two sexes therefore should work together, an idea that came up in many interviews. Yet on the other hand the existing division between women and men within these associations becomes clear through this attempt of unification, as the two sexes confront each other outside of the congress room. In order to explain the dynamics behind what happened at LIEEMA’s national congress we first have to
take a closer look at the content of the debate. The first question that needs to be addressed is why the women of LIEEMA had their own *cellule* in the first place, as many Muslim youth associations in Mali do.

The answer to this question is to a degree practical in nature. An interesting illustration comes from a conversation with Moussa Ba, secretary of youth affairs at *le Haut Conseil Islamique*. As the HCI functions as an interface between the public authorities and the Malian Muslim community, Mr. Ba functions as the voice of Malian Muslim youth with regard to the public authorities. He therefore has contact with all youth associations and is involved in the ongoing debates. While Mr. Ba embraces the idea of the two sexes working together, he brings up a practical problem that hinders the engagement of young women. As young unmarried women are generally not allowed by their parents to travel alone for long distances or at certain hours, it is often quite difficult for them to be involved in the work of associations. This is why specific structures are set up that meet the conditions under which young girls are allowed to go out, and that can address specific social and economic problems of women.

Mr. Ba’s words clarify that the existence of separate structures for women in Islamic youth associations is connected to the fact that it is difficult for women for women to truly commit to the association. This problem often came up in conversations with the women of LIEEMA as well. When I asked Maïmouna, a very active female member of LIEEMA and the only female member of the *Conseil Administratif*, why there were so few women in the *Bureau Executif National* she told me that most women rarely attend activities of LIEEMA and are therefore too inexperienced to be appointed to these positions. This does not mean women are not serious about their religion. According to many informants women are more inclined to actively practice their religion than men. It was widely believed that this is a part of women’s nature. An example that came up frequently was the fact that the first converts who answered the call of the prophet to convert to Islam were women. According to Maïmouna, the absence of young women at the activities and in leading positions within the association had a cultural cause, since boys are brought up more freely, while girls have to justify their whereabouts all the time. Moreover, combining membership of an Islamic youth association with the traditional tasks of Malian women can be quite a challenge, especially for married women.

In his article on Islamic NGOs in southern Mali Benthall (2007) describes the challenges for rural women to participate in associational life: “The present generation of women in the rural south of Mali generally work rather harder than men, about fourteen to fifteen hours a day, and any time spared for studying or associative life has to be set against all their other obligations” (Benthall, 2007:173). Obviously there are important differences between the lives of rural and urban women in Mali. Young women in Islamic youth associations in Bamako have generally received formal education, which is certainly the case for the women of LIEEMA. Moreover, the living standard in the
city is usually higher, and most women are not dependent on agriculture, which is a time-consuming occupation. Yet to a degree women in the city face the same predicament as women in a rural environment. Young women have many tasks that are hard to combine with associational life. Childrearing and housekeeping are primary female activities. Even if these responsibilities are often shared amongst family members in an extended family unit and many families employ a maid, they still take up a lot of time. Besides their tasks in the domestic sphere, women are also in school and, if they have finished their education, they are more often than not involved in the economic field. The female members of LIEEMA all had a clear vision of pursuing a professional career. Moreover, as we have seen in Hawa’s story in chapter two, it is not uncommon for women to take on all sorts of projects (such as the breeding of chickens in Hawa’s case) to add to the family income.

While young married women who are part of a Muslim youth association explain that they struggle combining their different roles, they believe that their familial duties and their social and economic responsibilities do not have to stand in the way of work and being active in an association. Often their husbands are also actively involved in the Islamic community, which makes them supportive of their wives membership of an Islamic youth association. Fatoumata, secrétaire à la mobilisation féminine of les deux A and a married mother of two, pointed out that the support of family is pivotal in a woman’s ability to be involved with LIEEMA:

“It is not easy but we manage well. It works because my family helps me out a lot. My husband also helps me out a lot. And the activities of LIEEMA are programmed with a certain reality in mind, because women have many tasks in Bamako.”

For unmarried women support of family members is also very important. Objections of relatives often pose great problems to their involvement with Islamic youth associations. The concern of family members was a returning theme throughout my research. Many parents do not approve of their sons or daughters participating in Muslim youth associations as they think it will interfere with their children’s education and career prospects. The fear of parents and other relatives is that their children will devote all of their time to their religion and neglect their other duties. This is especially a problem for young women since they are more protected and, as some young women pointed out, since their involvement in Muslim youth association is more visible than in the case of men. Young men do not go through drastic physical changes as they start to participate in Islamic youth associations. Women on the other hand usually adopt the veil as they become Islamic youth associations. The issue of the veil came up in every conversation I had with young Muslim women. Women describe adaptation of the veil as one of the most important changes that joining an Islamic youth association brings along. To them the veil has primarily positive connotations as it reconfirms
their Muslim identity, yet they also describe the veil as an important marker for the problems they face when joining an Islamic youth association. I will briefly describe these different dimensions of the veil, and how they inform us about the role of women in Islamic youth associations. It is important to point out that the veil is not exclusively worn by female members of Islamic (youth) associations. There are of course also Muslim women who do not participate in any association who wear different type of veils. It is not my intention to provide a thorough analysis of the veil as such. However, as female members of Islamic youth associations connect the adaptation of the veil to their membership of an association, it is important to describe the veil in connection to Islamic youth associations.

5. 3 *Prendre le voile*: between mistrust and respect

Adaptation of the veil is not an official condition for young women to participate in the activities of Islamic youth associations; it is not part of any association’s charters. Yet as the veil is interpreted to be an Islamic precept, young women are expected to adopt the veil at some point after they become members. Female members of LIEEMA explain that adaptation of the veil is a process, which requires deeper understanding of the Islamic precepts and their theological basis. Therefore prospective members are not expected to start wearing the veil immediately; they should decide for themselves when they are ready to wear it. In practice most young women adopt the veil very quickly after they come in contact with an association and start attending activities. During fieldwork I never met an unveiled female member of an Islamic youth association. Salimata, the president of the *cellule féminine* of LIEEMA, explained how she felt when she did not wear the veil yet and started attending activities of the association:

“Well, I felt a bit...like I was less in my religious practice. I do not know how to describe it. I felt uncomfortable. I do not know...Before, I did not practice my religion. I knew it is written in the Quran that a woman has to veil herself, but I did not do it. So there [at the activity of LIEEMA] I saw that is it true, that there are people who do it. And that they go to school and do all that as well. I thought why should I not do it? I want to be like them. I go to school, I do everything I want, but in harmony with God.”

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Most young women in Islamic youth associations are (one of) the first in their family to, as they refer to it, “prend le voile”. While it is not uncommon for Malian woman to cover their hair for prayer, or to wear the traditional Malian headscarf that is wrapped around the head, the veil of young women in Islamic youth associations is different as it is often combined with a long kaftan which covers a woman’s body completely (except for a woman’s face and at times her hands and feet). Moreover, a woman cannot take off the veil in public places and if men other than her closest relatives are present.

When it comes to their appearance young women in Islamic youth associations are no homogeneous group, as the style and color of their veils differs greatly. Some wear what they call the hijab, which does not cover the face; others have adopted the niqab, which covers all but the eyes. Some women wear colorful ensembles, others are completely dressed in black. Some cover their hands with gloves, others do not. A woman’s choice of dress can also differ from situation to situation. Some young women, who always wore the niqab outside of their home, would lift up the cloth in front of their face at LIEEMA’s headquarters, even if men were present. Moreover, as already described in the story of Hawa who let go of her niqab (see chapter two), the adaptation of a certain kind of veil can change through time. Some young women expressed that they were not ready to wear the niqab, but that they might adopt this kind of veil in the future.

LeBlanc (2000) who studied young Muslim women of Malian origin in Bouaké, Côte D’ivoire, distinguishes three elements of identification that play a role in determining what style, or combination of styles individual women opt for at different times and in different places: “the status of an individual in the life course (age set), the socio-political conditions emerging from the politics of
cultural and religious difference, and the individual’s socio-economic status” (LeBlanc, 2000:449). She concludes that as women gain social maturity and tend to become more pious, they dress increasingly in a way that emphasizes their Muslim identity. The institution of marriage plays a pivotal role in this process (LeBlanc, 2000:476-7). Not surprisingly, especially young unmarried girls shared stories of difficulties with family members. Fatoumata, secrétaire à la mobilisation féminine of les deux A, told me for instance of her difficulties when she first joined LIEEMA, and how these were connected to the veil:

“In the beginning my family did not accept it [her involvement with LIEEMA], but...I did not care about that. I continued in spite of the fact that my family did not accept it, in spite of what my parents said. I continued to practice my religion. Now, we get along. Well, they did not understand it because a lot of Muslims here do not veil themselves. In fact, there are many Muslims who do not really understand Islam. [...] My family did not easily accept that I veiled myself. They said that Islam does not prescribe it...and...for my family Islam consists merely of prayer. They said that if I would face difficulties if I did it, with regard to work. And I would not be able to get married because men do not like women who are veiled. But I did not listen.”

Other women expressed similar concerns on behalf of their parents. There are two main concerns of parents with regard to the veil. First, some parents do not consider the veil to be an Islamic precept. According to them it is not necessary to adopt the veil in order to be a good Muslim. Second, parents feel the veil will prevent their daughter from finding a husband and a suitable job. When asked if these worries were grounded in reality the answers of young Muslim women were mixed. They were generally not worried about the possibility of finding a good husband. In fact young women felt that their turn towards Islam and their adaptation of the veil would attract Muslim men that would be equally serious about their religion. The question if wearing the veil would negatively affect their chances on the job market met with a mixed response. Some women claimed that their dress style did not hold them back from finding a suitable job, while others explained that in at least some sectors wearing the veil could be problematic. Alima, an economics student at the University of Bamako, explained that she had some worries with regard to finding her dream job, which was working in management:
“There are many sisters who work and have good jobs. Niagali Sidibe is a sister who works in the hospital. She wears the veil, she is a member of les deux A, and she works at [hospital] Gabriel Toure. She is a pediatrician. But is it easy to find a job when you wear the veil? No, it is not easy. When you wear the veil in our society you can work for example as a teacher or at the pharmacy. But to become for instance a secretary at a big office you have to be sophisticated. When you wear a short skirt and make-up and your hair is styled, you will find a job. Men give jobs to those kinds of women.”

Even though there are examples in the association of working Muslim women in high positions, Alima is thus concerned about her own future. If in general the veil is not an issue when it comes to job applications, in certain sectors a woman who wears the veil is not considered to be suitable. Besides these restrictions on the side of the employer, many women themselves also wonder if they should pursue certain kind of jobs. A woman can be in leading position for example, but she cannot be in the highest position. Some young Muslims explained this out of a woman’s nature; women would be too emotional to have any final responsibility. More importantly, certain requirements of these kinds of jobs would not be suitable for women. It would be for instance improper for a woman to take on a job that involves travelling alone. It is generally not considered appropriate for a woman to be travelling alone, especially at night time. Moreover, it would seriously interfere with her role as a caretaker in the family. Some informants also consider it improper for women to work closely together with men. In general, however, young Muslims in Islamic youth associations believe that it is possible for the two sexes to work together as long as certain rules are respected.
Salimata, the president of the *cellule feminine* who wore the *hijab* herself, made a distinction between the *hijab* and the *niqab*: "[Wearing the veil] poses hardly any problems. Except, there are girls who adopt the *niqab*. Well, that is difficult. But when you wear the veil you can do anything nowadays. People really understand our religion." In spite of these difficulties, there are young women who are determined to make a career wearing the *niqab*. Hawa, who wore the *niqab* at the time, told me how she encountered some mistrust while looking for a job:

“Sometimes when you are looking for a job and they see that you wear the veil they say: ‘ah fundamentalists, terrorists. They do not even try to understand. But if they give you the chance to work you can show that you are as capable as anyone else. You see? Well, I was looking for an internship at several places. I want to work with children. I love children. When they started talking about fundamentalism and terrorism and things like that, I said: "do you see that bag? It is filled with bombs. And we joked around and laughed. It is important to always be patient. Each person has his flaws and positive qualities.""

What becomes clear through Hawa’s experience is that the veil, and especially the *niqab*, carries certain connotations. Even if the employer that Hawa approached was not serious in his assertion that Hawa had anything to do with terrorism, people do make the connection between the veil and religious fundamentalism. Generalizations are often made about women who wear the veil, that are solely based on the ideas people have about what it means to wear it. I sometimes heard people around me who were not involved in Islamic youth associations refer to veiled women as ‘*ansars*’, implying that all women who wear the veil are involved with *Ansar Dine*, the popular Muslim movement led by Sharif Haidara. The term *intégrisme* would come up a lot as well. I will return to the issue of *intégrisme* in chapter six, but the generalizing use of these terms with regard to veiled women shows that there are certain ideas about who they are, that might not have to do anything with the complexity of reality. Hawa’s story illustrates that these ideas can indeed hinder young Muslim women on the job market.

Besides feelings of mistrust that people might have, young Muslim women explain that there are many positive reactions towards the veil as well. In fact people generally have great respect for women who wear it. At times I heard men who were not involved in an Islamic association claim that they would prefer for their (future) wives to adopt the veil, as it would guarantee modesty on their part and a certain degree of respect from the outside world. Many young Muslim women stated that the perception of people on the streets towards them had changed in a positive way the last couple
of years. The work of Islamic youth associations was credited for this improvement. President of the cellule féminine Salimata explained:

“Nowadays yes. They respect us now. For example, even today, I was at a gas station to get gasoline for my motorcycle. There was someone there who really appreciated me. He said that I was well dressed. Nowadays they encourage us. Nowadays. Before, well...I think it was just ignorance. They did not understand that we can study or be in school. But we can do it, you see. They could not imagine that. Well, it also has to do with the efforts LIEEMA made. LIEEMA is a student association. Before we knew that the veil was only worn by students of Quranic schools. So with LIEEMA, people have come to understand that even if you go to a French school you can very well wear the veil.”

The feeling that the attitudes of people towards them were changing was not just restricted to women of LIEEMA. I encountered similar stories with women of other associations who felt a change in perception of society towards the veil and also credited the work of Islamic associations. Members of the cellule féminine of AMJM that I visited in Magnambougou for instance stated that it used to be hard for a girl to be veiled on the streets, but that the girls of AMJM were more and more accepted in the neighborhood. Women of the cellule féminine of UJMMA also expressed that people generally show great respect for women who have adopted the veil.

Most importantly young Muslim women themselves have very positive feelings towards the veil. Informants explained that wearing the veil puts them at ease as it protects them, from the outside world as well as from their own negative inclinations. Fatoumata explained:

“There are many reasons behind the veil. God has asked us to wear it because of a number of things that concern women. If you wear it, you immediately feel the difference. You are more at ease. You are not spoken to on the streets. You are not.... Because of the fact that we know that we wear the veil we are always reminded that Islam teaches us not to do certain things, so we pay attention to our behavior. We pay attention to what Islam asks us to do with regard to our behavior and our work. It has to do with morality. At the same time it protects me from people with bad intentions on the streets. When you are veiled they leave you in peace. Life before and after [the adaptation of the veil], it is not the same. With the veil I am worthy. I know the worth of a woman, but I was ignorant before.”

5.4 Contestations over the need for a cellule féminine
Female members of different Islamic youth associations express that the attitude of society towards them improve. On the other hand informants point out that parents and other family members are
still concerned when a young woman decides to join an Islamic youth association, in part because of the veil, but also because they fear it will prevent her from her other tasks, such as her role in the domestic sphere, her education and her economic contribution to the family. In the debate about the abolition of the *cellule féminine* the fact that women are less experienced than men when it comes to their work for the association was mentioned repeatedly. The concerns of family members are one of the main challenges that young women face when they decide to join an Islamic youth association. Yet, as we have seen, support of the family is pivotal if a woman wants to be active in an Islamic youth association.

If, despite the difficulties mentioned above, young women do become active members of an association such as LIEEMA there are strict rules as to what is seen as correct behavior between men and women. It is not forbidden to be in contact with a man while working for the Islamic cause yet one cannot be alone with someone from the other sex, there can be no physical contact, and a man cannot step in a room with women present without asking for their consent. The veil also plays an important role. Within the room of the *cellule féminine* the women take off their veil, chat, eat, gossip, fall asleep and admire each other’s dresses. While the relations between women and men are very warm and friendly, this playful behavior could never take place in front of men. Moreover, some topics are exclusively reserved for women. Issues concerning the female body, health and sexuality are strictly taboo in the presence of men. These issues as well as topics such as motherhood are being discussed at special conferences that are exclusively organized and attended by women.

