Breaking Cover: Confronting Crisis and Displacement in Timbuktu, Mali

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BREAKING COVER: CONFRONTING CRISIS AND DISPLACEMENT IN TIMBUKTU, MALI

by

ANDREW HERNANN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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ABSTRACT

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by

Andrew Hernann

Advisor: Gary Wilder

In Spring 2012, a loose alliance of ethnic Tuareg nationalist and Jihadi-Salafist militant groups occupied Mali’s northern regions, forcibly displacing nearly 300,000 residents and ultimately imposing their harsh interpretation of shari’a among those who remained. Later, in January 2013, as these groups began marching towards southern Mali, the French army suddenly intervened, “liberating” urban centers in the North as the militants fled into the Sahara Desert and across the Algerian border. My research examines this period of occupation, displacement and intervention, which most Malians have come to term “the crisis.” Specifically, I analyze the cultural and religious frameworks through which IDPs and refugees from Timbuktu conceptualized and negotiated broader, transnational structures including militant groups, national and foreign armies, refugee camps, humanitarian agencies and so on. As a semi-autonomous hub of Islamic learning that has remained politically and economically distant from the administrative centers of multiple polities over the centuries, I find that Timbuktu reproduces a simultaneously peripheral and central positionality among my interlocutors. Their dissonant, co-lived subjectivity has influenced both how displaced Timbuktians have made sense of (being in) crisis, as well as the creative strategies that they have attempted in order to minimize
hardships. By way of example, one of the primary religio-cultural knowledge-practices that many displaced Timbuktians expressed throughout the occupation was an ethic of privacy rooted in intersecting globalized and localized understandings of secrecy, modesty and shame. Articulated in social and metaphysical spheres, this ethic of privacy both exacerbated the difficulties that many Timbuktians faced and provided a framework through which they attempted to address them. Indeed, my interlocutors referenced this and other knowledge-practices when organizing self-help groups and commenting upon the socio-political landscape surrounding the crisis. Timbuktian IDPs and refugees’ perceptions of occupation, displacement and intervention, along with the actions that they took in order to better their circumstances, reveal the need to analyze crises beyond certain hegemonic, Euro-American optics. Taking localized knowledge seriously decenters and decolonizes the presumptions that many theorists, humanitarians and politicians have reproduced and more effectively repositions displaced persons as active, strategic agents.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Timbuktians in Crisis

Salt comes from the North, gold from the South and silver from the Land of the Whites, but the Word of God, the famous things, histories and fairy tales, we only find them in Timbuktu.

~Timbuktian proverb, retold by an adolescent as we played checkers,
Timbuktu, August 2013

The rebels took Kidal on Friday, Gao on Saturday, and Timbuktu on Sunday. One, two, three… There were so many flags, one for each group that claimed the town as their own. Nobody knew what was what or who was who. We said that we should just make our own flag and fly it over Timbuktu. Maybe then we’d be in charge!

~Interview with Moustafa, displaced in Sevare, Mali

As I sat in the gate waiting for my connecting flight to Bamako, Mali, everyone’s anxieties were running high. This was early January 2013, and the militants that had been occupying northern Mali for the past nine months had started moving south. International news channels reported confrontations between the Malian army and “the Islamists.” Everyone was full of questions. Malian families wondered bitterly if their military would be able to contain the militant groups and if the international community’s reluctance to intervene would continue. Journalists and camera crews wondered what kind of coverage they would be able to get. And I wondered about my project, if I would be safe in Bamako, the Malian capital, and if I would still be able to travel to central Mali, as I had planned. I wondered what I would do if I had to just scrap my original plans entirely.

As I landed in Bamako at 2:00am, floodlights on the tarmac illuminated gigantic military cargo planes. My friend Ibrahim picked me up, and he could only repeat what my many voicemails and unconfirmed alerts had suggested: Mali, this former French colony, had declared a state of emergency, and the French army was on its way to intervene against the terrorist
groups. Ibrahim took me to the house where he had been staying since departing Timbuktu a couple weeks earlier. It was full of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Timbuktu, who were all scrambling for news. Normally, this would have intrigued me. But I was exhausted from stress and 36 hours of travel, and I instead chose to collapse on a bed. I slept late into the next morning, and upon getting up I did not see anyone. After wandering outside, I found a large group – who I later discovered to be both the residents of the house and their neighbors – huddled around a cell phone that was playing the radio. When Ibrahim noticed me, he got up enthusiastically and said, “It’s official! It’s over! The French will fight for us. Soon, Timbuktu will be free!”

**Project**

How did local, historically-rooted cultural and religious systems frame how displaced Timbuktians conceptualized and negotiated what they termed “the crisis”? How did Timbuktians engage everyday practices and values in order to manage transnational structures and institutions including militant rebel groups, terrorist organizations, narco-traffic networks, refugee camps, the Malian army and police, the French military and international relief organizations? I argue that due to Timbuktu’s historical development as an Islamic and commercial zone peripheral and frequently semi-autonomous to most polities, particular religious and cultural notions have emerged that are unique – or at least are perceived to be unique – to the region. By privileging these notions, displaced Timbuktians attempted to navigate and make sense of the Malian crisis. However, the same practices that helped them to negotiate this crisis also reinscribed Timbuktu’s historical status on the periphery and thus reinforced Timbuktu’s marginalization vis-à-vis the Malian state. While rendered peripheral,
therefore, Timbuktu is also a center unto itself, a social formation through which residents have reproduced particular ideas, values and practices through which they frame (trans-)local events. I do not aim to situate the center as periphery or vice versa, though. Rather, examining how Timbuktians experienced and navigated the Malian crisis obliges us to analyze the center and periphery as a simultaneous and co-lived experience.

This is a story as much about crisis as it is about Timbuktu, or rather, Timbuktians. Indeed, crisis is the lens through which we can glean something important about Timbuktu, and consequently, about post-colonial African states. At the same time, however, examining the Timbuktian community during such a context is equally revealing about crisis. As such, this is not a case study of Timbuktu. Nor is it merely happenstance that Timbuktu is the optic through which I analyze occupation, displacement and military intervention. As will become clearer in chapters to come, both place (Timbuktu) and event (crisis) are inextricably connected.

I frame my analysis by linking the everyday and the transnational. This is a purposeful way of avoiding the false dichotomy of “the local” and “the global.” In my experience, “the global” is often misused, as it frequently references another local, just one that is “over there” (see Trouillot 2003). Many social scientists also tend to evoke the terms differently depending upon the context. “The local,” for example, is often used in Africanist analyses as if the continent were not connected to the same global process that link other “globalized” places in other parts of the world (Piot 1999). We are all simultaneously local and global, or better stated, localized and globalized. However, these same categories – despite certain warnings and critiques – continue to mischaracterize African communities. To avoid this problematic confusion, therefore, I turn to the “everyday” and the “transnational.” While these frames of
reference do not solve all of the issues that come with the local-global dichotomy, I hope that it leaves behind at least some of the baggage.

These are not just discursive moves for me, though. This is also an important theoretical consideration. Wilder (2005) challenges us to analyze political forms and rationalities on their own terms without representing such forms and rationalities as external to broader political economic relations. As such, I attempt to decenter some of the discourses and frameworks that have historically dominated scholarship of Africa (and Islam). By placing my Timbuktian interlocutors’ ideas as central, however, is not to suggest that I remove them from the wider frameworks within which such ideas may be embedded. By turning to the intersections between everyday practices and transnational processes, I examine the avenues through which communities navigate various systems of power. Some of these avenues engage localized knowledge – or said differently, norms, traditions and/or common sense (Gramsci 2005 [1971]). Individuals, particularly those not entirely “disciplined” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Foucault 1995 [1975]), utilize historical, customary knowledge in order to make sense of and manage supra-local structures and events. At the same time, though, states regularly attempt to render these communities visible, quantified and, thus, under their more formal control (Foucault 2010 [1978]). Nevertheless, individuals and communities differently engage these processes using a variety of everyday cultural expressions (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Piot 1999; Shannon 2015). Without adopting Gramsci’s distain for the commonsensical, therefore, I take everyday knowledge of transnational processes and institutions seriously as legitimate commentary, critique and even a means for conceptualizing alternative futures and political relationships (Freire 2000 [1968]).
Postcolonial States

Adequately examining the Malian crisis in structural, as well as everyday Timbuktian terms demands an interrogation of states within the postcolonial context. Weber remains the traditional starting point for social and political theorists who seek to describe or – even more audaciously – define states in general: they are that which hold the monopoly on the legitimate form of violence in the enforcement of “order.” However, “the state” is operationalized in various, not always consistent discourses. Following Asad (2004:280), some of these include:

The discourse of sovereign states (whether princedoms or republics) facing one another in war and peace; the discourse of state governance (in the regulation of behavior, the acquisition and distribution of resources, the care of populations, the maximization of security); and the discourse of state politics (the struggle to establish a nation-state; competition over policy). Such discourses invoke languages of law, of justice, of raison d’état, of benefit—languages that define and redefine the foundations of sovereignty and the obligations of obedience, the criteria of citizenship and nationality, the rights of self-defense and punishment. The boundaries of “the state” vary accordingly, as does its internal morphology: the different ways of determining membership and inclusion, inside and outside, the law and the exception.

Without essentializing institutional and ideological differences between “the West” and “the rest,” though, we must consider some of the (supposed) particularities of postcolonial African states. For, as Mbembe (2001:24) reminds us: Postcolonial African regimes did not invent what they know of state forms or governance from scratch; rather, their knowledge is the product of “several cultures, heritages, and traditions of which the features have become entangled over time, to the point where something has emerged that has the look of ‘custom’ without being reducible to it, and partakes of ‘modernity’ without being wholly included in it.” Therefore, it is important to take seriously, while simultaneously problematizing, the colonial legacies of state forms.
Colonial African states – and by extension, postcolonial African states – were not a single phenomenon. Rather, (post)colonial states are the result of contentious political, economic, racial, religious and sexual ideas and networks differently reproduced throughout the European and African continents (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:237). Nonetheless, we can identify certain commonalities – which should not to be confused with universalities – across African colonies and postcolonies. For instance, throughout the colonial world, most administrators and soldiers created and reproduced a racialized, bifurcated colonial state whereby mostly European officials – and European settlers – were granted rights, education and access to state institutions as guaranteed by European citizenship (Mandani 1996:20; Wilder 2005:5). Many African civil societies under the colonial era also often replicated such racialized exclusion. Significantly, however, while early French colonialism largely practiced more direct confrontation with local regimes throughout the African continent, thereby institutionalizing the racialized exclusion of African subjects, their intervention in Islamic affairs was (from the French perspective) less coercive. For example, throughout West Africa – and including in Bamako and Timbuktu, Mali – French colonies established multiple “medersas” and (attempted to) limit entry to the African sons of nobility, thereby endeavoring to create a population of West African Muslims more open to French administrative action (Mamdani 1996:86). Such religious and racial interventions, however, concerned more than formal governance. For, the ultimate objective for wave upon wave of colonizers was – and continues to be in more contemporary expressions of neocolonialism – to colonize their subjects’ consciousness with neoliberal capitalist ideologies (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:4).

Recognizing the multiple, dissonant “shifts” that occurred in the transition from colony to post-colony (see Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:238), following decolonization, anti-colonial
movements and ultimately independence, many – though certainly not all – former African colonies formally deracialized their state structures. Nonetheless, many postcolonial African civil societies remained racialized. And, some – particularly those whose newly independent governments were co-opted by bourgeoisie, European-trained civil servants – reproduced (though, in their own terms) some of the same neoliberal ideologies that were privileged under colonialism (Fanon 2004 [1963]. Furthermore, following the continued influence of Muslim communities, organizations and brotherhoods, while many leaders of former French colonies in West Africa – including Mali – asserted the secular nature of their now independent states, most postcolonial regimes have sought to associate themselves with Islam (see Soares 2005:211). Consequently, while colonialism’s bifurcated state became formally deracialized, it was not adequately democratized racially or religiously (Mamdani 1996:26).

Indeed, we must not over-emphasize the supposed democratization of postcolonial states. Throughout the African continent and beyond, the democratic process has morphed from the substantive to procedural, increasingly connoting little more than an exercise of choice (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997:126). This correlates to the growing insignificance of the government – and by extension, the state – itself, as politics become more and more decentered and deinstitutionalized. Consequently, Africans are left with a precarious dilemma, itself two alternative conceptualizations of modernity: on the one hand, an un-African model of the nation-state based upon an autonomous, individualized and rights-bearing notion of citizens, or, on the other hand, an anti-modern, ethnically based and pluralist community whereby some people, based upon select characteristics, enjoy particular entitlements whereas other are denied them (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997:128).
Postcolonial African power and politics – including both political subjectivities and positionalities – were largely forged via the colonial experience (Comaroff 1998; Mamdai 1996; Mann 2015 Mbembe 2001). What we must remember, however, is that neither colonial states nor, subsequently, postcolonial states in Africa represent the favored definition of the modern state as a sovereign, all-encompassing, dominating, interconnected, centralized and constitutional bureaucracy (see an-Na’im 2010; Hansen 2001:217). Indeed, the French nation-state – and by extension, its (former) colonies – was always a disjointed political form. As the administrative, liberal and parliamentary dimensions did not always align with one another, neither did European territories, populations and governments (see Wilder 2005:7).

Throughout the postcolonial world, most states do not command a self-evident authority to affect the rule of law. Rather, there exist competing centers of formal and informal, official and unofficial centers of power – including religious organizations; “corrupt” or “illicit” networks; police, military and para-military forces; and so on – that stake various claims of sovereignty, employ multiple registers of biopower, and make different claims to stately authority (Ferguson 2007; Hansen 2001:217; Mann 2015:208; Roitman 2004). The peoples and communities that fall within spaces of more direct, legible and official state domination, therefore, are conceived of as “the center.” Conversely, those groups and regions outside of direct, legible and official state domination are termed “the periphery,” sites and practices that are perceived as out-of-(the-state’s-)control (Das & Poole 2004). Most inaccurately juxtapose center and periphery. However, peripheries are not the opposite of centers: peripheries are not the “primitive” to centers’ “civilization,” nor are peripheries the absence of states’ coercion. Instead, peripheries are exemplified by the negotiation between legible and illegible, legal and illegal, and formal and informal state structures (Das & Poole 2004).
Rather than “actual” sovereignty, therefore, postcolonial African states are characterized by a specific imaginary of sovereignty (Mbembe 2001:25). Indeed, instead of asserting sovereignty through maintaining a monopoly on violence, postcolonial states often perform such sovereignty through spectacles and spectacular (threats of) violence. Public demonstrations of governance and sovereignty remain vital to the (re-)production of “stateness,” and thus, “the state” (Coronil 1997; Hansen 2001; Limbert 2010). Therefore, it is partially through such aura, magic, spectacle and so on that the state becomes the organizing concept through which societies imagine their society’s cohesion, order, sovereignty and (sometimes) happiness, as well as its secrets, sources of violence and malevolence (Hansen 2001:128; Mbembe 2001:31). In some cases, this comes about when a local commitment to the power and efficacy of public ritual converge. Particularly when the peasantry, rural communities or “the village” are situated as central in the national imaginary (see Trouillot 2000 [1990]), leaders can make themselves and the state more visible by drawing power from public images (Piot 1999:76,101). In other cases, officials demonstrate the spectacular – though often inconsistent and episodic – disciplinary power of the state through theatrical elections (Wedeen 2008:81). And in other cases, still, coercive symbols, such as oppressive labor camps and prisons – such as those in the Sahara Desert – served to remind colonial and postcolonial citizens of the strength and breadth of state power (Mann 2015:216; Mbembe 2001:28). Significantly, however, such spectacles teach of both the domination of states, as well as their precariousness (see Wedeen 2008:100), particularly as unofficial and non-state actors can also perform their authority through (sometimes violent) spectacle.

Clearly, we must not mistake spectacle, or even the imaginary, for “unreal.” Though, it can be suggestive of postcolonial states’ disjointedness. For instance, punishments have been
administered by the agents of decentralized state apparatuses (Mann 2015; Mbembe 2001:28). And, while “local state” and non-state institutions were intended to reinforce central state policies, they often express a degree of autonomy (Mandani 1996:60). Such fragmentation further threatens (even the symbol of) state sovereignty, for while states might continue to be perceived as “omnipresent,” they are hardly “omnipotent” (Mamdani 1996:11). This is particularly true within the “development” sphere, where non-state or supra-state projects depoliticize poverty, for example, while expanding bureaucratic structures (Ferguson 1994).

Indeed, with expanded privatization comes the expanded depoliticization of politics: as neoliberal capitalism overtakes states as the all-encompassing system within and beyond state borders, no broader ideology or political economic system suffices as a viable alternative (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:242).

Consequently, without suggesting that colonial societies were actually as hierarchical and centralized as colonial history might imply, as the pyramidal organization of postcolonial states becomes increasingly decentralized and privatized, the precolonial and colonial tensions that African civil society inherited also risk becoming increasingly acute (Mann 2015; Mbembe 2001:79). This is especially the case as local and non-state agents, perhaps while under the guise of the state, reinforce local grudges, express biases or jockey for their own authority. Often postcolonial states attempt to reduce such resulting tensions while simultaneously bolstering their own power by creating jobs in the public services or through direct intervention (Mbembe 2001:43). Indeed, as I describe in Chapter 4, officials in Bamako attempted just that in order to quash various insurrections in Northern Mali. Nonetheless, conflict – racial, ethnic, national, religious, territorial, and so on – often emerges as the gap between the official attributes of the state and the changing economic, sociocultural and political properties of the citizenry widens.
Indeed, “crisis” as warfare has marked postcolonial African states as groups increasingly feel overtaken by a majority of “outsiders” (Comaroff 1998; Mbembe 2001:86-7).

**Crisis**

As an American ethnographer of crisis in a part of Africa, I am sensitive to the challenges of analyzing it without reinforcing a problematic, reified narrative that “naturalizes” conflict throughout the continent. By emphasizing the confluence of historical political economic, territorial and racial tensions, I maintain that crisis in Africa is not, contrary to the popular stereotype, in any way “biological” or “genetic.” Postcolonies have been referred to by many labels: hallow pretense, regime of unreality, fetish, sham, artifact. And, owing to their “chaotic pluralism” and the impossibility of creating a single, stable system of all of the signs, images and markers associated with postcolonial states, conflict often arises (Comaroff & Comaroff 2005; Mbembe 2001:108). Indeed, it is due to this precarity and the seeming irreducibility of difference that postcolonial states often (must) turn to the aforementioned magicalities and theatricalities in the first place (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:239-40).

Most of the Timbuktian IDPs and refugees with whom I spoke described the occupation and their displacement as a major political, economic and social crisis. In this sense, therefore, the Malian crisis reflects social and political rupture, rupture which if not addressed leads to communal disorder (see Gluckman 1965; Turner 1957). Indeed, throughout the African continent, crisis – either at the local or the state level – often exacerbates the marginalization of already marginalized social sectors, thereby causing more widespread disorder and conflict (see Little 2003; Obarrio 2010; Peters 2011). However, while many anthropologists continue to formulate crisis as a break, the break is not exclusively a political economic one. Crisis itself
often serves as a narrative device; that is, the invocation of crisis enables certain narratives and questions while simultaneously foreclosing others (see Roitman 2013; Taussig 1992).

Political or economic crisis also frequently produces a corresponding narrative break between past and present, as individuals, communities, ethnic groups, nations, militaries, states and so on promote particular accounts of events. Crisis, therefore, dismantles and mobilizes reality and what defines who we are (Mbembe & Roitman 1995; Nordstrom 1997:179). Instead of striving for historical accuracy, for example – indeed, historical accuracy is often not the point, nor even discernable (see Feierman 1993; Vansina 1985) – these accounts regularly and strategically (re)produce certain identities in order that individuals, groups or institutions can make specific claims in order to pursue specific goals (Mamdani 2002; Pottier 2002). Of course, “identity” is often a misused concept that tends to essentialize complex practices (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). And to be sure, while violence and narrative formation sometimes correspond to identity (re-)formation, identity is not always a problematic category during times of crisis. It is not uncommon, for instance, for an individual or group to maintain contradictory community, ethnic, racial and/or national identities all while operationalizing other culturally significant categories (Hoffman 2011). For, identity itself, often serves as a simplified gloss for more complex, interrelated and conflicting expressions of knowledge that are implicated in the general destabilizing (and enactment) of power structures (Mbembe & Roitman 1995:345).

The accounts that emerge during times of crisis can also strategically reproduce additional discourses that have little to do with identity per se (and, again, without specifically attempting historical accuracy). Indeed, crises can mobilize conflicting discourses that evoke divergent bodies of knowledge, and in cases of (calls for) international intervention, they can strategically overlook local knowledge as a way to justify – or disqualify, as the case may be –
outside military involvement (Mandani 2010). Thus, it is important that we remember that crisis concerns more than social structure. Displacement disrupts nearly all aspects of everyday life, thereby placing IDPs and refugees in a liminal – and thus vulnerable – political economic and existential position (Malkki 1995). Instead of focusing only on social and narrative rupture, therefore, we must also consider how disruption produces dissonance and disconnection (see Jackson 1995).

I therefore examine crisis as both a product and a producer of fragmented postcolonial states (see Hallaq 2014). Indeed, crisis within and among postcolonial states are the result of institutional challenges to state sovereignty. At the same time, however, postcolonial states and crisis also cultivate often competing narratives about authority and legitimacy (see Asad 2012). Therefore, we must not interpret crisis – even in the case of war, occupation and displacement – exclusively in the negative, as that which confronts and sometimes breaks down official institutions or imaginaries about the state. Rather, we must also consider how crisis within postcolonial states can be productive, productive of or privileging heretofore marginalized narratives and rationalities about states, for example, or about the center and periphery.

**Timbuktu as a Site: Problematizing Race and Ethnicity**

I examine Timbuktu as a social formation unto itself. Doing so more effectively highlights the ruptures and transformations that emerged as various categories became more politically significant during contexts of crisis. By centering Timbuktian conceptualizations of crisis, I attempt to relieve my examination of ahistorical, exoticizing and Eurocentric frameworks. Colonial administrators and military officers, for example, regularly used race or ethnicity as a – if not the – predominant framework for conceptualizing and governing African societies. For the
most part, however, more than reflecting political and sociocultural realities throughout the continent, these frameworks mirrored both a racialized European society and their orientalized views of the non-European other (see Ranger 2003 [1983]). Unfortunately, many scholars adopted these problematic presumptions, thereby mischaracterizing—or rather, “inventing”—an idea of Africa that overemphasized the everyday significance of ethnicity and labeled all Africans as Black (or, conversely, all non-Black inhabitants as non-African) (Mudimbe 1988; see Said 1979). Consequently, contemporary deployments of race and ethnicity in African political society largely remain a legacy of colonial hegemony, if not a product of neocolonial systems of power (Mamdani 1996).

The various ethnic groups in Mali, for example, are differently racialized. Most southern Malians – broadly made up of various Mande ethnicities, the largest of which are the Bambara – are almost exclusively racialized (and they almost exclusively racialize themselves) as black. However, racial belonging is more complicated in northern Mali: some northerners can make different racial claims, sometimes based upon skin color, sometimes based upon ethnicity and/or notions of nobility. Prior to French colonization, individuals of slave and sub-Saharan origins who practiced less-than-“noble” labor were often racialized as black; whereas individuals of non-slave, North African or Middle Eastern ancestry who practiced “noble” professions were often racialized as white (Austen 2010:9; Hall 2011:241-72; Lecocq 2010:93-7; Stoller 1989:47; see Klein 1998:137-40). Despite these local racial idioms, though, French colonial soldiers and administrators introduced European racial frameworks throughout West Africa that identified “Africans” as black and “Arabs” (including certain ethnic Tuaregs) as white (Hall 2011; Mann 2006:16; Mudimbe 1988:1; Robinson 2004:80-7). It was also through this framework that the notion of “master” and “slave” became racialized and only white individuals—primarily colonial
officers and administrators – were perceived as free and could enjoy civil liberties (Mbembe 2001:28-9). While the French did not recognize the lighter-skinned Tuaregs as free, they did stereotype them as “fierce warriors.” Mythologized as the “lords of the desert,” colonial policy romanticized Tuareg communities as the proud bearers of their original culture and thus in need of protection from modernity in order to preserve their way of life. French administrators did not similarly romanticize darker-skinned ethnic Songhay communities, who they perceived as “denigrated” (Lecocq 2010:91-2). This colonial attitude resulted in the de-racialization of an internal “white” elite within Songhay society (Hall 2011; Stoller 1989). As a result, most Songhay today identify themselves as black. However, French colonial orientalizing (partially) preserved and refashioned certain pre-colonial racial frameworks within Tuareg and Arab society (Lecocq 2010:102-8). What this has created, therefore, is some fluidity regarding race. Throughout northern Mali, for example, many Tuaregs and Arabs – regardless of skin tone – are still not considered white because they are of less noble status. This is particularly true for the Bellah and Haratin, (former) Tuareg and Arab slaves, respectively (Lecocq 2005). However, some of these individuals might claim their “whiteness” when engaging French racial categories and attempting to assert their superiority over their darker-skinned Malian counterparts.

As such, situating my project as an examination of blackness or whiteness, or even of “the Songhay community,” for example, in Timbuktu would detract from rather than contribute to my analysis. To be sure, there are contexts during which various Timbuktians have differentiated themselves according to perceived notions of racial and ethnic belonging. Many of my Timbuktian interlocutors proudly declared that Timbuktu, supposedly unlike other places in Mali, is a cosmopolitan city where race and ethnicity are less relevant, where all individuals and family mutually help one another. Indeed, most detailed how – regardless of race and ethnicity –
throughout the city’s history, all Timbuktians have been able to access the commercial and religious networks and institutions that have contributed to the development of Timbuktian sociocultural values and practices. To be sure – and as I will explore more fully below – this is a dubious and romanticized claim. Nonetheless, without suggesting that race and ethnicity are unimportant, or that we should disregard these categories entirely, that is exactly why we should not begin with race or ethnicity. Such attitudes highlight the privileging of locality-based (rather than race- or ethnicity-based) Timbuktian identity. They also highlight how various notions concerning sociopolitical belonging – such as family and clan, for example – may transcend racial or ethnic membership as preeminent social categories. Or, that individuals differently support, contest and creatively undermine predominant social orders (see Stoller & Olkes 1987:13).

Timbuktu, situated some 10km north of the northern bend of the Niger River, is simultaneously Saharan and Sahelian, maintaining historic longitudinal and latitudinal commercial and social links. Despite such links, however, many residents have perceived the city as isolated, relatively poor and underdeveloped, highlighting its vast, partially unpaved distance (1200 km) to Bamako. Nonetheless, this city is locally and regionally conceptualized as an Islamic and commercial center, which has been inscribed in the built environment (see Grémont 2004). Most Timbuktians refer to downtown Timbuktu as “Medina,” the site of its three world famous mosques: Djingarey-Ber, Sankore and Sidi Yahya. “Medina” is also the site of Timbuktu’s small and large markets, which, unlike the surrounding towns and villages, are open everyday. The mosques and the markets are the heart of Timbuktian religious and commercial society. This is where the most well-known merchants sell dry goods, fabrics and salt from further north and produce from further south. It is also where the more renowned
imams and marabouts\textsuperscript{8} preach and teach. Not uncoincidentally, “Medina” is also where the wealthiest Timbuktians tend to live.

There is a mystique about Timbuktu, one that most of my interlocutors described and that I have experienced myself.\textsuperscript{9} Most attributed this to the 333 saints, individuals whose piety made them God’s intermediaries, for whom the city is known. Many of the saints’ mausoleums are situated within “Medina.” Indeed, some are located in the three main mosques, where these individuals preached, taught and prayed before achieving sainthood. When discussing the “mystery” of Timbuktu, many of my interlocutors also referenced the many libraries that dot “Medina’s” narrow, winding streets. They house the centuries-old manuscripts that Timbuktu’s Islamic scholars composed during and following the city’s medieval Golden Age. And while few Timbuktians have read the manuscripts, most described to me how important they are for Timbuktu. Of course, the manuscripts contain invaluable knowledge and information regarding Timbuktu town and the surrounding region, not to mention tomes of religious philosophy and jurisprudence, science, mathematics and so on. However, most of my interlocutors also described the manuscripts as semi-divine objects worthy of deference. Many suggested that – at least to the true believer – the manuscripts emit a kind of aura.

Surrounding “Medina” are numerous less wealthy neighborhoods. Primarily residential, the houses there tend to be made of stucco, rather than the more expensive limestone bricks found downtown. Of course, there are madrasas – Islamic schools – in these neighborhoods, too, as well as small shops, but they also lack the reputation and grandeur of their more central counterparts. To the south, these neighborhoods eventually give way to scrub, fields and rice patties on the flood plane, and ultimately the village of Kabara, a port along the Niger River where goods and passengers circulate to and from Timbuktu. To the north, these neighborhoods
fade into the Sahara Desert, where pastoralist and nomadic families set up temporary
encampments, particularly when they have business to attend to in Timbuktu town.

Different ethnic groups have “claimed” Timbuktu at various points in time (see Saad
2010 [1983]). Nonetheless, most Timbuktian residents today have characterized the city as
multiethnic. Three main ethnic groups live in and around Timbuktu: Songhay, Tuareg and Arab.
Though, there are also a number of Fulbe and Bozo residents, who have historically lived along
the Niger River. And there are many Bambara residents from central and southern Mali who
have moved to Timbuktu for work or family reasons. While not nearly as bounded as
Timbuktian discourses might suggest, many of my interlocutors described a fairly clear division
of labor in Timbuktu (see Grémont 2013). For instance, “the Arabs” are nomads and merchants,
meaning they maintain trans-Saharan networks – including the famous salt trade – and are
largely responsible for bringing and selling affordable goods south from Algeria. “The Tuareg”
are pastoralists who herd cattle and goats. And “the Songhay” are sedentary, who both farm and
perhaps run businesses or do manual labor.

These discourses, however, misrepresent Timbuktian society, reproducing an
essentialized construction along the lines of “action” (see Asad 2009 [1986]). They suggest that
there is a strict division of labor. They also suggest a rigid notion of ethnicity. Not all
Timbuktian Arabs are nomadic or run shops, nor are all Tuareg herders or all Songhay farmers.
Part of the reason for this is high rates of unemployment, which means that many Timbuktians
have no work at all. Another reason, however, is the diversification of labor. Some Timbuktians,
for example, have managed to travel to Bamako to attend the university and have become civil
servants, engineers and so on. Others have attended vocational schools and are now drivers or
mechanics. Still others have tapped into a struggling tourism industry and have become guides,
restaurateurs, hoteliers and travel agents. Many others, however, have found work with the number of humanitarian agencies and militaries that have permanently or temporarily come to the North for relief or training purposes.

Dominant Timbuktian ethnic discourses also misrepresent Timbuktian society because they are patriarchal in nature. Thus, another reason that not all Tuareg, for instance, are herders is because animal husbandry is primarily a male activity. Many Tuareg women, however, make leather goods, process milk into yogurt and cheese, play music and so on. Further, many Arab women also work in shops, while many Songhay women sell foodstuffs in the marketplace. Moreover, across Timbuktian society, it is primarily the women who are responsible for childcare and housework. Significantly, however, despite a gendered division of labor and the privileging of male activities, most Timbuktian women are not subservient to the men in their families. Of course, most Timbuktian husbands expect a degree of respect and deference from their wives. But, most of my interlocutors also emphasized how important it is for men to respect women. Many claimed that something that sets Timbuktu apart from other Malian towns is the degree to which women’s rights are emphasized. And particularly as the money that a woman earns is her own—that is, while there is not an expectation that she will work in the first place, her wages need not necessarily be shared with her husband or father—she retains a degree of economic (and thus, social) independence.

Predominant discourses, however, also problematically suggest that ethnicity in Timbuktu is bounded and rigid when, in fact, it is porous and fluid. For instance, while not always desired or celebrated (though not necessarily because of ethnic differences), mixed marriages are rarely frowned down upon in Timbuktu, and, according to my interlocutors, they remain rather common. Traditionally, one takes the ethnicity of one’s father. Therefore, even in
multi-ethnic households, there is a clear notion of ethnic belonging. However, one’s sense of identity is not always so clear-cut. Particularly as female guardians tend to be the primary child caregivers, even if someone is technically considered the ethnicity of one’s father, the child may identify more strongly with the ethnicity of one’s mother. Or, more commonly still, the child would likely identify—and feel culturally and linguistically comfortable—with both ethnicities.

Ethnicity in Timbuktu is complicated even further because it cannot be divorced from the discourse and residual sociopolitical hierarchy of slavery. As I introduced above, Timbuktian society is largely divided along racialized notions of the (former) master-slave relationship. I reiterate: not all Tuareg are herders. This is not only because some have found work elsewhere, but also because most of the Tuareg manual laborers (“Bellah”) and blacksmiths and craftspersons (“Forgerons”) are the descendents of Tuareg slaves (see Lecocq 2012:3-15, 87-134). Similarly, not all Timbuktian Arabs are caravaners. “Haratin” – again, the descendents of Arab slaves – remain both the salt miners and those responsible for selling rock salt in the market. In this sense, therefore, while predominant Timbuktian discourses regarding ethnicity are male-centric, they are also slave owner-centric.

On the surface, such ethnic and master-slave designations may not seem to hold great significance. For instance, many of my Timbuktian friends – Bellah and non-Bellah alike – liked to remind me that the city had elected a Bellah as mayor. Nonetheless, slave status does impact everyday interactions in Timbuktu, as many of the descendents of slave masters still expect favors and services from the descendents of slaves (see Hall 2011, Chapter 2 of this manuscript). Further, most of my interlocutors explained that many descendents of slaves are neither surprised by these unofficial orders, nor do most begrudge them. However, notions of slavery have influenced relationships in more formal ways as well. For example, while inter-ethnic marriages,
I was told, are considered less problematic, most descendents of masters (attempt to) prohibit their children from marrying the descendents of slaves.

The Malian Crisis

The events leading to the occupation of Timbuktu are many and complicated. Since the colonial era, Tuareg nationalism has run high among certain Tuareg families in northern Mali, and various rebel movements have fought off and on for independence or increased autonomy. Following the fall of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi in summer 2011, battle-hardened Tuareg of Malian origins who had fought in Libya returned (with Libyan weaponry) to Mali and joined various organizations endeavoring to assert their dominance in the North. Some linked with a group of young Tuareg and experienced Tuareg politicians, forming the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in October 2011. An extension of previous Tuareg nationalist groups and partially armed and funded via long-standing gun- and narco-trafficking networks interlocking the Sahara, the MNLA has sought increased autonomy or independence for “Azawad,” a region largely comprised of northern Mali. The influx of fighters in the North, however, spawned additional groups. The transnational Jihadi-Salafi movement, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), had been in the southern Sahara for the past several years. However, in December 2011, a new organization, the Movement for Divine Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) emerged from within its ranks (Lecocq, et al 2012:3). AQMI and MUJAO also both tapped into gun- and narco-trafficking, though rumor has it that a few wealthy Middle Eastern families have also funded their cause. A more locally-rooted Jihadi-Salafi movement called Ansar Dine also developed in late-2011 after MNLA leadership rejected a proposal to reform the organization along shari’a lines (Erless & Koné 2012). In late-2011 and
early-2012, these groups began attacking villages and Malian military and police headquarters, mainly situated near the Algerian border and in the mountainous Kidal region. However, divided over nationalist and religious objectives, these numerous organizations, while at times loosely collaborating, could never form long-lasting alliances.

Meanwhile, politicians in Bamako were preparing their candidature for the presidential elections scheduled for April 29, 2012 while also trying to respond to the attacks in northern Mali. Growing insecurity and threats to Malian territorial integrity became a major campaign issue. The theme of Malian “indivisibility” grew stronger – and more desperate – as the Malian army continued to experience more setbacks than successes. The military temporarily retook the town of Menaka from rebel control in January 2012. However, less than a week later the town of Aguel’hoc brutally fell to allied militants from AQMI, Ansar Dine and the MNLA (though the MNLA denies any involvement with the atrocities) (Koné 2012:8).

Numerous villages and towns were attacked throughout northern Mali – Menaka, Tessalit, Aguel’hoc, Anderamboukane, Léré and Niafounké. In some cases, with the help of reinforcements from neighboring towns, the Malian army was able to fend off the attacks, though often not before losing weapons, munitions and vehicles to the militant groups. The continuation of northern instability and the widespread perception that the Malian military remained under-funded and under-resourced sparked protests in Bamako. The wives and families of soldiers criticized the supposed inaction of President Amadou Toumani Touré – popularly known as ATT – and many also attacked Tuareg and Arab residents. ATT attempted to rein in the protests. And, at the request of the Malian High Islamic Council, imams from various mosques organized prayers for peace. Nonetheless, these demonstrations proved the prelude to the departure of
many light-skinned residents – i.e., those perceived as Tuareg or Arab – living throughout southern Mali.

Later, in mid-February 2012, after attacking the locality of Youwarou, an officer in the MNLA declared: “[T]he populations of the north and of the south of Mali are too different to constitute a single state, just as Mali and Senegal were not made to be a single country. That is why we [the MNLA] call on the international community, so that they convince Mali to give us our independence.” This officer also affirmed that the MNLA had absolutely nothing to do with AQMI: “Give us independence, and you will see; that will be the end of AQMI, of the kidnapping of westerners and of drug trafficking” (Groga-Bada:2014). On the same day, however, a special commission charged with investigating the events of Aguel’hoc rejected the MNLA’s claim that they had not participated in the massacre. The commission affirmed that the MNLA had participated alongside AQMI (Koné 2013).

While the MNLA and the Malian state continued to denounce and point fingers at each other, the international community scrambled to reign in the impending civil and humanitarian crisis. A communiqué released on February 23, 2012 by the Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA) confirmed that since just January 17, 2012 the number of northern Malian internally displaced persons had swelled to 61,400, while the number northern Malian refugees had grown to 65,000 and spread throughout Western and Northern Africa (UN 2012). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) approximated that of the internally displaced persons, at least 12,000 were from the Timbuktu region (ICRC 2012).

Anger at the Malian crisis boiled over as an “improvised” coup d’état on March 21, 2012 (Lecocq, et al 2012:4). Dozens of soldiers left the Kati military camp for Bamako, all while spraying bullets into the air. Some entered the Office of Malian Radio-Television (ORTM),
suspending national programming. Others, after a few exchanges of gunfire, entered the Presidential Palace and lit part of it on fire (Koné 2012:30). President Touré had apparently fled and could not be immediately found. However, that night, soldiers arrested certain officers back at the military camp, as well as some members of Touré’s administration. The following day, at 5:00am, the newly formed National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE) made a declaration on national television: Lieutenant Amadou Konaré, the committee’s spokesperson, announced the suspension of the Malian constitution, and Captain Amadou Sanogo, chief of the coup d’état, announced a curfew, effective immediately (Koné 2012:31). That same day, MNLA rebels took the military camp of Anefif, which had been abandoned by the Malian soldiers that mutinied in Gao as part of the coup d’état. Also on that same day, OCHA estimated that at least 206,000 Malians had been displaced (UN Mar. 2012).

Significantly, neither the coup nor Sanogo were universally unpopular throughout Mali, at least initially (Whitehouse 2012b:96). Many disapproved ATT, perceiving him not only as incompetent, but also as the most recent despot in a series postcolonial leaders who espoused democracy while engaging in corrupt and authoritarian practices (Nathan 2013:467). Nonetheless, following the coup the Malian army collapsed, as much of its general staff were under arrest and vital northern garrisons were in mutiny (Lecocq, et al 2012:7). Immediately following the coup d’état, most Malian presidential candidates and political parties denounced the uprising and the CNRDRE, demanding the reinstatement of the constitution and President Touré. Such demands, however, were not met, and the ensuing days proved quite chaotic and deadly. In Bamako, most families hid indoors, crouched around a radio or a TV, listening for developments. Though, many Bamakois civilians – particularly students – also took to the
streets. Many burned tires, constructed roadblocks and chanted to show the ousted government, and the CNRDRE, of their support of the coup d’état. Meanwhile, in the North, a civilian militia, along with the assistance of a handful of Malian soldiers, attempted to prevent an MNLA occupation. As they entered Ansongo and Menaka, however, the superiority of the MNLA’s weapons and numbers overwhelmed them. Also, according to a source cited by Radio France International (RFI), a colonel of the Malian army, along with 30 of his men, deserted and joined the MNLA (Koné 2012:32).

Many complicated, simultaneously events immediately followed. The next day, the MNLA encircled Kidal, where certain Ansar Dine militants were already in place. Recognizing the ambiguity between the organizations, the MNLA reaffirmed that there was no connection between the two, after which they proposed to the Kidal governor that the army surrender in order to avoid further bloodshed. The same day, Captain Sanogo appealed to the “Tuareg rebels” to “cease their hostilities and rejoin the negotiation table without delay…[because] everything is negotiable aside from national territorial integrity and the unity of [the] country” (Koné 2012:33).

In the meantime, from an emergency summit in Abidjan, Nigeria, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) decided to exclude Mali from the organization’s activities, barring the restoration of the constitution. They also debated possible military intervention, though they ultimately opted for various sanctions and named Blaise Compaoré, former president of Burkina Faso, official mediator of the Malian crisis. At the same time, a delegation of Timbuktian Arabs met up with certain officials of the MNLA, requesting that they reconsider their plan to attack Timbuktu. In response, the MNLA instructed the delegation to hunt down the Malian soldiers remaining in Timbuktu, or let the MNLA do it. Otherwise, they were told to prepare themselves for an attack (Koné 2012:32-3).
That weekend, northern Mali was occupied. On Friday, March 30, 2012, in a coordinated assault, militants overwhelmed Kidal with the MNLA attacking from the north, and Ansar Dine from the south. Though, witnesses affirmed that certain AQMI fighters participated as well. Almost immediately, government officials fled the 350km south to Gao. The militants pillaged the Kidal military camp and the houses of state officials while taking captive the governor, the army commander for the region, the colonel of the special forces and the chief of the gendarme. The army evacuated their camps in Ansongo and Bourem in order to reinforce their positions in Gao.

On Saturday, March 31, 2012, the MNLA took Gao. Again, there was little fighting, and most of the soldiers fled. Alassane Ouattara, president of Cote d’Ivoire and acting president of ECOWAS, put on alert 2000 ECOWAS troops in the case that they might need to be used to “preserve at all costs the territorial integrity of Mali,” while also reiterating his wish to avoid war. Meanwhile, at the Modibo-Keïta Statium in Bamako, some 25,000 people – Muslim, Catholic and Protestant – gathered to pray for peace and unity. At the same time, though, Colonel-Major Elhadj Ag Gamou, former commanding officer for Malian troops in the Kidal region, announced that he had defected and joined the MNLA (Koné 2012:36).

On Sunday, April 1, 2012, in response to the threat of intense sanctions and just a few weeks before the presidential elections were originally scheduled, Captain Sanogo declared the restoration of constitutional order and his willingness to establish a transitional government without delay. Also on that Sunday, Timbuktu was taken without encountering any resistance. According to Moustafa, cited in the opening vignette:

It started at 6:00am. No one could pray that morning. If anyone told you that they prayed that day, they’re lying. The Arab militiamen were the ones who started attacking. They attacked the military camp. They were supposed to be with us. We each paid them 2000 CFA [$3.50 USD] to
protect us. And the state gave them weapons to fight the rebels. But, the Arab militiamen took the military camp. It was later in the day that the MNLA came.

The militia fled quickly after ransacking the military camp. And just a few hours later that morning, the MNLA arrived and immediately claimed the independence of “Azawad.” According to my Timbuktian interlocutors, MNLA militants in trucks circled the town while hoisting the Azawad flag, all while spraying gunfire into the air and throwing hand grenades at public buildings. They looted the military camp, police headquarters and other state buildings. Later, the MNLA political bureau issued the following declaration: “We reassure our neighboring states, the populations of the region and the international community that the liberation of Azawad will contribute to the reinforcement of security, development and peace for a better integration of peoples, cultures and better stability in the Saharo-Sahelian zone” (Koné 2012:40).

Following the MNLA’s entry, Ansar Dine and MUJAO arrived. They hoisted their own flags and started shouting such cries as “God is great!” and “God hates alcohol!”, causing considerable confusion among the residents as to which organizations were in charge. Some of the Jihadi-Salafi militants began destroying churches, while some MNLA members began to harass non-pro-Azawad and non-Tuareg residents. However, some MNLA members also did attempt to convince the population of the validity of northern Malian independence. The MNLA’s control of Timbuktu was short-lived, though. Just a day after Timbuktu was taken, Ansar Dine and MUJAO confronted the MNLA and pushed them out to Timbuktu’s airport, forbidding them from entering Timbuktu while armed. With that move, Ansar Dine and MUJAO established authority over Timbuktu town, though the MNLA continued to lay claim over many villages, as well as roads, throughout the region. Thus, various groups had begun to
occupy the North, while all official Malian presence remained absent throughout the region. Yet, lack of political cohesion characterized the early occupation. The MNLA partially controlled Kidal as well as the more rural areas, while the Jihadi-Salafi factions primarily controlled the main towns. Organizational heterogeneity aside, though, the MNLA continued to assert the independence of Azawad, a claim that the other militant groups, the Malian government and the international community swiftly rejected (Koné 2012:42).

