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### “The World is Made by Talk”

Female Fans, Popular Music, and New Forms of Public Sociality in Urban Mali

« Le monde tel qu'il est créé par la conversation » : admirateurs des chanteuses, musique populaire et sociabilité urbaine au Mali

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Dorothea E. Schulz

“The World is Made by Talk”  
Female Fans, Popular Music,  
and New Forms of Public Sociality  
in Urban Mali\*

A striking feature of pop music consumption in urban Mali is female adolescents' devotion to women pop stars who, in singing style, lyrics, melody and rhythm, follow the conventions of “griot” (*jeli* in Bamanakan) music, a genre generally associated with Malian tradition and cultural authenticity<sup>1</sup>. In this, female youth sharply contrasts with young men and their

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\* The article is based on research conducted in the towns of San and Segou in Southern Mali, and in two neighborhoods in the capital Bamako, in the period between 1994 and 2000 (altogether 15 months). I combined qualitative research on different listener segments' reception practices with quantitative data collected in two surveys (1994, 1998) on listeners' reception and on their changing preferences for local radio programs. I thank Bob White and Craig Tower for their thoughtful comments and Tomás Rodríguez for his editorial suggestions. M. Saidou N'Daou helped me think through the material that forms the basis of this article. I feel particularly indebted to friends, neighbors and acquaintances in Bamako, San, and Segou who let me participate in their daily gatherings and graciously responded to my sometimes intrusive questions.

1. The *jeliw* (singular *jeli*) are professional musicians, traditionists and orators who belong to a special category of professional specialists (singular *nyamakala*) who are distinct from “free-born” people (singular *hòròn*) and descendants of serfs (singular *jon*). Until French colonial occupation of the area in the 19th century, *jeli* families lived together with the most wealthy and powerful free-born families of a rural community and passed down their patron family's traditions and histories in exchange for material support. On festive events that were of import to the entire local community, *jeli* women were expected to praise their patron family's prestigious genealogy and heroic origins, and thus to enhance its reputation. Patron families recompensed their *jeli* women's musical performances by giving them occasional gifts in the form of grain, cattle, and captives. To heighten the public renown of their patron families through musical performances and historical recitations was only one of the *jeliw*'s tasks. Other important functions were the resolution of conflicts and the restoring of social order and harmony to the local community. In compensation, wealthy patron families provided food and shelter for their *jeli* clients (SCHULZ 2001b: chap. 1).

preferences for diverse, mostly international African musical styles linked to a progressive and “hip” mood and life style. Since Malian independence in 1960, the musical performances by *jeli* women from southern Mali have been extensively broadcast on national radio and, after 1983, television.

While the former institutional context of *jeli* praise changed drastically, the textual properties and performance style of *jeli* singers continued to enjoy such popularity among (mostly female) audiences that more and more singers of non-*jeli* background came to employ central elements of their musical style and turned public flattery on behalf of renowned personalities into a lucrative profession<sup>2</sup>. In this process, *jeli* praise singers, whose performances were broadcast on national radio and, after 1983, on television, became emblematic of “Malian” music and identity. Starting in 1992, however, when the current president Alpha Konaré reached power in the first democratic elections, the politics of communication changed considerably. The broadcasting of *jeli* publicity on behalf of politicians is now prohibited. Also, local radio stations and their national and international music broadcasts introduce greater choice into musical broadcasting formerly dominated by the national radio station.

The pop stars’ success, the acclaim they earn in national and international arenas are a function of their resourceful combination of local musical conventions and visual aesthetics with emblems of a cosmopolitan consumer style (Schulz 2001b). A number of authors who work on cultural dimensions of current processes of globalization argue that the spread of media technologies and images does not lead to cultural homogenization but to consumers’ selective “appropriation” of globalized cultural forms (Miller 1987; Friedman 1990; Appadurai 1996; Weiss 1996; Piot 1999). The success story of female pop singers in Mali can be read as an illustration of processes of cultural production in which people modify Western consumer styles and thereby leave a local imprint on standardized symbolic forms that circulate at a global scale.

Girls listen to the pop singers’ music broadcast on local radio whenever they sit together with friends, relate the most recent social events to each other, and a radio set is available. Even if they lack the opportunity to listen to their favorite singers’ music, their conversations quickly turn to the discussion of their favorite stars’ personal life, acquisitions, and concerts. References to the lyrics of a song are almost absent. Girls’ admiration for the pop singers, their seemingly obsessive talk about their idols’ personal lives and success stories is ridiculed by the generation of their parents. The latter hold that many pop stars whom their daughters adore lack the musical and rhetorical skills that former generations of *jeli* singers used to display. Parents decry that to girls, the display of international consumer

2. For an account of transformations in the institutional context that changed the social significance of *jeli* performances and moved women as performers to the foreground, see SCHULZ (1998); also see DURAN (1995) and DIAWARA (1997a).

style matters more than musical and textual quality. In their eyes, this proves their daughters' lack of sensibility and taste. At the same time, parents occasionally associate the very pop singers whose lack of skills they deplore with feelings of pride in local musical traditions.

Scholarly evaluations of the pop singers' performances are similarly divided. According to some authors, the pop singers' production of music for a mass mediated market goes hand in hand with the emptying and corruption, of "deep tradition" (Keita 1995; Diawara 1997a; Traoré 2000). This somber depiction of the women singers' musical productions is countered by authors who see the pop stars as "superwomen" (Duran 1995) and representatives of a new generation of women and their emancipation from conventional gender roles (also see Hale 1998)<sup>3</sup>.

These equivocal interpretations of the pop stars' significance resonate with similarly contradictory evaluations of mass culture in Western industrial societies and of the role of women, as producers and consumers, in it. Some authors point out that derogatory views of the ephemeral nature of mass culture are often expressed in its feminization. Distinctions between mass culture and "high culture" tend to be linked to the denigration of female consumers, to their "irrational" consumption rituals and bodily expression of consumer "obsessions" (Huyssen 1986). On the other side, there is a tendency in studies on pop culture to celebrate commercial mainstream culture as a site of "resistance through ritual" for groups that are marginal in a patriarchal and capitalist order, such as working class youth subcultures and women (Clarke *et al.* 1976; but see Thornton 1996). More recent studies, in contrast, depart from neatly opposed interpretations and posit a double-edged significance of mass culture productions to consumers' life. They replace previous interpretations of women's consumption in terms of "blind/passive consumerism" versus "creative resistance" with differentiated accounts of the transformational potential and limitations of mass culture products (Radway 1984; Modlesky 1982).

In spite of these efforts, female fan culture remains a field that is considerably less explored than that of male youth. Even if a number of studies followed the initial call for investigation into female "Teeny Bopper" fan culture without assuming that it displays the same features as male subcultures (Mc Robbie & Garner 1976), few studies account for these practices without

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3. This view does not account for the conservative gender ideology of most of the lyrics which are greatly appreciated as "moral education" by middle-aged women. The latter's emphasis on the "edifying" character of the songs that deplore the degradation of social life under the effects of money seems to contradict women's enthusiasm about the fashionable outfits and wealth that stars display. One reason for the pop singers' popularity among women is that they harmonize in a visually compelling style what otherwise appears as mutually exclusive claims. They mediate between the opposing demands for being a "modern progressive woman" (materialized in certain imported consumer goods) while presenting themselves as being firmly rooted in an "authentic" morality that is associated with the "uncorrupted" life in the countryside (SCHULZ 2001a).

interpreting them as instances of star-centered hysteria or of a “magical obsessive world of fandom” (Cline 1992). Also, because studies on female fan culture focus on cults of male pop idols (Lewis 1992), they leave aside the crucial question as to possible, and essential, differences between male pop idol culture (that revolves around the objectifying of the male star) and the cult of female stars (that allows for admirers’ identification with the idol).

This article focuses on female adolescents’ fan culture in urban Mali to explore the objective and subjective dimensions of new forms of sociality that emerge at the interface of new media technologies and a commercial music culture in urban Mali. My first concern is to understand what particular, imaginary relationship individual listeners establish with a pop star in the very act of listening to and talking about her. The notion of imagining, as an autonomous mental act (Casey 1976; also see Castoriadis 1975) and as a mimetic practice (Benjamin 1980) may help us understand the particular dynamics at stake in the act of consuming radio broadcasts. In a second step, I assess the implications of local radio stations and their music programs for conventional forms of socializing. I argue that these changes not only make practices related to the consumption of pop music more central to everyday life in town, but give rise to a new kind of public. I explore what is novel about these new forms and how they are constituted. Here too, the act of imagining plays a central role in understanding the dynamics and constitutive features of the new, mass mediated forms of publicness<sup>4</sup>.