Although each individual member decides how far he or she goes, and religious regulations and cultural boundaries do not necessarily form an obstacle for a good working relationship between women and men, they do point out the fact that women’s and men’s worlds are quite distinct within Malian society in general, and Islamic associations specifically. The social and religious status of women thus calls for a separate unit in which they can relax, express themselves and address issues that could not be addressed with men present. Moreover, such a unit can give attention to the special needs of young women with regard to activities of the association, as women, more than men, are subject to concerns of family members, and are often not allowed to travel alone for very far or in the evening hours. Evidence amongst women in the reformist *Tablīgh Jam‘ā‘at* in the Gambia (Janson, 2005) and amongst women’s formal associations in Mali (De Jorio, 1997) suggests that women are not only objects who are subjugated to a strict gender segregation discourse, but that they are also agents of the Islamization process of the associations they take part in. Through the *cellule féminine* the women of LIEEMA were active agents of *le travail Islamique* under their own conditions.
The *cellule féminine* could thus accommodate the specific needs of young Muslim women brought along by the specific challenges women face. Then why would the existence of such a unit be problematic? Why would most men, and some women of LIEEMA call for its abolition? First, it cannot be seen separately from the modern aspirations of LIEEMA, and its members’ ideas of how a modern Muslim woman should behave. We can see similarities in the study of Deeb (2009) amongst Shi’i gender activists in Lebanon, who propagate “a new model of ideal moral womanhood” (Deeb, 2009:116) that emphasizes active public participation of women:

“This model emphasizes particular forms of publicly expressed and cultivated piety as a key aspect of being considered a modern person, along with active participation in the community. A woman’s public participation and public piety are understood as linked, and are evaluated in terms of her contribution to the common good of the community, the cultivation of her own piety, and the demonstration of the modern status of herself and her community to the outside world.” (Deeb, 2009:116)

The reasoning behind the abolition of the *cellule féminine* was that the women of LIEEMA would be better able to actively participate in public life if they would work side by side with men. Deeb mentions that women’s public participation is emphasized as a religious duty to demonstrate the modern status of Muslim women and their community to the outside world and to “contest transnational stereotypes about women being passive or oppressed” (Deeb, 2009:116). In this light, the fact that the French and Senegalese representatives explained that their respective associations did not have separate units for female members, might have had a great impact on the speed with which the decision was made.

However, the abolition of the *cellule féminine* cannot solely be explained as a response to outside ideas about the position of Muslim women. The decision was meant to resolve an actual problematic situation in the association. What triggered the debate on the *cellule féminine* were the problems within the *cellule* caused by the lack of engagement of a lot of female members to the association. Within the *Bureau Exécutif National* the *cellule* was considered an inefficient poorly functioning entity. At the congress of LIEEMA some men argued that some of the competent women should be integrated into the BEN, as this would give the women the opportunity to rise up to the standards of this male-dominated unit. The decision to abolish the *cellule féminine* was thus meant to empower women.

The decision to abolish the *cellule féminine* was also justified in an Islamic framework. One of LIEEMA’s most prominent members, the president of *les deux A*, explained that at the beginning of Islam the men and women used to pray together, but that they were separated later on, when the
female presence started distracting them from their religion. The separation of men and women in the context of prayer does not imply that men and women cannot work together for the benefit of Islam. There is no sin in women and men working together, as long as some religious boundaries are respected.

The decision to disband the cellule féminine was not a completely isolated phenomenon. When Moussa Ba, secrétaire à la jeunesse at the Haut Conseil Islamique, explained the challenges of young Muslim women and why these challenges lead to the need for a separate structure for women in Islamic youth associations, he pointed out that his own association in Kati does not have a cellule féminine. He emphasized that he believes that women and men should work together in le travail Islamique. Most of the associations I visited, however, did have separate structures for women, the cellules féminines of AMJM and UJMMA being the most notable examples. In contrast to LIEEMA, the existence of these cellules féminines was not subject to debate. With the abolition of its cellule féminine LIEEMA thus seemed to be at the forefront of the debate on public participation of women, and the cooperation between women and men in Islamic youth associations, a debate that took place in other youth associations as well. This notwithstanding, it is interesting to see that while the decision to dissolve the cellule was meant to empower women, the women were practically invisible in the decision making process itself. To get a better understanding of the power relations between men and women in Islamic youth associations, it is therefore useful to analyze the course of the debate at LIEEMA’s national congress.

5.5 The formal and the informal: gender roles and power in different domains

The voice of the women of the cellule féminine seemed to be absent when the decision to abolish the cellule was made at the national congress. Yet the case of LIEEMA also suggests that the position of women vis-à-vis men changes from situation to situation. In the room where the conference was held the women and men debated together, even though they were physically separated and the men held a somewhat dominant position, but outside it was a case of men against the women, in which the women regained some of their control. The move of the women of the cellule féminine to go outside was thus particularly interesting, since it provides insight into the power relations between the men and women of LIEEMA, and how they can shift from domain to domain.

First, it is significant to point out that as the debate on the cellule féminine progressed most of the women, including Salimata, the president of the cellule féminine, did not speak much. Unlike the presidents of the BEN and les deux A Salimata had no special speaking time at the national congress.
As said before, this is due to the fact that the president of the *cellule féminine* is not chosen, but appointed by the president of LIEEMA and therefore does not have to defend any mandate. The first day of the congress Salimata was not there at all, the second day she came in late. This means that there is not a single woman that has to answer to the congress, since the presidents of LIEEMA and *les deux A* can only be male. As all of the speakers were male, the moderator of the debate was male, and two hundred men were present against thirty women, the debate and the decision making process were very male dominated. This does not mean that the women could not speak. As members of LIEEMA they indeed have the right to take part in the debate. Some women made this move throughout the day, yet the numerical minority of women made that their voice was quite marginal. Some male members pointed out that the fact that there were so few women at the congress illustrated the problem of female engagement. A complicating factor, however, is that the people who attended the congress were mostly those with important positions in the association. These positions were mostly filled by men.

This notwithstanding, there is more to the issue of male dominance within LIEEMA than a numerical question. Throughout my fieldwork there was a tendency to let the men speak. At all of the official conferences and meetings that I attended at which both women and men were present, women were never part of the list of speakers and they would take a modest position in the discussion. When asked about this apparent shyness of most of the women, some women explained that Islam teaches women to be modest in public. Hawa, an active member of *les deux A* and one of my main informants, told me about a *hadith* that states that the voice of a woman in front of the crowd is the devil. She pointed out that this text is not understood within the proper context by most
Muslims. While they believe it is immoral for a woman to speak in front of men, she clarified that this only applies under certain circumstances. In the context of work, especially work that is dedicated to Islam, women are allowed to speak up.

Although religious modesty can be presented as a reason, the reserved role of women in public debate was explained as a social phenomenon as well. As traditionally the domains of men and women are separated within Malian society, women would not feel comfortable to speak up in a male domain. After the debate on the cellule féminine, two male members, including Ousmane who would become LIEEMA's next president, came up to me to clarify the proceedings. They explained that the women had their chance to speak during the congress, but that they had not made use of to the occasion. When asked what they thought was the reason why the women had not spoken, Dramane, a law student who had been a part of the Bureau Executif National for the last two years, answered that they lacked both the courage and the competence to speak. He identified this as a social phenomenon that was not restricted to the religious sphere. He shared this observation with some female members of LIEEMA who sat beside me during the conversation.

What is interesting is that at other times female informants credited LIEEMA for teaching them to express themselves. Maimouna, the only female member of the Conseil Administratif, explained for instance what membership of LIEEMA had taught her:

“(...) I am more tolerant, more open. I have learned to express myself. I can speak in front of an audience. This is very important, especially for women. It gives us the opportunity to participate in debate, to be a part of public life.”

It is interesting that Maïmouna states that women have to be trained to become part of public life and participate in debates. In informal contact or within the setting of the cellule féminine the women of LIEEMA generally did not come across as quiet and unable to speak up. Yet in the formal, hierarchical structure of the congress the decision-making power was monopolized by LIEEMA’s male membership. Of course there were women who made use of the opportunities LIEEMA provided and who took the stage, such as Fatim and Maïmouna, but at the congress they proved to be exceptions. So while in theory the women of LIEEMA were encouraged to develop their debating skills and speak up, in practice for most women obstacles remained to speak in public in a male-dominated domain such as the congress.

Differences in women’s and men’s verbal practices play an important role in this dynamic. While men were often quite blunt in their criticism of the cellule féminine, women tended to avoid confrontation, which ultimately led to the quite radical move of the women to leave the room. What is especially telling is that Salimata, the president of the cellule féminine, still did not speak when she
was specifically urged to do so. In response to the provocations of male members the women mostly whispered amongst themselves. The women who did speak up were considerably less straightforward in their verbal practices than men. As the men stood up and faced the audience in front of the room, women usually stayed seated as they talked. Moreover, women never responded to direct provocation. A couple of times men directly questioned the women with regard to the poor functioning of the *cellule féminine*. Instead of addressing this specific issue, the vice-president of the *cellule féminine* responded with some general remarks about the importance of women in Islam. All in all the men seemed to speak to the women, rather than with them.

De Jorio (2009) observed similar patterns in linguistic practices amongst men and women at a conference on gender issues in Bamako in 2004, organized by the cultural association *Acte sept*. While the conference offered men and women the opportunity to temporarily overcome traditional boundaries between the two genders, it turned out to be difficult to find common ground:

“Women’s and men’s different verbal practices, and particularly men’s critiques of women’s form of political participation, limited any concrete building of bridges and led to little recasting of positions. Said differently, the end result of such a space of contestation appears to have been the unresolved articulation of conflicting world orders.” (De Jorio, 2009:107)

The difference in linguistic patterns between women and men can be explained through the fact that it is perceived to be necessary for Muslim women to show certain restraint in public, especially when men are present. In her study on Bangladeshi women in Islamic study circles of an organization of female students Huq (2009) identifies certain feminine Islamic virtues that keep the women from expressing any kind of physical *and* verbal aggression in public. These virtues include ‘shyness’, ‘modesty’, ‘humility’, and “the related, urban attributes of politeness, decency and civility in deportment and interpersonal relationships” (Huq, 2009:107). The cultivation of these Islamic feminine virtues generally leads to an attitude of withdrawal and non-confrontation amongst Bangladeshi women (ibid, 2009:107).

While the women did not speak up in the male dominated domain inside, outside a heated debated with the men of LIEEMA developed. This brings up the question of power. Outside the formal framework of the congress room the women of LIEEMA stood up for an issue that is important to them. The *cellule féminine* served as an opportunity for women to literally show themselves and express their points of view within the formal structure of the association. If this female domain within the formal structure disappears, the women of LIEEMA will only have informal spheres in which they can regroup to defend their specific interests. This will affect their position and the
power they have to set their agenda within the association. After the congress several women predicted that the cellule will come back, whether in the old form or a new one, because the integration of the male and the female domains will not work, at least not at this point in time. It is therefore likely that the topic of female and male cooperation will remain ambivalent because the factors that encouraged the existence of a separate cellule féminine have not disappeared, while new developments did eventually lead to its abolition.

5.6 Feminine Islamic virtues and the complementarity of gender roles

As to gender and power in Mali, Brenner (1993) pointed out that in its essence Mali is a patriarchic society. In his view both men and women use Islamic initiatives to enhance their own social position, yet men form the dominant power:

“There is no doubt that the Muslim initiatives described above [in education and health services] are dominated by men, and that these men seek, through their own interpretation of Islam and its institutions, to reinforce the social dominance which Malian patriarchy has afforded them in gender relationships. But it is also clear that women use Islam to enhance their own social position.” (Brenner, 1993:70-1)

I do not contend that the men of LIEEMA were consciously reinforcing their social dominance – I rather argue that they were trying to reinforce female public participation-, yet what happened at LIEEMA’s congress does fit into Brenner’s observations. While the events illustrate that ideas about the role of women in society are changing, as men and women are both urging for female public participation, the decision to abolish the cellule féminine was made in the existing male-dominated framework of the congress. The debate preceding the abolition and the way the decision was contested by the women both show that it is hard to overcome traditional gender barriers and the Malian patriarchy that Brenner pointed at. I argue that the role young Muslim women through their membership of an Islamic youth associations becomes very complex, as it is often not clear what constitutes her new position in the public sphere, and how she is expected to behave. I will address these ambivalences and the possible contradictions between women’s public role and traditional and Islamic female virtues. Second, it is important to point out that women and men in Islamic youth associations are not necessarily set on breaking traditional gender hierarchies as such.

As pointed out in preceding chapters, Mali is not only part of the Muslim world, that what lies outside of Islam figures very prominently indeed (Soares, 2006: 79). The ideology of Muslim youth associations is thus not only created in relation to the Umma, but also in relation to local historical,
cultural, economical and political factors. Historically the roles of women lay mainly in the private domain, which is in line with Islamic precepts that seclude women to the private sphere (Bonvillain, 2001: 276). In this respect it is important to point out that Islam has been present in Mali for over a millennium. As said before, women in Bamako do have an economic role outside of the private domestic sphere, and young Muslim women point out time and again that this is not in contradiction with Islam, as long as it does not interfere with their roles as a wife and mother. The women of LIEEMA are also part of a community of highly educated Muslims in which excellence in school and the importance of building a career are emphasized. Female members of LIEEMA therefore generally aspire to participate in the economic sphere, but they also try to juggle traditional Malian demands on a woman with a proper Islamic lifestyle, which includes certain feminine Islamic virtues. It can be a challenge to put the different ideas about who they are and where they are going together in a sound picture of how a proper young Muslim woman in Bamako today should behave in the private and the public domain. The debate in LIEEMA essentially focuses on the question how far a woman can go in public life.

At times it can be difficult for a woman to determine her boundaries. She has to be pious and modest, and her main priority is the role of wife and mother, while she is also urged to step out and become visibly involved in public life. A Muslim woman thus has to be active, but she also has to display certain feminine Islamic virtues (Huq, 2009:107). These views on women’s roles are not necessarily contradictory, but at times they can be hard to balance. Some boundaries are obvious, such as the prohibition of physical contact between men and women, but at times the decision as to what is appropriate behavior can be more complex and each woman decides for herself what she can and cannot do. It is not only hard for women themselves to balance the different roles that women are expected to take on, the role of female members of Islamic youth associations is frequently misunderstood by the general public. Because of their strict interpretation of feminine Islamic virtues, female members of Islamic youth associations are often believed to be unable to participate in public life. As Fatoumata explained:

“There are many people who attacked me: ‘you do not shake hands with men. Why don’t you stay at home?’ But if I do or do not shake hands with someone does not say anything about what I have in my head. If I am there to work, I do my work. [...] Women will explain to the people that Islam has never asked women to stay at home, or not to talk when men are talking, or not to participate in debate. Well, there are women who want to stay at home, but they are few. Little girls are told to do so by their families. It is tradition. It is not the Quran, because Islam has given a choice to women. She can decide to work just like she can decide not to work; she is free. But we try to educate
people. We are waiting for the day that they will understand. When we stick together we are strong.62

According to Fatoumata people mistake traditional Malian views on the role of women for Islamic precepts. Her adaptation of an Islamic lifestyle has not prevented her from taking part in public life. The confusion of people stems largely from the modest behavior that young Muslim women display in public, especially towards men. They identify these behaviors with an interpretation of Islam that prevents women from taking part of public life. According to the young women themselves it is in fact their religion that encourages women to be active both in the formal and the informal domain. Many times women gave the example of the important role of the wives of the prophet. Hawa, for example, described the role of women in Islam as follows:

“She is the pivot of society. She plays a very big role. Family is the most important, and within the family women are the most important influence on children. This is why it is necessary that women participate in everyday life. It is necessary that women participate in Islamic debates. A woman has an important role in the transmission of Islam. She is there for the children. She is like the media. You see, a woman is like the radio or the television. If she wants, she can pass on good ideas. But men do not see this.

Even in the time of our prophet...you see, the first convert was a woman: the wife of the prophet. She was the first who accepted to become a Muslim. And afterwards, women were the first to convert. They have fought for our religion.”63

The fact that the women of LIEEMA did not believe they were ready for the integration of the cellule féminine does therefore not mean that they believe that they cannot be part of public life altogether. As said before, women emphasize that there is an important role for women beyond the private sphere of the household. Maïmouna, a very active female member of LIEEMA and the only female member of the Conseil Administratif, might be somewhat of an extreme example but she represents a side of the spectrum that is very important to highlight. Maïmouna attaches great importance to the development of women in the traditional male domain of science, and encourages them to build up a professional career. She is a clear product of LIEEMA, showing how LIEEMA, despite the male domination of its board, can encourage women to engage in public life. In conversations she often emphasized the importance of her career, which is not to say that she completely abandoned the traditional roles of wife and mother. Maïmouna does want to start a family in the future, but at this point she and her husband do not have children. She dreams of receiving a scholarship to study abroad to become an English translator. Maïmouna knew of many examples of Muslim women who study abroad:
"The sœurs who study abroad leave their husbands in Mali. There are no frères who do not want their wives to work. There are many examples. I cannot even tell you all. There is a sœur in Venezuela. There is one in Norway; she has been there for four years now, one in France, one in Japan. She has found a scholarship in Japan. All is possible. Marriage is not the most important thing, marriage and having children. The most important thing is excellence. To live an intellectual life is the most important thing to me."  

Maïmouna is an exception in that she places greater emphasis on her education and her career than on her marriage and the possibility of having children. However, she does represent a tendency of young women in LIEEMA to step out into the public sphere, in spite of the difficulties involved. They explain that Islam encourages them to do so and that the association gives them a platform. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the patriarchy that Brenner (1993) described is being challenged. Bintou, the nineteen year old secrétaire à l’information of the cellule féminine of LIEEMA (see chapter four), explained:

"A woman has to submit herself. First of all, a woman has to understand that men are always superior to women. A woman has to accept that. It is God’s word...Subsequently a woman should not talk to men in a bad way. She should not be attractive to men. She should always behave well."

