

## INTRODUCTION: KNOWLEDGE IN PRACTICE

*Kai Kresse and Trevor H. J. Marchand*

To demarginalize Africa and the Third World with regard to knowledge as well as in all other respects, to ensure . . . that the margin be no longer margin but part and parcel of a multi-faceted whole, a centre of decision among other centres of decision, an autonomous centre of production among others, such is today a major task. But such appropriation by the periphery of all the useful knowledge supposes further, a conscious effort towards a critical but resolute re-appropriation of one's own practical and cognitive heritage, a negation of the marginality of one's endogenous knowledge and know-how, and a re-insertion of the 'traditional' into a living tradition that looks out to the future. (Hountondji 1997: 36)

Paulin Hountondji's demands for the study of knowledge in Africa offer a suitable starting point for the theme of this special issue. His words flag up points of practical engagement and sketch a desirable perspective of Africa as a self-confident, forward-looking centre of knowledge production. This special issue contributes towards this endeavour by presenting empirically grounded case studies of 'knowledge in practice'. More specifically, the articles illustrate the construction and exercise of 'expertise' in numerous settings, and reflect theoretically upon the criteria by which expert knowledge is judged and the social processes of its validation. While the articles are analytical (rather than political), they respond to Hountondji's challenges by providing focused discussions on Africa's diverse 'practical and cognitive heritage'. They investigate the ways in which expertise and the transmission of knowledge are part of meaningful living traditions, grounded in everyday life and connected to the wider world.

Notably, the epigraph is taken from Hountondji's introduction to a volume on 'endogenous knowledge'<sup>1</sup> that progressively explores

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<sup>1</sup>Hountondji advocates use of the term 'endogenous' to qualify the sort of knowledge he thinks should be investigated. Endogenous, he argues, defines this knowledge 'as an internal product drawn from a given cultural background' (1997: 17). Importantly, it avoids

the relations between Africa's longstanding traditions of science and literacy with its ever-present traditions of orality and myth. In contrast to Hountondji's earlier stance (see Hountondji 1996), the African researchers do not reinforce polarity and opposition, but instead testify to the complementary roles of orality and literacy in the transmission of knowledge. More recent scholarship has endorsed this view, showing that, in Africa and elsewhere, orality and speech performance interact with literacy and literary skills in more dynamic ways than was commonly assumed (Furniss 2004; Finnegan 2007; Barber 2007a). Even if the so-called 'great divide' between literate and non-literate communities persists in some grand (and rather abstract) social-historical narratives of 'civilization', in actual practice everywhere, speech forms the basis for rhetorical skills. Orality continues to be fundamental to the production and communication of knowledge in *all* societies, and nowhere has it been simply replaced by literacy.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, neither politics, nor religion, nor intellectual progress can be realized, or imagined, without the direct 'interaction rituals' of face-to-face dialogue (on the latter, see Collins 1998: Chapter 1).

The function of language, whether spoken or written, is duly recognized as pivotal to any knowledge economy,<sup>3</sup> but the acting body, too, is integral to the formation, acquisition, expression and continual transformation of knowledge (Marchand 2007). Though propositional and embodied forms of knowledge differ in significant ways (in terms of the cognitive apparatuses that give rise to them and their respective modes of expression), they are nevertheless mutually constitutive and cannot be isolated, one from the other, in studying 'expert' performance or knowledge transmission. Marcel Mauss's seminal contribution (1934) to our understanding of the body as a nexus of social and cultural knowledge, technical skill and habitual activity was most famously elaborated by Bourdieu (1977). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological studies of the senses and perception likewise designated the body as the locus of human knowledge and experience (1962). In combination, practice theory and phenomenology have directed recent generations of social scientists to carefully examine people's actions as well as their words.

In this regard, Africanist anthropologists have made outstanding contributions to the study of embodied ways of learning and knowing in the course of daily life and work activity. Lave's research on apprenticing tailors in Liberia (n.d.; 1982), for example, laid the

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suggestions of 'stasis' that may be implied by the term 'traditional', and it evades the derogatory connotations of 'native' or 'primitive' that Hountondji associates with the term 'indigenous'. The differentiations he makes are noteworthy, and the political weight of such connotations should be kept in mind.

<sup>2</sup>In this sense, the term 'literate societies' is a shorthand for societies in which literacy has a crucial, but never exclusive or completely dominant role (well illustrated in Furniss 2004).