By April 17, 2012, Captain Sanogo had stepped down, and Dioncounda Traoré had taken over as Interim President and Cheick Modibo Diarra as Interim Prime Minister for the transitional Malian government. Minority support for captain Sanogo notwithstanding, most Malians were relieved that the coup d’état was seemingly behind them. President Traoré and Prime Minister Diarra immediately began working more closely with President Compaoré specifically, and ECOWAS more generally, in an attempt swiftly resolve the crisis. However, there seemed few real options due to chronically low resources. Furthermore, the MNLA – the only occupying group in northern Mali not internationally declared a “terrorist organization,” and thus the only group invited to the negotiating table – did not express any willingness to discuss a deal that did not include northern Malian independence. Consequently, the negotiations were stalled before they even began.

As a result, the occupation continued and by April 17, 2012, at least 268,000 northerners had been displaced in southern Mali and 161,000 had become refugees in neighboring Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Algeria (UN April 2012). The reasons for this exodus are varied. However, one is most certainly related to war crimes. Human Rights Watch has accused the MNLA, the Arab militia and the various Jihadi-Salafi groups of committing rape, using child soldiers, and pillaging hospitals, schools, churches and public buildings (HRW April 2012).
(Both the MNLA and Ansar Dine deny these allegations.) Shortly thereafter, in June 2012, the UNHCR announced that the agency had only received 13% of the 153.7 million dollars needed in order to attend to the needs of over 300,000 northern Malians internally and externally displaced over five countries (UN April 2012).

By late June 2012, in Kidal the population protested Ansar Dine’s presence, but the regime was quick to violently repress them. And in Gao, the people protested the assassination of an elderly municipal councilor. MUJAO took advantage of the deteriorating situation and waged an attack against the MNLA, asserting their full control over the town. As a result, some MNLA militants were killed; some were arrested; and others fled. “Everything is under our denomination,” the spokesperson for MUJAO affirmed on June 28, 2012 (Koné 2012:77). By that point the Jihadi-Salafi organizations – AQMI and MUJAO allied with Ansar Dine – had asserted their control over all three of the major towns in northern Mali, and the MNLA had largely been driven out, many to refugee camps in Niger and Burkina Faso. Though, the MNLA delegation remained intact in Ouagadougou.

With the Jihadi-Salafis in more or less full control of northern Mali, come July 2012, they were able to impose their radical brand of shari’a (at least in town centers and larger villages, where they maintained a greater presence). This process had already been underway throughout the region, but the MNLA had partially tempered it – aside from in Timbuktu, where Ansar Dine and AQMI had asserted their control months earlier. Shari’a regulations became more severe, as did punishments for rule-breakers. This moment also saw the destruction of historic mausoleums in Gao and Timbuktu, for the militants claimed that visiting these sites were counter to Islam. The demolition of such cultural patrimony – much of which was protected under the designation of UNESCO World Heritage – outraged the Malian populations, as well as the Malian
government and the international community. In response, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon attempted to accelerate ECOWAS’s efforts to reinforce the capacities of the transition government, while ECOWAS itself pressed to accelerate a resolution authorizing the deployment of an armed force in the North. Towards the end of August 2012, the Malian army announced its intention to reinforce its positions in the Mopti region. In response, on September 1, 2012, MUJAO expanded its occupation further south to the town of Douentza, 190km from Mopti in the center of the country (Koné 2012:78, 89).

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In many ways, this remained the situation for the months to come, a stalemate characterized by unstable Malian politics, a weak and vengeful Malian military, ineffective mediation in Ouagadougou, empty threats of military intervention, the weakening of an already small and weak Malian economy, a frustrated and angered populous, intensifying radicalism in the occupied North, and a worsening humanitarian crisis. Soldiers staged themselves in Mopti, and militants staged themselves in Douentza, while governments, agencies and civilians largely issued the refrains that they had been employing since before the coup d’état. That is, until the militants suddenly started advancing from their positions at Timbuktu and Douentza in January 2013. With renewed intensity, they claimed that they were on a great march southward to impose shari’a in Bamako, all of West Africa and eventually Paris and New York.

According to my interlocutors who were displaced in the Mopti region, the Malian soldiers stationed there went out to fight back the militants. Though, they remained outmatched. Indeed, before too long, AQMI and MUJAO had advanced as far south as Konna, a small village just 70km from Mopti. They arrived on a Wednesday, January 9, 2013, and claimed that they would be praying in Mopti’s famous Komoguel Mosque by that Friday for Jumu’ah. However, that Friday did not result in AQMI and MUJAO militants praying in Mopti. Instead, in a move
that surprised most Malians, France’s President Francois Hollande deployed his troops. Almost immediately they began attacking militants in and around Konna, and within just a few days, most were pushed back to their major strongholds in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal.

A few days later, French soldiers had entered and “liberated” Gao and Timbuktu, dispersing most of the remaining Jihadi-Salafi militants north into the desert region and northeast to the more remote and mountainous areas of Kidal and the Algerian border. For the displaced communities, this French intervention – which would eventually be partnered with ECOWAS and UN troops – was met with euphoria, relief and the anticipation of their speedy return home. However, the many who had remained in the North, while also feeling reassured that the militants would be driven away, also feared collateral damage caused by French bullets and bombs. Some also feared possible Malian army-led abuse and harassment against the northern population. Thus, while the intervention was met with applause, it also resulted in increased displacement. Indeed, each stage of the occupation and the intervention pushed more and more individuals and families to flee Timbuktu and the rest of the North. And while no official number exists for Timbuktu alone, some of my interlocutors estimated that as much as 90% of Timbuktu was displaced at that time.

**Methods**

My project is the culmination of 16 months of fieldwork. My entrée to Timbuktu as a field site began in 2010 when I conducted two months of preliminary fieldwork in northern Mali, working with local merchants and religious figures on the intersections of labor, commerce and Islam. Later, in summer 2011, I conducted archival work at the *Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer* in Aix-en-Provence, France. There, I examined colonial documents that detailed the
military and administrative governance of what is now Mali. I paid particular attention to the degree to which the French military and administration dominated the southern Sahara, and to the regional unrest that they encountered. I also analyzed documents that detailed Timbuktian political and civil society.

The bulk of my fieldwork occurred in January 2013-December 2013. Without initially intending it to be, my research immediately became multi-sited. I had originally planned to continue my initial ethnographic fieldwork with Timbuktian merchants who had become displaced in Sevare in central Mali, just south of the de facto border between the occupied northern region and the South. This was when I, like so many others, anticipated that the standoff between the occupying groups and the Malian government (and international community) would continue. However, as I described above, just as I arrived in Bamako, the French military began their intervention of the North. Immediately, all anyone could talk about was the occupation, the intervention and their anticipated quick return to Timbuktu. As a result, I “followed my (ethnographic) nose,” working with new and old interlocutors on the difficulties of the occupation, how they negotiated the hardships of displacement and their thoughts regarding the occupying and intervening forces.

When the French troops “liberated” Timbuktu and secured some of the surrounding areas in late-January 2013, many of my interlocutors and their family began organizing their return home. As such, my fieldwork consisted of moving more northerly with them. I spent January and February 2013 in Bamako. But, as central Mali became safer and more open to outsiders, I traveled to Sevare – after brief stopovers in Segou and Djenne – where I stayed through April 2013. In May 2013 I traveled to Burkina Faso, where I worked with refugees in Ouagadougou and Djibo. In all, I spent the first six months of 2013 in various hubs of internally and externally
displaced Timbuktians. For various reasons, it would have been impossible for me to conduct thorough ethnographic work in every region where Timbuktians had fled. As a result, I spent most of the second six months of 2013 in Timbuktu, working with (formerly) displaced persons as they returned home. This allowed me, for example, to speak to individuals and families who had become refugees in the Mbera camp in Mauritania, or in various urban centers in southern Algeria—places that were off-limits to most Westerners. It also allowed me to work with more people from some of the same cities where I had conducted fieldwork during the first six months. In fact, splitting my time as I did between southern Mali, Burkina Faso and Timbuktu proved an ideal format. For, I was also able to reconnect and follow up with some of the individuals that I had befriended earlier in the year.

Methodologically, most of my research consisted of what anthropologists formally term “participant observation” and “interviews.” However, it was much more informal than that the terms suggest. By “participant observation” and “interviews,” I hung out. I quickly learned that displacement—particularly because it is characterized by unemployment, among other things—is quite boring. There is little to do. So, I sat around chatting, making tea, eating, making more tea and zoning out with my friends and other interlocutors. I also listened to the news multiple times a day with groups of displaced Timbuktians. It was usually during these times that individuals would begin talking about the events surrounding the occupation and the intervention without me posing any questions. However, we would also chat during the same contexts that one might expect: preparing meals, eating meals, waiting for a professional soccer match to begin, after playing in an amateur soccer match, strolling through the market, and so on. Of course, some of these chats were more structured, particularly early on when I was getting used to conducting
fieldwork in a conflict setting and had to determine to what degree I could just stroll around and talk with others. I also collected many life histories.

The “participant” side of things was equally informal. I learned—or at least tried to learn—how to prepare Malian tea right away. Not only did the learning process help to develop trust and friendships, but from then on, seeing the white American preparing Malian tea became a great icebreaker when meeting someone for the first time. I also walked with friends as they collected aid packages from the various humanitarian agencies providing food and supplies. Back in Timbuktu, I was able to expand my participation. I helped friends and friends of friends to repair damage to their houses, for example. For the most part this meant schlepping mud stucco to be used to make new bricks or to fill in where the rains had eroded parts of walls. Again, this rare site became one of amusement and entrée. More than anything, though, I played a lot of checkers. Even upon returning to Timbuktu, there was little to do, as continued regional unrest has prevented the revitalization of most businesses. So, many of my interlocutors played hours of checkers, during which we chatted...or not.

To be sure, there were limits to my participant observation and interviewing. I could not— or at least, would not—pray with my interlocutors, as I am not Muslim. This also meant that I could not visit any of the three historic mosques in Timbuktu, as they are off-limits to non-believers. Furthermore, despite my respectful efforts, my ethnographic access to many women was restricted. This is not to say that I could not speak to women, but it was culturally inappropriate for me to be alone with a woman. Thus, most of the time, when I interviewed a woman from Timbuktu, I was chaperoned by a brother, a father or a husband. As a result, the more informal—and far more ethnographically significant—exchanges that I had with many men remained almost impossible to have with most women.
I also struggled to engage with Timbuktian Arab and, to a lesser degree, Tuareg interlocutors. As they tend to be lighter-skinned than their Songhay counterparts, many fled southern Mali when intensifying turmoil in the North fueled anti-Arab and anti-Tuareg sentiment in Bamako. Therefore, few remained in the South by the time I arrived in January 2013. As I describe in the Chapter 3, the Burkinabe camps largely housed Tuareg refugees, so I was able to speak with more members of that community while in Burkina Faso. Unfortunately, even after the French intervention, many Arab and Tuareg Timbuktians feared being mistaken for militants. Thus, while numerous Songhay IDPs began to return to Timbuktu as early as April 2013, fewer non-Songhay followed suit. Indeed, it was not until much later in my fieldwork that my interlocutors and I noticed increased Arab and Tuareg refugees returning to the city. And thus, aside from my fieldwork in the refugee camps, it was not until much later in my fieldwork that I was able to speak with additional Arab and Tuareg Timbuktians.

An additional limitation was language. Most of my interviews were in French, though some of my better-educated interlocutors wanted to show off their English (and make me feel more comfortable) and insisted that we talk in my native tongue. Nonetheless, neither French nor English were my friends’ native languages. I was able to converse in Songhay (the lingua franca), but not in Tamasheq (most Tuareg individuals’ natal language). Nor am I familiar with southern Malian languages. As a result, some of my interviews were conducted with the help of a very good and trusted friend. Fluent in French, Songhay, Tamasheq, Arabic and Bambara, he occasionally served as a translator.

Perhaps the largest limitation, however, was my own positionality as a white American conducting fieldwork in southern and northern Mali during a time of great crisis. I was constantly negotiating this landscape. Indeed, many of my interlocutors falsely presumed that I
could get them a job, access increased aid or just give them cash. Others thought that my ethnographic work would immediately and significantly improve their livelihoods. When these assumptions surfaced, I had to confess that I had neither government access nor unlimited funds. Furthermore, the likelihood that they would feel any impact from my research was extremely limited. I also had to navigate potentially unsafe spaces. In the South, for example, some of my friends explained that others had suspiciously asked them if I was an Arab (who, again, had been the targets of violence for many months). In the North, there was near constant chatter about the threat of kidnapping. Mentally and emotionally coming to terms with a sense of unease was something that I had to manage almost every day. This, of course, influenced if and how I interacted with others, who I trusted, where I traveled, and so on.

Throughout my fieldwork, therefore, I largely worked with Songhay, Bellah and, to a lesser degree, Tuareg men from Timbuktu, generally aged 18-55. The women with whom I interacted tended to be either related or married to these male interlocutors. Aside from the imams and marabouts with whom I spoke, most of my interlocutors generally considered themselves as “regular” Timbuktians. Some were (or, through family or friendship connections, had access to the resources of those who were) merchants, teachers, public servants, tourist guides, farmers, and so on. They were able to flee Timbuktu during the occupation, which meant they had at least minimal finances. Thus, many also came from “Timbuktu proper,” rather than the outskirts, which are dotted with tents and other forms of unofficial housing characteristic of those who, either due to unemployment, for example, or living a more pastoralist lifestyle, lacked significant financial liquidity.

**Chapter Summaries**
The chapters in this dissertation connect transnational institutions and processes with everyday practices by analyzing how displaced Timbuktians utilized historically rooted cultural and religious concepts in order to frame and negotiate the hardships of occupation, displacement and intervention. This dissertation is divided into four in-depth historical and ethnographic chapters, followed by some concluding remarks.

In chapter 2, I analyze Timbuktu’s historical development as a central social formation that at various time has been rendered – and has rendered itself – peripheral to the various polities that have laid claim over it. As of the 15th century, Timbuktu has been known as a religious and commercial center. Privileging education and piety above (regional) politics, the city’s scholar and merchant leaders resisted more formal inclusion into wider administrative apparatuses. At the same time, many medieval administrative and military rulers from outside of the region tended to grand Timbuktu a degree of semi-autonomy in certain spheres. Later Empires, – namely, the Moroccan and the French – sought to more sufficiently dominate the region. Nonetheless, owing to Timbuktu’s remote geographic position, not to mention many of the residents’ reluctance to lose their semi-autonomous status, various individuals and communities resisted foreign rule. Many continued, for example, to seek out a local, religious education despite French officials coercively matriculating them in colonial schools. And others – particularly among the pastoralist and nomadic groups adjacent to the city – took up arms. Without suggesting that Timbuktian norms have remained “pure” or unchanged since the city was founded, I nonetheless argue that many Timbuktians at least partially avoided or differently navigated the various imperial hegemonic apparatuses that attempted to dominate them. Consequently, Timbuktu’s – and Timbuktians’ – dissonant, co-lived central and peripheral status has reproduced (perceptions of their) unique practices, values and sociopolitical subjectivities.
In chapter 3, I analyze my interlocutors’ everyday experiences with and perceptions of internal and external displacement. Furthering my examination of crisis as rupture, I explore the strategies through which my interlocutors negotiated economic, social and even existential disruption. While highlighting some of the differences and similarities between hubs of internal displacement and refugee camps, I focus upon one of the most culturally significant expressions that most Timbuktians reproduce, an ethic of privacy called sutura. This concept largely framed local understandings of the occupation of Timbuktu and my interlocutors’ subsequent displacement. Timbuktian oral history maintains that the city’s founding scholar-saints first articulated and preached about the importance of modesty and “maintaining cover.” Re-articulated over the centuries, most of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke emphasized sutura and resisted over-publicity of any kind. They expressed this through clothing, through the built environment and through everyday interactions. Sutra has interrelated social and divine components that influenced how many Timbuktians negotiated the hardships of the Malian crisis. However, sutura also exacerbated these hardships. On the one hand, particularly as Timbuktian IDPs and refugees were forced to wait in long lines for humanitarian assistance, for example, or were obligated to reside in cramped living spaces, their ability to avoid over-publicity significantly diminished. At the same time, however, as sutura also evokes divine cover and protection, the more time that they stayed away from Timbuktu, most reasoned, the more vulnerable they became, the more difficult it was to protect their privacy.

In chapter 4, I examine unofficial Timbuktian narratives (as revealed through joking, rumors and storytelling) in order to explore everyday Timbuktian conceptualizations of the state’s center-periphery relationship in light of occupation, displacement and militarization. I argue that this relationship reveals perceptions of a structural relationship whereby peripheral
zones and their residents are exploited to suit the needs of individuals and institutions based in the state center. In other words, the periphery itself – not to mention conflict in the periphery – supposedly benefits the center. According to my interlocutors, the marginality of Timbuktu’s northernmost reaches, for example, facilitates illicit narco- and gun-trafficking, from which some Bamako-based politicians are rumored to receive a commission. This same marginality facilitated the occupation of the North. At the same time, however, the maintenance of Timbuktu’s peripheral status also reflected the community’s general – though not exclusive – reluctance to intensify its administrative relationship with Bamako. For, while Timbuktians have clearly suffered from the periphery’s marginality, and without suggesting that many of my interlocutors did not simultaneously make explicit claims on the state, many expressed distrust in southern Malian politics and preferred to maintain a degree of sociopolitical distance.

In chapter 5, I analyze Timbuktian collective action in the face of the practical challenges of the Malian crisis, some of the sociocultural strategies that many Timbuktians privileged while displaced, and expressions of Timbuktians’ political rationalities and subjectivities. Many of my Timbuktian interlocutors narrowly defined “political mobilization” as protests, marches and rallies. As a result, most described themselves, or at least their activities, as apolitical because – due to various challenges (i.e., outside coercion, inexperience and sutura) – few Timbuktians supposedly could or would mobilize in such explicit ways. We must not mischaracterize displaced Timbuktians as politically disengaged or ignorant, though. For, whether or not overtly political, we cannot divorce Timbuktian collective action from Malian politics. At the same time, however, we must avoid categorically politicizing all collective responses to crisis. Therefore, as neither local interpretations of crisis nor local understandings of how best to respond to crisis are universal or uncontested, any analysis of collective action within the context of occupation,
displacement and military intervention must attend to historical and social context, as well as to local links between politics and culture. As such, I analyze the role of Timbuktian “associations”: Many Timbuktian IDPs and refugees turned to already established networks to help them navigate the challenges they encountered in southern Mali and in refugee camps. Their experiences with self-help organizing influenced the development of new associations that directly engaged the various transnational institutions – i.e., national and international NGOs and humanitarian agencies. These helped many displaced Timbuktians to navigate a particularly complicated military and humanitarian landscape.

The concluding chapter briefly considers and questions the presumption that the existence of peripheral zones, let alone crisis and corruption in such zones, are indicative of a state’s “weakness” or “failure.” Many continue to characterize Mali as weak, failed and underdeveloped. This is a faulty characterization, though, that reveals more about hegemonic, Euro-American conceptualizations about state forms than it does Mali itself. This is not to suggest that analyses of Timbuktu and the occupation of northern Mali avoid political economic discussions of the state, though. Instead, it is a call to analyze crisis and peripheries in their own terms without simultaneously removing peripheries from the transnational structures within which they are (partially) reproduced.
Notes

1 All names have been changed in order to protect my friends’ identities.
2 While I acknowledge that the ethnographic encounter certainly reproduces certain power hierarchies, I find that “friend” – when applicable – is less stale and more suggestive of the collaborative relationships that I attempted to cultivate in Mali. Of course, not everyone with whom I spoke during my fieldwork became a friend; in those cases, I use “interlocutor.”
3 Recall, civil society, while autonomous of the state, is not independent of it. As the state itself is the guarantor of civil society’s autonomy, civil society often reproduces many of the same sociopolitical fault lines as the state (see Gramsci 2005 [1971]).
4 In short, such French “mederas” were colonial schools guised as “Islamic.” Aside from incorporating limited Arabic language education, most were very similar their secular counterparts (see Cooper 1996).
5 Which, of course, is not to suggest that analyzing colonial or postcolonial African states – in its fragmentation and decentered, nodal configuration of official and unofficial power – is not, in fact, exemplary of modernity (Comaroff 1998; Wilder 2005)
6 The Sahel – meaning “shore” or “coast” in Arabic – is a geographical and ecological zone situated between the Sahara Desert to its north and the Sudanian Savanna to its south. Its name implies the historical and contemporary connections that link it and the neighboring regions.
7 My interlocutors offered multiple explanations for naming downtown Timbuktu “Medina.” Most, arguing that the neighborhood is the city’s religious center, suggested that “Medina” referred to the holy city in Saudi Arabia where the Prophet truly formalized the first Muslim community. Other interlocutors – reminding that “medina” translates to “city” in Arabic – cited Timbuktu’s Arabic history. These two popular understandings, I feel, are not unrelated.
8 Both Imams and marabouts are Islamic leaders. However, marabouts tend to be teachers, and in certain – especially West African – contexts they are associated with the transmission of both Islamic and esoteric knowledge. However, while Imams often teach as well, they are rather more strongly associated with prayer worship in a mosque (see Soares 2005).
9 Though, I do not claim that the mystique that I experienced is the same as that experienced by my interlocutors.
10 Jihadi-Salafism is a transnational political-religious ideology rooted in the idea of violent “jihadism” and the Salafi movement that promotes a return to supposed “true” Sunni Islam. “Transnational,” however, should not equate to “unified.” Indeed, many Jihadi-Salafist organizations throughout the world espouse divergent goals, target different communities and utilize dissimilar practices (see Lecocq et al 2013).
11 “Shari’a” is often translated into English as “Islamic law.” And while – using various interpretations of religious texts and decrees – its various expressions form the bases of Islamic regulations, we must not equate shari’a with Euro-American notions of “the law,” for it largely resists the coded nature of law common in more Western settings (see Hallaq 2010 [2009]; Messick 1993).
12 The congregational prayer that Muslims hold on Fridays at around noontime.
CHAPTER 2

Gold and Dust: 1000 Years as a Peripheral Center

Today I sat and chatted with Hamed, an older scholar and neighborhood leader. The discussion meandered, and at one point he brought up local forms of justice. “In Timbuktu people rarely go to the police. Only for big things,” he said. “Otherwise they go to marabouts or old, influential people. It’s looked down upon socially if someone is seen going to the police. Also, the justice system doesn’t work very well in Mali. There’s a lot of corruption. So you rarely even see people there....” Just then there was a serendipitous knock on the door. An older gentleman—though younger than Hamed—from a nearby village had come for some legal help. The two men mumbled in the corner as I looked on. The man’s large hand motions and dramatic “inshallahs” revealed the issue’s seriousness. After about five minutes, they shook hands, and then Hamed guided the man by the shoulder towards me. Continuing with his lesson from before the interruption, he summarized, “You see, André? This man is in the middle of a land dispute. The owner of a plot allowed him to build his house on his land. Unfortunately, the owner of the plot just passed away, and now his son wants this man and his house off his land. You see? This man has come all the way from his village to see me and explain his problem. Now, I’ll call the owner of the property and talk to him and see how we can resolve things. He came to me, but he’d never thing to go to the police. [Turning to the man] Isn’t that right?” “Wallahi! Wallahi!” the gentleman says.

~Fieldnotes, Timbuktu, Mali, mid-November 2013

When I spoke with my Timbuktian interlocutors about northern Mali, most emphasized Timbuktu’s centrality. Many described the city’s three famous mosques as both the sites of some of Timbuktu’s most celebrated scholars from the Medieval Era and bastions of contemporary Islamic learning. Other Timbuktians highlighted the seemingly countless manuscript libraries that house a millennium of religious, scientific and historical documents. Others, still, referenced centuries of West African and trans-Saharan trade that have converged in Timbuktu’s markets. As a result of what many of my interlocutors detailed as an exceptional religious and commercial history, Timbuktians have developed certain practices and values that (they at least perceive) set them apart from other Malians. Indeed, many described Timbuktu as the center of its own sociopolitical world.
At the same time, “Timbuktu” has also long been synonymous with “the middle of nowhere” or a place far, far away. Tales of streets of gold filled European imaginations and inspired intrepid explorers to traverse either the vast Sahara Desert or the farthest banks of the Niger River. Their initial failures, furthermore – due to illness, bankruptcy and even murder – only intensified Western impressions of Timbuktu’s remoteness and inaccessibility. Such impressions have endured European adventurers’ eventual successes, French colonialism and even the development of a Timbuktian tourism industry. Many of my southern Malian interlocutors also expressed Timbuktu’s isolation and distance. Though, without the Euro-American romance for the “primitive” Other, many in the South dismissed Timbuktu as marginal, a clump of old buildings, a grain of sand in a vast desert. Of course, such descriptions expose pervading Western orientalism on the one hand, and Mande- and Bambara-centric Malian nationalism on the other. Nonetheless, they also reflect a 1000-year-long history whereby Timbuktu has been rendered administratively peripheral and marginal to the regional polity of the time, including the French Empire and the post-colonial Malian state.

In this chapter, I analyze Timbuktu as simultaneously central and peripheral throughout its history. Such background information, however, is not significant “only” as historical context. Rather, it also foregrounds the chapters that follow, contextualizing my interlocutors’ political, social and existential perceptions of their own being-in-the-world. Therefore, this chapter also provides a useful lens for analyzing how the Timbuktians with whom I spoke understood and navigated the occupation of northern Mali and the hardships of their subsequent displacement. I begin with a brief theoretical discussion of states as both coercive and persuasive apparatuses, focusing upon the differences between center and periphery. In the next three sections, I analyze Timbuktu’s history, loosely dividing it into precolonial, colonial, and decolonial/postcolonial
periods. As such, however, I do not attempt a holistic discussion of Timbuktu’s history. Instead, I explore Timbuktian history with the aim to demonstrate its co-lived central-peripheral status over time.

**Coercion and Persuasion**

In order to analyze Timbuktu as peripheral, we must return to states as a theoretical concept (as introduced in the previous chapter). Coercion is the preeminent expression of colonial power: coercion is domination’s defining element (Guha 1998:24; Hall 2014; Mamdani 1996). Indeed, militaries and police forces are fundamental for producing and reproducing states’ authority through directly coercing their citizens (Foucault 1977:282; Gramsci 2005 [1971]:216). Nonetheless, while we can consider states only through the lens of direct coercion, they are – in fact, they must be – expressed and reproduced in more complicated, indirect ways.

Indeed, in addition to coercion, states are also characterized by persuasion. Indeed, a state reproduces itself and its citizenry through complimentary expressions of domination. Following Gramsci (2005 [1971]:12):

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural ‘levels’: the one that can be called ‘civil society’, that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or ‘the State’. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of ‘direct domination’ or command exercised through the State and ‘juridical’ government. The functions in question are precisely organizational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.

Clearly, it is both difficult and costly to govern a people and territory only through coercive domination. Instead, states – through civil society – must also express leadership and persuade populations to obey its authorities (see Gramsci 2005 [1971]). In order to effectively lead,
however, states must organize themselves (Scott 1998:19). That is, states must establish order within their territorial boundaries by organizing space and people. Improved infrastructure, for example, particularly of transportation networks of roads and railways, is key for shaping a state (Ferme 2001:33). Indeed, transportation helps to draw inhabitants directly into state economies (Soares 2005:61). Connecting inhabitants more directly, however, also serves to make inhabitants more visible to states. Taking measurements and producing statistics are expressions of state power because they make individuals legible to a state (Scott 1998:31). This serves to organize individual inhabitants into populations, which, subsequently, increases order by making people easier to control (Foucault 1977).

In addition to infrastructure and making populations more legible, the state also orders and disciplines its citizens through various institutions, particularly law and education. For, military governance does not create a social ideology. Nonetheless, these hegemonic institutions are extensions of state dominance. In other words, coercion without persuasion fails to justify a state’s coercive actions in the minds of its residents, nor does it develop self-governance within populations (Gramsci 2005 [1971]:216). Law and education, as extensions of a state, serve both to win the active consent of those over whom a state rules and to homogenize society (Gramsci 2005 [1971]:244-6). Indeed, law and education discipline individuals such that, instead of resisting the apparatuses of domination, they reproduce them willingly (Foucault 1977).

Both the coercive and persuasive technologies of domination – including militaries, police, infrastructural schemes, and legal and educational institutions – are characteristic of a state. Or, at least, of a state center, where such technologies are more firmly established and socially accepted. Following Das and Poole (2004), however, state peripheries are instead characterized by other forces. Located on the margins of what is accepted as unquestioned state
control and legitimacy, peripheries are imagined as “wild” sites outside of state control. Not only territorial, these are sites of practice “on which law and other state practices are colonized by other forms of regulation that emanate from the pressing needs of populations to secure political and economic survival” (Das & Poole 2004:8). As such, whereas state centers are characterized by the legibility of its spaces and residents, peripheries are characterized by illegibility. Given the illegibility of formal state structures, residents constantly negotiate the thin line between legal and illegal, formal and informal (Das 2004:244).

I analyze peripheries as spaces and populations of partial coercion or persuasion. This is somewhat characterized by a state’s failure to implement an infrastructural or educational scheme in a given territory. However, this is also partially characterized by limited hegemony and self-governance. Of course, I do not wish to suggest the absence of coercive institutions, but instead I highlight residents’ selective avoidance of or unique engagement with military and police forces, for example. This is additionally characterized by the continuation of local values and practices – “traditions” (Gramsci 2005 [1971] – divergent from those privileged in state centers.

As I introduced previously, I argue that throughout most of its history, Timbuktu has simultaneously existed as a center unto itself while being rendered administratively peripheral within wider regional politics. Examining both coercive and persuasive apparatuses, I will demonstrate that Timbuktu has never been fully dominated (at least not for a sufficiently prolonged period), and as a result, has not completely adopted foreign hegemony. This is not to say, though, that Timbuktu has remained unchanged over the centuries. To be sure, at different times Timbuktu has negotiated annexation and occupation. What I aim to show, however, is that instead of being dominated, Timbuktian civil society was able to negotiate diverse militaristic
and administrative networks while retaining (at least what many contemporary Timbuktians interpret as) exceptional values and practices. In what follows, therefore, is an examination of Timbuktu as both center and periphery during different historical periods.

**Precolonial Timbuktu**

Before the occupation of northern Mali, the displacement of most of its residents and the subsequent military intervention in 2012-2013, when foreign visitors arrived in Timbuktu, it would not be long before they were surrounded by teenage tourist guides. Eager to make a few dollars, each would attempt to make the bewildered visitors their client. Upon selecting the winning guide and being assured that they had made the best choice, they would begin the compulsory tour of Medina, central Timbuktu. This was nearly my experience in 2010 when I first visited the town. Fortunately I had made arrangements in advance and was mercifully shepherded to my lodgings. Nonetheless, the following morning I had no choice but to comply in the requisite walking tour. Big Mohamed, the ironically nicknamed mousy nephew of my Songhay host, cut my breakfast short so that we could visit all the sites before the hot midday sun peaked. Like all guides, Big Mohamed began with the same popular retelling of Timbuktu’s mythical origins. Despite a lack of official consensus over the meaning of the town’s name (see Africanus 1896; Barth 1857; Hunwick 2003), Big Mohamed privileged Timbuktu’s Saharan connections, asserting that some 1000 years ago a group of Tuaregs used the site as an encampment. There they found (or perhaps dug) a well, “Tin” in Tamashq. In order to prevent others from destroying the well, Buktu, a woman from the group, stayed behind as the rest ventured further northward into the desert. Legend has it that she never moved from the well while the rest were away. As such, the site became known as “Tin-Buktu,” or Buktu’s well. ¹
Timbuktu owes its existence both to geography and the development of intensified trade throughout the Sahara and along the Niger River. Its 12th century origins are as a depot of more localized regional trade between Saharan pastoralists and boat trade on the Niger Delta (Saad 2010 [1983]:6). However, situated as it is where the Niger River reaches furthest north into the Sahara desert, Timbuktu eventually became an axis of wider commerce, linking Mediterranean and trans-Saharan goods with those from along the Niger River and sub-Saharan Africa (Saad 2010 [1983]:5-6). Timbuktu also linked other commercial towns along the Niger River, specifically Djenne and Gao. Thus, particularly when the annual floodwaters rose, traders recognized Timbuktu’s importance as a regional entrepôt.

Scholars have long shown how during this time Islam was gradually introduced into West Africa alongside commercial contracts. The spread, however, was not uniform, nor was it homogenous. Indeed, merchants were most likely some of the first converts, followed shortly thereafter by city and state leaders. Only afterwards did more of the general population follow suit. When Timbuktu came into being, Islam had already penetrated the market towns and state capitals in the surrounding areas to the east and west, as well as to the south. In the 12th century, the kingdom of Ghana was formally Islamicized – this most likely influenced the development of Islam in Timbuktu, as merchants from Ghana were some of the town’s earliest and principle long-distance trading partners at the time (Saad 2010 [1983]:24). Of further importance, however, was the invasion of the kingdom of Ghana by Soumaoro Kanté, king of the Sosso Empire, later in the 12th century. For, with the fall of the Ghana Empire, Muslim scholars from the ancient Ghanaian town of Walata (now Oualata in modern-day Mauritania) fled to Timbuktu, thereby solidifying the position of Islam in the town (Levtzion 1973:147).
Until the early 14th century, Timbuktu was a self-governed town, though settlers and merchants most likely accommodated various nearby Tuareg confederations (Saad 2010 [1983]:11). Significantly, these origins contrast Timbuktu to the histories of other Islamic cities, which emerged under the purview of broader states, dynasties or empires. Instead of being modeled according to the dictates of a wider polity, very early on Timbuktu developed its own civil society based first upon commerce, and shortly thereafter, upon Islam. However, in 1325 CE Timbuktu was peacefully annexed by King Musa I, the pious Muslim leader of the Mali Empire, upon returning from his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 CE (Hunwick 2003:9-10). Musa I, it is said, ordered the construction of a royal palace and the Djingareyber Mosque (Hunwick 2003:81; Levtzion 1973:201). Musa I’s endorsement of Islam likely further established the religion in Timbuktu. Nonetheless, during this period Timbuktu was still largely able to maintain significant internal autonomy (Saad 2010 [1983:11). Timbuktu remained administratively peripheral to the federalist Mali Empire. Its capital was situated some distance away, near what is now the border between Guinea and Mali, and despite the king’s religious interests in Timbuktu, he seemed even more interested in filling his coffers with the profits from the salt mines of Taghazza.2

Timbuktu remained a part of the Mali Empire until the early 1430s CE, when the federation of Maghsharan Tuaregs seized it. However, the Maghsharan did not formally govern Timbuktu afterwards. Instead for the next few decades Timbuktu retained significant autonomy under the suzerainty of the Tuareg chieftain (Saad 2010 [1983]:11). However, in 1468 CE Sunni Ali, the leader of the Songhay Empire, conquered the city, effectively absorbing Timbuktu into a new political regime. This period is seen as one of the greater threats to Timbuktu’s autonomy, particularly as conquest was followed with severe political and social conflict and upheaval that
did not conclude until Sunni Ali’s death in 1492 CE (Gomez 1990:7). In 1493 CE, though, Askia³ Mohamed I established Gao as the political capital and instituted a new order within the empire more favorable to its commercial centers (Saad 2010 [1983]:11). Which, is not to imply that the Songhay Empire did not financially exploit Timbuktu – it certainly did. However, the arrangement was not so oppressive that Timbuktian governors could not contest Songhay political and economic directives (Gomez 1990).

The 16th century was Timbuktu’s golden age, marked by significant commercial prosperity and Islamic scholarship. Merchants from cities in West and North Africa converged in Timbuktu in order to exchange various goods. Similarly, scholars and students from throughout the Muslim world gathered to study at the renowned Islamic universities. Popular memory recounts that during this time the population of Timbuktu swelled to 100,000, a full 25,000 of whom were students. As such, while gold, slaves, horses, salt, cloth, foodstuffs, and so on were valuable objects of exchange, perhaps some of the most precious items – both in terms of financial cost and social prestige – were manuscripts. While part of the Songhay Empire, internal Timbuktian politics were largely administered by its scholars who had acquired significant cultural, and economic, capital (Saad 2010 [1983]:15). This is not insignificant, for, following Gramsci, education is one of the primary institutions through which intellectuals are both elaborated and knowledge is reproduced (2005 [1971]:9-10). As an extension of civil society, education inserts the individual into a given polity (Foucault 1990 (1978); Gramsci 2005 (1971):34). Given Timbuktu’s quasi-autonomy, however, the society into which its educational system would have integrated its students was, for the most part, its own.

Arguably the most dramatic change in Timbuktian history—indeed, perhaps even more dramatic than French colonialism or Malian independence—occurred in 1591. The Moroccan
Sultan Al-Mansur sent an expedition of mercenaries and slaves dubbed the “Ruma” into the Sahara Desert in search of gold. The Ruma captured Timbuktu and the surrounding region, thereby bringing to an end the Songhay Empire. The Moroccans established their dominance over the Niger Bend, though significantly, they patterned their political order along Songhay lines (Saad 2010 [1983]:11). Indeed, it seems the Moroccan Ruma were aware that their position in the region would be tenuous unless reinforced by the presence of the sons of the Askias among them (Saad 2010 [1983]:172). Nonetheless, for the next century or so, Timbuktu operated as the capital of an empire. This period was marked by dramatic decline, both in economic and educational terms. In 1593 – citing “disloyalty” and seeking to turn Morocco into the new hub of Islamic learning – Al-Mansur arrested most of Timbuktu’s scholars, who were subsequently killed, exiled or forcibly brought to Marrakesh (Hall 2011:52; Hunwick 2003). Intensifying trans-Atlantic trade also shifted significant trans-Saharan trade to the coast, further weakening Timbuktu’s position as a commercial center.4

Shortly after Timbuktu’s conquest, however, the Ruma lost their connection with Morocco. So, while Timbuktu technically remained subscribed under the Moroccan Empire, the grip and influence of subsequent Pashas, high-ranking officers in the Moroccan military, began to diminish. Indeed, by 1700 CE, while scholarly and judicial matters were conducted in Arabic – as had been the case since the solidification of Islam in the city – few urban Timbuktians conversed in Arabic; most spoke Songhay (Saad 2010 [1983]:11). To be sure, during this time, the Ruma remained as a distinct military class, but the 18th century saw the gradual erosion of even that difference. The Ruma regime itself seems to have been destroyed in 1737 following their defeat to the Tuareg confederation of Kel Tadmekkat, and for the next 90 years Timbuktu
was variously and briefly occupied or besieged by different Tuareg, Bambara and Kounta groups (Saad 2010 [1983]:206-214).

In the early 19th century emerged West Africa’s famous jihads, some of which threatened to incorporate Timbuktu into additional imperial regimes. One jihad gave rise to the caliphate of Massina, an empire centered along the Niger floodplain at the town of Hamdullahi. In 1826, Massina formally integrated Timbuktu into its empire for the following 20 to 40 years. Though, the relationship was again characterized by Timbuktu’s semi-autonomy, and the weak political relationship between Timbuktu and Hamdullahi began to fade after 1844 (Saad 2010 [1983]:12). A more significant threat to Timbuktu’s self-rule came in 1862 with the jihad of al-Hajj Umar, who aimed to bring the city more firmly under his direct control. However, this gave rise to a counter jihad led by the Timbuktian scholar, Ahmad al-Bakka’i. Al-Bakka’i successfully opposed al-Hajj Umar, even ending his caliphate in Hamdullahi and sending him further south. Notably, this did not lead to the rise of an imperial theocracy based in Timbuktu; instead it led to 30-year period of relative self-rule and suzerainty (Saad 2010 [1983]:12). Debate wages concerning who was formally in charge when the French Empire officially annexed Timbuktu in 1893. Saad (2010 [1983]:219) states that the Tingeregif, a distinguished noble-warrior class among the Tuareg, were in control. Hunwick (2003:xvi), however, is less certain, arguing that several states and groups vied for power in the region in a “shadowy way” until the arrival of the French. Regardless, these final pre-colonial years, like the vast majority of Timbuktu’s pre-colonial history, were largely marked by semi-autonomy and the lack of imperial domination.

Indeed, “the most interesting factor in the history of Timbuktu is its autonomy” (Saad 2010 [1983]:12). Not unlike other cities throughout the Muslim world, Timbuktu was largely managed through the leadership of Muslim scholars and other notables. Where Timbuktu is
unique, however, is that these leaders were, for the most part, independent of broader imperial politics. This history of non-interference primarily relates to Timbuktu’s symbolic value. As the town’s reputation as a religious center grew, so did its aura of “sanctity”. Its security emerged not from a strong Timbuktian military, but from its Islamic image, particularly as Timbuktu’s mosques, schools and shrines began to be perceived as its guardians (Saad 2010 [1983]:25). Through this aura, then, Timbuktu also assumed for itself, and was granted by many imperial leaders, a sort of inviolability.

Timbuktu was by no means historically isolated or closed off, though. Quite the contrary. As I have discussed, since its earliest establishment as a hub of local exchange among pastoralists and river-based traders, different peoples – from the Niger River Delta to the Mediterranean and even the Middle East – have passed through Timbuktu. Furthermore, Timbuktu did pay taxes or tribute to monarchs and state capitals, and clearly some empires sought to intensify their political relationships between Timbuktu and their respective centers (see Gomez 1990). Timbuktu also often hosted, if perhaps only minimally, representatives of an empire’s military or police force. And, the Mali, Songhay and Moroccan Empires – not to mention the various Tuareg confederations – did at least partially establish themselves politically throughout the Timbuktian region, which meant that Timbuktian traders and scholars had no choice but to interact with them.

That said, Timbuktu was largely allowed to manage its own affairs. Most militaries remained a separate entity and hierarchy, distinct from the general ordering of Timbuktian society that privileged the hierarchy of Islamic scholars and jurors (Saad 2010 [1983]:14). If we examine the broader pre-colonial history of Timbuktu, therefore, we come to realize that Timbuktu’s semi-autonomous and peripheral status facilitated the systematic absorption and
integration of a given empire’s uppermost ranks, rather than the other way around (Saad 2010 [1983]:14). In other words, instead of Timbuktu being absorbed and dramatically altered by a given polity’s political and civil hegemonic apparatus, Timbuktian civil society integrated the agents of that apparatus into its own semi-autonomous, and central, system.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Timbuktian society has remained unchanged since around 1100 CE. However, the historical assimilation of different outside groups, coupled with the continued leadership by local scholars, facilitated the development of Timbuktian norms and “traditions” that largely developed distinctly from the hegemonic empires to which Timbuktu formally belonged (see Gramsci 2005 [1971]:195; Saad 2010 [1983]:17, 231). As a result, a dynamic Timbuktian civil society survived multiple pre-colonial imperial threats. And, as I demonstrate below, while French imperialism also threatened Timbuktian semi-autonomy, the French regime, while disrupting various Timbuktian systems and practices, never successfully pulled the Timbuktian region into its political system either.

Colonial Timbuktu

Analyzing modern Timbuktu is complicated. Characteristic of the broader European colonial project, the French administration created categories and divisions among peoples in ways that had not been all that significant prior to their occupation. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, French officials introduced European racial frameworks that conflicted with northern Malian conceptions of nobility. Furthermore, the colonial – and postcolonial – administrations organized northern Mali based on whether or not its inhabitants were sedentary or nomadic. Timbuktu, however, confounds these categories. As a town, Timbuktu’s residents are sedentary, as are those who live in the region’s villages mainly along the Niger River.
However, Timbuktu also houses many nomadic groups. In some cases, Timbuktu has been and remains a “home base,” a place to trade before returning to encampments in more remote areas to the north, east or west. In other cases, nomadic individuals themselves have settled into a more sedentary lifestyle, living permanently in Timbuktu town, but expressing values and practices more characteristic of their nomadic counterparts. These tensions certainly emerged as the French—and later, the Malian—governments attempted to administer residents’ often dissonant allegiances within Timbuktian region.

Lecocq (2010:91) divides the colonial period of the French Sudan—that is, colonial Mali—into three phases: An initial phase of military conquest and pacification, then a phase of functional administration and exploitation, and finally a phase of gradual decolonization and development of the colonized. However, particularly in the case of Timbuktu and the Saharan region, we must interrogate the degree to which French colonialism successfully conquered, pacified, administered and exploited the local populations. Popularly, most identify the “Scramble for Africa” and the Berlin Congo Conference of 1884-1885 as the beginning of European colonialism in Africa. And while this is true in a legal sense, it is not true in a social, economic or even political sense either in Europe or in Africa. Indeed, particularly given the city’s precolonial history, French colonization of Timbuktu was relatively brief and incomplete, interrupted by two world wars and ending only 55 years after it formally began.

Contrary to popular modern perceptions of Africa and its inhabitants as isolated and detached from broader world history, Timbuktu had maintained commercial networks with the southern—and by extension, northern—Mediterranean for centuries prior to formal European colonization. Further, the Atlantic and trans-Atlantic trade had already modified and disrupted West African and trans-Saharan trade since the 15th century CE. In the early 19th century, the
European presence in North and West Africa largely consisted of coastal trading posts, which did not effectively endanger the sovereignty of local states or society (Austen 2010:118). Nonetheless, in the 1820s CE the European threat was known throughout the Saharan and West African region. News spread of British naval attacks in India and North Africa, as did French assaults first on Algeria, and later on Tunisia and Morocco (Austen 2010:119).

