6 ‘Clothing cannot improve moral behaviour’

Pilgrimage, fashion, and entrepreneurship in a West African market

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Introduction

Adja M’Ballou sits on a low stool in the lengthening shadows of the Friday evening market in Kankan, Guinea. Spread out in front of her is a wide assortment of fancy dresses and shoes for children. Women dressed in bright skirts and head wraps bend over the clothes, holding them up for closer inspection, occasionally beginning negotiations for a good price. While she attends to her clients, I scroll through the photographs on Adja M’Ballou’s phone taken during her pilgrimage to Mecca in 2014. Many of the images are already familiar to me from their debut on Facebook. I hold up pictures of well-dressed women wearing carefully applied make-up and show them to her. I ask about hijab, I ask about niqab, I ask about other clothing designs I see in the pictures. We are discussing the clothing people purchase for the hajj. I ask, ‘What is the best way for a Guinean woman to dress in Mecca?’ Adja M’Ballou laughs at my naïve question and tells me, ‘Clothing cannot improve moral behaviour. But if Allah wills it, people will see something in Mecca that can change their lives.’

Opting to wear hijab each day, Adja M’Ballou’s personal clothing style visibly identifies her as a pious woman. Her choice is slightly unusual for Guinea, where most Muslim women choose not to veil despite a general rise in Islamic clothing conventions across Africa (Ajakaye and Wasike 2019). I first met Adja M’Ballou when she was 15 years old and I arrived in her family’s household to interview her father, an important *Hajji* at the local mosque. Given that her profession involved selling religious clothing to members of her community, her wry comment that clothing has little to do with the moral character of the wearer struck me as insightful. She identifies the desire on the part of some customers to create impression through clothing but also recognizes that demonstrated behaviours carry far more weight than an appearance of piety. Adja M’Ballou’s experience of pilgrimage enhanced not only her personal insights about what customers might desire in the marketplace, but also her capacity to create a pious persona for herself that is relevant to her ability to be successful in business within her

community (see Buggenhagen 2012, 102). Her status as a *Hajja* enhances how others come to respect and patronize her business. Her livelihood as a merchant of imported clothing relies on actively cultivating pious personhood and developing social relationships with pious women clients.

Building upon previous ethnographic research and relying on continued communications via social media networks, this chapter examines the lived experiences of Guinean *Hajjas* who leverage their pilgrimage as an opportunity to start a business. This research pays particular attention to how participating in the hajj intersects with experiences of marriage and widowhood and allows certain Malinké¹ women to craft a culturally appropriate version of personhood that enhances their business ambitions. Qualities of ideal Malinké personhood, including impressions of ideal womanhood and piety, are continually evaluated by the community, especially how the female body is presented and displayed through conscious cultivation of clothing (Schulz 2008). In the case of Adja M'Ballou, projecting an image of piety in her role as a clothing merchant allows her to earn a living.

Wardrobe choice may reflect piety, discernment, and economic prosperity, but the wrong choices also may allude to potential problems with debt. Personal styling, especially during highly anticipated religious events like the hajj to Mecca, often merges the voices of Conakry's urban elite and the Muslim clergy to fuse economic success and moral respectability of a person with middle-class aspirations. Wardrobes can reveal tensions and alliances in cultural meanings about gender and class. Each day, as women in Muslim communities select their clothing for their lives, they weigh questions of personhood, social relationships, and self-presentation. The role of the *Hajja* as entrepreneur in a Guinean community may intertwine in complex ways as various discourses about power, legitimacy, status, and identity are carried out through the media of Islam and of gender and as women and men manipulate the material and symbolic resources at their disposal (Bernal 1994, 56).

Through both their experiences of pilgrimage and their access to economic resources, daily arbitrations of taste and piety by Guinean *Hajjas* underscore issues of contestation and connection to global flows of fashion, trends, and the cultivation of respectable piety for women in Guinea.

