The Shirts of the Donso Hunters: materiality and power between concealment and visual display

Lorenzo Ferrarini

Abstract: This article looks at the characteristic shirts of the *donso*, or initiated Mande hunters. Often described in the literature as visual displays of the wearer's power, in the context of contemporary Burkina Faso these shirts are instead an example of how hunters deal with representations of power through an aesthetics of concealment (Ferme 2001). An excess of display is conversely connected with the politics of state-recognized hunters' associations. Issues of ecological change, local conceptions of power, and contemporary struggles with state authority intersect in the practices and discourses on hunters' shirts.

Résumé: Cet article se penche sur les chemises caractéristiques des *donso* ou chasseurs initiés du Mandé. Souvent décrites dans la littérature comme des visualisations de la puissance du porteur, dans le contexte contemporain burkinabé ces chemises sont plutôt un exemple de la façon dont les chasseurs traitent les représentations du pouvoir par une esthétique de la dissimulation (Ferme 2001). Un excès d'affichage est inversement lié à la politique des associations de chasseurs reconnues par l'État. Les enjeux de changements écologiques, les conceptions locales du pouvoir et les luttes contemporaines avec l'autorité de l'État se recoupent dans les pratiques et les discours sur les chemises des chasseurs.

Keywords: Burkina Faso; Clothing; Donsoya; Hunting; Materiality; Power; Secrecy; Visibility

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In this article I examine contemporary practices and discourses surrounding the characteristic shirts of the *donso*, or initiated Mande hunters.[1] These clothes, a sort of uniform for this power association, allow an insight into conceptions of visual display and concealment that speak to the current relationship between hunters and power. The appearance of the hunters' shirts and of the items attached to them is a contested field that generates internal debates on the role of donso hunters in the current West African context, which is characterized by ecological transformations and political insecurity. Examining these debates provides a window on these interrelated processes of transformation.

The hunter's shirt is an object that has a strong identity value and at the same time some very practical functions. As such, understanding this and other objects associated with performances of power requires supplementing a more traditional approach based on meaning by putting the concept of materiality at the center. As this article will argue, this is not just a way to address debates in the humanities and in particular in anthropology, where materiality has recently been reframed as a major force in social life, rather than as a substrate for human signification and culture (Appadurai 1986; Henare et al. 2007; Krmpotich et al. 2010; Miller 2005). A parallel debate, I found, is taking place among hunters as they discuss the relationship between their shirts and internal hierarchies of power. For some hunters in contemporary Burkina Faso, the shirts paraded at gatherings and social occasions are a reflection of the wearer's prestige and power. Others reject this approach, refusing to treat the shirt as a transparent signifier of the status of the person wearing it. An analysis of this discussion allows to gain insights into the relationship between materiality and power, insights that go beyond the level of regional ethnography.

Can we understand the role that these shirts play for donso hunters with a model that derives their power from a dualism between materiality and meaning? Treating them, in other words, as signifiers that express powerful meanings? This model not only downplays the material aspects of the shirts and of their power, but it also does not adequately account for the processual and contested conditions from which performances of power emerge. Concentrating exclusively on materiality, on the other hand, would ignore the social dynamics whereby hunters' shirts and things in general acquire new roles and are *at times* treated as signs. But treating things as signs to be interpreted is not a neutral step in the process of analyzing their cultural meanings. It is a possibility emerging from the discourses that Webb Keane has called *semiotic ideology* (2005), referring to the set of conventions regarding what constitutes a sign and how signs are supposed to work. In other words, semiotic ideology is a historically specific meta-discourse on the status of signs.

Throughout this text, I approach the power of the shirt as primarily *constituted by* its materiality, rather than *signified by* it. This allows me to account for attempts to relocate its power in processes of signification as emerging from a historically specific semiotic ideology. This move is aimed

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at doing justice to the materiality of things, rather than treating it as a medium for representation, and at explaining the role things play in discursive practices, while at the same time connecting these with the broader context. In fact, as will become clear in the rest of the article, local conceptions of power and contemporary struggles with state authority intersect in the politics of display surrounding hunters' shirts.

The Shirts that Mande Hunters Wear

In parts of Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso, where hunting is typically an exclusively male activity, some men pursue a path of initiatory knowledge called *donsoya*. Being a donso is not entirely synonymous with being a hunter. Donsoya includes practical knowledge about killing game along with initiatory knowledge that is only in part related to hunting. Donso hunters are often expert diviners, they prepare medicines with their vast knowledge of plants, and they manipulate powerful objects such as amulets and fetishes. According to oral traditions, initiated hunters had important roles in the creation of medieval Mande state formations and constitute a remarkable example of interethnic power association whose membership transcends national borders (Cashion 1984; Cissé 1994; Traoré 2004).

During the last thirty years, the associative forms of donso hunters have undergone important changes, through their widespread constitution in state-recognized entities whose members are often employed as security guards, park rangers, and even mercenaries (Bassett 2005; Ferme & Hoffman 2004; Förster 2012; Hagberg 2004; Hellweg 2011; Leach 2004). These transformations are strictly connected to long-term processes of ecological change, which for the hunters mean negotiating new and restrictive environmental laws and the disappearance of many types of prestigious game from the bush (Ferrarini 2016). As a result, donso identities are increasingly constructed, legitimized, and performed away from hunting contexts and closer to urban spaces.