<sup>3</sup>For an African case study making explicit use of this term, see Kresse 2009 (cf. also this issue).

groundwork for the anthropology of knowledge to move beyond its focus on content and top-down accounts of teaching to include the psychological and embodied processes of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Her work reinforces the ideas that 'transmission' necessarily encompasses the activity of learning as well as teaching, and that the environment of social relations, tools and materials to hand, and surrounding activities play a critical role in structuring knowledge within communities of practice. Apprenticeship-as-field-method has been increasingly adopted by anthropologists striving for a 'closer approximation' of the local learner's point of view (Hoffman 1995). This approach, which immerses researchers in the motor-cognitive experiences of practice and the socio-political arena of work, is exemplified by several contributing authors to this special issue. Growing numbers of studies on craft production, divination and performance have highlighted the transformation of the apprenticing novice into qualified practitioner, involving multiple domains of knowledge that exceed the technical know-how of their trade. Studies such as Dilley on Senegalese weavers (1989), McNaughton on Mande blacksmiths (1993), Frank on Mande potters and leatherworkers (1998), Stoller and Olkes on Songhay sorcerers (1987), Marchand on Djenné masons (2009), Brett-Smith on Bamana sculptors (1994) and Kingdon on Makonde carvers (2002) demonstrate the intricate weave of skilled activity, physical comportment, demeanour, and manner of speech that compose the expert (Marchand 2008).

The studies in this special issue explore the parallels and interplays between orality and literacy, and they illustrate the carefully calibrated combinations of language and embodiment that make up expert performance. They also investigate the social, cultural and historical contexts in which knowledge is created, enacted and evaluated. Context, as pointed out above, is not merely location: rather it comprises material and technological artefacts; geography and architectural environment; and the myriad of social relations and activities that animate 'place'. The studies show how context is shaped and shared by local communities of social actors that include so-called 'experts' and 'ordinary' people, but also how the ongoing construction of context is inextricably linked to extra-regional and global networks of politics, trade and religion (Falk Moore 1993: 4). Political regimes and ideology, for instance, affect the 'socio-cultural basis of knowledge production' as displayed most vividly by Apartheid's coercive influence on all fields of knowledge and practice in South Africa, from everyday spoken language to academic disciplines (Prah 1999; for a related discussion on post-Apartheid South Africa, see Thornton, this issue). Falola points out that the academy, too, actively constructs and reifies categories of 'worthy' knowledge, relegating 'alternative' corpuses of knowledge such as oral and local histories to the sidelines of respectability (1999). It is also well known that religious frameworks and practices have significant bearing upon political discourse in Africa (see Ellis and ter Haar 2004; Chabal and Daloz 1999), and likewise influence the scope and limits of

'acceptable knowledge', and shape categories and criteria of 'expertise'. In the case of Muslim contexts (which constitute the majority of cases described by our contributors), recent research has documented the historic and ongoing thriving connections between Africa and the wider Islamic world, as well as the internal dynamics relevant to the social transmission of knowledge (Insoll 2003; Reese 2004; Tayob 2007).

Portrayals of broader world systems and networks feature variously in the articles, but it matters that these common global contexts are kept in mind. An imagined vicinity to other regions and other parts of the world is conceptually important for making fruitful comparisons between cross-cultural learning systems, the production of knowledge, and the construction, evaluation and validation of expertise. Despite the regional foci of the studies, the authors, through their ethnography, are exploring general questions concerning the social dynamics of 'knowing something', and of having that knowledge recognized and affirmed by a public (both local and international). In this way, our essayists have wider contributions to make beyond the regions featured, and beyond Africa. What constitutes an 'expert'? What is conceived as 'innovation'? What is valued as 'wisdom'? These are questions of wider interest, and we hope that further empirical investigation and cross-cultural comparison will nurture deeper thinking and understanding about both the diversity and the commonalities in human ways of knowing.