In this chapter, I introduce the stories of four Guinean *Hajjas* whose lives capture some of the themes and nuances of how the projection of feminine piety, combined with kin and community-based relationships, not only give meaning to their lives but also provide them with successful businesses and a material basis for living. Following conventions of feminist ethnography (Mountz and Hyndman 2006), I argue that these practices provide insight into how global networks of business and enterprise overlap with intimate, embodied, everyday practices of self-presentation, revealing pragmatic spaces where religious notions of gender and class are shaped, reproduced, and contested. I conducted 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Guinea during 2003–2004, and 15 years later, in the summer of 2019, I returned

to the community for three months of follow-up work. I also conducted interviews via Facebook Messenger and Skype during 2019 with six women living in Saudi Arabia.² Interviews and conversations were conducted with linguistic flexibility, as informants and I switched back and forth between Malinké, French, and English, according to our abilities.

In the rest of this chapter, I review historical connections between Islamic West Africa and Mecca to recount the ongoing importance of pilgrimage to processes of cultural identity. Next, I briefly discuss Mande culture to highlight a few key themes about gender, marriage, and the expected economic of women within the household. I then introduce readers to four Guinean *Hajja* women entrepreneurs and examine the social significance of marital status and appropriate couture associated with an Islamic lifestyle in the lives of an aspiring middle class in urban Guinea. Ultimately, this analysis focuses on how women's involvement in entrepreneurship connected to Mecca reveals and reinforces emergent patterns of consumption, reconfigured notions of respectability and piety, and transformed family dynamics.

Networks of piety, networks of trade

Islam arrived in Guinea more than 1,000 years ago as part of a trade route leading from Sijilmasa in southern Morocco through the Sahara Desert to the central Niger River Valley. Within this diverse region, Islam generated its own distinctive scholarly conventions and institutions in the 1100s, spreading through the savannah grasslands until it reached the rainforest (Levtzion 1968). Accordingly, Islam and commercial activity have a long history of mutual support in West Africa (Akyeampong 2010). Islam universalized cultural standards across many distinct regions by forging an umma, a global Muslim community, which was the economic and moral foundation that connected merchants in West Africa to Muslim communities elsewhere and differentiated believers from animists (cf. Şaul 2006).

Oral tradition in Guinea recounts the legendary pilgrimage of 1324 to Mecca by Mansa (or Emperor) Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire who united the Mande people and built a wealthy empire based on salt and gold. Legend holds that during the 5,000-mile pilgrimage across the Sahara Desert, Mansa Musa dispensed monies for the construction of a mosque wherever his caravan stopped on a Friday. The much-loved story also contends that Mansa Musa amazed the population of Cairo with the opulence of his pilgrimage caravan, spending so much money in Egypt that he caused a global recession felt all the way to Europe. While scholars may debate the specific details of the trip, they do agree that Mansa Musa was a real person who had an enormous impact on the Muslim world of the day. However, Mansa Musa was hardly the only West African leader to journey to Mecca. Despite his notoriety, Mansa Musa was just one of six rulers of West African empires who performed the pilgrimage within three centuries. Until the eighteenth century, towns throughout the Sahel organized caravans of

pilgrims, who typically took from five to eight years to accomplish the journey because of large detours to avoid the desert (Şaul 2006). Mansa Musa returned from his pilgrimage with fresh knowledge, contacts, objects, and people. He brought with him a field of jurists and scholars, including the Andalusian poet and architect Abu Ishaq al-Sahili, who built both a palace and the Great Djingereyber Mosque at Timbuktu (Şaul 2006).

The social, economic and historic relationships originally forged hundreds of years ago are still closely intertwined in the social imagination of Guineans today, as they continue to value and prize items that come from Mecca, which act as contagious items, carrying symbolic capital from the religious holy city as markers of piety and religious authenticity (Kenny 2007; Vukonic 2002).

According to tourism data, Mande speakers from Guinea and Mali continue to plan and undertake pilgrimages at a very high percentage, especially given the relatively high cost of the voyage for members of this mostly under-resourced region. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the government of Guinea waged a popular campaign to promote Islam as an index of 'modernity,' banning all ceremonial rituals of traditionally polytheistic communities of the south-eastern rainforest region (McGovern 2012). Today, Islamist policies and transformations characterize many regions of West Africa. In part as a response to Western imperialist practices of neoliberalism, formerly 'tolerant' communities in the region are undergoing conversion to Wahhabism (Amselle 1985; Warms 1992). Although I do not have any specific data on the topic, I could imagine that Saudi funds have contributed to this trend. Returning to Guinea in the summer of 2019, I noted that many new mosques funded by Saudi Arabian money have been built in Guinea in the 15 years since my previous period of fieldwork.