To a visitor happening upon a donso parade in a West African town, the hunters in their characteristic shirts would likely appear visually striking (Figure 1). Being in fact oversized tunics sewn out of narrow strips of locally woven cotton, the shirts are dyed in vegetal and mud solutions that give them muted hues ranging from red to brown and yellow, often with black and grey/green motifs. They swing around as the hunters dance, waving a number of objects attached to their outside surface. Some of these objects look like leather packages or bundles, while others consist of animal parts such as tufts of hair, horns, fangs, or claws. Long strings of hide and knotted cotton threads hang from them as well, further complicating the visual appearance of the shirts.

In a classic article, Patrick McNaughton describes this visual clutter as an iconic reference to the hunters' privileged space, the intricate and wild bush, and at the same time to the moral ambiguity that surrounds their power (1982b).

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Figure 1. Donso hunters circling a burial site in Karankasso Sambla, Houet, Burkina Faso, April 2015.

According to his analysis, the busy and murky appearance of the shirts symbolizes *dibi*, the darkness associated with sorcery. Young or recently initiated hunters, he writes, start with a plain shirt and gradually build it up with objects they receive from their masters, more experienced hunters who transmit to them knowledge and talismans. As the apprentice hones his hunting skills, he will kill more and more animals whose remains will start to appear on his shirt. A hunter's shirt then, in McNaughton's view, becomes a sort of curriculum vitae worn on the body, where one can read the history and career of the wearer, "an index of the hunter's greatness" (1982b:57). To a knowledgeable onlooker, it would then be possible to roughly rank the hunters at a gathering on the basis of their clothing, distinguishing master hunters from novices and mid-career initiates. Significantly, McNaughton references all three of Charles Sanders Peirce's (1932) categories of signs—icons, indexes, and symbols—to describe the shirts, thus foregrounding their capacity to signify.

This study, based on fieldwork in western Burkina Faso in 2011–12, offers an alternative perspective. There are two reasons for this difference: firstly, there is a difference in the approach and fieldwork methods characterizing my interactions with the hunters, and secondly, there is a difference in time, whereby the more than thirty-five years between our respective fieldworks have seen important changes involving donsoya and its contexts. In contrast

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with previous studies, I centered my research on the skills (Grasseni 2007; Ingold 2000) and embodied knowledge (Harris 2007; Jackson 1983; Weiss & Haber 1999) that donso hunters acquire as part of their apprenticeship.

Further, apprenticeship was for me both a focal interest and a methodological device, through my own initiation in donsoya and intensive practice of hunting. By becoming a member of the hunters' association of Karankasso Sambla, Houet, and a pupil of master hunter Adama Sogo Traoré from Samorogouan, Kénédougou, I tried to put into practice what Loïc Wacquant has called *enactive ethnography*: "immersive fieldwork through which the investigator *acts out (elements of)* the phenomenon in order to peel away the layers of its invisible properties and to test its operative mechanisms" (2015:5, emphasis in original). This involved a steep learning curve consisting of lengthy hunting expeditions in the bush, gradual memorization of incantations and medicinal recipes, acquisition of amulets and power objects, and also constituting my personal hunting shirt (locally *donsodileke*, McNaughton spells *donsondloki* in 1982:54). So, my perspective is enriched by the experience of having worn the shirt on the hunt and at gatherings, having sought and received amulets to hang on it, and having gradually developed it as my hunting skills and achievements progressed. However, I am not basing what follows exclusively on my experiences but also on conversations with fellow students, teachers, and numerous hunters met at ceremonies and gatherings in the course of my fieldwork.

Being mindful of what McNaughton had written, it was surprising for me to see the hunting outfit my teacher Adama wore to participate in ceremonies and gatherings. Characterized by dark green vegetal motifs on a pale brown fabric, combined with epaulettes and tapered trousers, the shirt had a somewhat military appearance. This style of pattern, achieved by stamping fermented mud on vegetal tinted cloth with a small acacia branch from which the compound leaves had been removed, is common in the westernmost regions of Burkina Faso (especially Kénédougou and Léraba. See Figure 2). Remarkably, in a region where the dyeing of *bogolanfini* is typically the task and art of women (Brett-Smith 2014; Donne 1973; Imperato & Shamir 1970), I only saw men handle the fabric of donso shirts. Since donsoya is such a markedly masculine domain, it is generally accepted that women should not come in contact with a hunter's outfit.[2]

Adama's shirt usually sports no more than two or three objects, neatly arranged on the loops designed for this purpose, on the upper chest. There are no visible threads or strips, no mirrors or general clutter on his shirt. Nevertheless, Adama is hardly a novice. Almost seventy years old as of the time of the research, he is known and recognized as one of the most knowledgeable and prestigious master hunters in the province of Kénédougou and beyond. A student of Tiefing Coulibaly of Dakoro, the first national leader of the donso hunters of Burkina Faso (Hagberg 2004), Adama is part of a network of allies and students that extends well beyond his natal town of Samorogouan to other regional centers of donsoya such as Ouolonkoto and Samoghohiri, not to mention his relatives and associates