Finally, we raise the issue that conceptions and categories of 'knowledge' are defined and expressed differently by different language communities. For example, Yoruba language, in its ordinary use, is more scrutinizing and precise than English in qualifying something as 'knowledge' (see Hallen and Sodipo 1997, first published 1986). This fact, demonstrated more than two decades ago, served to disprove common Western assumptions that African conceptions of knowledge were constrained by 'tradition' *per se* and thereby comparatively less critical and dynamic. In this regard, it is worth remembering the protestations voiced by African philosophers against the sorts of reductive oppositions espoused paradigmatically by Horton (1974).<sup>4</sup> Kwasi Wiredu (1980), for instance, rejected the fundamentally flawed parameters employed when comparing 'African traditional thought' with 'Western science,' and has continued to do so (1996). Odera Oruka (1990) embarked upon fieldwork to prove the existence of critical independent thinkers within so-called 'traditional' African settings, and to document their reflections (cf. Graness and Kresse 1997). By doing so, both scholars forge a connection with Hountondji and his repudiation of the double standards too often applied in cross-cultural comparative

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<sup>4</sup> Horton's valuable and progressive insight into the fact that African cultures engage in true 'theoretical' forms of thinking must be accredited.

studies of knowledge, science or philosophy (see also Hountondji 2007).<sup>5</sup>

#### ANTHROPOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICA

The contributors to this special issue (except Janet McIntosh) presented original versions of their articles on a panel entitled 'Expertise and the Transmission of Knowledge' that was organized for the first European Conference of African Studies (AEGIS) in London, July 2005. The purpose of the panel was to bring together anthropologists with shared interests in the question of 'expert knowledge'. The aims of their publication in this special issue of *Africa* are, first, to expand the remit of ethnography to include in-depth analyses of the social and cultural formation of experts and their associated corpuses of knowledge; and, second, to engage critically with the concept of 'expertise' as it is understood and applied in various locations. The individual studies with weavers, builders, healers, diviners, poets and Islamic scholars included here represent various sub-Saharan contexts across the continent. The regional imbalance in favour of West African Mande societies and cultures is not intentional, but nor do we feel that it detracts from our objective to highlight Africa's 'cognitive and practical heritage' at work in contemporary settings. The contributors employ different field methods and offer diverse but complementary perspectives on the issues of expert knowledge, practice and learning. Notably, all confirm that expertise in Africa, as elsewhere, is qualified by specialized forms of knowledge, skilled performance, politics of exclusion and recognized status.

Anthropology has an especially strong contribution to make in challenging existing conceptions of Africa as a marginalized, anachronistic entity, and recasting popular understanding and appreciation of the continent as a vibrant and globally relevant centre of knowledge production.<sup>6</sup> One of anthropology's core tasks is to render the internal social dynamics and meaning-making apparatuses of a place comprehensible to an external audience. This requires anthropology to remain current with the ever-evolving discussions, overarching theories, and the progress of its sister social sciences and other disciplines (Marchand forthcoming). In doing so, anthropologists are positioned to pose better-informed questions, hone their ethnographic focus and observation, and formulate new and

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Appiah's recent contribution to the debates on cosmopolitanism are made in the vein of a universal project and heritage of philosophy underpinned by different regional traditions (2006).

<sup>6</sup> This is exemplified in the work of ethno-mathematician Paulus Gerdes who has conducted long research among Southern African basket weavers. The 'mathematical heritage' of these craftspeople is not notated, but rather mathematical knowledge is expressed in the weavers' practices and the things that they make. Gerdes recommends that this sophisticated mathematical 'know-how' be integrated into mainstream education and mathematical research (1999).

critical perspectives on longstanding issues. In turn, it is hoped that anthropology reshapes the thinking and method of other disciplines (James 2003; Moore 2007; Kresse 2007a). When engaged in this process, anthropology needs to integrate the reflexive dimensions of local knowledge (in Africa and elsewhere) into its theory, in order to make the theoretical reflections generated in particular local settings part of a wider common discourse about what it means to be human (see Moore 1996; for a recent overview of African anthropology, see Ntarangwi *et al.* 2007). We fully agree with Bates, Mudimbe and O'Barr, who note that anthropology rests on 'foundations built in significant part of African materials' (1993: xxi). This fact needs to be more widely acknowledged and rightfully accredited.