My interest in the mutually constitutive relationship between practices of imagining and new forms of sociality is inspired by and simultaneously departs from Habermas’s account of the bourgeois public in eighteenth century Europe (Habermas 1989). According to Habermas, the latter was constituted by the printed word and its discursive deliberation, and based on shared normative understandings and consensus-oriented argumentation. As Anderson (1983) argues, central to this form of sociality that occasionally spanned over larger distances was the idea of belonging to an “imagined community” created by print capitalism. I take pop music broadcasts and their reception by female youth as a starting point to explore the new realms and forms of publicness created by new electronic media and their normative foundations (Waterman 1994; Barber 1997, 1999).

My approach differs from Habermas’s privileging of the political-critical, consensus-oriented dimensions of public debate<sup>5</sup>. Even if the new publics created by local radio stations emerge around debate, the compelling force

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4. With “publicness” I translate the German term “Öffentlichkeit”; its connotation of openness (in an ideational, not spatial sense) is not conveyed in the terms “public” or “publicity” (HANSEN 1993: footnote1).
  5. As CALHOUN (1992) points out, Habermas oscillates between a descriptive statements about the late 17th and 18th century bourgeois public on one side, and normative assertions about its inherently critical nature on the other.

of these debates, and of the performances the stations broadcast, resides not in their critical-rational appeal, but in the “community of sentiment” they create (Appadurai 1990). My perspective also departs from Habermas’s focus on one broadcast technology. As I will show, audiences make sense of aural broadcasts by placing them in the larger field of media products, many of which are visual. Media consumption is thus predicated upon the “inter-medial” nature of most commercial culture products and on consumers’ *combined* reception of their various (mostly aural and visual) incarnations<sup>6</sup>.

### The Pop Stars and Their Audiences

Almost all pop stars come from the southern triangle of Mali where people speak two closely related Mande languages, Bamanakan and Maninkakan<sup>7</sup>. Because the women pop stars draw upon the musical repertoire, languages and historical traditions of their home communities, the extensive broadcasting of their songs on national radio, television, video tapes and local radio has rendered them icons of national culture and pride<sup>8</sup>. But they are not equally held in high esteem by people who generally distinguish between them according to their performance skills. At the top of the charts range singers who are mostly of *jeli* birth and started their success story with recordings at the national radio station. Over the past ten years, the position of these *jeli* singers has been increasingly challenged by women of “free birth” who come from the Wasulu, a region south of the capital Bamako<sup>9</sup>. These pop stars are the only ones who are regularly invited to sing in public concerts. Even though older rural and urban listeners often criticize their “venality”, they generally hold them in great esteem because of their performances skills that make them emblematic of “local” culture. In contradistinction to these successful women singers, there are numerous women who, to embark on a musical career, try to pass on one of the television music programs. Many of them make up with evocative body movements, a pleasing composure and fashionable dress for their often limited textual knowledge and musical qualities<sup>10</sup>.

6. For an interesting parallel, see FABIAN’s discussion of the “intertextual” nature of diverse genres of popular culture in Zaire (1997).

7. Some singers whose performances are frequently broadcast on local radio stations are from the Maninkakan speaking areas of Guinea which are part of the same Mande-speaking cultural realm.

8. This dominance of southern languages and traditions in the national Malian arena goes back to the colonial period, when peoples from the south were more willing to be integrated into the colonial administration. The unequal representation of Malian local cultures has been enhanced by the fact that for more than 20 years, international popular press and scholarly publications focused on musicians from the south and their musical traditions (Ali Farka Touré and Boubakar Traoré are being two notable exceptions).

9. The most prominent of these singers is Oumou Sangaré (DURAN 1996).

10. A final category of *jeli* and other nyamakala singers restrict their realm of action to unmediated performance settings. They show up (often uninvited) at family

The pop singers' concerts are literally packed with women of all ages. But evaluations by older married women on one side and younger women and girls on the other reveal significant discrepancies in the importance they attribute to various aspects of a performance<sup>11</sup>. Middle-aged women tend to highlight the "educational" ("*ladili*" in Bamanakan) and moral character of the song text and its consoling effects. Central to girls' conversations, in contrast, is the assessment of the pop stars' outfit and crafty employment of emblems of a cosmopolitan consumer style. Also, middle-aged women have a clear preference for the pop stars whose rhetorical and musical skills, knowledge of the different local musical styles, songs and historical traditions places them in the top ranks of hit charts. In contrast, girls' enthusiasm for a singer's outfit, "air" and elegant body movements makes them admire even singers who are denounced by their parents as performing songs emptied of any deeper meaning<sup>12</sup>.

Apart from attending their idols' public concerts, girls and women know about their most recent song releases, outfits and hairstyles from the weekly music programs on television which they await eagerly, follow attentively and debate hotly with their peers<sup>13</sup>. But the number of girls who have an opportunity to watch television is considerably smaller than those who regularly listen to their favorite pop stars on local radio.

The pop stars address women in many songs and deplore their "difficulties" in town where envy rules the relations among relatives and friends, and "money" undermines any sense of moral obligation. They denounce the evils of polygamous marriage, such as back-biting co-wives and husbands who fail to treat their different wives with impartiality. And they laud women for their accomplishments as mothers and spouses and implore them to feel "proud" of their elegance and accomplishment. The following song is characteristic of the mixing of "women's problems" with an appeal to "feel good" about being a woman, in spite of the difficulties she has to put up with. Similar to many popular songs, it represents procreation and motherhood as a central source of women's dignity. The singer, Oumou Dioubaté, comes from the Maninkakan speaking region of Guinea. Her

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celebrations, such as weddings and baptizing ceremonies, and bestow (and sometimes impose) their praise on hosts and members of the audiences in exchange for money (SCHULZ 1999a).

11. Variations in preferences among women and girls do not clearly correlate with differences in education and socio-economic background. This insight supports Miller's finding that in urban Trinidad, variations in "taste" and "style" do not demarcate and reproduce neat class distinctions (MILLER 1987).
12. Critics employ images of "hollowness" (*kòrò t'a la*) and "distortion" (*donkili karabalèn de do*) to refer to what they experience as the songs' loss in meaning and quality (SCHULZ 2001b: chapter 7).
13. In addition, the second program of the national radio ("Chaîne Deux") created in response to the competition of commercial local radio stations, features their music in special programs.

song, from an audio tape released in 1996, was broadcast on local radio several times a day in 1998 and ranged at the top of the charts.

Oumou Dioubaté: *Women of Africa*

*Chorus:*

Women are overburdened, women are overburdened, aa  
 women, aa, women of Africa, you are treated badly  
 The women are overburdened, the women are overburdened, aa  
 women, aa, women of Africa, your are badly treated

*Oumou Dioubaté:*

I say, women are badly treated  
 women of Lebanon, you are badly treated  
 women are overburdened, indeed  
 women of Angola, you are overburdened  
 women are overburdened  
 women of Ethiopia, you are overburdened  
 women are treated badly  
 women of Liberia  
 women are treated badly  
 women of Rwanda are overburdened  
 their children suffer with them  
 that's what makes the conflicts even worse

*chorus:*

repetition lines 1-4

*Oumou Dioubaté:*

when a woman gets pregnant  
 when her belly starts hurting  
 then the truth of the matter becomes evident:  
 this is the time of women  
 when her pregnancy reaches its termination  
 when it is time to give birth to the child  
 a woman goes into labor  
 the child's hair is already visible  
 when she is still in labor  
 then the real work of giving birth has started  
 a woman starts doing her real work  
 the months of pregnancy are over  
 the times of disquiet are over  
 the woman's health comes back  
 the woman comes out of this work with pride  
 the woman comes out victorious  
 the woman is noble  
 your child may turn out to be useless, but you cannot tell  
 your child may turn out to be a bad spirit, but you cannot tell  
 your child may turn out to be stupid, but you cannot tell  
 only God will know it  
 my belly is hurting hurting hurting me  
 my belly has started hurting

...

*After enumerating further reasons for women's sufferance,*

*Oumou Dioubaté concludes:*

the children of Mali's women are blessed  
 I say, the time has come



the time of waiting has really come to an end  
 ...  
 women, come out  
 women of the world, stand up and work  
 women, come out and give womanhood its dignity back  
 women, come out, etc.

