of Djenné proclamed his conversion to Islam, 4200 ulama were present, as written by the West African historian as-Sudî in approximatively 1650. Although the writer, himself, is not once imam of the town, may have exaggerated, clearly Islam was significant in the city at that time, and it remains so today.

Djenné is now a small town with about 13,000 inhabitants of ethnically diverse origin – mostly Marka/Sonray, Fulani and Bozo. It is of only minor economic importance to the region. But Djenné’s famous mosque (placed on UNESCO’s world heritage list in 1985) and its many Qur’anic schools still reflect the glorious days of the past.

The town has some 35 schools for elementary Qur’anic education as well as a dozen schools for ‘secondary’ education where law, Arabic grammar, rhetoric and literature, theology, the traditions of the Prophet and Qur’anic exegesis are taught. Teachers at these schools are known as alif (derived from the Arabic al fitâḥ) in Songhay, or módîbo (from the Arabic mu’addîb) in Fulful. Young children are entrusted to an alîf. Instruction in reciting the Qur’an. Older students seek his guidance in their pursuit of Islamic knowledge. In French, the language of the former colonizers, the teachers are known as marabouts, a term which is employed throughout Muslim West Africa.

Marabouts, as my research assistant Bouba Kouroumane once told me, ‘teach how to follow God and marabouts know how to ask God’. In this concise way, he referred to the two kinds of knowledge marabouts possess. A distinction is made between so-called ‘public’ knowledge and ‘secret’ knowledge. Public knowledge is associated with the praxis of education at the Qur’anic schools and secret knowledge is applied in ‘maraboutage’ – the complex of magico-religious practices of which amulet production and divination are the most significant.

Marabouts and the individual’s well-being

Marabouts play an important role in the life of the individual in Djenné. This becomes especially clear at the critical stages of life – birth, circumcision, marriage and death. At an infant’s naming ceremony a marabout announces the child’s name and blesses it. At the time of their circumcision, young boys are provided with amulets to protect themselves against evil and dangers. When the boys return to their families, parents ‘store’ the night of seclusion, a marabout pronounces benedictions for them. A marriage is contracted by a marabout and, finally, it is a marabout who leads the last prayers over a corpse and directs the reading of the Qur’an or the Dala’il al Khairat – a panegyric in honour of Muhammad – at the condolence gatherings to facilitate the afterlife of the deceased.

The individual’s well-being, however, is not only taken care of at the critical stages of life. In everyday existence, marabouts also render a variety of services to ensure a person’s health, to offer security and to guarantee the material welfare. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life. By means of divination, suprernatural prayer, amulet production and divination they may cure someone, protect them, offer security and to give a guarantee of a successful life.