Since 1991, when multi-party democracy was established in Mali, there has been a remarkable proliferation of Muslim associations that call for moral renewal of Malian society and for spreading the teachings of Islam. Some associations make extensive use of broadcast technology, helping them create transnational communities of believers at an unprecedented rate. Women play a prominent role in these associations, not only as followers, but as self-appointed spokeswomen and models of a new ‘Islamic’ way of life.

Many members of the Western-oriented elite explain the Muslim associations’ current success by the substantial financial support they receive from the Arab world, but the reasons for their prominent position in the national arena are far more complex. They are the most recent expression of a longer history of intellectual and material exchange between Muslim West Africa and the Arab world – and more recently, cities of the West. Contrary to their supposed literalist readings of written sources and claims to authentic ritual practices – seen by the associations themselves as countering the influences of the West – these Malian initiatives can be understood as locally variable incorporations of Western consumer culture and notions of subjecthood and achievement, and of religious symbols and accessories from the Arab world. This heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory legacy of current Muslim movements in Mali is clearly expressed in the field of education, where the struggle for access to political and economic resources in the post-colonial state is predominant.

There are a few associations that call for the return of the sharia. Most of them emphasize faith as a matter of personal conviction and moral conduct. Their view strongly individuates religious identity. This concurrence with individual conviction offers an explicitly ‘modern’ element to the associations’ search for identity in a public arena where the government controls national and local broadcasting, does not hold the monopoly over resources of ideological orientation. In fact, the government is deeply ambivalent about the whether, and the extent to which, a ‘Malian’ path towards modernity should be based on ‘occidental’ or ‘Islamic’ values.

A women’s association was invited to perform at a baptism ceremony.

The public debate over Malian moral values

The competing versions of what constitutes the ‘authentically Malian’ moral values constitute a central field of contention and ideological struggle among Muslim associations and socio-political interest groups. Central to the public debate is a concern with what is seen as the dissolution of traditional values and social solidarity under the onslaught of Westernization. Instead of criticizing the degrading living conditions which are a source of growing intergenerational and gender conflict, Muslim leaders attract follow-

ers by presenting these difficulties as a matter of moral decadence, proposing individual solutions to the moral war waged in other countries in response to radical changes in living conditions. Women, in their roles as respectable mothers and dutiful wives, are given a central role as guardians of tradition. Women’s dress code and bodily enactment of chastity become central codes of moral conduct. The movements differ substantially in their relationships with current political leadership and in their degree of secularism. This also sets them apart from the leading marabout clans and representatives of the different brotherhoods that form a substantial part of the religious establishment. The new Muslim initiatives are especially critical of the practice of curing illnesses attributed to occult forces causing illness and disease. Rather, they condemn many self-appointed marabouts turning the fabrication of amulets and other protective ‘medicines’ into an expanding, lucrative business.

The new Muslim associations are primarily an urban phenomenon, both in their antecedents and in the way they express themselves. While some groups recruit their followers primarily from graduates of Western schools, other groups are comprised of people from lower urban classes (artisans, petty traders, people working in the informal sector of town). Apart from regular attendance of group meetings and the exchange of written correspondence, members perform the rituals associated with the original, often public and male-dominated Islamic practices. The meetings provide a sanctioned space for women to attend group meetings is that they promote emotional certainty and some financial support. Socializing with women with similarly modest lifestyle styles liberated women from the social pressure to prove sociability through their capacity to spend. Also, the small contributions collected during group meetings are given out to members to enable them to overcome financially difficult situations or to start a small-scale trade enterprise. The meetings provide a sanctioned space for informal exchange of information, and even gossip. Many men strongly oppose their wives’ joining a credit savings group which even many women do trust because of the many stories of failure and misappropriation of group funds, but no husband can prevent his wife from joining such a group without risking being called a ‘bad Muslim.’

Reaching out to a transnational community

A major factor facilitating Muslim women’s public prominence is their central role in local radio stations and audio cassettes to disseminate to a larger public their vision of an Islamic renewal and of the role that women should play. These male representatives of Muslim associations. Although these female speakers articulate their call for moral renewal in ways that support male authorities’ conservative outlook on gender roles and conduct, women’s sermons appeal to many men and women, not only members of associations, because they articulate a discussion relevant to the loss of social solidarity. Moreover, they represent current difficulties of urban life as something to be resolved by individual