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Figure 2. Lacole Traoré dyeing a donso outfit, Samorogouan, Kénédougou, Burkina Faso, May 2012.

in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. In other words, Adama does not lack the experience, the relationships, or the prestige to be considered a top-tier donso, but nevertheless his hunting shirt is relatively plain. Furthermore, Adama is not an isolated example of a master hunter sporting a surprisingly low-key outfit. His approach to the furnishing of his shirt was shared by many of his high-ranking colleagues. In the following analysis I explore why this might be the case in the context of Burkina Faso in the 2010s, based on both the testimonies of the hunters and on broader observations conducted during fieldwork. The answer to this question is not just limited to the ethnographic context; rather, it implies an understanding of the relationship between materiality and power that can be extended to other analyses of powerful objects on the African continent.

The hunting shirt: materiality and the senses

It is important to keep in mind that a donso shirt is first of all a garment born out of practical necessities. Ideally, a hunter will reserve one shirt for social occasions and another one for walking the bush with the shotgun. In fact, though, many of the hunters I met are not able to afford two shirts, whose locally woven fabric is significantly more expensive than imported printed cotton or synthetic fibers. As a result, they invest in a single shirt that has to

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function in both situations. This shirt will often lose its mud-dyed pattern due to exposure to the sun and soaking in sweat. The shotgun's sling will gradually wear the yoke to the point of tearing the fabric, and many hunters with whom I spent time would wear shirts whose original shape was barely recognizable.

These ragged shirts are not necessarily worn with embarrassment. On the contrary, their owners are somewhat proud of them. They are part of a discourse of authenticity that I will return to later, functioning to remind other hunters that donsoya is a discipline fundamentally concerned with spending time in the bush. They remind non-hunters that the bush is not an easy place to be, and that its sun, rocks, thorns, and many dangers are hard on the hunters. The materials, colors, and shape of the donso shirt suit the needs of the hunters: its thick cotton, for example, might seem overly warm at first but, as I found out for myself, it affords protection from the many thorny bushes that one often ends up scrambling through. Initially, I tended to leave my donsodileke at home, choosing instead lighter, fresher cotton clothing, but I had to rethink my approach after coming back from the bush with my shirts torn up by the thorns that would painfully prick my arms. The heavier donso shirt, on the other hand, offered significantly more protection and resistance. Its numerous and large pockets were ideal for containing the small game that we would hunt on most days—hares, francolins and other birds, hedgehogs, or giant pouched rats. Smaller pockets and loops offered storage for shotgun shells, medicinal powders, and amulets. I was the only one in our group to use a small backpack, but most of the hunters with whom I went searching for game carried everything they needed for one or more days in their shirts.

While visually the sun and the dust enhance the camouflaging qualities of the shirt, turning it the same color as the bush during the dry season, this garment also has important auditory qualities. Let us not forget that hunters all around the world, at least those who practice stalking, are one of the few categories of people who choose their clothes on the basis of how they sound in addition to how they look. Donso hunters are no exception, and their shirts are made nearly silent by the soft yarn that is woven into the constituting fabric strips. Additionally, the characteristic trousers that with the shirts are usually part of a donso's outfit are slimmed down below the knee with buttons, to avoid producing any rubbing sound during a stalk.

There is a parallel here between the scarcity of studies on what donso hunters do in the bush that I had identified as a point of departure for my research and the lack of attention that the hunting shirt has received compared to the ceremonial shirt. While the latter might seem more fertile ground for anthropological analysis, allowing connections of hierarchies, symbols, sorcery, religion, and history, I contend that focusing on the hunting shirt also allows insights into important aspects of donso sociality, provided these are understood to include transspecies forms of sociality (Haraway 2008; Kohn 2007; Nadasdy 2007) and engagements with environments and materials (Ingold 2007; Tilley 2004). The shirt can be

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understood as a tool (Gibson & Ingold 1993), one of the interfaces mediating hunters' interactions with the bush environment, its features referring to ecological engagements as knowledge-in-practice (Eden & Bear 2011). In my own work (Ferrarini 2014) I have explored how hunters form an aesthetic community, a group sharing perceptual patterns (Cox 2002; Goldstein 1995; Meyer & Verrips 2008), based on the control and discernment of sound. The hunters' sensibility to sound highlights their connection to the bush as an acoustic environment where one's capacity for suppressing sound is in direct connection with the capacity to perceive sound. The shirt's materiality, its fabric, shape, and accessories, directly connect to the quality of the interactions that hunters have with the bush. Its discolored, dirty, blood-stained, and at times burned and ragged appearance echoes the sometimes self-indulging rhetoric about heroically enduring hardships that I heard in Adama's tales about hunting in the days of his youth and in informal conversations between hunters. This kind of rhetoric is also present in donso epics, and Karim Traoré has termed it an "aesthetics of suffering" (see also Kedzierska 2006:50–52; 2000:94, 186–192).