Increased access to pilgrimage to Mecca for West Africans accounts for the transformation in local attitudes about piety (Soares 2005). In Guinea, returning home as a *Hajji* or a *Hajja* elevates the status of not only one individual, but also of their family (Ferme 1994). In many parts of the world, women are leading Islamist cultural revivals through the uniquely gendered strategies of the 'politics of piety' (Schulz 2007; Mahmood 2005), especially in the ways that mature, respectable women offer highly feminized models of new urban middle-class family dynamics and consumption (Thimm 2018; Buggenhagen 2012). Another significant factor influencing the ways that West Africans think about Mecca comes from the high rates of migration to the region for work contracts. In the 1980s and 1990s, many hopeful West African men and women left the continent for Saudi Arabia. As neoliberal policies took hold and economic prospects dipped for many families in Guinea during the 1990s and early 2000s, households increasingly sent their best and brightest members abroad to seek their fortunes. Remittances were sent to households back home.

Since the era of neoliberal policies began in the 1980s, many West African economies have struggled with currency devaluation and high rates

of unemployment. Many West African men have sought employment through transnational migration. West African migrants frequently seek out opportunities for investments designed to secure their futures (Kenny 2005), including starting or maintaining small businesses, for which they import merchandise with the assistance of family members. However, individual traders, especially African women, are rendered invisible in economic studies of transnational corporate trade. Although some estimate African women's undocumented contributions to informal trade to be staggering (Ellis and MacGaffrey 1996), most trade is still measured via macro-processes, including the volume of trade, the balance of trade between countries, how most trade is between subsidiaries of transnational corporation, and how trade benefits economic growth. When women do appear, it is often as low-paid, exploited workers or as caregivers who care for managers' families (Desai 2009). Occasionally, female entrepreneurs may appear in the economic literature as recipients of microloans. While women throughout Africa continue to be disadvantaged by poor access to education, low incomes, and patriarchal restrictions on their ability to work outside the home, the social transformations of the neoliberal era have made it increasingly difficult for West African men to find work, creating additional strain on resource-poor households (Kringelbach 2016; Buggenhagen 2012). Women often manage household incomes in the absence of male household-heads, sometimes by relying on social ties, reciprocity, sharing, or collaboration (Kinyanjui 2014; Langevange and Gough 2012).

Being a *Hajja* in Guinea

Culturally appropriate qualities of personhood can be judged by how the body is presented and displayed through conscious cultivation, especially clothing choices (Gökariksel and McLarney 2010). Traditionally, West African women gave each other cloth as gifts to mark important life cycle events like marriage or the birth of a child (Sylvanus 2016). While the quality of fabric given depended on the means of the woman who presented the gift, bonds of mutual reciprocity demanded that the best quality damask cloth be exchanged. As prospective grooms, men may also give women gifts of cloth, which she may make into a *complét* ensemble, which, in turn, indexes the wealth and generosity of the male partner, much as the quality and carat of a diamond ring may do for Western women. However, women's clothing always belongs to her alone, although she may choose to share it with others. Purchased in part by her own wealth, clothing becomes one of a woman's most significant investments. West African women exercise considerable economic independence, which may be enhanced and reinforced by reciprocal aid within carefully cultivated networks of female relatives and friends throughout her life (Buggenhagen 2012; Heath 1992).

While transnational commodity circuits paired with the processes of economic liberalization have reconfigured traditional patterns of personhood

in West Africa and elsewhere (Kopytoff 1986), most women in Kankan still aspire to model feminine respectability within their local communities through their social relationships and their displays of Islamic piety. With nearly 80% of Guineans practicing Islam, each week takes shape around Friday prayers and the year is shaped by observance of religious holidays. Regardless of the financial status of the family, efforts are made to save the 'best' clothing for the mosque. Personal styling, especially during highly anticipated religious events, can often reveal the qualities of personhood that a person wishes to convey to others; clothing choice may also reveal tensions present within the status quo. Guinean women carefully calibrate their consumption with their presentation of selfhood in a way that signals respectable feminine piety. The female traders who are the focus of this chapter tap into these sartorial practices. Their connection to Mecca increases their business options for pious clothing available for women in Guinea. To demonstrate commonalities and differences in how women may operate, I will sketch the life stories and activities of four female traders who occupy different positions in the clothing trade business between Saudi Arabia and Guinea.

