Renewal and Enlightenment: Muslim Women’s Biographic Narratives of Personal Reform in Mali

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Abstract
The article takes Muslim women’s biographic self-constructions as proper believers in urban Mali as a window to inquire into the kind of responsibility and moral agency that these women assume and make central to their search for ‘closeness to God’. Focusing on the moral agency the women claim for themselves, it is argued, brings insights into their particular conception of collective and personal renewal and, by implication, into the particular religious subjectivity they formulate. Women’s accounts of their learning activities highlight the virtues of personal enlightenment and individual self-improvement, thereby revealing how a longer-standing trend toward individuation comes to inform these believers’ articulation of eschatological concerns. Moral agency, defined by its capacity to scrutinize and choose between alternative normative viewpoints, assumes a central significance.

Illustrating the great variety of motivations that prompt women to join a Muslim women’s group, the paper argues that these motivations need to more consistently studied with reference to Muslims’ everyday struggle and negotiation than has been often done in ethnographies of Islamic revival.

Keywords
Islamic revival, gender relations, moral agency, religious subjectivity, West Africa

My wife and I, we used to quarrel a lot, over money, children, work, everything. Then she heard from our neighbor that going to the Muslim women’s learning group helped her sort out the problems she had with her husband. My wife started frequenting that group too. Life in our family improved so much because she became much quieter and willing to follow my orders. This is how my wife became a better Muslim. (father of two children, mid-thirties, San, April 2000)

Women do not marry to be free of sorrow. Life is sorrow and we ask God to help us accept it. What God decided for us, this is our destiny. Our husbands are
Introduction: Narrating Personal Reform

Since the early days of Mali’s multiparty democracy in 1991, urban public arenas have been permeated with emblems and idioms of Muslim piety and with a mushrooming infrastructure of Islamic proselytization (da’wa) in the form of Muslim associations, mosques, and schools (medersas).1 Women play a prominent role in these material and symbolic forms of Islamic renewal, a renewal that many Malians associate with Arab Islam, that is, a transnational trend toward stricter appliance of rules regulating everyday conduct sponsored heavily by Saudi Arabia, Libya, and other countries of the Arab-speaking Muslim world. Female supporters of the movement publicly endorse the movement’s leading (male) representatives’ call for a return to the original teachings of Islam. They refer to themselves simply as ‘Muslim women’ (silame musow) and thereby mark their distance from ‘the other women’ (musto tow) who, in their eyes, are not ‘real Muslims’.2

The Muslim women organize themselves into neighborhood groups with the stated goal of learning to read and write the Qur’an, and to engage in joint religious practice. The female leaders (présidentes, in Bamanakan ton-tigiw) of these groups advise their ‘disciples’ (kalanidewu) on proper female conduct in ritual and daily settings, or hire male teachers to do so. They assert that women play a key role in effecting societal moral reform, thereby echoing central tenets of Muslim activism throughout Africa and elsewhere in the Muslim world (LeBlanc 1999; Augis 2002; Alidou 2005; Masquelier 2009; Göle 1996; Navaro-Yashin 2002; see Deeb 2006); and they publicly articulate their conviction that women’s God-ordained roles relegate them to the domestic realm. This assertion appears paradoxical at first, but it actually reflects these women’s particular conception of the relationship of personal ethics to collective well-being and public affairs. Some female leaders also appear on commercial local radio stations, which have been multiplying at a breathtaking speed since the introduction of the multiparty democracy, and disseminate their teachings in audio recordings that circulate primarily among their immediate followers and disciples.

not what we wished for, they are our destiny… God will help us to…change their minds from time to time. For God is truth and justice. He tests my endurance by making me suffer. But it is not my husband who should make me suffer. (member of a Muslim women’s group, mid-forties, seven children, Bamako, August 1998)
The focus of the moral message Muslim women formulate is the invitation they extend to other women and men to join their endeavor to ‘embark on the path to God’ (\textit{ka ala sira ta}), that is, to make the search for personal and societal transformation central to their everyday lives. Similar to male supporters of the movement, many Muslim women present their invitation in terms of returning to the true teachings of Islam and of adopting a true, Sunni identity. They refer to their search for greater piety as a process of reversion (\textit{ka sègin silameya ma}) and personal self-making rather than as conversion.\(^3\)

Central to this process of ethical self-making is a woman’s acquisition of certain virtuous qualities, among them patience, endurance, and forbearance. In addition to this emphasis on personal reform, Muslim women stress the need to extend their call to a broader constituency, and they single out ritual practice as the key domain for doing so. Engagement in publicized ritual prayer and religious celebrations is meant to validate the genuine nature of a woman’s pious transformation and thus her status as a true believer (Schulz 2008a).

With their assertion that only those practices they themselves advocate make someone a true Sunni Muslim, Muslim women enter a contested field of Muslim debate. In this field, which emerged in its current configuration in the late colonial period, notions of religious orthopraxy have played a central role in individuals’ positioning vis-à-vis competing religious interpretations and groups on one side, and actors and institutions on the other. These notions are instrumental to efforts on the part of the state to define Islam as a private faith and thus to align it with the principle of \textit{laicité} (Schulz 2006; see Brenner 2001; Soares 2005).

In addition to their claims to orthopraxy and to Sunni identity, claims they frequently articulate in the course of their learning activities, Muslim women also present their views of the ‘path toward God’ in personalized accounts of the experiences and motivations that prompted their decision to join the movement.\(^3\) These personal stories and the biographic anecdotes they entail illustrate in often fascinating complexity how Muslim women’s personal quest for pious self-making reflects and feeds into broader social and political processes in Mali (Schulz 2008a, b, 2010b).

This article zooms in on these biographic accounts by Muslim women to center attention on the subjective dimensions of women’s pious endeavor, particularly on the concerns, moral and social, that prompt women to endorse the objectives of the renewal movement. With my focus on the intricacies of personal remaking, I emphasize that while social and historical in its sweep, religious renewal in contemporary Mali and elsewhere is always
effected through the individual and therefore ‘subjective and capillary in its embodiments’ (Keane 2007, 51).

A guiding concern of my exploration is to reconstruct what views of moral agency and of what kind of moral agency ‘being a true Muslim’ involves, according to these women. Hereby I follow Bowen (1997) and Keane (2007) who, while working on different historical, regional, and religious contexts, both emphasize that believers’ self-constructions as ‘modern’ subjects revolve on very specific definitions of the kinds of virtues and responsibilities that moral agency involves. To understand what specific attributes of moral agency Muslim women formulate and seek to acquire, I examine biographic accounts that relate to Muslim women’s decisions to engage in learning. Muslim women’s learning activities and attendant forms of sociality, I argue, are pivotal to remaking themselves into a very specific kind of moral agent, one whose responsibility for personal salvation requires a particular mode of subjectivation in relation to God and her immediate social entourage.

This brings me to the second guiding concern of this article: to understand how Muslim women’s pious endeavors relate to the context of everyday life that constitutes the ‘horizon of experience’ (see Negt and Kluge 1993) within which these women formulate their striving for personal reform and labor to realize it. A response to this question involves not only interpreting Muslim women’s personal quest against the backdrop of the social struggles that constitute their daily lives and experiences; it also involves a reflection on how to think the relationship between moral motivation and the practice of everyday life.

