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PRICEY PUBLICITY, REFUTABLE REPUTATIONS
Jeliw and the Economics of Honour in Mali*

Dorothea E. Schulz

1. INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to the volume on "Honor and Shame" in Mediterranean societies, Peristiany (1965b) posits that a person's social standing is always related to the fulfillment of certain normative expectations, norms that are most binding within a small scale society. In these communities, characterized by face to face interaction and personal relations, "[h] onor and shame are the constant preoccupation of individuals" (Peristiany 1965a:11). Not only has honourable status to be acquired and sustained, it is open to challenge, threat, and doubt by other members of the community. The volume's fascinating case studies illustrate that each society has its own notions of honour and shame. Also, the ways in which individuals gain and sustain 'honour' are not static, but vary from one situation to another and change with the transformation of social and political hierarchies.

Because all these case studies are based on research in rural areas, they pay little attention to the effects of urbanization and the related new forms of social interaction with individual actors' strategies to achieve a honourable position. Peristiany establishes a contrast between the domain of "minimal solidary groups", such as clans or families, in which "spheres of action are well defined, non-overlapping and non-competitive" and the outside world characterised by an "insecurity and instability of honor-shame ranking" (Peristiany 1965a:11). Peristiany thus emphasizes that the need to constantly create and maintain one's good reputation becomes more salient when formal hierarchies are less binding and prone to challenge. He does not explore, however, how the integration of small-scale societies into a larger nation state and the concomittant transformation of socio-political hierarchies affect individual actors' need to secure their political standing.

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What are the implications of these changes on people's ambitions to achieve an honourable standing? How do they assert their social standing in a situation in which former social and political hierarchies do not have the same validity as before? How do urbanization and the emergence of a larger public affect the setting in which a person claims and achieves honourability? And finally, what happens if the possession of money, as a means to distribute wealth and to display prestige, becomes a constitutive element of social relations? How do these changes affect the relationship of interdependence between wealth and reputation?

To explore these questions is the purpose of this article. It draws on case material from contemporary Mali to show how people find innovative ways to achieve honourability in a new, urban setting where the acquisition of honour involves both more risks and more gains than in the more close-knit setting of rural communities. It examines the intricate procedures of honour acquisition in Mali, and how the sources of honourability and prestige change over time. Analysis focuses on one particular instance of honour acquisition in Mali: encounters, in the presence of a larger audience, between wealthy, influential members of Malian society and praise singers, the so-called *jeliw*.[1]

2. *Ambivalences of Public Praise*

Over the past 20 years, a number of women singers have become the stars and emblematic figures of Malian popular music. Many of these women belong to a group of professional musicians, the *jeliw* who, before and during the colonial period, worked as praise singers and public speakers for powerful families in southern Mali.[2] At that time, the societies of southern Mali were highly stratified and included people of free birth (*hòròn*), serfs (*jon*), and *jeliw* and other families of clients (*nyamakalaw*). The latter were endogamous and usually specialized in various artisanal productions in the service of powerful patron families.[3] *Jeliw* lived next door to powerful and rich families for whom they performed various tasks of social mediation. *Jeliw* men and women with outstanding musical and rhetorical skills spoke for their patron families at public events and praised them. *Jeliw* lauded the accomplishments of legendary members of

1 The singular form of the Bamana term '*jeliw*' is '*jeli*'. Discussion focuses on praise singers of the societies of southern Mali where most people speak either Bamana or Maninka, two closely related languages (cf. footnote 8). All expressions and quotations given in the text are in Bamana.

2 At that time, the public performance of music was considered a client's service and not appropriate for a free-born. Today, in contrast, a growing number of Malian musicians are of free birth. Regardless of their origin, these artists adopt in many performances the *jeli* praise style because public praise of powerful individuals has become the most important source of income on the popular music market (Schulz 1998).

3 These groups of specialists included the blacksmiths (*numun*), leathermakers (*garanke*), and people specializing in public speech (*fune*).

the patron family, and suggested to other free-born people who assisted to the performance that they should feel gratified to live together with these models of personal excellence. In this fashion, *jeliw* often played a crucial role in sustaining and enhancing the honourable reputation of their patron family. Public speech and praise were only a few among many tasks members of *jeliw* families were expected to perform on behalf of their patrons. *Jeliw* with psychological and rethorical skills would be called upon to resolve all kinds of conflicts arising between families from different villages. Also, as go-betweens, marriage negotiators, and family traditionalists, *jeliw* facilitated the interaction between different free-born noble families. Depending on their own economic standing and satisfaction with the *jeliw*'s service, free people compensated the *jeliw* for their interventions with varying generosity. They gave *jeliw* diverse kinds of gifts, such as food, cattle and even slaves.[4]

In contrast to oral tradition that presents the relations between *jeliw* and free people in nineteenth century as full of harmony and mutual empathy, some written accounts suggest that the patronage relations were fraught with tension. Free people had mixed feelings about *jeliw* and their activities of mediation, and *jeliw* capitalized on the fact that they were expected to utter publicly what a free born person could never express without being considered 'shameless' (see Monteil 1977:24–25).