Women and girls spontaneous, enthusiastic reactions to the song generally reflect how much they are taken in by the aesthetic force of the singer's voice, the song's melody and rhythm and the singer's tonal modulation of the text. The text's reduced complexity sets it apart from "traditional" lyrics whose interpretation was predicated upon implicit understandings of locally determined audiences (Diawara 1997b). But this does not minimize the song's popularity among female urban audiences. One reason for its appeal is that the singer skillfully combines a compelling rhythm and melody with a text that "speaks to the heart" of female consumers.

But female adolescents may appreciate the pop stars' performances for other reasons than their mothers. To understand what renders the pop stars so attractive to female youth that they devote a major share of their time to the discussion of their idols professional triumphs and personal trials, we need to know more about the social setting in which their consumption takes place.

### Youth in Urban Mali: a "Generation-in-Waiting"

The impossibility to clearly demarcate the category of girls and young unmarried women, whose consumption practices I explore, from women reflects some of the current predicaments of female youth in Mali<sup>14</sup>. These predicaments provide the backdrop against which girls' consumption preferences, and the significance they attribute to the pop singers' songs, are to be understood. Conventional, normative definitions of a female adolescent by the combination of her unmarried status and the reaching of puberty (*pògòtigi*<sup>15</sup>) are incongruent with the current situation. Especially in town, the number of children born out of wedlock, and thus of unmarried mothers,

14. Given the historical and cultural variability in notions of adolescence or youth, considerable conceptual difficulties are involved in defining "youth" as a (homogenous) category (BAKAN 1972; KETT 1977; GRIFFIN 1993). It seems that this task is rendered even more difficult in the current postcolonial world where a number of the conditions that allow to set youth apart from the adult world are no longer guaranteed, and age no longer serves as a distinctive marker. The girls and young, unmarried women whose consumption practices I explore are between 12 and 25 years old.

15. The literal meaning of *pògòtigi* is "someone who has (protruding) breasts" that is, someone whose breasts have not yet been weighed down as a consequence of pregnancy and breastfeeding. This ideal of young female beauty is reflected in a variety of visual representations, such as statues, drawings and postcards.

has been skyrocketing over the past fifteen years, to the extent that marriage no longer serves as a marker of female adulthood.

Without assuming homogeneity in consumption preferences or class background, I consider the female adolescents whose consumption practices I explore as a constituency emerging in and around the act of consumption, manifested in girls' informal gatherings<sup>16</sup>. I conceive of "female youth" as a group defined by a common preference for certain consumer styles or, in this case, a particular genre of pop music. My focus is on girls and unmarried young women whose socio-economic background can be roughly described as "middle" and "lower middle class". Only some of their fathers earn a regular income as government officials or teachers, while others try to make a living from activities in the informal sector of the economy<sup>17</sup>. Whenever a father earns a regular salary, this gives his daughter a certain, limited spending power, or at least the possibility to lay claims on her parents' funds. Girls from poorer households regularly visit their better-off neighbors to watch TV music programs. Their actual capacities to spend money is replaced by their constant talk about prices and values of desirable goods which most often they cannot afford to buy.

Marriage constitutes the crucial criterion for "achieving" adulthood and the first step in a life-long endeavor to become and remain a respected member in one's social circle. But the factors that currently impair young people's possibilities of becoming full-grown members of their community are played out differently for male and female adolescents.

The scarcity of income opportunities and employment in the formal economy makes it difficult for most young men to marry and to build an independent homestead, and thus to enjoy an economic and a certain social autonomy from their parents and family. Their on-going economic dependency on their parents keeps men (often until the late 20s) in a status of "adulthood-in-the-waiting" that excludes them from any participation in decision making both at the level of the family and of society at large. Male adolescents' relative exclusion from the tight labor market seriously limits their possibilities of gaining a "name" (*tògò*) and "respect" (*dambe*), the two markers of individual achievement. Their chances of becoming wealthy both in a social and political way, by attracting a group of followers and friends and having children who contribute to one's affluence and social standing, draw to a close.

Young men's exclusion from the political decision making process constitutes the other face of their marginality (Brenner forthc.). It is one of the most important factors of current political instability in Mali. In

16. I am aware of the problematic use of the notion of "female youth consumption" which glosses over differential experiences and consumer preferences. Even though they have to be taken into account, they can not be neatly related to differences in class and educational background (MILLER 1987).

17. In almost all cases, the girls' mothers pursue an income generating activity as well, sometimes as formal employees but most often in the informal economy.

the absence of any hopes for self-sustenance, male adolescents' growing realization of a foreclosed future feeds into their development of clientelist expectations towards both parents and the state, as providers of jobs and a "good life". Frequent conflicts with their parents over allocation of resources, and their constant expression of disappointment with their parents' "stinginess" illustrate an inversion, and even perversion, of earlier conceptions of intergenerational responsibilities (Berry 1985). Prospects for changing one's life situation are small and male adolescents are confined to merely *talking* about the possibility of "venturing out" to the Euro-American West with its promises of employment and a "good life". Their disillusion with the new government to whose ascendancy they contributed substantially<sup>18</sup>, is at the basis of an urban oppositional movement. Its destructive force not only poses a threat to the current regime, but nourishes an already existing, widespread disenchantment with the unfulfilled promises of "demokrasi" and the government's incapacity to establish law and order (Schulz 2001b: chapter 3).

Thus, similar to other postcolonial settings (Mbembe 1985; Comaroff & Comaroff 2000a: 306-309) young men's lack of opportunities to become full-blown members of the national community turns them into a "generation in-the-waiting" in a double sense. In urban Mali, they wait not only for achieving a status of adulthood, but for parental support and for the state's creation of the very conditions that would enable them to become full-grown members of the social and political community.

The concerns of girls and young women are manifest in what appears as their obsessive preoccupation with marriage partners. Conversations among them, and the talk radio programs they listen to, center on questions such as how to find a husband, if necessary by occult means, and how to prevent other women from pinching their lovers<sup>19</sup>. Contrary to the conventional terms in which their persistent talk about marriage is framed, it reveals a new, heightened concern that emanates from radically altered conditions for reaching the status of womanhood. Having off-spring and establishing an independent homestead gives a young woman a certain economic autonomy, at least in the long run, when her grown-up children will be able to support

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18. BRENNER (forthc.) shows convincingly how the "grin", the site of informal gathering (see below), became the most important "cell" of critical political discourse and action. The social basis of this violent opposition was composed primarily of young men without formal education or job opportunities. But the leaders were from a small group of relatively privileged men, unemployed graduates from the national high-schools, whose hopes to find an employment in the public sector were stifled by the reduction of state bureaucracy initiated by the structural adjustment program since the 1980s.

19. Even though girls often state their wish to live in a monogamous marriage (among other things, because this would give them more control over the family income), they prefer a polygamous marriage to not being married at all. This, and the competition over potential husbands, often creates an atmosphere of distrust even among girls who consider each other friends.

her<sup>20</sup>. But the prospects for marriage and procreation, as the socially sanctioned avenues to adulthood for women, are blocked by men's lack of possibilities, and sometimes unwillingness, to marry and assume full financial and social responsibility.

For a man, procreation is only one way of generating wealth and affluence, and not the most prominent way of proving his rightful claim to full membership in the community. For women, by contrast, their capacity to bear children and to contribute through them to family prosperity and repute remains the principal path towards the realization of ideals of femininity. Precisely this capacity to legitimately procreate and augment the family's wealth is seriously impaired under current conditions of economic disparity. Also, the postponement of the socially sanctioned conception of offspring, means to foreclose a woman's (in)famous "power of the bedroom". The latter is based on a woman's abilities to exert influence via informal channels, such as her sons or her capacity to mollify her husband's decisions by withdrawing her affection and sexual attention. Last but not least, only a married status allows a woman to gain full access to social events, such as family ceremonies, in which women perform and thus create themselves as full-blown members of the community.

All of this implies that girls' impaired possibilities to enter the status of adulthood has ramifications that reach beyond the inhibited fulfillment of sexual and emotional desires. The current predicament undercuts a woman's perception of herself as an "accomplished" woman in the double sense: as one who has accomplished what is expected from her (that is, to contribute to the wealth and social standing of the family through procreation) and as one who is a sophisticated and admirable woman.