During my research I soon realized that women’s decisions to join the moral reform movement could not be understood in their complexity by focusing exclusively on the biographic narratives that they themselves provided. I was perplexed by the frequency with which not only women themselves but also their husbands narrated their decision to ‘revert’ to proper Muslim practice. Without explicitly being asked, numerous husbands eagerly offered accounts, and notably different ones at that, of the circumstances and motivational matrix of their wife’s participation in a Muslim women’s group. As I grew to realize, all these accounts by Muslim women and their husbands were part and parcel of a broader discursive context in which reflections on gender relations and the moral order are key. The pervasiveness of this discursive context led me to acknowledge a certain lacunae in the literature on conversion narratives. Understanding biographic narrative as a form of making and validating conversion necessitates a departure from a focus on individual converts’ narratives that studies on conversion in Muslim contexts often propose (e.g., Wöhlrab-Saar 1999; Augis 2002). We should take seriously that
gender as a relational category allows scholars to explore shifting dynamics between men and women and how these dynamics reverberate in individual biographic accounts. Muslim women’s narrative self-constructions offer reflections on but also a means to transform the realities of daily life in which these women live, feel, think, and labor to become a proper Muslim. Their daily realities are shaped by and bring into relief conflictual dynamics that unfold at the interface of intergenerational and gender relations.

But how should we view the relation between women’s individual motivations and the living worlds in which they live? What status should we give morality and moral motivation in understanding their striving for personal reform? Is it enough to interpret women’s personal projects and participation in learning groups as a means of coming to grips with and transforming the conditions of their daily lives? Such an interpretational scheme has tended to inform conventional studies of women’s participation in Islamist (e.g., Esposito 1998; Roy 1994) and other ‘fundamentalist’ movements (e.g., Marty and Appleby 1993a, b), yet also continues to haunt the work of important critics of these earlier studies (Göle 1996, 2002; Ask and Tjomsland 1998; Brink and Mencher 1997). To put it in a somewhat exaggerated form: moral aspirations are portrayed as a cover-up for practices and concerns that are ultimately reducible to domestic power struggles and relations of social inequality, or to competition and identity politics in a broader public sphere. The question is how far this emphasis on and assumption of strategic interest behind moral motives leads us in anthropological analysis. In what sense does it allow us to understand Muslim women’s concerns and learning activities?

A reflection on the status of the moral concerns that Muslim women formulate in their conversion narratives thus provides two insights. First, it sheds light on the nature of moral agency that these women claim for themselves. Second, it contributes to recent debates on what theoretical and conceptual toolset anthropologists should bring to bear on the study of Muslim societies, and of domestic and gender relations in particular (e.g., Kandiyoti 1988, 1994; Wilkan 1982; Boddy 1989; Masquelier 2001, 2009; Willemse 2001; Mahmood 2005; see Asad 1986; Bowen 1993).

Muslim Women’s Learning Activities in Historical Perspective

In the area of present-day Mali most women’s level of knowledge of ritual matters and the different Islamic religious disciplines was low until the 1970s. This was partly due to the fact that broad segments of the population converted to
Islam only gradually in the colonial period, that is, starting in the 1910s. Throughout Mali’s southern triangle, families of Muslim merchants and religious specialists constituted pockets in areas where animistic practices were predominant. To the majority of these Muslims practice of their ‘submission’ (the literal meaning of ‘Islam’) to God was limited to the regular performance of ritual worship and to adopting a particular dress code. This did not preclude certain women, usually from a highly privileged economic background, to become models of female piety and, occasionally, to act as patrons of religious socializing activities. For a woman, leading a life withdrawn from the pressures of public opinion and in devotion to prayer and the study of religious texts remained a marker of considerable prestige and elite family background throughout the colonial period. For the majority of Muslim women the written traditions of Islam, whether passed on in Arabic or regional vernaculars, had only scant influence on their religious understandings and practices. The Malian situation thus resembled that of other regions of the French Sudan, such as the areas of present-day Senegal and Niger (e.g., Coulon 1988; Masquelier 2001, 2009; Alidou 2005).

Changes affecting women’s self-understandings as practicing Muslims gained new momentum in the 1980s under the influence of a transnational da’wa movement generously sponsored by Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Arab-speaking Muslim world. Local recipients, often graduates from the Arab-speaking world or people with business ties to this area of the Muslim world, widely expanded the existing infrastructure of Islamic education and worship. Opportunities to learn about religious and ritual matters were extended to people who would have formerly found it difficult to access this knowledge. Youth from all walks of life and also women from the urban middle and lower-middle classes were among the main beneficiaries of these changes. In turn, these institutional changes affected conventional sites and appreciation of female leaders’ moralizing activities (Schulz 2007).

The liberalization of the media after the overthrow of president Moussa Traoré in 1991 facilitated the multiplication of Muslim organizational forms and a fierce competition among Muslim actors, traditional authorities, and various types of activists who base their claims to leadership on new credentials. At present these different Muslim interest groups compete in the public arena over a following and over recognition by the state as representatives of civil society that can participate in public controversies over the common good (Schulz 2003, 2006).

Muslim women have widely capitalized on the new possibilities for self-organization that opened up under the multiparty democracy of President
Konare (1992-2002) and that continue under the current president, Toumani Touré. They have organized themselves into neighborhood-based ‘learning groups’ (singular, kalaniton), a label that, similar to their reference to group members as ‘disciples’ (singular, kalaniden), indicates that they single out learning (kalan) as the main objective of their gatherings. Also implied in these terms is an intellectualist definition of learning: learning as the capacity to read and write.6 These groups draw on earlier conventions and forms of female socializing and mutual support that have sprung up throughout sub-Saharan Africa since the 1970s and that intervene in domains of social life from which the state has withdrawn or in which it never operated successfully (Schulz 2010a). However, as I will argue throughout this article, Muslim women’s groups are much more than that.7 In their combination of educational, moral, and social motivations, the groups are clearly inspired by a broader, transnational da’wa movement that aims to reform the moral and the social simultaneously.8

The primary objective of Muslim women’s biweekly or triweekly meetings is to civilize themselves through the acquisition of Arabic literacy and of a basic knowledge in correct ritual performance. While some of their leaders (tontigiw) hire (male) teachers for these sessions, other tontigiw practice tafsiri (from Arabic tafsir, interpretation) themselves and lecture on the meaning of individual Qur’anic verses or hadiths. Because they carefully keep to the interpretations of their own teachers rather than proposing independent interpretations, their views usually reflect the level and kind of education their own teachers received at local schools or at institutions of higher religious learning in North Africa or other Arab-speaking countries.

Tontigiw understand their moral instructions as part of an endeavor to return to more authentic modes of interpreting and living God’s word. They advise women on questions of proper comportment in domestic and public settings, and on their duty to invite others ‘to embark on the path to God’.9 They place much emphasis on believers’ individual responsibility for salvation, a responsibility that transpires first in the effort to understand and appropriate the written sources of Islam, and second, in the daily practice of a pious disposition. True religiosity, they argue, should manifest itself not only in the performance of the conventional obligations of worship, such as the five daily prayers, but in a range of acts that are religious and social in nature. Women’s self-disciplinary endeavor should show in specific dispositional and emotional capabilities, among them the capacity to feel shame (maloya, ‘modesty’), endurance, patience, and a capacity for self-control and submissiveness (munyu). Women are to practice these virtues in various social
and ritual activities in public and semi-public settings to profess their ethical quest to a broader, potentially nationwide, audience, and with the aim of extending their invitation to other Muslims (Schulz 2008b).

I return below to the tontigiu’s insistence on the virtues of understanding and debate. For now, suffice it to say that their emphasis on believers’ personal responsibility for salvation—an emphasis that most of their disciples share—is noteworthy in two respects. It can be seen as the culminating point of a long-standing reformist emphasis on text-based notions of Muslim proper life and ritual orthopraxy. It also indicates a historical shift away from understanding Muslim identity as a family and professional identity (Launay 1992), and toward adopting a proper Muslim conduct as the result of individual conviction and choice.