It merits dwelling briefly on the nature of ethnographic work and the collection of field data that supports the essays published here, since these activities are not specifically outlined by the authors. In addition to a shared fieldwork experience of lengthy observation and participation with their subjects of study, the contributors are unified in their mission to convey a sense of the complex, multi-layered processes involved in the transmission of knowledge and the shifting criteria for its recognition and appreciation. In being socially, linguistically and epistemologically conversant with their field sites and subjects, the authors convey culturally specific features of the application, contestation and negotiation of expert practice, while drawing out general understandings of human knowledge and identity construction. On the one hand, this is achieved through a focus on individual practitioners, involving biographies and life histories (McIntosh, Jansen, Gemmeke, Kresse); and on the other, personal fieldwork experience in the form of apprenticeships enabled several authors to 'learn about learning' through direct immersion in the processes of healing (Thornton), weaving (Dilley), building (Marchand) and divining (Graw).

Certain categories of professionals and skilled practitioners included in the articles that follow have figured prominently in the anthropology of Africa (blacksmiths, healers and diviners), while others have received less attention (weavers, masons and philosophers). As noted by Guyer, there has perhaps been an 'over-emphasis on ritual and witchcraft' in the study of expertise, and if we are to 'take the ethnography of multiple expertise seriously then we need to branch out into other kinds of knowledge, which may work quite differently' (1996: 16). The array of 'experts' presented here does justice to Guyer's call for expanding the scope of study on African knowledge. Based on long-term fieldwork, the authors present ethnographic accounts that contextualize and bring deeper understanding to the words and deeds of skilled practitioners as they are enounced and enacted in the realm of ritual and the sacred, as well as in the schedule of everyday life and work. By situating these actors within local networks of fellow practitioners, clients and pupils, as well as within the wider context of national agendas and global

economies, the authors squarely address the multiplicity of channels for negotiating expertise.

Expert status is configured within the broader social and cultural matrices in which all identity is constructed, and thus the construal of expertise intersects with the politics of gender, ethnicity, age, education and social class. The communication and transmission of specialized knowledge and skilled practice, and the negotiation of status, are typically embedded in hierarchical relations of power. Access to ritual and trade secrets, magic and powerful benedictions are tightly controlled, and acts of initiation can play a prominent role in procuring legitimate recourse to bodies of 'esoteric knowledge' (Brenner 2000). The authors investigate the complex ways in which expert knowledge and its associated ways of being-in-the-world are appropriated, embodied and reproduced by students, disciples and apprentices. Equally important in their considerations are the ways in which expertise is perceived, evaluated and acknowledged by audiences of fellow practitioners and members of the general public. As stated above, acquisition and the honing of skills, both physical and verbal, are enacted in contexts of participatory learning. Such contexts are defined by the social and professional working relations that evolve between mentors and novices or within the peer group, as well as by ever-changing parameters of the working environment.

The essays present a range of methods and theoretical perspectives for investigating knowledge-in-practice in dialogue with recent concerns in the anthropology of knowledge (for example, Crick 1982; Whitehouse 2001; Barth 2002; Boyer 2005; Harris 2007; Marchand forthcoming), as well as with interdisciplinary interests in the interrelated topics of divinatory, religious, and political forms of knowledge in Africa (for example, Peek 1991; Janzen 1992; Lambek 1993; Feierman and Janzen 1992; Olupona 2000; Ellis and ter Haar 2004). While a general overview of research on knowledge in Africa cannot be provided here (see, for example, Kresse 2007b; Fardon 2007; Moore 1996), the contributions to this special issue together cover much of that scope, each drawing upon the existing literature and underscoring recurrent and salient themes while at the same time presenting novel insights.

Despite differences in regional and systematic foci, all the studies emphasize the fundamental role played by context in constituting and forming popular conceptions of expert knowledge. In analysing human knowledge and the dynamics of meaning, our intellectual interpretations of the people and events we observe are necessarily shaped and influenced by our prior experiences and understandings of the world. This hermeneutic principle applies as much to us as scholars and private selves as to the people among whom we conduct research. It is therefore crucial to recognize that our human frameworks for seeing, knowing and understanding are laden with cultural conventions. Our contributors attempt to understand and represent the making of experts as 'experts', and the validation of knowledge as 'knowledge',

by analysing knowledge and expertise in relation to localized discourses and practices, and their relation to the circulation of values and ideas beyond the village, region or nation.