The conditions that impede or postpone young men's and women's "becoming" a person in the fullest cultural sense (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000b) form part of a recent transformation in which the material and normative foundations of former divisions of labor, of responsibilities and obligations between the generations and between men and women are changing radically. Many men from the lower classes are less and less capable of securing the survival of their family. Their wives are often forced to assume a greater, if not exclusive, economic responsibility. These radical modifications affect middle class households as well. While before, women from many middle class households spent the money they earned on their own consumption, an increasing number of women are forced to come up

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20. In spite of regional variation in rural areas, marriage generally invests a woman with greater economic independence from her own family because it offers women the access to the means of production, such as a strip of her in-law's land and her husband's labor. Today in urban areas, middle- and upper-middle class women, unless they earn an independent income, are dependent on their husband's financial contributions. Lower-class women, who work for themselves are economically more independent, yet also have to assume a heavier financial responsibility for their family.

for at least part of the family's subsistence. Changes in financial responsibilities engender new conflicts within the field of familial decision-making, a field already ridden with conflicts among co-wives and potential challenges to male elderly control<sup>21</sup>. In a situation where institutions of conflict-mediation that used to stabilize family relations are weakening, these conflicts seriously threaten the stability of conjugal relations. Women's greater economic responsibility gives them more weight in disputes over the use of family resources<sup>22</sup>.

Modifications in the relations between men and women are not only manifest in the realm of the economic. Nor are their effects restricted to claims and conflicts over financial contributions. Tensions between gender norms and ideologies, old and new<sup>23</sup>, come out most clearly in everyday discussions among men, women, but also in many "folk stories" told on national and local radio. These stories, a modernized form of conventional "human-interest stories", are being framed in the conventional form of story telling. Most stories reflect men's fear of women toppling them in the family and in public settings. These stories, and the fear they convey, have become much more pronounced since 1992, when the party ADEMA took over power and facilitated women's access to leading positions in the state bureaucracy and the governmental apparatus.

Many young men delve in the promises of a greater autonomy from parental control, which in the absence of economic opportunities for its realization remains, by and large, something to talk and daydream about. Girls and young women, on the other hand, nurture very contradictory expectations with regard to marriage and their future husband. These expectations result from a blending of conventional gender roles (such as the expectation of the husband's full economic responsibility for the family income) with ideals of greater female autonomy and decision-making power,

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21. According to some young men, their incapacity to respond to conventional expectations regarding their role as main providers is exacerbated by the fact that their fathers often hesitate to provide them with the necessary political or/and economic resources to find a job or to start an independent business, because it is in their interest to keep control over their sons.
  22. Given the fact that their greater realm of economic maneuver is paired with a greater responsibility, it would be extremely misleading to welcome this development as a sign of women's greater "independence". Women do not necessarily have a greater say in actual decisions but their chances of challenging decisions by the family head are rising.
  23. Mass education, substantially improved through reform since 1992, and the growing presence of globalized media images are only two among a number of recent developments that help introduce international conceptions of modern life style and subjecthood to an ever expanding constituency. Caught between donor agencies from the West and the Arab speaking world, Mali straddles between influences from international discourses on Human Rights versus cultural authenticity that provide the basis for a serious challenge to conventional norms about women's appropriate behavior- and for its backlash in the form of a new and markedly patriarchal gender ideology based on "Islamic" values (SCHULZ forthc.).

and the ideal of romantic love. Because many girls do not earn an independent income but work for their mothers, their spending power depends entirely on the gifts that friends, male relatives and lovers make them. This “non-productive” form of income-generation comes close to a “rent” that girls receive in exchange for other favors<sup>24</sup>. Whether they received higher education or not, they show relatively little interest in pursuing a professional career or finding regular employment to gain economic autonomy. Most of them seek to earn money, but only as long as they have not found a husband who, as they hope, will then fully provide for their needs. This expectation stands in stark contrast to economic realities that not only require most women to come up for a share of the family income, but also that their husband’s income will hardly give them the spending power they are envisioning.

It is not surprising, then, that the “love” relationships between young men and women constitute a principal site in which changing gender norms and ideologies, and men’s and women’s ambivalent feelings and expectations towards each other are played out and manipulated<sup>25</sup>. Young men and women talk about short-term liaisons as a kind of “makeshift” solution to the tampered chances for marrying.

The open-ended nature of these current forms of courtship is experienced by many young women and girls as a situation of great emotional and material insecurity. At the same time, the (often vaguely defined) love relations make it possible for them to bend the relationship according to their own interest, be it directed at receiving material favors or at establishing a longer-lasting relationship. Centrally at stake is the access to female sexuality. Beyond the pleasure it entails for both sexes, courtship bears different significances for young men than for women<sup>26</sup>. For the latter, establishing amorous ties is an offshoot or a distorted play-off on the central role that pregnancy plays in their striving for the status of a full-grown woman. Granting or withholding sex to a man becomes a way of attracting

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24. Male adolescents’ expectations towards their future spouses reveal similar ambivalences regarding between partnership ideals, old and new: while they aren’t adverse to the idea of women contributing to the family income, they often emphasize that they would prefer their women’s full dependence on their own income because this would perpetuate their own control over family decisions.

25. Given that the “love” relationships vary considerably depending, among other factors, on the socio-economic background, the strictness and religiosity of their parents, and the neighborhood, it is difficult to ascertain a clear direction towards which the patterns of interaction between female and male youth evolve. But the urban setting clearly offers new opportunities for less restricted interaction and sexual relations. Parental control, particularly over their daughters, is receding, but there are many families who seek to counter what they perceive as a loss of morals by imposing serious restrictions on their daughters’ activities.

26. As I witnessed on numerous occasions, male and female adolescents lay claims on each others’ material signs of affection by blurring the distinctions between (sexual) “love making” (“*kanu kè*”), feeling attracted to someone (*fè*), “fooling around” (“*tlon kè*”) and “true” affection (“*jarabi*”).

admirers. As many women admit, sometimes under bursts of laughter, it also serves as a means to obtain some materialized tokens of the lover's affection. Of similar importance is that "being attractive" to a number of lovers helps to show off one's "female qualities" to friends and competitors in the absence of any legitimate possibility to "prove" one's womanly capacities of procreation. Girls are manipulated by as much as they plot against young men. They try to "convince" the latter to marry them by conceiving children or by playing them off against competitors<sup>27</sup>. But these strategies often backfire. Ultimately, the "powerful" position that women seem to have (and that young men often complain about) by granting access to their bodies is of a double-edged nature. Giving sexual favors may inspire in them a temporary feeling of empowerment, but girls' complaints about men's "dishonesty" reflects their disillusion about it. Also, it undermines a woman's "bargaining" position once it comes to marriage. Because of the prevailing gender ideology that evaluates "extra-marital sex" by women differently from that of men, granting men access to their body makes women vulnerable to men's (and other people's) attacks on their moral looseness.

To men, on the other hand, having one or, if possible, several lovers demonstrates a man's virility in a double material sense: his physical and economic capacities to attract and keep lovers. Unmarried men, in the absence of the economic power to generate sustainable wealth and achieve personal autonomy and social control, thus become "gods of small things" (Roy 1997) but in a truncated, almost perverted sense. Thus, as granting sex becomes central to girls' "rent-seeking" strategies, the significance of sexual relations changes from a source of human, and ultimately material, wealth to sex as a short-time assurance of small favors.

Indicative of the female youth's predicaments are their conflicted relationships to female relatives of the older generation, towards whom they tend to bear feelings of envy and incompleteness. Even if girls feel that their parents' conceptions of marriage are outdated, they seek to straddle a line between their own desire for a greater realm of maneuver and their parent's normative expectations, which revolve around the maintenance of the family's reputation and "public face"<sup>28</sup>. Girls' incapacity to produce wealth, be it material or human, is succinctly stated by mothers who frequently blame them for being "useless" and "worth nothing". Allegations

27. It is an open secret that some women seek to consolidate their relationship to a particular lover by getting pregnant, by this trying to oblige the man to marry her.

28. The situation of unmarried mothers is particularly revealing about the double-bind in which female adolescents find themselves. Having children sets a woman apart from her unmarried age-mates, but she remains under the control of their parents from whom they continue to be dependent in more than just economic terms. Whenever she pretends to the status of a "complete" woman by adopting the behavior and outfit of a married women, her claim will be challenged and denigrated by her mothers.

such as that they “lack shame” (“*u tè maloya*”) and “go astray” (“*yaala*”, sometimes implying sexual looseness) emphasize their failed accomplishment of becoming a full member of the family in a material and moral sense. In short, the feelings and accusations of incompleteness experienced by girls contrasts starkly with the “dignity” of African women celebrated by the pop singers whose performances girls so much admire<sup>29</sup>.