What also indicates a relatively novel development is the highlighting of women’s obligation to become a more public example and agent of moral excellence. Women’s self-conscious adoption of a public persona departs from the traditional relegation of female religiosity and devotional practices to an intimate, secluded space within the domestic realm. Whereas before women’s spiritual experiences were predicated on their withdrawal from the area of worldly matters and mundane daily activities, the emphasis placed by many leaders on Muslim women’s collective responsibilities establishes a direct link between the practice of piety and its public profession (Schulz 2008b).

The Social Setting: ‘Family Authority has Gone Kaput’

Conventional gender ideology assigns men and women to distinct and complementary spheres of productivity and responsibilities. This conceptual ordering, while always subject to challenge and negotiation, has been exposed to new uncertainties by recent transformations in urban household economies. Some of these transformations can be linked to the effects of structural adjustment measures implemented in Mali since the mid-1980s. While wives were commonly expected to find some sources of additional income to satisfy their and ‘their children’s little needs’ (olu den’w ka musaga), the husband’s capacity to provide for the family constituted a major source of self-esteem and continues to be central to ideals of adult masculinity (Schulz 2004, ch. 2). As a consequence of the shrinking of the public sector and income opportunities in the formal economy, more and more households in town struggle to maintain their living standard, very often with substantial input from wives and from junior migrant workers (see Lachaud 1994; Marfaing and Sow 1999).
The often palpable disjunction between ideological ordering and actual praxis opens up some space for maneuvering to women, yet also puts them under additional social pressure to conform to the dominant ideal of the acquiescent woman who heeds established gender and age hierarchies. The discrepancies between norm and praxis of gender-specific realms of influence, activities, and responsibilities are felt most acutely in low-income households, but they are also evident in numerous middle-class families in which male household heads face a lack of work opportunities and, accordingly, their wives are obliged to extend their activities beyond what is commonly seen as requisite female pursuits. Partly as a result of these transformations, everyday family life in town is punctuated with recurrent ‘struggles over the sauce price’ (*nasôngo kêlè*), an expression that captures husbands’ growing inability to provide for their families and their simultaneous attempt to keep the upper hand in family decision-making processes. ‘Sauce price struggles’, in other words, put into relief the ambivalences of a situation in which, as my interlocutors often put it, ‘family authority has gone kaput’ (*du fanga tinyéna*).

For married women these changes risk jeopardizing some of the advantages that the established ‘patriarchal bargain’ yields for them. A pervasive atmosphere of disappointment and resentment adds to many women’s subjective sense of vulnerability. Even if a woman’s marriage is strengthened by support from her relatives and in-laws, she is likely to remain in a state of emotional and often material insecurity. Her (realistic) apprehension that her husband might take another wife and thus increase the number of those relying on his income is even greater if she cannot rely on an independent income. Arguments over the allocation of resources turn ever more acrimonious in polygynous marital arrangements or in situations where the husband maintains a ‘second office’ (*deuxième bureau*, the common term for concubinage).

Although there is an uneasy awareness among family fathers that their problems derive as much from their children’s rebelliousness, that is, striving for greater autonomy, as from ‘quarrelsome’ wives, most of them blame women for what they consider a disruption of family ties and obligations. Male youth similarly decry women’s ‘greed’ and ‘lack of love’ and thereby hold them accountable for their own reluctance, and often financial inability, to commit themselves to legalized forms of cohabitation. In all these accounts a moralizing discourse on the socially disruptive force of money (e.g., Taussig 1980; Weiss 1996; Masquelier 2001; also see Parry and Bloch 1989) is combined with a moralizing register that feminizes immorality (Schulz 2001). Women are held responsible and come to stand for the pernicious effects of money.
In this atmosphere of diffuse resentment women too tend to blame other women for the erosion of trust, friendship, and love. Competition over material tokens of affection from suitors and lovers fuels a spectacular ‘occult economy’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), and feeds into constant complaints by (mostly younger) women who identify ‘immoral women’ as principal agents of social disintegration. Older women deplore their daughters’ or daughters’-in-law ‘lack of love’ and voice their apprehensions that their daughters’ greater financial independence will result in their own loss of control. In turn, younger women accuse their seniors of greed, an accusation that hints at disappointment in their incapacity to establish themselves as independent adults, and their envy of their mothers’ status and control. Complaints about women’s envy thus cut across the generational divide and reflect a pervasive sense of shortage in opportunities of income generation, social networking, and control. Tropes such as that of the ‘insatiable woman’ and a ‘woman without love’ serve not only husband and wife in constructing and claiming female propriety; they are also essential to the construction, attribution, and disclaimer of notions of female propriety among women.

Ideals of female propriety and accomplishment therefore do not exist in the singular. Coexisting notions of exemplary femininity are generated and assessed in various kinds of personal interaction and intimate settings. Their mobilization in public arenas, sometimes triggered by political controversies and supported by new media technologies, provides women with multiple occasions to formulate, reconsider, and circulate views of self-esteem and personal worth. This intricate, dialectical process of individual and social, public and intimate articulations of ideals of femininity and moral personhood constitutes the background for the biographic self-constructions of Muslim women and the accounts their husbands offer of their wives’ return to proper Islam.

Notably, women’s and men’s narrative constructions of female propriety—and of male honor—are embedded in a broader discursive context in which insatiable, money-driven women are held responsible for the destruction of the affective geist that once animated social bonds and kinship obligations. Muslim women’s autobiographic self-constructions as proper Muslims, and their reflections on acceptable forms of female responsibility and moral agency, need to be understood against this backdrop. They should be analyzed in consideration of the recent unsettling of conventional foundations of male family authority, and of contested and changing ideals of adult masculinity. These unsettling developments and the anxieties they generate are displayed in various publicly circulating male narratives on moral disintegration and social disorder.
Fathers’ Discursive Regulation of Gender Relations

One form that male discursive constructions of moral disintegration takes is the personal experience story that constitutes a peculiar form of biographic narrative. Personal experience stories imply a tint of anonymity because they never specify the identity of the hero (‘a friend of a friend’); instead, each story starts with the premise that his trials and triumphs were related to the present raconteur through hearsay. At the same time, the stories are decidedly personal, in two respects. The storytellers always claim some intimate (though indirect) connection to the story’s protagonist; and the framing of the story as ‘personal’ experience helps validate its immediacy, genuineness, and truth. What greatly adds to the appeal and poignancy of these stories is that they circulate publicly. Men tell these personal stories during their daily informal gatherings (the so-called grins, see Brenner n.d.) with male friends and peers. The stories also feature widely in last-page-entertainment sections of the daily press, and are the subject of many talk radio programs on the local commercial radio stations which have been mushrooming in Mali’s urban areas since 1991 (Schulz 1999). In broadcast personal experience stories, reports of encounters with the occult mix with accounts of personal bravery and adventure. Similar to the story lines of soap operas on national television, the personal experience stories operate through a ‘rhetoric of contrast’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987) that opposes women who embody female treachery and ‘lack of love’ to the figure of the good, faithful wife. What these stories ultimately tell is a tale of female greed, insubordination, and dangerous attraction in which the woman’s luring appeal needs to be contained and overcome by the emotionally challenged male lover. Rather than attributing the unsettling of patriarchal authority to recent radical transformations in the economic set-up of domestic power relations, they posit a causal link between women’s economic self-reliance, their greater autonomy from family control and conventional behavioral standards, and finally, their propensity for sexual promiscuity and betrayal. This narrative scheme, far from being a mere set of signs with which men make sense of their current dilemmas, provides them with a blueprint for interaction with women and daughters in quotidian life. Men’s stories about their experiences do not simply reflect a particular social context, but refract and constitute it. Similar to the autobiographic self-constructions of Muslim women, these personal narratives are performative; they make and remake gender relations.