The essays illustrate how authority and power, reputation and distinction, and acts of creativity and innovation among professionals and skilled practitioners are the outcome of historic – yet changing – constellations of social, cultural and political interaction. Authority over secret rites and knowledge among the Mijikenda of Kenya, for instance, is not brokered exclusively by members of that community, but rather is confirmed and contested within a national arena of inter-ethnic and political debate (McIntosh). In Senegal, local popular distinctions made between the secret lore of weavers and the special powers wielded by marabouts are entrenched in competing discourses on occult knowledge and Islam that impact upon the meaning and valuation of a broad spectrum of issues in West African societies (Dilley). The far-reaching reputation of a blacksmith who practises divination in a Mande village is incumbent upon creating and sustaining distant trade relations and wide social networks (Jansen); and strategies of self-presentation among female marabouts – or, as the author puts it, experts in esoteric knowledge – in urban Dakar employ creative narratives of self and index international connections to clients in France and America (Gemmeke).

Innovations introduced to Djenné's traditional building methods and architectural styles (Marchand); creative contributions to the reflexive discussions among Muslim men in Mombasa's *barazas* (Kresse); and meaningful improvisations made in divinatory ritual processes (Graw) – all must be conceptualized with reference to a field of existing schools of knowledge and practice and of established genres and styles of expression. But innovation, creativity and improvisation – as the traits of originality shown by extraordinary, gifted individuals – must also be considered as responses to the constant flux of socio-economic pressures and political forces. The success of a creative improvisation or innovation is often reliant on the practitioner's ability to frame change within a discourse of continuity and tradition. Barber astutely observes that humans characteristically introduce improvisation while simultaneously striving to 'make things stick' (2007b: 38). The production of knowledge and tradition cannot therefore be antithetical. Indeed, as Moore notes in her study among the Marakwet, knowledge itself is a 'powerful mixture of tradition, experience and repetition' (1986: 176). In short, tradition cannot be grasped adequately by a ready-made and ideologically motivated definition that casts it as static and backward-looking. To the contrary, Boyer reminds us that 'the repetition or reiteration of tradition implies complex processes of acquisition, memorization and social interaction' (1990: vii). Thornton reinforces this ever-important point in relation to South African healers whose traditional practices are perpetually (re)defined in compliance with, and in struggle against, government policies and legal definitions. As Hountondji cautioned, we must not 'close up our traditions into the past, as if it were something dead, external and/or superior to us' but



rather we must engage with tradition 'as a living heritage which calls upon our free, rational, critical evaluation and initiative' (1983: 139; see also Gyekye 1997).

As demonstrated above, social context extends far beyond the geographic limits of a place, and Africans, as much as human beings everywhere, are part of an interconnected life-world which they actively constitute and contribute to. Therefore, in the words of Goodman, 'if worlds are as much made as found, so also is knowing as much remaking as reporting' (1978: 22). The essays here buttress this observation. Knowledge and expertise, like the contexts in which they are realized, are not bounded artefacts available for straightforward observation and classification. Satisfying research on human knowledge in African contexts cannot be born of relativist studies that describe African particularities in isolation; nor by classifying Africa as a minor player in the global knowledge economy, nor by subscribing to notions about the inferiority or diminished scope of African knowledge. Rather, anthropological and philosophical concern for the manifestations of human knowledge everywhere must always recognize it as part of the larger worldwide context that people are constantly shaping and acting within (see also Kresse 2007a: Epilogue).

Though the following portrayals of 'knowledge in practice' describe *African* actors and contexts, the insights they offer on knowledge and expertise will also be valuable to non-regionalists with a shared interest in the human condition and ways of being-in-the-world. The practices of building, weaving, healing, divining, philosophizing and ritual gate-keeping presented here possess particular social histories and operate within regionally specific parameters, but the accompanying accounts of moral agency and the responsibility that accompanies professional practice have universal resonance. The same applies to the strategic negotiation of status, the controlled transmission of specialized knowledge and trade skills, and the critical questioning or restyling of knowledge in the face of change.