#### “The World is Made by Talk”<sup>30</sup>: Youth Forms of Sociality in Town

Male social life in town is structured by groups of informal socializing, the so-called “grin” in which men of various ages meet on a daily basis, drink tea, and play cards<sup>31</sup>. While *grins* are heterogeneous in composition, their members generally share a common marital status<sup>32</sup>.

Perhaps the most important social significance of the *grin* is that it offers men of all ages a space where they can address their concerns in a sphere outside of the household among friends and peoples whom they trust<sup>33</sup>. Married men discuss worries, such as concerns about financial hardship or marital conflicts, which their role as head of the household prevents them from doing otherwise. To young and unmarried men, *grins* are the place where they can express and exchange opinions outside the control of their parents (Sessay 2001). In 1990, the *grins* of unmarried and unemployed men acquired a central political significance as centers of popular protest and opposition to the government of the former president Moussa Traoré. They constituted the rallying points for the violent confrontations between the youth and military forces, which ultimately led to the overthrow of his regime<sup>34</sup>.

29. Girls’ subjective experience of being incomplete is revealed in their frequent remark “*an’w man dafa*” (literally, “we are not full, complete”).

30. *Duniya ye baro ye*.

31. Some authors interpret the *grin* as a neo-traditional form of male “bonding” that is, as a reconstruction of a form of male socializing in the culturally more diverse and anonymous urban setting (Cissé 1985). But this interpretation is misleading because the *grin* has no equivalent in rural areas where young men tend to socialize in working parties (singular *ton*).

32. A characteristic feature of the *grin* is that it cuts across divides of socio-economic background, age, occupation and educational background.

33. The groups are generally based on friendship and neighborhood connections. They are created by a leading figure, the “president”, who has the means to provide tea and sugar for the daily tea-drinking ceremony and at whose working place or home the friends gather. Depending on the members’ occupations and activities, their meetings start at different times of the day.

34. It is because of their role in the recent political past that the *grins* (and the segments of the disenfranchised urban youth they represent) played are viewed as a threat by the current government of president Alpha Konaré. But it seems that the political force of *grins* are limited, in part because of their highly ambivalent attitudes and actions vis-à-vis the government which they consider to be at the origin of their economic, political and social marginalization. At the same time, they represent a generation that, grown up under the single-party rule of Moussa Traoré, has become used to a state that acts as patron-father. They



Girls' gatherings usually take place around activities that give their socializing a *raison d'être* because many women consider their daughters' meeting and chatting with friends as a sign of lack of discipline. Their meetings are thus more informal and publicly less visible and accessible than the *grins*<sup>35</sup>. They generally meet in the courtyard of one girl's family, or in front of it, yet usually not too far away so that she can always respond to her mother's and brother's requests<sup>36</sup>. Their groups seem to be more homogenous with respect to "class" and educational background. Wherever girls hang out together, they make sure that their mothers will not overhear their conversations.

Common to young men and women's forms of socializing is that they center on, and are constituted by, the very act of conversing. Similar to key role of male beer drinking to Iteso social life (Karp 1980), conversation is the central medium and expression of commensality. The meaning of *baro*, the Bamana term for talk or conversation, is revealing in this respect. It designates talk-as-action and points to its socially constitutive quality. That is, it refers to the capacity of "talk" to create sociality, rather than merely resulting from or reflecting on it. It is often contrasted to a feeling of isolation and longing (*nyanafin*) that emerges in the absence of social company. Metalinguistic commentaries, such as the frequently evoked adage *duniya ye baro ye*, "the world is (made by) talk" similarly illustrate that "just talking" is far from being without aim<sup>37</sup>. Talk adds a social dimension to the texture of everyday life that is crucial to a person's being-in-the-world (Finnegan 1969, Stross 1974). Its socially generative quality is reminiscent of Habermas's conceptualization of "communicative action" which constitutes the "living world" ("*Lebenswelt*"; Habermas 1988). The performative capacity of "talk" to create commensality is also manifest in

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therefore expect the new government to provide the solution to their problems that is, to distribute jobs and other favors in exchange for the role they played in the overthrow of the former regime (BRENNER forthc).

35. If they are good friends with, or dating, a member of the male group, they may occasionally show up at men's *grin* meetings. But they are rarely considered a member of the group.
36. When girls spend their evenings away from their courtyard, this is considered—and commented upon by neighbors—as a sign of her lack of education. Therefore, many parents will at least try to oblige their daughters to show "shameful" conduct that is, to act according to the public standards of female conduct and thus to protect the family's reputation.
37. In my conversations with girls and young men, the proverb was sometimes cited as a meta-commentary on one's own ability and readiness to engage in dialogue with others. Very often, my interlocutors contrasted the "discursive" character of "African" sociability to (what they perceived as) the "mute" and asocial behavior of "Westerners". But I also overheard numerous conversations in which the adage was cited spontaneously to emphasize the central importance of socializing ("talk") to individual happiness. But a number of proverbs also reflect people's fear of the dangerous implications of speech (DIAWARA 1997b). These various adages thus reflect people's highly ambivalent attitude towards the creative and destructive dimensions of socializing and talk (KARP 1980).

the wider range of semantics of *baro* once it refers to a mixed female-male setting. While occasions for casual interaction between female and male youth are limited during daytime, at night they may and often come together to “have fun” (“*tlon kè*”<sup>38</sup>) and “talk”. In the context of these encounters between young men and women then, *baro* refers to a form of socializing that entails the possibility of a sexual encounter<sup>39</sup>.

The fervor with which young men and women discuss problems relating to courtship in their respective single-sex groups illustrates not only its salience but that it should be concealed from the adult world. The riskier it is to discuss matters relating to female-male encounters in a realm beyond parental control, the more hotly debated they are. A common trope is the highly ambiguous image of “money”, both as epitome of what is aspired yet cannot be achieved and as an almost personalized force responsible for the erosion of trust, true love and a sense of moral obligation. The image of the financially “insatiable” woman that recurs in young men’s discussions illustrates how the new possibilities for engaging in more casual relationships instill feelings of both desire and fear. They tend to blame women for entering into relationships “for the sake of money alone”<sup>40</sup> thus putting a female face to urban life with its limited prospects of self-realization. Young women’s portrayal of the situation is even more ambivalent, most likely because the prevailing gender ideology applies unequal standards to female and male “promiscuity”. Their denouncement of their partners as being volatile “crooks” or *kalabanci* who “speak a double language”<sup>41</sup> and whose only interest is to have sex, hints at their misgivings about their own dependence on their lovers’ provision of material favors. At the same time, there are many women who are ready to hold “women” and their “greed for money” responsible for their own dim hopes in finding a husband. Thus young women, as much as men, express their current misgivings about the foreclosed possibilities to become full-grown members of society through the figure of the greedy woman. As I will argue, local radio creates a new stage and genres that, even if not entirely novel, offer the urban youth new opportunities to express their concerns in such moralizing tropes.

### “Hot” Music and “Kuu!” Speakers: Talk Radio and the Emergence of an Intimate Public

Listening to music programs broadcast on local, international or national radio is, in addition to talk and tea drinking, the third essential “ingredient”

38. The literal meaning of “*tlon kè*” is “to play around” but it also alludes to sexual play, as in the English notion of “fooling around” (cf. footnote 26).

39. The “sexual” connotation of *baro* is not restricted to urban areas. In the countryside, too, a man’s announcement that he wants to “come and talk” with a woman conveys his interest in having a sexual relationship with her.

40. “*olu bè wari ko dōrōn*”.

41. “*u be kanfila fō*”.

of daily *grin* socializing<sup>42</sup>. Young men often mention that the common preference for a particular radio station or even a particular program and radio speaker was at the origin of their *grin*. Similarly, what binds many girls together is their preference for a particular musical genre, the pop singers' music<sup>43</sup>. In this sense, local radio stations further new audience communities that come into being in the very process of listening to particular programs or pop music genres.

Local radio stations have been mushrooming in urban Mali since the military overthrow of the former president Moussa Traoré in 1991 when multiparty democracy was introduced under the transitory military regime of Colonel Toumani Touré. The number of commercial radio stations is steadily rising. In spite of differences in their financing structure, their programming does not differ in any remarkable sense from that of community radios and local antennas of the national station<sup>44</sup>. Most local radio broadcasts are relatively repetitive and monotonous, but this does not lessen their high popularity among a broad spectrum of listeners<sup>45</sup>. Young people, in particular men, who before the liberalization of the media market preferentially listened to music and news programs on international radio stations, now most often prefer local radio stations because, as they put it, "they play hot music, that's what we like. They speak to us and our concerns here in Mali"<sup>46</sup>.