Hadjasaran: second-hand clothing from the Holy Land

After the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, outsiders were welcomed to the Kingdom under the *kafāla* system, which requires a sponsor for each foreign worker. A *kafāla* resident of Riyadh for the past 30 years, Hadjasaran³ is a widowed mother of eight children and a supplier of second-hand clothes to Guinea's capital Conakry, specializing in affordable, high-quality, modest outfits for weddings and Islamic occasions. Following her marriage to Musa Kallo in 1986, Hadjasaran and her husband travelled to Riyadh for lucrative service work under the booming reign of King Fahd. While Musa did construction work on apartment buildings and shopping malls, Hadjasaran worked as a domestic who shopped, cleaned, and cared for the elderly mother of her employer. In their third year in Saudi Arabia, she and her husband performed the hajj, something they had wanted to do since their arrival, but had not managed to do earlier because of the birth of their first child soon after their arrival in the Kingdom. Over the next 15 years, Musa and Hadjasaran's family grew to include five boys and three girls. Her youngest child was born in 2004. Musa died in 2006, leaving Hadjasaran a 37-year-old widowed mother. Her reputation for good moral character and religious piety allowed Hadjasaran to continue working to provide for her children, but making ends meet and providing childcare was challenging. She had some assistance from the Guinean community around her, but she was eager to supplement her earnings as a housekeeper.

Hadjasaran's second-hand clothing business began with some small efforts about 25 years ago. She loaded suitcases with used clothes, some of it worn by her own children, to take with her when she returned home to Guinea, and she asked Guinean pilgrims to take home extra suitcases

with items she asked them to sell or give away as gifts. Gift-giving among women, especially of cloth or clothes, is at the heart of feminine sociality in many West African cultures (see Guyer 1981, 26). Gradually, Hadjasaran came to realize that she could turn a tidy profit by selling used clothes she collected from second-hand shops in Riyadh.⁴ There is a hungry Guinean market for second-hand clothes imported from the Arabian Peninsula that comply with notions of religious modesty. Nearly every day, Hadjasaran looks for sales, buys used clothes, and maintains and expands her networks with vendors through connections at her mosque. When negotiating to buy in bulk, she insists that she be allowed to see each item that she buys, as she says that sometimes sellers try to get rid of less desirable pieces by bundling them with better-quality clothing. To make decisions about what to buy and what to pass on, she relies on her instincts and her years of experience in buying clothes for her family.

This familiarity and intimacy that Hadjasaran lavishes on each article of clothing sold through her export business is emblematic of women's small business and makes visible how relationships of power are reshaped and reproduced daily through ordinary moments and pragmatic connections (Whitesell and Faria 2019). Each individual decision about what to export is an arbitration of taste that influences Hadjasaran's financial success and the clothing choices of another person in a Guinean market who does not have access to the variety afforded to Hadjasaran.

Hadjasaran exercises extreme prejudice when selecting clothing for her inventory, mirroring the notoriously 'picky' attitude of her customers in Guinea. She specializes in clothes that attract affluent Muslim women, so she looks for *abāyas*, caftans, headscarves, and niqabs (a type of veil that covers the face but leaves the eyes visible). Hadjasaran also buys children's clothes, but the profit margin for well-maintained women's clothes suitable for special occasions is the highest and most reliable commodity of all her inventory. She sells her merchandise through her children and nieces in Guinea. In Guinean marketplaces, second-hand clothing may be sold without much discernment, Hadjasaran's proxy sellers try to place her clothing at 'higher end' clothing stalls by telling customers that the selection provided by their mother is hand-curated by their mother who is a highly respected local *Hajja* living abroad. The value of the clothes is thus increased by being displayed and sold with explicit reference to Hadjasaran's *Hajja* status.