Knowledge aside, however, there was little that African states or communities could do to prevent the Berlin Congo Conference, and it was a result of this that Timbuktu became a part of the French Empire in 1885 (Austen 2010:119). However, it did so in name only. Before Timbuktu could truly be considered part of the French Sudan, and thus, part of the French colonial regime, French administrators first had to establish treaties with local Timbuktian leaders. Following the Principle of Effective Occupation established at the Berlin Conference, powers could only acquire rights over colonial lands if they first “effectively occupied” them by establishing an administration and police force with which to govern the territory. It was not until 1892 that the territory of the French Sudan fell under French colonial rule and became part of Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF). However, Timbuktu was not formally annexed until December 15, 1893, when a small group of soldiers established themselves in the city. Even so, it was not until 1905 that the French Sudan even became a formal colony, instead of a military territory, and resistance to the French presence continued throughout southern and northern French Sudan through World War I (Hall 2011:53).

Timbuktu, since at least the publication of Leo Africanus’ History and Description of Africa in the sixteenth century, had enchanted European minds. In the 1850s and 1860s, one of the main objectives of French expansion up the Senegal valley was to extend their commercial networks towards Timbuktu and make a sort of lynchpin between French possessions in northern
and western Africa (Hall 2011:133). However, various military attempts to enter the city in the decades that followed failed, particularly as resources remained thin. Local Sahelian and Saharan groups waged successful military campaigns against the French in Segou and Masina in the Upper Niger, thereby slowing the French’s northward progress. Furthermore, the relationship between French military officers on the ground and colonial administrators based in Saint-Louis and Paris was complex and strained. For, despite a less expansionist colonial policy, military officers regularly disobeyed orders from political superiors in an attempt to secure more and more territory (Hall 2011:134). Indeed, such military-civilian dissonance characterized much of Timbuktu’s colonial period, and, as I argue below, partially disrupted effective colonial hegemony.

Following a failed – and unsanctioned – attempt to conquer Timbuktu in 1893, the French military finally established themselves in Timbuktu in 1894. However, the officers’ expansionist ambitions fueled even further disobedience. The following year, French forces launched punitive expeditions against local Tuareg groups. Part of this was in retaliation for the massacre of many French troops in the early 1890s. However, it was also a campaign to terrorize the local population so as to force the local populations – sedentary, pastoral and nomadic – to submit to the French regime (Hall 2011:136-7).

In order to establish French domination over the area, the military implemented a few additional posts in the region, including in Goundam, Soumpi and Ras-el-Ma. However, their resources were sparse, and they needed the assistance of local leaders in order to manage the population while they sought to conquer more groups active in the area. For instance, in 1896, the governor of Soudan, Colonel L.E. Trentinian met with Sobbo ag Fondogomo in Timbuktu. Following one of the French massacres, Sobbo had assumed the leadership of the Tengeregif,
one of the primary Tuareg groups in the region. On March 1, 1896 the two men signed a treaty whereby Sobbo agreed not to rebel against the French. But, the treaty also stipulated that Sobbo would retain control over those subordinate groups ruled by the Tengeregif, who populated much of the Timbuktu region, and that the French would not intervene in his internal affairs (Hall 2011:138). Some—though certainly not all—Tuareg leaders followed Sobbo’s example and acquiesced to the French. Despite these relationships, however, the colonial administration’s authority remained tenuous and questionable. Indeed, while many Tuareg leaders wrote letters of submission, most refused to come in person to Timbuktu. And even Sobbo himself, who dominated local politics in the western half of the Niger Bend until his death in 1946, was often suspected by the administration of preparing and anticolonial rebellion (Hall 2011:185).

Once the French military successfully occupied what ultimately became the French Sudan, the colonial administration established bureaucratic order, dividing both land and people. Most colonial administrators decided for themselves who belonged together and what that group would be called (Lecocq 2010:14). Characterized by a double system of French Commandants and locally recruited Chefs Traditionels, the French Sudan was divided first into Cercles, and then into Subdivisions and finally Villages, Cantons, Tribus and Fractions. Of course, the creation of cantons, villages and so on should not be interpreted as a one-way procedure dictated exclusively by French administrators. Rather, this was a process whereby grouping and regrouping occurred on the demand of, and effected under the influence of, the chiefs (Lecocq 2010:14).

Despite the continuation of Saharan unrest in the Timbuktian region throughout the colonial period, the French were able to establish at least nominal coercive domination in Timbuktu following World War I. Nonetheless, efforts to impose uniform codes ultimately gave
way to local practices – including Islamic or customary courts – with local languages primarily serving as the languages of social interaction; and Cercle administrators – citing security or administrative effectiveness – regularly championed local perspectives against the edicts of the metropole (see Clark 1990:269). Therefore, examining the roles – or lack thereof – of French infrastructural schemes, abolitionism, and military service and education, I argue that the French administration was never able to establish persuasive colonial hegemony in Timbuktu. In other words, Timbuktu was rendered peripheral under the French colonial scheme.

**Infrastructure**

As discussed earlier, infrastructure is one mechanism through which the state enhances visibility. On the one hand, infrastructure – including roads, public facilities, systems of tax collection, a postal service and so on – effectively make the state visible to local populations (see Lefebvre 2008 [1974]:97-8; Scott 1998). On the other hand, this same infrastructure organizes individuals and creates populations, thereby making local groups more visible to the state (Foucault 1990 (1978); Scott 1998:77). Making both itself and its populations legible, the state utilizes infrastructure to regulate individual life. Particularly within colonial contexts, improved infrastructure – including roads, canals and irrigation systems, hospitals, banks, markets and so on – allowed the state to more directly intervene on the social body through taxation, military recruitment and coerced matriculation in colonial and mission schools (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:247; Lecocq 2004:99; Mann 2006:26; Piot 1990:40; Rasmussen 2006:152). As such, infrastructure becomes one of the primary mechanisms through which state hegemony is implemented. By highlighting local “development,” for example, states utilize infrastructure to
“construct” modernized, homogenized expressions of both regions and populations (see Ferme 2001:34).

One of France’s primary justifications for their initial occupation of Timbuktu was the removal of the supposed negative impact of Tuareg domination on commerce. However, the imposition of new French taxes exacerbated commercial hardships. As a result, certain groups – particularly those Arab and Tuareg groups north of the Niger River – who remained openly hostile to the French presence severely disrupted colonial order. Avoiding direct confrontation, they raided the commercial networks of sedentary and pastoralist communities who had submitted to the French (and could thus be considered under their protection). This lasted until the 1920s (Hall 2011:139-145). Along with their military, the French sought to increase commerce and subdue local resistance through increased infrastructure. However, despite extensive plans dating back to 1879 for the construction of a trans-Saharan railroad, by the early 20th century, little track had been laid and the project was abandoned (Austen 2010:123-4).

Consequently, in the more remote areas of the French Sudan, colonial trade had a smaller impact relative to more central areas (Clark 2000:271). To be sure, some new products were introduced to Timbuktu, but as elsewhere in the French colonies, many goods – such as guns, bullets, tobacco, alcohol and so on – were highly restricted, intended not for African, but for French consumers. Without a proper road and only seasonal river access, Timbuktu could not become a hub of colonial trade like other cities more connected to the metropole.

Moreover, World War I interrupted significant colonial development in the more inaccessible regions. Not only was France’s attention split between European conflict and its colonies during this time. But, those groups in the most remote areas, over which the French had not established their dominance relative to less remote areas, took advantage of the Great War
and began rebelling against the French colonial regime as well. In 1916 the French faced the threat of a serious Tuareg rebellion throughout the southern Sahara (Austen 2010:124; Lecocq 2010). Following Soares (2005:46), before – and even during – the First World War, “pacification of the Sahel and Sahara could not have been considered complete.” Indeed, this period was known as “le temps des ‘bandits,’” or, “the time of the bandits,” during which many in the more distant parts of the colony openly rebelled against the French (Bernus et al. 1993; from Soares 2005). In the southern Sahel such activity was finally repressed after a couple of decades of intense French military intervention. However, further north – in Timbuktu and beyond – bandit groups were a constant source of fear, and a constant drain of colonial resources (Lecocq 2010).

**Slavery**

I have been arguing that Timbuktu was rendered peripheral within French Sudan largely because of the inability to completely pacify the population or instill French dominance. In addition to the failure of the trans-Saharan railroad, and thus the inability to immediately alter the region’s commercial networks, we should also consider the issue of slavery. Despite the metropolitan demand to end slavery, the practice continued under French military rule. Particularly in the North, the French established little more than military control over the population. In this sense, therefore, colonial leadership and persuasion—to use both Gramsci (2005 [1971]) and Guha’s (1998) terms – were limited, trumped by domination. To be sure, law both creates and homogenizes a population (Foucault 1990 [1978]). However, such homogenization requires that law not only be implemented from the top down. Indeed, military governance does not create social ideology (Gramsci 2005 [1971]:216). In the case of northern
Mali, therefore, where colonial mechanisms remained weak, European expressions of hegemonic self-discipline failed to effectively take hold among the colonized.

In the French colonial world, talk of abolition was intended for civilian consumption, but it was not a directive for action on the ground (Lydon 2000; Mann 2006:31). It was not until the civilian government began administering French West Africa that real attempts were made to end the trade and practice of slavery. In 1903, the metropole instructed colonial administrators not to use the term “slave” as an administrative category anymore (Klein 2005:831). And in 1905, by formal French decree slavery became outlawed throughout French West Africa (Mauxion 2012:197). As a result, particularly in the southern and western parts of French Sudan, many former slaves moved away from their former masters, often settling in French-supported settlements along the Niger River (Klein 2005). However, in the northern and eastern parts of the colony, the practice of slavery largely continued with as much as two thirds of those in servitude remaining with their masters (Klein 1998:114; Mauxion 2012:197). This reflects the colonial inability to significantly pacify the Sahara. Slaves at that time were not an important object of trade with North African and Middle Eastern countries. Instead, they were mainly purchased by Tuareg and Arab groups who exploited Saharan salt mines; further, across the desert slaves did most of the herding, domestic labor and oasis agriculture (Klein 1998:56).

Of equal significance, however, is not only that local slavery could not be stopped, but also that French soldiers and administrators in the Timbuktu region contradicted official orders and perpetuated the system themselves. Despite the French mandate to end the institution throughout its colonies, according to missionaries based in Timbuktu, there were secret orders to tolerate ongoing slavery (Klein 1998:122). Early in the colonial period, most of the population of Timbuktu was probably servile. And attempts to disrupt it most likely would have resulted in
increased local resistance to the French regime. Additionally, as Timbuktu was so distant from the colonial center in southern French Sudan, officers were less beholden to administrators in the metropole. Consequently, efforts at asserting colonial control were often difficult, contentious and inconsistent. When soldiers took Timbuktu in 1894, they found themselves in conflict with the Tuareg groups who had established a suzerainty over the region. However, because the soldiers’ goal was not control of the desert but a share of fertile Sahelian lands, they were not as interested in completely pacifying the region, only securing it for themselves (Klein 1998:137).

One of the difficulties in affirming even modest French control over the Timbuktian region was economic. The French wanted to occupy contested areas before the British or Germans could get into them. However, their resources were incredibly limited, and they were unable to commit appropriate funds. Another difficulty was hegemonic. It is debatable whether the French really intended to “civilize” the inhabitants of its African colonies, or whether they used the discourse of the civilizing mission in order to justify their imperial ambitions.

Nonetheless, particularly when it came to the remotest regions of the French Sudan, for example, there were few illusions as to the administration’s ability to substantially “civilize” the local population. The primary interest was gaining access to commercial agriculture. Again, this meant that the main region of occupation in the northern zones was Sahelian. As a result, France’s (interest in) hegemonic dominance was weaker in the northernmost areas, as was their ability to significantly disrupt local practices and values.

Regarding slavery, therefore, despite missionaries explaining that servile individuals were free, many remained indentured. To be sure, some took advantage of the new colonial laws, fleeing to cities where they could work in quarries, become prostitutes or farm (Klein 1998:237; Lydon 2000). Most, however, continued to work as slaves. One reason for this, certainly, was
the coercion of their masters. However, another is that they accepted their role. Firstly, the legal process through with the French freed the region’s slaves did not correspond with local conceptualizations of the slave-master relationship. It is likely that most slaves felt that they belonged to their masters despite the French decree, for they had not personally purchased their freedom (Maugham 1961; in Klein 1998:238). As such, while slavery perhaps disappeared as a legal institution, it continued as a social arrangement that shaped the lives of both slaves and masters, and their descendents (Klein 1998:238; Mann 2006:6).

Military Service and Colonial Education

Slavery also influenced French Sudanese conscription into the French military during the two World Wars (Mann 2006). Many West African slaves and “clients” – because they willingly enlisted in order to escape their masters, or because their masters or French administrators coerced them to enlist – fought in North Africa, Turkey and southern Europe. Most military recruits, though, came from “liberty villages” in central and southern Mali, where the population was densest and where the colonial administration was strongest (Mann 2006:230 n51). The northern region’s low population density, plus the mobility of its pastoralist and nomadic residents, made the conscription of northern residents more challenging. Further, as Tuareg and Arab groups continued rebellious activity throughout the colonial period – and especially during the World Wars – instead of utilizing these areas as a source of West African soldiers, Tirailleurs Sénégalais (Senegalese infantrymen) were often sent to the Saharan regions in order quell uprisings and secure trade routes (Mann 2006:17).

Twentieth century military service, though, was a key component of establishing colonial – and later, postcolonial – hegemony (see Foucault 1977). Conscription brought many West
African males under the direct influence of the French military, providing certain benefits, opportunities to travel and even the possibility of French citizenship. As such, military service opened up radical new possibilities for West African families, possibilities left closed to those Saharans who did not enlist. In southern Mali, where colonial intervention in civil society was more acute, the power of chefs de canton and other elements of local authority slowly declined as new sources of patronage, power and prestige emerged (Mann 2006:62). Higher ranking French Sudanese veterans were able to pursue new political allegiances. They disentangled themselves from old affiliations of labor, obligation and reciprocity while employing a new language partially rooted in the same ideas, though inflected by evolving republican colonial notions (Mann 2006:62). Conversely, the remoter areas along the Sahara experienced significantly lower levels of conscription, the continued presence of the French military and a smaller degree of administrative intervention in civil society. As such, northern populations became less integrated into the colonial hegemonic apparatus and were less able and willing to disentangle themselves from “traditional” social relations.

The importance of military service for the French colonial project cannot be overstated, particularly as this was one of the colony’s primary disciplinary institutions. However, as discussed above, schooling was also a site of colonial hegemony whereby French policymakers sought to manage and in some cases create new Frenchmen out of colonial populations (Stoller 1989:149; Wilder 2005). By the early 1900s, colonial elementary schools were established in many towns throughout the French Sudan, including in Timbuktu and Goundam. Further, in 1911 Timbuktu’s Medersa Franco Arabe opened. The late-1930s also saw the creation of the école nomade, an educational institution for nomadic students in the Goundam region, characterized as a mix between a French school and a madrasa. Also, in the mid-1940s, the
French opened the *Collège Nomade*, in Diré. The college trained mainly Tuareg students either to become teachers themselves or veterinary assistants. Nonetheless, in 1947 less than five percent of school-age children were actually attending colonial schools in the French Sudan. And of even that percentage, few female students were admitted (Lydon 2000:75-7).

Furthermore, it was not until the 1950s that French Sudanese students began studying in European institutions abroad or the first lycée classes opened in Bamako (Lecocq 2010:44).

This is not to suggest, however, that those Timbuktians that did not attend French schools lacked education. Rather, during the colonial period, most children regularly attended some form of Qur’anic school (see Mommersteeg 2012 [1998]:35-53) where local religious and cultural values continued to be taught. Further, many of those who received a French education resisted it. Following Ali, an elderly scholar from Araouan now living in Timbuktu:

> Until 1947 there had only been one French school here, and one French school in Gao. After World War II, though, there were three schools here. But there were more than that in Gao ville and region—they wanted more; they asked for more schools. We didn’t ask for more, but they built two more. One was the “Madrasa,” but it was a French school. The only difference was that they taught a half hour of Arabic. I actually went to the madrasa. I was forced to go—[the French] forced all of the students who ended up attending any of the French schools. I was already in Timbuktu, leaving Araouan, as I’d come to attend Qur’anic school and learn real Arabic. But, the French told the chief of Araouan that he had to provide a certain number of students for the French schools. He complied, sending the students from Araouan who were already in Timbuktu—it was easier that way. So, they took me out of Qur’anic school and sent me to the madrasa. Then I could only go to Qur’anic school on Thursdays and Sundays. In the South, though, there were a lot more schools than there were in the North. This was especially true in the Christianized areas.

Despite a general resistance to colonial education, certain Tuareg groups expressed interest in colonial higher education in Dakar. However, because the French so mistrusted the Tuareg, these requests were often denied. Instead, the French promoted the education of the descendents of Tuareg and Songhay slaves, a system that would continue in the postcolonial
period (Stoller 1989:150, 172). As a result, the new position of these former slaves in colonial society was difficult for the nobility to accept, further straining French-Tuareg relations and discouraging the matriculation of the children of Tuareg nobility from regularly attending French schools (Lecocq 2010:45).

Colonial interest in Saharan zones quickly diminished relative to interest in more coastal and tropical regions. Following conquest, questions of order, stability and economic viability most concerned the French. For, order and stability were the means of economic exploitation with the least cost to the metropole. Whereas trade in gum and gold dominated the colonial market in the French Sudan’s southern regions, in the Sahel – from Nioro to Gao – they aimed to exploit agriculture, livestock and commerce (see Soares 2005:46). Remote Sahelian and Saharan regions, however, were difficult to pacify and render economically viable. Consequently, their colonization was comparatively brief and incomplete. Of course, half a century of direct political, economic and cultural disruption – not to mention the indirect disruption that occurred prior to formal annexation – certainly impacted Timbuktu. Nonetheless, following Austen (2010:128), the norms and practices resulting from the town’s long history of semi-autonomy and Islamicization could not be reversed in so brief a period.

**Decolonial and Postcolonial Timbuktu**

Even following the colonial period, the independent Malian state maintained an administrative and political relationship between southern and northern Mali similar to that introduced by the French. Following a decentralized configuration, Mali is divided into six *Régions*, each of which is subdivided into *Cercles* and then *Arrondissements* (Clark 2000). And while the central government issues plans, governance – and in many cases, (the financing of)
regional projects – is largely the responsibility of each Région. Consequently, many of the issues that plagued colonial officers and administrators continued to disrupt Malian governance in the North (see Mann 2015:91). Indeed, relative to other parts of the country, Timbuktu remained remote and disconnected in terms of infrastructure and public services. Also relative to other regions, most Timbuktians did not actively pursue higher education or military, bureaucratic or political service in Bamako. As a result, Timbuktu remained politically peripheral to Bamako, while Timbuktians largely retained and reproduced notions of their own exceptionalism and centrality.

I link Mali’s decolonial and postcolonial periods because the administrative and militaristic policies of the post-war period reflects postcolonial Mali more so than it does the pre-war colonial period of the early 20th century. Indeed, the colonialism following the Second World War was unlike that of the interwar period (Cooper 1996:451). Without suggesting that September 22, 1960, Mali’s independence day, is an arbitrary or insignificant date, starkly dividing the country’s history into “the colonial” and “the postcolonial” risks overlooking important processes of transition.11 The French Sudan in the 1950s saw the commencement of decolonization and certain processes equivalently characteristic of postcolonial Mali. For instance, it was during this time that local party politics – led by a faction of predominantly southern Malian evolus – became more fully developed and formalized. They argued for independence and (re-)produced a very particular expression of the Malian nation.

Nonetheless, the events of 1946 to 1960 are complicated, incoherent and contradictory. Indeed, “the shape Mali took can only be seen from a supra-regional viewpoint overlooking [Afrique occidentale française]12 AOF, North Africa and the Sahara, with France on the horizon….Agency in this process was dispersed over a multitude of players, and power balances
shifted continuously between Europeans and Africans, administrators and politicians, parties and people” (Lecocq 2010:28-9). The decolonizing process was slow and gradual, involving numerous legal transformations of both the territory and its inhabitants. It involved the shaping and reinforcing of states, and the imagining and re-imagining of nations. And while the entire history of the decolonial period remains outside the scope of this analysis, I want to emphasize the implications of decolonizing the northern regions before they could be wholly subjugated. To be sure, decolonization did not necessarily mean the backtracking of French administrators from civilian intervention. Indeed, as I discussed above, the first secondary school was opened in Bamako in 1950. Nonetheless, this period is characterized by a shift of priorities away from militaristic dominance and to a more acute civilian, commercial, even neocolonial structure. As Timbuktu had little to offer France – either as a colony or neocolony – by way of agriculture or commerce, this period saw a reduction in French intervention and the reliance upon local political and social systems.

The postcolonial African state is, for the most part, the reshaping of the colonial African state by African servants of the colonial order, those educated under the colonial system (Davidson 1992; Mbembe 2001). Consequently, the outcome of post-war decolonization in AOF – as in the rest of colonial Africa – was not sufficiently shaped by practices of resistance and control between colonizer and colonized, but instead “through close association and the meeting of diverging interests in shared political arenas” (Lecocq 2010:35; see Chafer 2002). Employing a logic of “blood for rights,” local demands for increased political rights – and in some cases, French citizenship – followed the return of West African soldiers to the colonies following World War II (Mann 2006). As such, the first elections where African candidates for the Constitutional Assembly could present themselves to an African electorate took place
immediately following World War II in October 1945. This election spurred the process by which the French Fourth Republic was created, which effectively restyled the colonial empire into the *Union Française* the following year. Significantly, one of the new rights that emerged as a result was the freedom to create political parties (Lecoqc 2010:32).

In 1958, the Union Soudanaise—Rassemblement Démocratique Africaine (US-RDA) led the development of the Francophone West African Federation and subsequently became the prevailing political party within colonial French Sudan, and later, independent Mali. Under the leadership of Modibo Keita, the US-RDA, along with the Senegalese Parti Socialiste (PS) under Leopold Sedar Senghor, Soudan Français and Senegal formed the Mali Federation within the *Communauté Française*. In April 1960, the Federation negotiated its existence independent of the *Communauté Française*, and then in June 1960 declared its independence from France. However, political conflicts quickly arose between the two leaders, and on August 20, 1960, Senegal left the Mali Federation. On September 22, 1960, the congress of the US-RDA in Bamako declared the independence of the Soudanese Republic under the name of the Republic of Mali. Following formal independence, however, it became clear that Timbuktu remained peripheral to the Malian political center. In order to demonstrate this, I examine the process of developing the Malian nation and state and civil societies.

**Nation-Building**

Schachter-Morgenthau (1964) argues that those Africans who most participated in postcolonial processes – like those who most participated in colonial processes – were chiefs, teachers and soldiers. Of course, this is an over-simplification, for it ignores the important roles played by such actors as Dioula merchants, the small professional class of mechanics, truck
drivers, radio operators, veterinary assistants, nurses and so on. Furthermore, it neglects the gradual process whereby postcolonies came to be driven by party politics (Lecoqc 2010:36). Nonetheless, colonial French education played an important role in the creation of a new class of politicians and the transformation of the Malian state, particularly as most of the early party leaders were educated under the French colonial system (Lecoqc 2010:37; Lydon 2000). Problematically for Timbuktians and other northern Malians, though, is that they did not receive a colonial education to the same degree as their southern Malian counterparts. This meant that they could not, would not, similarly participate in Malian party politics and their subsequent attempts at nation building (Lecocq 2004:99; Rasmussen 2006:152). In some cases, Timbuktians – particularly Tuareg – refused to “board the ship;” however in other cases they were actively excluded from party politics (Lecoqc 2010:38).

Most southern Malian politicians did not perceive northern Malians – particularly light-skinned, nomadic Tuaregs and Arabs – as truly Malian in a nationalist sense. Similarly, many (though certainly not all) northern Malians – again, particularly light-skinned, nomadic Tuaregs and Arabs – did not perceive themselves as truly Malian either (Lecocq 2010:40-44). This is not to say that the US-RDA did not insist upon maintaining the territorial integrity of the Malian state, despite certain national and international resistance. Due to potential mineral wealth in the Sahara, as well as the nationalist import of maintaining territorial integrity, colonial French Sudan and postcolonial Mali retained the North. Nonetheless, particularly because some northern communities had supported northern autonomy or the region’s incorporation into an independent Saharan state, many northern and southern Malians remained distrustful of one another.
The political and geographic distance between Bamako and northern Mali meant that political leaders in the two regions did not effectively work together to create the new Malian nation (Lecocq 2010:70-1). With Malian political power vested in the South, mainly southern Malian party leaders went about developing a sense of Malian nationalism following independence. The Keita regime of 1960-1968 (and most subsequent regimes) promoted a national historical myth rooted in the Mali Empire and its famous Mande founder, Sunjata Keita (see Konaré 2000). Basing the Malian nation in the Mande ethnic group and the Mali Empire, however, necessarily excludes the historical and cultural significance of more northern-based regimes, including the Songhay Empire, the Fulbe jihad states or any number of historic Tuareg confederations. It also tended to privilege sedentary lifestyles over the more pastoralist and nomadic forms often privileged and romanticized in the North. Of course, the new government did admit the importance of other ethnic groups and empires – including the historic significance of Timbuktu – and attempted to bring them into the national story. Nonetheless, “the historical foundation of the Malian national myth is first and foremost based on the all-important living history of the Mande and Bambara areas” (Lecoqc 2010:72). In this sense, then, Timbuktu – while perhaps symbolically important to the Malian nation – remained politically and nationally distant from Bamako.

Clearly, some Malians are considered more or less representative of the nation. This is not to say, however, that most Timbuktiants do not claim to be Malian. Indeed, even during the height of the 2012 crisis and their displacement, even when their criticisms of the Malian state were the most intense, most of my Timbuktiant interlocutors asserted their “Malian-ness.”18 Most blamed the Malian army – which, importantly, is primarily comprised of southern Malian soldiers – for the fall of the North. “[The Army] was supposed to protect us,” my friend, Papa,
said. “They were supposed to protect us, but what did they do? They ran. They ran all the way back to Bamako and abandoned us.” At the same time, however, many Timbuktians also blamed the Kidal-based Tuareg nationalists for allying with Jihadi-Salafists and occupying the northern regions. Rejecting the notion of Azawad, the majority of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke insisted upon maintaining territorial integrity.

I found that there was little better way to strike up an energetic conversation with my southern Malian interlocutors than to inquire about Mande legends. However, many of my Timbuktian interlocutors maintained that the Malian national narrative largely excludes them. And, most expressed substantial apathy toward Mande heroes. For instance, one day, I asked my Songhay friend’s high school-aged brother about Sunjata Keita. He, like so many of the other Timbuktians to whom I had posed this question, just looked at me and shrugged, “Yeah, I know who he is. We all do.” Then he – again, like so many of my other Timbuktian interlocutors – changed the subject to other, more northern components of the nation narrative, components often minimized by their Mande counterparts. Acknowledging Sunjata and the Mali Empire, many of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke quickly emphasized that it was equally the Songhay, Moroccan, Fulbe and Tuareg polities that historically developed contemporary Mali. Many northern Malians were keen to remind me that it was Mansa Musa and the Songhay Empire that defeated the Malian Empire and became the dominant power in the region. In addition to citing these regional histories, many of my Timbuktian interlocutors also highlighted supposed “cultural” differences. Southerners – especially those in Bamako – are all “backward,” many of my friends claimed. Apparently instead of prioritizing religion and the family, all they do is drink, watch TV and have premarital sex. And even worse, many southerners are – again, according to some of my Timbuktian interlocutors – not even Muslim, but are instead “animists.”
Despite my Timbuktian interlocutors’ claims to belong to the Malian nation, not all southern Malians are as generous. Reflecting upon the current crisis, as well as a long history of unrest and insecurity in Mali’s Saharan zones, many of my southern Malian interlocutors were quick to tell me that all northerners – including Timbuktians – were not Malian, or at least they were not “properly” Malian. Instead, asserting their own cosmopolitanism, they contrasted most northerners as religious zealots, slave owners and terrorists (see Lecoqc 2010:100). Indeed, I remember one instance when I was traveling by bus back to Bamako. I befriended Tanti, a young Bambara woman sitting next to me. When I explained to her that I was conducting fieldwork among Timbuktians, she looked at me wide-eyed. “Why?” she gasped. After I discussed my project, Tanti remained unimpressed. “Why do you work in Timbuktu? It’s nothing. It’s a speck of sand. There’s no plumbing there. Nobody washes. You can’t drink. You can’t dance. No hanging out with boys. All you do is pray and pray and pray. You should just do all your work in Bamako instead. It’s much better there.” I said that Timbuktu is actually more fun than she suggested and asked if she had ever visited. “Me? Visit that pile of dust? Oh no. Never!” She then explained that no one in her family, and none of her friends in Bamako or the surrounding areas had ever visited any locale in northern Mali.

State-Building

Some of the older Timbuktians with whom I spoke recalled Timbuktu immediately before and after independence. They described the lack of paved roads, electricity, telephones and transportation; they described the many days – sometimes even a week – that it took to travel to Bamako. Lecoqc (2010:74) states, “Reading the official newspaper l’Essor of those years, one is left with the impression that Mali did not extend beyond the area directly surrounding
Bamako and Segu, with outposts at Mopti, Gao, Kayes and Timbuktu.” As a result, in 1961 Bamako unveiled a five-year plan to improve the general infrastructure of the country. Intended was the construction of a railway from Bamako to Conakry, the enlargement of six regional airports, the improving of river transport between Koulikoro and Mopti, the strengthening of roads as far as Mopti, the building of bridges and ferries, and the expansion of postal and telegraph services (Lecoq 2010:74-5).  

A barrier to this plan, however, was – and still is – Mali’s administrative decentralization, which, despite rhetoric expounding its supposed efficiency and developmental and democratic potential (see Rawson 2000), ultimately complicated and slowed many infrastructure projects intended towards Timbuktu. Of course, some plans were successful. The regional Timbuktu Airport, for example, was opened on April 15, 1961 (Coleman & Rosberg 1964:222). And around the same time, a ferry capable of transporting up to two tractor-trailers or five cars at a time was established at Kabara, the Niger River port situated 11 miles from Timbuktu. Nonetheless, electricity was very late in arriving, as was telephone service, only effectively being established – according to my Timbuktian interlocutors – about 20 years ago. And even then, those on the not too distant outskirts – and many within Timbuktu town itself – remain without electricity, for families themselves must pay to connect to the grid. Internet access remains weak and spotty, when a connection can be made at all. What seems to anger Timbuktians the most, however, is that there is still no paved road to Timbuktu. As a result, Bamako remains distant. The fastest option is by plane, but tickets remain exceeding expensive, especially by Malian standards. This leaves river or overland transport, or some combination of the two. Taking a public 4 x 4 the 200km dirt path south to the highway and then connecting to a public bus takes a minimum 36 hours to reach Bamako. Opting for a cheaper option—either a public bus the entire
route or a motorized *pinasse* along the river to Mopti, followed by a bus—will extend the trip by at least 48 hours. Yet, even these modes of transport remain costly (and exhausting) and prohibit many from regularly traveling to southern Mali, or vice versa. This infrastructural lack is, for many Timbuktians, exceedingly symbolic of Bamako’s disregard for and even abandonment of Timbuktu.

But even the US-RDA’s limited proposed infrastructural and administrative interventions in the North were interrupted and short-lived. As cultural and political distrust and alienation mounted, in 1963 Tuareg groups based out of Kidal revolted against the Malian state. Known locally as the *Alfellaga*, and popularly as the “First Tuareg Rebellion,” this was a major event imbedded within a long history of Tuareg resistance and struggles for independence (Lecoqc 2010:183). This rebellion, and the “Second Tuareg Rebellion” of the 1990s were centered around the families and politics of Kidal. Nonetheless, the rebellions destabilized all of northern Mali and made southern Malian governance difficult to maintain. Furthermore, following militarization and then peace talks and negotiations, the result of each rebellion was the further decentralization of the North relative to the South. As such, from a federal standpoint, the ties between northern Malian communities – including Timbuktu – and southern Mali generally weakened. These rebellions, and what many southern Malians perceived as the rebels’ reward for taking up arms, only further increased the national divide between the two regions.

Both during and immediately following the rebellions, governance in Timbuktu and the rest of northern Mali became more militarized, that is, characterized more by—to use Guha’s (1998) terminology—dominance and less by hegemony. In 1963, for example, military units in Timbuktu and the Adagh were transformed into the *Groupes Nomades d’Intervention de la*
Gendarmerie and were mobilized against the rebel groups, who were ransacking police and military supplies (Lecoqc 2010:192, 198). After successfully combating the rebel groups, in a hyper-nationalist move and claiming the superiority of sedentarism over nomadism, the Keita regime celebrated the end of the First Tuareg Rebellion in Kidal on the third anniversary of Malian independence.

The following two decades brought northern Mali somewhat more under southern Malian control, but not for reasons of effective political or civilian governance. Instead, severe droughts in the 1970s and 1980s crippled much of the southern Saharan and the Sahelian regions. The Malian administration, therefore, used the droughts to support their claims that pastoralism and nomadism are economically and culturally inferior modes of existence relative to sedentary agriculturalism. The continued institutional rejection of non-sedentary existence, however, further alienated many northern Malian groups, and the anti-Malian and pro-Tuareg nationalist sentiment that fueled the rebellion of the early 1960s began to increase again. In response, predominantly Songhay individuals based in Gao formed the Ganda Koy, a civilian force aimed at pacifying the new rebellion. As a result, throughout the 1990s, Malian state attention largely transcended Timbuktu, focused instead on the increasingly ruthless – primarily Tuareg – rebels (and, seemingly to a lesser degree, the continued narco- and gun-trafficking presence) coming out of Kidal and vigilantes coming out of Gao.

**Civil Society-Building**

Up to this point I have attempted to demonstrate how during the decolonial and postcolonial periods, Timbuktu was rendered nationally and politically peripheral to Bamako. This is not to say, however, that the Malian state has no presence in Timbuktu. Quite the
contrary. Timbuktu houses most of the agents and institutions that one typically considers when thinking of the state. The region has a governor, and the town has a mayor, both of whom live in state-funded mansions adjacent to Timbuktu’s center. There are a handful of public primary schools and one secondary school. There is a government subsidized energy plant. There is running, treated water. There is a police and gendarme headquarters. There is even a Malian military base. Of course, as discussed above, the degree of integration into the Malian state remains low relative to the national, infrastructural and political integration experienced throughout southern Mali. The conversation about periphery, though, should not be limited to political society, specifically how political society attempts (or fails to attempt) to extend its reach. Instead, we must also consider how individuals selectively avoid or actively resist the state and its hegemonic institutions. In other words, as during the colonial period, following independence, Timbuktu largely remained the center of its own sociopolitical world as Timbuktians privileged many of their own values and practices rather than engaging Malian state structures.

Consider, for example, the epigraph that opens this chapter. While the police and judiciary are present in Timbuktu for conflict resolution, most of my Timbuktian interlocutors explained that they preferred not to approach such state officials with their problems (see, too, Roitman 2004; Soares 2005). Instead, most individuals or families consulted neighborhood leaders who offer advice and seek to resolve issues without needing to incorporate the police. Indeed, as my friend Abdou once told me, “In the North…we are taught to be patient and not to go to the police. But to solve problems among ourselves. We’re taught that as children, and then do it as adults. Sure, sometimes children fight – sometimes it’s bad – but the two families get together and smooth the problem, and then it’s over. It’s bad if you go to the police or a
judge.” Often, my interlocutors would explain this practice as cultural, saying, “It’s just how we do it in Timbuktu.” Others, however, would evoke local religious knowledge based upon Timbuktu’s history of saints and Islamic learning (see Chapter 3).

Similarly, as discussed in the section on colonial Mali, the presence of state-funded public schools does not necessarily imply that Timbuktians consumed or accepted Bamako-centric Malian hegemony. On the one hand, while many children – at least before the occupation – were able attend some primary school in Timbuktu, few are able pursue secondary school. And, even among those who do receive a public education, there remains a significant gender gap. Due to multiple factors – including the cost of public education; the demands of household chores and agricultural and pastoral labor; and undervaluing public education – more males than females are even able to attend primary school, let alone secondary school. As a result, only one segment of Timbuktian society is regularly exposed to Malian public education and the broader histories and values that it expresses. Furthermore, as under French imperialism, most children regularly receive some form of religious education. Even those who attend formal public schooling begin Qur’anic school a couple of years beforehand and continue long afterward. Indeed, almost everyone I talked to in Timbuktu insisted that every child in town receives a Qur’anic education. And while this is almost surely an over exaggeration, it became immediately clear that for most Timbuktian families, it was important that their children attend Qur’anic school, learn how to practice Islam and develop a relationship with a neighborhood marabout. To be sure, most mornings I stirred to the low-pitched hum of older students reciting Qur’anic verses streetside and finally awoke to the falsettos of the children who arrived half an hour later. And in most of the households I visited I saw, covered with youthful charcoal
handwriting, the individual boards that students used to help them memorize passages and prayers from the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{26}

Gramsci (2005 [1971]) describes that professional training is an important component for developing civil society and imparting the ideals of the hegemon. Timbuktu, however, has lacked post-secondary education facilities. In order to receive that kind of training – whether it be vocational or professional – one must go elsewhere. The closest institute has been a two-year teacher training center in Diré. Otherwise, one remains obliged to go to either Gao or, more likely, Mopti. If one seeks university education, however, one still must continue south to Segou or Bamako. Further, as professional jobs are scarce in Timbuktu, many of those Timbuktians who are able to earn a post-secondary degree have to stay in southern Mali, sending monthly remittances back North. As a result, many of the Timbuktians who encounter and consume Malian hegemonic ideas via post-secondary education do so outside of the North without extended feedback into local Timbukian practices.

Despite the presence of the Malian state, these examples of policing and education demonstrate that most Timbuktians have only partially accessed it. Instead, many have either selectively avoided it, or have complemented it with local cultural and religious norms, values and expectations. Indeed, local values and structures of power—such as slavery, for instance—have persisted regardless of (purported) colonial and postcolonial attempts at disruption. I recall one instance when I was just settling in during my initial fieldwork in Timbuktu in 2010. Khalid, who eventually became one of my closest friends, offered to walk me around town and introduce me to some of his friends. During the informal tour, he looked at me and cracked a wry smile, “You’re American, right André? From what I know of Americans, you guys are really interested in slavery. Well, you’ve come to the right place.”
“I suppose you’re right,” I said. “Timbuktu does have a really interesting history of it.”

“No, no,” Khalid laughed. “Not history.” Then he squinted at me to see if I understood his meaning. After a prolonged pause and my quizzical look, he continued, “It’s not history. My friend, there’s still slavery in Timbuktu.”

In large part, my friend has a flair for drama and overstated – or, better said, misrepresented – his case. Accurately capitalizing on a historical American fascination with slavery, Khalid knew that he would pique my interest, or at least get a laugh at my flabbergasted expression. Slavery as an official practice, for the most part, does not exist in Mali, even in the Sahara. Nonetheless, following Klein (1998), it continues as a discourse and social practice that socially and racially situates Timbuktian residents. Historically lighter skinned Arab and Tuareg individuals maintained dark skinned slaves. And, while darker skinned Songhay and Fulani individuals also once maintained equally dark skinned slaves, there were little to no accounts of individuals owning light skinned slaves in Timbuktu. As a result, blackness is something that can demarcate (former) slave status among Timbuktian residents. Such a demarcation is something that follows the descendents of slaves even generations following one’s emancipation, despite an individual’s attempts to assert an alternative label. Indeed, on more than one occasion some of my friends in Timbuktu were “corrected” for not claiming the appropriate identity.

Once I was chatting with Ahmed, a salt merchant and miner, in Timbuktu’s small market. We spent the greater part of the morning together. Between selling a couple bricks of rock salt, he discussed his childhood, his family and the difficulties of the salt trade, particularly given its interruption as a result of the occupation. Other friends passed by on their way to or from the market, pausing to catch up for a few minutes before continuing. At one point, our Bellah friend, Bouba, sat down and started faux interrogating me. In his characteristic teasing fashion, he first
asked if Ahmed had said anything bad about him, and then he asked what Ahmed had said more generally. I jokingly refused to tell him, but then Ahmed provided a rough outline. When Ahmed mentioned his Arab family, however, Bouba stopped him as he burst out laughing. Turning to me, he asked, “‘Arab?’ André, did Ahmed tell you that he’s Arab?” Then he laughed some more. When he could finally control himself, he dramatically took me under his arm, and explained, “Ahmed is not ‘Arab’. No, no, no. Ahmed is ‘Arab slave’.” Ahmed, giggling, tried to deny it. But then Bouba continued to the both of us, “Ahmed, if you’re not a slave, how are you black? Did you rub charcoal on yourself? How can you be ‘Arab’? You’re the darkest man in Timbuktu!” And then Bouba laughed some more.

The legacy of slavery organizes Timbuktian society, for not only does it influence how people identify each other, but it also reproduces an unofficial system of indentured servitude. I saw this firsthand as I spent time in some of the northern Malian refugee camps in Burkina Faso. I accompanied a friend as he discussed a project with an older, well-respected and very light-skinned Tuareg man. While everyone talked, a couple of dark-skinned adolescents came in and out of the tent, passing around tea and brimming cups of reconstituted milk. The older man introduced the two as his children and then left them to attend to the group. Following the meeting, as my friend and I walked back to his tent, I asked him about our host’s family. “Does he have a black wife?” I inquired.

My friend shook his head no, saying, “No, no. His wives are all white; they’re all Tuareg.”

“So, how does he have such dark-skinned children?” I asked. “Are they adopted?” And then, lowering my voice because I was not sure if it was an appropriate question to pose, “Did he have a mistress?”
Then, chuckling, my friend continued his head shaking. “No, none of that. Those are his slaves. Or, at least they work for him in exchange for food and lodging. ‘Children’ is code. We don’t use ‘slave’ anymore. But, you know, this stuff continues, this relationship. I mean look: Those two, they’re not slave slaves. They technically can do what they want. But, they’ve been living in a refugee camp with this guy for over a year now. Here, in this camp. There are lots of ‘slaves’…‘children’.”

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that Timbuktu has been rendered peripheral to the various polities that have formally extended their administrative reach to the city. During the precolonial, colonial and decolonial/postcolonial periods, foreign dominance has never been complete, at least not for an extended period. As various Timbuktian populations have historically resisted foreign control, imperial occupiers have struggled to establish prolonged and wide-reaching footholds. Consequently, the infrastructural and institutional elements characteristic of a state have remained lacking in Timbuktu. Furthermore, as Timbuktu has remained its own sociopolitical center – producing and reproducing its own cultural and religious values and expressions – even when a given polity partially established itself in Timbuktu, the residents themselves often selectively avoided it, or they incorporated its practices into their own local systems. As a result, even given the presence of some Malian institutions in Timbuktu today, there remains a political and national distance between most Timbuktians and other Malians, particularly in the South. As mentioned above, this is not to suggest that Timbuktu has remained unchanged since its founding in the 12th century. However, its simultaneous peripheral-central status has allowed for the development of important “traditions,” religious and cultural
frameworks. I explore these frameworks more fully in the following chapters as I examine how Timbuktians engaged them in order to negotiate the occupation and displacement.
Which, we recall, was already tenuous in the colony’s more remote, desert areas. And, the degree to which this military domination itself was even successful, as we have seen, and as we will see, was limited to be sure.

Indeed, nomadism is impossible without a group’s integration into urban spaces and networks. Nonetheless, this military domination was limited to be sure.

In these senses, therefore, despite orientalist stereotypes about nomadic groups, nomads are incredibly “urban.” In these senses, therefore, despite orientalist stereotypes about nomadic groups, nomads are incredibly “urban.” Indeed, nomadism is impossible without a group’s integration into urban spaces and networks. And, the degree to which this military domination itself was even successful, as we have seen, and as we will see, was limited to be sure.

Which, we recall, was already tenuous in the colony’s more remote, desert areas.
All of which was in line with French colonial perspectives on improving nomadic existence. Indeed, like law, education is also a primary tool of population creation and homogenization (Gramsci 2005 [1971]:246).

To elaborate upon that which I introduced in the previous chapter: The French maintained a contradictory orientation vis-à-vis the occupants of the Timbuktian region. On the one hand, they romanticized the Tuareg – and, to a lesser degree, Arab – nomads. Because these groups long resisted the French colonial occupation, administrators perceived them as defiant and proud of their culture and traditions (Lecocq 2010:92). However, because of their continued defiance, administrators also perceived them suspiciously. Horowitz describes the distinction that most colonial authorities made between so-called modern and backward ethnic groups. The former embraced colonial modernity, whereas the latter remained resistant to it. As a result, colonists viewed “modern” groups as degenerated, astray from their culture, and as such, appropriate to develop. Sympathizing with “pristine” and “untarnished” desert tribes, administrators adopted a policy of “protection” and resisted changes that would alter the Tuareg’s “traditional way of life.” At the same time, though, the colonial administration eagerly attempted “development” policies in central and southern Mali where residents were perceived to be more “modern.” Furthermore, romanticizing the Tuareg, French soldiers and administrators in the northern regions adopted the racist Tuareg perceptions of their neighbors. According to this vision, the “white” Arabo-Berber Tuareg were of a naturally higher order than the “black” inhabitants of the French Sudan. The French, then, reproduced and further exacerbated this indigenous hierarchy in their administration of the Saharan regions.