42. Before 1991, when listeners had to choose between the national radio (with its relatively conservative choice of music) and international radio stations, tape recorders were greatly appreciated among young people because it allowed them to play their favorite tapes. Since the multiplication of local radio stations, however, tape recorders have become less important.

43. But girls identified less often the preference for a certain radio station as the reason for socializing with a particular group of friends. Instead, they highlighted "social" criteria, such as the trustworthiness or generosity of friends.

44. Since 1991, when the freedom of expression and free associational life became formally acknowledged civil rights, private radio stations and independent press organs has proliferated at a breathtaking speed. In 1999, there existed—at least nominally—more than 80 local radio stations, most of which were located in towns in the southern triangle of Mali. Ca. 60% of these radio stations were "private", in other words commercial radio stations set up by business men. It is difficult to assess the extent to which these stations were able to be financially independent from sponsors. In the period between 1998 and 2000, the directors of the commercial radio stations constantly complained that receipts drawn from advertisements and other forms of announcement were not sufficient to cover the expenditures (SCHULZ 2000).

45. Music programs featuring Malian pop music, and a variety of international African music styles and of Western pop music genres take up more than 80% of the airtime.

46. Quote from a recorded discussion with a group of 6 "jeunes diplômés sans emploi" (as unemployed young men with an educational degree are called in official parlance), August 1998, Segou. Of course, young men's preference for local radio does not exclude that they temporarily switch to international radio (preferentially Africa Numéro Un (Gabon) and Radio France International) to listen to the news program and particular music and information programs (result of surveys on local radio reception, conducted in 1994, 1998 and 1999).

“Hot music” refers to a broad range of musical styles ranging from international African pop music styles, such as highlife to reggae, salsa, rock music and, more recently, rap and hip hop.

“Hot” describes a rhythm that “makes one move” and, especially in the case of reggae, rap and hip hop, a text that critical and thus “moves” in a political sense. The fact that young people use the French term “*chaud*” to refer to “hot music” is indicative. The “heat” of the music is closely associated with the image of moving, both in a physical and intellectual sense. It also reflects that the various international musical styles they describe as “hot” are defined by their close association with the realm of consumption, media, and a cosmopolitan culture to which male adolescents aspire more than most girls do (Spitulnik ms.: chapter 10). The changes introduced by local radio stations are even more radical for female listeners who rarely listen to international radio stations because they do not play the (Malian pop) music they love for “the courage it inspires”<sup>47</sup>. Local radio stations, and the talk radio programs and women pop singers’ music they feature, create a new and unprecedented field of musical consumption for women of all ages.

The private radio stations’ association with multiparty democracy and the broad range of musical styles they broadcast are not the only reasons for their spectacular success. They broadcast in local languages and play music and oral traditions that many rural and adult listeners in town approvingly refer to as “our authentic traditions”<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, by greeting people of local renown, skillful radio speakers establish a dialogue that is sometimes imaginary, sometimes materialized in the form of listeners’ letters read aloud and commented upon by the speaker. Many listeners establish a personalized, emotionally charged relationship to particular speakers. The latter evoke a local, morally evaluating public by framing difficulties of urban life in strongly moralizing terms, thus creating the impression that the serious predicaments in which people find themselves could be overcome by “good” behavior. The “moral public” is based on the claim to transcend the dividing lines between rural and urban listeners by inviting them to engage in debates over issues raised by the radio speaker (Schulz 1999b, 2000).

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47. Women listeners (with the exception of those who live in Bamako where they can listen to the “Chaîne 2” of national radio) disapprove of the national radio that in their eyes does not broadcast enough of the pop singers’ music which they appreciate most and the lyrics of which they can follow.

48. That local radio stations broadcast in the local vernaculars is particularly important in the northern triangle of Mali (and in some areas of the south) where most listeners do not understand Bamanakan, the national language that predominates in programs of the national radio station. Also, given the fact that until 1992, Bamana and Maninka oral cultures and political histories were promoted as constitutive elements of a national identity, it is not surprising that many urbanites in non-Bamana areas hail local radio stations as institutions that promote “authentic” and locally particular identities in a multicultural nation state.

One of the greatest compliments adolescents pay broadcasters or pop stars is to characterize them as being “kuul”<sup>49</sup>. Most popular are “talk radio” programs in which *kuul* speakers invite listeners to call in or stop by and talk about questions related to the concerns of adolescents and married women<sup>50</sup>. To many girls and young men, it becomes a matter of personal pride and competition to have their statements recorded and broadcast live to their friends who, sitting in the courtyard or *grin*, keep an ear on the radio recorder and wait for their friend to “greet” them personally. A radio speaker’s “kuulness” is not just a function of the kinds of topics s/he chooses for debate. Equally important—and this makes speakers really *kuul*—is *how* they talk about it and, most significantly, whether they manage to convey the full complexity of a problem without naming it in too explicit a manner. As much as listeners cherish a speaker’s choice of words, the silences, implied allusions and subtle subtexts of her address are as momentous as what she actually utters<sup>51</sup>. Because so many broadcast debates center on issues that emerge in relationship to the other sex, issues that are considered “intimate” and “not to be talked about,” a *kuul* speaker’s proves her rhetorical and psychological qualities by her ability to let the guests’ express their point of view, without ever letting the debate become personalized or “heated”<sup>52</sup>. *Kuulness* as personal quality, conduct and attitude thus stands in contrast to the realm of music; where “heat” and the feelings it sets into motion have a positive connotation. But examples as the pop star Nana Kuul (see footnote 49) show that even a pop star who performs “hot” music may win public acclaim by being “*kuul*”.

*Kuul* speakers present central points of identification in a local and “intimate” public, a public that emerges around the debate of matters of intimacy

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49. A famous example is the singer Nana Kulubali, who is known by many fans under the name “Nana Kuul”. The association with US American radio speech repertoires does not seem to be as close as in the case of “the fourth radio” of the Zambian broadcasting station (Spitulnik ms.: chapter 10). “Kuul”ness makes reference to a way of talking that is reminiscent of US American rappers, but implies a wider range of personal qualifications. It adds a further layer of meaning to the semantics of “cool” (“*suman*” in Bamanankan) which describes a man or woman who is laid back, careful and deliberate in her or his actions and thus represents the opposite to someone “hot” (“*kalan*”) who “heats up” quickly and, at worst, is temperamental, impatient, and overly ready to engage in (fistful) arguments.
50. The questions range from rather “innocent” topics such as conflicts in a polygamous household and the pro’s and con’s of girls’ education to those relating to more intimate matters (mostly love relationships).
51. Here lies a continuity with conventions and preferences according to which public speech by professional speakers such as *jeliw* and by politicians in the national arena is evaluated.
52. On a couple of occasions, I witnessed that speakers were challenged by listeners on precisely these grounds. In off-stage discussions, but sometimes even in conversations with broadcasters, the critics complained that the speaker in question “does not have shame” or publicly attacked people “whom everybody in town knows”.

and love and broadcasts them to a broader constituency. The “intimate” public is novel, not so much with respect to the topics it addresses or the discursive conventions it follows, but in that it allows for the debate and dissemination at a larger scale of a knowledge that is both intimate and public. Also, its continuities with non-mediated forms of socializing notwithstanding, the “intimate public” is based on a new dimension of “being together” among female consumers. As we will see in the following section, female pop singers enrich this intimate public and contribute to the public intimacy created by local radio broadcasts. And this, I argue, is part of the secret of their success and popularity among female youth.

### Intimate Publics, Public Intimacy: Female Youth and Fan Culture

What, then, happens in the process of consuming the pop music? What meaning do female adolescents attribute to the music and how do they relate to the singers? The following statements, made by female adolescents with whom I used to spend most of my leisure time, suggest that an important reason for the attraction of the pop singers is the personal quality of their voice which allows listeners to establish an imaginary and very intimate relationship to them. The remarks convey some of the highly charged, emotional connection listeners feel whenever they hear their favorite stars. They also illustrate that listeners tend not to set apart the singer’s personality, voice and lyrics. Taken together, the voice and the song’s “moral lesson” create an atmosphere of intimate affection and a relationship that allows the listener to entrust herself to the singer whose “care” and empathy, they feel, is conveyed in the warmth, structural complexity, and “sharpness” of her voice. As a woman<sup>53</sup> explained to me when I asked her to explain to me the reasons of her admiration of a particular star: “You ask me why I like N. so much, what I like about her songs? It’s how she sings to me... uuh, you see, [...] it’s her voice. It is as if she carried herself over to me, one could say, it makes me feel [as if] I was sitting right next to her.”