When her husband was still alive, Hadjasaran's children attended school in Saudi Arabia. As they grew older, several returned to Guinea to live with extended family households and to seek business opportunities. The eldest daughter now attends university in Conakry, while her brothers help to manage the family clothing import business. The issue of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia raises concerns for the well-being of the nation as an estimated 66% of jobs are filled by foreign workers sending out approximately \$38 billion in remittances each year (Arabian Business 2018). In 2017, Saudi Arabian policy for guest workers was tightened, including the

implementation of an annual tax for children who reside with their guest worker parents, prompting Hadjasaran to send her two youngest children back to Guinea. Only one son, the second-to-eldest, aged 30, still lives with her, although Hadjasaran confides that he is eager to return to Guinea to find a wife and she expects he will leave her home within the year. She misses her youngest children very much and has considered returning to Guinea to be with her extended family when her eldest son takes a wife, but at a relatively young age of 50, she is ambivalent about leaving her business.

As a widow, she has complete discretion about how to invest her profits, though she typically invests first in additional inventory and second in educational opportunities for her children and grandchildren. For every \$1,000 investment in used clothes, Hadjasaran doubles her money. She makes much more money as an independent entrepreneur than she did as a domestic worker. Sceptical of banks, she has never borrowed money to build her business. Most money is transported through family and friends, and Hadjasaran feels more comfortable sending money back and forth through trusted members of her community than through official channels. She has an incentive to ‘stay off the grid’ to avoid taxation, but she says that she also appreciates the ease of working with people with whom she can speak her native language. A portion of the profits that are made through the sale of her inventory in Guinean markets are returned to her after accounting by her sons. Hadjasaran also relies on two of her adult children and two nieces to run her imported clothing business in Conakry. As noted earlier, Guinean women traditionally gave each other fabrics as gifts to mark important life cycle events like marriage or the birth of a child. For a Malinké woman, entrepreneurship through the clothing trade provides a culturally respectable and defensible business. Being a *Hajja* with access to high standard and fashionable but still ‘modest’ clothes associated with the Holy City of Mecca adds to Hadjasaran’s reputation as a respectable tradeswoman.

Hadjasaran admits to increasingly missing home. She could hardly ever afford the trip home when her children were small, and still is not able to visit Guinea as frequently as she would wish. As an active widow in her local mosque in Riyadh, Hadjasaran is particularly keen to host extended family members who come to complete the pilgrimage to Mecca. Often, pilgrims arrive with elderly parents, who Hadjasaran enjoys entertaining and cooking for. She also offers services as a matchmaker. In fact, this is how she came to work with her niece Adja M’Ballou, the woman introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

Adja M’Ballou: a marriage to a religious scholar

Hadjasaran’s mosque includes a core group of West African workers who came from Mali, Senegal, and Burkina Faso. Although they came from different countries, many of these workers share a common culture, including

Mande language, cuisine, and kinship ties. In the early 2000s, many West African families who were able to secure *kafāla* sponsorships from their employers invited relatives from their home communities to come live and work, although it is also reported that some arrived for pilgrimage and overstayed their visas. Many of the men in these families work as drivers; they also arranged for contracts with West African tour operators to transport pilgrims to Mecca during the season of pilgrimage.

Hadjasaran's niece Adja M'Ballou went to live with her aunt shortly after the death of her uncle in 2006. As a young widow, Hadjasaran struggled with childcare, and at the age of 18, M'Ballou was invited to come live with her aunt and to provide necessary assistance with raising the family. Despite changing sponsors and moving a number of times, finally a visa was arranged with the assistance of one of Hadjasaran's Saudi sponsors. Living in Riyadh, M'Ballou enthusiastically embraced wearing a hijab and began to learn some tailoring skills from a member of the West African community. She worked long hours as an informal tailor's apprentice, preparing custom-made white garments for the large amounts of West African pilgrims who arrived each year. However, as an unmarried woman, M'Ballou was unable to complete the pilgrimage to Mecca by herself.

At the same time, some of Riyadh's religious training programs for the next generation of imams offered scholarships to young men from African countries. Through a complicated community of kin relationships, M'Ballou met her future husband Sekouba at a Mande wedding party in Riyadh in 2009. A Malian, Sekouba first approached M'Ballou's aunt to arrange for a bride wealth. Hadjasaran redirected Sekouba to some distantly related men who were present in the mosque community, who, in turn, contacted M'Ballou's family in Kankan to arrange the marriage. Initially, M'Ballou's family was very sceptical of a young man who would approach their daughter in this way. Eventually, Sekouba persuaded his parents, who lived in western Mali, to visit M'Ballou's father in a village outside of Kankan where details of the marriage were ironed out and the bride wealth was exchanged. The wedding took place in Riyadh, celebrated by the West African community.