The submissive status of women was mentioned by women in all Islamic youth associations I visited. While women are stimulated to take part in public life through their membership of the association, this does not mean that the traditional hierarchies between men and women are challenged. One should thus be wary of approaching gender debates in Islamic youth associations in Bamako from the perspective of Western models of female liberation. Women can be part of public debate, but as seen in the case of the abolition of the cellule féminine the rules of the debate are set out by men. This does not mean women are powerless. Mahmood shows in her ethnography on a grassroots’ women’s piety movement in the mosques of Cairo how the observance of women to the patriarchal norms at the core of such movements corresponds with ideas about freedom, agency and authority (Mahmood, 2005). Such an approach can also be entertained with regard to women in Islamic youth associations in Mali. De Jorio (2009) has pointed out that Malian women activists often distance themselves from Western feminism, promoting women’s economic and political participation within the framework of existing family values. The women de Jorio described “often presented their work as reinforcing the stability of the Malian household and subscribed to a view of gender stressing complementarity rather than equality” (De Jorio, 2009:105). This is also how the debates in Islamic
youth associations on the issue of gender, the roles of men and women, and the specific case of LIEEMA’s *cellule féminine*, should be approached. Both female and male members of LIEEMA were not trying to radically change the position of women, that is to make it equal to men. The participants in the debate were rather seeking to redefine the roles of women, and the working relationship between men and women, within an existing framework of complementarity.

### 5.7. Concluding remarks

So what does the case of LIEEMA tells us about the relation between men and women? First, it sheds an interesting light on the ambivalent relations between women and men. Although it illustrates the fact that the two sexes do seek to work together, it also points out the difficulties involved. Second, the problem of engagement within the *cellule féminine* illustrates the difficulty of young women to combine the different roles they take on; those of being a daughter within a Malian family, those of being an educated intellectual woman seeking a career, and those of the pious women who is dedicated to *le travail Islamique*. Third, the events at the congress exemplify how the position and power of women and men changes from situation to situation. In the formal male-dominated hierarchical situation of the congress women sought the more informal setting outside as a place where they could express themselves.

The case of LIEEMA’s *cellule féminine* illustrates that religious values, cultural standards and outside forces such as the hope to connect with a modern urban lifestyle, all influence the debate, its arguments, its form and its outcome. The debate centered mainly on the question how to make women more able to participate in public debate in Islamic youth associations. It is important to point out that this is does not necessarily imply that traditional gender barriers are sought to be broken. Both women and men rather seek to redefine women’s roles within an existing framework of gender complementarity.

This chapter focused mostly on the women of LIEEMA. LIEEMA represents a certain faction of the Malian Muslim community that consists of young Muslims who have received a higher education in the French education system. What becomes clear through this case, and is applicable to all young Muslims in Bamako, is that not only local images and ideas about gender play a role, but that international Islamic and non-Islamic discourse also influences the debate. In this eclectic context the role of women and the relation between women and men is given new meaning. In the next chapter I will further explore how transnational connections do and do not play a role within Muslim youth associations. I will look at tangible influences on the level of associations such as language questions and funding of associations. Yet more importantly I will explore day-to-day connections of young men and women to a broader Islamic community, such as the influence of friends abroad, authors
they read and messages they receive in the media or at conferences of the associations they are part of.
Chapter five described how the debate on the role of women, and the relationship between women and men in Islamic youth associations, is not only influenced by local images and ideas about gender, but that international Islamic and non-Islamic discourse are also at play. In this chapter I will further explore how transnational connections of Islamic youth associations play a role in the lives of its members. A few reservations have to be made beforehand. First, it is not the intention of this chapter to provide a detailed description of transnational partnerships and connections of the different Islamic youth associations I worked with. The scope of this research did not allow for such a detailed approach. The intention of this chapter is therefore to provide insight into the ideas of young Muslim men and women with regard to transnational connections. Second, it is important to point out that my own status as a researcher has probably influenced the data on which this chapter is based more than in any other chapter. I will touch upon my own role as a representation of ‘the West’ to the young men and women I worked with. While I tried to take on the role of an observant, I was often approached as a window of opportunity, a connection to an outside world. This was both problematic, as it was something I had to break through, as well as an opportunity, as it gave insight into the search for connections of the youth involved.

In this chapter I will first explain this search by taking a look at two different organizations: LIEEMA and UJMMA. As we have seen in previous chapters UJMMA and LIEEMA did not always get along. This friction could mainly be explained through the different educational background of its members and its leadership. In light of these differences, it will be interesting to take a look at the transnational activities of both organizations. While, as said before, I do not claim to provide insight into the full array of transnational contacts of UJMMA and LIEEMA, a description of my experiences in the field does offer a glimpse at the transnational influences that make its way to the members of Islamic youth associations. Then, I will address the pragmatic approach Islamic youth associations...
employ with regard to international connections, and how this approach relates to the emphasis that gets placed on (financial) independence. I will connect this emphasis on independence to the issue of \textit{intégrisme}. The exploration of this term provides insight into the distinction that is made in the field between ‘the Muslim world’ and ‘the West’. The concept was touched upon by almost all of my informants. Many of them described the term \textit{intégrisme}, explained what it meant and that people feared it, but informants also pointed out that they had nothing to do with it. \textit{Intégrisme} thus seems to be somewhat of a ghost, of which no one will confirm its existence, but that does generate anxiety within society. Young Muslims in Islamic youth associations respond to this fear, as they feel that society often lays the load of the term on their shoulders. I shall argue that the response of young Malian Muslims to this dynamic is twofold.

6.1. Between the global and the local:

\textbf{Islamic youth associations as a threshold to the world}

In chapter four we have seen that Islamic youth associations are very much concerned with the development of Malian society. The activities of the associations through which they make an impact on the daily lives of its members and their surroundings focus, perhaps understandably, mostly on local problems and concerns. The case of LIEEMA’s \textit{cellule féminine} in the previous chapter illustrated that local issues such as the role of women and the relationship between women and men are highly influenced by the Malian cultural context. Yet what came through as well is that there are other important frames of reference for young Muslims. These frames of reference transcend the local circumstances of Bamako.

One of the most important issues for young Muslims today, also identified by Gomez-Perez (2008) in her study of the Senegalese Islamic student association AEMUD, centers around the relationship between “two modes of civilization, the western and the Islamic” (Gomez-Perez, 2008). On the one hand there is ‘l’Occident’, a model of civilization that summons admiration for its economic and scientific accomplishments, but that also brings about feelings of discomfort over its alleged hypocrisy with regard to human rights and its poor treatment of Muslims around the world. On the other hand there is the Muslim world, in the field at times referred to as the \textit{Umma}, the world-wide community of Muslims. The notion of the \textit{Umma} identifies the ideal of the unification of all Muslims. In chapter three we saw an example of this quest for unification on the level of the Malian Muslim community. What also became clear through this example is that the Muslim world is in fact highly diverse and often divided. As Mali is historically connected to the West as well as the Muslim world, young Muslims in Bamako today make their way through a world that is influenced by both the West and the \textit{Umma}. For young Muslims in Islamic youth associations Islam is the main
frame reference in their lives. They therefore identify first with the Muslim world. However, as will become clear, they are greatly interested in l’Occident as well.

The relationship to the West as well as the Muslim world is twofold. On the one hand, my informants believe that Islam teaches Muslims to be open towards the world, and that study and the gathering of knowledge are of the utmost importance. Therefore, young Muslims generally express that they have become more open through their membership of an Islamic youth association. They often illustrate this with examples from the prophet’s life. A story that I heard a couple of times described how the fleet of the Prophet got attacked in the Arabian Gulf and had to flee to Ethiopia. In Ethiopia the Prophet and his companions were welcomed in the house of a stranger who protected them and took care of them. The Ethiopian stranger was a Christian. To the young Muslims I spoke with stories like these provided proof that Islam is not against contact and exchange with other civilizations. On the other hand, informants were often quite cautious of the implications of the dubious morality of the western world, its materialism and its decline in religious observance. They are, however, also wary to be associated with violent tendencies in some parts of the Muslim world.

In this context Islamic youth associations provide a sense of direction, connecting young Muslims to the outside world in a morally sound way. To get a better understanding of the international ambitions of Islamic youth associations, and how international connections affect the lives of their members, I will explore the way the world enters into two different associations. Some examples of how international contact is sought and established will illustrate how Islamic youth associations function as a threshold to the world.

6.1.1 UJMMA

Hamsa Maïga, the vice-president of UJMMA, pointed out that the Union des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali was very interested in establishing contacts outside of Mali. As the union was in its beginning stages, the attention of the organization was mainly devoted to Mali itself and most international contacts were set up in the Muslim community within the region. There were also plans to extend the network of UJMMA even further in the future:

“Burkina Faso, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa...South Africa, Rwanda...The contacts are there. There is contact between us. But for the moment everyone is busy in their own countries. The contacts are there, however. So in the future we can join hands. We are in the beginning period. We [UJMMA] have just been set up. We first want to create our own structure. So at this point we have to devote all of our efforts to the national level. We have to work here so that we will become known. Then we consolidate and look to the outside world. Maybe the sub region, and then later on the continent. Step by step.” 67
My first visit to UJMMA was a meeting with a group of women of the *cellule féminine*. After we discussed the activities of UJMMA and what the association meant to them it was time for the women to question me. They asked for instance about the situation of the Muslim community in the Netherlands as they had heard stories about the poor treatment of Muslims in Europe. One of the women appointed me as the *liaison* of UJMMA in the Netherlands. The arrangement was made in a joking way and met with laughter, but there was a serious tone to the proposition as well. The interest of the women of UJMMA in my background resulted from simple curiosity, but was also related to the fact that the union was looking to establish connections outside of Mali.

A more specific example of these connections was offered when I met Boubacar, a member of UJMMA’s board and responsible for its public relations, who provided me with insight into some of the steps UJMMA undertook to establish international contacts. I went over to see him to exchange some pictures of a previous UJMMA conference. After we scanned over the pictures in question, Boubacar showed me other pictures that were related to his activities with UJMMA. Most of them were of conferences and seminars, but some of them were taken abroad. Boubacar explained that UJMMA was already in the process of establishing international contacts. A delegation of UJMMA had for instance just returned from Libya, where they had toured the country on general Qaddafi’s invitation.

Boubacar explained that one of the sights the UIJAMA delegation visited was the palace of Qaddafi that was bombed by the Americans in the 1990s. The palace has not been rebuilt after the bombing and the site has become a place for Qaddafi to display the brutality of the Americans. Boubacar’s pictures show the delegation of UJMMA in front of the heavily damaged front of the building and snapshots of the destroyed interior, with dusty desks, chairs and other pieces of furniture that suggest that the site has been left exactly as it was right after the American attack. One of Boubacar’s pictures that hints at the reason why Qaddafi chose to keep the building in its present state, shows a large statue of an American bomb that gets crushed by a strong iron–Libyan–hand. Boubacar explained that the brutality of the Americans inspires the people of Libya and visitors from other Muslim countries to fight the aggressor.

After the pictures of Qaddafi’s former palace Boubacar showed me pictures of the representatives of UJMMA with the Libyan leader himself. When I asked him how he had experienced Libya and the meeting with the Libyan leader, Boubacar explained that everything had been perfectly organized, from accommodation to transportation to sightseeing. He commended the Libyans for this. Yet Boubacar also believed that he could not really give a grounded opinion. A police convoy escorted the UJMMA delegation at all times and an officer was present during all visits.
Boubacar realized that the tour therefore had not been representative of the situation of ordinary Libyans.

The story and pictures of UJMMA’s trip to Libya show that the rumors on which LIIEEMA based its suspicion of UJMMA’s connection with Libya (see chapter three) were not totally unfounded. UJMMA’s contacts with Libya were an important reason for some Islamic youth associations not to join the union. There are indeed direct connections between Mohamed Macki Ba, UJMMA’s president, and Libya as he is a member of the conseil d’administration of l’Association Mondial de l’appel islamique, an international da’wa organization with its headquarters in Tripoli. Moreover, as the story of Boubacar illustrates, the board of UJMMA has been on trips to Libya that were sponsored by the Libyan government.

Libya and more specifically Qaddafi were a returning theme in Bamako. Under the rule of Muammar al-Qaddafi, Libya has had a long history of military, political and economic involvement throughout the African continent. The Libyan leader has taken a leading role in the African union. Qaddafi’s pan-African ambitions have not declined since the dramatic policy shift of the last decade, following his remarkable decision in 2003, after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, to give up Libya’s weapons of mass destruction; a decision that led to improved relations with the U.S. and Europe (Solomon & Swart, 2005). During fieldwork, references to the North African republic and its leader were made often, also amongst friends who were not involved with Islamic youth association. Driving through the city in a taxi, sotarama or on the back of a moto, friends would occasionally point out hotels that were in the hands of the Libyan leader. The most noticeable example of Libyan influence in Mali’s capital, symbolic of Qaddafi’s often excessive economic involvement with the African continent (ibid, 2005), was the parliament building, an impressive white construction on the banks of the Niger. On the building a big sign reads: ‘Malibya’. At the time of fieldwork the construction site was deserted, even though the building was only half finished. A friend explained that Qaddafi had pulled out from funding. It was not exactly clear why: “Il fait comme il veut.”

Qaddafi’s alleged involvement with Tuareg rebels in the north also influences his reputation. One friend described Qaddafi’s visit to Mali’s president Amadou Toumani Toure, known in Mali as ATT, in the north of the country. Qaddafi allegedly left his hotel in the middle of the night without notifying the Malian delegation that he was leaving, or where exactly he would be going. According to the story the Libyan leader disappeared into the desert; no one knew where he was. It was rumored that Qaddafi left the Malian delegation to talk with Tuareg rebels in the border area between Mali and Algeria.

Boubacar emphasized that Libya was only one of UJMMA’s possible partners. At the time of fieldwork UJMMA representatives were arranging visits to South Africa, Ghana and another trip to
Libya. When asked if official partnerships with organizations elsewhere were already established, Boubacar explained that for the moment these were restricted to West Africa, but that they were trying to focus on Europe as well. According to Boubacar the connections could be beneficial to both sides. As Malian Muslims could benefit financially and intellectually from European resources, Europeans would have the opportunity to learn about Islam.

There is no doubt that the wish of Boubacar and the women of UJMMA to set up contacts in Europe was sincere. However, as the union was in its beginning stages these contacts were not its first priority. Yet there is more to it than that. As the educational background of the leadership and the members of associations vary, the messages they receive vary as well. This often leads to differences in the direction that Islamic associations take. As we have seen in chapter three, the issue of language is not only an important indicator of the educational background of its members; it also influences the nature of the voices that get through within the association. UJMMA was led by Mohamed Macki Ba, a member of the conseil d’administration of l’Association Mondial de l’appel islamique, an international da’wa organization with its headquarters in Tripoli. Mr. Macki Ba as well as Arabic educated vice president Hamsa Maïga spoke little French. Activities of UJMMA always took place in Bambara as many of its participants do not understand Arab, French or both. In their educational background, the leadership and membership of UJMMA thus differs significantly from student association LIEEMA. In their approach to the world they emphasized the fact that they were students, pushing for an intellectual understanding of Islam. This also influenced the connections LIEEMA made with the outside world. As a researcher and a representative of a western university, I was for example often referred to as “une étudiante comme nous”. Just as I was very interested in learning about them, LIEEMA members would often be very interested in learning about me.

6.1.2 LIEEMA

At the end of my time in Bamako I heard from several people that a young member of the Bureau Exécutif National of LIEEMA was very interested in speaking with me. I agreed for him to get my phone number through a mutual acquaintance and a couple of days later Dramane called me. We made an appointment for a meeting at my house the day after. I assumed the law student at the University of Bamako, who had been a member of the BEN of LIEEMA for the past two years, came by to talk to me about his religion and the association. But after we performed the extensive courtesies of a Malian introduction, Dramane revealed the true reason for his interest in meeting me. He explained that he had always liked Dutch and Scandinavian football, and that ever since he saw the players of these Nordic teams on television he developed a special interest in the Netherlands.
He was pleased to finally be able to speak with a Dutch person. During my time in Bamako people had often made remarks about Dutch football players. The heroes of Manchester United, Real Madrid and AC Milan are known around the world and give many people a frame of reference as to what the Netherlands is. Knowledge of these players’ names is something you have in common, an opening to a conversation.

Yet Dramane’s approach was more serious than that. His analysis of the way the Dutch went about the way they played football had stirred his interest in the way Dutch society functioned as a whole. Explaining that he was very interested in international exchange, he wanted to talk about a number of issues with me. As a law student, Dramane was particularly interested in the juridical system of the Netherlands, but he also had very practical questions. He was for instance very concerned with the pollution of the Niger River and wanted to know what remedies European authorities employed against the polluting effect of Europe’s industry on the water. When I asked Dramane why he was interested in a western perspective, he emphasized that his interest in learning about other societies did not take away from his belief in Islam. His religion had given him peace of mind and he relied on Islamic teachings a hundred percent. These teachings had led him to look for exchange. As Dramane explained, it had been Islam that had sparked his broad interests, and it had been his religion that had encouraged him to talk to me.

More than any other association, members of LIEEMA emphasized the ‘globalité’ of Islam, explaining that Islam touches every domain of life and that a Muslim should therefore learn as much as possible in all sorts of domains. Part of this is that one should be open to different views and new ideas. This does not mean, however, that one should be uncritical of them and take them on without questioning. Islam remains the main frame of reference at all times. Central to this ideology of learning and the emphasis on the global nature of Islam are religious leaders and teachers who are able to provide a sense of direction. Inspirational figures and teachers that were mentioned by members were mostly local or West African religious leaders. One of the most visible sources of inspiration of LIEEMA was Oumar Farouk Diaby. He was described by several informants as one of LIEEMA’s imams, an important economist and theologian and a great friend to the association.