Given the existence of such powerful, publicly circulating constructions of female (im)propriety, how should we interpret Muslim women’s narrative accounts of their decision to revert to Islam’s true teachings? Should we see
them as attempts to paint a counter-image to the figure of the immoral, loose, disrespectful, greedy/envious woman that pervades men's personal stories and other publicized narrative forms? Are their self-constructions a way of negotiating power relations within the household, as has sometimes been suggested? Is there something else at stake in their insistence on the importance of their own patience, submissiveness, individual responsibility, and enlightenment?

**Women’s Narrative (Re)construction of Personal Renewal**

As I noted before, autobiographic accounts are one of Muslim women's privileged ways of framing and narrating their decision to ‘return’ to proper Muslim practice. These accounts are often highly charged emotionally and tend to portray the narrator as a self-determined individual who addresses the dilemmas resulting from her marital situation and her position vis-à-vis her in-laws and own kin. Whether or not this emphasis on self-determination reflects a globally circulating neoliberal paradigm of individual self-assertiveness and choice, it is certain that these women's accounts of personal experiences are contingent on and not fully reducible to the specific situation in which they were formulated.14

In what follows I focus on the biographic narratives of two women, Fanta and Maimoune, with whom I have maintained a close and long-standing relationship since I first began my research on the moral renewal movement in 1998. In spite of significant discrepancies between these two women's life situations and the different positions they occupy both in their family and in their immediate social entourage, they have certain features in common that make them representative of many female supporters of the movement. Fanta was one of the first women I met when I began my research on the movement in San in July 1998. A woman in her mid-thirties and then mother of three children, Fanta’s calm, self-restrained, and warm way of interacting with friends and neighbors made her one of the most popular and respected women of the Muslim women’s group that she had helped create two years prior to my arrival. Although Fanta’s relatively young age precluded her from the formal position of group leader (tontigi), fellow group members turned much more frequently to her for personal advice and organizational matters than to the official tontigi. Group members and neighbors looked up to her, and often cited her self-respecting and modest demeanor toward her husband (himself a respected member of the local movement) and her mother-in-law, to whom neighbors and group members surreptitiously referred to as the local ‘bickering queen’. Women also praised Fanta for her readiness to put her
seventh-grade school education to good use by helping out other, illiterate neighbors and friends.

Maimoune, whom I met during my second stay in San in 1999, was in a materially more precarious (and for Muslim women fairly typical) family situation. Her husband, whose approval of Maimoune’s personal transformation is quoted at the beginning of this article, had been left severely handicapped by a working accident in 1995. Maimoune, a woman in her mid-forties, had become the exclusive provider of family income. With the help of two teenage girls, a son’s infrequent remittances from Abidjan, and the occasional support from her own brothers who lived in a village about 40 miles from San, Maimoune struggled daily to make ends meet. Prematurely and visibly aged by constant worry and material deprivation, Maimoune nevertheless appeared to be a buoyant bundle of wicked humor and vivacity during group meetings. Although her remarkable determination to view her tribulations in a positive light certainly contributed to her popularity, fellow Muslim women usually highlighted her patience and modesty as characteristics that made her a model case of Muslim female piety. Joining the Muslim women’s group, Maimoune explained to me during one of my first visits to her compound, had been an important milestone in her career as the de facto household head. The friendships she made in this group allowed her to break out of her previous isolation, when her material deprivation made her feel ‘ashamed’. No longer was she in a situation where she felt apprehensive about her inability to reciprocate the material tokens of hospitality a woman usually offers her guests. After all, Muslim women’s socializing aimed at greater closeness to God, not at pleasing friends and family. In short, becoming a member (and a highly respected one at that) of the Muslim women's neighborhood group had given Maimoune a sense of emotional and material connectedness.

Regardless of these commonalities, however, Fanta and Maimoune offered markedly different accounts of what had prompted their decision to make the search for closeness to God central to their life.

**Fanta: Cultivating a Virtuous Self**

On an early evening in 1998, Fanta and I were sitting in her courtyard, watching the nightly soap opera installment while preparing dinner. Prompted by an argument between husband and wife unfolding on-screen that visibly annoyed her, Fanta mentioned that she had recently invited a woman next door to join the Muslim women’s neighborhood group. Observing that her neighbor’s attendance at group meetings had soon put an end to the quarrels that until then had characterized her interaction with her husband,
Fanta ended her account with a lecture on the advantages that female obedience and patience would bring to family life.

A woman’s submission to her husband’s orders, you know, is the first step toward reintroducing peace at home. Take me, for example. I used to find it hard not to contradict my husband whose conduct toward me, I felt then, sometimes lacked due respect. But whenever I challenged him it led nowhere; we used to quarrel a lot, and these quarrels only led to mutual aggravation. Joining other Muslim women in their quest for personal improvement and learning how to act as a respectable Muslim woman helped me get a different perspective on these matters. Now my husband and I, we quarrel very little; I put matters in God’s hand and no longer experience this feeling of personal aggravation.

According to this portrayal of Muslim women’s activities, learning boils down to acquiring the personal moral qualities that are expected from a model wife in everyday life. The substance of personal reform revolves as much around an acquisition of ritual knowledge as it centers on advice about how to apply Islamic standards of behavior to various quotidian situations and concerns.

On other occasions Fanta offered a similar account of what ‘becoming a proper Muslim woman’ involved, and intimated that women’s learning activities were also essential to the emotional and institutional support the group could offer a woman experiencing marital conflict and other trying situations. One day in late August of the same year, for instance, Fanta used the group’s recent intervention into a member’s marital conflict as a starting place to reflect on how the group had helped her in a similar situation, an experience that made her realize how much the practice of ‘socializing on behalf of God’ had transformed her view on dealing with her life situation.

S., the woman you sat next to during the last learning session, came to our meetings regularly after we had helped her settle a conflict with in-laws. It is S., you see, who makes the family living, but her husband used to beat her because he felt that she did not treat him with the respect he deserved. We talked to her in-laws and to her husband, and told him that as a good Muslim he should show forbearance toward his wife. We gave S. some moral advice too: that she should endure her husband’s dealings with patience and obey his and her mother-in-law’s orders. Since then things have improved greatly. That’s what our group does, helping each other in times of difficulties, be they financial, or a matter of social togetherness, or other occasions for difficulties. For me too, getting this kind of support was important. Especially when no one in my own family understood why I felt I should embark on the path that brings me closer to God. Several times my sisters in the group intervened when I was in trouble. This is what the group is for, even if other concerns are important too, because a woman alone in this world is nothing. Searching for God […] on your own amounts to nothing.
On another occasion a few weeks later, when I asked Fanta how her husband felt about her learning activities (and thus about her frequent absence from home during afternoons), she mused about how her mother-in-law initially objected to her joining the Muslim women’s neighborhood group.

It was difficult at first to attend the meetings. My husband’s mother complained that I neglected children and household, that I did not come back early enough to prepare dinner in time; she really made things difficult for me. At some point she even talked my husband into prohibiting me from attending the meetings. But, aa... [laughs] that did not work out. Our tontigi intervened. She took my husband aside and told him that no good Muslim should keep his wife from trying to strive for greater closeness to God. That put an end to it because our tontigi, she is widely respected. My mother-in-law stopped giving me grief.

Patently, developing the qualities that, in Fanta’s view, qualify a woman as a pious Muslim helps reassert and reproduce the conventional patriarchal gender ideology. Seen (and represented to the husband) in this light, Muslim women’s learning activities do not challenge male family authority; indeed, they can be viewed as bolstering a husband’s attempts to keep the upper hand in a situation where his prerogatives as pater familias have come under siege. In fact, as illustrated in the earlier remark by Fanta’s husband, this is precisely how many husbands of Muslim women see the usefulness of their wife’s decision to become a proper Muslim.