#### THE PLAN OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

We conclude by briefly describing the individual contributions in their order of appearance. In his study of *sangoma* healers in South Africa, Robert Thornton presents a critique of the post-Apartheid government's ideological uses of the category 'traditional healing' and, more fundamentally, 'traditional African philosophy'. Government policy and legal classification obstruct an understanding of the nature of healing and healers' networks. The *sangoma* healers Thornton works with are part of the wide-ranging *ngoma* healing complex (cf. Janzen 1992), and their associations are characterized by specific forms of intellectual practice, thus shaping a 'profession' (as opposed to a group of religious specialists). As in many so-called 'cults of affliction', the social character of such associations is 'kin-like'. Intertwined processes of healing, learning and initiation in which the afflicted becomes

healer are enmeshed in intense interpersonal relations. This kin-like attribute of the group, Thornton argues, situates healers within an imagined realm of secure, unchanging 'tradition' while in fact their healing traditions are in constant flux, responding to the ever-changing challenges of contemporary life. Thornton shows that ideologically driven categorizations of 'African healing' advocated by the government are incompatible with the healers' self-understanding. Inflexible legal definitions, aimed at legitimating traditional healing on a par with Western medicine, fail to grasp its nature and are instead threatening. Within a framework of national politics, this essay brings to light the competing criteria for 'expertise' and resulting tensions between the state and the community of practitioners.

Janet McIntosh's essay on the commodification of expertise on the Kenyan coast explores comparable issues to those presented by Thornton. The Mijikenda *kaya* elders control a recognized school of knowledge linked to ritual and secrecy; and the community of experts has recently become embroiled in fierce public debates over issues of authority, leadership and appropriate use of ritual practice. Controversy was sparked by the publicity generated around Mijikenda ceremonies that supposedly conveyed blessings and honorary status to regional and national politicians seeking electoral support. Internal opposition within the community challenges the authority of elders to initiate non-members of the *kaya* with traditional knowledge and status. McIntosh vividly describes how elders use the rhetoric of ethnic ideology and authenticity in their eloquent defence against accusations of selling tribal secrets for profit. The study discusses current ruptures in Mijikenda identity. As the lore that secures continuity and well-being for the group is transformed into commodity, its traditional value is compromised. The essay grapples with contestations of power and authority in a social milieu where issues of ethnicity and representation are dangerously volatile.

Roy Dilley's contribution to the discussion on expertise and the transmission of knowledge introduces two culturally recognized experts from Senegal's Haalpulaar society: weavers and marabouts. The respective bodies of knowledge they exercise and control are frequently regarded as antithetical to one another, but on closer examination Dilley uncovers fascinating commonalities and intriguing differences. The essay begins with an introductory discussion of knowledge (or *gandal*) as it is defined in Pulaar, and he draws attention to the cultural distinction made between 'white knowledge' linked with Qur'anic practices and Muslim clerics and 'black' occult knowledge associated with craft lore. The author's careful studies of the weavers' apprenticeship and learning among Qur'anic scholars demonstrate parallels in their pedagogical structures. Students of either discipline are subject to initiatory learning; and their training proceeds from mimetic practices and rote memorization to explicit didactic methods. In the final stages, selected individuals gain privileged access to esoteric knowledge. Dilley argues that though both communities possess a

distinct sense of authority and social range of legitimacy, they share common disciplinary practices and techniques of power that are expressed most clearly in the hierarchical relation between master and learner. Together, these serve steadily to reproduce generations of skilled practitioners.

The themes of apprenticeship and transmission are carried over in Trevor Marchand's study of expertise and innovation among the mud-brick masons of Djenné. Marchand argues that a mason's expertise exceeds mere building technique, and includes design skills, propositional knowledge and secrets. A mason's secrets combine so-called 'white' Islamic verses and 'black' animist lore, bearing striking similarity to the types of *gandal* discussed by Dilley. None of the categories of knowledge Marchand describes are enacted in isolation, but they are seamlessly integrated in daily work, and together constitute the mason as a publicly recognized expert. Through coordinated observation, imitation and repetitive practice of their master's techniques, comportment and attitudes, apprentices gradually gain the 'right feel' for their own skilled performance and win approval within the trade. In the second half of the article, Marchand focuses on the question of innovation and the relations of power that both facilitate and constrain it. A history of change in the masons' tools, materials and designs has both instigated and been the result of innovation. Innovations introduced to Djenné's building practices and architectural forms, he argues, involve intense social and political interaction within the community of masons and with their public of patrons. To qualify as innovative, the novel character of a new practice, fashioned identity or stylized form must be publicly recognized and provoke an evaluative response that accommodates it within the existing canon. Ultimately, expertise and the ability to innovate emanate from a mason's strategic negotiations for status and authority within the wider community.