A distant relative of hers, who overheard our conversation said, in growing exasperation at my incapacity to understand what my friend tried to explain to me: “Can’t you hear how her voice cuts everything, it cuts right through the air!<sup>54</sup> How she seizes you, she captures you, by the sheer sound of her voice. It takes you and doesn’t let you go, indeed!”

53. Ca. 20 years old and unmarried, she is the mother of two children.

54. It is important to note that my interlocutor used the image of a voice “cutting through the air” to make me understand the quality of the voice. *Kan magalen* is a more common description of a voice listeners find at once agreeable and far-carrying. *Magale* describes a voice (*kan*) that is not “too sharp” (“*kan gèlènin*”, literally, a “heavy voice”) or “too soft” (“*a kan sumalen do*”, literally, “her voice is too heavy”).

A girl of fifteen years explained to me: "When I hear her singing, this touches me, well, you know how this is, one cannot even tell [how this affects someone]. I just feel this swelling of pride, the new courage she gives me, I gain new courage to continue with my everyday chores, to hope that some day things will become easier. Some day they will!"

The following quote reveals the close connection that young female listeners establish between the singer's voice and what she "tells you" on one side, and the fact that listening and relating to a singer becomes part of an on-going process of constituting oneself as a *social* being on the other. The quote also betrays young women's experiences of loneliness in the middle of their peers, of occasional desperation, and of their feelings of being "redeemed" by the singer's voice and, even if to a lesser extent, by her "moral advice".

"Sometimes, I feel lonely. It is as if I was sitting alone, even though there are people, other women, friends sitting around me, even though I am sitting with them, chatting, you see. I then think of a good friend I have, we used to hang out all the time. But she left, she's gone off to France, to join her husband, you see, it has been a long time ago that this happened. Before that, we used to hang out, to make the time pass by, sitting together, we talked all the time. So I sit here and think of her, I long for her presence. Longing for her presence takes over, it's all over me. It is then, when I hear D.'s voice, it comforts me. It gives me great comfort, how can I tell you, I cannot put that in words... [she laughs, makes a gesture of embarrassment] Words are lacking, you see? When I hear D.'s voice, it is as if my friend was talking to me. Like her, she makes me feel that there is a value in being a woman, [...] that people, one day, they will realize that I am one of them. I don't know how she [singer] does it, it's something in her voice. She gives me the feeling of being complete. And no longer on my own. Hearing her voice makes me feel she is sitting with me, here, and talking to me."

To young women and girls, then, listening to the pop singers' music is an activity that is both individualized and social in its effects. It is part of a process by which a listener comes to see herself as a social being, constituted through her relationship to the singer and to friends with whom she may talk about the pop star. In fact, many conversations in which girls engage while listening to the pop music broadcast on radio, reflect that *talking* about the pop stars, their dresses, recent travels, family background and private lives is essential to the act of consumption.

As the "world is made of talk", exchange of information and opinions about pop stars, their trendy outfit, dance steps and glamorous life style becomes almost as important as the enjoyment of the aural and, in the case of television programs, visual aesthetics of the song performances.

Girls and young women are generally eager to "collect" detailed information about their favorite pop star's private life, an acquisition that allows them to at least imaginatively partake in her life and glories. In this, their star-related activities bear close resemblances to rituals among female "adoring audiences" in Western industrial societies (Cline 1992; Ehrenreich *et*

*al.* 1992). While most of this information is exchanged and debated in intimate settings, some girls take a great delight in hinting at the breadth of their knowledge whenever they are invited to speak on local radio. As a consequence, the exchange of minute details from a pop idol's personal life becomes part of a public intimate knowledge and contributes to a feeling of shared, "public" intimacy among female listeners. The public intimacy is by no means constituted through consensus alone. I witnessed a number of occasions on which competition among listeners or between a radio speaker and her acquaintances were played out over the air<sup>55</sup>. This shows how competition and strategies of exclusion are constitutive of the new, mass-mediated form of sociality.

The numerous anecdotes that girls relate to each other reveal as much about the pop stars' lives, and sometimes personal dilemmas, as about the girls' desires and their simultaneous awareness that hopes to realize their aspirations are dim. The heroine of the pop star anecdotes is generally very much in control of her life. She impresses her social surroundings by her imposing demeanor, makes a lot of money, chooses her husband herself (and among a range of admirers), and keeps her family and in-laws at bay who criticize her for embarking on a musical career. Girls, in their seemingly obsessive debates of pop singers' private lives, express, with striking explicitness, their longing for becoming an "accomplished" woman<sup>56</sup>. As they turn their pop idol into the alter ego, into the mirror image of their own unattained status of womanhood, this reveals their awareness of their own marginal position, both within the family and society at large.

My argument here is not that the popularity of the singers derives from their capacity to "dissimulate" the serious constraints with which female youth has to grapple in urban Mali. Rather, the pop singers' appeal is closely linked to the fact that they offer their fans an imaginary access to the world of accomplishment and female pride from which they find themselves excluded. We should not mistake girls' devotion to their stars' glamorous lives as an indicator of unconditional empathy or even imitation. Sharing information about the pop idols does not mean that girls fully identify with them. Quite the opposite is true: most of the positions that girls take during

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55. In one case, the radio speaker (a woman) commented in her talk radio program on the allegations of a friend who had criticized her for being arrogant. In another case, an invited guest digressed from the question the radio speaker asked her and publicly denounced "some envious friends" who had "made up bad stories" about her.

56. A striking difference between the way in which girls and married women talk about the pop stars is that the former only rarely contrast the pop stars to music performed in the countryside (and that is generally considered "traditional"). Married women, by contrast, situate themselves, even though often uneasily, in a continuum ranging from the "modern" pop stars and their sophisticated life style to the "women in the countryside" whom they consider to be more authentic and morally innocent (SCHULZ 2001a).



their discussions and on local radio reveal that they are aware of the distance that separates them from their idols, a distance they do not seek to transcend. Thus, what is at stake in the more or less public circulation of intimate information about the stars is a complex process of engaging with them that creates both imaginary closeness and distance and allows for the ongoing construction of a mimetic relationship to the stars (Benjamin 1980).

The pop stars' personal lives is not the only topic in which girls engage. Considerable time is spent on pondering the particulars of a pop singer's attire, "hip" dance steps and body movements which, as I mentioned before, girls know from public concerts and TV music shows<sup>57</sup>. By assessing the "accomplishment" of different pop stars on the basis of their recent acquisitions, girls link notions of personal excellence and achievement to the ability of consumption. A pop star who displays her ability to combine local notions of beauty and accomplishment with international consumer emblems is considered a "complete" woman<sup>58</sup>. That girls talk about outfits they can not see but know from visual broadcasts shows that listening to radio music programs is embedded in a wider field of media consumption. Also, their evaluation points to a process one might describe as "objectification" of personal value; that is, to a tendency towards defining oneself through the acquisition and consumption of goods (Miller 1994: 254, 1995). But, as the anecdotes and girls' preoccupation with the pop singers' marital lives reveal, the new avenues towards personal accomplishment do not fully replace conventional views or ways of becoming a "respectable" person. Nor is the "objectified" mode of gaining respectability a novel mode: the acquisition and distribution of goods, wealth and favors form part of a conventional repertory of strategies to gain "respect" (*dambe*) and a "name" (*tògò*) (Schulz 1999a). But the value of the objects that people acquire is more than before defined by reference to an international market of consumer culture. Also, the most heated arguments are not about a singer's dress and accessories per se, but on the question as to how and where to acquire them. Girls' infatuation with prices and the limited possibilities of purchase is thus a reflection of, and a commentary on, both the growing importance of consumer objects to one's positioning in the community of "complete" women and of the painfully perceived limits of one's own capacity to realize it.

57. One favorite topic is the way in which a pop star wraps her headscarf. Kandia Kouyaté, one of the leading stars in the Malian pop universe, is famous for her ingenious ways of wrapping her turban. Her ever-changing headgears generate heated arguments among her followers and fans. They even become a bone of contention for other pop stars who by times go as far as to present Kandia Kouyaté's spectacular headdresses as an indicator of her loose morality.

58. *nin ye muso lakika de ye*. Girls spend even more time on discussing the visual properties of the pop singers whenever they watch their performances on television and on video.