Still today, free people often view their public interactions with *jeliw* as a mixed blessing. Rich merchants, politicians or other people of public renown, once they become the object of a *jeli*'s praise, will not hesitate to display their generosity towards *jeliw*, whether this praise has been ordered or whether it has been spontaneously bestowed on the patron. In off-stage discussions, however, the person who has just given the singer a generous pay will express his fear of meeting the *jeli* again, because "these *jeliw* can ask you for whatever they want and you certainly cannot decline their offer to sing for you".

I made my first experiences with *jeliw* and the mixed feelings they may inspire in 1987. At this time, I lived in a village in the western Sahelian zone of Mali, near the Mauretanian border. Only a few days after my arrival, I paid a visit to a neighbouring village to introduce myself to the village chief family and to explain the reasons for my stay in the area. We had not even reached the courtyard of the village chief when a woman suddenly walked up to me, inquired about my name and then asked me in a direct and, as I felt, impudent manner to give her some money. I felt uncomfortable about her request and could not understand what all of this was about. I sneaked a look at people standing next to me and realized that they avoided eye contact with me. They explained to me in a strangely uptight manner that "this is the village *jeli*, this is

4 Today, many *jeliw* claim that their fathers "never had to cultivate" but lived exclusively from their patrons' provisions. It is, however, likely that most *jeli* families were not as dependent on their patrons in nineteenth century as *jeliw* claim it today – and as it is often presented in the scholarly literature. On the reasons for this retrospective idealization of *jeliw*'s extent of economic dependence, see Schulz (1998).

the person we entrust ourselves to once we disagree with each other"; but they were reticent to give me any further cue as to how to deal with this situation. My impression was that they felt embarrassed, too, but did not want to interfere. I declined giving money to the woman, because I strongly resented what I saw as her lack of politeness and *decorum*. After some minutes that appeared to me an eternity, the woman walked away, very visibly upset about my refusal. And glancing at my co-visitors faces, it dawned in me that my decision was a serious mistake. But people nevertheless did not explain to me why I had been wrong. Several weeks later I returned to the same village. Once again, I was confronted with the *jeli* woman's request for money. She emerged all of a sudden, as I was walking through the village, took position in front of me and before I could even address her with my share of the common exchange of polite greeting formula, yelled some (for me unintelligible) phrases which, as people were pressed to explain to me, were lines of praise for me. This time, people immediately suggested to me – with visible embarassment – that such praise was to be remunerated in the form of a gift. So, I gave some money to the *jeli* woman, although I still felt somehow awkward being obliged to pay somebody for a praise I had not even asked for. Still today, I have very visceral memories of the fear and uneasiness I felt any time I returned to this village. I felt haunted by the prospect of meeting the *jeli* woman again, because I was both afraid and resentful of having to respond once again to her demands.

3. *Ethnographies of 'Griotism': Jeliw's puzzling Status*

It is striking how much room and effort nineteenth century travelers and later, colonial administrators, devoted to understanding the role that *jeliw* (or 'griots' as they called them) played at that time. To these authors, the activities of *jeliw* and their status were somewhat enigmatic.[5] What puzzled them most was that *jeliw* were held in fear and respect, yet looked down upon at the time. Other authors wondered why *jeliw* were given presents without even actually singing the praise of the free born patron (e.g. Monteil 1977:25). As a result, the early writers on Mande[6] speaking societies were

5 For an intriguing example of the travelers' astonishment about *jeliw*'s behaviour and status that appeared to them both striking and incomprehensible, see Conrad and Frank (1995).

6 The term 'Mande' or 'Manding' is often used, in particular by scholars of the anglophone world, to refer to all societies in West Africa that speak a Mande language (for example Conrad and Frank 1995). Although authors emphasize that Mande peoples have been for centuries interacting with neighbouring peoples, the term 'Mande culture' is problematic because it implies that all people who speak a Mande language share a 'pool' of common cultural practices and social institutions which distinguishes them from other people living in the same territory, such as the Fulbe peoples. This view has been questioned long ago by Bazin (1985) and Amselle (1990). For a recent interrogation of the assumption of clear-cut boundaries between different 'ethnic groups', see the contributions to de Bruijn and van Dijk (1997).