Yet Fanta also intimates that Muslim women’s socializing offers important institutional and emotional support in often-difficult marital situations. The second biographic snippet makes it particularly evident that becoming a pious Muslim allows a woman to move in a sphere of normative protection in which she can engage in activities that would otherwise fuel her in-laws’ suspicions, such as spending considerable amounts of time away from home while acquiring Arabic literacy and ritual knowledge. If we follow the interpretational scheme by Kandiyoti and other authors who highlight interfamilial power relations as the main subject of concern to women in Muslim societies, we could interpret Fanta’s and others’ joining a Muslim women’s learning group as part of the patriarchal bargain or deal these women seek to strike. Yet, I suggest, this interpretation fails to render the subjective significance this membership has for Muslim women. Fanta’s reminiscences suggest that her acting in conformity with dominant norms of proper female behavior was not motivated primarily by an attempt to negotiate her power position within the family. What she highlighted instead was her and fellow Muslim women’s wish to remake themselves as believers who positively embrace the responsibility they bear toward God and the society they live in.
Clearly the husbands and in-laws of these women hold very different views on Muslim women’s motivations. As Fanta’s husband maintained, he wholeheartedly supported his wife’s endeavor to become a pious Muslim because her finding Islam helps him keep her in check. His preoccupation with spousal obedience led him to propose a very different account of Fanta’s decision to ‘revert’ to proper Muslim practice. In his view, an acquiescent and submissive demeanor is the principal sign of a woman’s pious transformation.

I found a similar, palpable discrepancy between other Muslim women’s account of their conversion and of the means of ethical remaking, and the ways in which their husbands viewed the matter. Their different perspectives suggest that they attribute very different significances to the repertoire of propriety that Muslim women seek to adopt. Men’s biographic accounts of their women’s decision to ‘become a better Muslim’, particularly their focus on the ways in which group membership improved their marital relationship, fail to capture the complexity and intent of women’s virtuous self-reconstruction. Yet rather than interpreting men’s accounts as misleading and women’s autobiographic reconstructions as more authentic, I propose that they need to be considered as complementary so as to reflect on the complex and sometimes paradoxical implications of the path on which Muslim women embark.

Moreover, what Muslim women and their husbands highlight in their autobiographic reconstructions should be seen as an engagement with the parameters of their daily lives. For instance, as much as Fanta emphasized in conversation the virtues of wifely patience, submissiveness, and obedience, I soon realized that this emphasis needed to be read against the backdrop of an ongoing process in which Fanta straddled her own concerns and aspirations with the changing demands of her marital situation. This point was forcefully brought home to me one afternoon a few months after our initial acquaintance. As we were driving back on my motorcycle from a courtesy visit to the tonjigi’s sickly older sister, Fanta suddenly suggested that we take a detour. Reaching the outskirts of a new settlement area located in the northeast part of town, Fanta asked me to stop. With visible pride, she pointed to a plot of land that, to my astonishment and surprise, turned out to be her own recent acquisition, bought with her savings and her oldest brother’s financial support. To my ever-growing amazement, she explained to me that she had decided to buy ‘something on her own’ as a safety measure ‘in case something goes wrong with my marriage, and my husband does not treat me well’.

Fanta’s participation in a Muslim women’s group and her subscribing to the patriarchal gender ideology promoted and presented by the teacher as Islamic did not turn her into a mere object of her husband’s whims, but helped her become a particular kind of actor. Fanta’s striving for a certain
degree of material independence illustrates that her endorsement of the virtues of submissiveness and forbearance did not induce her to give up a certain sense of autonomy. Indeed, as we see below, it was Fanta’s fusing of an independent mind with a demeanor that qualified her as an exemplary pious woman that helped her in the marital trials she faced in the years to come.

This incident taught me two lessons. One was that in Fanta’s recollections of her decision to become a pious Muslim woman her silences counted as much as her reminiscences. Thus to fully grasp the motivational backdrop of Muslim women we should pay attention to what they chose to omit from their biographic narratives. Only by juxtaposing what is said and what remains implicit can we understand how Fanta, or any other group member, constructs herself as a pious Muslim woman against the backdrop of a dominant discourse on female propriety, a discourse that her husband as well as the group’s teacher legitimates by presenting it as grounded in Islamic normative principles.

The second insight to be gained from this anecdote is that Fanta’s and other women’s ethical self-making has very equivocal implications both for their immediate life situation and their relation to their husband and in-laws, and for the ways these women position themselves vis-à-vis dominant moral discourses on gender relations. As captured in the second quote prefacing the introduction, Muslim women can be critical of their husband’s arbitrary treatment and of the dominant gender ideology that validates such treatment, and simultaneously seek to accommodate it through exercising self-restraint and forbearance. Their participation in Muslim women’s group activities do not lead to (or aim at) a direct challenge to patriarchal authority and gender ideology, nor can their group membership be read as an unequivocal endorsement and reproduction of established power inequalities between husband and wife and between the generations. Reality is certainly more incongruent and unstable.

What complicates the picture further is that Muslim women’s motivations to ‘embark on the path to God’, as well as their perceptions of what this path requires them to do, changes over time along with individual women’s actual experiences and life situations. On my annual returns to San between 1998 and 2006, I realized how much Fanta’s biographic accounts changed over time in tone, orientation, and emphasis, thereby reflecting not only her constant reappraisal of the endeavor of ethical self-improvement in which she and other group members engaged, but also substantial changes in her life situation. I single out one of these changes to illustrate my point.

During a phone conversation in late 2003 Fanta told me, clearly upset, that on her return home in the afternoon one day in October of that year she
found her new co-wife, whom her husband had just married without even notifying her. Fanta blamed her mother-in-law for both the marriage arrangement and its clandestine nature, yet also expressed, somewhat tamely, the hope that ‘things would work out in the end’. Upon my return to San in November 2004, I learned that her hopes had not been borne out. Daily life in the courtyard was punctured by the quarrelsome interventions of the second spouse (who had a strong ally in her mother-in-law), while the husband avoided the emotionally charged situation at home by spending more and more time with fellow supporters of the Islamic renewal movement. Fanta freely admitted that the radically changed conditions at home made her feel constantly under siege, with some ill-wishing neighbors adding to the burden by pointing out that polygamy was something a woman had to endure. However, she also stressed that leaving her husband was not an option because that would have meant relinquishing her four children and leaving them under the care (or carelessness, Fanta insinuated) of her co-wife and mother-in-law. Socializing with fellow Muslim women had become existential for Fanta. Many of our conversations still revolved on the question of what ‘moving closer to God’ meant to her and what it required from her and her fellows, but the tone and focus had changed. Only rarely did she talk about how the group teacher’s moral injunctions helped improve women’s marital relations. Many of her reminiscences centered on instances when the group lent support to women who found themselves in difficult situations at home, with neighbors, or in the workplace. There was also a new emphasis on the advantages of learning, and on how it helped women in their striving for moral renewal and personal salvation. In Fanta’s narratives, learning was now more explicitly linked to notions of ethical improvement and individual responsibility.

Being a woman these days is no easy matter, you know. There are so many responsibilities we need to shoulder, and everyone is ready to criticize us if we do not do it in ways they agree with. People say that a family’s well-being depends entirely on the mother, that her character and good breeding shows in her children’s conduct, in the respect they pay others. There are women who spend all their time complaining about the burden they carry, but this is no good. It is so important that we women embrace these duties, that we think about how to deal with our obligations and difficulties in ways conducive to family peace and to everyone’s well-being. This is why more and more women ask us whether they can join our learning group. They all want to learn about how to become a proper Muslim, and they want to talk about it with equal-minded women.