The material, sensuous experience of hunting in the bush, in which vision is just one among other sensory modalities, shapes the shirt and forms the basis for connecting it to the discursive levels of narrative and rhetoric. The shirt is not so much a representation of the bush, then, as it is a product of specific ways of human interaction with that environment. In this sense, the shirt is so much more than a material sign to be read by other humans in a context of semiotic representation. Conversely, most studies of clothing use during the 1980s had their main focus on dress codes as ways to signify belonging in social interactions (Barthes 1983; Lurie 1981). Only later did anthropologists of materiality, building on explorations of dress as "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle 2000), use embodiment as an approach to framing clothes as intersection of sensual, affective, gendered, and identity factors (Küchler & Miller 2005; Woodward 2007).

McNaughton mentions hunting shirts only in passing and then dedicates the rest of his article to ceremonial shirts (1982b:56). As an art historian, he was concerned with those shirts that were deemed worthy of introduction into museum or private African art collections, which in the case of the donso hunters seem to correspond to the most ornate ones. If we take a look at the photographs that appear in his text, it is interesting to remark how in two informal portraits his informants wear simple, practical outfits, just fitted with a whistle and a knife. The other two images he selected, though, are still life shots from private collections, representing extremely complex and busy shirts of the kind that he describes in writing. The photographs represent well how the everyday shirt, in its utilitarian plainness, is treated with a documentary approach, whereas the more exceptional shirts are elevated to the status of art objects. The material, sensory, affective, and phenomenal qualities of the hunting shirts—and of many other cultural artifacts—have traditionally been given a secondary status by museum curators, in favor of visual appearance and the potential for "reading" cultural

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meanings (Edwards et al. 2006). That the most meaningful shirts are those with the most visual complexity is a principle against which I argue throughout this text, on the basis of local practices of display of power that are not in direct correlation with visual appearance. The tendency to privilege the visual is, instead, typical of the Western conception of the museum as a way of knowing, in which objects are deprived of their context of use and put on display for visual consumption (Alpers 1991; Mitchell 1988). As such, it speaks more of McNaughton's approach and background than it does of Mande practices of power.

The two aspects of emphasizing the shirts' semiotic functions and privileging their visual features over the sensuous, material qualities are then interconnected, leading to the neglect of important aspects of the everyday practices of donso hunters. Additionally, a different approach to the powerful objects that are hung on these garments is necessary.

The powerful shirt: materiality and concealment

While hunters do not want too much material on their hunting shirts that could slow them down and create noise, even the practical and no-nonsense outfits are enhanced by a few amulets or talismans (Figure 3). In most cases, these will be related to the dangers inherent in the hunting activity: talismans against snakes or scorpions, or against accidents such as being shot by

Figure 3. Closeup of the author's hunting shirt after ten months of apprenticeship, including whistle, amulets, and a bundle of rope.

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a companion or injured by a misfiring gun. Other objects are meant to enhance the chances of killing, as in the case of the *kisen tilennan* (literally "ball straightener") or of the *fereke*, a charm taking its name from the word that activates it ("trip!" or, more literally, "tangle up!"), designed to prevent an animal from running away. Some hunters will carry a variety of small, portable fetishes that will enable them to approach animals more easily, and that they can reward on the spot with the blood of the prey they just killed. Well hidden in the hunters' pockets, the fetishes of the donso hunters are smaller versions of power objects that are diffused throughout Mande Africa (Brett-Smith 1983; Colleyn 2004; Kedzierska-Manzon 2013). They are believed capable of interacting with humans if addressed and rewarded with the right procedures, constituting a form of highly specialized gendered knowledge (Royer 1996:253), which is normally surrounded by discretion.

On the other hand, the function of objects on ceremonial shirts is more likely to be that of shielding the wearer from sorcery attacks by colleagues. Related objects may be tasked with increasing the appeal of the wearer or preventing poisoning. In other words, most of the objects on a ceremonial shirt address relationships between hunters, instead of being directed at hunting. The social occasions in which a number of hunters from an area gather together are potentially tense situations, as described by Hellweg (2011:Chapter 8). Musicians, through their praise, put some hunters in the spotlight and provoke them to promise that they will accomplish hunting feats that will enhance their prestige, if they succeed—or ruin it, if they fail. Internal hierarchies are renegotiated as each hunter brings the results of his hunting expeditions to share with his fellow hunters. I heard numerous stories of sorcery attacks motivated by jealousy on such occasions. Similar to the reaction to excessively proud or arrogant verbal statements, excessive adornment in these occasions can lead to aggression. The Jula term used by the hunters in the area where I worked is *kòròbò*, which is significant because it means to test somebody, but literally it is composed of "revealing (*bò*) the underneath (*kòrò*)." This expression reveals a consciousness of the presence of layers, and references the idea of going beneath somebody's surface to prove his real worth. The metaphorical aspect here is parallel to the general principle whereby the most powerful objects one carries will be hidden from sight, sometimes literally under the external layer of the shirt.