Girls' passion for the pop stars' dresses, their persisting concern about the possibilities of acquiring them can be seen as a sometimes bodily, but more often imaginary appropriation of emblems of a modern, accomplished woman. This points to a parallel to youth fan cultures in Western societies where, as some authors show, the material and verbal exchange of and about pop idol paraphernalia may become as important to the fans as the actual consumption of music (Fritzsche *forthc.*). Another similarity to "boys groups" fan culture is that most young admirers of the Malian pop singers, too, eagerly partake in the lives and glories of their pop idols, yet also keep a conscious and deliberate distance. However, hidden underneath these similarities lies a substantial difference that is indicative of the marginal place that the Malian youth occupies both in an international and a national culture of consumption. While Western pop music fans generally freely indulge in the collection and exchange of paraphernalia and consumer objects they link to their pop idols, female fan culture in urban Mali consists first and foremost of *talk* about and the *imagination* of purchase. Another crucial difference resides in the ways in which female adolescents engage in pop fan practices to situate themselves vis-à-vis the adult world. Whereas Western pop fan cultures often revolve around the acquisition of "sub-cultural capital" that is separate from mainstream, adult culture (Thornton 1996), a primary concern of Malian female adolescents is precisely to gain access to the world of full-grown adults by displaying the taste and style of "complete" women.

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My account of female fan practices in Mali was based on the contention that girls' admiration for pop stars should be understood by reference to their current predicaments of "postponed becoming" a full-grown member of the adult world (Seebode *forthc.*). Female fan-culture, constituted by a discursive and imaginary engagement with the personal lives of pop singers, is far from a mere "imitation" of a "modern" or cosmopolitan femininity. To girls, the stars represent women who are at once modern, cosmopolitan *and* rooted in an "authentically Malian" ideal of femininity. Nor does the fan culture simply reveal girls' impaired possibilities of participating in a transnational constituency of consumers. Instead, their preoccupation with the accessories that the pop stars display can be seen as a mode of imaginatively partaking in the world of womanhood that the pop stars embody, and of engaging with the control the latter seem to have over their lives. *Imagining* establishes an emphatic relationship to pop singers, yet is preconditioned upon female listeners' awareness of the unbridgeable gap between their own life situation and that of their pop idols. This act of imagining bears close resemblance to Gebauer & Wulf's (1995) conception of mimesis

as an autonomous bodily practice that is nevertheless social in that it is related to, and acquires significance from, other people's actions. Seen in this light, female adolescents are skilful and experienced media consumers whose practices cannot be appropriately interpreted as instances of escapism (Fritzsche *fortc.*; also see Radway 1984).

Female adolescents interpret their pop idols' performances in the light of their everyday experiences and create new meanings at the articulation between individual experience and market-driven pop culture. Their fan practices qualify Miller's claim that a distinct feature of the experience of modernity resides in its increasing mediation by objects of consumption (Miller 1987: 19-82). Young women make sense of the dilemmas they confront and of their aspiration towards being a "modern woman" by reference to imported consumer articles. Yet these objects only acquire significance once fans regard them as bearing the personal character of the stars whom they admire and to whom they establish an imaginary relation of trust and intimacy. At the same time, as *talk* about the pop stars' accessories prevails over their actual acquisition, it clearly points to the limits of mimetic appropriation. In this sense, girls' fan practices shed light on the historically specific possibilities, such as imagination made possible by new media, but also the limitations in the current era of global capitalism. Crystallized in these consumer articles, in girls' debates about them are their conflicted relationships to their lovers and mothers. Displaying materialized icons of one's "accomplished" femininity becomes a substitute for the capacity to legitimately procreate and thus to become an accepted member of the adult world. Girls, by exchanging detailed information about the capacity of lovers to provide their girl-friends with gifts, present them as tokens of the value of their relationship to men, and simultaneously carve a space of discussion to which only girls have access.

The fact that fan culture is organized around *talk* illustrates that pop music reception by female urban youth in Mali forms part of a larger field of commercial public culture to which access is restricted (Bennett 1986). At the same time, commercial music culture, enhanced by local radio, creates a space in which girls talk about themselves as "modern" women, and in which feelings of belonging to a peer group with similar tastes and experiences are played out. This "discursive mode of imagining," that is, the combination of debate and imagining, rather than constituting dull or uncritical consumption, is a creative activity which is central to girls' sense of social being.

Female fan practices take place in new, "intimate" publics that are constituted by listeners' debates and their experiences of "being touched" by the singer's voice. Music programs and talk radio programs on local radio create a realm of public and localized intimacy based on a community of common taste. One could argue that the new, "intimate" publics that local radio stations further are more important to female than to male

youth. In the absence of “formal” meeting points for girls, the intimate public offers female adolescents a durable “meeting space” outside the household. It remains to be seen whether the “intimate publics” that local radio creates will become more palpable in nature, in other words, whether local radio furthers a development towards the institutionalization of girls’ informal socializing.

The combination of listening and debate draws on existing conventions of socializing and gives rise to a form of sociality that is partially new in character and extension. It bears some similarities with the public sphere portrayed by Habermas for eighteenth century Europe: it is based on shared normative expectations and common concerns. It emerges through the debate of the pop singers’ appearances and personal fates. Girls’ discussions, their engagement with consumer culture, do not lack the rational, argumentative dimension identified by Habermas as the essential characteristic of the bourgeois public. But the particular nature of the issues debated in the “intimate public” renders it incongruent with Habermas’s insistence on the fundamentally critical-political dimensions of a “discursive” public. Practices related to the consumption of pop music confirm that the discursive and the performance dimension inherent in a public are intertwined and feed on each other, rather than constituting mutually exclusive orientations or different steps in its historical evolution (Meyer 1994).

Perhaps more fruitful than a comparison to Habermas’s normative concept of the public (and more appropriate to his theoretical project, see Postone 1992) is to start with a phenomenological account of social formations constituted at the *interface* of different media. Female adolescents in urban Mali, in their reactions to radio broadcasts, often privilege visual markers of their idols’ “completeness”. This not only implies that consumers, by highlighting particular dimensions of a polysemic broadcast, chose among competing interpretations and thus actively attribute meaning (Freitag 2001). It shows that new forms of sociality emerge around the consumption of different types of broadcast media. Characteristic of the new, local forms of public sociality is that they are predicated upon commercial culture. It therefore makes little sense to speak of “print” or “visual” public spheres, in other words, to define a public according to the media technology on which it is based.

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#### ABSTRACT

The article combines an interpretation of female adolescents' fan practices with an exploration of new forms of "coming together" made possible the creation of local radio stations in urban Mali. To understand girls' admiration for Malian women singers who, have become acclaimed stars in national and international arenas, the article explores their fan practices by reference to their current predicaments of "postponed becoming" a full-grown member of the adult world. Girls' fan practices shed light on the historically specific possibilities of mimetic appropriation, such as imagination made possible by new media, but also its limitations in the current era of global capitalism. Their consumption of pop music takes place in new, "intimate" publics that are constituted by listeners' debates and their experiences of "being touched" by the singer's voice. Music programs and talk radio programs on local radio create a realm of public and localized intimacy based on a community of common taste.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*"Le monde tel qu'il créé par la conversation": admirateurs des chanteuses, musique populaire et sociabilité urbaine au Mali.* — Cet article est consacré à la fois aux pratiques des admiratrices des chanteuses et aux nouvelles formes de "rencontre" rendues possibles par la création des nouvelles stations de radio dans les villes du Mali. De façon à rendre compte de l'admiration des jeunes filles envers les chanteuses maliennes qui sont devenues des vedettes à la fois sur le plan national et international, l'auteur analyse les pratiques des adoratrices de ces dernières en les situant par rapport au problème du report de l'entrée de ces jeunes filles dans l'âge adulte. L'étude des pratiques d'adoration des jeunes filles éclaire sur les spécificités historiquement situées d'appropriation mimétique, telles qu'elles sont rendues possibles par les nouveaux médias, mais également sur leurs limitations à l'époque du capitalisme global. À cet égard, la consommation de musique populaire s'effectue dans le cadre de "publics intimes", c'est-à-dire de discussions d'auditrices centrées sur la façon dont elles ont été touchées par la voix de la chanteuse. Les programmes musicaux de même que les débats radiophoniques créent un domaine d'intimité à la fois privé et public, domaine qui repose sur une communauté de goût partagé.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Mali, cultural globalization, gender, griot, popular music, radio consumption, youth culture/*Mali, globalisation culturelle, genre, griot, musique populaire, écoute radiophonique, culture des jeunes.*