Mandjou, the resourceful businessman in chapter two, explained that Oumar Farouk Diaby was a great scholar, but also ‘a jeune’ as he was not even 45 years of age, which perhaps made him more approachable than other imams. Mr. Diaby is a Malian but he has spent a lot of time in the United States where, amongst other things, he has been the imam of the Malian community. Many members of LIEEMA wanted me to meet him, as he would be able to teach me a lot about Islam, but it was not easy to set up a meeting. According to my informants Mr. Farouk Diaby was always travelling, and if he was around in Bamako, he was very busy as well. His numerous travels have
gained him respect and are part of his appeal. Eventually an introductory meeting was set up and I was able to meet with him at several following occasions. Mr. Farouk Diaby was very much concerned for his pupils to acquire sound theological knowledge. He explained that knowledge of the foundations of Islam is indispensable in understanding the current Muslim world.

Apart from religious teachers such as Mr. Farouk Diaby, books were an important tool to get me on the right track with regard to Islam, especially for the students of LIEEMA. Informants often recommended titles or brought along a copy of a book that had inspired them. Books were usually handed to me with the remark that they would enlighten me about Islam in a way that an interview with a member of an Islamic youth association never could, as the authors had much greater religious authority and theological knowledge. Some of the books I received were of Malian authors (at times they were even written by the gift givers themselves); others offered an insight into the influence of international Muslim thinkers on the men and women of LIEEMA.

The first book I received was given to me by Hawa (see chapter two). She gave me a book that was very important to her; ‘La Série des Vertus’ written by le professeur Amr Khaled. Hawa especially recommended the chapter ‘al hijab’ on “la voile” (the veil). When I asked her where she got the book from and what she could tell me about Amr Khaled, Hawa told me that a couple of LIEEMA sœurs had brought it back from a visit abroad to hand out to other members of the association. She believed they had acquired the document on a conference in Egypt, but she was not sure. The teachings in the book had been very helpful to Hawa in improving her understanding of the background of Islamic precepts and their rightful application. She particularly liked that the book is very practical in nature, applying Quranic verses to contemporary examples of everyday life. Hawa told me that she did not know much about Amr Khaled, but that she believed him to be an Egyptian who had studied Islam intensively. Even if Hawa could not tell me much about Amr Khaled, it is not surprising that at least some of his work has reached members of LIEEMA. His ideas fit into the modern, global and intellectual ambitions of the association.

When I asked Hawa if she could name other sources of inspiration that she had come into contact with through LIEEMA she mentioned Farouk Diaby and Tariq Ramadan. Mr. Ramadan was mentioned several times by members of LIEEMA as a mentor and an inspiration. He visited Bamako not long before my period in the field, and some of my informants had met with him. It was not easy to get insight as to what exactly attracted them in Mr. Ramadan, but some of his ideas may indeed appeal to LIEEMA’s students. His call for Islamic reform in the West and the reinterpretation of Islam in the modern world reflects the modern aspirations of LIEEMA and Mr. Ramadan’s stress on the importance of the preservation of cultural authenticity in the reinterpretation of Islam fits into the African identity that young Muslims often stress. Moreover, the ideas of young Malian Muslims

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about the image of Islam in the West, which will be further discussed later on, could be partly informed by Mr. Ramadan’s views.

When I went to visit Mandjou, the president of les deux A at his house in a quiet area of Bamako he showed me his book collection, of which he was very proud. Covering two small bookcases, it was indeed a rather impressive collection. Most of the Malian houses I visited only had a few books in addition to a copy of the holy Quran. In light of Mali’s tough economic circumstances and with the country’s high illiteracy rate, the investment of books is seldom a high priority. Mandjou often emphasized his love of reading and was happy to show me his books. He had categorized his books and placed them on the shelves according to their topic, ranging from astronomy and biology to literature and of course religion. Most of his books about religion focused on Islam but he also showed me books on Christianity and Judaism. From the section on religion, he handed me ‘À la Découverte de la Foi en Islam’ by Turkish author Ismail Büyükçelebi. Mandjou explained that the way Islam is approached in Turkey appealed to him. He described Islam in Turkey as moderate and contrasted the Turkish situation to the example of Saudi Arabia. Mandjou though that the Saudis take Islam too literally as they apply Islamic precepts without paying consideration to the context of a given situation. He emphasized that he did not want to judge the whole of the Saudi people. Mandjou explained that he was aware that there would be many good people in Saudi Arabia, just as there are poor Muslims in Turkey. Yet he stood behind his general point.

Mandjou clarified that especially when it comes to the shari‘a, Islamic law, the context in which it is applied is key. He explained how Islamic laws were often misunderstood, also by Muslims themselves. Mandjou mentioned the example of adultery which according to shari‘a law should be punished by stoning the perpetrator to death. He heard of cases of Saudi women being sentenced to this slow and painful death. Mandjou explained that the Shari‘a mentions that a woman should be caught in the act with at least three witnesses present who are able to testify of the woman’s dishonorable behavior. According to Mandjou this could not possibly have been the case for the Saudi women. The probability of three people being able to testify of something so private and secretive as adultery seemed very unlikely to him. The conclusion Mandjou drew from the example is that God is merciful and does not condone inhumane punishments. The written punishment is meant to show the severity of the crime, and the severity of the punishment is the reason for the exceptional condition of the three witnesses.

According to Mandjou the point of Islamic law often remains unnoticed, as the focus tends to be on the severity of some of its punishments. Mandjou pointed out that people should consider the shari‘a like “la loi occidentale” (western law); a big body of laws that together make up a full legal system. Like western law, Islamic law consists of many different fields, from family law to criminal
law to corporate law. According to Mandjou the wrongful application of the *Shari’a* by the Saudis adds to the caricatured vision many western people have of Islamic law, focusing merely on its relative limited number of severe punishments, without proper understanding of the specifics of these laws and neglecting the broad scope of the *shari’a* in general.

Mandjou’s story was not my first encounter with distrust of the Saudis. In chapter three the example of Sheikh Bilal Diallo, sheikh of *la Communauté Malienne des Sufis* (CMS), was mentioned. Sheikh Diallo identified the Saudis as “*une force dans tous les domaines*” and was wary of their influence in the *Haut Conseil Islamique* through their growing power in Islamic associations. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 Iran and Saudi Arabia, two Muslim countries with opposing ideas about Islam, have overtly competed for influence in the Muslim world. In the 1980s the Iranians pursued to export their revolutionary model in the Muslim world and to counter the influence of pro-Western Arab governments. In response the Saudis intensified their relations with the Muslim world (Otayek & Soares, 2007:9). Saudi influence in Mali has taken place ever since colonial times, especially through privately funded *médersas* (Brenner, 2001). Moreover, the Saudis have used their immense economic resources to support public Islamic international organizations that promote a principally conservative Wahhabi agenda (Sadouni, 2007).

Sheik Bilal complaints centered on the Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic precepts that, according to him, was winning terrain in the Malian Muslim community. According to Sheikh Diallo the growing number of followers of the Wahhabi doctrine is intolerant of Sufi practices, ordering men to wear their pants above the ankles and criticizing the Sufi mode of prayer. Sheikh Diallo emphasized that he not only disagreed with the content of the Wahhabi criticism on Sufism, as he emphasized that these practices had existed in Mali for centuries and were in line with Islamic precepts, he also strongly opposed the intolerant nature of the criticism. Even though Mandjou did not identify with the Sufi movement and might have had his own objections to its practices, his critique on ‘the Saudis’ followed similar lines. A recurrent concern focused on the issue of the intolerance of Wahhabism and its literal yet incorrect interpretation of Islamic precepts.

Reformist groups in Mali often get labeled as Wahhabi in Malian public debate. This categorization, finds its origins in the colonial period, in which the French classified reformist groups as Wahhabi in opposition to Muslim traditionalists (Brenner, 1993:65-6). The term Wahhabi, however, does not do justice to the heterogeneous nature of reformists groups that have come up since colonial times (see chapter three). So while Mandjou might be part of an association that calls for Islamic reform and that is sometimes classified as Wahhabi in Malian public debate, this does not necessarily mean he identifies with Wahhabi doctrine.
In spite of criticism, people came to the defense of Saudi influences as well. When Hawa took me to see her aunt Mme. Coulibaly (see chapter two), a founding member of la ligue des prédicatrices du Mali, a league of female Islamic preachers, an important part of the conversation focused on the position and role of women in Islam. Mme. Coulibaly expressed concern about the behavior of many young Malian women which she described as being modeled on the West. She emphasized that in spite of the fact that women feel liberated because they go out on the streets alone and wear revealing clothes, they are in fact anything but free. She then gave the example of Saudi women whose position is often portrayed incorrectly. According to Mme Coulibaly Saudi women are not the caged victims they are often mistaken for, as women have an excellent position in Saudi society. Saudi women are treated with the upmost respect by men, are protected from harm, and are able to fulfill their tasks in a safe and morally sound environment. Mme Coulibaly explained that this is what constitutes real freedom to her. When I talked about the meeting with Mme Coulibaly with Hawa later on, she agreed with her aunt on the fact that the situation of Saudi women is often caricaturized. She emphasized that the Saudi situation could not be literally applied to the Malian context, but she felt a deep connection to Saudi women: “Nous sommes ensemble. Nous sommes tous des Musulmans” (We are together. We are all Muslims).

While members of LIEEMA’s board expressed mistrust of Wahhabi ideology, there are signs that the association’s refusal of Saudi Arabian influence is less straightforward in practice. An example is the presence of the president of French student association EMF (Étudiantes Musulmans de France), a partially Saudi sponsored association (Gabizon, 2002) with links to the Muslim brotherhood (Roy, 2004:213), at the national congress of LIEEMA (see chapter five). Leading members of LIEEMA were positive about the possibilities of a partnership with EMF. This does not automatically clash with their criticism of Wahhabi ideology. As mentioned above, in general members of LIEEMA have a nuanced perception of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Saudi contacts do not inevitably lead to the adaptation of Wahhabi interpretations of Islam. In her study on Islamic humanitarianism in South Africa, Sadouni (2007) states that Saudi transnational funding does not necessarily imply the spread of a strict Wahhabi ideology:

“These public international organizations propagate, for the most part, a Wahhabist ideology that serves the interest of the Saudi monarchy and helps to reproduce its pretension to hegemony over the Sunni world. It is nonetheless necessary to understand that this projection of a Wahhabist ideology on the international scene is not so straightforward. […] The Saudis buy their supremacy and their tranquility without worrying about maintaining close control […]” (Sadouni, 2007:6-7)
A good example is Al-Muntada Al-Islami, an Islamic NGO that was set up in 1986 London by Saudi students and British converts, and that pursues a combination of humanitarian and religious goals (Benthall, 2007:166). Several members of LIEMMA were involved with activities of the organization. Even if Al-Muntada is very much involved with the Islamic médersas that were set up through Saudi funding in the 1970s and 80s, as part of a campaign to support Wahhabism in Mali, Benthall (2007:167-8) argues that there is little evidence that Al-Muntada is promoting a strict Wahhabi agenda in Mali.

In conclusion, the globalité of Islam was emphasized by members of both UJIMMA and LIEMMA, and Islamic youth associations were credited for encouraging its members to be open towards the world. The association in this respect functions as a threshold to the world, providing its members with a morally sound sense of direction. While associations offer certain directions, individual members are making their own choices. Different associations offer different pathways. These pathways, however, are not always clear-cut. A rejection of Wahhabi ideology, for example, does not necessarily mean the rejection of Saudi funding, as Saudi support does not automatically imply the adaptation of a strict Wahhabi doctrine. It should be noted that most direct and overt international contacts that I encountered in the field were established with other (West) African countries and organizations. As we have seen a glimpse of the transnational connections that are desired and established by Islamic associations in Bamako, and the influence of these connections on its members, let us now take a closer look to what these connections are based on.
6. 2 International connections: independence versus pragmatism

At LIEEMA’s national congress, after a debate on ways to engage more members in LIEEMA’s activities, a member from the audience took the microphone and called for unity based on Salafi principles. The reaction in the room to his appeal was one of disbelief, a girl next to me whispered: “Nous ne sommes pas en Arabie Saoudite.” In spite of the fact that he was not taken seriously, the man’s remark illustrates the diversity within Islamic youth associations. The diversity of its membership generates a diverse range of influences that makes its way into an association. It is therefore hard to make generalizations about international influences on a certain association. On the other hand, the leadership of associations does make certain choices as to who they associate themselves with and which international partnerships are made. It is not always as clear-cut, however, where these choices are based on. What becomes clear in interviews with leading figures of Islamic youth associations is the fact that, even if Islamic ideals form the basis of all associations and these ideals influence the international partnerships they take on, pragmatic considerations have to be taken into account.

It is not possible to go into the specifics of funding of Islamic youth associations in this thesis, as it would require further research, but it is feasible to say that all associations I visited emphasized their financial independence. Nevertheless informants explained that the difficult financial situation of their association forced them to be pragmatic. While emphasizing that the association is not financed by Arab countries and that they are independent, a leading member of LIEEMA for instance demonstrated his view on the pragmatism of funding in Malian circumstances with a story which he called ‘the anthropology of development’.

In the story a group of development workers comes to a remote village in a big truck with the proud image of their NGO logo on every side of the vehicle. They have come to the village to teach the farmers about agricultural techniques that can enhance the yield of their harvest. They also teach the farmers’ wives about hygiene and clean sanitation. As the development workers speak, the villagers listen attentively. Sometimes they nod or make agreeing sounds. After a couple of hours the development workers have instructed everyone in the village and their work is done. Yet before they leave, they hand out money to the farmers to set the programs they have instructed them about into motion. The farmers thank the development workers heartily and take the money. When the development workers step in their truck and hit the road to the next village, the villagers return to daily life as they have lived it the centuries before the development workers came, and do as they please with the money. The LIEEMA member who told me the story connected it to the way most Malian Islamic youth associations look at funding, whether it comes from the West or another
Muslim country: they listen, they nod, they say thank you, take the money and do exactly as they please.

Of course reality is more complex than the story. Even if considerations for the acceptance of funding might be pragmatic in nature, the acceptance of funds can have serious consequences for the association. If an association accepts funds from one party, other possible donors might be unwilling to step in. Since the Al Qaida attacks of September 11, 2001, numerous Islamic NGOs have been confronted with obstacles, such as “the freezing of bank accounts and blocking of financial transfers” (Benthall, 2006:20-1). In his article on Islamic NGOs in Northern Mali, Benthall points out that the developments since 9/11 do not seem to have had great consequences in Mali, since only a limited amount of Islamic NGOs from the Middle East operate in Mali (Benthall, 2006:20-1). However, I did encounter some stories that suggest that there are some difficulties resulting from sharpened post-9/11 policies. A member of UNAFEM, l’Union Nationale des Associations des Femmes Musulmanes du Mali, complained for instance that a project on HIV/AIDS education for women, which had been set up in cooperation with western NGOs and several Islamic (youth) associations, no longer received the necessary funding as USAID, a united states federal government organization, had pulled back from the venture. When I asked why they had pulled back she explained that Islamic associations with ties to Arab nations no longer received funding from the United States. She was interested in finding out if European countries had the same policy.

The array of (possible) partners of Islamic youth associations in Bamako is thus fairly broad, ranging from USAID to Islamic NGOs. In chapter three we have seen that differences between associations with regard to these connections can lead to disunity in the Malian Muslim community. UJMMA’s connection to Qaddafi pushed away LIEEMA. Moussa Ba, secrétaire à la jeunesse at the Haut Conseil Islamique and vice-president of UJMMA, had a more pragmatic approach to the relations between UJMMA and Libya:

“I have an association in Kati71. We organize for example a day dedicated to the fight against AIDS. We have worked together with western NGOs. We work with everyone. The United States have organized a forum on Quranic schools. Many people were critical of that. The ties with Libya were a reason for many associations to quit UJMMA. They said that there is no order in Libya. This can pose a problem in the unification of the Muslim community. Personally, I do not like Libya or their president. He has no respect for human rights or democracy. I am a democrat, I am a liberal. But there is no law against the financing of a Malian structure by Libya. Libya is a sovereign country. But in principle I prefer not to associate myself with a country like Libya.”72
In opposition to this pragmatic approach stands the wish for financial independence. As said, leading figures of all Islamic youth associations emphasized the independence of their association. The fact that there were no financial connections to Arab countries was specifically emphasized. Whether these claims are realistic indeed, they touch upon an important issue that needs to be explored further in order to understand the international concerns of members of Islamic youth associations in Bamako today. As young Muslims have their eyes on the world, a general distinction is often made between two power blocks; the Muslim world and the West. The emphasis on financial and ideological independence is an illustration of the ambivalent relationship of young Muslims Muslims to both worlds. To get a better understanding of this position it is useful to take a closer look at the term intégrisme as a label that gets attached to the men and women who participate in Islamic youth associations.

6.3 “Al Qaida? C’est un nom fantôme...”: the social realities of intégrisme

When one of my hosts in Bamako found out I was doing research about Islamic youth associations and was looking for contacts within these associations, he thought for a while, started nodding and said he had a colleague to whom everyone at the office referred as ‘the Taliban’ because he was always talking about his religion. He was active in many associations and could probably help me out a lot. The term Taliban was mentioned in a joking way, but it reveals a lot about the ideas of Malians on what Muslims who are part of Islamic youth associations are about. Even if my host was also a Muslim, he made a distinction between himself and his colleague. This distinction is also made by members of associations themselves.