All of the above objects, whether related to hunting or to dealing with other hunters, have in common one simple thing: they are chosen and placed on the shirt primarily for their function rather than for their visual appearance. This is an important point to emphasize, especially because it helps make sense of those objects that are not meant to be seen, but which still empower the wearer through their presence. In this sense, there is more to a donso shirt than meets the eye. Not only does a hunter wear a number of amulets under his clothes, in contact with his skin, but some are even sewn into the fabric of the shirt so that they become an invisible part of it. Brett-Smith also reports on the manner in which the tassels at the

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extremities of a donso shirt are tied with knots, with incantations recited on them, so that power is imbued in the fibers themselves (2001:122–23). Unlike the knotted threads that can be hung on the shirt, these tassels are an integral part of it and do not necessarily advertise themselves as charms.

These practices serve as a reminder of how throughout the Mande area people deal with power through what Mariane Ferme called an "aesthetics of concealment" (2001), whereby a dialectic of knowledge and secrecy produces powerful persons. As in the case of the Poro association mask on the cover of Ferme's book (taken from Bravmann 1983), whose internal surface hides powerful Arabic inscriptions, the hunter's tunic draws some of its power from the contact between his body and things hidden within the shirt. This is particularly evident when hunters, like other seekers of knowledge in the area, employ amulets and charms based on Quranic scripts. These can take the form of folded up paper, often together with an activating substance and wrapped with cotton thread, which is then sewn in leather pouches that are worn on the body, hung on the shirts, or kept in pockets (locally called *sebèn*, see Mommersteeg 1990). Another related use of Arabic and Quranic scripts is the repeated washing of the ink used to write on wooden tablets. The resulting liquid (locally called *nasi* or *nesi*) is then used for medicinal purposes, to wash the body, or to impregnate objects (Bledsoe & Robey 1986; Ferme 2001:166–68; Marchand 2009:201–2). In both practices, it is interesting to remark how the function of writing as a material carrier of power outweighs the more predictable function of carrying meaning. This power, generally referred to with the term of Arabic origin *barika* and deriving from the Quranic provenance of the texts, is materialized through a process of concealing, whether by sewing in leather, liquefying, spitting as saliva, or burying in the ground.

These materials carrying power rather than semiotic meaning are representative of the way a hunter's shirt is only partially meant to be a display of initiatory knowledge. From this point of view, donso hunters conform to a wider regional trend that characterizes the careful hinting at the possession of knowledge as a wise, reasonable means of gaining prestige and influence (Piot 1993). In my experience apprenticing in donsoya, master hunters were especially skilled at balancing the limited display of their knowledge with the promise of sharing it with the students, or, in other words, they were masters of the "paradox of secrecy" (Bellman 1981). Adama, for example, was able to juggle the appropriate distribution of occasional incantations and medicinal recipes to his cohort of students, which numbered almost thirty members at very different levels of seniority of initiation, while at the same time being very careful to keep us in a relationship of dependence on him for certain indispensible rituals and medicines. In other words, through giving and hinting at knowledge, he was able to keep us interested and motivated but was careful to make sure that we were still dependent on him (more details in Ferrarini 2016:87–89). Ferme's use of the expression "concealment" is here very appropriate, because it points at the act of hiding, which can of course be noticed and reveal that there is something

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hidden. The term often used locally is *gundo* which, rather than being equated to *secret* in the dictionary acceptation of the term, is better translated as *restricted access knowledge* (Jansen 2000:106). The parsimonious distribution of knowledge is strongly characterized in gendered terms, as one of the main attributes of *ceya*, or manhood. An unregulated flow of knowledge is instead associated with femininity, and is often used as an explanation of the exclusion of women from donsoya and other power associations (Leach 2000:583). Initiated hunters, in a similar manner to the members of other power associations, negotiate their power through a balance of display and concealment.

Given the practices outlined above, I find McNaughton's approach to donso shirts as a display of power problematic, especially because he shows awareness of these dynamics of concealment in his work on blacksmiths and on the Komo power association (1979, 1982a, 1987). Not only does he underestimate the sensory and affective qualities of the garment, privileging its visible meanings, but he also downplays the pragmatic functions of the complex shirt-amulets. To the practitioners of donsoya, their power derives from the materiality of the shirt and of the objects that with it constitute a complex whole. For them, the primary functions of the shirt-amulets complex is not one of communicating or representing, but rather of enabling, empowering, and protecting. These powers are sometimes in direct conflict with visibility, as demonstrated above. Considering power as based on materiality, rather than signified by it, allows to make sense of concealment, because it separates power from social recognition in the absence of acts of representation.

Having clarified how much of the power of a donso shirt is independent from signification, I move now to an analysis of how social and ecological changes in the years between McNaughton's fieldwork and mine have reconfigured practices of concealment and display among donso hunters, creating a debate on whether shirts can be representations of the status of the wearer. I will trace the emergence inside Burkinabe donsoya of semiotic ideologies that treat the shirt as an expression of power and explain what conditions have favored their appearance.