preoccupied with the attempt to place *jeliw* and other client families (*nyamakalaw*) in a social clear-cut social hierarchy. This concern with status and social hierarchies is still visible in recent scholarly accounts of *jeliw* and *nyamakalaw*, because they, too, posit that *jeliw* occupy a special position in society, a position they then set out to explain (e.g. Hoffman 1995; cf. McNauhgton 1995). Inspired by the work of Dominique Zahan, some scholars even argue that *jeliw* have an 'ambiguous' and 'contradictory' status (e.g. Conrad and Frank 1995). In their view, free people have ambivalent feelings towards the groups of clients (*nyamakalaw*) to whom the *jeliw* belong, because they control an occult and enabling force, *nyama. Nyama* is set free in any process of transformation (such as animal skin into leather, iron into tools, silent knowledge into the spoken word) and is feared by people of free descent for its potentially destructive effects. In my view, however, the preoccupation with the 'status' of *jeliw* offers little insight into the activities and political and social significance of *jeliw*[7], but perpetuates the Western tradition of puzzlement over free people's mixed feelings towards *jeliw*.

How, then, can we explain that free people view the speech and praise performances of *jeliw* as a mixed blessing? Why do fee people rely on *jeliw* to gain public renown and respectability? Have these ambivalences always been inherent to the ways in which *jeliw* fabricated a good name for patrons – or are these tensions a result of recent changes that affect the relationship between *jeliw* and patrons and thus the social conditions that circumscribe the fabrication of honour in Malian society?

To respond to these questions, the following discussion explores the performances of the *jeliw* women pop singers, and how they create a good reputation for their 'patrons'. This group of women pop stars owe their success as emblematic figures of Malian popular music to the emergence of electronic media, in particular radio, cassettes, and television. They flatter individuals of public renown in their broadcast songs, but they may also spontaneously bestow praise on a patron whom they perceive in the audience of their public concerts in Mali's capital Bamako and other towns. My discussion focuses on praise encounters in concert halls. Analysis of the interaction between pop singers, patrons, and the audience will shed light on the reasons that motivate patrons today to treat *jeliw* with respect, skepticism and distrust, yet to give them generous gifts.

I argue that the uneasiness that free people feel with respect to *jeliw* praise might is due to the particular exchange relation in which the two partners engage. The *jeliw*'s position is not 'contradictory' or 'ambiguous', but free-born people have ambivalent feelings towards *jeliw* and their praise performances in particular. We will understand these ambivalent feelings when we pay closer attention to the values that patrons and *jeliw* exchange and negotiate over. For this purpose, we need to consider the audience's assessment of the exchanged services and goods, and of their respective values.

7 I have argued elsewhere that the notion of an 'ambiguous' or even 'contradictory' status is inaccurate because a status in itself can not be ambiguous. Rather, people may hold divergent and contradictory views of a person and its social standing (Schulz n.d.).

I analyse the particular rhetorical strategies that *jeliw* apply to praise patrons in public concerts and to convince the object of their praise that their reputation management is crucial to his or her public renown. The results shed light on the ways in which public reputation is currently created in urban Mali, on what basis honour is accorded, yet also, how an individual's good reputation may be threatened. But before turning to the analysis of these instances of the fabrication of honourability, I retrace the most important changes that affected the relationship between *jeliw* and their former patrons over the past hundred years. In a second step, I identify the predominant conceptions of reputation and of honour on which *jeliw* play.

4. The Changing Terms of Patronage

Changes in the social organization, political structures, and economic conditions put the previous mutual and binding obligations between *jeliw* and their patron families at risk. After Mali's independence in 1960, *jeliw* did not manage to gain an official position in the institutions of the nation state. They were thus not able to transform the roles they had been playing in rural political and social life to similarly influential positions in the nation state. Another consequence of the social and economic changes was that many *jeliw* lost their former privileged position as allies of the political and economic elites, and had to look out for new income opportunities. Some *jeliw* were able to find new economic niches as musicians and entertainers performing on the only recently introduced broadcast media. Another result of the profound changes was that new elites emerged in the colonial and postcolonial state who owed their power and wealth to colonial schooling, positions in the colonial administration and in the political parties, and to the new markets and consumer demands created under colonial rule. These new elites were often of lower social origin and felt therefore often under pressure to prove to contestants the legitimate basis of their claims to power. But they also had an income to spend on activities that would enhance their public renown as rich, powerful, and generous patrons. Over the years of colonial rule, more and more *jeliw* from urban areas affiliated with these new rich individuals. *Jeliw* publicly referred to them as 'patrons' and offered to praise them. Over the past 20 years, a veritable market of flattery has emerged, supported by the new leaders' increased demand for prestige enhancement, by the ambitions of numerous *jeliw* to find a new income opportunity in town, and finally, by the broadcast media that offered novel possibilities of public prestige management (see Schulz 1997). Women *jeliw* have been particularly successful in turning praise into a profession: their songs range on the top of the national hit list, and their tapes are sold in national and international markets (Duran 1995). In Mali, the pop stars perform regularly at public concerts in Bamako, Mali's capital, and in other towns. They benefit from these public occasions to laud and flat-