Fanta’s insistence on the individual judgment Muslim women exert in joining the group reflects her acute sense that her new marital situation required
greater independence, both mentally and materially, and simultaneously brought a greater dependence on ‘equal-minded women’. Joining a Muslim women’s group had liberating implications for her and other disciples, but not in the sense of negative freedom, of freeing her from constraints within the family (see Mahmood 2001, chapter 4). Rather, her moral endeavor was liberating in both an ethical and eschatological sense. A woman’s independence from the pressure exerted by family, neighbors, and public opinion enables her to positively embrace the path toward ethical self-making and spiritual salvation, and to assume greater responsibility for realizing the teachings of Islam.

Maimoune: Learning about Virtue; the Virtues of Learning

If, as I suggested, Fanta came to stress the liberating virtues of education as a response to a drastically altered domestic situation, this interpretation does not hold true for other Muslim women with whom I interacted on a regular basis. It certainly does not apply to Maimoune who, from the early days of our acquaintance, gave education a central place in her autobiographic self-construction. Rather than interpreting these discrepant views as mere reflections of individual idiosyncrasies, I take them as a starting place for reflecting on what Muslim women consider to be the ethical ramifications of their learning endeavor. Closer scrutiny of Maimoune’s account of her decision to join a Muslim women’s learning group reveals a differentiated understanding of the notions of self-improvement and moral agency that underlie her decision to ‘revert’ to proper Muslim practice. I draw inspiration from Keane’s discussion of the complexities of the notion of moral agency on which Protestant proselytizing in the colonial Dutch Indies revolved (Keane 2007: 52) in order to assess what understandings of religious subjectivity and pious self-making are formed in Muslim women’s learning activities.

After our initial meeting in July 1999, Maimoune and I became close confidants in the years to come. Because my host family lived almost next door to her courtyard we saw each other almost daily; very soon we made it a habit to get together on Friday afternoons when we knew that Maimoune’s husband would spend almost the entire day at San’s main mosque. From early on, Maimoune singled out learning as the central rationale of Muslim women’s group meetings, and emphasized time and again the beneficial aspects of ‘becoming a learned Muslim woman’. As she put it to me in early August 1999,

I have never been to school, you see. My parents used to tell us that girls are not made to be highly educated; that the modern school would only inspire disobedience and
obstinacy; and that girls should strive first and foremost to assist relatives, particularly their mothers, in the daily chores. This would prepare them to later become good wives and mothers. All my brothers went to [primary] school, while my older sister and I had to stay home. My parents did not know better, you see. My husband and I think differently; we send our three girls to school to give them some education and enable them to tackle life in town…. For me, the wish to become educated remained for all these years, but I was not really interested in going to one of these evening classes [i.e., adult literacy courses]. I wanted to learn how to be a proper Muslim woman; I wanted to know important suras. Because this is what ultimately matters in life: how to worship God properly. Now that I have learned the suras and am able to read them in Arabic, the language of the holy book, I feel very proud. I feel that I did something for myself. Taking these matters into your own hands is important. Because once we die and are summoned by God, no one else can stand up for you and defend your case.

For Maimoune, learning is an endeavor deeply inflected by eschatological considerations rather than a morally neutral act of expanding one’s skills and horizon of knowledge. Because the responsibility for salvation lies with every individual, she argues, each and every Muslim has to show a certain degree of autonomy and take the acquisition of morally relevant knowledge in his or her hands. In this view not just any form of learning is significant to personal self-making. Rather, certain contents (such as the memorizing of suras important in ritual practice), objectives (proper ritual performance), and a particular disposition render learning morally significant, and thus designate and help inhabit Muslim moral agency.

Earlier in this article I observed that Muslim women’s socializing activities are strongly inflected by the idea that personal reform should be achieved through the acquisition of ritually relevant knowledge. Maimoune’s account reveals the same preoccupation with the importance of Arabic literacy and religious knowledge, and thus articulates a pointedly intellectualist approach to moral reform. Yet closer scrutiny of her marked stress on intellect and understanding reveals that her conception of valuable knowledge also includes non-cognitive, emotional dimensions of learning and personal reform (see Schulz 2004, chs. 7, 8). The multivalent nature of learning, and the diverse emotional capacities and dispositions the process should foster in a disciple were subjects Maimoune brought up frequently in our conversations.

In March 2000, for instance, I met Maimoune shortly after her return from Segu, where she had visited a friend who had been the founding member of one of the first Muslim women’s neighborhood groups there. My question about the activities of this Muslim women’s group in Segu
prompted Maimoune to reflect on the aims of learning. Here, again, she highlighted believers’ individual responsibility in achieving salvation.

L. [Maimoune’s friend in Segu] was very important in my decision to embark on the path to God. When I visited her in 1997 and accompanied her to the learning group, I was very impressed with what she and her fellow disciples knew and how they acted. This instilled in me the desire to become more knowledgeable in matters of Islam. Clearly, they have been very devoted to learning what makes a woman move closer to God. What impressed me most about L. was her conduct, though. What an example of patience, wisdom, and forbearance she has become! She was not always that way, you know. But then [on the occasion of the 1997 visit], she had changed completely. All of this is because she strives to learn and improve. She gives me great courage and hope. She encourages me to emulate her, to fully subject to Islam’s injunctions, and to strive daily to become a better human being, a better wife, a better mother, and to be more patient with those who wish you ill.

Maimoune’s account of her friend’s transformation portrays learning as a process whose effects are capillary, diffuse, and pervasive. This form of learning depends on its realization both in and outside regular group meetings. Its objectives encompass not only proper ritual performance but a purposeful and total self-making that is reflected in and effected through quotidian practices of worshipping God (ebadati, from Arabic ibadat) outside the ritual domain. Maimoune’s admiration for her friend’s complete transformation illustrates that she considers learning to be effective if it is affective, that is, if it molds a woman’s emotional and ethical disposition as evidenced in spontaneous acts of model female behavior. There thus exists a certain tension between the intellectualist aspirations that Muslim women such as Maimoune articulate and their simultaneous stress on the embodied, emotionally transformative, and effective forms of learning. Yet, as I realized on many occasions, Muslim women such as Maimoune, while recognizing this tension, consider both the cognitive and emotional poles of learning to be of equal importance and to unfold their transformative potential fully only if they are achieved in tandem.

A third dimension of the learning process that Maimoune as well as her fellow disciples articulated consists of a particular mode of engagement: critical scrutiny (segesegeti), which aims at a thorough understanding (famuya, famuyali) of the teachings. Critical scrutiny, as Muslims told me repeatedly, is not geared toward challenging their teachers’ lessons or any other mode of oppositional engagement. Rather, its main rationale is to gain a thorough understanding of texts and teachings so as to come up with a firm defense of
Islam and of the contents and claims of the movement for moral renewal (Schulz 2004, chs. 7, 9). As Maimoune put it in her account of her friend’s learning activities in Segu:

I soon realized that L. took the learning very seriously. After group meetings, L. and her closest confidants often visited each other to talk about (baro) what they had learned. They carefully scrutinized (sègèsègè) each moral lesson they had received, and what their teacher had told them about the meanings of individual lines of a sura. And in case they could not find an answer to a question, or disagreed among themselves, they always brought this question up during the next meeting, and asked their teacher to elaborate so that they could understand (famuya). Their desire to truly understand Islam is certainly the reason why, when I met them again last month, they showed such improved knowledge of Islam.