The ceremonial shirt: materiality and change

Why would a respected master hunter such as Adama wear a relatively plain hunting shirt at ceremonies and gatherings? As he recounts his many tales of sorcery duels dramatically carried out around gatherings of hunters, he does not seem to be afraid of attracting malevolent attentions. Adama is, in my experience, very conscious of his aspect and also very proud of his masterfully dyed shirt, whose contrasting lines clearly show that he can afford not to use it for hunting. On the other hand, he wears very few items attached to it (Figure 4). He does this purposefully, and makes scornful remarks about those hunters who, on the other hand, choose not to keep a low profile. Like other hunters of his generation, Adama associates an excess of display with donsoya as it is practiced within the associative forms that have

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Figure 4. Adama Sogo Traoré posing in front of his house in Nyawali, Kénédougou, Burkina Faso, August 2012.

transformed initiatory hunting in Burkina Faso during the past twenty years. For this newer incarnation they use the term *donsotòn*, using the suffix -*tòn* that is used for most associations with voluntary membership, also underlining how it does not entirely correspond to donsoya, which is the body of knowledge and practices of the donso (or literally being a donso, donso-ness).

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Donso hunters started to seek state recognition through formally constituted associations in the neighboring countries of Mali during the 1980s, and later in Côte d'Ivoire (Cashion 1984:101–3; Hellweg 2011). Originally created to negotiate less restrictive hunting regulations and permits, these early associations took up the jargon of environmentalism in order to obtain state support. The urban civil servants who in many cases were behind their creation promised to enlist hunters who would act as native forest guards, at times involving foreign funders by playing with the trope of the ecologically noble savage (Leach 2000:577–86). But their environmentalist agenda put in motion processes that soon went beyond the original plans. Hunters' associations converted in short order to enforcers of security in situations where the state was absent, or in some cases transformed into actual militias (Bassett 2003; Hellweg 2009, 2011:45–51). Somewhat later than in the two bordering countries, in the mid 1990s Burkina Faso witnessed the advent of these modern associations. The idea, modalities, and even the name of the association (*Benkadi*) were imported from Côte d'Ivoire by one of Adama's own mentors, Tiefing Coulibaly. He used existing networks among donso hunters to spread new initiation procedures and a simplified form of admission that allowed young men to receive a membership card and the status of donso hunter with the payment of a small fee and a simple sacrifice. This "fast-track" access to donsoya contrasted with the lengthy process of apprenticeship whereby a man who sought membership had to patiently prove himself worthy to a master hunter for up to seven years before he could be initiated (Hagberg 2006:782). Tiefing Coulibaly's move conflated and confused membership into an association with initiation, and created scores of young hunters for whom both the esoteric dimension of knowledge and the hunting-related skills were secondary to the local authority conferred by the association card and donso shirt. The new associative form spread quickly in western Burkina Faso, where Benkadi became a movement marked by ethnic friction between the farmers who constituted its membership base and Fulani herders and Mossi farmers, who were perceived as foreign invaders and thieves (Hagberg 1998, 2006).

The impact of these new dynamics cannot be overestimated. In Burkina, as elsewhere, hunters' associations changed donsoya into a wider movement less rooted in solitary hunting activities in the bush and more concerned with policing delinquents. As the new associations started to gain recognition by the state, their internal micro-politics became more entwined with party politics. It is fairly common today to see donso hunters being mobilized to campaign for a politician, taking advantage of their popularity among rural populations. A case in point was the struggle over the succession to Tiefing Coulibaly after his death and the presence of politicians at his funeral (Hagberg 2004:63–65). This process is not just peculiar to Burkina Faso, but is also a general trend in other countries where donsoya is present (Bassett 2003; Förster 2012; Jansen 2008).

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Many of the master hunters belonging to the older generations with whom I discussed these trends expressed negative opinions about the way the donsoya of the associations is distancing itself more and more from what they perceive as core values: dedication, stoic endurance of the hardships of the bush, thirst for knowledge, integrity, respect for the elders. Bakari Sanou of Kouakoualé, a master hunter well into his seventies when I visited him in his compound not far from Bobo Dioulasso, was very outspoken in denouncing modern donsoya, which for him is all about *politique*, a term which he tellingly used in French. He referred to the behind-the-scenes power negotiations that took place at meetings of hunters, and evocatively mocked the new, up-and-coming hunters by sticking his chest out and gesturing at the many ornaments on their shirts. Like Adama, who had been his hunting companion in the 1970s, he said that at gatherings and ceremonies he would sit in a corner, with his simple shirt, and leave the youngsters to their strutting around. The fool would dismiss him for his ordinary appearance; the wise would fear what he was not showing. His compound mirrored this philosophy, seeming to be the unremarkable home of an elderly farmer and his wives, and yet politicians and football players would take the sandy dirt road to visit him and request the help of his power objects.