ter rich and influential members of the audience. In the scholarly and popular international literature, the pop stars are often referred to by their French name *griot* (e.g. Hale 1994). People in Mali refer to them as "these modern *jeliw*" or "today's *jeliw*" (*jeli kura*, *bi jeli* in Bamana). The pop stars themselves, on the other hand, claim that they faithfully preserve the traditional profession of *jeliya*. However, a growing number of pop singers are not of *jeliw* birth, but simply adopt the demeanour and rhetoric of praise singers. This development shows that broadcasting and the musical recording industry has created a new market which musicians of various social background try to enter. Song performances, and the public praise of rich individuals in particular, have become a highly lucrative profession. Musicians from various social origins seek to endow themselves with the prestige that some *jeliw* performers and traditionalists, usually from the older generation, hold in Malian public culture (Diawara 1994; Keita 1995).

The songs of the pop stars are often based on the melodies, rhythms and texts of songs that are widely known in the diverse rural regions of Mali. But because most *jeliw* stars come from the Bamana and Maninka regions of the south, their songs reflect the musical traditions of southern Mali (Schulz 1996:207–208). Some of the songs are praise songs, others are revised versions of already existing folk songs.

5. Reputation and Honour in Contemporary Malian Society

No word in Bamana or Maninka, the two languages in which the pop stars sing, fully translates our conceptions of a good reputation and of honour.[8] Three concepts come close to our notions of reputation and honour. Each of them renders only one dimension and sheds light how this particular aspect of a good reputation is acquired, created, questioned or threatened.

The word that comes closest to our notion of reputation is '*tògò*'. The literal translation of *tògò* is 'the (first) name of a person'; it implies the public reputation that an individual achieves on the basis of his or her accomplishments and personality features such as courage, strength, ruse (for men), and patience, submission, and endurance (for women). Most often, a person's good reputation is the result of the activities and tasks she performed in the interest of the community, in accordance with the

8 In scholarly publications and in Malian public discourse, Bamana, the language of commerce, is often referred to as the *lingua franca* of Mali. In reality, however, Bamana, similar to the closely related language Maninka, is mostly spoken by the diverse peoples of the southern triangle of Mali. The peoples of southern Mali were less reticent to the French colonial penetration and were integrated rather smoothly into the administrative structures of the colonial state. As a consequence, Bamana and Maninka have been promoted as national languages at the expense of other languages. Malian radio and television broadcasts are primarily in Bamana and French.

standards of appropriate conduct. On the other hand, an individual may gain public renown precisely because he breaks the norms that guarantee social harmony and community welfare, if he accomplishes outstanding deeds and, by his success, establishes new standards of personal excellence (Bird and Kendall 1980:22–23).

'*Dambe*' designates the honour and prestige a person gains from living up to the expectations put on him, his social position and status in society. Thus, *dambe* comes close to our concept of professional ethics. It prescribes a particular pattern of conduct, the enactment of which guarantees an exemplary professional performance. Not only people of free descent strive to live up to the standards of their *dambe*. I met many *jeliw* who, in discussions with me and in interaction with patrons, made it perfectly clear that they took great pride in the fulfillment of their *dambe*.

'*Hòròn*ya' is usually translated into French as 'nobility' (*noblesse*) and 'free descent' (*souche libre*).[9] It refers to a particular social status and origin, and to the normative expectations linked to this status. *Hòròn* are all those who are free born and who descend from families who, in the 19th century, lived, even though to varying degrees, from warfare, slave trade, and agricultural production. The notion of 'free birth' clearly sets them apart from descendants of serfs and from the socioprofessional groups of clients (*nyamakala*) to whom *jeliw* belong. The norms of conduct that are expected from a *hòròn* include: moderate, low-pitched, quiet speech, use of carefully-measured and well-reflected expressions, down-playing gestures, and finally slow and controlled body movements and walking. In addition, a person is considered *hòròn* when she behaves in a modest, restrained, and understating way in public. Yet in interactions with people of inferior status, she is expected to show her superior rank by a condescending and arrogant air.