The use of the term Taliban gives insight into a confusing mix of labels that get attached to members of Islamic youth associations, both in the field and in academia. It is not the only term I encountered in the field to describe these young Muslims, some more serious than others. A generic term that came up most was intégrisme. Informants often used the term as a way to describe why some Malians are wary of the existence of Islamic associations. LIEEMA, for instance, describes these feelings in society in a reflective document on the state of the association. Sometimes fear of intégrisme leads to reservations on the side of parents of LIEEMA members: “ [...] there is a fear of Islamism or intégrisme. We ask Allah [...] to especially make sure that the parents will be more tolerant and understanding towards their children.”

The term intégrisme had a negative connotation when it was used by people both in and outside of Islamic youth associations. Yet even if young Muslims in Islamic associations do not identify with the term themselves, its use does illustrate that distinctions are made between them
and other Malian Muslims. However, as Schulz (2008) points out in her study on reformist women’s learning groups in San, it is impossible to make clear-cut demarcations between groups of Muslims:

“It is impossible to draw a clear line between Muslim women whose practices are in continuity with conventional views of religiosity and women whose views are informed by Salafi reformist thought or Wahhabi doctrine. [...] It is more useful to think of their positions and those of fellow male activists, as ranging on a continuum of positions and local reformulations.” (Schulz, 2008:40)

Schulz mentions ‘Salafi reformist thought’ and ‘Wahhabi doctrine’. As seen before there are certainly Saudi influences in the Malian Muslim community, but it is not accurate to categorize all young Muslims involved in Islamic youth associations as such. The category of ‘conventional’ views on religiosity is equally indistinct. Schulz makes a valid point when she emphasizes that there are no clear lines between the two groups. In reality it would indeed be more fruitful to approach the Malian Muslim community as a continuum on which people can take in different positions on different issues throughout time. It is important to keep this in mind in the exploration of the term intégrisme and what the term means to different people. Exploration of the term can help to get insight into the complicated relation of young Muslims in Islamic youth associations with the West as well as the Muslim world. In light of Schulz’s observation it is interesting to take a closer look as to what the term conveys, rather than who exactly it includes.

When asked what the term intégrisme means, explanations in the field were always layered. A distinction was made between the definition of the West, or more specifically certain western media, and what the term meant to those Muslims who were considered intégristes themselves. Informants described the western definition of intégrisme as activities that are meant to destabilize a society in the name of Islam with the intention of installing Islamic law. However, as my informants emphasized, for Muslims who are involved in these actions themselves the destabilizing efforts are a way of realizing their right to live life in concordance with Islamic precepts. As one member of UJMMA explained: “If you make it impossible for me to pray, this can push me into taking up arms.” 

Intégrisme is thus a term that describes activities that are meant to destabilize a society in order to make it possible for Muslims in this society to rightfully implement their religion. It therefore touches on the issue of politics. While the western media portray this struggle as a danger, my informants pointed out that to some Muslims it is a matter of religious freedom.

As seen in the example of LIEEMA above, the term Islamism is used in combination with intégrisme as well. Miles (2007-1), employing a definition that not necessarily includes the use of
violent force in bringing politics in line with Islamic precepts, describes Islamism as “a spectrum that spans both moderation and extremism, with many intermediary steps for line-drawing. This is certainly the case in West Africa, where the ethos of intensified politics towards Islamist ends still generally eschews wanton destruction of life and property” (Miles, 2007:1:4). If we reason along the lines of Miles, my informants generally placed themselves on the moderate end on the spectrum. It could even be questioned if they are part of the spectrum at all, as the Islamic youth associations I visited did not openly discuss any explicit political agenda.

As we have seen in chapter three, UJMMA’s political connotations made many associations wary of joining the union. UJMMA’s problems indicate that political involvement on the part of Islamic associations is generally met with distrust and condemnation. All leading figures in Islamic youth associations that I spoke with in light of my research stated that their associations are strictly a-political and are willing to work within Mali’s secular democratic system. Many emphasize that they are democrats. If there are ideas about installing Islamic law, they are at least not seriously considered on the level of Islamic youth associations. This is not to say that there are no political ambitions amongst young Muslims, or to deny that some of the actions and positions of Islamic youth associations have political dimensions. There are indeed points of discontent with the authorities which are being played out in the Malian Muslim community, such as for instance the issue of family law reform (De Jorio, 2009: 97-100). However, young Muslims generally do not identify with a political struggle.

Besides insistence on the a-political nature of Islamic youth associations, the explanations young Muslims give as to why they will never resort to a (violent) struggle to implement Islamic law, can be divided into roughly three categories. First, perhaps most importantly, there is a theological reason. According to informants intégrisme is not in compliance with the nature of Islam and those who know the Quran and the hadiths cannot be intégristes. Second, a historical explanation is given. While Mali was one of the first African regions to embrace Islam, and Muslims have been present in Mali for over a millennium, there has never been a real intégrist movement in the region. This relates to the third reason which is social in nature. Time and again informants emphasized that religious extremism and violence are not in concordance with Malian culture.

The rejection of the term intégrisme is thus in part based on the dimension of repression and violence that gets connected to the term. Young Muslims in Islamic youth associations condemn the violent and repressive actions of some of their fellow Muslims, yet there is sympathy as well towards the struggle against injustice of Muslims around the world. This struggle consists of specific conflicts that receive much attention on a global level, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or the war in Iraq, but is also based on a general feeling of deprivation. Like Bintou pointed out in chapter four, African Muslims feel left behind compared to the western world. Anti-western sentiments fuelled by
their marginal economic and social position, enhanced by the recent rhetoric of “war on terror” (Masquelier, 2007) leads young Muslims in Bamako to identify with an image of reformist Islam that is victim to stereotypical ideas, locally as well as globally.

In contrast to intégrisme and Islamism, some informants explained that they did not mind being called a ‘fondamentalist’, as it implies a ‘pure’ form of Islam that is true to the sources of the religion. References to the early days of Islam and the life and times of the prophet were, perhaps not surprisingly, often made. Yet as Gomez-Perez (2008) points out, this period, which is considered to hold “universal value”, has specific meaning in the present era of globalization:

“The connection between these periods recreates a continuity between the early years of Islam (the time of the Prophet) and the present-day, and provides an Islamic way of interpreting globalization through the call to establish a new world order while confirming the supremacy of the prophet’s time. This period is considered to hold a universal value. Thus the AEMUD [Senegalese Islamic students association] was able to position itself outside a strictly local, national or even African context, and stand squarely on the global stage.” (Gomez-Perez, 2008:107)

Identification with the days in which the Umma was created does not necessarily have political implications in the case of Malian youth. As Gomez-Perez points out in the case of the Senegalese student association AEMUD, the Umma is “defined as an entity that allows Muslims to solidify their connections through their common faith, regardless of their culture or which country they live in. It is first and foremost a religious notion, and a political notion second” (Gomez-Perez, 2008:107). While intégrisme and islamism have strong political connotations, the term ‘fundamentalism’ in this respect could be interpreted as a purely religious notion unifying the Umma and offering a religiously sound way of dealing with processes of globalization.

My curiosity as a researcher was sometimes interpreted as an interest in religious extremism or even Islamic terrorism. The interest of members of LIEEMA and UJMMA to speak with me and to make sure that I would inform people back home about the true nature of Islam, fits in this idea of young Muslims fighting transnational stereotypes (Deeb, 2009:118). In her study of pious Shi’i Muslim gender activists in Lebanon, Deeb (2009) shows how female Islamic activists in Beirut feel as though they have to respond to stereotypical transnational images, specifically with regard to gender norms. In chapter five we have seen a similar situation with young women in Islamic youth associations in Bamako, especially with regard to their adaptation of the hijab or the niqab. We could extend the
notion of fighting transnational stereotypes to a more general level, as young Muslims in Islamic youth associations feel like they have to defend their religious ideas in response to “[...] local and international concern, as well as local concern about international concern” (Deeb, 2009:122). Explanation of the fact that they were calling for the transformation of society according to Islamic precepts was in most cases thus followed by a clarification of their openness towards the world and their tolerance of other religious beliefs, which was mostly presented as a specific Malian feature. This is an interesting example of how informants placed a global Muslim identity within a Malian context.

The terms intégrisme reveals a form of social labeling; a way of categorizing the world. The use of these labels in Bamako today illustrates that young Muslims in Islamic youth associations represent a certain kind of Islam that is different from conventional Malian Islamic interpretations; an interpretation of Islam in which men do not shake hands with women and in which the dances that take place at traditional wedding ceremonies are not condoned. The young Muslims in associations, of which some women wear the niqab and men often wear North African kaftans, are a visible component of this interpretation. As said before, young Muslims feel like they have to respond to the negative connotations this image brings about both locally and globally. It is a debate full of stereotypes and more complex than can be explored in this thesis, but it is impossible to understand the world of young women and men in Islamic youth associations without paying closer attention to this dynamic.

6.4 “L’Occident n’aime pas les Musulmans”: challenging transnational stereotypes
A said before, one of the most important issues for young Muslims today, also identified by Gomez-Perez (2008) in her study of the Senegalese Islamic student association AEMUD, centers around the relationship between “two modes of civilization, the Western and the Islamic” (Gomez-Perez, 2008:112). Alleged tensions between the West and the Islamic world were a returning theme throughout my research. The withdrawal of American funds to certain Islamic NGOs, the headscarf debate in France, the Danish cartoons of the Prophet, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and of course the violence in Israel and Palestine were international examples that came up repeatedly to illustrate a feeling amongst young men and women in Islamic youth associations that there is a level of animosity towards Islam, or as one of my informants remarked in rather straightforward terms: “L’occident n’aime pas les musulmans”. This rather confrontational perception of the world is perhaps the result of international developments that are out of their control, but this does not take
away from the fact that informants felt like they need to respond. These feelings were voiced by Moussa Ba at a conference of UJMMA:

“The HCI [Haut Conseil Islamique] has organized a seminar with the International Red Cross in the Grand Hotel in Bamako last Friday. At this seminar the International Red Cross was represented by many young people of their organization. There were even a few representatives from Geneva. One of them was a twenty-six year old researcher who spoke Arabic, French, Spanish and German. After breakfast I approached him and asked him about Europeans’ perception of Muslims. His answer was that at this moment Islam is minimized in Europe. It is difficult to put people at ease with regard to this subject. There are places where you will be isolated if people know that you are Muslim. There have been European hotels that have gone bankrupt because they accommodated large numbers of Muslims. These hotels have been abandoned by non-Muslims because they were not willing to be in the same place with Muslims. At certain places Islam is considered as a religion that harasses and traumatizes people. The cause of this attitude lies in the events of September eleventh in the United States, and the subsequent events that took place in different places in Europe. It is difficult these days for Europeans to understand Islam.

After his answer, I asked him if this is due to the fact that Muslims in Europe cannot explain Islam well, or if it is Muslims elsewhere who have not succeeded in this. He answered me that this is the fault of the Muslims in Europe who have not been able to adequately explain Islam to people. It has come to a point in Europe where the media express nothing but slander about Islam. Facing this difficult situation, European Muslims have become passive. Because these Muslims prefer to remain silent instead of reacting to those who spread this slanderous propaganda about Islam, they have proven to be incapable of effectively denunciating the media.

Then I asked him if the media spread this slander on purpose or if this is the result of a misunderstanding about Islam. He said that certain media spread slander on purpose. He named Fox News in the United States, CNN and some French channels. These channels have experts to their disposal who have studied Islam and who know the religion well. Then I asked him which solution he proposed. I want to conclude with the solution he proposed. He told me that in more than twenty years religious wars that are characterized by the use of dangerous arms will get to an end around the world, like for example the case of Russia and Georgia. At that moment people will understand that war will not resolve the crisis. This can only happen through ideas, through exchange. He told me that he is sure that any war that will take place in more than thirty years will be a war of ideas. So to be able to face such a war of ideas, Muslims have to prepare themselves and gain knowledge in every area.

Let me repeat what I have said. I have said that in more than thirty years the young people who are here today and those who are of age today will be the representatives of the
Islamic movement in Mali. For this movement in defence of Islam we need to be well prepared on the economic, juridical, social and historical front. Second, I have spoken about journalism. We thank God for the services of Al Jazeera to defend the interests and goals of Islam. The channel reveals the exaggerated lies of some to better inform everyone. But the channel suffers from a crisis in human resources. They have journalists who are qualified to speak in the name of Islam, but their number is insufficient to assure a complete media coverage. Al Jazeera has been created two years ago, but it has representatives everywhere in the world. The channel has made use of all necessary means, but these days it is difficult for Islam to provide a sufficient number of qualified people who can give information about Islam, because we do not have enough amongst us who are knowledgeable, even if we over a billion people today.

Because of this the new generation will be questioned before God, in the hereafter. In spite of their great numbers they have not been able to employ strategies to overcome our difficulties. The elderly who are sixty years old cannot be engaged in training and education. But the youth who are in their twenties can better devote themselves to their studies and follow training.”

At the time of Mr. Ba’s speech I was seated in the back of the conference room with the UJMMA women who had come to attend the meeting. During his words on the western media a young girl who sat beside, bent over to me and whispered, as she nodded at my voice recorder: “This is very interesting. Are you recording?”

In a conversation after the conference, Mr. Ba explained more specifically what he meant by his description of the tension between the West and the Muslim world. He clarified that he had voiced the worries of many youths who are concerned about the position of Muslims in the world. In Mr. Ba’s view Islamic youth associations do not devote enough attention to these feelings. As UJMMA focuses on small issues such as organizing prayer services or handing out alms to the poor, it underestimates the greater concerns of young Muslims. As already pointed out in chapter three, Mr. Ba wished for a large union like UJMMA to focus on these larger issues, providing young Muslims with a sense of direction and a chance to reflect on their position.

In his speech Mr. Ba touched upon a number of issues. Mr. Ba mentioned the poor treatment of Muslims in the West, giving the example of the hotel that went bankrupt because it accommodated Muslims. The image problem of Islam comes from a misunderstanding of the religion, partly caused by the insufficiency of European Muslim to clarify Islam. Yet Mr. Ba also indicates the critical role of western media that purposely spread slanderous images of Islam. It is interesting that he made his point clear at the UJMMA conference by referring to the words of a Red Cross employee from
Geneva. The fact that the source of his information on the European situation came straight from Europe lent authority to his words. Furthermore, it clarified to the audience that the assumed hostility of the West towards Islam, based on an erroneous understanding of the religion, is not unalterable.

Mr. Ba emphasized that the ultimate responsibility of the wrongful treatment of the West towards Islam lies in the hand of Western leaders. Although he believes that there are many people in the West who have negative feelings towards Muslims, he also mentioned the crowds on the streets of Europe, the United States and even Australia when the United States threatened to invade Iraq in 2002, and after the invasion of 2003. He was impressed with the numbers of people who took to the streets, while the citizens of Muslim countries mostly remained quiet. According to Mr. Ba the relative silence in Muslim countries around the world illustrates the dire state of the Muslim world. Most Muslim countries simply do not grant their citizens the right to march the streets and voice their opinion. It saddened Mr. Ba that many Muslims live under dictatorships, while most countries in the west are relative stable democracies.

This notwithstanding, Mr. Ba emphasized that the freedom of speech that citizens in the Western world enjoy has gone too far, as western authorities condone the publication of insulting remarks and images of the most sacred in Islam, the prophet and the holy Quran. The cartoons of the prophet that were published in a Danish newspaper in 2005 were known amongst most of my informants. Some also confronted me with the controversial films about Islam that were made by members of Dutch parliament. They were referring to 'Submission', made by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and film director Theo van Gogh in 2005, and to 'Fitna', made by Geert Wilders in 2008. Few had seen the actual images, but films were often brought up as an example of the lack of respect towards Islam in the West.

When he found out that I came from the Netherlands, the first reaction of radio Dambe director Mr. Kimbiri for example, was to start up his laptop to show me pictures of a crowd of demonstrators on the streets of Bamako; the men in the front, a sea of veiled women in the back. The demonstrators carried Qurans, Dutch and Danish flags and signs with slogans like ‘Les Musulmans du Mali condamnent le film Fitna’ (The Muslims of Mali condemn the film Fitna), ‘Fitna = occident, Islam = paix’ (Fitna = the West, Islam = peace) and ‘nous sollicitons le boycott des produits néerlandais par le monde Musulman’ (We call for the boycott of Dutch products by the Muslim world). Mr. Kimbiri explained that he himself was one of the organizers of the march after the release of ‘Fitna’. The march had been organized by elder leaders of the Malian Muslim community, but young Muslims shared in their concern about the insults against Islam. All my informants believed that there is a limit to freedom of expression, and that the films and cartoon mentioned...
6.2 and 6.3 Demonstrators in the streets of Bamako in response to the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet in Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on September 30, 2005, and to the release of the film ‘Fitna’ by member of Dutch parliament Geert wilders, on March 27, 2008 (Photographs provided by Mohamed Kimbiri).
above crossed the line.

The disrespect shown towards Islam in the western world gave some of my informants the feeling that Muslims are not welcome in the western world. Hawa, for instance, once remarked that she would love to travel abroad. Her wish was to see other West African countries, and of course she dreamed of making the pilgrimage to Mecca, but she also expressed curiosity about Europe. She immediately added that travelling there would be impossible because of her financial situation and the strict visa requirements that make it almost impossible for Malians to travel to European destinations. Furthermore, she was concerned about the practical possibilities and religious implications of a woman traveling. But most importantly, Hawa expressed fear that people outside of the world she knew would not accept her because of her appearance. She felt as though her *niqab* would scare of people and make it very hard to make friends.