Adja M'Ballou earned her honorific title of *Hajja* in 2011, when she finally participated in the pilgrimage to Mecca with Sekouba. She described that time to me as the happiest occasion of her life. She stated that despite traveling with a primarily West African group of pilgrims into the Holy City, during the pilgrimage she witnessed the kindness and solidarity of people from all over the world. Her first child was born a year later, and three other children quickly followed. In 2014, after five years of marriage and with Sekouba's religious schooling complete, the family returned to Kankan to find work. Sekouba began his term as an imam at a small mosque in the city, while Adja M'Ballou began to receive shipments of clothing from her aunt for resale purposes.

Adja M'Ballou continued to capitalize on the lessons she learned those years she was in contact with pilgrims and during her own hajj journey. In addition to selling used clothes, she partners with a local tailor to design and offer bright, white clothing suitable for hajj or for celebrating religious festivals. In general, such clothes are intended to be worn only once, and can be out of the price range of many customers in the Kankan market. The preferred fabric locally for such couture is rich *bazin*, hand-dyed polished cotton, but for those who cannot afford such expense, Adja M'Ballou offers similar styles in plain cotton fabric. She told me this attention to the needs of pious customers regardless of their ability to pay was an insight she gained during her own pilgrimage.

When her inventory stagnates and pieces of clothing are no longer saleable, Adja M'Ballou rounds up the unwanted dresses and scarves and gives them to her sisters' children, her neighbours, her friends, and to those in Kankan who are in need. Through her active gift-giving, she reinforces her reputation as a generous *Hajja* who recognizes the moral obligations of her own position and the privilege of her mobility. She also invites women who lack means, especially those who have absent or underemployed husbands, to come to her shop and sell clothes for a share of the profits and as an opportunity to access 'new' used clothing. Each time I visited Adja M'Ballou's shop, I found a different woman from the neighbourhood working there, all of whom praised the generosity of their pious friend.

Muna: tapping into middle-class desires

Muna is a 38-year-old *Hajja* and trader of high-end Islamic fashion in one of Conakry's new neighbourhoods which attracts professional elites. Her much older husband, a teacher, died about five years ago, leaving her with three children: a 14-year-old and 12-year-old twins. As a young widow, having no husband or small children gives Muna more mobility in comparison to other *Hajjas*. She did not consider remarriage, nor does she have living male relatives who would insist upon a remarriage. Muna considers her work seriously because it provides for her children and allows them to attend an international school in Conakry. She has no desire to create romantic entanglements either in Guinea or in Saudi Arabia that might make it more difficult to do her job well. While she herself is not especially religious, she recognizes the potential for her business to succeed since she has access to a niche market that is in high demand at home.

Just as Muna's business runs on formal as well as informal transactions (Verne 2018), so too does her history of the hajj. Until recently, Muna travelled to Saudi Arabia every other year on a coveted hajj visa rather than a business visa. Because of her familiarity with several languages and her international travel experience, her 'side business' involves accompanying older women pilgrims during the season of hajj. Only 300 hajj visas are released to the general public in Guinea each year, but because of Muna's

pre-existing informal network of reciprocity and exchange based on kinship, she has enjoyed good luck with the visa system, often by paying a 'premium' of \$600 on top of the travel fees to a pilgrimage tour operator to participate in pilgrimage more frequently than every five years. However, with recent policy changes to the visa allocation system in Guinea and a closer monitoring system of the procedure criticized for nepotism and favouritism, Muna fears that she may not be able to travel to Saudi Arabia to maintain her business as easily as before and that she might need to find the money to apply for a business visa.