6. *Praise in Public Concerts*

The women pop stars laud patrons either in live concerts or in songs broadcast on radio and television. Some particularly successful women have already made some recordings of praise and other songs which are reproduced on tapes and CD disks in Europe, and distributed in African countries and all over the world. A handful of pop stars travels regularly to Europe and the US to give concerts and make new recordings. Because international audiences cannot fully appreciate the praise content of these

[9] In most of the scholarly literature, people of free birth are usually referred to as 'nobles' (e.g. Hoffman 1995). This term is misleading because it insinuates a parallel between the aristocracy or nobility of European history and the powerful clans of Malian precolonial history. The term '*hòròn*' comes from the Arabic term '*hurr*' and simply indicates that the person in question was not born into captivity or dependence. See also Diawara's insightful account of 19th century social hierarchies in the Jaara 'kingdom' (1990:38–50).

songs, the appeal of *jeliw* performances to international audiences resides mostly in their music and performance skills. In contrast, at public concerts in a Malian setting, it is likely that the *jeliw* performances are so compelling first, because of the combination of its visual, musical, and textual elements and second, because the audience takes great interest in the interaction between the performing *jeli* and the patrons they laud. This section analyzes the different steps of the interaction between *jeli* pop stars and the patrons they laud in public concerts, to illustrate how *jeliw* laud patrons and thus create 'on the spot' his honourable reputation.

Jeliw pop stars and members of Malian 'high society' have plenty of opportunities to meet and interact, such as at weddings, other family events or public concerts. The degree of publicness and the publicity effects of these settings vary strongly and depend, among other factors, on the size and composition of the audience. Many *jeliw* pop stars consider live concerts the best setting to gain large sums of cash. Another advantage of a praise performance that is staged in front of a larger public is that it will enhance her renown as a skillful client of influential patrons. In a similar vein, many 'VIPs' not only welcome but intentionally arrange a public encounter with famous women singers, because the public setting gives patrons the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations to popularity and renown.

A striking feature of all pop concerts I attended to in the period from 1992 to 1996 was that about 85 per cent of the audience was female.[10] The women and men I asked about the reasons for this 'gender bias' explained to me unanimously that "women are just more interested in this kind of singers and their performances". However we might interpret this statement, the strong representation of women in the audience implies that most of 'the rich and the beautiful' who hope to be lauded by *jeliw* during live concerts are women. Many of the rich women who attend the concerts owe their positions of prominence and wealth to commercial activities.

The pop stars perform a wide array of songs in concert. Only few songs are praise songs in the strict sense of the term. Many songs draw on the text, melody, and rhythm of already existing and often well-known folk songs from the rural areas of southern Mali. Sometimes they are newly arranged by the performer, who combine the rhythm and melody of a folk song with a new text. The song texts vary considerably in their rhetorical *rafinesse*, metaphorical depth, and in the topics they address. Some songs recount the deeds of exemplary personalities or of legendary heroes. Other songs address issues that are of particular concern to urban listener groups, such as 'poverty' and 'politics' for young, unmarried, and often unemployed young men, or 'marital affairs' and 'family conflicts' for younger and middle-aged women. Some songs are reminiscent of Western-style love songs. The selection of topics and arrangement of the

10 The entrance fee for the concerts ranged from 1.500 to 2.500 FCFA (1000≙10 FF), a sum that equals the costs of two dishes prepared for a household with twelve persons. Therefore, only people from middle and higher income groups of urban society can attend to these concerts.

text depends on the knowledge, preferences and taste of the performing singer. Praise songs (*fasa*) in the true sense of the term focus on the laudible characteristics and accomplishments of a person whose identity is already alluded to, if not explicitly mentioned, in the song title. They are performed at family ceremonies and other occasions on which a larger public gathers, both in rural areas and in the city. Similar to their 'folk models', the pop stars' praise songs are composed of lines of formulaic expressions that alternate with passages that are open to spontaneous invention and variation. Lines of praise may be added or taken of at the performer's discretion. If the pop star recognizes a person in the audience whom she hopes will pay her generously, the *jeli* will try to please and flatter this prospective candidate of her praise. One way of pleasing a patron is to mention his or her prestigious family name. If a *jeli* wants to render her public flattery more explicit, she may allude to certain details of the patron's family that are so specific and characteristic that only somebody close to the family will know of. Whatever form the praise may take, it is important to keep in mind that it is entirely at the *jeli*'s discretion to flatter a patron. A rich woman who wishes that the pop star will mention her name publicly may encourage her with some generous presents. But the praise is not always solicited by the person to whom it is attributed: *jeliw* singers may impose their praise on a reluctant patron by publicly lauding his generosity. They may openly declare how attached they feel to the patron and thus publicly pressure him to live up to the 'hope' (*jigi*)[11] put on him.