I feel similarly regarding the stark ways in which many have analyzed the “precolonial” vs. the “colonial” periods, as I have tried to demonstrate above.

Aka, French West Africa, a federation of eight French colonial territories including Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan (now Mali), French Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Dahomey (now Benin) and Niger.

For more information on this period, please consider Hall 2011; Lacoq 2010; Mann 2006.

Senghor’s African Socialism was much more moderate that Keita’s Marxist Socialism, and the US-RDA took an active stance against French foreign policy on the Algerian war of liberation, whereas the PDS was more reconciliatory (Lacoq 2010:34).

Indeed, most southern Malian politicians, when referencing the “sacrifice” they made for having served – or, during the colonial era, being forced to serve – “the bush”, they often meant “the North.” They juxtaposed their southern (not to mention urban) life with the remote, “backwater” life of northern groups (Lecocq 2010:40).

Particularly as northern elites attempted to rewrite and “whiten” Saharan history in order to exclude and distance themselves from darker-skinned, southern Malians (Lecocq 2010:50, 54).

Indeed, prior to Mali’s independence, the French attempted to retain the Sahara through the creation of the Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes (OCRS), while the Moroccan Istiqlâl party – citing precolonial historical grounds (see above) – claimed parts of the Sahara including Mauritania and the northern French Sudan up to Timbuktu (Lecocq 2010:48). Many in the north of French Sudan – including Mohamed Mahmoud ould Cheick, known as “the Qadi of Timbuktu” – supported the OCRS, claiming that Saharan inhabitants are full French citizens and feel no affiliation with African political leaders (Lecocq 2010:52-58). The US-RDA leadership counteracted all attempts to actualize the OCRS on Soudanese territory.

This is not the case in and around Kidal, where various Tuareg groups have long asserted a competing, Kel Tamashëq nationalism regionally rooted in “Azawad” (see Lecocq 2010). Very few Timbuktians – including even lighter-skinned Arab and Tuareg individuals – upheld the Azawad nation, however.

Even Adame Ba Konaré, wife to then Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré, upon expounding upon (and even lauding) the centrality of historic Mande heroes in Malian nationalism, warned: “The perpetual agitation the past and its heroes does not permit us to move forward; rather, it leads to the hardening of positions around values that are undoubtedly shared but which belong to another era. Too much remembering can become an obstacle” (Konaré 2000:22).

Of course, despite waging such criticisms, many of my younger Timbuktian male friends reluctantly admitted – while giggling – that this same reputation is one of the main reasons why they are eager to spend any savings on bus fair to Bamako during school breaks.

Significant in this five-year plan is its southern centrism. Besides postal services and the airport, little northern infrastructural development was intended beyond Mopti.

Indeed, when it came to the North, infrastructure was not the Keita regime’s primary concern. Due to political and racial differences, US-RDA leaders did not trust the northern Malian populations. This is especially true for the nomadic groups. For this reason, many administrative posts in the North were not given to northerners,
thereby fueling increased discontent amongst the northern populations (and even further amplifying southern Malian distrust) (Lecoqc 2010:138-9). Articulating a nationalist and ethnocentric viewpoint, Keita saw agriculture and sedentarism as the mechanisms for socially and economically developing northern Mali. To be sure, the political goal was to end nomadism. In order to sedentarize the nomadic populations, as well as bring all northern populations more effectively under Bamako’s yolk, the Keita regime reformed the educational curriculum. It was intended to inculcate students with a “patriotic spirit and a sense of national consciousness.” As such, only the French and Bamanakan languages were allowed. After school, students participated in different sporting and artistic groups, which featured a strong southern Malian repertoire. At the same time, the regime implemented the Service Civique, intended to create new buildings but also install a sense of civic duty and work ethic amongst the population (Lecoqc 2010:157-8).

23 Following the uprisings of the 1990s, rebel leaders and southern Malian politicians negotiated the Colleges Transitoires d’Arrondissements, which – championing the notion of (territorial) unity through decentralized governance – produced the devolution of Bamako’s authority in the North (Rawson 2000:277).

24 That is, increased regional autonomy alongside the providing of former rebels with lucrative jobs in the Malian government and military.

25 This is not to suggest that all Timbuktian families obliged their children to miss school in order to work or undervalue the education of women. Nonetheless, as in other regions throughout Mali and the region, Timbuktu expressed similar (gendered) patterns of school matriculation.

26 The Qur’an is the central religious text of Islam.
CHAPTER 3

Everyday Experiences of Displacement

In French, Mohamed, a Tuareg refugee from Timbuktu tells me: “As-sutur – sutura – it’s like a secret. It’s important. If there’s something between us, it should stay between us and not be told to others. It’s been difficult to preserve sutura during the crisis in the camps. It’s always in the head.” And then, switching into hesitant and heavily accented English, as if to ensure that I understand, he says: “Everything we think, it’s sutura.”

~Fieldnotes, Mentao Refugee Camp, Burkina Faso, mid-April, 2013

The title of this chapter, “Everyday Experiences of Displacement” is an oxymoron, even among my interlocutors who secretly feared that the occupation – and thus, their displacement – would last for years, even among those who had become experts at navigating refugee camps because 2012 marked their second or third time being forced into exile. The title is an oxymoron because, following the many Timbuktian IDPs and refugees with whom I spoke, there was nothing “everyday” about the occupation of northern Mali or their forcible displacement to southern Mali or neighboring countries. Rather, the Malian crisis figured as a major political and social rupture (Gluckman 1965; Turner 1957) that created and exacerbated communal and individual economic, not to mention physical and existential, vulnerabilities. At the same time, though, these vulnerabilities, while certainly exceptional, had to be faced every day. Indeed, day in and day out, despite continued food insufficiency, despite ongoing financial instability, despite constant anxiety over dispersed loved ones, my displaced Timbuktian interlocutors navigated a complex web of hardships.

Many of the strategies that Timbuktian IDPs and refugees practiced in order to minimize the ruptures they experienced, at least on the surface, seemed to me to be responsive to the immediate challenges of displacement. And indeed, in one sense they were. That is, those who
were hungry went in search of work or humanitarian assistance; those who were sick attempted to travel to the nearest clinic. However, “everyday” practices themselves are infused with historically situated, cultural meanings, as are violence and warfare (Nordsrom 1997; Roitman 2013). As such, the everyday experiences, perceptions and practices of displaced Timbuktians should not be overlooked, nor should they be divorced from their pre-crisis contexts. For, in many ways, everyday levels of experience reveal broader, culturally-rooted concerns.

Indeed, it was not long into my fieldwork before I realized that for my displaced Timbuktian interlocutors, the hardships that they encountered were more profound than the common tropes – including material hardship, fear of violence, leaving the security of home, and so on – through which displacement is frequently analyzed (see Holzer 2014; Malkki 1995b). Or, stated more accurately, I realized that even these supposedly common tropes were more complicated than might be first evident. Turning to the Timbuktian context, for example, my interlocutors revealed that sutura, a local social and metaphysical ethic of privacy inherited and popularly expressed, largely framed how they understood and experienced the occupation of northern Mali and their subsequent displacement. As such, I contend that in order to more thoroughly comprehend Timbuktian displacement, we must not only examine the dominant tropes surrounding IDPs and refugees. But, following Malkki (1995), Mead (1999 [1964]) and Nordstrom (1997, 2004), we must also analyze the local conceptual framework through which most Timbuktians organized their experience. I argue that interrogating sutura will help us to better understand crisis – as social and political rupture (see Crapanzano 2011; Gluckman 1965; Jackson 1995; Malkki 1995; Turner 1957) – and reveal how Timbuktians both made sense of and creatively negotiated the Malian crisis.
In this chapter, I address the following questions: What are some of the “everyday” ways in which Timbuktians experienced and negotiated displacement? What are some of the differences between the challenges that IDPs confronted, compared to those that refugees confronted? Furthermore, what is sutura as an ethic of privacy? How have Timbuktians expressed and managed sutura in their everyday lives? And how did sutura frame and influence most Timbuktians’ experience of crisis and displacement? I argue that, as a disposition of Timbuktian habitus (see Bourdieu 1990; Jackson 1983; Mauss 1973), sutura is a multifaceted and capacious notion that manifests in various settings. As an inherited and popular “ethic” (see Gramsci 1971), Timbuktians expressed its cultural and religious value in multiple ways. Firstly, through relations with, among other things, work and the built environment, Timbuktians attempted to preserve individual and familial sutura, thereby retaining social legitimacy (see Bourdieu 1994 [1997]; Lefebvre 2008 [1974]; Limbert 2010). Secondly, as a relation with the divine, Timbuktians guarded sutura as a way of expressing faith in God (see Esposito 2005 [1988]; Hallaq 2010 [2009]; Limbert 2010). Prior to the occupation most Timbuktians largely expressed sutura unconsciously as habits of everyday life. However, following the disruption of displacement, this underlying disposition of habitus began to surface. As such, sutura framed how most Timbuktian families experienced and attempted to manage displacement. Privacy, however, became nearly impossible to maintain following the occupation, as the hardships of displacement increasingly put Timbuktian individuals and families in the public eye. This, by extension, caused increased existential torment as many displaced Timbuktians then felt that they were not being properly pious. The crux of the matter, I maintain, is that, as residents conceptualized Timbuktu as sacred space (see Bataille 1992; Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Lefebvre
2008 [1974]), the hardships of displacement became impossible to alleviate. For, the issue was displacement itself, not its effects.

In what follows, therefore, I briefly examine both shared and disparate experiences of Timbuktian displacement. Then, I discuss how Timbuktians conceptualized *sutura* as an Islamic and cultural idea. Afterward, I examine how *sutura* was practiced in everyday Timbuktian life, followed by an analysis of displacement as a crisis of *sutura*. Indeed, in this final section, I explore how displaced Timbuktians attempted to (at least partially) alleviate “over exposure” through creatively reorienting their relationship to space and the built environment and through engaging local discursive genres – namely joking – to non-publicly express local truths about the crisis. This examination, therefore, addresses broader concerns about crisis and displacement, analytically bridging structural religious and political processes with everyday lived experience. Indeed, as I will show, it is not enough to explore militarization and forced migration through the optic of political economic disruption. Instead, we must also privilege the local frameworks through which communities negotiate hardship and produce practical and deep understandings about war and displacement.

**Displacement**

Many refugees have attempted to manage existential unease through striving towards “normalcy” despite being in such abnormal circumstances. Some – at least those of some financial standing – do so through economic investment in “luxuries and comforts” (Oka 2014). Other communities imbue new places with significance articulated through local knowledge (Crapanzano 2011; Halilovich 2013; Riaño-Alcalá 2002). Displaced Timbuktians attempted to navigate hardships and achieve a sense of normalcy in many ways. However, it became obvious
that not all Timbuktian experiences of displacement were universal, particularly as racialized differences influenced some Timbuktians to become IDPs and others to become refugees. And, while there were many commonalities – particularly surrounding sutura (to be discussed below) – these divergent experiences also produced significant differences.

**Internal Displacement**

Most Timbuktian IDPs were ethnically Songhay and darker skinned. And, lacking direct experience with displacement – that is, unlike their Tuareg counterparts, few Songhay had been displaced during the Rebellions of the 1960s or 1990s, or during the droughts of the 1990s (see Lecocq 2010) – few fled Timbuktu until after the occupation began. Consequently, most of the displaced Songhay Timbuktians with whom I spoke recalled the confusion, fear, acrimony and anger they felt during the first weeks of the takeover of northern Mali. Many explained that even just a day prior to the occupation of Timbuktu, even following the fall of Gao, they believed that Timbuktu would remain free. But then Timbuktu’s Arab militia, which Bamako had charged with protecting the town alongside the Malian army, abandoned their posts with weapons and ammunition in tow (see Koné 2012). Many of my interlocutors suspected that some of the militiamen joined the militants; others assumed that they sold their munitions on their way into exile in Mauritania or Algeria. Immediately following the militia’s exodus, feeling unable to protect the town, most of the soldiers stationed in Timbuktu likewise abandoned their posts. Sometimes blaming the Arab militia and Malian army directly, sometimes blaming Bamako for failing to support them, many Timbuktians bitterly discussed watching what they described as “cowardly” soldiers bury their weapons, uniforms and IDs, changing into civilian clothes just before the MNLA and MUJAO arrived. Nonetheless, many of my interlocutors also described
how those Timbuktians more sympathetic to individual soldiers hid them in their houses and arranged their secret transport to the South.

Meanwhile, in the hours between the abandonment of the militia and army and the entry of the MNLA, many Timbuktians ran to the empty military barracks, desperately searching for supplies. I was surprised when I first heard of this, particularly as it was not until a couple of months into my fieldwork when Cheik, who was typically quite quiet and nervous around me, opened up as I accompanied him to the market one morning in Sevare:

Don’t let anyone fool you. If someone was in Timbuktu during the occupation, they ran and tried to take something from the military camp. People might deny it, but they’re lying. Most people were looking for food—they knew that the MNLA was coming, and they weren’t sure what was going to happen. Once the food ran out, though, people started stealing everything else: chairs, desks, bookshelves, refrigerators, anything that they would be able to sell. People needed money fast. For food. But mainly to escape. So they took things they thought they could sell. There were some people, though, who went looking for weapons and bullets, but I don’t think to join the terrorists. I know of one old man, my neighbor. He found a gun. He took it back to the house and buried it so that the terrorists wouldn’t find it. I heard that once the intervention began, he handed it over to the French.

With whatever funds they had – and from whatever sources – many black and Songhay Timbuktians frantically tried to rent cars or purchase bus tickets in order to leave. However, as many described to me, there were few spaces available, and families often split for at least the first months of the occupation. As many explained, fearing persecution and sexual violence, the first to flee following the occupation were public officials, Christians and young, particularly unwed, women. This meant that many men—often the eldest son of an extended family—stayed behind to look after his own house, not to mention his parents’ and siblings’ houses until the pressures of MUJAO’s forcible recruitment became too dangerous.
Without suggesting that their experiences were all the same, Songhay IDPs primarily settled in either the neighboring towns of Mopti and Sevare (situated just south of the de facto border between southern and northern Mali) or in Bamako, though there were a number of Songhay IDPs in Segou – not to mention a few families in Djenne and in smaller towns and villages throughout the South – as well. The financially very well off rented houses outright. And some of the international branches of the Christian churches to which a few Timbuktians belonged funded a handful of apartments. There was also a camp for northern Malian IDPs established just outside of Sevare. However, most IDPs sought out family, friends and other contacts in the South. Due to space constraints, this sometimes meant that families remained separated, as members dispersed to different urban and town centers. Regardless, quarters were tight. Most of the IDP households that I witnessed sheltered at least two families, the number of residents typically ranging from 15 to 40. Space and privacy were at a minimum, as were finances.

Many IDP households were reliant on limited salaries, those of the few family members who had previously moved to the South and already had a job. Others, however, were not so lucky, and had to scrape by doing odd jobs, draining any savings, and purchasing goods on credit. When someone was able to earn a little something – whether in the form of money or foodstuffs – most often they would add it to a house’s communal pot. Indeed, on different occasions – though, sadly, quite infrequently – some of my interlocutors would take me aside and proudly tell me that they had made the equivalent of a few dollars and had given it to the head of the household. However, when unable to contribute financially, IDPs would help out in other ways. Women would share cooking and cleaning duties. Men, when possible, might fix something in need of repair. My friend, Hamed, had even become the de facto tea brewer. The head of the
A household in Bamako told me one evening, “You know, Hamed doesn’t have any money. So, to make him feel like he’s helping out, that he has a responsibility, I ask him to make tea. Morning. Afternoon. Evening. [pause] Yes, I suppose we all must make sacrifices.” “You mean, you prefer to make the tea yourself?” I asked, presuming that, as the “host,” he felt obligated to make it. “No, no,” he laughed. “But Hamed, he’s really bad at making tea!”

Internal displacement was characterized by extensive movement. People went to the market and to humanitarian assistance distribution centers; people looked for jobs; people visited friends and family who were dispersed elsewhere in a given urban area. Of course, such movement was not always easy. Bamako especially is considerably larger than Timbuktu, and when most IDPs fled, they left their motos\(^1\) behind. Nonetheless, some of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke had means of transportation, and those with even the most modest finances could occasionally afford public bus fare. Young men in particular emphasized the importance of such movement: “I’m young. I’m single. And these houses, there’s no privacy! It’s not good to stay all the time with one’s parents.” Many would meet and sometimes stay a few nights at the apartments of siblings, cousins, friends and acquaintances who attended the university and lived alone (at least, before the occupation). These lodgings provided opportunities to hang out unsupervised, as friends chatted, took tea, smoked cigarettes, watched soccer, drank alcohol and/or played video games; meanwhile unwed couples would take advantage of an empty bedroom and a locking door.

Younger IDPs – male and female alike – would, when possible, also circulate around Bamako, Sevare, etc. in order to take advantage of the added opportunities for amusement and personal advancement that these urban centers have to offer. For instance, compared to Timbuktu, the hubs of internal displacement had many more bars and dance halls. Depending
upon their financial situation, not everyone would necessarily buy a lot (or anything); nonetheless, the change of atmosphere afforded younger Timbuktians what they described as a much-needed change of pace. However, some of my older Timbuktian interlocutors expressed disapproval and even fear regarding these outings, worrying that their children would either become corrupted or decide to stay in the South rather than return to Timbuktu.

Not all movement was in pursuit of entertainment, though. Rather, many IDPs also sought out such language or vocational training opportunities that were limited in Timbuktu. Many of my interlocutors, for instance, upon determining that they would be unable to find a job, decided to enroll in one of various programs, including French literacy, culinary arts and tailoring. Particularly in Bamako, this, too, influenced individuals’ movement: for convenience’s sake, those staying in one neighborhood of the city but attending a weekly course in another would often stay at a friend’s or relative’s place nearby either the night before or after it met. Frequently – again, in lieu of financially contributing to a given household – those IDPs with specialized knowledge would also help these Timbuktian students and trainees with their homework.

Despite such movement, however, the Timbuktian IDPs with whom I spoke generally remained rather insular in southern Mali. For, they experienced considerable discrimination. To be sure, as the South is racialized as black, Songhay Timbuktians could effectively blend in. However, as most could either not speak Bambara, or their Bambara was heavily accented, when they began talking it became clear to most southern Malians that they were from the North. Many of my interlocutors complained of verbal harassment on public busses or in the market. I witnessed this many times myself. Those from Bamako, Segou or Sevare would accost Timbuktian IDPs, saying, “This is Mali. In Mali, we speak Bambara!” Others would accuse
Timbuktians of being complicit in the crisis and of their supposed support of the occupation. Additionally, some IDPs were spat at and physically assaulted. One afternoon, a friend of a friend even recounted when a group of Bamakois pinned him on the ground and forcibly shaved his beard, saying there are no “terrorists” allowed in the South. Such discrimination also exacerbated IDPs’ already precarious financial situation as, according to my interlocutors, prejudiced southerners disproportionately inflated their prices upon encountering a northerner. “When I go to the market,” Fanta explained, “I can’t get a good deal. I know that I don’t know the system here [in Bamako] and that I can’t speak Bambara. But, that’s not the problem. When they find out that I’m from the North, they give me a bad price!” Others expressed that the same had happened when they looked for apartment rentals. Indeed, my friend, Baba, told me that one landlord even went as far as saying, “I don’t rent to ‘refugees.’”

**External Displacement**

While there were many commonalities between Timbuktian IDP and refugee experiences (to be described below), there were some key differences. Most of the refugees were Tuareg and Arab, and the reasons for this are many. Most Tuareg and Arab Timbuktian families had either direct or indirect experience residing in refugee camps previously. Many of my Tuareg interlocutors explained that in 2012 they went to one of the refugee camps – typically either in Burkina Faso or in Mauritania – because that is where either they or their parents went during the Tuareg Rebellions of the 1960s or 1990s. Indeed, expressing obvious exhaustion, Mohamed, an elderly refugee in the camp in Djibo, Burkina Faso, said, “I fled to Burkina in the 1960s. I lost my job, my house, everything. But, afterward, I returned. I started a business, rebuilt my house. In the 1990s I fled to Burkina again. Again I lost everything, and again I started over. So, when
the crisis began this time, I knew where to go. Back to Burkina.” Significantly, many — though certainly not all — Tuareg refugees fled the North prior to the actual occupation of Timbuktu. When I asked why they fled, most of my interlocutors remained quite noncommittal, shrugging and mumbling something vague about “past experience.” Months into my fieldwork, however, some of my Tuareg friends confided that many Tuareg families had fled the MNLA’s forcible recruitment. In Timbuktu, Wararni, who had spent the past year in a refugee camp near Ouagadougou, told me:

Most Tuareg families don’t exactly support the MNLA. They don’t want independence. But, they don’t support Bamako either. So, this makes it difficult to criticize the MNLA. At the same time, though, they don’t want to fight in the MNLA. You know, in 2011, the MNLA was going to Tuareg families, demanding that at least one male from each family join them. Sometimes someone did, especially if the family didn’t think that they could get to a camp or if they thought that they might make some money. But, many fled. Most Tuareg families – even those who the MNLA didn’t contact – knew that this was happening. The families told each other. When they found out, they fled, too. Some wanted to leave before the MNLA could contact them. Others fled because this is what happened before the 1990s Rebellion. They knew that there would be big problems in the North, so they got out early.

Another factor regarding why many Tuareg and Arab families left the country, though, relates to persecution in the South. As most Malians have come to associate these ethnic groups with the MNLA, Ansar Dine and AQMI, even those Tuareg and Arab families not affiliated with these groups (the vast majority) did not feel safe in the South. As described in the introductory chapter, even in the build up to the occupation – that is, when Tuareg nationalists attacked villages near the Algerian border in late-2011 and early 2012 – residents of Bamako began assaulting persons they presumed were Tuareg or Arab; they also targeted Tuareg- and Arab-owned business.2 Further, according to Miryam, who was a student at the university in Bamako but had since fled to Burkina Faso, Bamakois police officers were also monitoring Tuareg and Arab households: “I
overheard a conversation between two policemen. They assumed I couldn’t speak Bambara, so they didn’t know I was listening. They were talking about the surveillance that they were conducting and how they were trying to identify more Tuareg houses. It was then that I really realized that I wasn’t safe, not even in Bamako. So, I called my mother in Timbuktu and told her to pack everything up and go.”

For these refugees, reaching the camps was difficult business. Fleeing to Burkina Faso involved multiple transfers, each of which demanded a considerable exchange of money. Even more precarious, however, were the border crossings. Nearly every refugee with whom I spoke mentioned the fear and the danger they experienced, particularly at the Burkinabe border. Often, they said, border officials—expressing some of the same prejudice described regarding southern Mali—demanded substantial bribes and threatened refugees with arrest, violence or sexual assault. The border between Mali and southeastern Mauritania was more porous – especially when one avoided traveling on the road – but the journey remained unsafe for different reasons. Typically those heading to the Mbera camp in Mauritania were poorer, unable to afford the fares necessary to drive to Burkina Faso. So, many fled the 350km or so by camel or donkey, or by foot. Many became sick along the way, from the heat, hunger, contaminated water and/or exhaustion.

Upon reaching one of the refugee camps, many of their struggles continued. In both Burkina Faso and Mauritania, the camps were located in isolated, resource poor areas, meaning the refugees were almost exclusively reliant upon the camp itself for all of their needs – food, water, shelter, medical care, education. Problematically, many of these resources remained in short supply for months into the occupation, and even when available, refugees were often forced to pay for them. “My family’s tents, the ones right here with the UNHCR logo on it, we had to
pay for them,” Moktar, in Djibo, Burkina Faso, bitterly told me. “We didn’t get here until after
the occupation began. By then, the first wave of refugees had come and taken over management
of the camp. (Now, the Burkinabe officials just stay on the outside, do security. They let us run
things.) Well, the first refugees collected all of the tent supplies. So now, when a new refugee
family comes, these first-wave refugees won’t hand over a tent unless you give them some
money.” Most refugees, my interlocutors explained, also remained reliant upon the camp to
provide food, pots and pans, soap, blankets and mosquito nets. Many complained to me of
irregular delivery dates and inedible ingredients. Indeed, more than one of my interlocutors in
Burkina Faso would point at the dried beans they were recently given: “You see those [beans]?
They’re just for show. You can’t eat them. Even the goats won’t eat them. Goats!” Perhaps the
most common complaint, though – in addition to long waits at the few water pumps – was the
lack of firewood. As Abdrahman said one evening in Djibo:

Let me tell you a joke. The camp gives us this sack of rice. It looks big,
but it’s supposed to feed my family of five for an entire month. So, it’s
actually very little. But, do you think they give us firewood or charcoal
with which to cook the rice? No. And do we have any money? Any jobs
or salaries with which to buy the necessary firewood? Of course not. So,
what do we do? We have to sell at least half of the rice to the local Djibo
residents, and then it’s from them that we buy the firewood. So then,
finally, we have cooking materials, but we have no food left to cook!

Regarding the Timbuktian refugees in the Mauritanian camp, the grievances were similar,
though they also highlighted rampant camp corruption. According to many such
interlocutors, only about half of all food assistance deliveries made it to the refugees free
of charge. In terms of the rest, certain camp officials put it on sale in the market in a
town about an hour away from the camp and pocketed the profits. Those refugees who
complained – if they could even find someone with whom to lodge a complaint – risked
angering these officials and thus losing the little assistance that made it into their possession in the first place.

Widespread joblessness exacerbated the negative effects of the inaccessibility of such humanitarian assistance. At best, some families had a small savings with which to purchase supplementary supplies. But, that was a rarity, not only because few Timbuktians, in my experience, were economically secure enough to have much savings, but many Tuareg and Arab Timbuktians – particularly those living outside of town – have not substantially engaged in the cash economy. Rather, many have invested in livestock, particularly cattle and goats (see Lecocq 2010). Following the occupation, however, the market for livestock crashed as few Timbuktians had the disposable income to purchase any. Further, many herds were either stolen or lost, as families fled, leaving their animals behind with minimal protection.

Similar to the internally displaced Timbuktians in southern Mali, many of the refugees with whom I spoke emphasized the importance of movement. Many walked from tent to tent, though there were some – particularly younger men with some financial means – who would travel the expanse of the camps by moped or dirt bike. Indeed, despite older refugees’ complaints – “One cannot sleep here, not with the sound of the motos blaring into the early hours of the morning!” – these younger refugees emphasized the importance of maintaining at least some distance from one’s parents. Many visited the very few refugees who had either brought with them or purchased upon their arrival televisions, dvd players, video game sets and the necessary solar panel and extra car battery with which to power such electronics. And, as if to ensure that others would
come to visit, most of these refugees would also provided a power strip or two so that many people could recharge their cell phones at a single time.

Not unlike their student counterparts who had apartments in Bamako, these tents served as hubs of sociality. In other words, despite the presence – or presents – of such electronics, Timbuktian refugees used such hubs for more than just movie-watching or game playing. Of course, such entertainment was certainly part of their interactions. Though, in my experience, unless a tent had multiple panels and car batteries, there was rarely enough power to run a DVD player, a television set and charge everybody’s laptops and cell phones simultaneously. Indeed, there was one occasion in Djibo when I spent the day at one such hub. With at least seven other men, Mamayti, the host, attempted to play for us a bootleg copy of *Hurt Locker*.3 (To be honest, the choice of film surprised me, particularly given my Timbuktian interlocutors’ general frustration with both terrorist groups and imperialist foreign intervention.) However, we were not 15 minutes into the movie when the battery ran dry. Unwilling to connect the second battery, which was already working to recharge at least 10 phones, to the console, Mamayti reconnected the battery to the solar panel. Unfortunately—and comically, for everyone involved—Mamayti’s impatience continued to overwhelm him. And rather than wait for the battery to be fully charged, after about 10 minutes, he reconnected the battery to the TV and DVD player. However, there was only enough power to rewatch the opening credits before he had to attach the battery to the solar panel again. This process repeated itself at least five more times, before everyone urged him to give up. Despite the lack of cinematic entertainment, though, most guests stayed for the remainder of the day, chatting, napping, laughing at and with Mamayti. More important than *Hurt
Locker, it seemed, this group valued staying connected to friends and family dispersed throughout the camp.

Interestingly, though, in Camp Sangongo, situated just 10 miles or so from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, such circulation and social hubs became even more complex. Indeed, there was extensive circulation within the camp. However, there was also regular circulation between the camp and Ouagadougou itself, where there was a handful of very wealthy Tuareg refugee families from Timbuktu. Particularly those engaged in international business – in other words, those whose jobs were not entirely interrupted as a result of the occupation – were able to rent houses in the Burkinabe capital. That did not mean, however, that they could afford to put up their entire extended families and friends who had more modest means. Nonetheless, many of the rental houses were large enough that not all spare rooms were filled. Thus, those refugees based in Ouagadougou regularly hosted – sometimes just for a few days, sometimes for a week or two – affines from the camp. This was often the case if someone fell ill and needed both access to better medical care and an improvement from the more difficult living situation in the camp. However, many others would circulate through Ouagadougou as a way of taking a mental – and physical – health break. Particularly those with some finances, though not enough to rent a house month after month, would travel to Ouagadougou for a long weekend to attend a concert, go to a few bars or restaurants, socialize with other friends and family, and so on.

**Commonalities of Displacement**


Despite some of the differences described above, many displaced Timbuktians – both IDPs and refugees – shared numerous experiences. Both groups, for example, described the frustration of initial attempts to find jobs. From packed houses in southern Mali and tents in Burkina Faso (and, to a lesser degree, in Mauritania) displaced Timbuktians reached out to local businesses in search of work. And, younger men who spoke French often attempted to find work translating for the French or West African military forces. Also, particularly if they had familial or professional connections there, it was not uncommon for a family member or two of a displaced family – usually a father and/or an older son – to travel to other West African urban centers (in Niamey, Niger; Dakar, Senegal; Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire; and so on) in search of employment. Often, however, they remained empty-handed – either there was nothing available, or prejudiced employers would not hire northern Malians. Typically, this meant that – aside from happenstance day labor and irregular (and, both from what I was told and from what I could observe, largely unprofitable) vending – most Timbuktian IDPs and refugees became nearly exclusively reliant upon humanitarian assistance, the salaries of those who had left Timbuktu years previously, and any aid that friends and family abroad could provide. This also meant that many displaced Timbuktians sought out visiting journalists, photographers, NGO representatives and, in my case, an anthropologist, eager to provide tours, interviews, labor and/or permission to photograph their dwellings in exchange for a few bills or some tea, sugar, cigarettes or meat. Indeed, I recall various instances when a handful of displaced Timbuktians waited outside my lodgings, ready to “give me their interviews,” once word got out that following a formal discussion I would give my interlocutor a small monetary “gift.”

Material poverty exacerbated other hardships as well. Many of my interlocutors complained to me of insufficient food. Following Bouba, who had travelled to Sevare following
many months in a refugee camp in Burkina Faso, “I’ve seen families, the parents only eat once a day. Most families only prepare two meals now anyway. But even so, parents try to give more food to their children. But it doesn’t matter because the children are still too skinny.” Despite widespread hunger, though, perhaps the most common complaint that I heard related to illness, particularly malaria. “Everyone from the North is sick,” my interlocutors told me in Bamako, in Segou, in Sevare, in Djibo, in Ouagadougou. “We come from the desert. What do we know of malaria?” One Timbuktian teenager in Bamako laughed:

I’m in hell! You know, in Timbuktu there are no mosquitoes. It’s dry and there is lots of space—you can sleep outside in the fresh air. But not here. Ay, the humidity, the mosquitoes! You can’t sleep because you have to cram beneath a single mosquito net. But it doesn’t matter. Because you get bit anyway. Every month someone from my family is sick. Me, I’ve already gotten malaria twice, and we’ve only been here for eight months. And how are we supposed to pay for this? [“You have to pay for the malaria medicine?” I asked.] No, but my family doesn’t live near a clinic. So, it still costs money to get there and back. Imagine doing that twice for everyone in my family. That’s 12 people!

Such complaints should not imply that malaria is non-existent in Timbuktu. Though, many of my interlocutors insisted that the illness struck more frequently in southern Mali and in Burkina Faso. Furthermore, in Timbuktu, most emphasized, one could walk to the clinic, which meant that transport remained free. Such was rarely the case in Bamako and large towns in the South. Furthermore, for many, the mosquito nets that the UN and other agencies distributed to Timbuktian IDPs and refugees remained unused or insufficient. Many of my interlocutors, used to sleeping in the open air, disliked how stifling the nets felt, particularly in the exceedingly humid air further south in the Sahel. Nonetheless, many families utilized the nets until forced to use them for something else. To be sure, perhaps one of the most tragic scenes that I witnessed followed a thunderous storm in the refugee camp in Djibo. Washing away tents, buckets, food, clothing and other items, many families had to re-erect tents without the original materials. One
family, with whom I had been spending considerable time, only had enough credit to purchase the necessary wooden supports (stripped branches from nearby trees), meaning they would have to scavenge materials to use as ties and coverings from their own belongings: the only means of attaching the supports was with strips shorn from their sole mosquito net.

Despite such financial preoccupations, though, not all hardships were material. Indeed, most were emotional. As described above, whether due to fleeing the occupation over a span of many days, weeks or months, too little space in a given house, or attempts to search for employment elsewhere in the region, families and friends were frequently divided. This, compounded with the relatively high costs of telephone communication, meant that at best my interlocutors usually had infrequent updates on dispersed family members. Intense feelings of worry and loneliness were obvious as the Timbuktians with whom I spoke lamented that they had not spoken with their parents, siblings and/or children in months. Some – especially for those whose family had become refugees not in camps but in other urban centers – did not even know exactly where their relatives had settled. Given such limited communication, not to mention – at least in the midst of the occupation – the seeming lack of any political or military resolution, many of my interlocutors expressed anxiety, anger, confusion and impotence. “What [can] we do?” so many asked? “Nobody care[s],” said Fatoumata, in Bamako, not trying to hide her frustration. “The terrorists come, the army runs away and the government talks. They talk and talk and talk; all they do is talk. Meanwhile, we’re left here, abandoned, starving!”

As I have described, though, many attempted to manage the hardships of displacement. Many tried to find employment, and while the vast majority eventually gave up, there were some who almost daily went to the town centers in search of work. And in those rare occasions when someone found a day’s manual labor or was able to sell a piece of jewelry or a pot full of fritters,
they often split the earnings among a residency’s occupants. As such, everyone was able to eat a little more; everyone was able to make a couple of phone calls to family remaining in Timbuktu or spread across West Africa. Many also avidly listened to the news on the radio or, when possible, watched it on TV, typically listening for updates on the war and happenings in Timbuktu. At the same time, most navigated displacement by attempting some of the same activities that they practiced in Timbuktu. Some – mainly younger women – would cook or clean, all while chatting among each other and the older women who supervised. Others – mainly younger men – would often play soccer or, if possible, tend to a small garden. Children would either study (when schooling was available) or play with each other. Meanwhile, most would also gather to drink tea and talk, often about the crisis.

One of the most common practices that I noticed, however, was joking. Both Timbuktian refugees and IDPs frequently joked with one another, thereby easing tensions among the group and, in many cases, strengthening familial and friendship ties with one another (Hernann 2016). Of course, as with cooking, gardening, playing soccer, drinking tea, and so on—indeed, as with most of the activities that my Timbuktian interlocutors practiced in order to navigate the hardships of the occupation—joking was not unique to the crisis itself. As I often observed during my fieldwork in 2010, joking and joking relationships have occurred in Timbuktu and throughout West Africa outside situations of crisis. Joking facilitates conflict resolution, lessens stress and helps to make light of otherwise oppressive situations (Davidheiser 2005; Wilson-Fall 2000; Ziv 2010). Consequently, both in formal, ritual and in informal settings, joking can strengthen relationships and effectively “knit” groups together, particularly when (a sense of) community might not otherwise exist (see Griaule 1948; Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Turner 2012; Whitehouse 2012). I frequently witnessed that when displaced individuals began to quarrel—at
least when the fight was not too extreme—instead of physically intervening, the audience often began joking and laughing. Or, they would start joking immediately following a fight—often teasing about the fight itself—in order to move on quickly.

In one instance, for example, my friend Maryam—whose fiery temper is as short as her stature—started arguing with Fatoumata, another friend. A group of us had been socializing in the house’s courtyard in Sevare when Fatoumata accidentally spilled some tea on Maryam’s dress as she passed it. Maryam jumped up and began yelling at Fatoumata, calling her a klutz, an imbecile and so on.

“Who are you calling an imbecile?” Fatoumata responded angrily.

The two exchanged more insults as they got closer to each other, waving their hands in the other’s faces as they screamed. Before the argument could further escalate, though, a third friend, Amina, intervened. With a cracked smile, she signaled that everyone else should watch. Amina got on her knees and mimicked Maryam’s emotional and physical shortness. Facing Fatoumata, Amina echoed Maryam’s insults in a warped, high-pitched voice—“You klutz! You imbecile!”—all while waving her arms erratically. The audience began roaring with laughter. Fatoumata bent over in stitches, and even Maryam, when she recovered from the shock of seeing Amina’s imitation, giggled, put her palm in the air and conceded with an “Alright, alright.” Everyone congratulated Amina for the successful joke, and Maryam and Fatoumata for their quick reconciliation, as we all returned to our seats. And every now and then throughout the rest of the evening, someone would good-naturedly tease Maryam with another squeaky, “You imbecile!”

In another instance, rather than preventing conflict from boiling over, a group of displaced Timbuktians teasingly made light of the occupation, thereby bringing together—at
At least temporarily – a relatively disparate assemblage of IDPs: A number of recent Timbuktian friends and acquaintances – mostly Songhay, but some Bellah and Tuareg, too – were chatting in a semicircle around a small TV, waiting for a soccer match to begin. Most were men between the ages of 16 and 45, though both children and older individuals would stop and join the conversation for a moment or two before moving on. Just adjacent to the semicircle were a few women. Braiding each other’s hair, they were able to maintain their own separate space though still participate in the general chatter. As the sun set, most began to perform their ablutions and pray. Eventually, Mahmane began his *raka’at*. When he concluded, another friend – who had signaled for me to pay attention – asked Mahmane to recite the *Fatiha*, typically the first prayer a Muslim learns as a child. Mahmane waved him off, but the friend persisted, and the rest of the group watched with half-repressed smiles.

> “Mahmane, how does the *Fatiha* go? Recite the *Fatiha*. Mahmane, the *Fatiha*. Mahmane!”

Eventually, and reluctantly, Mahmane started to quietly mumble something unintelligible, not unlike someone attempting to sing along without actually knowing the lyrics. Everyone bust out laughing, and the children began to run around, all while chanting the *Fatiha*. The friend turned to me, saying, “André, you know, when the terrorists came, they said they were bringing shari’a, and anyone who didn’t obey would be punished. Mahmane got so scared, he started pretending to pray! He doesn’t know we’re in Bamako. He thinks the terrorists are coming!” Everyone laughed harder. Some mimed Mahmane’s faux prayer, while others patted Mahmane on the back and the jokester on the shoulder.

Clearly, joking – in addition to searching for jobs and humanitarian assistance, not to mention negotiating illness and feelings of loneliness, frustration and vulnerability –
characterized many Timbuktian IDPs and refugees’ everyday experiences of displacement. However, there was an additional overarching commonality that connected my interlocutors’ experience of the occupation: most displaced Timbuktians framed displacement—and its corresponding hardships—as an absence of sutura. As I describe below, sutura was the cultural mechanism through which most displaced Timbuktians experienced displacement and made sense of the occupation, particularly as they attempted to make meaningful the varied material, social, emotional and existential challenges they encountered, including poverty, vulnerability, loneliness, as well as disrupted relationships to space and home. Sutura was also the mechanism through which they attempted to navigate social rupture and maintain even a small sense of connection with their pre-crisis existence. In other words, sutura was often a guiding framework with which displaced Timbuktians creatively managed displacement. Nonetheless, as an ethic of privacy, conceptualizations of sutura also augmented the hardships of displacement. For, displacement necessarily put individuals on display, and as long as Timbuktians remained displaced, such publicity caused substantial existential difficulties.

Why “Sutura”?

One sweltering afternoon in Timbuktu I sat down with Mamadou, a neighborhood Qur’anic schoolteacher. Above the chorus of his students’ recitations, he told me:

The importance of sutura has become cultural. Most people don’t know the origins. They don’t know its religious origins – only the savants do. It’s become cultural. Parents tell their children not to gossip or to tell the news of the family. It comes from the Ahadith,6 but that’s not how it’s conveyed to the new generations. The notion of sutura is stronger here than in other places because of education. Timbuktu is a center of education in a way that other places aren’t. The old scholars knew the importance of sutura and taught it to their students. Even the people who didn’t attend school, they saw that the intellectuals were practicing sutura, so they did too.
As I described in the previous chapters, Timbuktu, a town dating back to at least 1000 CE, is the (symbolic) cultural and religious capital of the North (Saad 2010 [1983]). A hub of northern African, Saharan and sub-Saharan exchange, the trade of goods and people eventually paved the way for the exchange of ideas (Lydon 2009). By the 16th century – Timbuktu’s Golden Age – religious scholars and pilgrims travelled from the far reaches of the Muslim world to attend one of the town’s major universities and worship in its famous mosques (Hunwick 2003; Hopkins & Leviathan 2000). Diverse demographics facilitated the exchange of various ideas, versions of which, through the work of the celebrated scholars of the past half-millennium, survived multiple bouts of occupation and regional instability (Saad 2012 [1983]). Most of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke held the past scholars and their teachings in high regard and openly prioritized education.

“Sutura” is a Songhay term that most likely derives from the Arabic “satara”. Indeed, various Timbuktian Islamic scholars—citing both morphological and definitional similarities—affirmed its Arabic origins. Like the Arabic “satara” (see Cowan 1980), sutura simultaneously references both a social and a metaphysical index. On the one hand, as these scholars emphasized to me, it references familial and individual covering, screening and veiling; collective and individual privacy. On the other hand, it also evokes divine assistance and protection. As I will discuss, however, the two indexes are processually linked: Because God desires people to preserve privacy, those who attempt to do so receive God’s protection, which in turn further enhances their ability to maintain privacy. Asserting that sutura is rooted in both the Qur’an and various Ahadith, most Timbuktian religious intellectuals argued that the concept is universal throughout the Muslim world. Nevertheless, as Mamadou suggested above, many Timbuktians – savants and laypersons alike – felt that they are some of the only Muslims in the
world who adequately prioritize it. Indeed, many of my Timbuktian interlocutors affirmed that “sutura is more important than anything else,” but others “don’t know it like we do.”

Significantly, despite ethnic differences and some renewed inter-ethnic conflict resulting from the occupation, most of my interlocutors privileged Timbuktian understandings of sutura. Such exceptionalism is unsurprising given both how central a role sutura played in everyday Timbuktian life and how (as I explain below) Timbuktians integrated local history into their understanding of the concept. Nonetheless, sutura has many local iterations throughout the western Sahel and has become part of numerous languages spoken in the region. “Sutura” exists in both Bambara and Fulfulde, for example, and loosely translates as something hidden, modesty, protection or one who raises another out of a difficult situation (Bailleul 2000; Osborn et al. 1993). Furthermore, sutura reflects broader cultural and religious approaches to secrecy and privacy in the region. In West Africa, as well as the wider Muslim world, the possession of secrets is among the more important bases of authority, as is the ability to maintain privacy and discretion. Anthropological literature on secrecy in West Africa has tended to focus upon its role in ritual and the transference of esoteric knowledge to select individuals (McNaughton 1993:133; Mommersteeg 2012 [1998]:111). However, we can also analyze secrecy in everyday life. Throughout the region, even non-esoteric knowledge is not universally presumed to be safe, nor do all communities maintain that information should be democratically accessible (Bledsoe & Robey 1986). Private knowledge, thus, highlights exclusionary social hierarchies: secrets are intended to become known, but only certain members of a given community are permitted to reveal them (Bellman 1984). At the same time, however, secrets – at least until they are officially disclosed – can also maintain a sense of egalitarianism because facts remain ambiguous. Possessing and revealing secrets, therefore, is a “constantly moving process” (Piot 1993:362).
On the one hand, the revealing of secrets (Soares 2005:34-36) or the failure to protect one’s privacy (Mommersteeg 2012 [1998]:67; Reisman 1998 [1974]:264) can lead to a loss of power. On the other hand, strategically revealing secrets or private information can, in certain circumstances, increase one’s social status (Zeitlyn 2003). As an ethic of privacy that rewards discrete individuals and families with social capital, we must contextualize sutura among Timbuktians within such regional orientations of secrecy, knowledge and influence. What differentiates sutura, however, is that it relates less to authority per se. Instead, at least as my interlocutors described, it is an ethic primarily directed at the self: adequately guarding one’s sutura might bring one financial success or social influence, while failing to guard one’s sutura might yield economic or political downfall. Nonetheless, those effects are secondary to more immediate existential concerns.