Similarly to Adama, for Bakari Sanou a plain shirt with few amulets is a statement on the things he recognized as valuable in donsoya; it is a position against (relatively) new trends and associations. The way he treated visibility was a direct enactment of those values and a reference to times in which hunters were few and spent most of their time on the hunt. Most of all, he would never wear an association card: complete with ID photo and stamps, these badges were commonly seen during my fieldwork and were a way to signify loyalties in a time when two national associations were competing for the support of rural hunters. Hagberg gathered similar opinions from a master hunter of the Sidéradougou district, who commented on the decoupling of the shirt from the hunting knowledge and activity among younger, card-carrying hunters: "They carry the hunting dress as a sign of adolescence, bravery [*cameliya*]. All carry the hunting dress, because they say it is an association. Formerly, if someone carried this dress, there was something going on in the bush..." (quoted in Hagberg 2004:56). In the case of the Karaboro farmers dominating the hunting association examined by Hagberg, the hunting shirts had assumed the explicitly visual function of intimidating other ethnic groups (specifically Fulbe herders) and, especially combined with the association badge, of sanctioning the wearers' authority. This process, which derived from the new initiation procedures of Benkadi, weakened the links of the shirt with the bush and with the complex knowledge of donsoya.

Although there is a definite component of nostalgia in the discourses of these old master hunters, they were not alone in their opinions, as they continued to try to inculcate these values to their disciples. I experienced this firsthand when I was reprimanded for wearing too many objects on the front of my own shirt, especially considering my status of novice.

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However, as much as the masters insisted that internal hierarchies should be negotiated through hunting feats instead of being based on relationships between hunters, public speeches, and client-patron dependencies, the changing ecological context made their appeals more and more unrealistic. For many younger hunters in today's Burkina Faso, the prospect of killing the large animals that give prestige to a master hunter is made increasingly unlikely by those same environmental laws that started the trend of state-recognized associations. In other words, if associations were progressively distancing hunters from the bush, it was in part because they were born out of reconfigured relationships with it. Prestigious game, the killing of which earned Adama and Bakari their fame, are now protected with sanctions that are in most cases severely enforced. In other cases, for example with large antelopes or felines, the animal might be simply absent from the region, due to overhunting and reduction of its habitat. Killing that kind of game means then embarking on hunting expeditions that could mean a considerable financial investment and even take a hunter abroad.

For these reasons, the complex cycle of mutual influences between new associative forms and transforming ecology (Ferrarini 2016) makes the objects found on—or absent from—a hunter's shirt more representative of his network of human relationships than of his engagements with hunted animal species. Whereas McNaughton seems to imply that the animal parts present on a donso shirt belonged to an animal killed by the wearer (1982b:57), in my experience of contemporary hunting in Burkina Faso this is rarely the case. First of all, animal matter is often used as ingredient or container in the preparation of amulets, and its primary function is not that of displaying the wearer's prowess. Further, many amulets are made from parts of domestic animals, especially the horns of goats or rams, but also sometimes the hair of a black cat or the tail of a bull. Goat leather is often used for wrapping medicinal bundles, but I have seen some amulets sewn in reptile or fish skin, depending on the function of the object. When parts of a wild animal are used, it is often the case that the animal has been killed by somebody else, and the horns or fangs traded to a specialist who then crafted the object. Not only are animal parts traded using student-master networks or in market stalls, but finished amulets can also be given to a deserving disciple or even inherited from a relative. It becomes then more difficult to claim that animal parts hanging from the shirts make "obvious reference to the creatures from which they have been detached, and to the powers of the bush" (McNaughton 1982b:58). McNaughton remarks that the most elaborate shirts were becoming rare at the time of his fieldwork (1982b:56), but I would claim that in contemporary Burkina this is less a consequence of a lack of dedication to hunting than it is an index of the quality and size of a hunter's network of human relationships.

Significantly, among donso hunters, the category whose tunics corresponds most nearly to McNaughton's description of complex shirts is that of accomplished musicians (Figure 5). Literally covered in amulets, mirrors, hide strips, knotted threads, Quranic talismans, and animal parts, donso musicians

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Figure 5. Diakalia Traoré posing in front of his house, Fon, Kénédougou, Burkina Faso, August 2012.

are a central hub in the network of exchanges of knowledge and material objects among hunters. They are sometimes called *donsojeli*, but unlike griots they do not constitute an endogamous socio-professional group. They are instead initiated hunters who have specialized in the music-making activity, which in most cases replaces hunting for them. They play repertoires and musical instruments that, although related to other musical genres, are specific

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to donso hunters (Bird 1972; Charry 2000:Chapter 2; Traoré 2000). The musician is a key figure in the public sanction of the internal hierarchy among donso hunters. His praises during funerals, annual sacrifices, or other gatherings of hunters publicize the exploits of a donso in the presence of his peers. The musician can receive money in exchange, often dropped into the sound hole of his instrument. Theoretically, though, as I heard many times in Burkina, he should praise the hunter after receiving a share of the meat of the killed animal (traditionally the shoulder, see also Hellweg 2011:82). The bond between a hunter and his musician should not then be mediated by money, which resonates with the critiques I often heard voiced against musicians who insistently praised the wealthier hunters and not necessarily the most skilled. The idea here is not that praising should not be rewarded, but rather that rewards can be of different kinds than money: for example, a powerful master hunter can reveal medicinal recipes, give an amulet, tell an incantation, share an Arabic script endowed with power, or promise meat. A popular donso musician becomes then a nodal point in a network of master hunters, receiving knowledge from a multitude of sources in a shorter time than it would take for an apprentice to travel around and gain the trust of several teachers. Musicians invest a large part of their knowledge in gaining magical means that help them to be more popular, such as *dawulafla*, which are medicines for gaining charm. The downside to this broad exposure is the possibility of arousing jealousy and sorcery attacks, especially from colleagues. A musician's shirt, then, is a striking exhibition of knowledge in the way it is cluttered with amulets, demonstrating its owner's prestige as much as it works to protect him. Its workings are explicitly visual, as underlined by the many mirrors on it. However, while it is possible to roughly measure a musician's level of accomplishment by examining his shirt, the items he has on that shirt are not so much directly representative of his hunting or occult skills but rather, indirectly, of his ability to take advantage of networks of knowledgeable hunters.