What are the different steps of the praise encounter between *jeliw* pop stars and the people they chose to flatter? What rhetorics does a *jeli* employ when she imposes her praise on individuals of public renown? A pop star usually starts with her public flattery once she has warmed up the audience with some of her most popular hits. A subtle way of praising a patron who is sitting in the audience is to insert praise lines or passages that entail indirect laudations of the patron's family name. Or the singer may laud the prestige of the patron's clan by recalling some legendary events in the clan's political history. Still another possibility is to refer to names of places from the patron's native region, places that acquired a particular meaning as sites of historical events, such as battle sites. These rhetorical devices yield two advantages for the singer. First, the mere insinuation of the patron's prestigious family background will gratify the patron, whether his provenance from such a prestigious family background is invented or real. It is therefore most certain that he will compensate the singer generously. Second, the enumeration of past events, heroes, and strategic sites gives the *jeli* ample opportunity to show off her knowledge of a region's political history. In many cases, it suffices for the *jeli* to make a few, general comments on the patron's family *renommé*. While the star is still singing, members of the audience will rise in great numbers, walk to the stage with ostentatious composure and pride and throw bundles of money at the feet

11 This is the term that *jeliw* often use to address their patrons, in public speech and praise songs.

of the singer. Rare are the situations in which the patron acknowledges the pop star's skillful presentation personally. Usually, she relegates the gesture of gift-giving to her relatives and friends. Another possibility is that people who want to publicly declare themselves as this person's clients spontaneously decide to add their share to the *jeli*'s public recompense. There is thus a heightened effect of elevation of the praised person by a combination of the *jeli*'s words and allusions, and the acts of recognition of clients which serve as a confirmation of the praise.

All these ostentatious gestures of gift-giving, generosity, and self-display are but the initial step of a general euphoria that gradually overtakes the audience. Men, women, and little girls sent by their parents will form a never-ending line and slowly walk down the aisle to show off their generosity with flamboyant mannerism, all the while the pop star is continuing with her performance and flattery.

In summer 1993 I attended a concert of the famous *jeli* Kandia Kouyaté, a pop star who performs regularly in concert halls of Europe and the US. After some initial songs, Kandia descended from the stage and walked to the tribune. She continued to sing and gradually moved forward to the upper ranks of the audience arena. All of a sudden, she started to add, at an astounding speed, more and more praise names to the song, honorific names that, as my neighbours explained to me, referred to the clan name of a rich and well-known business woman who was sitting in the audience. Very soon, it was not difficult, even not to me, to understand that Kandia was directing her praise towards a woman of the Traoré clan. Kandia took upright position in front of her and yelled one praise line after the other at her, all of which were composed of the common praise vocabulary for the ancestors of the Traoré family. The woman reacted with feigned disinterest to this flattery. But Kandia did not let up:

> *Sira! N jatigi muso! I tama! I ka na! Lebu t'i la.*
> *Madu Traoré denmuso, Seku muso, i sigi, i bissimilah!*
> *Assou denmuso fòlò fòlò, i bissimilah!*
> Sira![12] My patron! Advance! More to the forefront! Don't feel ashamed.
> Daughter of Madu Traoré, wife of Mamari, sit down, welcome!
> Assou's first daughter, welcome!

These references to the business woman's marital status, her parents' names and to the fact that she was the family's economic support were meant to prove to the patron, her company, and the audience that Kandia, as a client, was well informed about her family connections and that she was a woman on whom many people depended.

At this point, a woman who was sitting next to Kandia's object of praise tended the singer a money note of 10.000 FCFA. But the praised woman herself continued to display a composed and detached attitude. So Kandia pressed even harder on her flattery emphasizing her attractiveness as a woman who merited to be her husband's favourite wife.

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12 The lauded woman's first name.

Eee! Nin ma n balano! Mamari ka sògòsògò bonbon!
E ye Mamari ka circulasion bloke de ye!
Eee! This does not come as a surprise to me! You are Mamari's treat![13]
You are the one who makes Marmari's circulation[14] stop!

And, as the praised woman herself slowly reached out to give her a note, Kandia exclaimed:

Uff! A nyè tè Madu Traoré denmuso sigilen na?
Mògò min y'a si bè kè nafolotigiya la. Son t'i pan, a den ka na yuyuman de!
Sira, an'w ye jeliw de. Dugumènè tè, mògò kina sògò ko m'e ya ma, nga facè do.
Uff! Let your eyes rest upon Madu Traoré's daughter who is sitting here!
This is a person who has spent her life in well-fed circumstances. If a gazelle knows to leap, its offspring will certainly not crawl.
Sira, we are *jeliw*. We are not ants. If we bite you, this is not because of your flesh, but because already our fathers have done this.

Clearly, these words were more than an expression of gratitude. Kandia conveyed to the public, the patron and her friends that she knew about the praised woman's wealthy family background – and that she expected her to be as generous as her rich and successful father. At the same time, Kandia presented herself as a devoted *jeli* client whose professional ethics prescribe to both praise and exhort patrons.

Kandia then switched to more and more metaphoric expressions to underline her own feelings of 'gratitude' and of 'love', because of the 'gifts' her patron had given her in the past. From Kandia's speech, it was evident that this was not her first encounter with the patron woman: she detailed the occasions on which she had lauded her patron in the past to prove the long-standing history of her own and devotion to the business woman's reputation.