Most of my Timbuktian interlocutors asserted that sutura comes from holy Islamic texts, thereby making the concept preeminent. And while most laypersons could not go into further detail, many religious scholars suggested to me that the concept broadly relates to certain components of Islamic doctrine. First, they emphasized a prohibition against excess, stating that the Qur’an – and thus, God – condemns gluttony, aggressiveness, financial excess, and so on (see Izutsu 2010:168-174; Hallaq 2009:231). These same scholars emphasized that the holy texts also highlight the importance of modesty (see Esposito 2005; Göle 1996; Wadud 1999). Most significantly for these scholars, though, is the Islamic faith-practice duality whereby individual agency is influenced by the divine. They explained that while the Qur’an provides guidelines for “horizontal” relations between human beings, the text’s ethico-religious concepts concern “vertical” relations between human beings and God (see Izutsu 2010). In this sense, a believer engages in specific practices not only to enhance interpersonal relationships in society,
but also the supernatural relationship between the individual and the divine. Therefore, despite one’s intentions or actions, it is only by divine generosity that humans accomplish anything. A dialectical relationship, God favors those who engage in proper practices and behaviors following His divine commands.

However, despite these scholars’ insistence on sutura’s conceptual connection to certain Islamic principles, the reason why Timbuktians historically “got it right,” most of my interlocutors claimed, is because sutura was preached and interpreted by the ancient scholars who founded the first mosques and universities in Timbuktu. Again, laypersons could rarely provide additional detail. However, many local intellectuals would cite some of the more well-known scholars in Timbuktu’s past. These often included Sidi Yahia, Ahmad Baba and Ahmed Bul’araf, scholars who emphasized the importance of humility and patience, as well as the importance of history and education (Elhadje 2013; Jeppie 2011). Instead of providing further detail, though, most contemporary intellectuals justified sutura as a concept by expounding upon the ancient scholars’ supernatural qualities. Reputed for their incontestable piety and religious learning, and their connection to the divine, most of these scholars have become known as some of the 333 saints for which Timbuktu town is famous (see Babou 2007; Crapanzano 1973; Soares 2005). Therefore, what seemed even more legitimate than the actual content of these scholars’ teachings was that it came from the saints. That made sutura, for example, a concept beyond reproach.

Reflecting upon the conversations I had with friends and religious experts, I am not convinced that sutura’s formal roots are its most noteworthy component. Religious expression should not only be interpreted against the universal backdrop of doctrine, texts, and so on (see Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Geertz 1971 [1968]). Like other mythical-historical concepts and events,
much of *sutura*’s significance would be missed if we were simply seeking an “objective” evaluation of its origins (see Comaroff 1985; Mommersteeg 2012 [1998]:24-5; White 2000). As such, we should also examine the particular frames through which the community inherits and enacts religious ideas, values and expressions. Highlighting *sutura*’s roots in Islam, its interpretations by the past scholars and how such interpretations link to a Timbuktian present and future is enough to highlight its worth and promote it as an important local concept (see Asad 2009 [1986]:20). A form of “necessary knowledge” (Messick 1996:157-159; see Gramsci 1971), *sutura* is therefore a collective notion with both formal and specialized elements on the one hand, and informal and popular elements on the other. Thus, when I write “*sutura,*” I attempt to evoke the historically and culturally layered ways in which most Timbuktians have come to value and understand it. “*Sutura*” becomes a way to articulate a vernacular Islam without theoretically removing Timbuktu from the broader West African, Saharan or Muslim world. Consequently, *sutura* is a useful entry for exploring and culturally grounding some of the everyday practices that Timbuktians engaged following their displacement.

**An Everyday Social Cover**

I started to understand the significance of *sutura* among Timbuktians one afternoon as I was hanging out with my good friend, Karim, who was displaced in Bamako. We had nothing scheduled—we were just relaxing in the courtyard shade after celebrating his uncle’s wedding the previous day. Eventually, Karim’s mother returned, having left early that morning. After removing the head covering and earrings that she wore for special occasions, she called her younger, unwed daughter to sit beside her. Glancing over at her youngest son to ensure that he was also paying attention, she looked at her daughter and began, “I was just counseling your
uncle and his new wife. The family chose me to give advice to the newlyweds, and I want to give you the same advice that I gave them.” She discussed topics that one might expect: mutual respect, the importance of family and children, maintaining a well-kept home, and so on. But, the primary theme was *sutura*. “Marriage is *sutura*,” she said. “When you’re married, people won’t think ill of you. But, with marriage comes responsibilities. It is your responsibility to keep the business of the family within the family. You shouldn’t go out telling others what should stay within the house’s walls. That is *sutura*. That makes for a good marriage.” All of her children, including Karim, shook their heads in agreement.

Following this and other cases of “*sutura*” being seamlessly inserted into conversation, I began to ask about it. During this inquiry, I noticed that few people could provide more than a generalized definition of the concept – nearly everyone explained *sutura* by way of examples. The reason, it seems, is not only because, as a metaphysical ideal that translates into a multidimensional ethic of privacy, *sutura* is a complicated idea. But, also because *sutura* is, I argue, a component of Timbuktian habitus. Habitus is described as a set of dispositions that incline individuals to act and react in certain ways. These dispositions reproduce practices, perceptions and attitudes deemed “regular” in a given social context without them being consciously coordinated by any rule or law (Bourdieu 1994 [1982]; Mauss 1934). Indeed, because habitus is rooted in the everyday, most individuals of a given society, while privileging the attitudes and expressions that it generates, are unable to sufficiently explain or justify them. Habitus becomes the essential. Thus, “because the subjective necessity and self-evidence of the commonsense world are validated by the objective consensus on the sense of the world, what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition” (Bourdieu 1994:163, italics in the original). That habitus largely
remains unconscious does not mean, however, that individuals cannot discuss commonsensical notions. Indeed, particularly when someone transgressed the everyday expectations embedded in sutura, my Timbuktian interlocutors certainly commented on it. It is worth mentioning, however, that I did not regularly notice these discussions of the everyday practice of sutura until after the occupation. Sutura, as a framework for understanding the self, became more overtly mobilized after Timbuktian society experienced major rupture and individuals actively felt their increased ethical vulnerability.

As most of my Timbuktian friends articulated, one of the most important expressions of sutura is financial. This is unsurprising, as theorists have long analyzed the intersections of economics and Islam. To be sure, throughout Timbuktu and other Muslim-majority areas of West Africa, merchants and businesspersons have creatively operationalized Islam as the moral framework for commerce (see Levtzion 1986; Lydon 2009; Soares 2005; Stoller 2002). Furthermore, in Timbuktu having work is expected—at least for males—because it keeps one out of the public eye. Work is a “cover,” for it facilitates discretion and convinces others that one’s family both lives well and lives honestly. As one of my Songhay interlocutors described:

Work is important. Not having work, that’s what’s bad…. Work is good for respect—without work, you don’t have respect…. Work helps to protect sutura—that is important. Sutura is important, good. Sutura is the most important—if you have sutura, no one can know your position, what you have or don’t have. It’s the most important thing in the world. Because if you have sutura, the world doesn’t know who you are, what you earn. They assume you have a full stomach, and then they respect you. Sutura protects what you have – if you have gold and people know, you don’t have sutura. It’s in the Qur’an – God likes discretion. If people don’t know how you get money, you have sutura. If you have sutura, people will think you’re higher than you are.

Work operates as a metaphorical covering, for it demonstrates to the public that one earns his income without stealing or otherwise engaging in underhanded activities. Further, work
means that a man can support his family without putting himself, or his family, on display through asking others for financial support. Many explained, though, that having a job in and of itself does not necessarily provide an individual and his family with sutura. For, an extension of this ethic of privacy includes a strong social prohibition against flaunting wealth. If, for instance, a worker is seen being paid, or if either he or his wife purchase lavish or excessive goods, their individual and familial sutura would diminish, particularly because neighbors might presume that they are spending too much money on themselves rather than providing familial support. Indeed, when I walked around Timbuktu with friends, they often shook their heads in distain when passing the houses of wealthy men with extravagant lifestyles. Usually, one said something like, “André, I could never have a car like that....” Or, “I could never have a house like that…because everyone would assume that I’m not taking care of my mother.”

Beyond the financial realm, however, another dimension of sutura is the built environment and the people’s relationship to it. Like some other towns in the Muslim world, the built environment has a great influence on individual and social expressions of piety and order, and vice versa (see Fernandez 2003; Limbert 2010). Space is (re)produced, as are the ethical attitudes and activities in relationship to it (Pellow 2003). Thus, habitus – or, the dispositions of habitus – develop in relation to the objective conditions they encounter (Bourdieu 1994 [1977]; Jackson 1983). Infrastructure and architecture influence how its inhabitants physically and conceptually interact with the built environment and with each other (vis-à-vis the built environment) (Bourdieu 1994; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003).

In this vein, Bourdieu (1979) argues that the house expresses and maintains the ideology of prevailing social orders. Regarding Timbuktian houses, therefore, in addition to protecting privacy, my interlocutors also situated them as central for socializing with friends and family.
How, then, to balance these two expressions in the same place? The “traditional” Timbuktian design, Elhadje (2011) explains, accomplishes this with the simple addition of a front vestibule. The layout of the vestibule, with a large pillar constructed between the door to the outside and the door to the rest of the house, obstructs one’s line of sight. So, Timbuktian families can remain social—that is, keep their front doors open at all times—without the risk of passersby really seeing inside the house. As most socialization occurs mainly in the vestibule, even visitors rarely witness significant family business. Demonstrating the relationship between sutura and one’s house, a Qur’anic schoolteacher told me a story:

A house is sutura. There was this man—he lived near the big market—and he was going to sell his house. When the potential buyers came, this is how he went about convincing them that it was a good house: He told them to wait in the vestibule. Then, he went into the house, took off his boubou and danced around naked! After, he put his boubou back on, went back into the vestibule and asked the buyers, “What was I doing inside the house?” They said, “I don’t know, you were in there alone.” After that, he actually decided not to sell because the house had sutura. He was protected. Whatever protects you from problems, or humiliation, we call it ‘sutra.’

Not all Timbuktian homeowners, however, reproduced the traditional design. This is not to suggest, though, that the importance of sutura has diminished. Instead, new practices vis-à-vis one’s house have developed in order to maintain individual and familial privacy within an architecturally different context (see Pellow 2003). As many of my Timbuktian interlocutors described, some among the younger generation have started to develop a preference for open-air courtyards enclosed by tall walls and accessed by a large door. Such a design eliminates the traditional vestibule. Nevertheless, families expressed their desire to preserve a similar degree of privacy that they would otherwise have in a more traditional home. Many slightly propped open the front doors with a rock, for instance. Thus, they retained a welcoming sociality without overly revealing the house’s interior. When socializing, extended family members and close
friends often sat on mats in the sand within the courtyard. In cases of lesser intimates, the host regularly placed a mat or chairs outside the courtyard walls alongside the road, thereby encouraging sociality without “breaking cover.”

We must also consider how Timbuktians’ applied the logic of *sutura* outside of the town center. Nomadic Timbuktians, for instance, maintained notions and practices of *sutura* vis-à-vis their lack of a significant built environment. Instead, they emphasized their relationship to open space. They often stayed in tents in the countryside adjacent to town, constructing temporary encampments where they remained for a couple of weeks to a couple of months at a time, depending upon the season. During one conversation, a friend recited the same Tuareg proverb that almost all of my more nomadic interlocutors shared with me: “One should place the tents at a distance, but the hearts close by.” He continued: “When the tents are too close, there are problems between the women, the children, the animals. That is why most nomadic Tuareg encampments are so spread out, with each family’s tents situated about one kilometer from another’s. They are close enough so that friends and family can socialize between meals, but far enough away that no one can really see or overhear anyone.” Then, with a smile, he tapped the side of his nose with his index finger, saying, “*Sutura. Sutura.*”

Aside from work and the Timbuktian house, most Timbuktians also practiced *sutura* through clothing choice. As one Islamic scholar in Timbuktu stressed to me, “*sutura*” literally evokes covering and veiling. He said: “[God] gave you a boubou to cover your body. That’s *sutura.*” Then he highlighted his perception of stylistic differences in Timbuktian clothing versus southern Malian clothing, emphasizing that Timbuktian men tend to favor a robe to more “flashy” and “western” clothing, while Timbuktian women almost exclusively wear dress-like wraps, often with a loose headscarf. Further, he continued, Timbuktian Tuareg men have long preferred
to veil all but their eyes in an attempt to preserve privacy and honor (see Murphy 1964). In addition to effectively covering the body, some of my interlocutors explained, such clothing also better serves to conceal one’s finances – literally one’s wallet – and amulets. In fact, I recall one instance when my Timbuktian friend, Ahmed, chuckled at some passersby as we chatted along a busy street in Bamako. When I asked what was so funny, he had me look at everyone’s hands. I noted that most individuals wore gri gri, the local term for items of religious protection, usually rings, bracelets or pouches worn somewhere on the body (see Mommersteeg 2012 [1998]:85-116; Soares 2005). He smiled and shook his head knowingly. Then he pulled back his robe’s sleeve, revealing a long string of leather amulets. “Why does one wear the robe?” he asked, not expecting me to answer. “So that nobody knows how one’s protecting oneself. One’s covered.”

However, I emphasize that most of my Timbuktian interlocutors attempted to preserve and maintain cover in copious, commonplace ways. Consider, for instance, a conversation I had with Salif, a well-educated calligrapher and manuscript copyist, whose studio I regularly visited. Salif taught me calligraphy, and as I practiced we chatted about the occupation, life in Timbuktu before and after the intervention, our families, and so on. I had asked him many times about sutura, but despite his attempts, I still did not quite understand the concept. Then, one day, he tried another approach, saying, “You, André, have sutura.”

“I do?” I said, surprised that the only non-soldier/non-UN white foreigner in Timbuktu could be considered discrete.

“Yes. You come to my studio, but you wear simple clothes. You don’t wear expensive shoes or shirts. You don’t have a big, expensive watch, a flashy phone or a large camera. You don’t bring your backpack with you everywhere you go. And when you leave, you don’t bring any papers with you. Nor do you tell people why you come here. So, people don’t know who
you are, what we do, what our arrangement is, or anything else. You’re protecting your *sutura.*”

Of course, for a number of reasons, I was purposefully attempting circumspection. Nonetheless, I understood what Salif was trying to convey: individuals mainly attempt to preserve *sutura* through everyday practices.

**The Cover of God**

We must not only focus upon *sutura*’s social index. As mentioned above, *sutura* also evokes a metaphysical index, God’s protection. As various imams told me, “Timbuktu is *sutura.*” Seven holy men originally were the ones to bless the different parts of Timbuktu. They prayed in the five directions, to the sky and to the earth – one each. This blessed the sphere of Timbuktu so that all of Timbuktu would be protected. This was a long time ago. They were the first seven holy men in Timbuktu.” Starting in the 15th century, the scholars who established the famous mosques and universities further blessed the town. Many Timbuktians asserted that over the years, these scholars have continued to bless the town, as they have become some of Timbuktu’s 333 saints. Further, while providing their own blessings, the scholar-saints also served as divine intermediaries. “The saints have God’s ear,” some said. Thus, some Timbuktians expressed that they demonstrated their faith through caring for the mausoleums constructed in the saints’ honor, offering blessings and making sacrifices in their names. As the saints are divine themselves, honoring the saints is a way to honor God and receive His blessings in return.

Nonetheless, Timbuktu’s sacredness is enhanced through more than the saints themselves. Many of my interlocutors also maintained that as generations upon generations of Timbuktian residents (popularly) preserved the scholars’ early teachings, God continued to bless Timbuktu. These blessings manifested as divine protection. Despite the entry of violent militants, most
Timbuktians continued to insist that the town remains “covered” by God. They explained that even though the MNLA, Ansar Dine and MUJAO all rushed into Timbuktu, spraying bullets into the air and harassing the population, only one person died. Grenades were thrown at groups of children, but they failed to explode. Most insisted that only those explosives that landed on the open ground, far from bystanders, detonated. Others recounted instances of rockets dramatically changing course at the last instant in order to avoid hitting a house, school or mosque. Far from “miraculous” – which is to say, exceptional – most Timbuktians perceived such events as expected of a blessed town. In this sense, therefore, most residents conceptualized Timbuktu as sacred space.

Of course, no space is inherently sacred. Instead, as a set of relations – both interpersonal and metaphysical – a given space can become distinct in a variety of ways (see Durkheim 1995 [1912]:11; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Most residents interpreted Timbuktu – as a relativized and historical space (see Lefebvre 2008) – as a particular form of “sacred” predicated upon centuries of Timbuktian expressions of Islamic piety. Timbuktu protects its residents from harm, most explained. However, “harm” is interpreted as more than just physical. Given the high priority most Timbuktians give to privacy, one of the most significant harms one could suffer was over-publicity. More than one of my Timbuktian interlocutors justified their claim that Timbuktu is blessed by arguing that sutura is easy to maintain there. In other words, because Timbuktu is sutura (in a supernatural sense), sutura (in an individual and familial sense) becomes easier to preserve. Many said that one encounters little public begging; the population—even during times of privation—eats well, and difficulties are quickly and easily resolved. As a Qur’anic school teacher told me, “The town is mysterious. Sutura is also mysterious. It’s part of the mystery of Timbuktu….”
most incredible things about Timbuktu is that a problem never lasts longer than three days here. That’s sutura.”

*Sutura*, therefore, is a relationship. Both the social and metaphysical dimensions feed back to the other. This becomes especially apparent when we consider that, as Timbuktian Muslims understand it, God ultimately bestows agency. Or, as in this case, God ultimately bestows *sutura* to both a place and an individual. As another interlocutor said, “*Sutura* is protection, something that God does for you. This is Timbuktu: every morning you wake up; every afternoon you wake up; and you eat your daily need. You eat without others knowing how. This is *sutura*. The blessings of God are *sutura*. You need God’s blessings to have *sutura*. There are some who, despite their efforts, are discovered.” The overarching Timbuktian logic suggests that as Timbuktians love God, God loves them back. As God loves *sutura*, Timbuktians express their faith through privileging it. In other words, God rewards the faithful with the *sutura* for which they strive.

**Crisis and Sutura**

One morning in the Mentao Refugee Camp in Djibo, Burkina Faso, I chatted with, Djibril, as his young daughters played with the children in the adjacent tent. Djibril was a computer engineer in Timbuktu before the occupation and made a comfortable living. Like so many other Tuareg men, though, he had to flee with his family in order to avoid forcible recruitment into the MNLA or Ansar Dine. And, like so many Tuareg refugees, he also had to struggle to get by on humanitarian relief and the random odd job in town. He owned little that was not a product of outside aid. Indeed, almost everything—from buckets, to sacks of food, to the tents and latrines—bore the brand of one agency or another. At one point during our conversation, as he
was describing the shame of waiting in line for food rations, his youngest daughter began shrieking, and multiple neighbors looked our way. But, Djibril remained in his seat, seemingly too exhausted to break up the children’s little brawl. Instead, this normally stoic father could only look at me and cry, “You see? We’re on display for everyone to see!”

Most individuals, when leaving Timbuktu either to become internally or externally displaced, were already living on savings (if they had any) and/or remittances sent from outside the region. As my interlocutors explained, many jobs disappeared in the months of unrest leading up to the actual occupation of northern Mali, and the remaining jobs also disappeared when the militants arrived. Indeed, essentially the only jobs available following the occupation involved working for the MNLA, Ansar Dine or MUJAO. Such a prospect, however, sent the majority of Timbuktiens away, as most wanted nothing to do with the occupiers. As described above, though, displacement is expensive, particularly when few displaced Timbuktiens were able to find any kind of work. Therefore, after settling in at a new location, a displaced family typically registered with the multitude of agencies that provided food, cooking supplies and health and education services. Food distributions and other humanitarian assistance, though, were public activities. Often a family member would have to wait in a line for hours for their allocation of rice, cooking oil and salt. Under such circumstances, many said, it became impossible to preserve their sutura. More than one head of a family described to me how painful this was: “Now everyone knows that I need help,” said Abdrahman dejectedly as he carted a large sack of rice back to a full house one afternoon in Sevare.

More personally, however, I contributed to and experienced—in my own way—how financial concerns painfully overrode the desire to guard sutura. I remember conducting interviews in Timbuktu in 2010, when more individuals had steadier employment. Following an
interview, out of politeness I would offer my interlocutor a small sum of money. This sum, however, was almost always rejected. My Timbuktian friends explained that it was a point of honor and respect to speak with me, a scholar, without accepting compensation, especially because it demonstrated one’s financial independence. In 2013, though, the reaction was different. After an interview, I would offer the sum. It was clear that my interviewee wanted to accept but could not do so without exposing their financial need. Often they would refuse the offer two or three times before finally acquiescing. Eventually realizing the emotional hurt that I was inadvertently causing, I began concluding my interviews with, “Thank you for speaking with me. This small sum is for your mother.” Such an offer alleviated some stress through allowing an interviewee to (at least partially) guard their financial circumstances. For, I did not formally compensate them; instead, I respectfully contributed to an older generation.

Many of my displaced Timbuktian interlocutors also creatively maneuvered this landscape of financial and alimentary deprivation in an attempt to better preserve sutura. While the vast majority of IDPs and refugees had incredibly limited finances, some – particularly those who conducted business overseas, or whose family lived in Europe or the USA – had access to some additional resources. In these cases, I observed families keen to supplement friends and neighbors who they suspected had insufficient food. As there was not enough food to distribute freely, however, families would first check another’s need. “You can’t just ask if someone’s going hungry, though,” laughed my friend, Ousmane. “Instead, at lunchtime or dinnertime you send over a young kid and ask for some fire [a piece of glowing charcoal]. If they have fire to give you [to start your own], it means that they’re eating that day, and so they’re fine. If not, though, then you know, and you can send over a small gift of some meat or rice.” Ousmane went on to explain that if a family in Timbuktu suspected another of going hungry, asking for
“fire” is a common way to confirm – and help – without asking outright or otherwise undermining one’s discretion. When possible, this practice continued following the occupation, as IDPs and refugees checked in with one another.

Lack of finances, however, affected sutura in another way as well. It was not only that families stood in Red Cross lines or accepted money from foreign beneficiaries. It also affected one’s relationship to the built environment as it contributed to a chronic lack of space. Displaced Timbuktians could rarely afford sufficient housing, often leading to overcrowding. For example, when I was in Bamako immediately following the beginning of the French intervention – that is, during the height of northern Malian displacement (see UNHCR 2013) – I stayed in a house primarily comprised of internally displaced Songhay and darker-skinned Tuareg Timbuktians. As a result of the occupation, the number of occupants swelled from four to about 20, and only one had a stable job. Those displaced were family members, as well as some friends, and friends of friends. Such cramped quarters meant that personal privacy was practically non-existent. Every room—aside from the bathrooms—had multiple occupants at night. Sadly, this situation struck many others as luxurious. I visited many IDP houses of the same size holding twice as many people, two to three families. As there were no private rooms, husbands and wives would not sleep next to one another. Instead, in order to preserve their privacy, older men would sleep in one room, and older women in another. Younger men would sleep in a third room, and younger women in a fourth. The children would all sleep together in the main salon.

Space was also a problem in the refugee camps. Overcrowding prevented families from spreading out as they would have preferred. As one individual at the Mentao Refugee Camp in Djibo, Burkina Faso explained: “There are four families here in these few tents—my widowed aunt, cousins. And over there [pointing to the adjacent tent], there are three families in the same...
tent. It’s hard, but in difficult moments we prefer to be together, the families. [He pauses.] One can’t be discrete – everyone sees everything. If you eat, everyone sees. If I slaughter an animal, I need to give some to all the families around here. There’s no sutura here.” In an attempt to maintain at least some sense of discretion, many refugee families, like their internally displaced counterparts, altered their sleeping arrangements. As another recounted:

In Mbera [Refugee Camp in Mauritania], you can’t protect [sutura] – it touches your heart. With everyone sleeping next to each other. It’s the most important thing! Why is it important? Let me give you an example. It’s shameful to extend your hand, begging for food. And it’s shameful to sleep next to your wife when there’s an old woman in the same tent or the next one over…. At the camp, my wife slept inside with the children and I slept outside because an older person slept right next door.

To be sure, some conceded that while they experienced substantial existential worry due to their diminished sutura, they tried not to excessively overwhelm themselves or criticize others.

“When no one has sutura, then we’re all the same,” one displaced Timbuktian told me.

Nonetheless, most everyone felt the absence of sutura and thus, ethical vulnerability.

**Sutura and Displacement**

As demonstrated above, most of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke conceptualized Timbuktu as sacred space. Upon fleeing, therefore, IDPs and refugees were no longer within the blessed protection of Timbuktu. Many displaced Timbuktians told me, “I’m in bad spirit here.” As a result, many displaced Timbuktians expressed a strong desire to return to Timbuktu as soon as possible because the longer they remained outside of its borders, the longer they remained outside of God’s direct gaze and protection. By extension, the longer they remained outside of God’s direct gaze—that is, the longer they remained displaced—the more difficult it would be to regain lost sutura.
Some displaced Timbuktians expressed an intense and immediate eagerness to return to Timbuktu’s divine cover. I recall the case of my friend, Adama, for instance. Despite his father’s fierce desire to remain in Timbuktu throughout the occupation, Adama sent his aging parents to southern Mali. “My father doesn’t like being outside of Timbuktu,” Adama recalled to me later. “He says that nobody outside of Timbuktu really knows Islam. But he is in bad health, and I knew that the situation would be bad under the terrorists.” Adama, however, had intended to weather the occupation in Timbuktu. Unfortunately, a couple of the militants discovered that Adama had fathered a child out of wedlock. And, hearing that these militants were searching for him – either to beat him or to force him to marry his former girlfriend – Adama left Timbuktu and joined his family in Bamako. While displaced, Adama’s father regularly asked to return, however this remained impossible while the occupation continued. But then the French military intervened, and before any community in northern Mali had been secured, Adama and his family had already purchased bus tickets to Mopti, where one could catch a boat up the Niger River to Timbuktu. I joined Adama one evening as he packed up his family’s possessions into a couple of large bags and asked him about his plans. “Now that the French are here, Timbuktu will soon be liberated….If we have to wait a few days along the banks of the river in Mopti until the fighting subsides, so be it. But, it’s time to go back. My father wants to pray in Timbuktu again.”

A dialectical logic, recall that it is ultimately God who grants an individual with sutura. Someone can try to be discrete, but to no avail if God chooses not to offer it. As popularly conceptualized, God rewards the faithful. Among Timbuktians, one expresses one’s faith through the maintenance of sutura. However, the hardships of occupation and displacement made it more difficult to maintain one’s privacy. Because one could not be discrete, many
Timbuktians described, one was not properly expressing their faith. As a result, divine protection diminished further, and the hardships of displacement increased even more. As a Timbuktian refugee said:

I don’t sleep well, can’t relax. There’s no salary. This is a prison. It’s difficult to be in Burkina Faso. There’s lots of pork and alcohol in Djibo – it’s hard to find a Tuareg butcher. The climate is bad—the land is hot, the air is hot, the tent is hot. I can’t sleep. There is lots of noise from children. We’re used to houses, but here the tents don’t block any noise, and the *motos* continue until morning. Every family is next to one another. There’s nothing here but heat and suffering. We’re in a park like animals. One can’t protect or preserve sutura here – there’s no privacy.

He, and others, went on to explain that hardships intensified as displacement continued—families lost more money; neighbors extorted them; Southerners discriminated; children became sick. One displaced Timbuktian told me, “People [in Timbuktu] help each other so we all stay with sutura. People look to make sure I’m eating, give food if I’m not eating so that I don’t need to ask. Islam is very important – there are real Muslims there, real mosques, the Qur’an, benedictions, everything.” Outside of Timbuktu, the connection to God – so many claimed – weakened, and thus, their hardships increased.

The crisis of sutura, then, became a crisis of place. And while it is perhaps self-evident to assert that the hardships of displacement are the hardships of being in a different place, in this case, we are not only discussing the practical difficulties of forced separation from home. Instead, we are examining the metaphysical implications of uprootedness, for that is what became the foundation for subsequent hardships. Jackson (1995:154) writes, “Experientially, home [is] a matter of being-at-home-in-the-world. It connote[s] a sense of existential control and connectedness – the way we feel when what we say or do seems to matter, and there is a balanced reciprocity between the world beyond us and the world within which we move.” Home, Jackson (1995) continues, is the relationship, the consonance between oneself and the other; life
takes on meaning when, instead of resistance, there is resonance between the world beyond and the world within which one lives. *Sutura* served as a framework through which Timbuktian IDPs and refugees attempted to manage hardships and achieve a small sense of maintenance within a context of social rupture. Nonetheless, displacement so disrupted existential control and connectedness – to a particular place, to friends and family, to the divine – that such maintenance became nearly impossible.

Malkki (1995:11) describes the widespread a priori Western expectation that when one becomes displaced – especially when one crosses an international border – one loses the connection to their culture and identity. However, Malkki continues, this is not always the case. Among most Timbuktians, for instance, displacement highlighted and privileged a local social-metaphysical framework through which IDPs and refugees experienced and attempted to manage the occupation. Indeed, as discussed above, the hardships of displacement were not limited to the dominant tropes that so many Euro-Americans have come to expect. By bridging broader historical and structural processes with everyday lived experiences and practices, this examination of *sutura* not only helps us to better understand crisis in a general sense, but it also reveals how Timbuktians made sense of the particularities of the crisis within which they played a part. Most displaced Timbuktians emphasized the need to return. However, an analysis of expressions and (re-)productions of habitus, for example, highlights that we must consider that this need was not only economic. Nor was it only about social or political rupture per se. Indeed, instead of considering rupture, we should consider the opposite side of the coin: attempts – even impossible ones – towards maintenance. In this case, such maintenance, however, is not primarily about social structure, economics or identity. Instead, it is about individual ethical expression and one’s relationship to the divine. Examining the frameworks through which
Timbuktians negotiated hardships and produced understandings about their displacement highlights the profound historical, cultural and religious attitudes that influenced how Timbuktians experienced and managed crisis. Indeed, for Timbuktians the crisis produced many hardships. And for many, the root of such hardships was not being in Timbuktu. Of course, this does not prevent displaced Timbuktians from endeavoring to navigate the many hardships that they encounter. In the following two chapters, therefore, I more thoroughly examine how my interlocutors situated themselves within the political landscape of the occupation and how their sociopolitical rationalities and subjectivities influenced the different, more collective ways in which many attempted to negotiate their displacement.
Notes

1. Mopeds.
2. In the end, few Timbuktians were actually attacked, as assailants regularly mistook migrant Mauritanians for northern Malians, targeting them instead. Nonetheless, most Tuareg and Arab Timbuktians understood that the South would not be a safe place for them to flee.
3. *Hurt Locker* (2008) is a narrative film directed by Kathryn Bigelow that follows a specialized American military bomb-disposal unit in Baghdad.
4. This became an ethically and culturally difficult landscape to navigate, particularly as I wanted people – as much as anyone does – to speak with me willingly about their experiences under the occupation and as displaced; I did not want my interlocutors to feel compelled share stories and opinions for fear of not receiving the gift. As such, I emphasized that all interviews were voluntary and could be cut short at any time. Further, regardless of the content or duration of the interview, I reminded my interlocutors that I would still give them the gift. However, in response to the community’s growing expectations of financial remuneration for interviews, I also cut back on the amount of formal interviews I conducted.
5. The prescribed movements and words followed by Muslims during prayer.
6. A Hadith (pl. ahadith) is a report of a teaching, deed or saying of the Prophet Mohamed.
7. Of course, Tuareg Timbuktians use the Tamasheq variant, “as-sutur,” when speaking Tamashq, and Arab Timbuktians continue to use the original word, “satara,” when speaking Arabic. However, “Sutura” seems more reasonable to me because Songhay remains the lingua franca of Timbuktu. This is not to suggest, however, that Timbuktu is culturally Songhay. Instead I am attempting to theorize Timbuktian cultural expressions that transcend ethnicity.
8. Timbuktians generally associate men with the work force and the public sphere, and women with the home and the private sphere (see Reitner 1975). Nonetheless, men and women regularly complicate these dichotomies, and women clearly have an influence in the public sphere (see Lamphere 1997; Limbert 2010; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003).
10. Given the tenuous security situation in Timbuktu during Fall 2013, I neither wanted to draw significant attention to myself or to the individuals with whom I associated.
CHAPTER 4
Thinking About the Center-Periphery: Timbuktian Geopolitical Imaginaries

Let me tell you a story: Before I fled Timbuktu, the terrorists shot and killed a lot of dogs because dogs are against Islam. Or, at least they’re not good within Islam. They are not noble animals. The reason why dogs are bad, though, is not what the terrorists think it is. Timbuktians don’t like dogs because the Prophet’s grandson made a trip to Timbuktu. He had planned to make Timbuktu the next Mecca. But, when he was praying, a dog started barking and interrupted him. This bothered him, so he left abruptly and did not turn it into the next Mecca.
~Interview with Ibrahim in Bamako, Mali in February 2013

In the previous chapters I examined how Timbuktians have reproduced (perceived) distinctive and exceptional cultural and religious expressions. These expressions were the frameworks through which Timbuktians negotiated the occupation and intervention of the North, as well as their own displacement in southern Malian urban centers and refugee camps in neighboring countries. For example, Timbuktians espoused sutura – an ethic of privacy – which influenced both how they navigated everyday hardships and the fervor with which many wished to return to Timbuktu. How, though, have Timbuktian cultural values and ideas influenced the development of local political subjectivities? And how have those subjectivities influenced Timbuktian conceptions of the Malian crisis? In this chapter, I argue that notions of shared Timbuktian history, as well as certain values and practices, have influenced the development of Timbuktian political rationalities that privilege (1) Timbuktian centrality, and (2) relative distrust in the Malian state. Significantly, these rationalities both shaped and are articulated in modes of Timbuktian communication – namely joking, rumor and gossip – that reproduced unofficial counter-narratives regarding the Malian crisis.
Timbuktian cultural and religious expressions have changed over time, and they have changed vis-à-vis broader social and political developments in the region. Therefore, by describing Timbuktian cultural and religious expressions as resulting from the city’s peripheral and semi-autonomous status, I do not wish to characterize it as a bubble, completely cut off and immune from outside influences. That is not Timbuktu’s history; the city is still a locus of regional movement and exchange. Nonetheless, for a number of interrelated geographical and historical reasons, Timbuktu was rendered peripheral to various Empires while simultaneously reaffirming its own centrality.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, we must not consider “the peripheral” in the passive voice. Neither peripheral zones themselves, nor crisis in peripheral zones, are accidental. Without suggesting that all actors and communities necessarily anticipate the results of their sociopolitical actions, the dynamic center-periphery relationship is the product of political economic and national forces that render certain regions central and others peripheral within the structures of a given polity. According to stories told among my interlocutors and to me, politicians and rebels, for instance, benefited from and (directly or indirectly) reproduced a peripheral and destabilized northern Mali. In this chapter, therefore, I explore how my Timbuktian interlocutors narrated this center-periphery relationship, and the role that crisis played in exacerbating it.

However, it is important to consider that people do not always directly speak with “truth;” instead they construct and repeat stories – often in the form of gossip, rumors, jokes and so on – that carry values and meanings that better evoke the understandings they wish to express (White 2000). Indeed, unofficial communication is often a mechanism through which individuals reproduce local and everyday commentaries on
and interventions in society and politics (Besnier 2009; Scott 1985). Gossip reveals how individuals think and talk about their moral dilemmas (Austin 1979 [1961]; Haviland 1977) and rumor serves as a cultural mechanism through which groups comment upon and manipulate political events (White 2000). This became clear to me early on in my fieldwork as my interlocutors repeatedly joked with one another about the hardships of displacement, told (melodramatic) stories about the occupation, and pulled me aside to not-so-secretly share the latest rumors about corrupt government officials.

Foucault (1990, 1995) argues that discourse is how individuals enter the historical record – a process of subject formation, the act of talking about oneself or others disciplines individuals and populations within the framework of dominant value systems. However, Foucault suggests that unofficial “crude” or “crass” speech can find itself outside of this management. As such, because joking and rumor, for instance, ambiguously carry both affability and often hostility, they remain (somewhat) outside of the structures that typically discipline discourse(s) (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]; Radcliffe-Brown 1952; White 2000). Unofficial discursive forms, therefore, have the potential to subvert, contradict and resituate the narratives aimed to discipline them in the first place. Indeed, particularly in marginalized societies, unofficial communication becomes a strategic “common language” (see Apte 1985) that affirms minority values in the face of more oppressive, majority and hegemonic values. The result is that minority populations propose their values as central (Cardeña 2003). The confrontation – or “dialogue” (Bakhtin 1990) – between dominant and marginalized traditions, I argue, promotes the development of new propositions about Malian geopolitics and Timbuktian subjectivities.
My Timbuktian interlocutors did not perceive any benefit from being peripheral. However, I argue that most of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke did not conceptualize themselves as peripheral per se, primarily because they largely did not interpret their sociopolitical belonging in center-periphery terms. Rather, my Timbuktian interlocutors regularly described Timbuktu as its own semi-autonomous center. Often perceiving Timbuktian religious and cultural norms as exceptional, prior to and throughout the Malian crisis the Timbuktians with whom I spoke attempted to maintain this central, semi-autonomous orientation. Indeed, while decrying what they described as Bamako’s marginalizing practices and the resulting 2012-2013 occupation of the North, they criticized any suggestions of a closer political economic relationship with the state center. Rather, they privileged Timbuktu’s separate sociocultural and religious centrality. In what follows, therefore, I return to the periphery as a theoretical concept (or construct). Then I analyze how Timbuktian joking during the crisis revealed an acute awareness of Malian center-periphery politics, while simultaneously reorienting marginalizing discourses. Afterward, I analyze how my interlocutors’ stories about the periphery position it as a zone that facilitates government corruption and exacerbates crisis on the one hand, and furthers the state project on the other. I conclude with a discussion of how many Timbuktians defended Timbuktu’s semi-autonomy.

Is the Periphery a One-Way Street?

Without reifying the state-society relations that many scholars have used to theorize (the development of) states, it is clear that state peripheries are often places of strong civil society, of law and order, and of creativity where alternative forms of
political and economic action are instituted (Das & Poole 2004:19). Indeed, Chatterjee (2004) demonstrates how in the absence of states’ recognition, certain paralegal communities can establish their own state-like governing structures in order to organize themselves and perform and assert their should-be legality. Roitman (2005) similarly explores practices on the margins within the Chad Basin, noting the region’s numerous, ordered political economic practices. However, she argues that we cannot and should not attempt to differentiate economic exchanges in the Chad Basin as “formal” versus “informal,” as is so often the theoretical tendency. The activities in peripheries, instead of differing themselves from those in state centers, share a vital characteristic: circumventing state economic regulation. As such, the vital distinction is not formal versus informal, but official versus unofficial (Roitman 2005:19).

Power produces reality, the domains of objects and the rituals of truth (Foucault 1977:194). More specifically, power and truth cannot be separated, as those in positions of power reproduce their hegemonic dominance by cultivating particular assumptions about certain populations, for example, or political economic strategies. According to my Timbuktian interlocutors, by defining Timbuktu as a lawless periphery, Bamako – and imperial France – has been and still is able to justify their particular interventions in the Timbuktian region. Of course, Timbuktians themselves are able to refute such characterizations. Due to their reduced political and institutional capital relative to their southern Malian counterparts, however, Timbuktians are often unable to transcend pervasive nationalist tropes outside of northern Mali. Nonetheless, both centers and peripheries negotiate each other. To be sure, peripheries are often characterized as sites of exception, sites of lawlessness and illegibility (Das & Poole 2004:10). However, as I
demonstrate below, many Timbuktians perceived this supposed lawlessness and illegibility to be necessary in order to justify and enforce the law and legibility of the Malian state center. Conversely, they also argued that individuals and institutions rooted in the state center deem it, profitable, if not incumbent to exploit the illegality ascribed to the periphery.

As described in the introductory chapter, states – particularly postcolonial states – are not fixed objects. They are not intended to be (though we might be told otherwise). Indeed, states’ abstract character is what enables them to define and sustain themselves; it is also what enables them to define and sustain peripheries as peripheries vis-à-vis a range of administrative practices (Asad 2004:281). Nonetheless, states are often imagined as always incomplete projects spoken of through an invocation of lawlessness and savagery that both lie outside their jurisdiction and threaten them from within (Das & Poole 2004:7). This facilitates the political integration of those more centrally situated by excluding those deemed outside of or contrary to nation-state projects; it also frames and reproduces particular economic possibilities tied to the political and geographical organization of states (Mitchell 1998:417-9). Indeed, peripheries are sites of non-state practices colonized by other forms of regulation emanating from the needs of their populations in order to secure political and economic survival. This is not to suggest that peripheries are “natural containers” for people insufficiently socialized into the law, though. Instead, peripheries are where states are continually experienced and undone through illegible and unofficial practices, documents, words, and so on (Das & Poole 2004:9-10).
As Chapter 2 elaborates, part of a periphery’s illegibility is due to the so-called “wild,” non-state nature of peripheral zones (Poole 2004). Timbuktu, like the peripheries of so many other states, is without sufficient roads, schools, clinics and other signs of the state relative to other cities and regions in Mali. However, it is not only physical location or a lack of more formal integration into the state center that reproduces Timbuktu’s peripheral status. Instead, it is the combination of its geography and the lack of state infrastructure with other ideas about the “natural,” cultural and/or national marginality of its residents (see Das & Poole 2004:26; Sanford 2004:260). In other words, certain spaces are rendered “peripheral” because popular discourses – differently reproduced in both state centers and state peripheries – articulate them as such.

Southern vs. northern Malians’ perceptions during the crisis reflected this very issue. Without always using the terms “center” and “periphery,” many of my Timbuktian interlocutors described their positionality as peripheral. They defended this perspective by evoking, as I have previously described, what they interpreted as the purposeful underdevelopment of Timbuktu – i.e., a lack of social services. Others complained about the distance – both physical and existential – between Timbuktu and Bamako. And others, still, described feeling abandoned by Bamako. Significantly, when I spoke to my southern Malian interlocutors about the occupation, they often evoked similar issues, but without suggesting that southern Malian regions were peripheral. It was using this discursive framework that Yahia, from Kayes, dismissed northern Malian claims to increased autonomy:

They complain of underdevelopment? Aye. They’re always complaining of that in the North, and then guess what? They get all of the foreign money. Have you seen Kayes? There’s nothing there. There’s dirt roads and bad schools and bad hospitals. But
we work. We don’t complain. We don’t leave….Mali is one country. Bamako hasn’t abandoned anyone. It’s not Bamako’s fault that the Tuareg [meaning, the North] are corrupt or bad at investments.

Clearly, Yahia – and most of my other southern Malian interlocutors – did not perceive “underdevelopment” as evidence of Bamako’s abandonment or the South’s peripheral status. And, they read poverty in the North as the fault of its residents. Of course, this is not necessarily to suggest that southern Malians did not interpret northern Malians as peripheral. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, many southern Malians certainly perceived northerners as ethnically, racially, religiously and linguistically different (and vice versa). Important for my argument here, though, is that the Timbuktians with whom I spoke interpreted a lack of social services, infrastructure and so on as evidence of their peripheral status, whereas my southern Malian interlocutors differently interpreted what they described as their equivalent poverty.

I do not argue, however, that peripheries are separate from or somehow not part of states. Indeed, for all the ways that Timbuktu differs from southern Mali, it is still very much part of the Malian state. To be sure, I have argued that Timbuktu has long existed outside of a given polity’s hegemonic apparatus. Nonetheless, that is not to imply that Timbuktu has existed outside of such a polity’s dominance (see Gramsci 2005 [1971]; Guha 1998). Certainly, outside military and police coercion has been more or less present in Timbuktu from the Moroccan invasion onwards. Yet, I dispute the argument that contemporary states aspire to make (official and legible) centrality total (see Lefebvre 2008:332).

A focus on a state as a coercive or hegemonic apparatus overlooks the myriad ways in which states are identified, consumed and reproduced in peripheral zones.
“[T]he state [is] neither a purely rational-bureaucratic organization nor simply a fetish, but [is] a form of regulation that oscillates between a rational mode and a magical mode of being” (Das 2004:225; see Coronil 1997; Hansen 2001). Within peripheries, state power might seem illegible, intermittent and constantly negotiated. Nonetheless, its signature is still read everywhere. As I explore in the following sections, states are operationalized through expressions of everyday life including rumor, for example, or gossip, mockery and mimetic representation (Das 2004:226). Consequently, states and peripheries are partners engaged in self-creation and maintenance (Das 2004:251).

Joking Marginalization

Timbuktian joking throughout the crisis revealed both an awareness of (displaced Timbuktians’ positionality within broader) Malian geopolitics and reoriented marginalizing discourses. Language and event produce dialogue and interrogation (White 2000). As such, jokes told among friends often serve as (counter) truth-telling mechanisms (see Wiley 2014:114). That jokes shared among displaced Timbuktians contradicted dominant narratives, therefore, reveals not that these jokesters misinterpreted events or their positionality relative to the state or civil society. Instead, such jokes represented analysis, commentary and refraction (see Bakhtin (1984 [1965]; Basso 2007 [1979]; Voloshinov 1973 [1929]). Indeed, joking among displaced Timbuktians highlighted contradictions, thereby revealing underlying truths (see Žižek 2001).