Upon arrival in Saudi Arabia, Muna stays with extended kin while she conducts her business transactions. Relying upon networks of mutual reciprocal exchange reinforces ties of friendship and familial identity. But these ties may also reproduce social asymmetry as most pilgrims from Guinea do not have equal resources to buoy them through the expense of a merchandising trip. Describing new biometric measures used by the Saudi Arabian immigration service, Muna lamented the challenge of overstaying visas or using the name of her sister to qualify for a visa, a ruse she apparently was able to successfully use in the past.

Muna tries to significantly increase her inventory prior to the month of Ramadan, as most aspiring Guineans invest in several new outfits for 'Īd al-Fiṭr, the feast at the end of the Holy Month of fasting. Increasing practices of consumption and materialism are markers of an emerging middle class (Scheld 2007), as displays of consumer discernment regarding pious couture index locally held understandings about respectability and success. Muna has forged professional relationships over several trips in the last eight years to increase shipments at critical times of the calendar year, working with Saudi merchants she trusts in the wholesale market. She haggles in English whenever possible to buy in bulk, using the calculator function on her telephone to convert currencies and convey her bottom line. She operates with limited amounts of capital and prefers to pay in cash upfront to minimize any ambiguity about quality or price.

Muna does not wear hijab when she is at home in Guinea. However, when she is traveling and buying inventory for her shop, she adheres to local standards of Muslim piety to get a feel for the new merchandise she is looking to buy for her shop. She observes that Guinean women will wear pious couture to augment their reputation as respectable women, but also laughingly states that Guinean women do not suffer discomfort easily. In her choices for inventory in her shop, Muna must strike a balance between representing the fashionable new developments of Arab women in the Gulf States with tried-and-true styles that she knows local women will respond to. Muna prides herself on knowing what her Guinean customers will wear and what clothing they would reject as too cumbersome or restrictive. She relies heavily on her reputation as a stylish insider with a loyal customer base. Customers are alerted to new merchandise through a very active Facebook page (see Lewis 2010). The clothes she offers are very expensive

in local terms, from US\$65 to \$300. Although Muna's relatively affluent Guinean customers have a bit more money to spend, they remain critical about the quality and value of the clothing they consume and will not buy unless they are confident that the effect of their new clothing will enhance their personal status as successful, respectful, modern Muslim women.

Fatime: tourism and the West African importer

Born in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s when her parents worked there as oil-boom labourers, Fatime's family returned to Guinea when she was a teenager. When she was 20, her father arranged for her to marry Ibrahim Kaba, a 50-year-old friend who organized logistics for pilgrims en route to Mecca. His tour operator license allowed him early access to the 300 pilgrimage visas distributed by the Guinean government, which he included as part of a pilgrimage tour package that included airfare, lodging, and transportation within the country. Because of her fluency in Arabic acquired during childhood in Riyadh, Ibrahim took his young wife along to Mecca with him every few years. Facilitated by her husband's pilgrimage tour business, Fatime set up her own business. Unlike the women introduced above, who import items for resale in Guinea, she exports coveted West African items for the expatriate community living in Saudi Arabia.

Fatime recounts many changes to the regulations around pilgrimage from Guinea in the last 15 years. Primarily, it is much more difficult to get a visa to go on hajj. Many years ago, the market for specialty products from home yielded a three-to-one return on investment. Fatime invested in palm oil, honey, karité oil and shea, and shea butter (used as skin moisturizers), *soumbara* (a local spice), kola nuts, and *bazin* fabric (favoured for West African ceremonial clothing) to sell to West African residents in Saudi Arabia. The items were selected based on requests that were sent from family members and things that Fatime remembered as special during her childhood. Fatime preferred to carry the items for sale in her luggage, buying a new wardrobe while abroad, with plans to sell it upon her return. Operating under the radar to avoid paying tariffs, Fatime never formalized her business and claimed on customs forms that the contents of her luggage were for gifts and personal use.

Fatime's frequent ability to travel to Mecca for pilgrimage and business rests solely on the accommodation of her husband's business. In the past, it was relatively easy for Fatime to get a special visa for the pilgrimage because of her husband's business and she looked forward to the opportunity to grow her capital. However, pilgrimage visas have become increasingly hard to get, and the Guinean government prioritizes travellers who have not made the trip in the last five years (discounting, of course, those who are able to pay high fees, including Muna, mentioned above). In recent years, Fatime's husband has scaled back his tour offerings, taking fewer and fewer pilgrims each time. Fatime notes that it has also become harder to resell

items because customs agents have begun restricting the amount of luggage brought into the Kingdom, probably in efforts to stop illicit smuggling. She herself was stopped several times by customs agents who questioned her about the spices and cooking ingredients she transported.