Other *jeliw*, whose praise I followed, were often more discreet in their praise. They described their past services in an unspecific way, as to not to offend the patron's feelings or counteract her need for secrecy. But even in those situations, the *jeli*'s expressions were specific enough for the patron and her friends to understand to what events the pop star was referring to. In one concert, however, a singer went as far as to disclose that she could irreversibly damage the patron's reputation and family honour if the patron proved to be 'ingrateful' or 'greedy' towards her.

N jatigimuso! bakilu ka jeli tè ne ye. Fennan di ka jeli tè ne ye.
My patron! I am not the *jeli* of somebody who never gives a gift. I am not the *jeli* of somebody who keeps on too much to her possessions.

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13 The literal translation of "*sògòsògò bonbon*" is 'cough sweet'. '*Sògòsògò*' (cough) is a brand name for the most popular candies in Mali.

14 'Circulation' designates blood circulation and, by extension, all bodily and mental functions that will come to a standstill.

And the singer suggested to the audience and the patron woman that anybody could consider herself fortunate to be praised by her, because she descended from a long line of competent master *jeliw* (*ngara*).[15]

> *Ne tè ngaara ye. Ne tè kumala ye. Nga ne bòra ngaraw la. Ne bòra kumalaw la.*
> *A to ne k'i jamu doni f'i ye.*
> I am not a master *jeli*. I am not a master of the words. But I am a descendant of master *jeliw*. I am descended from masters of the words.
> Wait! Let me tell you a little bit about your family's significance.[16]

By this rhetoric move, the singer ruled out anybody's reproach that she undeservedly called herself an accomplished speaker or skillful singer. At the same time, she clearly set herself apart from other pop stars with whom she competed on the market of praise. By way of this comparison to other '*jeli*' pop stars, the singer sought to convince the patron that her praise and prestige management was crucial to the patron's name and honourability.

In contrast, Kandia Kouyaté's recognition of the patron's generosity was straightforward, because, as she mused, only a grateful client was worthy of further gifts.

> *Da min to tè kòròlen do, kura kè kun tè o ye.*
> A mouth that does not recognize a previous gift should not benefit from a new one.

Her references to the patron woman indicated that already in the past, she had received a large sum of money and other gifts. Kandia expressed her gratitude for these signs of 'love' and even specified to the attentively listening audience how generous the patron's gift, and by implication, how considerable her 'love' towards her *jeli* client had been. Some of these lines of recognition went as follows:

> *Ne ka television na bo do, a ye basen metri tan de di. K'a dan gala la, ka borode, fadenw ka nye tele la, ka sanu don n bòlò ni tlon bèè la.*
> When I made my first appearance on television, you gave me 10 meters of bazin.[17] And you added (money for) its colouring and embroidering. On television, in front of everybody who envies me for my success, you gave me gold, to put it on my fingers and to adorn my ears with it.

In almost the same breath, Kandia made it perfectly clear that she expected further signs of 'love' from her. At this point of the performance, cash was literally hailing down on the singer and scarfs and flowers were flying from all directions onto the stage. Kandia reacted to this outburst of excitement and contentment with ostentatious reservation, *nonchalance*, and arrogance. From time to time she picked up a

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15 The attribute '*ngara*' is reserved for the most prominent *jeli* speakers, traditionalists, and praise singers and designates both personal and professional excellence.

16 Literally 'let me tell you a little bit about your family name (*jamu*)'.

17 *Bazin* (French) is a valuable and highly appreciated fabric of which the *dloki ba*, an elegant and impressive three-piece garment for women is often made.

money note from the floor, held it up in her right hand with seeming condescendence and disinterest and waved it around. In this fashion, she displayed the materialized value of her performance to the wooing and enthusiastic crowds of women and men who eagerly bent over to decipher the value of the note and told each other, in approving murmurs or exclamations, how generously the *jeli* had been rewarded.

So far, I have argued that in Malian public culture, the principal elements of an individual's good reputation and honourable name are articulated by *jeliw* during public praise encounters. What does Kandia's praise encounter with one of her patrons tell us about the constitutive elements of the 'honour' that a *jeli* pop star claims for her patron? Firstly, a honourable name is achieved by the public praise of a prestigious family or clan name and of a legendary political past. Inversely, any public mention of less laudible details from the family history damages the patron's reputation. Secondly, the fact that the patron is lauded in a public that reaches beyond the circle of friends, family, and neighbours substantially expands her popularity and renown. Third, the praise encounter offers the patron an opportunity to display her wealth and generosity in the gesture of gift giving. This public display helps her increase her reputation as a powerful patron who is capable of attracting and supporting a considerable number of dependants and followers. The other side of the coin is that while a *jeli* supports a patron's interest in ostentation, their public interaction may have reverse effects, too: A patron who refuses to pay a *jeli* for her public flattery would reveal his 'ingratitude' and thus put his good reputation at risk.