Despite the many frameworks through which most Malians organized themselves, as described in Chapters 1 and 2, many specifically emphasized the following three main
categories in order to make sense of the crisis: ethnicity (i.e., Songhay vs. Tuareg vs. Arab vs. Bambara), race (black vs. white) and region (northerner vs. southerner). Almost formulaically, these categories came together to produce certain givens. For instance, following many of the southern Malians with whom I spoke, to be Songhay, Tuareg or Arab is also to be a northerner; and to be Bambara is to be a southerner. Or, to be a southerner is to be black, while to be a northerner is to be white. Or, to be a northerner is to live in the desert, thereby making them backward, impoverished and religiously radical, compared to southerners’ cosmopolitanism, power and wealth. The supposed truths behind these categories, about who belongs to which categories and what that signifies concerning their position vis-à-vis the state, were especially active during the occupation. From the perspective of most southerners, for example, those categories associated with the North signified a person’s inherent “guilt” of facilitating the occupation.

These dominant tropes framed most of my Timbuktian interlocutors’ unofficial communication about the Malian crisis. As sociopolitical subjects, these individuals were subjugated “by the very power that constitute[d] both their subjectivity and the discursive formations through which they articulate[d] that subjectivity” (Crapanzano 2011:6). Consequently, jokesters engaged the categories that influenced their political existence while also creatively operationalizing the presumptions behind them in order to reveal contradictions and communicate local, minority conceptions about the occupation, the intervention, the Malian government and their positionality as Timbuktians. Part of the local landscape that framed Malian joking, then, was these dominant tropes of ethnicity, race and region. However, it was not only the tropes themselves, but also the historical and sociopolitical hierarchy imbedded within them. Therefore, to make sense
of Timbuktians’ jokes and other modes of unofficial communication during the occupation (and thus the local truths that they expressed), one must not only understand the dominant narratives of the events of Spring 2012. But, one must also understand the popular narratives that position the North as peripheral to the South, and subsequently, northerners against southerners, white Malians against black Malians, and even Tuareg and Arab Timbuktians against Songhay Timbuktians (and vice versa).

Consider Abdoulaye, who I met early on in Bamako and who ultimately became a close friend. He was clearly a jokester: In addition to his boisterous and exaggeratedly dramatic delivery, what often made his jokes so successful were the truths that he revealed. For example, often while displaced in Bamako, with plenty of onlookers nearby he would ask the head of the household (and the only resident with a consistent salary), “Why did you buy so little bread?” Or, “Why didn’t you slaughter a goat when I arrived?” “Why won’t you give us air conditioning?” “Where’s the satellite TV?” Often to a soundtrack of laughter, the head of the household would counter, “Ah, you want air conditioning? Where’s your money?” Or, “You want luxury without paying for it, are you sure you’re not the President?”

Such joking revealed two things: First, while engaging the trope of the impoverished northern Malian, it brought to light everybody’s shared poverty, that the head of the household could not serve as a proper host, and that none of the displaced persons could afford to contribute anything to the communal pot. Such joking also revealed that this suffering was not new, despite popular and media accounts regarding how novel the situation supposedly was. What made the group laugh was the insinuation that even before the occupation and their subsequent displacement most Timbuktians had
been able to afford sufficient bread, unlimited goats for slaughter, air conditioning or satellite TV. This, however, was not the case. Furthermore (and significantly), the joke also underscored that wealth remained with someone else. It reminded the group that there were Malians—many of whom, in their perspective, were southerners—who could afford such luxuries.

I encountered similar joking in the refugee camps. Just outside of Ouagadougou at Camp Sangongo – which, employing an “affectionate” play on words, many called “Camp Sanogo” after the bungling coup leader – I had the pleasure of meeting a jovial elderly Tuareg woman and her family in their UNHCR-issued tent. She wore thick, cloudy glasses that were scotch taped together at the nose, and on both wrists rattled many white beaded plastic bracelets. When our conversation turned to their displacement and the question of reconciliation and their return, she smiled and then, smacking my knee, yelled, “It’s not worth it!” The adults and children in the tent started to laugh. Seeing this, she continued. “It’s not worth it! It’s just not worth it! The Bambara are just waiting for us to cross the border. Then they’ll round us up and [lifting her arthritic hands in front of her and miming a machine gun] bam, bam, bam! [laughing and smacking my knee] That’s right. The Bambara! Bam, bam, bam! Bam, bam, bam!” I was a bit horrified at the idea of mass executions, but everyone else was in stitches. And every time over the next hour when the conversation fell silent, the old woman would reenergize the group. She would just look up, point her fingers at a different person, and say (sometimes whispering, sometimes yelling): “Bam, bam, bam!”

I observed many such jokes. However, Iken, one of my Tuareg and light-skinned interlocutors, illustrated perhaps the most common joke that displaced Timbuktians
enacted. One afternoon as we strolled in Timbuktu, Iken bumped into a few friends who he had not seen since he fled to a refugee camp in Burkina Faso. “Ah, look out, the MNLA has arrived!” shouted his darker-skinned, Songhay counterparts before wrapping him in a big hug. Iken explained to me later that this was not the first time that his friends had joked like this, either while displaced or upon returning to Timbuktu. And often, upon being called a rebel or terrorist, Iken would even keep the joke going by threatening to shoot or kidnap one of the jokesters. Another interlocutor of mine, Bachir, who is Songhay but has comparatively lighter skin, described a parallel instance:

After the terrorists moved south to Konna, I left Mopti for Bamako. There, I stayed with my family, but they wouldn’t let me leave the house for one week because Bamako had the same problems as Mopti. 1 After that week, though, I couldn’t take it anymore. I started going out and looked for some of my friends. When my friends – they’re black, Songhay – first saw me, they started teasing me. “Rebel! Rebel!” they’d say. Or, “Azawad! Azawad!” It was funny. I laughed.

In various ways, each of these jokes highlighted my Timbuktian interlocutors’ awareness of the North’s peripheral status vis-à-vis the South. Indeed, Abdoulaye’s joke played up the Timbuktian trope of the impoverished, marginalized northern Malian and the wealthy – and therefore, indulgent and corrupt – southern Malian. The elderly Tuareg woman’s played up the trope of the bloodthirsty Bambara soldier and the victimized Tuareg refugee. And, Iken and Bachir’s joking highlighted the dominant conception of northerners’ complicity with the occupation. On the one hand, the Timbuktians with whom I spoke appreciated and reproduced these jokes because everybody could access the tropes that the jokers directly and indirectly referenced; everyone had knowledge of the local landscape (Wiley 2014; White 2000). On the other hand, my interlocutors found such jokes humorous because they effectively inverted and over-exaggerated the
expectations of these tropes (see Bakhtin 1984 [1965]; Douglass 1999). Expressive of local knowledge that explicitly contradicts the dominant discourses emerging from the state center, such Timbukti Jain joking operated as heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]). A type of “double-voiced discourse,” these jokes appropriated dominant narrative and undermined it, at times highlighting my interlocutors’ knowledge of their own marginalization, and at others highlighting that such narratives were incorrect.

As a form of knowledge production, therefore, joking allowed the displaced Timbukti Jain speaker (and audience) to appropriate and invert dominant narratives, temporarily suspending the social and political hierarchies within which they are inserted (see Bakhtin 1984 [1965]). When commenting upon the Malian crisis and their own displacement, however, Timbukti Jain joking also subverted the process through which southern Malian groups came to be privileged – and thus, rendered central – in the first place. By jokingly demanding wealth, for example, or calling non-militants “terrorists,” “MNLA” and “AQIM,” displaced Timbukti Jains highlighted contradictions within the dominant narrative. As a result, such joking revealed not only a crisis of categories, as it were, but also a crisis of categorization, of the process by which categories are created and recreated in the first place. Consequently, Timbukti Jain joking (and other genres of unofficial communication) served to resituate Timbukti Jain knowledge – of the Malian crisis, of their broader geopolitical peripherality, and so on – as central. Significantly, however, it was not only unofficial communication per se that both reproduced and undermined (perceptions of) political forces in Mali. As I address in the following sections, my interlocutors neither perceived their peripheral political positionality as accidental nor as a relationship wholly beyond their influence.
The Strategic Periphery

One evening a few months into fieldwork I sat along a dust-stained wall in Bamako and chatted with friends while we waited for the night’s televised soccer match to start. Most took their turn praying at sun down, while I fanned the glowing charcoals that heated our tea. During our conversation, I brought up the gun and drug trafficking that seems a prerequisite component of any discussion of northern Mali’s problems. “Everyone I’ve talked to has mentioned guns and drugs,” I said, “But that’s it. No specifics. How do you know? Is this just talk?”

Those in the group who were listening started shaking their heads and giggling, as if to signal just how naïve I still was despite the time I had spent with them. “Just talk?” asked my friend, Dramane, while the others giggled harder and waited for what seemed an inevitable story. “Look, André,” Dramane continued, “I had an acquaintance, Malik. He’s Arab, and everyone in Timbuktu knows that he trafficked guns and drugs. I mean, one time I asked him directly if he had any guns. He just opened up his car door, and sitting there were 20 guns, Kalashnikovs. He said, “And I have 40 more at my house in [a neighboring town], and 40 more in my house here.’”

“Wow, he just had those guns in his car? Just sitting there?” I asked.

“Wait, it gets better!” Dramane said, now lifting his hands to silence the ambient chatter and direct all attention to himself. “One day, a friend of mine bought a refrigerator for her small store. She needed a car to transport it, so I asked Malik if he wouldn’t mind picking us up. He didn’t [mind]. He showed up in a nice, brand new car with air conditioning. There was a Kalash sitting right on the dashboard. When we
arrived at the Place de l’Indépendence, we heard a whistle. The police signaled for him to pull over. But when he walked up, he just smiled and said, ‘Malik, how are you?’ He gestured at the gun, but Malik just said, ‘Oh, it’s for my uncle.’ The police officer didn’t do anything about it. He just started asking Malik about the price of tea. After they were done talking, Malik gave him 10,000 CFA [$18 USD], and we drove on. I tell you, if it had been me driving, I would have been arrested on the spot and my car confiscated. But not him. The police just let him go. [Pause] Once the occupation started, Malik went to Mauritania. He was arrested there—he’d been trading with the terrorists. He’s in prison to this day. You see, in Mauritania there’s justice. But here in Mali, you just pay someone off.”

Of course, it seems that some racialized or ethnic prejudice was being mobilized in this story. At least during the height of the occupation and intervention, few Songhay could describe northern Malian instability without blaming – either directly or indirectly – Arab and Tuareg populations. Nonetheless, even my lighter-skinned Arab and Tuareg friends admitted that such clandestine networks were largely managed by Arab individuals. This makes sense, though. “Arab families do most of the long-distance commerce in Timbuktu,” said Moktar, who is Songhay, reiterating what so many others had already told me. “While most Tuaregs do pastoralism, and the Songhay do more farming, it’s the Arabs who have contacts in Mauritania and Algeria. But that doesn’t mean that trafficking is an ‘Arab thing.’ Most legally trade pasta, tea, petrol, etc. But, you know, some get involved in bad things.” And then, adding a common Timbuktian refrain, Moktar concluded with, “Of course, most of the traffickers, they’re not even from
Timbuktu. Most are from the outside, from Mauritania, Algeria, Libya. From North Africa, not from here.”

Drug and gun trafficking in northern Mali is far from accidental. Peripheral zones are often characterized by their residents’ tactics of mobility and misdemeanor, activities intended to circumscribe regulated targets of wealth and sketch out new economic spaces. Similarly, criminal organizations are quick to take advantage of peripheries’ strategic and illegible networks (see Bayart, et al 1999). The same processes that produce exclusion and marginalization of peripheral zones simultaneously produce new forms of government, new economic opportunities and new kinds of claims to membership at local, national and supranational levels (see Ferguson 2007:15, 24-49). As such, peripheral activities become new objects of regulation, the “heart of the postcolonial state’s endeavor to fill its coffers and finance its constituents” (Roitman 2004:192).

To paraphrase Mohamed, a journalist acquaintance of mine, Timbuktu’s “underdevelopment” benefited many who are officially and unofficially linked to the government (see Ferguson 1994). Pointing to Timbuktu’s limited infrastructural, educational or medical resources, Bamako could obtain millions of dollars of foreign assistance. But, before any of that aid reached Timbuktu, it was first filtered through Bamako, where the majority of it stayed (see Mann 2015:170-208). Indeed, following Bayart (2013 [1993]:80), food aid in particular has often been piped through private interests leading considerable amounts of foreign gifts to end up lining officials’ pockets or on the market. ² Consequently, Mohamed continued, Timbuktu remained “underdeveloped” and Bamako continued to request more assistance. And, if ever someone in Timbuktu complained, the official message they receive evoked...
decentralization (see Mann 2015; Chapter 2, this manuscript), arguing that it was
Timbuktu’s responsibility to develop itself. This, too, Mohamed insisted, benefited
Bamako. Not only did it perpetuate the cycle of aid, but it also maintained a peripheral
space where narco-traffic could thrive (see Ferguson 1994:254-277).

Speaking with reporters in Timbuktu, one might have gotten the impression that
the North was lawless, ungoverned and ungovernable. More than one Timbuktian
reporter complained to me that years of growing insecurity in northern Mali, culminating
in the occupation and intervention, had gone grossly underreported. As Soumaila, a
journalist friend of a friend, told me one morning over Nescafé and cigarettes:

There hasn’t been an opportunity to report critically, though not for
lack of wanting to. The reason is that most Malian journalists, like
me, work for the state, for entities like [the Office of Malian
Radio-Television]. As a result, we can’t be as critical as we want.
Because there really isn’t a state per se, at least one that respects
the law. If one reports critically, you get arrested, as happened
with the journalist in Gao. So, if a Malian journalist wants to be
more critical, he has to search out a journalist – Malian or
otherwise – who works for a private entity. They’re more
protected, but not completely immune. The public journalist will
give that private journalist some information, and then the private
journalist will report it. The message gets out, but it’s not traced
back to the public, Malian journalist.

Notice that Soumaila suggested that there was no Malian state, at least not in northern
Mali. Instead, corruption and coercion ruled the day. However, this does not imply the
limitation of centralized state power or the vulnerability of a sovereign center (see Das &
Poole 2004; Lefebvre 2008:280).

Instead, at least following widespread rumors, it seemed the result of the Malian
state’s *reluctance* to combat corruption. Indeed, according to many, the drug and gun
trade continued because Bamako benefited from it. Again, following Soumaila:
If you’re arrested but you’re well-connected, you’ll be set free. So for journalists, even though constitutionally there’s freedom of speech, that freedom isn’t protected. If you offend someone in the government, you’ll be arrested. In terms of the North, it’s been like this for a long time. But it’s been allowed to stay that way. It benefits the government and the army. It’s not only that they’re aware of it. They benefit from it, make money off of it. Either they get money directly from the drugs being trafficked in. Or, they get paid to look the other way. Drug traffickers have been involved in the desert for a long time, but they also come down to the river. Terrorists, too. And they get help from the army. If one of their cars breaks down, they’ll give them a new motor or a new tire. These are Malian soldiers. It’s been like this for a long time. The French were never able to control the North – it was always under rebellion during the colonial era.

Soumaila was far from the only Timbuktian to suggest that a corrupt Malian government and army profited from the drug and arms trade. Rumor upon rumor circulated of officials’ involvement in clandestine networks north of Timbuktu, as far as Taoudenni (see Lecocq, et al 2013:4). This, too, was unsurprising, giving the colonial and early postcolonial history of political parties utilizing Timbuktu, Taoudenni and other peripheral zones in the desert as official and unofficial sites of political intimidation, torture, work camps and prisons (Mann 2015:215-222).

A legacy of colonial states’ attempts to mold social stratification, the social struggles that (re-)produce a state “bear the hallmarks of the rush for spoils in which all actors…participate in the world of networks” (Bayart 2013 [1993]:70, 235). That is, corruption is a tool to find new opportunities for extortion, bolster one’s economic capital, and thus, augment popular perceptions as a ruler (Bayart 2013 [1993]:71). Of course, most officials do not systematically use their positions for large-scale participation in the drug trade; instead, narco-traffic “remain[s] secondary to more tested forms of predation and fraud which arise from the control of natural resources (especially oil) and the
import-export trade, and from the regular receipt of commissions derived from relations of various sorts with the outside world” (Bayart, et al 1999:30). Nonetheless, the illegal drug and gun trade was clearly the trope that most Timbuktians employed to demonstrate their perceptions of government corruption.

Perhaps the most common – and the most specific – story told and retold was of the “ghost plane,” the supposedly successful counterpart of one that crash-landed near Gao in 2009 (BBC 2009). Nearly all of my Timbuktian friends and acquaintances – almost anyone from Timbuktu who would talk to me, really – would eagerly recount the arrival of a specific cargo plane. Supposedly arriving from Colombia, it landed in the desert and unloaded tons of cocaine. Then, 21st century caravaners transported the drugs along traditional routes to the southern Mediterranean where the shipment was then transported across the sea to European consumers.

“What happened to the plane?” I always asked.

“Disappeared,” most everyone said. “Flew back to Colombia.”

“But, why come to the desert in Timbuktu? It seems like quite the hassle to get drugs to Europe.”

“Well, how else are you going to get them there? You think a Colombian drug plane can just fly to Paris? You know what it’s like here. You just pay the guard a couple thousand CFA and you go on your way, no questions asked. Well, same with the plane. Only you need a little more than 2000 CFA.”

“Yeah? Well, who’s the ‘guard’ then? Who’s just going to let this plane enter Malian air space?” I said.
“Well who do you think?” they asked. Then, lowering their voices, they said, “[President] ATT.”

Indeed, the ousted president was often the object of most critical Timbuktian rumors of government corruption. The idea seemed, “Who else would be powerful enough both to permit such an operation, and cover it up.” Such logic was impenetrable, even when I asked – given that Mali is a landlocked country – which other country would have permitted a drug plane to enter its airspace. Many just shrugged. Others inferred that Algeria, Mali’s even corrupter neighbor according to most Timbuktians, must have been complicit. Even after hearing this story numerous times, I often reacted incredulously. Such a phantom seemed far too illogical and improbable. But, of course, that was exactly the point. Without suggesting that my interlocutors lied or were mistaken, the actual existence of the plane was not important. For, the story – and the plane in particular – pointed to locals’ sense of lawlessness and government complicity in the Timbuktian region (see White 2000).

Terrorist cells had established themselves in the far north for the past decade, most explained. “Oh yeah, we knew about it,” my interlocutors said. And, as if to confirm their knowledge, many told me how they recognized some of the AQMI-affiliates who occupied Timbuktu. Apparently some had been coming to Timbuktu’s markets – the largest in the region – for years. Many of my interlocutors had supposedly suspected that they were terrorists, but said that there was little that they could do, particularly as they were certain that the Malian government – not to mention the French and American governments – were equally aware of the terrorist presence. Indeed, Mali had joined a USA-coordinated coalition of Saharan states to support efforts to combat the
spread of terrorism throughout the region (BBC 2010). But, most Timbuktians doubted Mali’s (or the other countries’) sincerity, suggesting that they had to sign on in order to save political face and win what they presumed were some hefty defense funds.

Many of the displaced Timbuktians with whom I spoke pointed to ATT’s creation of new regions as evidence of his complicity with narco-trafficking. As it turned out, one of ATT’s final acts prior to the coup d’état was to create five new administrative units within Mali. Perhaps the most disturbing, at least to most of my Timbuktian interlocutors, was the region of “Taoudenni” with Araouan as its regional capital. On the one hand, this angered many Timbuktians because they perceived Araouan, Taoudenni and the entire far northern region as fundamentally part of Timbuktu. Many of Timbuktu’s famous scholars – historical and contemporary – came from Araouan. And Taoudenni has been the source of Timbuktu’s salt trade. On the other hand, many Timbuktians also interpreted this “annexation” with suspicion. “Nobody lives there,” most said. “Why turn it into its own [administrative] region?”

For the most part, the only sedentary inhabitants in this part of Mali have been the 100 or so residents of Araouan. No one lives in Taoudenni permanently; instead miners set up temporary camps during the cooler months. And while there are some nomadic and pastoralist families who travel that far north, most remain further south near the Niger River and more adequate pasture. Some explained the bizarre new region as an attempt to appease Malian Arabs, as many live farther north and feel alienated and/or alienate themselves from the Malian nation. But, many more interpreted it as a way to purposefully create a new administrative unit practically empty of prying eyes. Others – again referencing the Arab-dominated merchant networks – perceived these explanations
as linked. According to one of my friends, “The division of Timbuktu [Region] into Timbuktu and Taoudenni, giving Araouan to the Arabs, would facilitate the drug and arms trafficking and allow them to benefit from the exploitation of mineral wealth, all while ATT gets a cut of the money.”

Indeed, widespread regional discourses criticized the Malian state’s supposed complacency – and complicity – in illicit activities in the North. Most of my Timbuktian interlocutors, for example, affirmed that it was the persistence of narco-traffic in the Sahara Desert that ultimately facilitated the region’s occupation. And this they primarily blamed on Bamako; many argued that had government officials attempted to stamp out illegality – instead of contributing to it – the illegible forces that funded militant organizations and afforded them safe passage would have been interrupted. Similarly, a spokesperson for the MNLA explained to me that one of reasons for their rebellion in the first place was Bamako’s corrupt exploitation of “Azawad.”

**Strategic Displacement**

We must interrogate not only the occupation in general, but also the resulting displacement of so many Timbuktian residents. For, according to many of my Timbuktian interlocutors, just like the maintenance of Timbuktu’s peripheral status was far from accidental, neither was the displacement of the periphery’s inhabitants. Crisis becomes a site and process full of legible and illegible possibility (Roitman and Mbembe 1995), particularly as internally displaced persons and refugees become the – sometimes symbolic, sometimes physical – pawns in the intersecting power plays of governments, armies, insurgent forces, paramilitaries and international organizations (see Malkki 1995;
Sanford 2004:257). Indeed, crisis and war are characterized by intersecting and illegible, coercive and exploitative processes at multiple levels. For example, troops demand payment (and/or sexual “favors”) from civilians in order to compensate both themselves and their commanding officers. Consequently those at the highest levels of power may come to control national concessions over valuable resources (Nordstrom 2004).

Significantly, such systems are often transnational, and only partially in the shadows. On the one hand, “beyond public scrutiny, commanders may partner with international wildcatters who move consumer items, from weapons to cigarettes, into a warzone while moving valuable resources, from diamonds to timber, out to the cosmopolitan centers of the world in less than legal ways” (Nordstrom 2004:9). On the other hand, however, these same commanders may more visibly “partner with international state-sponsored vendors to procure expensive weapons and goods – exports that peacetime countries are eager to sell for their own profits, but which rarely match the actual needs of the purchasing country and its war” (Nordstrom 2004:9).

Most of my Timbuktian interlocutors declared that the displaced population in general – and the refugees in particular – were being exploited. Some asserted that both the Malian government and the MNLA both benefited politically from the existence of a refugee population. They claimed that the hundreds of thousands of refugees gave a sense of desperation and even legitimacy to their respective claims. “The MNLA is using the refugees,” many, Songhay and Tuareg alike, told me. “Without the refugees, the MNLA is nothing.” From my perspective, it seemed that there was an element of truth in this assertion. At the very least, it was clear through my conversations with MNLA
spokespersons – and with refugees themselves – that the existence of the refugee population helped them to justify their political and social demands.

At the same time, as I explore below, most Timbuktians also did not trust the Malian state, neither its politicians nor its uniformed officials. Consequently, most IDPs and refugees doubted that the Malian government had their best interests at heart. As I briefly described in the previous chapter, while not always embracing the MNLA, many refugees – especially those who identified as Tuareg – suggested that they had no choice but to support it. “Who else is going to help us?” many asked me. However, not everyone agreed that the MNLA would benevolently represent the refugee population. They argued that through the continuation of the refugee crisis – not to mention the dissemination of images and stories of refugees’ suffering at the hands of an uncaring, if not oppressive, Malian government – the MNLA was able to bolster its influence as the refugee’s de facto institutional representative. Indeed, the most common sentiment that I encountered in the refugee camps was that of feeling trapped.

“We can’t go back [to Timbuktu] yet,” Tilelli, a middle-aged woman of four told me outside of a sweltering tent in the Mentao Refugee Camp in Djibo, Burkina Faso. “If we go back now, the Malian soldiers will arrest us or kill us. We must wait until the MNLA says that we can go back, until there’s reconciliation.”

“But when will that be?” interjected Mohamed, Tilelli’s teenage son. “The MNLA will never say that it’s ok to go back, not until they get what they want. They just want us to wait in Mentao, starving, while they have fancy, air conditioned meetings in Ouagadougou, Bamako and France.”
“Wallahi,” Amayas, Tilelli’s nephew, said. “The longer we’re here, the longer they’re in luxury.” As the conversation continued, it became clear that this family, like so many others, felt that instead of addressing the needs of the refugee population—including their safe return to the North—the MNLA was only concerned with pursuing a political agenda that benefited them more than the average Timbuktian. “But, as long as we’re here,” Mohamed later told me as we strolled in the camp, “as long as we’re here, the MNLA has influence. They can pretend to care about us and point to our suffering when negotiating with [Presidents] Hollande and Campaore.”

Many others also argued that, like the MNLA, the Malian government only feigned interest in assisting the refugee population or resolving the occupation. For instance, an MNLA spokesperson with whom I spoke in Ouagadougou in May 2013 suggested that officials in Bamako benefited from the destabilization and occupation of the North:

Everyone knows that ATT worked with terrorists and narco traffickers. ATT was on the commission to get money to free the hostages. If Mali had had the willingness to get rid of the terrorists instead of being complicit with them, we wouldn’t have needed the intervention. AQMI is well protected by the Malian government. All of the leaders of MUJAO are in Bamako….The secretary general of MUJAO is in Bamako, and another MUJAO leader was here in Ouagadougou for a meeting yesterday, and returned to Bamako today. Mali hasn’t really looked for a solution yet; it hasn’t addressed the cause of the problem. Gao, for example, is being rebuilt by the same people who created the problem in the first place, and it’s the same with the rest of Azawad.

Beyond those in the MNLA, many of my other Timbuktian interlocutors also suggested that the high numbers of IDPs and refugees were good for the Malian state, or at least for Malian government officials. For, the displaced populations had captured the international community’s attention – as well as their foreign assistance – and become a
politically significant talking point. Perhaps the most common example of this was the presidential elections, which were scheduled for July 2013. One refugee in Djibo, Burkina Faso echoed the frustrations of so many others: “There are over 300,000 refugees in Burkina, Senegal, Mauritania, Algeria and Niger, not to mention the thousands of internally displaced people. And the politicians are busy campaigning for president!” Sometimes, in response to such statements, I would ask my interlocutors if an election might be good for Mali’s political and economic stability and send a strong message to the militants in the North. I would also remind them that the government was somewhat limited on a timeline, as both France and ECOWAS wanted a quick election, and the USA maintained that it would not provide military or humanitarian assistance before a legitimate, democratically elected government had been established.

Many of my interlocutors disagreed. As Hamaye, an acquaintance from the Mentao Refugee Camp, said as we waited for the sun to set, “The politicians campaigning right now, they talk about the occupation. They talk about the refugee crisis. But have they visited us? Have they visited the camps? No. Not a single Malian official has come to Djibo. They don’t care about us.” Later, back at Ouagadougou’s Camp Sangongo a sector chief told me, “I used to be a politician. I understand the importance of having elections….But, the refugees need to be able to return first. I know nothing about the candidates, and I’m not in Mali, so how can I vote? It’s not fair to start campaigning already. The politicians have really abandoned us.”

Most of the IDPs and refugees with whom I spoke suspected that the presidential candidates did not intend to resolve any issues relating to the displaced populations until after the election. For, while displaced northerners were good talking points, many of my
interlocutors claimed that the government did not want them to vote. And, whether or not that was the actual intent, that is what happened. According to Amedras, who telephoned his family in the Mentao Refugee Camp on the day of the elections, only five individuals had succeeded in voting. This is most likely an exaggeration. Nonetheless, Amedras’ family explained that a polling booth had not actually been established in the camp itself, but the 10km to the north in Djibo town. Few refugees, many explained, had the money to take the bush taxi into town and back. I suspect, however, that confounding factors included exhaustion and frustration in the face of what most likely interpreted as their purposeful disenfranchisement, not to mention implicit and explicit intimidation tactics by camp officials charged with quashing political activity among the refugee population.

Many displaced Timbuktians also argued that the refugee crisis was caused, exacerbated and/or prolonged because politicians and those affiliated with the camps – including guards, checkpoint officers, representatives of NGOs and so on – made money from the influx of humanitarian assistance. Referencing the Mbera Refugee Camp in Mauritania, a friend of mine explained, “One official was in charge of distributing the aid packages. But, he would only distribute about half of it and then keep the rest for himself. There were sectors in the camp that would go three to four weeks without seeing one grain of rice. The chiefs of the camp sectors would complain to the authorities, but nothing ever improved.”

Another interlocutor, who had also spent many months in Mbera, said:

There are lots of NGOs – white people – involved in the camp in Mauritania. They came with sugar, dates, food, and the [Mauritanian guards] would intercept them, saying that it is not safe for them to go into the camp and that they would arrange for
the aid to go to the refugees. But this was all a lie. There was security at Mbera, total security. But then, the guards would collect everything – tents, mats, mattresses, dates, food, etc. – and go to the market to re-sell it once the NGOs went away. I saw it. I was in the town trying to sell some jewelry. I saw the relief materials in the market the next day. Once an English journalist even came to town. She wanted to go into the camp, but again, the same guards said that it was too dangerous. But they just didn’t want her talking to anyone. I tried to go up to her, to sell her some jewelry and tell her the truth. But before I could get close, one of the guards pushed me away. I heard him tell her that I was a dangerous person, part of the occupation and that she shouldn’t talk to me but stay near him instead.

Such complaints demonstrate the presumed political utility – not to mention the economic profitability – of conflict’s shadowy networks. According to my interlocutors, the displaced populations served official and unofficial, licit and illicit purposes for the various actors and organizations involved in the occupation and intervention. War and crisis facilitated creative and exploitative social, political and economic possibilities that many of my Timbuktian interlocutors perceived as emblematic of their politically and economically peripheral status vis-à-vis politicians, commanders and traffickers connected to Bamako. Similarly – and as I analyze in the following section – the realm of the unregulated was also where the average individual negotiated, manipulated and contested intersecting “formal” and “informal” power regimes (Nordstrom 2004:211; see Roitman 2004). That is my Timbuktian interlocutors also utilized, reproduced and even re-oriented unofficial networks and discourses. In other words, many creatively asserted their own centrality.

Co-Lived Center and Periphery
While attending to the political economic strategies implemented by those actors my interlocutors differently perceived as central and peripheral is significant, we must also examine how Timbuktian understandings of a corrupt and dangerous Malian state reproduced notions of Timbuktian exceptionalism and reluctance towards intensified relations with Bamako. In other words, notwithstanding the structural marginalization that often follows center-periphery relationships, peripheries are also spaces where their residents can avoid more official inclusion into state structures and creatively negotiate unofficial landscapes to their own benefit. I do not suggest, though, that Timbuktians avoided all interaction with the state. During the colonial era, for example, some – particularly women – explicitly sought out French courts rather than local Islamic courts when seeking divorces (Lydon 2000:74). And more contemporarily, many of my interlocutors have pursued a secular secondary and/or post-secondary degree (often alongside religious education) in order to maximize professional upward mobility. Rather, I examine how displaced Timbuktians selectively navigated and avoided official agents and institutions while privileging certain local systems.

Furthermore, it bears repeating that my Timbuktian interlocutors did not necessarily conceptualize their sociopolitical positioning as peripheral. While many southern Malians seemed to typify Timbuktu as “backward” or “radical,” for instance, most of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke affirmed that their values and practices made them both exceptional and superior. In other words, from the perspectives of the city’s residents, Timbuktian cultural and religious expressions, both during and outside of times of crisis, reproduced Timbuktu’s simultaneous centrality.
In the camp outside of Ouagadougou, one Bellah refugee told me, “Northerners are more intelligent than Southerners.” However, most of my Timbuktian interlocutors rarely expressed such attitudes so explicitly. For the most part, many would instead describe why Timbuktian practices were superior and then imply outsiders’ inferiority by explaining in a roundabout manner that non-Timbuktians do not know about them. For instance, telling stories similar to the one I introduced in Chapter 3, many emphasized: “Even though Timbuktu is poor, we never let anyone go hungry.” And, at the end such narratives about checking on potentially hungry neighbors, many of my displaced interlocutors were quick to add, “They do not do that in southern Mali….There, if someone is hungry, one must ask for food. That is shameful.”

Others highlighted the lack of bars and dance halls in Timbuktu, that unlike in Bamako – frequently articulated as the sight of all things sinful – Timbuktu was not a city of partying and its associated debauchery. Of course, neither the insistence that in Timbuktu no one goes hungry nor that no one engages in any of the “immoral” activities associated with nightlife necessarily makes such claims absolutely true. Indeed, in Timbuktu before and following the occupation of the North, I witnessed hunger in public. And I remember many nights when I could not sleep because the hip hop blaring from a neighborhood house and the dancing, inebriated party-goers went on until almost sunrise. Nonetheless, many Timbuktians maintained a sense of their (moral) superiority.

This was perhaps articulated most frequently and the most directly when it came to religion. Many highlighted the emphasis on Islamic education that one encounters in Timbuktu. And far from making them radical, my interlocutors stressed, this training cultivated patience, empathy and faith, not to mention theological knowledge in the face
of what they decried as religious ignorance. Consequently, maintaining a Timbuktian-led religious education was one of the more common hardships that many displaced Timbuktians encountered. Privileging Timbuktian instruction, most of my interlocutors were reluctant to send their children to local, southern Malian Qur’anic school teachers. Instead, even though finances were incredibly tight, those who could would often pool their money in order to hire a Timbuktian tutor to provide even minimal instruction. Due to the historical prominence that Islamic education has achieved in Timbuktu, many of my interlocutors suggested that their approach to religion was better than most—if not all—others’. For instance, as I examined this in Chapter 3, many insisted that sutura is a universal Islamic practice. However, most other Muslim communities, many claimed, do not even know about or value it as Timbuktians do. Such a sense of Timbuktian exceptionalism led many to criticize both the aims and the methods of the Jihadi-Salafi occupying groups. More than one of my interlocutors, exasperated and shaking their heads in disbelief, gasped, “Who do they think they are, coming to Timbuktu to teach us about Islam? We’re the ones who have been studying Islam for the past 1000 years. We’re the ones with the famous universities. We should be teaching them!”

As discussed in the previous chapter, Timbuktian distrust of politics prevented most Timbuktians from demanding increased ties with Bamako. Indeed, without using nationalistic or revolutionary language, many of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke insisted that a more direct relationship with Bamako has never been, nor would it ever be something that they would desire. This is not to suggest that Timbuktians did not have expectations of the Malian state, though. To be sure, most argued that Bamako has a responsibility to all Malians and must work to develop the more underdeveloped parts of
the country. Most frequently, for instance, my interlocutors would insist that Bamako must construct a paved road all the way to Timbuktu as well as improve the city’s Internet connectivity. Because they perceived most politicians as inherently corrupt, however, most also stated that neither Bamakois politicians nor their representatives should directly intervene in Timbuktu. Instead, many argued that the capital should send development funds to Timbuktu. The presumption was that residents would be better equipped to utilize such funds, and closer ties to and interactions with Bamako would be unsafe.

I found that there were three interrelated reasons why most Timbuktians distrusted the Malian state and remained reluctant to push for increased official political ties with Bamako. These included perceptions of (1) southern Malian officials’ corruption, (2) Bamako’s disinterest in Timbuktu’s security and development, and (3) the superiority of Timbuktian sociopolitical knowledge and practices. Turning to the first—and by far the most explicit—reason (corruption): many of my interlocutors were quite disgusted with the Malian police, gendarme and army, for example, who they almost universally labeled as southern. “Of course they [police officers] are all from Bamako,” many of my Timbuktian interlocutors told me. “You have to make a bribe to get that job. Who else but southerners has the extra money to make a bribe?” And the grounds for such disgust and distrust: rampant bribery at checkpoints, tolls and border crossings. Rather than something that only targeted northerns, though, I asked if such bribery might be the product of more widespread, unofficially institutionalized practices (see Bayart 2013 [1993]; Roitman 2004). Some entertained the notion. Nonetheless, most described such coerced bribery as privileged southerners taking advantage of marginalized northern
Mali. In other words, while the practice might affect everyone, my interlocutors perceived it as worse for those from the North. Indeed, one night in Bamako, Issouf, a Timbuktian displaced adolescent, caused a humorous uproar by inverting this local framework (see above). He sat with his back against the inside edge of the front doorway, his outstretched legs blocking the entrance. When the head of the household approached, he asked Issouf what he was doing.

“I’m a customs official,” Issouf said. “And I’ve set up a checkpoint right here to get into the house.” The head of the household asked if he could pass, at which point Issouf exaggerated a frown and brought his hand to his face. “I don’t know. Are you Songhay? If you’re Songhay you can go through, but not if you’re Bambara. If you’re Bambara, you have to pay!”

I experienced a much less humorous example of such practices on my way to Djenne, though. Not far from the turnoff from the highway, two gendarme officials whistled for my friend, Ousmane, and me to pull over. We slowed the motorcycle we were riding, parking beneath a tree. In Bambara, they asked us what we were doing, and, as I was told later, Ousmane began to say that I was a researcher. Before he could say much else, however, one of the officials cut him off, chastising him for making a grammatical error, which was offensive to his ears. Ousmane apologized, explaining that he primarily speaks Songhay and French, but that he was trying to be polite. But the official only chastised him further: “You’re in Mali. You should speak the Malian language!”

Eventually I was able to explain my work and show all of the proper documentation. Everything was in order, which as it turns out, was a bit of a problem,
for there was no way to threaten us—and coerce a bribe—before letting us go. So, they said that we had to give them “something to eat for the trouble of pulling [us] over.” As there was no getting out of it, we handed over 2000 CFA [$3.50 USD]—more than double the going rate in such a situation—but the alpha gendarme responded that it was too little. Ousmane and I refused to pay any more, and after a little more discussion somehow we were told that we could go. As we started to speed off, one of the officials laughed, “We look forward to seeing you on your way back to Sevare!”

Frustrated, I later apologized to Ousmane, suggesting that we were pulled over because I was a white, presumably rich foreigner. “No, that wasn’t it,” Ousmane said, pointing to my turban and sunglasses (which, I then recalled, we agreed I should wear both to protect me from the sun and to avoid advertising my presence). He continued, “You’re not dressed like an American. They thought we were Tuareg. That’s why we were stopped. [pause] Those motherfuckers!”

Many of my Timbuktian interlocutors perceived the formal government as inherently corrupt, and as a result, as a drain on resources. Some disdainfully described how checkpoint officials would confiscate supplies sent to Timbuktu from the South. “Can you believe it?” many asked me. “They’re starving in Timbuktu, while the people at the checkpoints have an easy, well-paid job. But they still need to steal from us?” However, evoking Bamako more generally, most also accused the government of siphoning significant international donations and multinational funds directed towards developing Timbuktu’s transportation, educational and medical infrastructure. “We prefer to work with NGOs than ask Bamako for something,” Aly, one of my Timbuktian friends said while we walked to lunch one afternoon in Sevare. Implying that politicians
were more interested in their own wealth, Aly continued, “Social services are not the vocation of the state….But some NGOs, even they have to work with the state. Then we don’t get anything.” Later, when I was back in Bamako, another friend said, “The United States and Europe have made a mistake. They sent money to Mali to help with development projects, but they didn’t send any representatives. They trusted the Malian government with the project. But, due to corruption, much of this money didn’t go to the projects.”

That many Timbuktians interpreted the Malian government as corrupt, expressed a preference to work with humanitarian agencies and even suggested that social services are no longer the purview of the state is not surprising. Nor are these perceptions necessarily inaccurate. Since the 1990s the Malian state has been rendered increasingly sporadic, primarily visible at semi-regular police or gendarme posts along the main highway (Mann 2015:166, 243). These traces are the visual evidence of a more profound issue, that NGOs have deeply invested themselves and been deeply invested in Malian political forms. The product is the perception of a corrupt state center. And while that might be the case, it would be more accurate to examine Bamako through a redefinition of what government is and could be, one that reproduces “nongovernmentality” by further entrenching “development” agencies across the landscape (Mann 2015:169).

Nonetheless, as I mentioned above, many Timbuktians – particularly parents and grandparents – perceived Bamako as corrupt. Yes, this includes the city’s politicians, but it also includes its nightlife, police force and army. Consequently, almost any time I inquired about Timbuktu developing a more official relationship with Bamako, most of my interlocutors dismissed the idea as dangerous. For, this would risk corrupting the
resident population with inferior religious practices and sinful activities, thereby undermining the values privileged within the Timbuktian community. More immediately, though, it would also risk Timbuktian lives. Perceiving most soldiers to be southern Malian, many of my interlocutors pointed to a half-century of military intervention in the North typified by the indiscriminate harassment of and violence towards resident communities (see Lecocq 2010; Nathan 2013). Indeed, referencing more recent events, many highlighted the Malian offensive that followed the French intervention in January 2013. “We know the Malian army,” Hamed told me in Sevare. “They throw the bodies of old men into wells and try to hide the evidence” (see Wolff 2013).

The second reason for most Timbuktians’ distrust was the perception of a Malian state disinterested in Timbuktu’s security and development. Most of my interlocutors claimed that Mali was either indifferent to Timbuktu, or, perhaps because they benefitted from crisis, they were keen to (adventently or inadvertently) promote northern rebellion. For instance, one evening in Timbuktu, Hawa, one of my closest friend’s twin sister, echoed a common complaint: “The terrorists came in March, April. And then what happened? Did the Malian Army come? Did they liberate us? No! Nine months we waited. And for nine months they talked in Bamako. Look, it’s not even September [2013] yet. If it weren’t for the French, we wouldn’t be here. If we were waiting on Bamako, if we were waiting on the UN and what’s his name, Ban Ki-Moon, you wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t be here. We’d all still be displaced….”

Many who I met in Ouagadougou’s Camp Sangongo echoed Hawa’s complaint. “Bamako doesn’t care about northerners,” most told me. Indeed, as I sat in a sweltering tent with Sharif, one of the camp sector leaders, he explained that no Malian officials had
contacted him or any other camp leaders. “Communications?” Sharif asked. “With whom?” Maybe some Malian officials talked with their Burkinabe counterparts, he suggested. However, Sharif maintained that no Malian government representatives had sent messages of comfort or support to the refugees, nor had they visited the camp. On the other hand, the camp leaders met with Burkinabe officials everyday. This made some sense to him, he supposed, as the camp was situated in Burkina Faso. “But we’re not Burkinabe,” Sharif continued, raising his hands and the pitch of his voice. “We’re Malian. Where are the Malian officials?”

Evoking the common discourse of political corruption, many of my interlocutors suggested that officials in Bamako disregarded the occupation and northern Malian displacement. The reason: these officials preferred to line their own pockets rather than maintain regional stability and security. I recall one Bamako evening: Exhausted from a day of interviews and vigorous note taking – it was still early in my fieldwork, and I had yet to feel comfortable with more informal, unscheduled and notebook-free methods – my friend Abdoulaye (from above) pulled me aside. Teasing as always and feigning disappointment, he asked why I had not interviewed him. I explained that I had intended to talk with him later that week, if he was willing. But, he insisted on talking to me then and there, certain that none of my other interviewees knew anything or could offer me a better account of the crisis. So, I somewhat reluctantly sat down while Abdoulaye paced and gesticulated. I asked very few questions as Abdoulaye schooled me on Malian history, ethnic relations, the occupation, displacement, the intervention and more. At one point he became particularly heated and instead of lowering his voice to a whisper – as I
eventually learned was more characteristic of my Timbuktian interlocutors when they shared something controversial – he bellowed:

My government, they didn’t do their jobs correctly; there is lots of corruption. One-hundred percent of the world’s corruption is in Africa. In Mali, there are politicians who support the drug trade and maybe even the kidnappings. The government, they say that they don’t have the resources to fight the rebellion, but they do. But, as they’re so corrupt, they take much of these resources for themselves – so afterwards, of course there aren’t enough resources. But there would have been!

Many even suggested that Bamako cared more for – or at least focused more on – the rebel groups than for the Timbuktians themselves. As Konate, who is Songhay and was displaced in Mopti, told me, “Those who participated in the last rebellion [in the 1990s] have only benefited. They’ve received jobs, money, projects, state positions. Malians are peaceful, so we just said, ‘No problem.’ But then they just came back and attacked again. So, do you know what Bamako is now trying to do to get them to stop? Negotiate them more jobs and more money.”