Moussa Ba explained the factors that he believed had caused the negative image of Islam. He mentioned terrorist actions of extremist Islamic groups as one of those factors, but pointed out that Muslims are the greatest victims of Islamic terrorism. Mr. Ba admitted that the issue of terrorism has added to the image problem, but he insisted that the mistrust of the Islamic world would not stop if there would never be a terrorist attack again. Mr. Ba mentioned the debate on headscarves in France. As he pointed out, young Muslim women in France have nothing to do with terrorism, yet they are hindered in the practice of their religion.

As said before Mr. Ba believed that the stereotypical image of Islam around the world is in part also the responsibility of Muslims themselves. He pointed out that Muslims in Europe had not sufficiently explained their religion. Part of the problem in this respect would be that there are not enough knowledgeable Muslims to speak in the name of Islam. The lack of educated Muslims around the world was not restricted to the field of religious education. In Mr. Ba’s eyes this explained the difficult economic and socio-political circumstances in many Islamic countries around the world. It hurt him to see the state of the Muslim world, and he called young Muslims in Bamako to focus on their education.

As we have seen in chapter four, the notion that education can transform society is indeed very present in Islamic youth associations. Mr. Ba connects the idea of transforming society through education to a higher ideal; the ideal of bringing the *Umma* as a whole forward. In his view the strengthening of the *Umma* is pivotal in the fight against transnational stereotypes about Islam. According to Mr. Ba young Muslims in Mali should work hard to guarantee the strength of the *Umma*. As Mr. Ba explained: “*Islam est une religion extraordinaire, il faut que nous sommes devant, sur tous les plans*.”
As Miles points out we have to be wary of ‘the reductio ad Al-Qaidum trap’ (Miles, 2007-2:183), and we should indeed be very conscientious when writing about the tense relationship between ‘the’ West and ‘the’ Muslim world, especially when we connect the issue to young Muslims in Bamako today. It is important to avoid oversimplifications drawing from Huntington’s refuted thesis of a clash of civilizations connected to the classical Islamic thinking of the Dar al-Islam (realm of Islam) versus the dar-al Harb (realm of war). Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan (2009) point out in their work on Islamic NGOs, that even if “all world statesmen have distanced themselves from it, it crops up continually in both public and expert debate, lent plausibility by mutual reinforcement of the stereotypes of an ultra-consumerist ‘West’ and a fundamentalist ‘Islam’” (Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan, 2009:153).

The reality of young Muslims in Bamako today is that societal ideas about intégrisme and the images that the term conveys are a factor that they are dealing with on a regular basis. Therefore, the notion of intégrisme is a social reality, even if it is only a ghost in the room. As Mr. Ba pointed out, the issue of the local and transnational stereotyping of Islam is not so much a focal point of Islamic youth associations as such. Yet during the time I spent in the field it came to the surface as a shared concern of the associations’ members. It will be interesting to see in what way these concerns will influence the international connections of Islamic youth associations in the (near) future. To get a better understanding of these international connections additional research is needed indeed.

6.5 Expanding the community: The Umma and l’Occident as ambivalent resources

In chapter four we have seen how Islamic youth associations offer a practical form of unification, a sense of belonging in a heterogeneous urban environment in which young men and women cannot rely solely on traditional kinship networks (Leblanc, 2006). Through their membership of an Islamic association young Muslims become part of a close-knit Islamic community which offers them a greater network of support and opportunity. Not only do Islamic associations directly extend the social networks of youth on the local level, they also offer the chance to open up a community beyond the borders of Mali. The idea of expanding one’s social network through membership of an Islamic youth association is foremost based on the ideal of the Umma and Muslim solidarity. Yet as we have seen the array of possible partners is not restricted to the Muslim world. Expansion of their network brings along potential social, economic and religious resources, while it presents young Malian Muslims with the opportunity to spread the message of Islam and to fight international stereotypes as well. Young Muslim men and women in Mali are thus not solely on the receiving end of the deal.

The idea of connecting to the world lives amongst members of Islamic youth associations indeed. Time and again informants expressed that, not in spite of their religion but rather because of their Islamic ideals, they had become more open towards the world. The resources they gain from
their membership of an Islamic youth association vary in nature. First of all, associations provide them with a chance to get into contact with Malian as well as foreign Islamic leaders and teachers. Furthermore, associations broaden the social and economic networks of their members. Perhaps these connections will not immediately provide tangible opportunities, but there is always the possibility that they will turn out to be beneficial in the future. Through their membership of the Islamic association young Muslims thus become part of an Islamic family which offers them a greater network of support and opportunity.

In spite of this advantageous role of Islamic youth associations, membership of such an association makes young Muslims part of the complex relationship between ‘the West’ and ‘the Muslim world’, and both worlds are not uncontested social, economic and religious resources. The general response of young Malian Muslims to these ambivalences is twofold. As their main frame of reference and identification is Islam, they identify with the battle against transnational stereotyping of Islam. On the other hand they repeatedly emphasize their own West African identity. In general, the issue of intégrisme and the idea of discrimination against Islam cause suspicion of the West. Yet in a sense young Muslims in Bamako also position themselves as bystanders who are observing and responding to a process that is going on outside of them. This is where the emphasis on a shared African identity comes in. As said before, informants distanced themselves from the ‘un-Islamic’ practices of family members and often stressed that the Islam that most Malians practice is not true Islam. Yet the importance of the notion of a shared position of African Muslims is based on a common history and similar daily struggles.

The concurrent identification with the Umma and emphasis on a West African identity is not contradictory. Young Muslims in Bamako will always defend Islam together with their frères and soeurs throughout the Umma, like in the case of the film Fitna. It does not matter in what association they participate, virtually no one disagrees on these kinds of issues. In other instances however, they distance themselves from fellow Muslims, denouncing both extremist Islamic interpretations of Muslims abroad as well as un-Islamic behavior of their family members in Mali. So while the Umma, the West and the Malian cultural context are all valued as frames of reference, which aspect gets emphasized can differ between persons and between situations.

6.6 Concluding remarks

In previous chapters we have seen that the activities of Islamic youth associations offer new answers and directions to young Muslims in a heterogeneous and ever-changing urban environment. One of the most important preoccupations of these young Muslims are the difficult socio-economic circumstances they have to deal with. Through the story of Bintou it became clear how Islamic youth associations can offer answers to the question of poverty and provide young Malian Muslims with
morally sound solutions. This guiding role of Islamic youth associations returned in this chapter with regard to transnational influences. Islamic youth associations function as a threshold to the world, providing its members with a window of new opportunities that transcends the boundaries of Mali.

Through their membership of an Islamic youth association, young Muslims also become part of a complicated social dynamic in which the idea of tension between ‘the Muslim world’ and ‘the West’ is projected onto them. The response of young Muslims to this dynamic is twofold. As their main frame of reference and identification is Islam, they identify with the battle against transnational stereotyping of Islam. On the other hand their own West African identity is repeatedly emphasized. In practice these two reactions are not contradictory. Young Malian Muslims take on what they find worthy from other societies and cultures under their own conditions. As this process is not always an easy one, Islamic youth associations can filter outside influences that are present around young men and women in Bamako, and advise on which direction to take. Islamic youth associations thus offer young Muslims a sense of direction that is in concordance with Islam as they navigate through an extended transnational community.
7. Conclusions

In the introduction I proposed that Islamic youth associations play a significant role in the construction of new religious identities among young men and women in Bamako. These associations are often labeled as ‘reformist’ or ‘modernist’, and are placed in opposition to a Sufi majority. Following Otayek and Soares (2007), I argue that the label ‘reformist’ as such does not do justice to the complexities of the world of young Muslims in Islamic youth associations in Bamako today. My incentive in writing this thesis has therefore been to contribute to a more balanced representation of Islamic youth associations in Bamako, and the young Muslims who participate in them. The successive chapters provided understanding of the structure and activities of Islamic youth associations and how these associations fit into the wider Muslim community of Bamako. Yet perhaps most importantly they offered insight into the world of its members, through the exploration of the role that Islamic youth associations play in the lives of young Muslims.

In this final chapter I intend to provide some general concluding remarks based on the analysis presented in the preceding chapters. I will do so in the framework of the questions that I initially raised in the introduction. First, I will describe what Islamic youth associations offer to their members, and why this is so essential in the context of Bamako. Next, I take a look at the question to what extent this causes an intergenerational break and/or a break with dominant religious practice. I will also give attention to the issue of international influences, and how associations serve as thresholds between the global and the local. Then, I will address the role of Islamic youth associations in the construction of new religious identities among young Muslims in Bamako today. Finally, I will present suggestions for further research.

In light of the work of Christiansen, Utas & Vigh (2006) on social navigation, I have drawn out the social fields through which youth in Bamako navigate on a daily basis to demonstrate that Islamic youth associations are part of a whole array of domains, each producing their own challenges and
opportunities. In my analysis I distinguished different –often overlapping- social fields in which youth in Bamako operate, such as the field of education and the economy, but also the family and urban youth culture. The relationship between Islamic youth associations and their environment is indeed a dialectic one, in which they not only impose images and ideologies on the world around them, but they draw inspiration from it as well. The ideology and activities of Islamic youth associations can therefore not be understood separately from other social fields.

In the interplay between youth and their social surroundings, youth in Bamako take on shifting hierarchical positions. As a result the pathways of young men and women in Islamic youth associations can be quite diverse. Nevertheless, the stories of my informants did point at common ground. What brings them together as a unified group in all its diversity is foremost their devotion to Islam. Yet these young men and women are also connected through the main challenges they face on a day to day basis, which are primarily related to the poor state of Mali’s education system and the country’s high unemployment rate. In this respect, the stories of the youth in this thesis represent the story of the majority of all young men and women in Bamako. In chapter four we have seen that these challenges are in fact, perhaps not surprisingly, also amongst the main concerns of Islamic youth associations. Besides being based on religiosity, the attachment of youth to Islamic youth associations thus also results from a shared concern about wider social issues.

In chapter four a distinction was made between four domains of activities that together make up le travail Islamique, as the activities of Islamic youth associations are often referred to by its members: the religious domain, the domain of education, the humanitarian/social domain and the domain of leisure. Although these distinctions are based on categorizations that were used in the field, they are in fact quite problematic. During my fieldwork it was stressed time and again that Islam touches all domains of society. In this light it is perceived to be a religious duty to contribute to the development of the country through social and educational activities. The appeal of Islamic youth associations on youth can in part be explained through the fact that le travail Islamique offers opportunities that impact not just their own lives, but that also contribute to the development of the world around them.

It is important to explain what constitutes the notion of development in the case of Islamic youth associations. My informants often contrasted the Malian situation with the Western world as a community of rich and powerful nations. This image spreads via the media and popular culture, but the influence of modern western notions in Mali has been particularly strong in development and aid programs in the postcolonial period. Between the early 1980s and late 1990s the Malian state-dominated economy has been liberalised under pressure from Western donors. In spite of considerable western intervention and its promises of western modernity, most Malian youth have
been forced into marginal economic and political roles. Political and economical liberalization have not yet proven to provide solutions to youth’s most pressing problems. Moreover, many of my informants were wary of its materialist and immoral effects on society. Therefore, in spite of the mirroring of the Western world, informants felt that development has to be met on Mali’s own terms within an Islamic framework. In this respect I argue that Islamic youth associations offer a sense of direction to young Muslims. They focus on education and moral purification based on the premise that the understanding and adaptation of what they consider to be proper Islamic practice would provide solutions to Mali’s social and economic hardships.

The emphasis on the adaptation of proper Islamic precepts and the pursuit of societal transformation poses the question if Islamic youth associations are politically motivated. Time and again informants pointed out that Islam encompasses all domains of society, which includes the field of politics. This notwithstanding, young Muslims in Islamic youth associations generally do not identify with a political struggle, just as the official stand of all Islamic youth associations is that they are a-political. If there are ideas about installing Islamic law, they are at least not seriously considered on the level of Islamic youth associations. I thus follow Otayek and Soares (2007:14) in describing the call for islamization of society rather as an affirmation of a Muslim identity than as a strategy to take over the state. This is not to say that there are no political ambitions amongst Muslims in Mali today, or to deny that some of the actions and positions of associations have political dimensions. Yet people are generally willing to work within the existing political framework. In chapter three we even saw that the political ambitions of some figures in the Malian Muslim community formed one of the main breaking points in the unification of Islamic youth associations. As the leaders of UJMMA were thought to be connected to certain political movements, many associations refrained from joining the union.

The call for personal moral purification in the pursuit of societal transformation seems to confirm Larkin and Meyer’s (2006:309) suggestion that reformist youth (symbolic) break with traditional gerontocratic, kin-based hierarchies and mainstream religious practice. In chapter four we saw indeed that Islamic youth associations are tight-knit social networks that offer support outside of traditional kinship networks and in which young Muslims create new communal identities based on religion. The stories of my informants point out that young Muslims indeed distance themselves from friends and family through their membership of Islamic youth associations. Diverging ideas about morality and what constitutes proper Islamic practice elicit a certain distance. It also works the other way around though. Friends and family often express objections when a young man or a woman decides to join an Islamic youth association. These objections are in a way practical in nature, as family members fear that young Muslims will devote all of their time to their religion and neglect
their other duties. Yet as we have seen in chapter six young Muslims in Islamic youth associations also represent a certain kind of Islam that is different from conventional Malian Islamic interpretations; an interpretation of Islam in which men for instance do not shake hands with women and in which the dances that take place at traditional weddings are not condoned. These images hold negative connotations in society which, as argued in chapter six, are connected to international stereotypes and separate young Muslims in Islamic youth associations from their fellow Malian Muslims.

Although some practices of family members are seen as un-Islamic by members of Islamic youth associations, it is indeed in the context of the family where the initial contact with Islam and its morality takes place. Often the seed of religious activity for members of Islamic youth associations lies within the family. While young Muslims distance themselves in certain ways from traditional, kin-based and gerontocratic hierarchies as well as from dominant religious practice when they join an Islamic youth association, the context of the family thus remains important. The case of the abolition of LIEEMA’s cellule féminine served as an illustrating example, providing insight into the way young Muslims in Bamako are juggling their membership of an Islamic association with an urban intellectual lifestyle and the traditional values of their families. In this light the role of women in society and the relationship between women and men within Islamic youth associations were areas of debate, which show that within Islamic youth associations interpretations of what constitutes true Islamic practice are not uncontested as they are influenced by religious values and cultural standards as well as outside forces such as the hope to connect with a modern urban lifestyle.

Chapter six suggests that Islamic youth associations function as a threshold to the world, providing its members with a window of new opportunities and influences that transcends the boundaries of Mali. As a result its members become part a complicated social dynamic in which the idea of tension between ‘the Muslim world’ and ‘the West’ is projected onto them. In general, the response of young Muslims to this dynamic is twofold. As their main frame of reference and identification is Islam, they identify with the battle against the international stereotyping of Islam. On the other hand their own West African identity is repeatedly emphasized. As this process is not always an easy one, Islamic youth associations can filter outside influences that are present around young men and women in Bamako, and advise their members which direction to take. Like the relation between women and men in the case of the cellule féminine, the international affiliations of Islamic youth associations are never uncontested.

While the Muslim world, the West and the Malian cultural context are all valued as frames of reference, which aspect gets emphasized can differ between different people, between associations and between situations. As the influences on the world of Islamic youth associations are diverse the
label ‘reformist’ as such does not do justice to the complexities of the world of its members. The same goes of course for the so-called Sufi majority; the category of ‘conventional’ views on religiosity is equally indistinct. Following Schulz (2008) in her article on reformist women’s learning groups in San, I therefore suggest that is more fruitful to approach the whole of the Malian Muslim community as a continuum on which people can take in different positions on different issues throughout time. In this light the Islamic landscape, of which Islamic youth associations are a part, is an interwoven social field through which individuals navigate, creating their own pallet of activity and affiliation in the process.

What does all this tell us about the role of Islamic youth associations in the construction of Muslim identities? There is a strong sense of unity amongst the men and women in Islamic youth associations. I suggested earlier that this common identity is mainly based on a shared interpretation of Islamic practice, which sets them apart from dominant religious practice. On the other hand we have seen that at many times what is proper Islamic practice is often contested and that young Muslims are constantly juggling influences that transcend the field of religion. They identify themselves for instance as being member of a Malian family, as students, as member of an urban lifestyle, as an entrepreneur etc. Identification is dynamic as it is indeed situational and dependent on internal and external stimuli.

As described in the introduction, Ewing (1990:251) argues that in order to experience wholeness and continuity a person keeps one frame of reference in mind at all times, and shifts between different identities are gradual and not contradictory to the individual. I connect this logic to the collective identities that are created by Islamic youth associations, arguing that associations play a role in alleviating some of the challenges in a rapidly changing urban environment, making Islam the main frame of reference, and providing clarity to its members with regard to conflicting identities, such as in the case of the debate over the role of women in society. This does not mean that Islam is the only frame of reference, or that Islamic youth associations offer unambiguous answers to all of the questions of its members. I would rather characterize their role in the words of one of my informants: as “une torche”, a guiding light that provides a sense of belonging and a general direction in the ever-changing and heterogeneous urban context.

Due to the relatively limited timeframe of fieldwork and the complexity of the questions that were raised, some issues require further research. First, this thesis could provide an incentive for further research about the issue of transnationalism. There is still more to learn about international connections that play a role in Islamic youth associations in particular and the Malian Muslim community in general. Although this thesis has provided a glimpse of the importance of the issue in
the light of Islamic youth associations, additional research is needed indeed to get a better understanding of what these connections constitute exactly and the extent of its influence on the lives of Muslims and Islamic institutions in Mali today. It might also be interesting to take a more regional approach, and make comparisons with other (West) African countries.