In the following essay, Knut Graw persuasively argues in favour of the 'autonomy' of the divinatory process itself as practised in the Senegambian region. The author moves away from technical and cognitive studies of divination toward a phenomenology of the nature of the consultation and the existential meaningfulness of the divinatory encounter. In doing so, Graw makes the important point that divination is a sort of 'subject-related lifeworld-poiesis'. Notably, it is the diviner's ability to make a relevant statement through the performance of the activity that marks him as an expert—as both a competent and trustworthy practitioner. Through his own training, Graw discovers that the correct procedures of divining involve the proper application of rules and memorizing the various possible layouts of divinatory tools. In principle at least, *any* person schooled in the technique and who abides by its rules may engage in this specialized practice; but in reality the meaning of a divinatory enunciation is not only derived from the layout but also from a deeper interpretation of the consultation context. In searching for the true ability to divine, Graw's essay begins with an informative summary of the literature on African divination, and

progressively develops the thesis that expertise in the Senegambian context is ultimately measured by the diviner's ability to interpret the inquiry posed within a dialogic process and produce a corresponding enunciation whose subjective meaning can be interpreted by the client and made relevant to their core issues of concern.

Jan Jansen's essay features a particular Mande diviner and makes a case for using a sociologically rooted interactionist approach in the study of expertise. In contrast to Graw's focus on the space of the divinatory practice, Jansen's analysis takes an expanded view of the expert's world. He explores the wide commercial and social networks created by Namagan (a blacksmith-diviner from a rural Malian village) and the ways in which his inter-ethnic contacts throughout the region serve to increase demand for both his divinatory and entrepreneurial services and endorse his status as an expert. Jansen differentiates between experts and specialists, defining the first as one whose applied knowledge provides solutions to social tensions, and the latter as one who possesses abstract, theoretical knowledge. Using firsthand anecdotes about Namagan's geographical movements, his economic activities and his multiple socio-cultural responsibilities, Jansen argues that 'impression management' is perhaps the most important factor in constructing and sustaining expertise. Inspired by the interactionist school and Goffman's sociology of everyday life, the essay demonstrates how Namagan tactically chooses his activities and manipulates circumstances. While continuing to fulfil a wide range of social obligations, Namagan takes on new ones in order to extend his sphere of influence, bolster his fame and expand his clientele.

Impression management is also a central theme in Amber Gemmeke's study of female marabouts, or experts in esoteric knowledge in Dakar. In a context where control over Islamic esoteric knowledge is dominated by men, women practitioners, according to Gemmeke, are 'considered a rare exception at best and a contradiction in terms at worst'. This essay makes a valuable contribution to the literature by documenting the life histories and professional practice of two women who provide divinatory services, dream interpretation and prayer sessions for local and international patrons of either gender. In their narratives, both women creatively combine model male attributes such as charisma with the idealized virtues of a Muslim female in order to construct an aura of authoritative piety and lay claim to expert status. Both emphasize affiliation to the Layenne brotherhood and their associations with male authorities, and stress their purity for using the Qur'an by denying menstruation. Gemmeke also sheds light on their practical management of social duties, family obligations and professional responsibilities, and stresses that 'image building' is key to establishing social recognition and success. These female marabouts have harnessed the economic uncertainty in Dakar's expanding suburbs to deliver a steady stream of hopeful clients. Rapid social change, too, proffers attractive potential for new and creative practices.

The importance of the social dimension of interaction is also (though differently) highlighted in Kai Kresse's exploration of wisdom in

Mombasa's Old Town on the urban Swahili coast. By concentrating on the everyday setting of the *baraza* and the texts and discursive practices of two renowned local intellectuals, Kresse discovers common features that qualify intellectual practices as 'wise' in terms of social appreciation. Competent communication and verbal skills, as well as sensitivity to social demands, hopes and expectation form part of these. Social context plays a role in determining who is counted as wise and for what reasons – yet the quality and originality of individual insights remain important markers of wisdom. Wise enunciations are measured against cultural traditions and idioms and by the impact they have upon previously conceived conceptual boundaries. Equally, the exceptional performance of individuals in the composition of didactic poetry and the delivery of Islamic speeches illustrates wisdom. The neighbourhood *baraza*, as the social meeting point and stage for everyday life, is where such practices may be witnessed. Kresse's study involves a comparative scope in his discussion of wisdom. As the various Swahili case studies are introduced, they are related to broader philosophical considerations and reflections upon wisdom as a general human quality that is recognized and reproduced in both similar and different ways by societies around the world.

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