The third, most implicit reason why many Timbuktians distrusted – or even rejected – Bamako, is that most privileged local forms of knowledge, affirming that they would be better off if left to their own devices (see, too, Chapter 2, this manuscript). In other words, not only did most perceive institutional relations with Bamako as dangerous and corrupting, but they also favored their own values and practices. Such favoritism seemingly produced and was produced by notions of Timbuktian centrality. Consider, for instance, this chapter’s opening vignette. Ibrahim’s story articulated – and framed the events of the crisis within his conception of – Timbuktu’s centrality. While the Qur’an and various ahadith question the merit of dogs, Timbuktu had not yet been established while the Prophet’s grandchildren were still living. Nonetheless, Ibrahim (and many
other Timbuktians) affirmed the centrality of Timbuktu – and thus its religious and sociocultural expressions – by inserting it directly into the history and genealogy of the Prophet.  

The importance of such expressions became clearer one evening later in my fieldwork as I chatted about his with Bokar, a journalist from Timbuktu who had covered the crisis. As the sun set, we reclined in the sandy courtyard. Bokar smoked some cigarettes and chuckled in approval as I prepared our tea. Emphasizing Timbuktian “traditional justice,” he expressed real distain towards Bamako’s influence. He said:

You know what the problem is in Timbuktu, the problem that facilitated the crisis? It began more than a decade ago, when the terrorists started moving south. Bamako started sending some more soldiers and police. And you know what happened? The people no longer relied on traditional justice. Before, if you had a problem, you’d go to the local marabou, who would try to resolve the problem. If that didn’t work, you’d go to the chief of the neighborhood. If he couldn’t resolve the problem, you’d go to the qadi. Finally, if that didn’t work, you’d go to the town chief, who would arbitrate. Only then, if all of that failed, would you go to the police, who has the strength of constitutional law and enforcement. This past 10 years, though, now most of those steps are skipped. Now everyone has a police friend or an army friend. If you have a problem with someone, all you have to do is ask your police friend to give him problems. Everyone has a corrupt police or military friend. This is undermining the traditional justice system. This is what has weakened Timbuktu.

Without divulging Bokar’s name, I asked some of my Timbuktian interlocutors – and even the head of the neighborhood – what they thought about his assessment. Few were quite as cynical. Most asserted that Timbuktians still prefered (and socially privileged) the local practices and values that supposedly made them exceptional. Nonetheless, my interlocutors almost unanimously agreed that Timbuktian sociocultural expressions were,
if not objectively superior, at least better than those they attributed to Bamako and the (rest of the) Malian state.

Similarly, while the state might prefer more official mechanisms – namely, the police, gendarmerie and military – Bokar (the aforementioned journalist) was certain that unofficial mechanisms are more effective and long-lasting. Inherent in Bokar’s critique is that Bamako mistakenly supported and rewarded the very rebels that it must combat through misguided attempts at reconciliation (see Lecocq et al 2013). “You want to end the rebellion?” Bokar asked, rhetorically. “Don’t give a cent to a single person who picked up a gun. Not then, not now, not ever. Instead, give those jobs, projects and money to those families who stayed peaceful. Give money to the people who are now really poor, but who didn’t go against the state. But does Bamako do that? Bah! [shakes head and flicks hand in disgust].”

To be sure, such an assessment assumed that funds from Bamako both financed and emboldened Tuareg nationalism and, more recently, Jihadi-Salafism. This was not the case, though (at least not entirely). Instead, militants have accessed funding and weaponry through narco-trafficking, for example, and likely foreign investment (Lecocq, et al 2013). Similarly, it overlooked that the militant groups have historically used creative and oppressive strategies in order to coercively acquire local economic, political and social support (Lecocq 2010). Nonetheless, Bokar’s assessment reflected the overarching perception that Timbuktian knowledge remained superior to Bamakois officials’ knowledge, and that most strategies coming from Bamako were inherently flawed. In other words, Timbuktians knew better.
While ecstatic that the French had intervened, for instance, most Timbuktians doubted that the French or the UN would be able to do more than “liberate” the city. That is, European and Chadian guns would force the terrorists to flee. But, they would not secure the region, especially not over the long term. My closest friend articulated this the most bluntly immediately following the kidnapping and execution of two French journalists in Kidal in November 2013. Everyone was extremely shaken. Though, I – unsurprisingly, as I was in Timbuktu at the time – was perhaps the most anxious afterward. Trying to calm me down, my friend said, “André, who do you think has been keeping you safe this entire time? Who’s making sure you don’t get kidnapped? Is it Bamako? Is it the French? Is it the UN? No. It’s me. It’s my father. It’s Mahmane and Bouba. It’s everyone, all of your friends. What does the UN know, anyway? They don’t know the desert. They don’t know who was here during the occupation.”

Of course, while not inaccurate, this perception was incomplete. My Timbuktian friends had access to certain knowledge and information that perhaps remained out of reach of the UN and French forces. At the same time, though, these forces had access to technology and intelligence far beyond that of my friends. Further, these forces also valued local knowledge, for they interviewed and employed Timbuktian residents. I do not know if it was my Timbuktian friends or the UN that kept me safe during my fieldwork, though I am tempted to suggest that it is not an issue of either/or, rather it is likely both/and. That is not really the point, though. More significant was the perception that Timbuktian knowledge of local, national and international systems trumped that of the Malian, French, Chadian and UN forces (see Stoller 1989:200). This is not to say that I, personally, always agreed or felt wholly comfortable with Timbuktian presumptions,
interesting and telling as they might have been. On more than one occasion when I felt particularly vulnerable, for instance, I asked my friends not only if they thought that I was safe, but also how they knew. Usually they reacted somewhat incredulously, and not a bit hurt.

“André, of course you’re safe,” my friend, Mohamed, assured me one afternoon as the rest of the group nodded their approval. “Do you really think that we would let you put yourself in an unsafe position?”

“No, I know,” I would say. But, then, while simultaneously kicking myself for expressing distrust, I could not help but pose the necessary follow up question. “But how do you know that I’m safe?”

“How do we know?” Mohamed sighed. And, purposefully avoiding too many specifics, he continued. “We just know. We need to stay safe, too. We talk to people, friends. Some of them fought. They will let us know if something is going to happen.”

“Yes, but what about random attacks?” I persisted. “What about, say, a suicide bomber?”

“You’re right, André, we wouldn’t know about that. But, you are a good person. God will protect you. We pray that God will protect you. So have faith that your safety is in God’s hands. Inshallah you will be safe.”

Timbuktu is peripheral to the Malian state center. However, this is not to suggest that only those from the center navigate, negotiate and even benefit from the unofficial political economic and social possibilities that emerge from peripheral zones. As I have discussed in various chapters, most Timbuktians, too, demonstrated a marked preference for local cultural, religious, educational, economic and political systems. As such, many
preferred to maintain institutional distance from the center. Supposedly like many of those in the center, they, too, preferred to reproduce many – though not all – of the networks and processes localized in the periphery. Of course, while expressing their frustration with Bamako, most Timbuktians did make some claims on the Malian state. However, they made their critiques while also insisting that government officials remain in the South.

Local knowledge and discourses that framed the city as exceptional and recreated shared understandings of Timbuktu’s historical distance (and difference) from Bamako undermined the Malian state’s institutional reach towards the city (see Ferme 2001:35). Indeed, as explained in Chapter 2, prior to the occupation, many strategically reproduced Timbuktu’s remoteness through a creative and selective negotiation of the modern political landscape. However, many clearly maintained such remoteness even while displaced and following the intervention (see Chapter 5, this manuscript). Privileging local values and practices over those of Bamako – not to mention those of international military and humanitarian organizations – most Timbuktians implicitly distanced themselves from the Malian center. We must not misread this as “traditionalism” or a rejection of modernity, though (see Ferme 2001:37). Nor must we misread this as an uncritical or essentialized nostalgia. Instead, we must recognize this both as tactical and as evidence of Timbuktian exceptionalism. Distrustful of Bamako and government officials, most of my Timbuktian interlocutors actively reproduced the expressions that they perceived as either more beneficial, or at least less dangerous, than increased institutional or ideological connections with Bamako.
Conclusion

Following my interlocutors’ stories, neither peripheries themselves nor crisis in peripheries are accidental or unfinished byproducts of states. Rather, peripheries are components of modern states. They are the spaces within which many politicians and businesspersons accumulate – or, at least are perceived to accumulate – the economic and, often, social capital in order to justify their dominance. Clearly, those officials in state centers seem to have a stake in and benefit from the maintenance of peripheral zones.

However, we must not presume that those individuals who live – and sometimes thrive – in peripheries exclusively perceive themselves or their situation as “underdeveloped” or seek a more direct, formal relationship with state centers. Neither must we presume that communities in peripheral zones are only attempting to informally replicate political society in light of its formal absence.

At the same time, however, we also must not presume that a local preference for the illegible and the unofficial suggests that these individuals are either corrupt or necessarily striving towards “traditionalism.” For, to suggest that peripheries (and the people within them) are anything but a vital component of modern states reproduces neocolonial discourses that discount the creative processes, understandings and subjectivities that are reproduced in those areas (see Das & Poole 2004; Guha 1998). Crisis and peripheral zones are not exceptional. They reproduce states, but not always in the ways that many of us are accustomed to thinking about it. States are not neutral or objective structures. Instead, a state is a subjective and contested institutional(izing) process. It is a process that aims to benefit its controlling group(s). But, it is
simultaneously a process through which marginalized groups can assert themselves in creative ways.

Most of my Timbuktian interlocutors expressed little interest in intensifying the city’s formal political economic links to Bamako. That does not mean, however that they were trying to render themselves peripheral. Instead, as evidenced from the discussion above, during the 2012-2013 occupation (as throughout much of Timbuktu’s history), my interlocutors expressed perceptions of their own centrality, of a particular political relationship whereby they remain a non-administrative center unto themselves. Especially within the context of postcolonial states, however, this simultaneously rendered them administratively peripheral to southern Mali. The question that remains, therefore, and is the subject of the following chapter, is how such political rationalities influenced Timbuktian collective action and political mobilization within the context of the Malian crisis.
Notes

1 Off and on throughout the occupation lighter-skinned individuals were attacked by soldiers, police officers and civilians (see Koné 2012).

2 Indeed, I saw this most acutely when UN-distributed “Plumpy Sup”, a peanut-based, vitamin enriched paste was being sold in Timbuktian stalls for about 50 CFA apiece.

3 This is not to suggest, however, that all Timbuktian rumors concerning Malian corruption or the occupation of the North were baseless, however. Indeed, it was well known both within Mali and without that Bamako had a history of corruption—of embezzlement of development dollars, for example, of fraud, etc. (see Koné 2012; Lecocq, et al 2013; Moseley 2012; Nathan 2013; Whitehouse 2012). The point of my analysis, however, is not (only) that peripheral zones can be and often are profitable to corrupt individuals and institutions in state centers. But, rather, that Timbuktians frame their experiences of the Malian crisis through their particular understandings of corruption.

4 I should add that all of the interviews I conducted were done in private, and I explained to my friends that I would not publish their true names or discuss with others what they had told me. Of course, this did not prevent them from chatting amongst each other as to what I had asked, how the interviews had gone, etc.

5 Citing a (genealogical) connection to the Prophet, His family or His tribe is a not uncommon technique for elevating a person or town’s prestige throughout the Muslim world (see Limbert 2010; Messick 1993; Soares 2005).

6 A qadi is a Muslim judge who interprets shari’a and administers religious edicts (Messick 1993).
CHAPTER 5

Collective Action: Politics and Self-Help Among Displaced Timbuktians

The men in Timbuktu were scared. In Gao, the men tried to protect the people and the town. Even without weapons they had courage and tried to protect the people. But Timbuktian men, without weapons, they’re scared. Because in Timbuktu, the men say, “Oh, we must wait for God,” “We must believe in God,” or “God will protect us.” Ah. They’re just afraid of dying! The MNLA comes into your house, orders you around, and the men say nothing. Even men in the villages didn’t protect—they were all scared.

~Interview with Fatoumata in Segou, Mali in February, 2013

In the face of suffering, individuals and communities often assert a connection to socially meaningful existence that both facilitates everyday survival and produces new subjectivities and sources of collective action (Comaroff and Comaroff 2007; Fassin 2007; Piot 2010). And, particularly during contexts of crisis, communities often refashion their worlds for particular purposes, within the frameworks of local cultural expressions and expectations, in order to give legitimacy to emergent political strategies in the present (Ferme 2001:30). Therefore, in order to make sense of how Timbuktian IDPs and refugees came to terms with and navigated the many challenges of displacement, we must examine both the local rationalities and subjectivities that influenced sociopolitical agency and how displaced Timbuktians mobilized them.

In my experience – and as I will demonstrate below – many Timbuktians narrowly defined “the political.” Without referencing – and, in most cases, without even being aware of – such European and American political philosophy that frames “politics” or “democracy” as active participation in the electoral process (see Schumpeter 1962), many of my interlocutors echoed such formalistic understandings of governance by arguing that “politics” and, more specifically, “political mobilization” equate to protests,
marches, campaigning and voting. In other words, conceptualizing political activity as that which makes a claim on the state (see Mahmood 2005), “politics” for the displaced Timbuktians with whom I spoke was that which directly engaged the Malian government. Consequently, many Timbuktians tended to perceive themselves and their actions, especially within the context of the occupation of the North and their subsequent displacement, as non-political because most shied away from such activities.

Communal responses to social and political crisis that take place outside the realm of (contentious) politics – like those more characteristic of my Timbuktian interlocutors – is known as “collective action” (Tilly & Tarrow 2006:5). Timbuktian collective action, therefore, might seem separate from and even unconcerned with Malian politics. However, we must avoid blanket claims that categorically politicize certain forms of response – i.e., social movements – and suggest that they are universally concerned with seeking the recognition of, or making contentious claims upon, capitalist institutions or modern nation-states (Price et al. 2008). Furthermore, we must not misinterpret alternative understandings of politics or explicit rejections of political action as a community’s political ignorance or apathy. Nor can we presume that a given community shares outsiders’ – for instance, a European military coalition’s or an American anthropologist’s – (initial) assumptions about the supposed roots of the political problems or the social suffering it faces (Abu-Lughod 2013). Accordingly, as neither local interpretations of crisis nor local understandings of how best to communally engage or respond to crisis are universal or uncontested, any analysis of collective action within the context of occupation, displacement and military intervention must attend to historical and social context, as well as local links between politics and culture.
By focusing on the lived experiences of participants (and non-participants) of collective action, we better understand the intersections of self-organizing and the local sociopolitical landscape (Edelman 2001:309). In this chapter, therefore, I examine how Timbuktu’s co-lived central and peripheral positionality influenced Timbuktian political practices and subjectivities. In my discussion below, I link collective action during the occupation of northern Mali with forms of self-organizing that were socioculturally meaningful independent of the Malian crisis. As such, I ask: what forms did Timbuktian collective action take during the occupation? And, what factors influenced my interlocutors’ perceptions of collective possibilities, the mobilization that displaced Timbuktians did or did not engage? Various everyday and sociocultural factors, I argue, reinforced a preference among my interlocutors for “nonpolitical” collective action, self-help groups concerned with providing mutual aid in both official and unofficial capacities. In what follows, therefore, I first analyze collective action during the occupation. In particular, I focus on how Timbuktians organized themselves into “associations” that served to emotionally and economically support one another. In particular, I examine how such self-organization largely remained inward looking and made few explicit claims on the Malian state. Second, I analyze some of the factors that foreclosed more politically overt forms of mobilization among displaced Timbuktians, including coercion and fatigue, a lack of experience with what they described as “Western” political organizing and prioritizing their return to Timbuktu over levying criticisms against the state. Third, I revisit Timbuktian conceptualizations of sutura and how despite some of my interlocutors’ desire to protest and march, the import of maintaining privacy prevented many from participating in such forms of political mobilization.
Timbuktian Associations

Broadly, displaced Timbuktian collective action took the form of the association, an organizational form with a long history in West Africa, particularly in Mali. In the broadest sense, associations consist of individuals coming together in more or less formal ways in order to pursue a common purpose, such as economic or social support or the transmission of specialized religious or indigenous knowledge (Davis 2000:295). Contemporary manifestations – and consequently, contemporary analyses – of associations and clubs are connected to the political economic demands of the colonial and neocolonial African state (see Gable 2000). Indeed, in AOF new forms of association emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as the French colonial public sphere began to transform urban life (Soares 2005:223). Most of these Associations villageoises were pseudo-cooperative farmer organizations that were established as part of the country’s rural development policies (Davis 2000:296). In southern Mali more specifically, though, many religious associations have emerged that promote a public discourse of Islam, animating discussions about how to be Muslim in modern contexts (see Soares 2005:210-243). Most contemporary Timbuktian associations have operated differently, however. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Timbuktian pubic sphere was not (as) threatened or transformed by the French and Malian states as was the urban South. Consequently, Timbuktian associations have tended to focus less on postcolonial Islamic discourses. As I discuss below, most Timbuktian associations did not define themselves in direct opposition to a foreign, imperialist or secular Other. Instead, they remained somewhat inward looking, emphasizing mutual self-help.
Nonetheless, the associations that I examined shared some characteristics with other associations in southern Mali. Related to youth groups (Davis 2000), they tended to be fluid in nature, for example, as it often remained unclear as to where one association ended and another began, and many individuals claimed membership to more than one association. Also, as elsewhere, in Timbuktu many of the associations were mixed gender (see Davis 2000). However, sometimes women – reproducing more widespread gendered norms – would take more supporting roles. These associations also tended to coalesce by place. That is, associations have often solidified among children living in the same neighborhoods. In some Timbuktian cases, therefore, associations have contained some ethnic diversity. However, as certain ethnic groups have tended to reside in particular *quartiers* in Timbuktu, the majority of many neighborhoods – and by extension, the associations that develop within them – have usually been populated by a single ethnicity. For example, most of the members of the association with whom I spent the most time, the “New Medina Association,” were Songhay, and some Bellah, which makes sense because as children, the members all lived in near Medina (that is, *centre ville*), where few Tuareg and Arab families have built homes. Nonetheless, this association does have a few Tuareg and Arab members as well.

Most of the members of this association were in their mid- to late-twenties when I conducted my fieldwork. However, they affirmed that they became a group in the same, quasi-organic way as their more senior counterparts did in years past. According to many of my interlocutors, neighborhood parents typically encourage their children to play together when they reach primary school age. As these children mature, they are given more and more independence. Nonetheless, their parents both continue to look out for
them and push these friends to stay together. And the children themselves, knowing that they will eventually formalize themselves into an association, also encourage one another to play. They venture beyond the neighborhood, explore the town, get themselves into and out of trouble. “Every wet season, we would go play in the canal when it flooded,” Moustafa, one New Medina Association member, told me by way of example. Indeed, the swelling floodplain remains a center of entertainment in the summer months. Almost every evening, I witnessed groups of children – who, so I was told, would eventually form their own associations – splashing and doing back flips in the murky water. Meanwhile, older generations – now formalized into their own associations – watched and reminisced as they picnicked above on the surrounding sand dunes. At other times, Moustafa explained, young friends would hunt feral cats. “Boys and girls alike, we used to set traps in our neighborhood,” he said. “When we caught one, the girls would roast it on the dunes. Then we would all eat. [Pause, and then, somewhat awkwardly] I know that white people don’t eat cat. Um, and we don’t either, as adults. It’s a kid thing. [Pause] But it was so much fun, a little hunting party!”

My interlocutors explained that in adolescence, having become close, these friends often decide to make the group more official. Either an older sibling gifts them a little money, or they raise some funds themselves, and they establish the group as an association, with an executive board. Sometimes this happens formally, registering the group with the city; and sometimes this happens informally, without the papers and government stamp. Regardless, most individuals come to recognize themselves as members of a lifelong organization. Indeed, as various New Medina Association members explained, their association and others have formally met, and will continue to
formally meet at regular intervals, particularly once northern Mali becomes more stable. However, as members are all friends, they also meet informally at irregular intervals.

As membership requires paying monthly dues, the purpose of such associations is twofold. On the one hand, they provide community services (see Davis 2000). As Fatim, a member of the New Medina Association, explained to me one day as we walked to her brother’s house:

André, do you see that trashcan over there? That’s one of ours. See? It says “New Medina Association” on it. A couple of years ago we noticed all the trash piling up in our neighborhood. That’s not good. The animals eat it, and the children play in it. They get sick. So, we created a fund and collected money. We bought 10 metal barrels to use as trashcans. We got a really good price because Khalid [a fellow association member] has a brother who works at a scrap yard. Then, Mohamed [who used to work painting signs] pained our name on it for free. We put the trashcans around and then went door to door, telling everybody to use them for their garbage. Every now and then, some of us empty the cans and burn the trash.

Trash collection was probably the New Medina Association’s most visible community service project to date. However, they explained that they and other associations have also helped with agricultural assistance, house resurfacing and so on.

Associations have also used their funds to assist their own members, though. At different times, collected dues can be utilized as a scholarship fund, an insurance policy, a housing loan, etc. “I wouldn’t have been able to earn my teaching certificate in Diré without the [New Medina Association],” said my friend, Aba. And one acquaintance, an older man and a member of a different association explained to me one afternoon how his association helped finance a trip to Bamako for his uncle’s funeral. Indeed, I collected many stories recounting how associations helped individuals to subsidize wedding costs, for example, or purchase a house so that they could get married. Others have helped a
member to start or maintain a business (see Elhadje 2012). And, in the case of
occupation (as I describe below), the association has been used as a means to
(temporarily and partially) finance displacement.

Another form of organization, though a less official one, is the women’s
association. Also common throughout the continent (and elsewhere), women’s
associations are opportunities for women both to socialize and assist one another (and
their children) economically (see Davis 2000:298-300; Russell 2003). According to the
sister and mother of my friend, Baragsen, who belong to different women’s associations,
these organizations are typically comprised of groups of friends. And like the more
formalized associations described above, membership can be multiethnic. Differently,
however, membership in women’s associations less permanent. Participants often come
and go. Further, rules are not always formalized. Thus, women’s associations differ
from one to the next. Most generally, however, these organizations meet at a different
member’s house at regular intervals—i.e., weekly, bi-weekly, monthly. The host usually
provides some refreshments, such as a few snacks and, of course, tea.

There was a women’s association in the neighborhood where I stayed in
Timbuktu. I recall women walking in twos or threes, dressed up in patterned wraps and
sometimes balancing a container of food on their heads as they passed by to the
designated house. Once everyone arrived, in addition to chatting and laughing with one
another, each member added a predetermined sum into the collection pot. “We each keep
the money hidden in here,” Baragsen’s sister, Takama, told me, removing and untangling
a knotted corner of her wrap, revealing a stack of coins. “Well, I do at least. Some knot up
their headscarf. But, you have to wear one of those to store your coins in there, don’t you!” Then Baragsen, in a not atypical move, took over the conversation:

You see, André, the women’s meetings are both a way for women to come together and laugh and talk. But it also gives them money. It’s a way for a woman to gather a big sum, an amount that she wouldn’t be able to save up for very easily. So, when it’s her turn, maybe she will buy herself a new dress. Or maybe she will use it on her children’s school fees. Or maybe she will go visit her sister who lives outside of Timbuktu. She can do whatever she wants with it because it’s her money, not her husband’s.

Smiling, Takama nodded in approval.

Both forms of association had a direct and indirect impact among Timbuktian individuals during the occupation, whether their members remained in Timbuktu or they were displaced. Many of my interlocutors explained that during the months leading up to the occupation when work began to suffer and during the initial months of the occupation when there was little to no work at all, those associations with funds attempted to financially support its members. Some helped with the costs of displacement – i.e., bus fare, house rentals, etc. – while others subsidized hospital bills for exhausted, ailing grandparents or for malaria-ridden children. It was not long, however, before most associations’ funds dried up. And, of course, given the employment difficulties that Timbuktians encountered during the crisis, there was little with which to replenish them, at least during 2012-2013. Nonetheless, most associations also provided emotional support during such a time of substantial emotional difficulty. As many of my interlocutors who were displaced in Bamako explained, their associations formed a pre-established network of friends that facilitated their circulation throughout an otherwise overwhelming and unfamiliar city. “Can you imagine what it would be like if I didn’t already have a group of friends in Bamako when I arrived,” my displaced friend, Moussa
asked one morning over breakfast (he had spent the night out with friends, many of whom belonged to the same association, and then slept at the house were I was staying).

“If I had to stay each night in my family’s house, I think I’d go crazy.”

In addition to financial and emotional support, however, these associations also prepared displaced Timbuktians to support themselves in other ways. Indeed, in most hubs of northern Malian displacement—Bamako, Segou, Mopti, Sevare in Mali, and even Djibo, Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso—IDPs and refugees from Timbuktu established organizations for displaced Timbuktians. Most formed in response to the initial hardships of displacement. Almost every displaced Timbuktian with whom I talked complained of climate-related illnesses, for example, and the difficulties of navigating NGO-sponsored healthcare. Others complained about the difficulties of matriculating their children in new schools, especially as most had fled Timbuktu so quickly that they did not have any official records to prove in which grades their children belonged. And others, still, noted inconsistencies regarding the assistance that IDPs and refugees received. To be sure, especially in the initial weeks of the occupation in April and May 2012, one of the major concerns – aside from anger, fear and sadness – was confusion. The self-evident solution, many of my Timbuktian interlocutors explained, was to create an association.

Following Oumar, a Timbuktian acquaintance displaced in Segou:

No one knew who to talk to, what to do to understand the system of displacement and aid. So I had an idea: I called all of my friends from Timbuktu. We met, and said it’d be better to do something as a group than as individuals. Teachers, civil servants, bankers, tourist guides, etc. – I contacted everyone one by one. I wrote up the paper for the association and showed it to an old former military serviceman from Timbuktu who was also in Segou. He said it was a good idea and gave his ideas. For about 4 days
everyone came and gave ideas. We wrote down the good ones and brought it to the administrator of Segou. I told them that there are people that will suffer – maybe not now, but when they run out of money. They’ll be in trouble. I gave a copy of the association documents to all of the aid organizations – so they call the association when there’s something to give. There’s something like this in Bamako, too.

Friends and acquaintances of Oumar joked that he likes to take credit for more than is warranted. “It’s not like this was a new idea,” chuckled my friend, Ibrahim. Nonetheless, he accurately reflects both the issues that many displaced Timbuktians experienced early on in the occupation, and the efforts that many took in order to resolve them.

Many Timbuktian refugees similarly organized themselves, though the form this took differed slightly, particularly within the camps. Like many refugee camps in other settings (see Malkki 1995; Oka 2014; Thorleifsson 2014), those in Burkina Faso, for example, divided themselves by zone or sector. Refugees in each sector elected a representative—usually a well-respected, older male—who served both to quell interpersonal conflicts and bring grievances to camp officials. As resources were scarce, however, often these representatives could not alleviate the economic and emotional hardships that most refugees experienced. Consequently, various types of associations developed within the camps in order to address certain needs. One association, for example, addressed education. As Aicha, a teacher, told me, the refugee camp had originally promised the displaced population that they would construct a school. Following many months without any progress, however, a group of displaced educators organized a “sector school;” each teacher was assigned a different grade and they rotated the use of a larger tent. “It’s important for the children to go to school, especially in a refugee camp,” Aicha continued. “Imagine what kind of trouble they could get into if
they’re not kept busy.” Another association organized a soccer league, providing children and young adults an opportunity to play some sport and the rest a chance to watch a game. As one member explained, “We’ve divided the ‘league’ according to *quartier*, that makes it more fun and more competitive. Mentao North will compete against Mentao South, etc., etc.” Yet another association – one consisting of Timbuktians staying in the camps and in the neighboring cities – sought out resources for refugees and organized events such as concerts to provide necessary entertainment and distraction.

In addition to operating as an organizational tool, these new associations also served as advocacy groups, for one of the main obstacles that prevented displaced Timbuktians from accessing either governmental or non-governmental assistance was ignorance. This ignorance, though, was often two-sided. Many of my displaced interlocutors explained that they did not know with whom to register themselves—or because they were suspicious of the registration process, were too proud to admit that they needed aid and/or too reluctant to publicize their financial problems. Consequently, many failed to connect with the plethora of organizations and agencies differently engaged in assistance. Indeed, part of the problem was also that there were so many different agencies, local, national and international. Some gave food, though all on inconsistent days. Others gave soap, pots and pans, clothing and so on. Still others offered healthcare or education assistance. But, of all of those agencies, some were exclusively devoted to children, whereas others focused on women, the elderly or people with disabilities. As a result, many displaced Timbuktians found the process too overwhelming and were unwilling to engage it. Subsequently, the agencies themselves
did not know to whom to give assistance, nor did many of the displaced families understand the process for obtaining assistance. In fact, most cities and towns did not even know how many displaced families had moved there. “They don’t know,” said Fanta, a Red Cross worker. “They don’t know which organization is the right one for them. Often the displaced wait for hours in long lines just to find out that they didn’t register properly, or that they came on the wrong day. Many have just stopped coming. Those that still come are connected to me because I will call them on their cell phone or put their food aside to make sure they get it.”

At the same time, though, as stated previously, not all hardships were directly financial. Most of my interlocutors described feelings of loneliness and vulnerability, especially as many remained disconnected from family and friends. Like the associations indigenous to Timbuktu, the associations for displaced persons simultaneously offered opportunities for community-building and socializing. Indeed, this worked in tandem with their efforts to organize the community and advocate for it. In Segou, the members of the Association for Displaced Timbuktians met daily adjacent to a main road and next to a stall where a Timbuktian butcher sold roasted meat. On the tall wall that ran behind the stall, they hung two banners. The first had the green, yellow and red of the Malian flag, and the second—which, was not draped until after the intervention—had the blue, white and red of the French flag. These banners demonstrated their support for the military intervention in the North (and, thus, their at least tacit support for the Malian and French states – in other words, they demonstrated to the southern Malian public that they were not “those northerners” commonly affiliated with the militants). But, these banners simultaneously signaled to passersby that that was where the displaced Timbuktians
congregated. Newly arriving IDPs would come, make friends, and also join the association. For the most part, male members would come in the evenings, chatting and taking tea. These sessions would conclude with the sundown call to prayer, at which point the more pious among them would walk across the street to the mosque. The rest would return home for dinner.

The association took responsibility for registering its members with all of the appropriate agencies. Recording the quantity of family members (specifying how many children and adults), their phone number(s) and their ID numbers, representatives from the association would give each family’s information to each agency. Operating as intermediaries, these agencies, then, interacted directly with the association, which would relay to the families when assistance was available and where to go to pick it up. They would also follow up with each family to ensure that they received what they had been promised. Thus, when the association sensed any discrepancies – someone not receiving their allotted amount of rice, for example – they would advocate on their behalf, aiming to either obtain the missing food or receive a double portion during the next distribution.

Significantly, as the crisis developed, the aims of the various Timbuktian associations shifted. Accessing aid was always a challenge, particularly as different governmental and non-governmental organizations came and went throughout this time period. Nonetheless, following France’s military intervention, the associations’ priorities changed. Following Mahmoud, who co-organized an association of Timbuktian IDPs in Bamako:

In this moment [February 2013], we’re trying to find [national and international] partners to help with repatriation, to help people return to their city of origin. When we created the organization, we made many commissions, one to collect money, one to analyze
data, etc. Now we have a commission for return. We must prepare for return. Even if it takes 5-6 years to fight the occupation, we must prepare for return. Now Timbuktu isn’t occupied anymore, and people want to go back. But, some don’t have the means. So, we’re looking for funders. Life is hard in Bamako. Thus, some IDPs will just wait for the corridor to open, and they’ll return, even if they need to pay for the return trip on credit. But, if we can help even just a few people return, that will be a great satisfaction.

Clearly, these associations kept its leaders quite busy, managing hundreds of families in each city, all while navigating the constantly evolving, though always obfuscated system of aid. While my interlocutors did not articulate it in such explicit terms, I sense that organizing oneself into and participating in an association felt culturally and religiously appropriate. Indeed, it was a way to confront some of the hardships that most displaced Timbukti ans faced, though in a way that did not significantly disrupt their privileged understandings and expressions of privacy and modesty. Further, it did not overtly engage “the political,” which so many found inappropriate and potentially dangerous.

Timbuktian Political “Immobilization”

Prior to fieldwork I had been following the ongoing crisis from a distance via the Internet and through cell phone conversations with my Malian friends. During this time, and upon my immediate arrival in Bamako in January 2013, I erroneously searched for evidence of what I would have considered political mobilization. However, I should not have necessarily expected to find similar political expressions in the southern Sahara or northern Niger Bend as I have in New York City or Paris. At the same time, though, I did come across more familiar forms of mobilization among other regions and populations in Mali. Indeed, one of the precursors to Captain Sanogo’s coup d’état was
the protest in Bamako: the wives of soldiers killed in the massacre of Aguel’hoc and their supporters marched the 10 or so kilometers from the military base in Kati to the Presidential Palace, demanding better military conditions and a solution to intensifying insecurity in the North. Furthermore, throughout 2012, university students in Bamako took to the street to protest both the coup d’état and the continued occupation of the northern regions. Further north, too, citizens in Gao actively confronted the occupying militants and demonstrated against them. And of course, many in the Kidal region have contributed to public debate, manifested and even taken up arms since the colonial era (see Lecocq 2010).

As opposed to some of their regional counterparts, it would be inaccurate to characterize the actions of most Timbuktians during this time as overtly political. While those in Kidal, Gao, Mopti, Segou, Niafunke, Bamako and elsewhere were taking to the streets, for the most part, Timbuktians seemingly remained quiet. Of course, some Timbuktians did organize two protest marches in the early days of the occupation: as many of my Timbuktian interlocutors recalled, about three weeks after the MNLA, Ansar Dine and MUJAO entered the city, a contingent of Timbuktians – predominantly unmarried, male youths – held a manifestation, protesting “20 days of [Mali’s] abandonment.” A month or so later, many Timbuktian women organized a march, this time against the “Islamist” regime. Following these two manifestations, however, most Timbuktians – both those who remained in Timbuktu and those who were displaced – remained more subdued, especially relative to fellow northerners in Gao and Kidal.

Coercion and Exhaustion
My friends offered many explanations for why they did not take more direct political actions. The most common was the coerciveness of the militants in the North and the desperate nature of displacement. In other words, they were either too frightened or too exhausted to more explicitly condemn the occupiers, the Malian government and army, or the international community. As Hussein, who had been displaced in Mopti for almost a year by the time I had met him, explained:

We organized a march against [Captain] Sanogo. This was April 20 or 21 [in Timbuktu]. We informed the Imam of the Grand Mosque. At this time the MNLA and the Islamists were there. The march was not against them, but against the government in Bamako. The Imam was scared about the march. We were too. We met at Sankore. The MNLA didn’t stop us. But, then the Islamists came and told us to stop because we hadn’t informed them. But we said that we were going to do it, that it didn’t concern them. So, then their commissaire came and told us that we couldn’t march without informing them first. They thought we were marching against the them, but we repeated that we were marching against our government. The commissaire said that next time, we had to let them know. So, we proposed to march on May 1. So, then on May 1 they accompanied us. The MNLA passed to the side. We filmed our march. The people organized the march. The people were forced to organize this, but after that march, it was finished. Everyone was together in that march, but after that [the terrorists] began imposing shari’a. So marching like that became impossible.

Indeed, fear seemed to be the overriding factor influencing discontinued uprising. As Fanta, a friend’s sister who started working for the Red Cross in Sevare, told me, “The men [in Timbuktu] didn’t do anything; the people didn’t do anything; the women didn’t do anything…. Did you see what happened in Gao, how many died? Did you see the images? It was really catastrophic.”
At the same time, however, some Timbuktian women did march against the Islamists themselves. Kadidja, who remained in Timbuktu throughout the occupation and intervention, explained:

The women decided to organize a march [against MUJAO’s forcible recruitment and their imposition of shari’a]…. When the women started to march, the Islamists fired into the air…A Bambara in the Islamists then snatched one of the women. Then, the spokesman of the Islamists said, “Ok, stop.” He said to send seven women representatives, and they’d meet them and discuss why we’re marching. The rest could go home. I was in the meeting…. The Islamists said that we can’t march without getting authorization, and that they’re the only law in Timbuktu….The Islamists said that they wanted to imprison us for three months, but the Imam intervened and prevented that from happening. The Islamists said that we needed to re-veil ourselves, and they said that if they want to insult or hit us, they would, because we marched. This lasted until they went to Konna [in January 2013]. It was all very tiring. They wanted to beat me.

Intimidation and coercion seemed to be the dominant rationale as to why most Timbuktians – at least those who remained in Timbuktu under the occupation – did not directly engage the militants (or the Malian government) following the implementation of shari’a shortly into the occupation. Though, the exhausting daily practice of finding sufficient food surely also contributed. Many Timbuktian refugees similarly evoked intimidation and fatigue to justify their relative silence in the camps. Many of my interlocutors explained to me that the Burkinabe and Mauritanian authorities had declared the camps to be completely “non-political” spaces. Rahman, a friend who had been displaced in the Mentao Refugee Camp in northern Burkina Faso, explained that not even the Imams could deliver sermons at the makeshift mosques that they had constructed, for the Burkinabe officials had deemed religious sermons too political. Mobilization of any kind, it seemed, was cracked down upon immediately. And it was well known that
Burkinabé and Mauritanian officials could make life quite difficult for rabble-rousing refugees. Indeed, especially as many officials – according to the Timbuktians with whom I spoke at least – perceived most northern Malians as “terrorists” and “rebels,” it was easy to justify imprisoning troublemakers or otherwise make it difficult to access sufficient assistance.\(^\text{10}\)

Most Timbuktian IDPs – like those who remained in Timbuktu and those who fled to refugee camps – were equally exhausted by their circumstances. They, too, had to struggle to pay for food, rent and hospital bills. Furthermore, they were minorities, dispersed within towns and cities largely unfamiliar to them (at least initially). As such, and as mentioned in Chapter 3, they similarly struggled to re-establish community while in exile. Of course, Timbuktian IDPs did not endure the direct coercive regimes as those in Timbuktu under the occupation, or even those in refugee camps. However, many IDPs expressed feeling vulnerable, particularly as southerners attacked northerners, blaming them for the occupation and the subsequent political and economic hardships that affected all Malians.

**Hope**

Clearly, violence, intimidation, fear and fatigue contributed to a certain just-keep-your-head-down attitude among many Timbuktians. Another auxiliary factor, though, was hope. As previously discussed, most internally displaced Timbuktians were Songhay, and, to a lesser degree, Fulani and members of ethnic groups more typically associated with the South. As such, unlike their Tuareg and Arab counterparts, for the most part they lacked any direct experience of or history with displacement. Contrary to those in
the camps, therefore, most IDPs expressed what many of my refugee interlocutors laughed off as naïveté. Articulating hope in temporal terms, many IDPs, it seemed, were unable (or reluctant) to accurately gauge how long the occupation or intervention would last. The most common estimate was two weeks. Indeed, even before starting fieldwork, when I would email my friends about the occupation, most would assert that it would be over and they would be returning home in “just two weeks.”

I remember December 2013, less than a month before I was to begin my fieldwork, Timbuktu was relatively empty of militants, as they had travelled to Douentza and threatened to attack Konna. I called my friend, Ibrahim (who was internally displaced in Bamako at the time and ultimately picked me up at the airport). Worried that it was too dangerous to travel to Mali, I asked about the situation. “No worries, André. Southern Mali is safe. And in two weeks, the Malian military will push the terrorists back, or the international community will intervene.”

“But you’ve said that before,” I respectfully reminded him. “Only now the situation has changed. Now the terrorists are moving south.” But Ibrahim repeated the refrain that he had been telling me for nearly a year.

“It’ll be fine. And you’ll see, in two weeks, Timbuktu will be liberated.” (And, for the first time in nine months, he actually was not wrong.)

I found this two-week timeframe curious and interesting, though try as I might, I could never ascertain why nearly all of my interlocutors deployed it. I indirectly queried about liberation and peace and reconciliation, hovering around the time issue. I also just came out and, laughing, directly asked a group of friends, “Why the hell does everyone keep saying ‘two weeks?’” What’s so damn special about ‘two weeks?’” How, after a year
of crisis, can you keep saying ‘two weeks’?” I never got a satisfactory answer. Some of my interlocutors muttered something about the Malian army, but frequently others dismissed the suggestion that the Malian army was anything but useless and corrupt (see Chapter 4). But most others stated something vague about hope, and the importance of prayer and faith. “*Inshallah* the crisis will be over soon. We think that it might be because we pray to God,” said one older Timbuktian man with whom I chatted one day in Segou. The reason for the timeframe aside, though, many of my interlocutors agreed that the occupation would not last long, and that soon all of the displaced persons would return to Timbuktu. The frequent attitude that followed, then, seemed to be: If we’ll be going home in a couple of weeks, why stir the pot now?

The refugee population held out a less temporalized, more institutionalized, kind of hope, one predicated a particular, somewhat constraining, social and political relationship with the MNLA. Refugee status was complicated for the Tuareg and Arab Timbuktians in the camps because the MNLA laid a certain political claim over the refugee populations, stating that the organization represented them. Not all refugees supported the MNLA, though this was not a sentiment most felt they could widely publicize. Nonetheless, to most Tuareg and Arab refugees, they had to place hope in – or, differently stated, a kind of institutionalized loyalty with – the MNLA to negotiate with the Malian government to resolve the occupation and permit safe return. Clearly, hope here is tied to fear. For, most were afraid of harsh military reprisals against those ethnic groups associated with the MNLA. In order to preserve the perception of a “united front,” and not alienate themselves from what seemed like the one regional organization dedicated to protecting them, my interlocutors in the camps explained that few refugees
were willing to march, protest, etc. Instead, they waited, smiling at the thought of MNLA leadership meeting with representatives from Mali, ECOWAS and the UN.

Hope increased while a sense of political urgency decreased the moment that the French intervened in January 2013. At that time, many – IDPs more than refugees – adamantly insisted that the crisis was over and that the whole of the North would be secured immediately. And as described in Chapter 3, some of my interlocutors even bought bus and boat tickets to return to Timbuktu only days after the French forced the militants out of Konna, before Timbuktu had even been reclaimed. The intervention was both a source of hope and a major distraction, which is not to suggest that displaced Timbuktians would have mobilized had the French military not intervened. However, it did increase hopeful sentiments, as well as exacerbate certain worries and social pressures. Indeed, once France began combating the militants approaching Mopti, most of my displaced Timbuktian interlocutors became inseparable from their phone radios and any television set they could find. Initially, they feared collateral damage. After confirming their families and friends’ safety, though, they yearned for the official declaration of Timbuktu’s “liberation” and the “end of the crisis.”

Both political crisis and militarization sometimes increases nationalistic sentiments among (certain facets of) the state’s citizenry (see Malkki 1995; Trouillot 1990:30-1). This certainly was the case in Mali. Indeed, the French intervention spiked a sense of nationalism among most Malians, even some from Gao and Timbuktu.12 Declaring French President Francois Hollande a national hero, one could see Malian and French flags everywhere. Many – southern and northern Malian alike – yelled “Vive Hollande! Vive la France! Vive le Mali!” as French tanks and armored vehicles crawled
to the North on the only highway. Some even joked with me that we would see a spike in the popularity of both “Francois” and “Hollande” as first names for sons born in Mali in 2013!

However, this also relates to the fear described above. As I have already mentioned, many southern Malians had already blamed northern Malians for the occupation. Therefore, even for those displaced Timbuktians critical of the French and/or the intervention, critiquing them would have served as further evidence of their supposed terrorist sympathies. Many Timbuktian children learned that it was important (and fun) to demonstrate their support for the French. Indeed, on more than one occasion, when a group of displaced Timbuktian children saw me walking by, mistaking me for a French journalist or humanitarian worker, they rushed up and, grinning widely, jumped in a circle around me, chanting, “Hollande! Hollande! Mali! Mali!”

This is not to suggest, though, that most Timbuktians were critical of the intervention or sought to make more explicit political claims against the French. Indeed, in the minds of most of my Timbuktian interlocutors, President Hollande was the reason for their imminent return home. And this, not unsurprisingly, many told me they desired “more than politics.” “We don’t want to march, we want to go home,” said Awa, an exhausted mother of four, all of whom were displaced in Mopti. “Or maybe, if we march, let’s do it in Timbuktu!” Indeed, many of my interlocutors said, “I just want to go back to Timbuktu.” Most IDPs even suggested that they did not even need to wait for a formal reconciliation. To be sure, as mentioned above, those in the refugee camps did emphasize the need for some kind of accord or ceasefire. Nonetheless, even there, most
echoed what Drissa, an IDP in Bamako, told me, “We don’t care how it’s done, we just want to go home. Inshallah, it will be soon.”

Inexperience

According to some of my interlocutors, another reason why most Timbuktians did not organize marches, demonstrations and so on comes down to inexperience. I witnessed this firsthand. During my time in Bamako, some Timbuktian IDPs wanted to organize a march to the national monument in heart of the city to protest their continued displacement. However, the vast majority of the organizers were not displaced per se. While it would have been unsafe for them to return to Timbuktu, most were students at the university and had moved to Bamako prior to the occupation. University student groups have a long history of organizing and mobilization in Bamako. Indeed, these groups have long created spaces where students from both Bamako and other urban and rural areas in Mali can engage, develop and reproduce Marxist and leftist discourses, (see Mann 2015; Soares 2005; Lecocq 2010). In the past, these groups have operationalized these discourses in anti-corruption campaigns and the pursuit of more progressive policies regarding the university, unionization, freedom of speech and the press and so on (see Mann 2015). Typically, student collective action has taken the form of marches and rallies, civil disobedience (including creating unofficial roadblocks and organizing strikes), “rock the vote” events, etc.