With regard to the specific group of Malian youth it would be interesting to further explore the state of the Malian education system. I have touched upon the issue several times, especially with regard to institutions of higher education, but the issue requires further research. Finally, it will be interesting to see how the quest for unification of the Malian Muslim community and the debate on the changing role and position of women progress. Throughout this thesis we have seen that young Muslims are highly creative in their navigation through the ever-changing urban context, including the domain of religion. It is therefore likely that they will remain a fruitful and rewarding subject of further research.
Notes

2. Navigating youth: challenges and chances in Bamako

The stories of two young Islamic activists


2 1,000,000 Franc CFA is about €1500

3 Sikasso is Mali’s second largest city, located about 400 kilometers southeast of Bamako, near the border with Burkina Faso.

4 Jinns are invisible, supernatural creatures. They can be either evil or good. Jinns are mentioned in the Quran, most notably in the surah of the Jinns (Al-Jinn, surah 72). Often popular beliefs about genies and demons get attached to the Quranic notion of Jinns.

5 Marabouts are a specific kind of West African religious specialists (see chapter four).

6 Médersa comes from the Arabic word Madrasa which means ‘school’.

7 ‘Call’ for Islam, mission.

3. The Islamic landscape of Bamako

Islamic youth associations in a broader perspective

8 Motto of LIEEMA (la Ligue Islamique des élèves et étudiants du Mali).

9 The worldwide Muslim community

10 Salafism comes from the Arabic term as-Salaf, which refers to the first generations of Muslims. Salafism regards only the holy Quran and the first generations of Muslims as religious authorities (Jomier, 2000:236). The term Salafism is often used interchangeably with Wahhabism.

11 The conduct of the Prophet which should be imitated by mankind, and has been written down in the literature of Tradition (hadith).


13 Muslim scholars
The pilgrimage to Mecca

Mr. Diamoutani makes a reference to cousinage, a system of joking relationships based on epic tales about the origin of Mande society that classifies all Mande family names, and dictates the correct social manners that are expected between members of different families. In present day Bamako this usually consists of teasing and joking around. Malians generally take great pride in their tradition of cousinage as they consider it to be an explanation for Mali’s relative lack of ethnic and religious tensions.

« Ce n’est pas un travail facile. On ne peut pas faire allusions aux toutes les tendances. Les Sunnis, Les Tiyanini...tous le monde est là. Même les shi’a, c’est une tendance au Mali. Ce n’est pas possible de satisfaire tout le monde dans tous les cas. Mais on s’amuse. On s’attaque. » (Mamadou Diamoutani, interview, October 24, 2008)


« L’objectif d’UJMMA est de créer une entente entre les membres de l’association et jamais de les désunir; de les ressembler en une entité, qu’ils aient le même programme, la même manière d’agir dans la réalisation de nos objectifs. Cela a pour objectif de ne pas créer une discorde entre les membres, de rendre les activités communes et cohérentes, pour qu’il n’y a pas de répétition de ce qui se fait par d’autres. Cela a ma connaissance traduit une progression de l’association; que les uns sachent ce que font ailleurs les autres dans tout le Mali. L’objectif aussi est de favoriser une collaboration parfaite des membres pour éradiquer les illusions, des soupçons, des méfiances afin que on se donne les mains pour la réussite de l’association. De nous accepter dans nos idées, dans nos usages, combattre la séparation des membres, de nous respecter entre nous pour notre force. Dieu merci les tendances qui ne s’acceptaient jamais se rencontrent aujourd’hui, on est parvenu à mettre en attente les différentes tendances dans l’association. Même si les petits conflits ne sont pas finis complètement, les jeunes travaillent bien ensemble dans un esprit de collaboration, et nous comptons à des jours de l’avenir de mettre fin à tout les difficultés et méfiances. » (Hamsa Maïga, vice-president UJMMA, journée de reflexion, November 30, 2008, translation from Bambara by Mahamadou F. Keïta)

« L’UJMMA travaille pour l’unité dans la communauté Musulmane, c’est-à-dire la paix sociale et la paix mondiale. » (Aïcha, interview, November 11, 2008)

« L’esprit qui allume cette jeunesse est différent que ceux de nos grands-parents, sinon nos parents, qui sont dans leur soixantaines. Ce ne sont pas les mêmes objectifs, ce n’est pas le même esprit du travail. Nos réalités sont différentes. C’est pourquoi on a besoin qu’on se comprend...on a besoin des explications et de coopérer ensemble. [...] Les vieux qui sont là maintenant, leur compréhension est différente. Eux, ils comprennent l’état précédent de l’Islam, donc ce n’est pas la même réalité. [...] C’est à cause de la démocratie. Et puis, les jeunes d’aujourd’hui, ils sont plus cultivés. Il y en a qui sont sorti, il y en a qui se sont promené ailleurs, qui ont eu d’autres expériences. Donc, eux qui n’ont pas eu cette même expérience, ils n’ont pas la même approche. Il y a un différence d’approche. » (Mohamed Macki Ba, interview, December 15, 2008)

« Chaque association a ses vieux, mais les acteurs principales sont les jeunes. Ils ont le temps, l’énergie. Il faut que nous ensemble...ensemble on peut concrétiser quelque chose pour l’Islam. » (Mohamed Macki Ba, interview, December 15, 2008)
Nous prenons notre temps. Après on retirera. C’est pour ça que nous voulons que tout soit écrit, que tout soit bien précisé. Que la structure sera en bon état pour la nouvelle génération. » (Mohamed Macki Ba, interview, December 15, 2008)

N’Ko literally translates as ‘I say’ in all Mande languages.

La vie quotidienne est pour les associations dans les quartiers. Nous, on devrait s’occuper de la grande problématique. » (Moussa Ba, interview, December 15, 2008)

Nous sommes différents que les autres associations. Comme Ansar Dine, ça c’est une personne : Sharif. Moi, je pense que c’est une secte. Avec LIEEMA, il y des Sufis, les Sunnis, les sj’ia, les tijani. Tous. » (Maimouna, interview, 18 november 2008).

l’AMJM sont les étudiants. Mais ils sont très différents que nous. Le président est un cadre, avec Sotelma. Il est marié avec beaucoup des enfants. Leur niveau est très différent. » (Maimouna, interview, 18 november 2008)

4. “Nous sommes pauvres”
Islam as an answer and a direction

LIEEMA, Projet de statuts et règlement intérieur 2008-2010, p.9.


J’ai des amies non-voilées, je ne les ai pas laissé. Ils sont des êtres humains. Bon, c’est Allah qui m’a fait Musulman. Ce n’est pas ma propre volonté. C’est Allah qui a fait ça. Donc, j’ai dit à mes amies que j’espère qu’Allah donnera ça à eux aussi. Et...on peut faire tous ensemble, on peut se promener, on peut causer, on peut étudier ensemble. Mais quand ils font quelque chose que Allah n’aime pas, je dis « j’arrête ici ». Je ne participe pas. Mais ils ont pensé que je vais eux laisser tomber, mes amies non-voilées. Mais ce n’est pas comme ça. [...] Ils me critiquent. Nous ne sommes pas sur le même chemin, le chemin droit. Mais ce n’est pas moi qui a décidé ça. C’est Allah qui a fait ça. Et j’espère que Allah va faire ça pour vous aussi, ce qu’il a fait pour moi. Mais je dis: mettez-vous en l’aise. Si tu portes des jupes courtes, ou des robes. Je suis en l’aise avec tout le monde. Je ne ressente pas. » (Bintou, interview, October 17, 2008)

Est-ce que tu as remarquée? En Afrique on marche beaucoup, ce n’est pas facile.» (Bintou, interview, October 17, 2008)


32 « L’Islam est la soumission à Dieu. Cette soumission a deux aspects. Premièrement, il y a la soumission qui est volontaire, comme jeuner, ou se voiler, ou la prière. Pour faire des choses comme ça, on a besoin une certaine acceptation, ce n’est pas forcement qu’on le fait. Deuxièmement, on a la soumission qui est malgré nous-mêmes, comme le fait que tu respire, le fait que tu dois utiliser la toilette, le fait même de ta naissance. Tu n’as pas choisi le fait de ta naissance. Mais les aspects volontaires, tu es jugée sur ça. C'est la miséricorde de Dieu. Donc si tu es riche ou pauvre, c'est égal pour Dieu. On a besoin les deux. S’il n’y avait pas des pauvres, qui va travailler pour qui? Dans ce monde il y a les patrons et les subordonnés. La santé c’est la même chose. On a besoin les deux. Quand tu es malade tu vois la richesse de la santé. Mon épreuve est ma grâce. C’est Dieu qui nous a crée, c’est Dieu qui nous jugera. Même si tu n’es pas musulman. Il nous juge par nos actions. Pense aux grâces que tu as eues. Un aveugle ne peut pas voir. Toi, tu peux voir. Si tu es sourd tu ne peux pas entendre. Toi, tu peux entendre. C’est une grâce. Tu as l’intelligence de comprendre les choses. Tu comprends ce que je te dis. Tu parles beaucoup des langues, tu comprends le français, l’anglais, quel est le lang de l’Holland ? Tu comprends l’hollandais. Tu as les moyens de te déplacer. Il ya des gens qui n’ont pas les moyens, ou qui sont handicapés. Tu peux manger, il y a des gens qui ne trouvent pas à manger. Ce sont tous des grâces. Tu as des compétences. Mais comment as-tu utilisé ces grâces? Qu’est-ce que tu as fait avec tes compétences ? Dieu nous juge sur ça. » (Ismail Traore, interview, October 18, 2008)

33 Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam: the alms.

34 « Donc, si on parle de la lutte contre la pauvreté, on parle de l’Islam, on parle de la Zakat. Le système d’Islam a la force d’éradiquer la pauvreté si on l’applique intégralement. Donc si tu es riche, on ne parle pas des petits aumônes; ce que tu donnes dans la rue. C’est vraiment donner de l’argent. Tout ça est écrit, c’est obligatoire de donner un pourcentage de ton salaire. Donc, si tout le monde travaille comme ça, on peut lutter la pauvreté dans deux ou trois ans. Bon, ce mot même, c’est un mot inutile. On devrait dire que c’est une lutte contre la richesse, comme ce n’est pas possible d’éradiquer la pauvreté. La pauvreté a son fonction, comme la richesse a son fonction. Mais ils sont
des limites. Nous, on cherche une société qui est juste. C’est tout. » (Ismail Traore, interview, October 18, 2008)

35 « Pas tellement, parce que souvent il y a des clashes, des gens qui disent le contraire que les autres. Mais il faut continuer la marche. Si tu as la force. Mais la vie associative aussi te donne plus de courage de continuer. Si tu as un problème tu vas l’amener et tu vas te donner aux mecs, et tu trouveras qui ils vont te soutenir. Tu trouveras qu’il y a un qui a eu la même épreuve que toi. Donc, cette personne va t’expliquer facilement et toi aussi tu va résister. [...] Par exemple… on prend le cas des parents. Ils sont des parents qui ne comprennent pas trop. Le fait qu’un jeune donne…qu’il fait uniquement les activités spirituelles. Quelle est la position qu’il faut prendre par rapport aux parents. Si tu as l’association qui te soutient, tu as la force de continuer et de communiquer avec les parents. » (Mahamadou, interview, September 16, 2008)

36 « L’efficacité et le dynamisme d’une association peuvent se mesurer par la choix, la pertinence et la pérennité de ses activités. » (LIEEMA, Rapport de travail de la Commission Finances du Congres 2008, December 17, 2008)

37 « On est là pour l’Islam d’abord. Oui, on est là pour les jeunes, mais on s’occupe de la religion d’abord [...] l’Islam touche tout dans une société, il n’y a pas des distinctions. » (Mohamed Macki Ba, interview, December 2008)

38 « Les prêches en français, chaque vendredi on les organise. Et c’est tout en français ça. Nous sommes les premiers qui le faisons et les gens l’apprécient beaucoup. Nous sommes des étudiants, des intellectuels, donc on invite des grands intellectuels. Comme le vendredi passé, c’est Farouk Diaby qui a parlé. Il est un grand économiste et un grand théologien. Il a parlé des élections aux Etats-Unis, les candidats et tout cela. Et il a expliqué les conséquences de cette élection pour le monde africain. C’est apparent que les développements aux Etats-Unis touchent les africaines aussi. Nous ne sommes pas isolé ici, donc on doit s’intéresser au monde entier. » (Mandjou, interview, October, 2008)

39 « Malgré les progrès scientifiques et techniques, le monde d’aujourd’hui est bâti sur une économie sans foi ni loi, une déstabilisation de l’environnement sociopolitique entraînant des événements tragiques telles que les guerres, la famine, les maladies etc.

L’homme quant à lui, perd progressivement son patrimoine culturel et ses valeurs morales et spirituelles.

En réalité, cette situation résulte du vide spirituel crée et entretenu par la civilisation matérialiste. C’est pourquoi, nous assistons de par le monde à un regain d’intérêt pour les valeurs spirituelles et religieuses. » (LIEEMA, Projet de statuts et règlement intérieur 2008-2010, p.2)

40 Mr. Maiga is referring to the popular Brazilian soap opera au cœur du péché, which aired every weekday evening on national broadcaster ORTM.

41 « Maintenant les associations ont un rôle dans l’éducation et la sensibilisation en général. On doit informer les jeunes des conséquences des certains comportements. Prend l’exemple de l’influence de la télé. Tu as vu le feuilleton de Barbara ? C’est un feuilleton qui vient de l’Occident, n’est pas ? Bon, tu l’as vu ? Les personnages dans ce feuilleton, ils ont une moralité qui est inacceptable dans un contexte Islamique. Barbara, par exemple, elle dit que le père de son fils est Paco, mais en réalité c’est Octavio. Mais un comportement comme ça, ce n’est pas bon pour les Musulmans.
[...] Donc, les jeunes ici ils voient ça et ils pensent que c’est une réalité, mais ils doivent comprendre que ça n’est pas un travail de l’Occident ou de l’Amérique. Les créateurs de ce feuilleton là... C’est une entreprise qui veut gagner l’argent seulement. Mais ça ne veut pas dire qu’on ne peut pas échanger avec l’Occident. On peut apprendre beaucoup de l’Occident, surtout les sciences. Ce n’est pas contraire aux nos valeurs sociales. Mais c’est ça le problème de la mondialisation. On doit aider les jeunes avec l’interprétation de la mondialisation: comment vivre dans un monde mondialisé? » (Mr. Maïga, interview, August 28, 2008).

42 Amulet, usually a small cloth or leather bag worn on the person containing Quranic verses or materials that are believed to be powerful.

43 « Ça, ce n’est pas l’Islam. Il y a des marabouts qui demandent beaucoup d’argent, mais ça c’est le diable. C’est un problème. Les gens n’ont pas la connaissance et ils pensent que c’est l’Islam. Ils ne savent pas que le prophète même était contre des fétiches. Il a même interdit ça. Mais les gens ne savent pas. Ce n’est pas leur faut. On ne juge pas. Ils ne sont pas éduqués. Ils n’ont pas la connaissance profonde de la religion. » (Hawa, interview, august 8, 2008)

44 « Qu’est-ce que c’est le développement? Au début j’ai 500 francs et après j’ai 1 000 francs. Est-ce que je suis développé ? Il y a des ONG’s qui viennent ici avec une fortune, mais le plus important est la paix d’esprit. Est-ce que ton esprit est tranquille ? Peut-être tu auras des difficultés ici, mais si tu faisais le bien Allah ne te laissera pas. Tu auras la récompense. Peut-être ici, peut-être dans l’au-delà. Tu peux avoir des difficultés ici, mais il n’y a pas de souffrance là-bas. » (Fatim, interview, October 9, 2008)

45 « C’est indispensable pour moi. La vie religieuse est surtout l’enseignement, et Dieu merci j’ai beaucoup profité de cette vie religieuse. J’ai aussi eu une éducation dans ma famille, mais cette éducation est complétée. C’est été renforcé par l’éducation Islamique au sein de l’association. L’association c’est comme une torche quand tu es dans une très grande obscurité. Ça te permet de voir là ou tu dois mettre ton pied....sur le plan spirituel, accepter les uns et les autres, comment les accepter. Comment s’associer avec des choses qui ne vont pas te décourager, mais qui donnent de l’énergie. L’association est comme une source d’énergie. Quelqu’un qui est dans l’obscurité, il faut lui donner la chance, il faut lui encadrer. Si tu as cette source, ça te permet chaque fois à ressourcer l’énergie et tu peux continuer la marche avec la torche. Donc, il faut etudiér. » (Ousmane, interview, September 20, 2009)

46 « C’est la mondialisation. On doit se développer. Les gens ont besoin du travail, ils doivent être pratiques. » (Mr. Maïga, interview, August 28, 2008)

5. Women and men in Islamic youth associations

The abolition of the cellule féminine

47 Line from a poem by an anonymous female member of LIEEMA, written for her Muslim sœurs and read at a journée de Reflexion of the cellule féminine of LIEEMA with the theme 'engagement des sœurs à le travail Islamique’. November 9, 2008.

48 Simplified chart based on a chart drawn up by Mohamed Diarra, august 9, 2008.

49 BEN : Bureau Exécutif National. The president is elected every two years by the national congress. Not all members get to vote, but a selected number of wise –primarily male - members. The president is always an active student and is always male. The President appoints the other members
of the bureau. The bureau has been called “Bureau des hommes” by some informants, but there are also female members of the bureau, most notably la secrétaire à la mobilisation féminine (this is not the president of the CFN).