Just before her third pilgrimage in 2011, Fatime realized she was pregnant with her third child. Pregnant women do not typically participate in pilgrimage, so with the blessing of her husband, she hid her pregnancy, overstayed her pilgrimage visa, and gave birth to her son in a hospital in Saudi Arabia. She lived with a distant relative in Riyadh for a few months after the baby was born while her husband returned to Guinea. Anxious, she feared she would be fined at the airport when she left the country with the baby, but no such problem arose. She feels like her son's life was blessed by the pilgrimage she performed. She hopes to continue regular pilgrimages as she enjoys visiting friends and family who live in Riyadh, and she also welcomes the chance to grow her business, even considering the possibility of applying for a legitimate business visa.

Conclusion

The Guinean women in this chapter use their experiences of the pilgrimage to Mecca to capitalize on locally understood configurations of respectable feminine piety and to make daily arbitrations of taste and piety, underscoring a connection to global flows of fashion to Guinea. Understanding these practices allows us to link global, power-laden networks of business and enterprise with intimate, embodied, everyday practices of self-presentation (Mountz and Hyndman 2006). This chapter has been a preliminary investigation, posing questions to interrogate the everyday and overlooked places where identity is shaped, reproduced, and contested.

Importantly, the cultural mobility to engage in pilgrimage and to operate a business remains strongly influenced by the marital status of the entrepreneur. Marriage and widowhood matters for these entrepreneurs, in part because their potential mobility challenges economic, religious, and cultural conventions about femininity, both at home and abroad. This paper has shown the challenges surrounding pilgrimage for widows, young women, pregnant women, and newly delivered mothers. The two widows Hadjasaran and Muna, whose trade activities were discussed above, have been able to combine the necessity to earn a living with their mobility as single women with an outstanding reputation as pious *Hajjas* to navigate the market, negotiate prices, and import clothes that are associated with the holy places in Saudi Arabia. The young wives Adja M'Ballou and Fatime both work on the periphery of the businesses available to West African pilgrims, especially busy during the season of the hajj. Each woman cultivates a network of individuals who can share the work with her, and each relies on a kin network to support her during times of pregnancy and new motherhood.

As shown, the experience of pilgrimage increases the opportunities and sharpens the insights of these individual women of what may sell well. In particular, they capitalize on their own experiences to make sales to other would-be pilgrims. As Adja M'Ballou observed, 'Clothing cannot improve moral behaviour.' She, however, will remain at her stall in the Kankan market, selling clothing imported from Mecca and taking orders for the next season of pilgrims. Her hope is that the women who buy her clothes to travel there will find the type of respectability they desire.

Notes

- 1 This chapter deals specifically with practices observed and recorded among Malinké families residing in Kankan and Conakry, Guinea. The term Mande refers to a larger linguistic category of people living throughout West Africa, sharing a number of cultural practices. Mande culture was traditionally horticultural, with well-developed endogamous castes based on occupational specialization. Most Mande peoples practice a form of syncretic Islam, though among the elite lineages, more attention is paid to the politics of piety; see Kenny 2007.
- 2 This is admittedly an extremely small sample size. I frame this research as exploratory to denote the possibility for observation of emerging themes but am unable at this time to extrapolate data to a larger population based on this sample. It is also important to note that all names and some details of residency are disguised because some of the residency circumstances within this paper do not conform to sanctioned immigration policies of Saudi Arabia. I collected a large number of stories from informants outlining stressful working conditions, racism, and experiences of deportation.
- 3 All names in this paper have been changed to disguise those women who shared their stories with me. I have altered some details and collapsed identities of informants to protect their anonymity.
- 4 Second-hand clothing represents an informal and small-scale business enterprise which largely operates through barely legal transborder trade (Hansen 2000). Technically, goods being imported for sale are supposed to be taxed, but second-hand clothing are imported by container and suitcases, making it more difficult for them to be accurately counted or taxed at the ports or borders (Scheld 2007).

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