For the most part, demoralized and overly politicized, both these student organizations and Malian intellectuals (either former leftist politicians or university professors) remained relatively silent following the coup d’état and occupation of the
North (Mann 2015:246). However, aware of this history of student-led mobilization, later in 2013 I asked some of my university interlocutors if they had considered organizing some kind of event, and if not, why? It remains unclear to me if their desire was there before I inquired about this, or emerged in response to my question. (On the one hand, I fear that they might have felt pressured; on the other hand, though, I worry that such fears give me far too much credit.) Regardless, many of my Timbuktian interlocutors at the university did say that they wanted to stage a protest to draw attention to and condemn continued northern Malian instability, the ongoing refugee crisis and their perceived government inaction. On more than one occasion, these students asked me to discuss the idea with other displaced Timbuktian youth, feeling that the plan of a political march would be more convincing coming from an American. I led no meetings, but when asked my opinion on matters, I willingly—though carefully—shared it.

These meetings were quite informal, usually taking place in the early evening just in front of someone’s rented house. Over tea, these largely young, all-male groupings discussed the occupation, the politics of the intervention and the hardships that their friends and families constantly navigated in southern Malian cities and in the refugee camps. Unfortunately, these meetings lacked significant collaboration and failed to establish significant praxis (see Freire 2008 [1970]). Typically, the university students did most of the talking, that is, until someone who had experienced the Tuareg Rebellion of the 1990s as an adult came by. When that happened, one usually gave up a seat and allowed him to recount his experiences and reflections. However, when it came time to discuss personal experiences with the occupation – experiences that most of the students lacked because they were already in Bamako the weekend that Timbuktu was overrun –
they often turned to me. At more than one of these meetings, when this transition occurred, I was asked, “André, you’ve talked to the displaced in Segou, Mopti, Sevare and in the camps. What have you learned?” This often made me uncomfortable, because many of the students positioned me as an authority, rather than their peers who had actually lived through the initial days, weeks and months of the occupation. In response, I would often provide a brief summary of what I had perceived to be common experiences and then quickly invite one of the displaced members to participate. At this point, many of my displaced interlocutors would speak, but it usually was not long before their university counterparts would cut them off in order to comment on the value of protesting and then invite me to agree.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite these meetings, most Timbuktian IDPs (and even some Timbuktian students, too) felt uncomfortable with the idea of staging a protest. Many – particularly those without a university education – feared the exposure that their participation would create. They worried – not illegitimately – how the Bamako police force and/or the Malian army might react. Others (and as I elaborate upon below; see, too, Chapter 4) alluded to sutura, suggesting that putting oneself on display would be existentially inappropriate or dangerous. Some Timbuktian IDPs also suggested that protesting, civil disobedience and so on were ineffective political strategies. “What good will that do?” more than one of my interlocutors asked. “I think we must be patient instead.” Consequently, perceiving the march either as a (potentially futile) threat to their livelihoods or as the equivalent as a day’s work, much to the university students’ frustration, many only agreed to march if they would receive some form of compensation.
Many of the university-educated Timbuktians with whom I spoke complained that such reservations revealed non-university educated Timbuktians’ inexperience with political protesting. It also revealed different and conflicting philosophical orientations towards mobilization between the two groups. Indeed, most of my university interlocutors had spent the past few years in Bamako, studying, improving their Bambara and regularly interacting with a more politically mobilized cohort. However, for most of my displaced interlocutors, this was their first time spending significant time outside of the North. And when the university students first introduced the idea of protesting, many Timbuktian IDPs expressed certain reservations regarding such overt forms of political mobilization. Privileging the more Eurocentric philosophy taught in the university—not to mention the political activism practiced by many Bamako-based youths—many Timbuktian students privately complained to me about how “primitive” most Timbuktians were for “not understanding” the value of taking to the streets and making their grievances public.

Speaking with some of the Timbuktian student leaders following these meetings, it was not long before I realized that a protest would never happen. “We [the university-educated Timbuktians] are too few;” “The displaced [Timbuktians] are too ignorant and too unorganized;” “The police are too dangerous,” different students told me. Some leaders blamed the Timbuktians’ inexperience, asking how a protest could possibly succeed with such “amateurs.” From my perspective, however, this also revealed the inexperience of the Timbuktian student leaders when it came to organizing. Never before, it seems, had they been confronted with the task of mobilizing non-university students. And as a result, some of their methods ultimately served to alienate Timbuktian IDPs
rather than incorporate and cooperate with them. Due to their university education, many perceived themselves as the natural leaders of collective action. This presumption, however, exacerbated some of the negative (and not necessarily unfounded) perceptions that many under-educated Timbuktians already maintained – i.e., a certain elitism among the university students – and it prevented the development of solidarity and a willingness to mobilize. Indeed, I overheard more than one IDP grumble, “They think they’re better than we are.” Others accused these leaders of being as corrupt as the politicians they intended to protest: “You just watch, they’ll ask for dues or a collection, but they they’ll just eat the money.”

There are many factors – intimidation, fatigue, hope and inexperience – that seemed to have influenced a preference for what my interlocutors articulated as nonpolitical collective action over more overt forms of political mobilization among displaced Timbuktian communities. We must take seriously the practical challenges that displaced Timbuktians faced in southern Mali and in refugee camps in Burkina Faso and Mauritania. At the same time, however, we must not divorce fear, hope and inexperience from Timbuktian understandings of privacy. For this, too, affected how my Timbuktian interlocutors conceptualized the sociocultural appropriateness and effectiveness of particular strategies of action in the face of occupation and displacement.

**Politics and Privacy**

One summer day in the midst of my fieldwork, I was hanging out in Timbuktu with Aziz and Youssouf, two of my closest Timbuktian friends. They had known each other since childhood, but by this time, they had become pretty used to me as well. And
vice versa. As was our custom, following that afternoon’s lunch, the three of us chatted while what seemed like the rest of the town napped. We lazily prepared some tea and Youssouf chain-smoked his cigarettes.

Aziz: [As if to no one, alluding to the Arab Spring] The revolution [in Mali] will come. The revolution will come. You know why? Two things. First, nobody in Timbuktu during the occupation, nobody, didn’t handle a gun at least once. Second, we witnessed lots of death. [Pause, then continuing, only now more intense and looking Youssouf and me in the eyes.] I mean, think of the kamikaze [suicide bomber]. All of the children witnessed it. And then they went up and touched the body. They’re going to grow up with that; it’s going to change them, alter their mentality, their spirit. They’re not going to be afraid of dying.

Me: But, why wait? Why is it the responsibility of the younger generation to start “the revolution”? As you said, you’ve all now experienced weapons, and you all witnessed death. What are you waiting for? [Then, losing my cool and discarding any sense of academic “objectivity,” I threw my hands up.] Everyone tells me that they just want work like before. They want the schools and banks to be running like before. “Like before!” The situation was shitty before! And now that’s all anyone wants. Why are you looking to the past when you should be looking to the future?

Youssouf: [Laughing.] Oh, look, the American gets it! [Pause, and then more seriously.] But no, we don’t have the right mentality yet. We’re not like Tunisia or Egypt.

Aziz: You need to have guns to have respect in this country, and money. And we don’t have either. We’re too poor.
Me: But in Tunisia and Egypt they didn’t have guns. They just demonstrated.

Aziz: Yes, but we don’t have a leader. Maybe there’s someone with the ideas for a revolution right now, but he doesn’t have the means of creating it. Or maybe there’s someone with the means, but doesn’t have the right ideas yet. That will take time.

Youssouf: But the revolution will come.

Aziz: We need the right man to organize 10,000 people. But right now, we don’t have the right mentality. It’d take a great man just to organize 20 others, let alone 10,000. No one will contribute to a cause. They all want to know how they’ll “benefit directly”. That means money. And right now, any time there’s a march and people give a small contribution, the leader eats most of the money. Who’s going to follow someone like that?

By “revolution” Youssouf and Aziz seemed to be vaguely referring to some political action that would either make Mali more accountable to the North, or that would provide the North with increased autonomy (even independence). Aside from the few former-MNLA fighters and MNLA sympathizers with whom I spoke, practically no northern Malians perceived the crisis of 2012-2013 as the—or even a—revolution. Commonly referring to any combatant – regardless of their affiliation to the MNLA, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, AQMI, etc. – as a “terrorist,” most reiterated that the occupation was not even political. “How could [the occupation] be a revolution?” more than one of my friends interlocutors. “Did we vote for it? Does it have the weight of the people behind it? No.” Instead, many maintained that the occupation was the product of a hodgepodge assemblage of invaders who represent minority interests (i.e., certain Tuareg families, radical Jihadi-Salafi terrorist organizations and narco-traffic networks).
Many Timbuktians, however, expressed (in their own ways) both their contempt for the Malian government and army, and their desire to alter Malian political structures so that such an occupation does not repeat itself. Indeed, despite many people’s— including, initially, my—dismissal of Timbuktians’ supposed political immobilization, most were acutely aware of the political circumstances surrounding the Malian crisis (see Abu-Lughod 2013; Chapter 4). Particularly my Tuareg and Forgeron interlocutors whose families had experienced displacement more than once over the past couple decades complained of both the economic and emotional exhaustion of being displaced twice in the span of two decades. Nonetheless, very few Timbuktians interpreted the occupation as a moment to demand the structural change they insisted was necessary. Instead, as I complained of during some of my conversations with Aziz and Youssouf, many wanted the situation to “go back to normal,” to “go back to how it was.”

Of course, part of the reason for this is at least partially retrospective. Back in 2010 many of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke complained about a weak Malian economy, being forgotten by Bamako, and so on. Nonetheless, given the harsh conditions of the occupation and displacement, nostalgic remembering and forgetting (see Piot 2010; Rasmussen 2008) made the situation of 2010 seem more and more pleasant to many. However, such romanticization coupled with seeming inaction also relates to the strong Timbuktian faith in a Divine plan (as discussed in Chapter 3). Recall that most Timbuktians (including the youth) asserted their religious and educational exceptionalism. Compared to other northern and southern Malian regions, they argued, Timbuktu is a special site of religious knowledge and expression. Timbuktian parents and grandparents have continued to tell stories of Al-Farouk, the town’s sacred protector,
a *jinn* who rides at night on a brilliant white horse. Al-Farouk is a sign of Timbuktian piety, which, as I analyzed in the previous chapter, requires patience, moderation and privacy as an expression of faith. Such religious knowledge and expressions, my interlocutors argued, help Timbuktians to weather contemporary political hardship, just as they supposedly did in the past.

Towards the end of my time in Timbuktu, I organized an interview with DJ Cool, the stage name of a local 20-something-year-old musician who used rap as a mechanism of social justice. A minority even amongst younger Timbuktians, DJ Cool was outspoken. He attempted to unify Timbuktian youth and mobilize them against the threats of a new occupation. In particular, he stressed interethnic solidarity and condemned religious extremism. He explained to me the difficulties he regularly encountered:

> The older generations, I think, are afraid. But we, the [unmarried] youth, are ready for anything. Here in Timbuktu, it’s a town that doesn’t like war. It loves peace. That’s why older people were more restrained. It’s easier for the younger people to be active. The youth do a lot of things. The old don’t do anything. Even if you organize a march, the old won’t come. They’ll tell us it’s bad, that it will result in a fight. When we youth want to do something, the old will tell us not to. But here’s the problem: when you get married, you have a lot more responsibilities. And there are many things that you don’t want your in-laws to see. There are a lot of things you don’t want to show publicly. When you’re married, it’s not easy to do something.

Interestingly, during a conversation with Boubacar, a friend of DJ Cool, he told me that despite being unmarried, he never marched during the occupation or following the intervention. Neither he, nor other unmarried men, he argued, would be willing to significantly put themselves on display socially or politically. “I didn’t want anyone to discover me,” he said. “Maybe if I was married it would be easier. That way I would
have my own house. I wouldn’t be living with my father, and he wouldn’t know
everything that I was up to.”

During my fieldwork, some of my Timbuktian interlocutors reiterated DJ Cool’s
sentiments, whereas other reiterated Boubacar’s. Indeed, sometimes the same individual
at different times claimed that it would be too difficult to be politically active while
unmarried as well as while married. While unmarried, being too visible risked shaming
one’s father. And while married, being too visible risked shaming one’s father-in-law as
well. The common denominator here, however, is the local social and religious
prohibition against overexposure. (Indeed, I emphasize the word “prohibition.” Many of
Timbukians described how they negotiated privacy and publicity using an idiom of fear.
However, while most of my interlocutors mentioned being afraid of overexposure, this
fear seems to differ from that described above, the fear of the jihadists’ beatings or the
army’s coercive tactics. For, the result of overexposure is shame, whereas the perceived
result of crossing the jihadists or army was pain, incarceration and death.)

Throughout the occupation and the intervention, most of my Timbuktian
interlocutors expressed that they felt that they could do little but wait on the sidelines.
Perceiving that Gao received more military and humanitarian assistance due to the
residents’ continued protesting and Ganda Koy’s attempted involvement in local defense,
more than one discouraged Timbuktian youth, for example, complained that all older—
and thus, respected and authoritative—Timbuktian men know how to do is pray. Many
expressed frustration in the face of such perceived powerlessness. Some Timbuktian
youths in particular – but, as indicated in the opening vignette, some Timbuktian women,
too – felt frustrated by the demands to remain private, demure, and pious. Some
begrudged the demands to not put oneself – and by extension, one’s family – on
display. As my friend, Issa, told me, “The custom of Timbuktu is to be content with
what you have. I don’t know why. It’s a little bizarre. Maybe Timbuktiens lack a
certain sense, or heart. Maybe they’re afraid. In Gao, there were lots of confrontations
[with the terrorists]. But here, even though [the terrorists] did lots of unjust things, no
one said anything.” Indeed, as Mohamed, one of my displaced interlocutors from Gao,
explained: “After the amputations started, many in Gao said, “Enough is enough.” They
flew the Malian flag and chanted, “Mali! Mali!” The people started marching….In
Timbuktu, the youth ask permission from the older people. In Gao, the youth decided
and acted.”

I do not submit, however, that all Timbuktiens thought that they should have been
or should become more outwardly vocal. Quite the contrary, in fact. As I have explained,
a handful of Timbuktiens youths recognized the sociocultural limits on their opportunities
to more explicitly mobilize themselves. While perhaps romanticizing Gao’s more overt
mobilization, many also stated that its residents may have aggravated the situation there,
causing even greater hardship. Indeed, some of the same individuals who criticized most
Timbuktiens’ seeming inaction at different times suggested that Timbuktu’s reaction was
“well done” relative to Gao’s. I emphasize, however, that displaced Timbuktiens did not
merely sit around waiting, doing nothing. Indeed, as I detailed above and in the previous
chapters, Timbuktiens IDPs and refugees collectively and individually engaged in daily
struggles to manage the economic and emotional difficulties of displacement.

Conclusion
In the face of social and political crisis, we must not presume that the organizers and participants of subsequent collective action maintained the same (Eurocentric) political and ideological understandings of self-organizing as others do elsewhere (Bevington & Dixon 2005). Theorists of social movements often highlight the supposed politically predominant role of identity, for example, or the import of a centralized organizational structure (Castells 1997, in Edelman 2001:298). As I have described, though, while Timbuktian self-organizing is largely identity-based – that is, self-help groups primarily prioritize shared notions of Timbuktian belonging, and to a lesser degree notions of gender and ethnicity – my interlocutors were often reluctant to politicize Timbuktian identity. Further, few displaced Timbuktian self-help groups in southern Mali or Burkina Faso were preoccupied with connecting to Malian state structures or affiliating with international humanitarian organizations. Similarly, Timbuktian collective action remained fairly decentralized. While each association might have an executive board, and while each association represented similar interests and the needs of displaced Timbuktians, there was little to no official interaction between an association in Sevare, for example, and one in Bamako.

We must not misinterpret the relative non-politicization of my Timbuktian interlocutors, though, as their ignorance of the politics surrounding their circumstances. To be sure, as I elaborated upon in the previous chapter many displaced Timbuktians were keenly aware of the complex local, national and international politics surrounding the Malian crisis. Similarly, we must not misinterpret this non-politicization as a community’s inability to engage the political processes. In other words, I do not wish to fully rearticulate Scott’s (1985) notion of symbolic- or micro-power in the southern
Sahara and the Sahel. Contrary to the manner in which many peasant – that is, marginal and peripheral – societies are (mis)represented, Timbuktian society in the 21st century has not suffered a totalitarian government that effectively turns residents into non-citizens and robs them of agency. I reiterate that peripheries are known for their creativity and negotiation vis-à-vis centers (Chatterjee 2004; Das & Poole 2004; see Chapter 5). And while states often render the processes localized in peripheral zones illegible (Roitman 2004), we must not conflate legibility with agency, or conversely, illegibility with a lack of agency.

Given such disparate notions of politics and political mobilization, though, I do not wish to suggest that Timbuktian collective action was actually political after all, despite Timbuktian understandings of the nonpolitical nature of their self-organizing. Perhaps Timbuktian associations were political without intending to be. Perhaps they represented a political mobilization of a different sort, one not immediately recognized as such because it was not articulated in the modern, Eurocentric framework through which many tend to situate and legitimize agency, mobilization and/or resistance (see Abu-Lughod 2013; Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005). Clearly, community action can have direct and indirect political effects, whether intentional or not (see Bergoffen 2004; Limbert 2010:82-114; McClintock 1993; Russell 2003:279-295; Thorton 2000). And we must consider political mobilization and contestation beyond the narrow frameworks of party politics (Przeworski et al. (2000:15, from Wedeen [2008:107])). Importantly, though, most of my Timbuktian interlocutors did not perceive themselves or the actions that they have taken while displaced to be political in nature. Indeed, as I discussed above, most
explicitly rejected the suggestion that political mobilization would be desirable, let alone effective. These understandings must be taken seriously.

Whether or not Timbuktian collective action was political – or, said differently, had political ramifications – is not the point. Instead, I have attempted to map how Timbuktian understandings of their positionality within the Malian political landscape during the occupation, not to mention their perceptions of the limitations of political action in general, influenced what they characterized as their non-political collective action. Linking collective action during the occupation and military intervention with forms of self-organizing that were socioculturally meaningful prior to the Malian crisis, I have aimed to demonstrate how displaced Timbuktians’ discourses revealed something important about how they managed the hardships of displacement and situated themselves within the broader crisis. Unlike their counterparts from Gao or Kidal, for example, who experienced many of the same challenges in southern Mali and in refugee camps, most displaced Timbuktians did not spout the importance of rallies, armed protest and so on. Instead, they negotiated intersecting transnational military and humanitarian forces via privileged locally-articulated expressions of privacy and mutual aid. Such an inward looking and non-political subjectivity, I posit, is the product of and subsequently reproduces such local cultural expressions.
Notes

1 I differentiate Timbuktian associations here from Qur’anic study groups, often gatherings of adult learners led by a marabout or someone else with more specialized Islamic learning.

2 To my knowledge, this was not always the case, particularly as more elderly male Timbuktians suggest that their associations were male-only. It is also unclear how female membership in associations changed following her marriage, and what would be seen as a necessary reorientation of priorities to her family. Furthermore, the coed nature of contemporary associations is not to suggest that there are not gendered organizations – i.e., female-only or male-only – that are also culturally and socially significant.

3 This is not to suggest that Timbuktians only ever hung out with members of their association. Nor is it to suggest that associations were constantly organizing activities. It was not so formal. Instead, these were friendships that also happened to solidify into associations. In the case of picnicking, for example, while most groups belonged to the same association, it would be false to refer to the picnic as an “association-sponsored” event.

4 Such organizations were also likely present in other hubs of Timbuktian displacement, such as Nouakchott, Mauritania and Niamey, Niger, not to mention other Malian cities and towns further south, such as Kayes and Sikasso. However, as I was unable to adequately visit these sites, and local communication remained difficult, I cannot confirm this.

5 Of course, IDPs and refugees from Gao and Kidal also formed associations to help navigate the hardships of displacement. However, within the unique context of Timbuktians’ privileged ethic of privacy, their associations hold a special theoretical significance in that they allow them to gain assistance and help one another while limiting – though not completely eliminating – the need to put oneself on display.

6 Recall, not all refugees were in camps. Particularly for those who stayed in cities outside of Mali, while they had access to assistance, it was not as regularly and evenly distributed as it was for those in more formal camp settings.

7 Some of these organizations include CARE Mali, Caritas, Red Cross/Red Crescent, the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNHCR. They also included local missions, clinics, schools and associations with international partners. Finally, both the United Nations and the French army partnered with various West African forces maintained a humanitarian branch to their military offensive.

8 At least “political” in the sense that most Westerners and most Malians typically interpret the term.

9 By discussing “the streets,” I do not wish to suggest that protesting, marching and so on are the only overt forms of political mobilization that makes claims on the state. Indeed, many theorists have examined how performance and satire, for example, are also explicitly political activities (see Haugerud 2012; Klein 2011; Thiong’o 1987 [1981]).

10 I witnessed and experienced some of this coercion firsthand while in the Burkinabe refugee camps. It seemed that most officials feared the dissemination of negative press – or any press, really – concerning the camp, and worried that foreign, especially White, journalists or NGO workers might mobilize refugee populations. Few European or North American visitors were permitted to enter the Burkinabe camps, most of my friends inferred. And those who were, were often followed by armed officials who eavesdropped on interviews and pre-approved which photos could be taken. Indeed, it was quite difficult for me to gain entry to these camps, and I was only able to do so because I had so many refugee friends who were able to vouch for me and help me navigate bureaucratic red tape. The Mbera Refugee Camp in Mauritania was even more notorious. Mobilization of any kind, I was told, was immediately quashed due to “security concerns.” And to my knowledge, only a handful of Euro-American outsiders have been permitted to enter, and only then by official escort. Despite my efforts, and despite multiple invitations by friends in the camp, I could not gain entry. Indeed, I could not even get within 100 miles of the site before being turned away.

11 Indeed, this fear was based on the memory of past events, when the Malian army massacred many Tuareg and Arab encampments during the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s (Lacocq 2010).

12 However, due to a different and complicated history with both Bamako and the MNLA, most of those from Kidal did not celebrate the French intervention, nor did it substantially increase their sense of Malian nationalism. Indeed, many were dismayed when the French intervened because it simultaneously weakened MNLA’s political position with the Malian government.
In this sense, these Timbuktian friends reflect broader patterns that suggest that despite the degraded state of public universities throughout the African continent, they remain sites of critique and political mobilization on behalf of political change, even in the face of more authoritarian and corrupt government regimes (Lebeau 2008).

Indeed, political exploitation and insecurity, while sometimes mobilizing people politically, can also have the opposite effect (see Eberle & Holliday 2011).

16 A jinn is a supernatural being, a significant component of Muslim cosmologies. Some are good, while others are bad, and they can have direct interactions with the human realm (see Crapanzano 1973).

17 In this section, I am purposefully not writing that my Timbuktian interlocutors felt frustrated or confined by (the rules of) sutura. Sutura was rarely described to me so directly or formally. Instead, many—often in a vague, meandering way—expressed the need to remain private, stay off the street, not disappoint one’s family or in-laws, and so on. I attempt to reflect such expressions in my own writing.
In early May 2015, after agreeing to a preliminary ceasefire months prior (BBC 2015), the Malian government and various Tuareg rebel groups were poised to sign the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali from the Algiers Process. Twenty-eight months after the French intervention began, the Agreement would hypothetically stabilize much of the North. In exchange for a continued ceasefire and an end to all claims of the independence of Azawad, it stipulated intensified decentralization and self-determination in northern Mali, a recognition of the importance of Mali’s ethnic diversity, and the increased economic investment throughout the northern regions (Al-Jazeera 2015; UN 2015). By addressing the issue of regional separatism and Tuareg nationalism, so the logic behind the Agreement seemed, all parties – including the Malian government, the French and UN troops, as well as northern Malian communities – could address the “real” issue of transnational Jihadi-Salifism.

Also in early May 2015, Abdel, one of my closest friends in Timbuktu, collected a couple thousand CFA ($3.50 USD) to purchase an international calling card. When my phone rang, I was surprised to hear his voice on the other side of the choppy and delayed connection—this was far from the first time that we had communicated since I had returned to New York following my fieldwork, but normally we text via Facebook Messenger. We exchanged the expected greetings.

“How are you doing?” “I’m fine, hamdulillai.”

“How is your health?” “It’s strong, hamdulillai.”

“How is your family?” “They’re fine, hamdulillai.”
“Please send your family my greetings.” “I will, inshallah.”

And vice versa.

Then the conversation paused. Normally, I would have given Abdel time to collect his thoughts and say his piece. But, knowing how expensive the international phone rates were, I anticipated that he had no more than 90 seconds before his connection would cut out. I asked – this time as a question, not as a greeting – if everything was alright.

Everything was not alright. A couple of days back, his uncle had died in the Mbera refugee camp in Mauritania after prolonged illness. However, sad and not the least bit bitter, Abdel suggested that it was less sickness and more exhaustion and the hardships of the infamous camp that finally took his uncle’s life. Left behind was Abdel’s aunt and cousin, now widowed and orphaned. It was nighttime in Timbuktu when he called, and I imagine him pacing, alone, away from the inquisitive ears of younger siblings. Following another brief pause, Abdel finally said, “I am the oldest son. This is my responsibility. My aunt, she is the sister of my mother, so she is also my mother. That means that my cousin is my brother. I need to travel to Mbera to bring them back to Timbuktu. They cannot do it themselves. But, I have nothing. If you please, André, I need you to send me some help.”

“Some help.” Neither then, nor during our subsequent conversations would Abdel ever use the word “money,” even when I asked how much “help” he needed. It was awkward for both of us – I needed to know how much to wire him, but he was reluctant to say more than “whatever you are comfortable sending.” The next day, I transferred him some money and bid him safe travels and the best of luck. He thanked
me and said that, *inshallah*, he would contact me in two to three weeks, when he regained
an Internet connection upon returning to Timbuktu. However, just three days after his
departure, he sent me a desperate message:

I am back in Diré. The bus made it to Leré, but a group of armed
bandits stopped us. They were Tuareg, probably former rebels.
They took everything we had. They stole my phone. I am
borrowing this one to message you. They took the money. It is
too dangerous to continue to Mbera. Plus, there is not [sic] money.
I am scared even to stay in Diré. Yesterday in Leré this group
stopped a bus and killed two passengers. I am lucky. But my aunt
and cousin must stay in Mbera. I am going back to Timbuktu. I
will contact you soon.

The accord has since been signed, and the sponsoring and supporting entities –
Mali, most of the (former) rebel groups, France, Algeria, the USA, ECOWAS, the UN –
made public congratulations (UN 2015). Nonetheless, many of my Timbuktian
interlocutors, not to mention many scholars of the Sahelio-Saharan region, doubted the
ultimate strength and duration of the accord, particularly because the largest, and
arguably most influential, rebel group expressed substantial reservations in signing it or
abiding by its provisions (Moran 2015). Indeed, the accord does little to address the
historically-rooted nationalist, ethnic and racialized reasons behind Tuareg nationalism
and northern separatism. Nor has the accord seemed to have had an immediate effect on
decreasing violence in the North. After all, it was not a group of Jihadi-Salifists, but
former (and potentially current) armed rebels who were likely targeting vehicles in
northern Mali despite a formal ceasefire. Consequently, the accord has done nothing to
assuage Abdel’s anxiety of traveling to Mbera. His aunt and cousin remain in Mauritania,
while he remains in Timbuktu, all three too afraid and too impoverished to reunite.
A Weak of a Failed State?

Despite the *Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali from the Algiers Process*, many journalists and political commentators have anticipated ongoing conflict in northern Mali. Further, they have continued to label Mali – and most other Sahelian countries – as “weak” (see Carson 2013; Kraxberger 2013; Watanabe 2015). Citing ongoing humanitarian crises, the inability to secure borders, the entrenchment of Jihadi-Salafist and terrorist groups, a weak military, the coup d’état and interethnic tension, many have characterized Mali as a failed state (see Mann 2015: 243-248). Some have even pointed to the existence of the periphery itself – not to mention crisis in the periphery – as evidence of Mali’s weakness and failure. Indeed, questioning the sincerity of both the Malian and the rebel groups, some have suggested that northern Mali is destined to remain “in crisis.” I take issue with this characterization, though.

A state is considered “failed” when it is deemed – to return to Weber’s definition – to have lost its monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force (Patrick 2007). Successful states are deemed to have an effective central government capable of providing security and public services to its citizenry. Failed states, on the contrary, are deemed to have a relatively ineffective central government, rife with corruption and criminality, not to mention the displacement of its citizens, sharp economic decline, and the inability to monitor or survey its populations. Notably, many states are considered to be failed when some of its cities or regions fall outside of state control (see Gros 1996; Kaplan 2008; Rotberg 2004). This is significant, for legal scholars and policy makers rarely cite democracy, rights and/or social justice, for example, as indicators of “strong states” (see Hallaq 2010 [2009], 2014). Rather, sovereignty over everyday life – even
when such sovereignty, often using discourses of security, infringes upon the rights and freedoms of the citizenry – remains the preeminent barometer for so-call strength versus weakness (see Agamben 2005).

Such a framework certainly positions Mali as failed. The failed state, however, is an arbitrary, Eurocentric designation, one whose primary goals often seems to justify neocolonial military intervention in the Global South (Call 2008). Furthermore, the notion itself is a gloss over an otherwise complex intertwining of systems and institutions. State forms are not universal; they change and are changeable. And, the forms that particular states take affect their “content,” what ultimately shapes into the state. In other words, for an entity to become a fully realized state, it must adopt certain structures and subjectivities (Hallaq 2014:21). “Failed” states, therefore are not necessarily weak (nor, as I have suggested, are “non-failed” states necessarily strong). However, they may not adopt the presupposed binary configuration of power that situates authority in state centers and marginalization in peripheries. As I have discussed, state power can be simultaneously contested and considered logical, normal or justifiable (see Asad 2004; Trouillot 1990:18). Indeed, power – and by extension, a state – is ambivalent. That a given state does not conform to a European model of what a state should look like, therefore, does not make it “failed” (Maroyo 2003).

Neither peripheries themselves, nor crisis in peripheral zones, are evidence of a state’s purported failure. Even though they are locked in unequal relations centers and peripheries are not binary opposites; they are enmeshed in one another (Das & Poole 2004:22). Gramsci (2005 [1971]:160) states, for example, that “since in actual reality civil society and state are one and the same, it must be made clear that laissez-faire too is
a form of state ‘regulation,’ introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means.”

In other words, the “free hand of the market,” a lack of regulation, is in itself a relationship between state and civil society. It is a relationship that is protected and maintained. We must think of center-periphery similarly. Again, some conceptualize peripheral zones as areas devoid of state influence or intrusion. Others interpret them as the absence or limit of the state. Such conceptualizations, however, fail to acknowledge the very real (institutional) relationships that occur between center and periphery, relationships examined in the Chapters 4 and 5.

The weak or failed state model is elevated by the pervading conception that states—as sovereign, legitimate, bureaucratic, hierachical and territorialized institutions—remain incomplete projects until all regions, inhabitants and activities are rendered legible. Indeed, one of states’ primary projects, in the words of Foucault (1963), is to convert people into populations that are monitored and surveyed. As such, peripheral zones are often interpreted as evidence of a state’s weakness because its residents are not always integrated into the state in the manner of their counterparts in the state center. We must remember, though, that a state—including both its center and periphery—is strategically produced. “The term ‘strategy’ connotes a great variety of products and actions: it combines peace with war, the arms trade with deterrence in the event of crisis, and the use of resources from peripheral spaces with the use of riches from industrial, urban, state-dominated centres” (Lefebvre 2008:84).

Euro-American conceptualizations of states and the over-emphasis of the supposedly contingent relationship between center and periphery are arbitrary (Asad 2004:287). They characterize the practices (and crises) in peripheries as “non-state.”
Because we also consider – rather, have been taught to consider – peripheral zones as “wild” and “savage” as opposed to regimented and disciplined (see Foucault 1995), we tend to interpret the practices in peripheries as different from those in the center. As different as they might be, though, we must not overstate the case. Inherently privileging the practices situated in state centers, we have come to perceive them as (relatively) legitimate. There has been an attempt to situate states and regions along a continuum in terms of their relative institutional strength and presumed lawfulness (see Marten 2012:5-6; Stewart 2011:7). Nonetheless, differentially defining similar activities as “politics” in one geo-historical context and as “corruption” in another reveals the neocolonial discourses that attempt to characterize certain oppressive practices and structures as natural (Chomsky 2006:39-78; Gupta 1995:378). To be sure, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the practices rooted in peripheries express not a difference in kind, but a difference of “officiality.” That is, because peripheries are designated as the site of unofficial peoples, subjectivities and activities, the practices that develop in peripheries are also designated as unofficial, even if they resemble those that emerge from centers.

The designation of specific zones as official and unofficial are contrived political and national abstractions. Nonetheless, they inform the administrative and social relationships between center and periphery. Often, such relationships are perceived as centers attempting to overcome peripheries, or of peripheries being dependent upon centers (Das & Poole:2004). Indeed, most of the Malians with whom I spoke – Timbuktians and non-Timbuktians alike –situated Timbuktu in a peripheral and dependent relationship with Bamako. This was revealed most acutely within the context of the Malian crisis. How many of my interlocutors lamented, “Bamako has abandoned
us,” or “Bamako never cared about the North”? How many flatly, and dejectedly, said, “We must wait for Bamako to secure Timbuktu,” or “We cannot go back [home] until Bamako says so”? I have lost count.

As part of a post- and neocolonial state, we must theoretically consider Timbuktu, its occupation and the displacement of so many of its residents from the theoretical orientations through which we analyze other transnational systems and institutions. After all, the Malian crisis is (at least in part) a modern problem: competing nationalisms, transnational narco-traffic, porous borders, coup d’état, military intervention and humanitarianism. Even the issue of Jihadi-Salifism – which many in Mali perceived as the “real” problem – is a modern one that confronts states, despite many jihadis’ insistence that they are interested in shari’a (and, for some, the establishment of a neo-caliphate), rather than contemporary state structures. Indeed, without oversimplifying radicalization in Sahelio-Saharan regions, even most of my Timbuktian interlocutors reiterated some of the discourses often coming from France, the UK, the USA and so on that connect poverty and terrorism. That is, almost all of the Timbuktians with whom I spoke denied that Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda or MUJAO were really interested in jihad. “No, most of the leaders just want money and power, to take advantage of an unsecured desert,” my friend Ibrahim said. “And most of the followers, they’re just poor and uneducated. What else are they going to do? If Bamako won’t give them food or medicine, well, what else are they going to do?” The connection between poverty and education is still an open question, and more recently, scholars have posited that while socioeconomic status certainly contributes to radicalization, there are other ideological factors at play as well (Asad 2007; Piazza 2014; von Hippel 2014; Mesoy 2013). Nevertheless, even global
jihadist movements that claim to disregard state are confronted with and forced to engage their institutions. As such, we must not dismiss the role that modern, neoliberal systems play in crisis. While examining this role, however, we should not reproduce the problematic position that situates states as “weak” or “failed” due to artificial definitions that privilege certain official and legible relationships and systems over others. Neither should we dismiss local experiences and understandings of crisis.

**Crisis in the Periphery**

The Malian state (and Timbuktu as a peripheral component of that state) is not the only starting point for analyzing and resolving the occupation of Timbuktu. We must also consider both peripheries and crisis in peripheries in their own terms. In the case of Timbuktu, therefore, without removing it from broader political economic networks, we must also analyze the city as a center unto itself. As I argued in Chapter 2, throughout its 1000-year history, Timbuktu has reproduced its own centrality. To be sure, this process has also rendered Timbuktu peripheral to various regional polities. However, limiting my analysis to the supposed domination of Marrakesh, Paris or Bamako would overlook and minimize the cultural expressions and political economic systems that have developed and have been privileged within Timbuktu and among Timbuktians.

In the case the Malian crisis, therefore, and how Timbuktians negotiated the hardships of occupation, displacement and intervention, we must examine Timbuktu not as a periphery, but as center unto itself. At least in part. Just as I attempt to transcend narrow analyses that posit the state center at their foundation, I similarly attempt to transcend an equally narrow, culturalist analysis that separate Timbuktu and its residents.
from broader global systems. Timbuktians are not exclusively beholden to or
deterministically shaped by postcolonial policies. Neither are they unaffected by national
and international institutions. Therefore, I emphasize how Timbuktians have utilized
everyday sociocultural expressions in order to negotiate, make sense of and situate
themselves within transnational processes.

This dissertation examines both states and crisis as interrelated. I examine how
the particular, two-way center-periphery relationship has laid the foundation both for the
occupation of northern Mali and the creative ways in which displaced Timbuktians
navigated and conceptualized it. I emphasize how sutura, an ethic of privacy, influenced
how many of my Timbuktian interlocutors managed displacement. On the one hand,
sutura exacerbated many of the hardships that they encountered in southern Mali and in
the refugee camps. On the other hand, it influenced the social and political landscape
through which official and unofficial commentary became possible, as well as which
forms of collective action many deemed appropriate, worthwhile and effective. I do not
wish to limit my analysis only to sutura, though, as significant of a religious and cultural
category that it is. As an ethnography of displacement, my analysis also considers the
sometimes monumental and the sometimes (seemingly) mundane hurdles that many IDPs
and refugees had to negotiate. In other words, rather than only examine the politically
salient issues – such as nationalism, identity politics, militarization, humanitarianism and
so on – that so often predominate analyses of crisis, I attempt to balance such issues with
the “thick description” of refugee camps and hubs of internal displacement.

This is important. For, it forces us to consider these transnational forces from a
local perspective. It privileges the discourses that emerged from and were reproduced
within the displaced Timbuktian community itself. It examines how Timbuktians – as simultaneously peripheral and central – interpreted, commented upon and navigated modern, neoliberal and global phenomena. Consequently, my analysis attempts to dismantle the hegemonic, whitewashed framework through which such categories are popularly interpreted. We are obligated to concede that even dominating global systems must be interpreted through a local lens. If we fail to do this, we risk missing important, alternative scholarly and political conceptualizations of and orientations towards systems and institutions that many of us often take for granted. Particularly in peripheral zones – as in the case of Mali – state-centered hegemonic apparatuses that privilege certain ideas about states, nationalism, global capital, borders and so on may remain incomplete. Of course, this is not to suggest that those on peripheries are not affected by strategies of state dominance or the ideas that emerge from state centers. Indeed, as I have discussed, peripheral peoples are certainly affected as individuals and institutions from the center engage in illegible and unofficial activities in the periphery that risk destabilizing what might already be a less than stable region. At the same time, though, incomplete hegemonic discipline creates openings for alternative understandings of the ideas that emerge from states, including their own importance and universality. If we overlook or minimize the perspectives of those in peripheries, therefore, we simultaneously fail to understand crisis and states. We must stop examining conflict from a top-down orientation, just as we must also stop presuming that conflict is only structural and institutional issue.

The reverberations of such an analytical orientation are broad. For, it forces us to reconsider regional conflict in peripheral zones throughout the trans-Sahara, if not
throughout the wider African continent. For instance, we should not limit our interpretations of the ongoing destabilization of Libya at the hands of Daesh (Islamic State) as a product of American and French interventionism, the legacy of Colonel Qaddafi or regional “tribalism,” though these are all certainly factors. Similarly, we should not interpret Boko Haram’s occupation of northern Nigeria as, for instance, Nigeria’s incomplete state and national integration in the postcolonial age, though, again, that is certainly a factor. Rather than exclusively focus our analyses of these crises on a given state’s administrative and bureaucratic issues, for example, or rampant corruption, we must also examine the perspectives of the communities that reside in these areas. Many in the peripheries creatively and strategically navigate the hardships of crisis and displacement, just as they creatively and strategically situate and conceptualize themselves within the intersecting forces that reproduce crisis and displacement. To be sure, there exist both practical and sociocultural restrictions that influence just how members of these communities might manage or understand a given conflict. But that makes their perspectives all the more significant. That is, if those in peripheries engage state and non-state systems, we must consider both if we are to best comprehend their experiences and perceptions during times of crisis and engage in culturally relevant, non-oppressive and, consequently, longer lasting conflict resolution.

Which brings me back to the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali from the Algiers Process. I remember Abdel echoing national and international discourses that emphasized the need for some kind of formalized accord between the Malian government and the Tuareg nationalist groups. He, like so many of my Timbuktian interlocutors, said, “We need a formal accord. We need reconciliation. How
else will there be peace?” By late-April 2015, when it was far from clear if the rebel
groups would sign the Agreement, this insistence even became desperate. During one
correspondence, Abdel wrote, “They must sign. We must have an accord….There are
armed groups organizing themselves just outside of Timbuktu. If there’s not an accord, it
will be very bad. They will attack...The UN troops in town are already getting ready.”

“Will the UN troops be able to prevent them from entering Timbuktu?” I asked.

“Inshallah,” he responded.

Many—but not all—of the parties signed the Agreement in mid-May 2015.
Indeed, the affiliates of the MNLA in the mountainous regions near Algeria refused until
mid-June 20, 2015. Many were cautiously relieved. The few journals still covering the
Malian crisis published photos of southern Malian politicians and northern Malian
(former) rebels shaking hands. The corresponding articles suggested that now
“everybody” – southern and northern Malian alike – could turn to the “real” problem of
Jihadi-Salifism. I messaged Abdel, asking how he felt about the Agreement and the
signatory holdouts. “This is very good. Most groups signed. Now Timbuktu is safe,” he
wrote. About a week later, though, he contradicted himself. “The Agreement doesn’t
matter. It won’t help anything.” And, as if to prove his point, just a few days later a
report came out detailing the 57,000 northern Malians that had been newly displaced
following various, rebel-led attacks in northern Mali in Spring 2015. This brought me
back to “Camp Sanogo,” the refugee camp just outside of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.
There, I met a dejected older Tuareg man:

This is my third refugee camp. This is my third time losing
everything, my house, my business, my savings. In the 1970s we
were displaced – they say it was because of the drought. But, you
know, it had more to do with problems between the North and
Bamako. In the 1990s we were displaced again. It was the Second Tuareg Rebellion, and we fled to Mauritania. I didn’t want to join the rebels. And now, here I am in Burkina. I’m an old man. I don’t know if I can start over again….And now everybody is demanding an accord. What is this accord? How many accords have we had? They’re not worth the paper they’re written on. If they were, do you think you’d see me here in Ouaga[dougou]?

Revealing a sense of Timbuktian exceptionalism their own centrality, many of my Timbuktian interlocutors, despite reproducing discourses that maintained the importance of such official agreements, have expressed doubt over the impact or duration of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali from the Algiers Process. Reflecting upon similar conversations during my fieldwork, in the relatively stoic manner I have become accustomed to, many of my interlocutors revealed their suspicions that the conflict will either be ongoing or that regional stability will be temporary. Which is not to say that they were not hopeful. Nonetheless, it was a more guarded optimism, revealing their sophisticated and creative analysis of the occupation, the role of transnational institutions and how to best negotiate the hardships of displacement.

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One evening in Timbuktu, a group of us sat outside of a friend’s shop. Two dedicated checkers players remained committed to their game, but the rest had given up. The sun had set, but the electricity had yet to come on, and we had all become fuzzy, dark grey shadows. As the youngest among us fumbled with a match to get the charcoal going for some tea, I asked, “Would an accord and formal reconciliation bring peace to
the North?” There was a pause, followed by a match strike that briefly illuminated our
casual circle.

Then, shadows again, one of my friends said, “Yes, it will bring peace, inshallah. I think finally we will have permanent peace.”

“Yes, permanent peace,” another friend said. “It will last for ten years.”

“Wallahi,” responded the first. “A ten-year peace. That will be nice.”

Another pause. I shook my head, fumbling over what to say next. Everyone else seemed to nod in serene, confident approval.

“But,” I began. “But, only ten years? That’s a ‘permanent’ peace? If there’s an accord with the state, won’t that mean something longer than 10 years?”

I heard those subtle, knowing chuckles I had become accustomed to, even coming from the direction of the boys fanning the charcoals, too young to have any memory of the 1990s Tuareg Rebellion or even the attacks of 2006. Someone said, “André, ten years is a long time, especially for Bamako. We’ll take it. But you can’t trust Bamako to care about us for too long. Soon they’ll forget about us again, and then the problems will re-start.”

“So, what will happen?” I asked.

“We’ll be fine, inshallah. We’ll take care of each other. We’ll pray. We’ll…”

The electricity coming on cut him off. Those with children walked home, while the unmarried reset themselves around the checkers board, glorifying the yellow, fluorescent light above as if it were the sun. On my way back to my lodgings, I passed children playing and adults thumbing bead after prayer bead while households finalized their evening meals. Back home, I turned on the radio, listening for updates about the
intervention. Before long, though, my friend, Abdel, came by. “André, that’s enough. Too much war will make you sad. Abdoulaye is making tea. Let’s go.”
Notes

¹ Meaning “thanks be to God.”
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