Conclusion

Donsoya went through important changes in the interval between the place and time in which McNaughton's fieldwork took place (Mali in the 1970s, when associations were not yet diffused) and the circumstances of my own research. Some of McNaughton's characterizations of hunters as individualistic and antisocial actors in Mande society (1982b:55, 1988:71) seem to have been supplanted by a different paradigm of the networked donso. This new incarnation of donso carefully tends to the micro-politics of associations and through them deals with state actors such as politicians and forest guards. The wilderness, which has been traditionally the center of hunting activities and a major source of power and knowledge, is becoming less important in comparison to the urban manifestations of donsoya and the workings of modern associations.

The literature on Mande hunters in the past thirty years tells the story of various stages of reconfigurations in the relationships between hunters,

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between hunters and their environment, and between various forms of authority. The practices and discourses which surround the hunters' shirts reflect a struggle over changing values, in which the ways of understanding display are the subject of disagreement between traditionalists and the exponents of associations. The belief espoused by traditionalists such as Adama or Bakari is that the shirt is not a sign, and that it does not represent the power of its wearer. They are not treating it as epiphenomenal, replicating a typically Western conception of the distinction between the superficial appearances of clothes and the deeper substance of the inner self. Rather, they practice a more complex relationship between the shirt and the power of the wearer, centered on concealment and a "dialectic of extraordinary visible effects caused by powerful hidden means" (Murphy 1998:563). Importantly, those same amulets and talismans would likely not have been an issue had we not been in a time of associations, ecological crisis, and spread of donsoya among unskilled youths. In this sense, Adama or Bakari's low key outfits also have a performative character, in their oppositional stance, that perhaps goes beyond their wearer's intentions.

Today's donso shirts in Burkina Faso are also shaped by the changing ecology, the availability of animals, and the possibilities of hunting them. Here the political ecology of hunting reconfigures the hierarchies of hunters, for example, when my teacher Adama was fined and threatened with imprisonment for having killed a hippopotamus with the wrong permit, on the occasion of his mother's funeral. The young president of an emergent hunters' association, on the other hand, with the right political connections and the skills to maneuver inside the bureaucracy of the Burkinabe state, gets to pull the trigger on a hippo while accompanied by forest guards. In such a reconfigured scenario, where killing great animals is no longer a matter of initiatory knowledge or hunting skills, we need to look at the shirts of the donso hunters with different eyes. The shirts today also tell us about donsoya's relationships with the state, acting as paramilitary uniforms that allow the wearer to carry a gun, through the exhibition of association cards or as expressions of support for a political candidate.

Even recognizing these contextual changes, I have proposed a different, more nuanced approach to visibility. I am critical of an approach that views hunters' shirts primarily as displays of amulets and animal parts. Such an ocularcentric approach downplays functions beyond that of signifying, such as the practical uses of the shirts and the material power of its objects. In this respect, I have underlined the importance of materiality vis-à-vis the semiotic, while still recognizing that both dimensions coexist and function in making hunters' shirts what they are. In general, while I argue that language should not constitute the model for analyzing material objects, things in general, and specifically clothes, offer the potential to be understood either as primarily material or as primarily semiotic. Which aspect will gain the upper hand depends largely on contextual factors such as circumstances of use and broader political or ideological discourses. A struggle between hunters is taking place at the level of creating the conditions for the

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establishment of dominant semiotic ideologies, which enables the treatment of existing objects as signs or their resignification. Similar processes even invest masks and power objects brought on parade for independence ceremonies under rebel domination in northern Côte d'Ivoire, which come to stand for the forces behind national unity (Förster 2012:49–51). The struggle for power is located on the same meta-level; it is also a struggle for whose semiotic ideology will become predominant and not simply confined to acts of signification.

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Notes

1. Alternative spellings of the term *donso* are known in the literature, for example *dozo*, *donzo*, *dosso*. The spelling *dozo*, in particular, is increasingly used in Burkina Faso in the context of contemporary associations, in part due to the influence in this field of Ivorian *donsoya*, where this spelling is more common. I will stick to the spelling *donso* because I consider it a more faithful representation of the way the word is pronounced in the area where I did research.
2. But as most literature on African dress reminds us, most items associated with tradition actually emerge from long histories of regional or transnational contact and processes of invention (Allman 2004; Hansen & Madison 2013). In the case of *donso* shirts there is a clear absorption of features of military provenance that likely has a long history. During my fieldwork I witnessed the delivery of a batch of hunting suits printed with the usual leaf motif on robust polycotton fabric.

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