Intellectual insight and conscious appropriation of the teacher’s lessons play a central role in this account. But, Maimoune insists, this ‘understanding’ follows a specific objective. It does not aim to be a challenge to male-dominated interpretations, as some studies on Muslim women’s learning and other da’wa activities would have it (e.g., Weix 1996). Rather, a Muslim woman’s learning endeavor is characterized by the constant effort to make the teacher’s lessons her own. Understanding is the first step toward articulating an independent standpoint, a step that allows women to fully endorse their decision to revert to the true teachings of Islam and to defend it against competing normative viewpoints. In other words, knowledge acquisition is intimately linked to its defense vis-à-vis hetero-normative constituencies.17

Maimoune’s emphasis on women’s individual responsibility echoes Fanta’s insistence that education opens up new spaces for autonomy to women under adverse conditions. Still, the two women privilege very different facets and implications of the same process. Fanta’s singling out of religious education as a major rationale of Muslim women’s joint activities was stimulated by the fact that her situation at home forced her to gain a certain intellectual and emotional independence from her immediate social entourage. Maimoune’s decision to join the Muslim women’s group, on the other hand, was strongly shaped from the beginning by her great appreciation of learning. The fact that she, in contrast to Fanta, had not received any Western school education certainly contributed to her eagerness to join the Muslim women’s learning group, but Maimoune’s description of the emotional and dispositional ramifications of learning illustrate that to her more is at stake than a desire for personal enlightenment qua knowledge. While intellectual autonomy counts for her too, it is only valid insofar as it is combined with and brings to the fore a believer’s emotional and dispositional re-formation. Although
Maimoune’s view is not representative of the range of positions formulated by supporters of Islamic moral renewal in Mali, her emphasis on the virtues of learning certainly reflects the convictions promoted by some of its leading female protagonists (Schulz 2004, ch. 7).

As in Fanta’s case, Maimoune’s motivations to participate in Muslim women’s learning activities should also be understood by considering her particular position in her family and in relation to her immediate surroundings. This became clear in conversations with both Maimoune and her husband, even if the two proposed very different accounts of why Maimoune’s learning activities should be relevant. In a situation where Maimoune and her husband felt they constantly had to justify Maimoune’s ‘strolling’ outside the courtyard—a charge that implicitly challenged the husband’s authority as the pater familias—he was eager to portray Maimoune’s participation in Muslim women’s learning activities as proof of her true dedication to becoming a proper Muslim and, by implication, of his continued control over her. For Maimoune, emphasizing the intellectually and ethically transformative effects of learning was a way to defend herself against charges of impropriety, and to assert that her learning was not a challenge to but rather as a reinforcement of established normative views of marital relations. But ultimately, her positive reading of the advantage that learning brought to her situation could not help her overcome the dilemmas and emotional impasse in which she often found herself.

Clearly, Muslim women’s autobiographic accounts of their learning endeavors incorporate long-standing reformist concerns with personal reform, and are also a mode by which these women seek to rework the parameters of their individual life situations—limited as this reworking may turn out to be in its effects. Broader concerns addressed by the reform movement take on material forms, and are validated according to the particular life situation and dilemmas in which individual female supporters of Islamic renewal find themselves, dilemmas that are strongly shaped by women’s particular domestic situations.

Fanta’s and Maimoune’s accounts of learning as a process of constant personal remaking also suggest that although the lessons they receive have no liberating effect in a Western feminist sense, their learning endeavors reflect a self-assertiveness that is novel in orientation and scope. For Muslim women like Fanta and Maimoune, autonomy may not come as the primary fruit of their efforts nor is it their primary concern. But the fact that notions of personal enlightenment and remaking have gained such salience in their autobiographical narratives indicates that the ideal of personal reform through knowledge acquisition, whether inherited from regional discursive traditions of Islam or inspired by Western school education, effectively reshapes women’s scope for negotiating their position within the family.
Conclusion

In this article I have taken Muslim women’s biographic self-constructions as proper believers as a window to inquire into the kind of responsibility and moral agency that these women assume and make central to their search for ‘closeness to God’. Examining what kind of moral agency they claim for themselves, I suggest, brings insights into their particular conception of collective and personal renewal and, by implication, into the particular religious subjectivity they formulate.

Muslim women’s socializing activities solidify their conviction that Islamic renewal, while centering on the individual as agent and measurement of moral reform, is deeply social in its repercussions and means of realization. Islamic renewal in urban Mali, as Fanta’s biographic account highlights, is realizable, effective, and considered genuine by its supporters because it draws on conventional ideals and forms of sociality and mutual support. This does not preclude the fact that Muslim women’s groups accomplish very diverse functions for individual members, and depend on the particular dilemmas and concerns these individuals encounter and address. In fact, an important conclusion to be drawn from the examples of Maimoune and Fanta is the great variety of motivations, and that they need to be more consistently studied with reference to Muslims’ everyday struggle and negotiation than has been done in ethnographies of Islamic revival (but see Deeb 2006; Masquelier 2009; also see Marsden 2005).

The polyvalent relevancy of these groups allows Muslim women and their husbands to articulate very different views of the rationale and effects of group membership. Socializing with like-minded women grants Muslim women emotional and institutional support that becomes especially pertinent when they find themselves in difficult domestic arrangements, but these considerations may not be women’s primary motivation for joining a Muslim women’s group. Women’s accounts of their learning activities highlight the virtues of personal enlightenment and individual self-improvement, thereby revealing how a longer-standing trend toward individuation comes to inform these believers’ articulation of eschatological concerns. Their husbands, in contrast, emphasize the disciplining effects of group membership. They assess women’s learning endeavors primarily according to its socially ordering and conservative effects, and thus foreground what for them is primarily at stake: women’s ‘insubordination’ and hence domestic power struggles.

As I have argued, Muslim women’s emphasis on individual responsibility and their positive embracing of intellectual enlightenment as a venue toward personal salvation are in line with renewal trends in the area since French colonial rule (Brenner 2001; Grosz-Ngate 2002), yet also introduce impor-
tant departures—most notably, the emphasis on personal responsibility defines female religiosity and moral agency in novel terms. Proper ritual practice figures centrally in Muslim women’s conception of Sunni identity, yet being a proper Muslim also requires the capacity and readiness to assume full responsibility for her actions, knowledge, and attitudes, all of which should reflect a woman’s efforts to realize God’s will in everyday life. Muslim women may submit to the conservative gender ideology they are taught by their leaders and teachers, yet their decision to adopt this behavior and their expressive wish to make it the path toward personal and societal moral renewal indicate that something significant has been changing in recent decades. These urban women leave the realm of moral action and responsibilities to which they have been assigned conventionally. Their decision to train themselves in the virtues of submission and forbearance is in itself a sign of assuming personal responsibility, of seeking to defend their pious disposition as enactment of their personal conviction against competing normative positions. Seen in this light, we can detect strong similarities between the female individual produced by this process of conversion to proper Muslim practice and the modern Christian analyzed by Burridge. Both individuals emerge as modern believers in the sense that they have the will and the ‘capacity to deliberately step outside custom, tradition, and given social roles, rights and obligations, scrutinize them, formulate a moral critique, and…envisage a new social order governed by new moralities’ (Burridge 1978, 13-14, cited in Keane 2007, 52). In both cases moral agency, defined by its capacity to scrutinize and choose between alternative normative viewpoints, assumes a central significance.