Jeliw pop stars present their flattery of patrons as an expression of their feelings of 'love' towards their patrons. They emphasize that they expect patrons to respond to their clients' 'loving' services with good money. *Jeliw* sometimes even assert that the amount of remuneration equals the value of the patron's honour. To Western eyes, this rhetorical conversion of feelings of empathy into hard currency appears unpersuasive or even 'immoral', as we like to see 'honour' as something that cannot be acquired by or expressed in material terms. We consider the *jeli* dishonest judging her rhetoric of 'love' as mere concealment of her true and calculting intentions, that is, the purpose of selling honour against cash. To us, the explicit connection that *jeliw* draw between honour and the value of the counter-gift is shameless and dishonourable, because we like to place honour, like love and virtue, outside of the sphere of market exchange.

However, if we interpret a *jeli*'s rhetoric as a simple money extorting strategy, we would be unable to understand the degree of the patrons' and their followers' generosity. Why would a patron not simply refuse to pay the pop star for her praise or pay her less? Where does the appeal of the pop singers' performance to patrons and their friends reside, why are they so eager to throw bundles of money at the feet of the star? Also, why do they do so in the presence of an audience, given the normative expectations towards free people to show a modest and understating demeanour? And finally, how can we explain the audience's enthusiasm about these acts of ostentation?

Clearly, to view the patron's payment as an act of mere remuneration and as the equivalent to the 'good reputation' fashioned by *jeliw* can not fully explain why it is so important to patrons to be praised in public and why this flattery is so popular. There must be something in the very gesture of gift-giving that enhances the patron's respectability.

To understand why patrons are so eager to pay the pop stars large sums of money, we have to keep in mind that, apart from a conduct corresponding to a free descent, the prestige of an honourable status is also enacted through the gesture of gift giving. Whoever is inferior in status to a free-born person (any person of serf or *nyamakala* origin, that is) may publicly 'entrust' himself to the patron as a client. To become a client implies to place oneself at the receiving end of the social hierarchy. The client is allowed and even expected to show his deference and devotion to the patron by asking him for a 'gift'.[18]

Therefore, we should not understand the patron's money giving gesture as a mere recompensation of the *jeli*'s efforts, but as a display of her status superiority and the respectability ensuing from her standing. The double sided nature of the gift giving gesture may explain why powerful and wealthy individuals purposefully arrange their public encounters with *jeliw* pop stars. The *jeli*'s exchange of client services against hard currency in a public setting offers patrons an opportunity not only to hear their name and family honour praised in public, but also to display their superior social standing by giving a gift.

7. Concluding Remarks

Influential and rich people in Mali are aware that their reputation and honour is under constant threat. *Jeliw*, on the other hand, are skilled in reading and acting upon their patrons' insecurities in this respect. A patron's ambition to reassert her social rank is a major reason why *jeliw* pop stars are so successful in convincing her that she can not do without her client's 'PR' management. Moreover, *jeliw* aptly play on the fluent, never clearly defined boundaries between the patron's name (*tògò*), professional ethics (*dambe*), and free rank (*hòrònya*). In their performances, pop stars appeal to the patron's wish for respectability and assert that the only way to display a honourable name, a prominent standing and a 'free-born' status is to express it in generous gifts. *Jeliw* insinuate that a person of public importance can prove her interest in a reputation by giving generous gifts.

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18 A patron recompensates a client for a particular service or simply for his devotion and faithfulness. Any form of remuneration is called 'to give a gift' (*ka son*). This terminology is, of course, typical of many patron-client relationships (see Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984).

In contrast to many societies of the West, the clear link between a good reputation and wealth is not considered dishonourable by many Malians. In Malian urban public culture, influential individuals will be even called upon to display their wealth. People will not resent a patron showing off her money. They will only take issue with her if she ever refuses to distribute it to a large number of clients. This view explains why many people I discussed with during pop concerts argued that "their way of achieving a name" was less hypocritical than the methods by which "you white people in Europe and America make yourself known to people". To them, we rely on wealth and property to increase our good reputation as much as they do, but we seek to conceal the close connection between wealth and reputation and pretend to pursue honour and virtue just for its own sake.

Contemporary politics and social life in Mali are characterized by the fact that traditional status and rank distinctions are more than before open to challenge and reversal. Individuals who strive for influential positions sustain their reputation and social standing by public expanditure and ostentation. Although people speak of free-born individuals, *nyamakalaw* and descendants of serfs as belonging to separate and clearly distinguishable categories of social status, individual representatives of these social ranks devote considerable effort and money to reassert or brush up their social background. The encounter between pop stars and 'patrons' in concerts is only one of many instances in which individuals try to enhance their own status or to confirm the honourability connected to their families' name. Thus, similar to our culture, social rank and status is open to challenge, change, and distortion.

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