**CFN:** *Cellule Féminine National.* The president is appointed by the president of the BEN, afterwards the president of the CFN appoints the members of her bureau. The CFN is autonomous, but not one hundred percent (the working relationship between the BEN and the CFN is in practice not entirely clear and a frequent point of debate). One member explained that a married man functions as “garde-fou” (safe keeper) of the CFN.

**CA:** *Conseil Administration.* Made up out of members (mostly anciens) who have been a part of the BEN previously and who understand the reality of the work of the BEN. They are meant to advise the BEN. The president of the CA, always male, is elected, like the president of the BEN, every two years at the national congress. Further members of the CA are appointed by the president of the CA.

**Section:** Every commune (there are 6 communes in total) in the district of Bamako has a section. Every region of Mali (there are 8 regions) has a section as well. Sections coordinate the work of the comités and are the link between the comités and the BEN.

**Comité:** *Comités* function on the level of lycées throughout the district of Bamako, the national regions and on the level of the different faculty’s of the university of Bamako. It is though the work of these comités that most students get to know LIEEMA. Recruitment for “le travail Islamique” and education are thus amongst the most important activities on the level of the comités.

**Les deux A:** *Amicales anciens.* When members of LIEEMA cease to be students they automatically become a member of les deux A. This association, which functions more or less separately from LIEEMA, is less active since most of its members are married and/or working. The idea is that members stay committed to the work of the association for the rest of their lives, helping out the students of LIEEMA with knowledge, financing etc. The president of Les deux A gets elected, like those of the BEN and the CA, every two years at the national congress and is always male. The president of les deux A appoints the members of his bureau.

50 See: http://www.emf-asso.com

51 *Takbir* is the Arabic name for the phrase ‘Allahu Akbar’ (God is great). The phrase is used for many purposes, in this case to express approval.

52 « Ce n’est pas facile mais on réussit bien quand même. Ça va parce que ma famille m’aide beaucoup. Mon mari, il m’aide beaucoup. Et les activités de la LIEEMA sont programmés entant qu’une certaine réalité quoi, parce que les femmes ont beaucoup des charges à Bamako. » (Alima, November 14, 2008)

53 I choose to translate this term (which women use in the field) with ‘the veil’. I do not use the term ‘(head)scarf’ as the dress style adopted by women in Islamic youth associations can also include kaftans, socks and gloves. When women in the field want to make distinctions between certain kinds of styles of ‘la voile’ they use the word ‘niqab’, which refers to the all black veil that covers the entire body and the face except for the eyes, or ‘hijab’ (which literally translates as ‘the veil’ in Arabic), which refers to the styles that cover the (upper) body, hair and neck, but do not cover the face. The word ‘foulard’ is used as well. This term refers to the traditional piece of cloth that Malian women wrap around their head, or to shawls that are loosely wrapped around the shoulders or head.
«Bon, je me sentais un peu...moins pratiquant quand même. Je ne sais pas comment je dois le dire. C’était une gêne. Je ne sais pas... Avant je n’ai pas pratiqué. Je savais que c’est dit dans le coran que la femme doit se voiler, mais je n’ai pas fait ça. Donc en passant là, j’ai vu que c’est vrai alors. Il y a des gens qui font comme ça, et malgré tous ils viennent à l’école et font tous avec tout ça. J’ai pensé ‘pourquoi pas moi ? Je veux être comme elles’. Je étudie, je fais tous que je veux, mais dans une entente avec Dieu. » (Salimata, interview, September 26, 2008)

« Au début ma famille n’a pas accepté ça, mais... je m’en fous de ça. J’ai continué, malgré que ma famille n’a pas accepté, malgré ce que mes parents ont dit. J’ai continué à suivre ma religion. Maintenant on s’entend bien. Bon, ils n’ont pas compris parce qu’ici beaucoup des musulmans ne se voilent pas. En fait, il y en a beaucoup qui n’ont pas bien compris la religion Musulmane.

[…] Ma famille n’a pas accepté que je me voile comme ça. Ils disent que l’Islam n’a pas dit ça... et... pour ma famille l’Islam est prier seulement. Et si je fais ça, j’aurais des difficultés... pour travailler, et je ne pourrais pas me marier aussi parce que les hommes n’aiment pas les femmes voilées. Mais je n’ai pas accepté. » (Fatoumata, interview, October 12, 2008)


« Presque, presque. Sauf si... il y a des gens qui prennent le niqab. Voilà. Ça c’est difficile. Mais avec la voile, actuellement tu peux faire tous, les gens ont vraiment compris la religion. » (Salimata, interview, September 26, 2008)


« Actuellement oui, actuellement oui. On est respecté maintenant. Par exemple, même aujourd’hui, j’étais à la station pour prendre le gasuel. Il y avait quelqu’un qui m’a bien apprécié. Il a dit que j’étais bien habillé. Actuellement ils nous encouragent. Actuellement. Avant, bon... Je crois que c’est juste l’ignorance comme ça, voilà. Ils n’ont pas la compréhension qu’on peut étudier ou être à l’école. On peut le faire. Ils ne s’imaginent pas quoi. Bon, c’est aussi l’effort de la LIEEMA. LIEEMA, se sont les élèves et étudiants. Avant, la voile, on sait que c’était juste les étudiantes qui vont à l’école coranique. Donc avec LIEEMA on a pu comprendre que même avec l’école française tu peux bien être voilé. » (Salimata, interview, September 26, 2008)

“ Parce qu’il y a beaucoup des choses sous la voile. Et Dieu nous a demandé ça. C’est pour un certain nombre des choses par rapport à la femme. Si tu le porte on voit directement la différence. On est plus en l’aise. On n’est pas adressé dans la rue. On n’est pas... le fait que nous savons que ça c’est la voile, immédiatement on sait que l’Islam dit qu’il ne faut pas faire cela, donc on fait attention à notre comportement. Ce que l’Islam demande de faire dans le comportement et dans le travail.
C’est le moral. On fait tout ça et en même temps ça me protège également contre les gens mal intentionné dans la rue. Si tu es voilée on te laisse tranquille. La vie avant et après, ce n’est pas pareil. Avec la voile j’ai la valeur. Je connais la valeur de la femme même. Mais avant j’étais ignorant.» (Fatoumata, interview, October 12, 2008)

« Je suis plus tolérant, plus ouvert. J’ai appris à m’exprimer. Je peux parler devant la masse. Oui, c’est très important, surtout pour les femmes. Ça nous donne l’opportunité de participer au débat, de faire partie de la vie public.» (Maimouna, interview, November 18, 2008)

«Ils sont beaucoup qui m’attaquaient : ‘tu ne donne pas la main aux hommes. Pourquoi tu ne reste pas dans la maison ?’ Si je donne la main à quelqu’un ou je ne le donne pas, ça ne dit rien sur ce que j’ai dans ma tête. Je suis là pour travailler, donc je travaille.

Les femmes vont expliquer aux gens que l’Islam n’a jamais dit à la femme de rester à la maison ou bien de ne pas parler quand les hommes parlent, ou bien de ne pas participer au débat. Bon, ils sont des femmes qui veulent rester à la maison, mais il n’y en a pas beaucoup. Ce sont les familles qui donnent ça aux petites filles. C’est la tradition. C’est la tradition, mais pas le Coran. Parce que l’Islam a donné un choix à la femme. Elle peut travailler comme elle ne peut pas travailler, elle est libre. Mais on essaye d’enseigner les gens en attendant que les gens comprennent un jour. Quand nous sommes ensemble nous sommes fort.» (Fatoumata, interview, October 12, 2008)

« Elle est le pivot de la société. Elle joue un rôle qui est très grand. La famille est le plus importante, et la femme est le plus importante pour les enfants. C’est pour ça qu’il faut que la femme participe à la vie de tous les jours. Il faut que la femme participe au débat Islamique. Elle a un grand rôle dans la transmission Islamique. Elle est là avec les enfants. C’est comme les médias. Tu vois, la femme est comme le radio ou la télé. Si elle veut, elle peut donner des bonnes idées. Mais les hommes ne peuvent pas voir ça.

Même dans le temps de notre prophète... Tu vois, le premier converti était une femme: la femme du prophète. Donc, c’était le premier qui a accepté d’être musulmane. Et après, les femmes étaient les premières converties. Ils se sont battus pour la religion.» (Hawa, interview, August 20, 2008)


« La femme doit se soumettre. Premièrement, la femme doit comprendre que l’homme est toujours supérieur à la femme. La femme doit accepter ça. C’est Dieu qui a dit ça....Et puis, la femme ne doit pas parler mauvais devant les hommes. Elle ne doit pas être attirante pour les hommes. Elle doit avoir toujours le bon comportement.» (Bintou, interview, October 17, 2008)

6. Where ‘le monde Musulman’ and ‘l’Occident’ come in
Between transnational connections and local realities

66 Alima, interview, november 14, 2008

67 Burkina Faso, Ghana, Côte D’Ivoire, l’Afrique de l’Ouest...Sud Afrique aussi, Rouanda...Il y en a. Il y a des contactes entre nous. Mais pour le moment chacun est sur son terrain, chez lui, dans son pays.

68 The document can also be retrieved from:
http://www.amrkhaled.net/acategories/categories70.html.
There is also an English version available online called ‘The Manners Series’.

69 Amr Khaled is an Egyptian television preacher who has become widely popular in the Muslim world. He is known for his rejection of religious extremism, and his practical advice on how to apply Islamic precepts in modern lifestyle.

70 Tariq Ramadan is a Swiss born theologian. He currently is professor of Theology at the University of Oxford. Mr. Ramadan is the grandson of Hassan al-Banna one of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

71 Kati is a small town about fifteen kilometers north of Bamako.

72 « Moi, j’ai un association Islamique à Kati. On organise par exemple une journée pour la lutte contre le SIDA. On a travaillé avec les ONGs occidentaux. On travaille avec tout le monde. Les États-Unis ont financés le forum sur les écoles coranique. Beaucoup des gens ont critiqués ça. Les liens avec la Lybie étaient un raison pour beaucoup des associations de quitter l’UJIMMA. Ils disent que la Lybie est un pays ou il n’y a pas d’ordre. Ça peut être un problème si tu veux unifier tout le monde. Moi, personnellement, je n’aime pas la Lybie, leur président. Il n’a aucun respect pour les droits de l’homme, la démocratie. Moi, je suis démocrate, je suis libéral. Mais il n’y a pas une loi contre le fait que la Lybie finance un structure au Mali. La Lybie est un pays qui est souverain. Mais par principe je préfère de me pas associer avec un pays comme la Lybie.»  (Moussa Ba, interview, décembre 2008)

73 « […] il y’a une crainte de l’Islamisme ou l’intégrisme. Nous demandons à ALLAH […] surtout de faire en sorte que les parents aient un comportement plus tolérant et plus compréhensif envers leurs enfants. » (LIEEMA, Document de Réflexion sur la LIEEMA, October 2008, p.13)

74 « Cette conception nous soumet à une obligation, nous tenons par vous informer que le vendredi passé le HCI a organisé un colloque avec la croix rouge international au grand hôtel de Bamako. A ce colloque la croix rouge s’est présentée avec beaucoup des jeunes qui sont dans leur organisme, même ceux de Genève. Aprés le déjeuner il y avait parmi les jeunes de la croix rouge quelqu’un de 26 ans chargé de la recherche pour la croix rouge qui parle arabe, anglais, français, espagnol et allemand. Juste après le déjeuner je me suis adressé à lui en lui posant la question de savoir quelle est la perception des européens du musulman. Il m’a réponduit qu’actuellement en Europe l’Islam est tellement minimisé que c’est difficile de faire convaincre quelqu’un a ce sujet. Il y a des endroits ou qu’il est su que tu sois musulman que les gens t’isolerent. En Europe il y a eu des hôtels qui sont allés à la faillite par le fait qu’ils hébergeaient en grand nombre des musulmans. Ces hôtels ont été abandonné par les non-musulmans parce-que ils ne veulent pas cohabiter avec les musulmans. A certains endroits l’Islam est considéré comme une religion qui est là pour déranger et traumatiser les gens. La cause de cette attitude provient des événements de 11 septembre aux Etats-Unis et des événements à certains endroits en Europe. C’est difficile aujourd’hui pour les européens de comprendre l’Islam.

A cette réponse je lui ai encore posé la question de savoir si cela est du au fait que les musulmans en Europe ne sont pas parvenu à convaincre ou bien si ce sont les musulmans d’ailleurs
qui n’y sont pas parvenu. Il m’a répondu que cette faute incombe à la non-capacité des musulmans d’Europe à faire convaincre. Il est arrivé un moment en Europe où les médias ont portés toutes les calomnies à l’endroit de l’Islam. Face à cette situation les musulmans d’Europe ont été passifs. Des lors ces musulmans ont préféré se taire que de réagir grâce à l’emploi de ces propagandes calomnieuses. Ils se sont considéré incapable à réussir le démenti contre les médias.

Je lui ai encore posé la question de savoir si c’est par exprès que les médias calomnient ou si c’est par la méconnaissance de l’Islam. Il dit que c’est par exprès que certains médias calomnient, il m’a cité Fox News aux États-Unis, CNN et ensuite certaines chaînes françaises. Ces chaînes ont des experts à leur disposition qui n’ont fait que des études spécialisées sur l’Islam et qui connaissent bien l’Islam. Je lui ai posé la question de savoir quelle est la solution qu’il propose à cela. C’est par cette solution que je vais conclure. Il me dit que dans plus des vingt ans les guerres religieux caractérisées par la prise d’armes dangereuses entre les hommes à travers le monde vont cesser. Comme par exemple le cas de la Russie et de la Géorgie. Qu’en ce moment les hommes comprennent que la guerre ne ressoude pas la crise. C’est seulement par les idées, par les échanges. Que lui il est rassuré que la guère qui va venir après plus de trente ans sera la guerre des idées. Donc, pour faire face à cette guerre des idées, les musulmans doivent se préparer au niveau de tous les plans des connaissances pour réussir.

Je reprends ce que j’ai dit, ce qui est que dans plus des trente ans ces jeunes qui sont là aujourd’hui et ceux qui sont à leur âge seront les responsables suprêmes de mouvement de l’Islam dans le Mali. Ce moment devrait nous trouvé bien préparé sur le plan économique, juridique, social et historique pour défendre l’Islam. Parce que les experts aujourd’hui qui parlent au nom de l’Islam abordent tous les domaines de l’Islam. Au deuxième point je parlerai du journalisme, nous remercions beaucoup Dieu par la restauration des services d’Al-Jazeera qui œuvre aujourd’hui pour la défense des intérêts et des buts de l’Islam. Elle dévoile aussi des mensonges renforcés par certains à l’endroit de la connaissance pour mieux informer tout le monde. Mais le problème de cette chaîne est la crise ressources humaines. Elle a des journalistes qualifiés qui parlent au nom de la religion mais le nombre est insuffisant pour assurer toute la couverture médiatique. Elle a été créée il y a pas plus de deux ans, mais elle a ses représentants partout dans le monde. Elle a pu déployée tous les moyens nécessaires pour ce travail. Il est difficile aujourd’hui pour l’Islam de se procurer en nombre suffisante de personnes ressources qualifié pour donner des informations sur l’Islam car on en a pas assez parmi nous, sachant bien qu’on atteint aujourd’hui plus d’un milliard.

Cet état interpelle la nouvelle génération devant Dieu à l’au-delà par le fait que malgré le grand nombre vous n’êtes pas parvenu à dégager des stratégies pour surmonter à vos difficultés. Les vieux aujourd’hui qui ont soixante ans ne peuvent plus être engagés pour des études et des formations. Par contre les jeunes que nous sommes aux environs des vingt ans peuvent mieux suivre encore des études et faire des formations.» (Moussa Ba, secrétaire à la jeunesse Haut Conseil Islamique, journée de réflexion d’UJMMA, November 30, 2008, translation from Bambara by Mahamadou F. Kéita)

75 The cartoons about the prophet Mohamed that were published in Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on September 30, 2005. After outraged Danish Muslim organizations brought the images to the attention of newspapers worldwide the cartoons led to fierce protests throughout the Muslim world.

76 ‘Submission’ aired for the first time on August 29, 2004 on Dutch national television. The film was written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali born publicist and politician. At the time Hirsi Ali was a member of Dutch parliament for the liberal VVD. The film is an expression of Hirsi Ali’s views on the position of women in Islam, the religion of her youth, which she left later on in life. In the film Quranic verses that deal with the relationship between women and men are painted on the bodies of abused women. The film led to disapproval and outrage in the Muslim world. Theo van Gogh, the director of the film was murdered by Mohamed Bouyeri. During his trial Mr. Bouyeri stated that he
had murdered van Gogh because of the insulting nature of Submission, and previous degrading remarks made by van Gogh towards Islam and the prophet.

77 ‘Fitna’ was released on March 27, 2008 by Dutch member of parliament Geert Wilders, a former member of the liberal VVD, currently leader of his own PVV, Partij voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party). The PVV has a strong anti-Islamic agenda and, amongst others things, advocates a ban on the Quran and an immigration stop for Muslim immigrants. ‘Fitna’ was meant to show how Quranic surahs incite Muslims to behave violently and undemocratic, which is why, according to Wilders, Islam and modern democratic system of law are incompatible. The movie was highly anticipated after repeated announcements of Wilders. Dutch officials around the world, especially in predominantly Muslim countries, warned for the possibility of a violent response to its release. The film was released online and stirred outrage. Some international demonstrations took place, but most of these were peaceful. The reaction of the Dutch Muslim community was relatively calm.
Bibliography