This leads me back to the question about the status that we, as scholars, attribute to morality and moral motivation as objects of study. By highlighting the central relevance of moral concerns to Muslim women’s search for pious self-making, I want to enter a plea for a consideration of morally motivated action on its own terms, a consideration that would make morality and moral motives the subject of anthropological inquiry. My plea draws inspiration from recent trends in the anthropology of religion that reflect an increased interest in issues of moral subjectivity. Inspired by an Aristotelian virtue ethics, scholars such as Lambek (2000), Laidlaw (2002), and Asad (2005) have called for greater attention to the subjective dimensions of visions of a good life, to the practices aiming to foster a desire to lead a virtuous life, and the models of personhood that people aim to realize in their own lives (see Mahmood 2005). These authors have made important forays into an emergent anthropology of morality, yet it seems that studies of conversion to Islam have not yet fully capitalized on these authors’ insights nor on recent studies on Christian conversion (e.g., Keane 2007).
Rather than taking the enormous appeal of morality in contemporary Islamic revivalist movements as a simple reflection of strategic interests or of political competition, I argue for an understanding of morality as one aspect of human condition and social practice that needs to be taken seriously in its own right (see Karlstrom 2004, 2008). To assume that people always act out of moral considerations would obviously be an idealist fallacy, but to reduce all action to interest would amount to a similarly reductive rationalist-strategic reading. Studies of processes of conversion to and within Islam could benefit immensely from navigating the fallacies of both interpretational schemes.

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Notes

1. The article is based on research conducted primarily in San, a town of ca 12,000 inhabitants in southeastern Mali and in the capital, Bamako, between July 1998 and August 2006 (twenty-two months in total). I conducted the research in Bamanakan, the lingua franca of southern Mali, and in French. In addition to participant observation among and more than 60 semi-structured interviews with supporters of the Islamic moral-renewal movement, I regularly attended the two—or three-weekly learning sessions of Muslim women in San and Bamako. I also participated in numerous religious ceremonies and social events organized by Muslim women in these two locales.

2. The moral renewal movement is strongest in urban areas in which lineages associated with Sufi orders and other traditional religious authorities formerly had little political influence. In these towns women who participate in Muslim women’s groups make up between 30 and 40 per cent of adult (married) women. By referring to themselves as ‘Muslim women’, female supporters of Islamic renewal posit, if only implicitly, that only they follow the path set by the *sunna*, that is, the example of the Prophet. They avoid making this claim more explicit, knowing well that by denying other women the status of Sunni Muslims they risk perpetuating earlier struggles among Malian Muslims over ritual orthopraxy (Schulz 2008a). Still, to other women who also see themselves as observant Muslims, the claim that they are not Muslim women is deeply offensive and often strongly contested. This article focuses on married Muslim women who are the strongest group of female supporters of Islam in Mali, in contrast to Senegal and Ivory Coast where female students seem to play a much more prominent role in Muslim activism (LeBlanc 1999; Augis 2002).

3. Following Nock’s (1933, 7) definition of conversion as a process of reorientation in personal piety and a deepening of one’s relationship to God, Muslim women’s ‘return’ can be portrayed as a conversion process. Yet it is important to keep in mind that rather than speaking of conversion, Muslim women portray their support of Islamic renewal as ‘reverting’.
to true Islam (*ka sègin silameya la*). See Schulz (2008a) for a discussion of the complexities in Muslim women's accounts of their reversion.

4. I did not purposefully elicit autobiographic information from the Muslim women with whom I socialized; nevertheless, there were many instances in which women spontaneously framed their explanations of their decisions to join the movement in an autobiographic narrative form. These statements did not have the conventional form of autobiographic narrative in the sense of being collected during interviews and studied by scholars of conversion, yet even though these autobiographic accounts consist mostly of snippets of reminiscences, they matter, I argue, because they illustrate that these women privilege autobiography and personal experience as a means of framing and presenting their support of Islamic moral renewal and their decision to join the movement.

5. Their activities have antecedents in the reforms initiated by a younger generation of Muslims after their return from prolonged stays in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and sometimes North Africa in the 1940s. Their reforms contributed importantly to the unsettling of conventional foundations of religious interpretive authority.

6. *Kalan* means both ‘to read’ and ‘to learn’.

7. Some of them date back to the 1980s, that is, to a historical period marked by the fundamental restructuring of urban domestic economies under the effects of neoliberal economic policy. But the majority of these groups only began to play a public role after the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1992. Since 1996 the majority of the women's groups have organized themselves within the national women's organization, the UNAFEM (*Union Nationale des Femmes Musulmanes du Mali*), a branch of the AMUPI.

8. In contrast to West African countries where Muslim activist projects seem to attribute great importance to addressing youth, in Mali mobilization has been strongly geared toward married women (e.g., Roy 1994; Le Blanc 1999; Miran 1998; Augis 2002; Alidou 2005; see Hock 1998).

9. Although the notion of a pathway to God echoes conceptions of religious striving formulated by supporters of mystical Islam, Muslim women do not recognize these parallels as significant or noteworthy. Their indifference toward (or, as one could view it, broad acceptance of) concepts central to Sufi-related practices indicates how much the practices of these believers are inflected by conventional understandings of religious practice and thus do not introduce a radical break with ‘traditionalist’ Islam (Brenner 1993, 70f).

10. Even before the implementation of Structural Adjustment measures, employees of the public sector were confronted with notoriously irregular payment of their salaries. Almost without exception, employees devoted most of their time to making a living outside their formal employment (Konaté 1990).

11. *Nasongo* refers to the various food items that, ideally, the *pater familias* should provide.

12. Kandiyoti coined the term ‘patriarchal bargain’ to elucidate why women comply with the patriarchal norms of female propriety even if these norms go against their own perceptions of personal dignity, responsibility, and the legitimacy of male public command (Kandiyoti 1988). Kandiyoti argued that women accommodate gender-specific norms of propriety against their own short-term interests because strategic advantages to compliance exist for both men and women. Women consider the adoption of a certain code of moral conduct as the price they need to pay for the protection and material support they receive, or hope to receive, from husbands and male relatives.

13. If a husband cannot ensure his family's survival his mother is expected to take over at least part of his responsibilities, such as additional costs of child maintenance. Many
conflicts arise between women and their mothers-in-law, who blame the former for spend-
ing their money ‘idly’ instead of reinvesting it into family subsistence, and accuse them of
‘greed’. Other mothers-in-law contrast their daughter-in-law’s ‘selfishness’ with the ‘good
old times’ when women were ready to give up everything ‘for love’ and out of respect for
their parents.

14. If autobiographic accounts came up during conversations, it was my conversation
partner’s choice to frame her reflections in this manner. My conversation partners chose
an autobiographic framing of their reflections more often in situations in which the two
of us were alone. I also collected snippets of autobiographic accounts on occasions when
we socialized with other Muslim women and conversation moved from one topic of every-
day concern to the next.

15. My argument capitalizes on Karin Willemse’s (2005) insightful distinction between
two different kinds of silences: that the first omits what the speaker assumes to be com-
mon knowledge, shared by speaker and interlocutor; the other silence (exemplified by this
particular case) refers to something left out, whose articulation would expose the speaker
to social sanction.

16. This view echoes understandings of the objectives of learning that are formulated
by female participants of the ‘Mosque Movement’ in Cairo (Mahmood 2005). However,
important variations exist in the understanding of learning articulated by different Mus-
lim women’s groups and their leaders in urban Mali (Schulz 2004, ch. 7). Also, as
Maimoune’s case illustrates, we need to make room for the possibility that the meanings
individual women attribute to ‘learning’ change substantially over their life course, partly
as a result of women’s changing experiences and domestic situations. This point, which
can be explored satisfactorily only through research spanning several years, is not addressed
in Mahmood’s analysis.

17. Muslim women’s emphasis on their ability to defend their decision to ‘embark on
the path of God’ leads them to emphasize the obligation to publicize their efforts and
convictions so as to invite other women to join the movement toward moral renewal
(Schulz 2008a, b).