THE PROOF IS ON MY PALM:  
DEBATING ETHNICITY, ISLAM AND 
RITUAL IN A NEW AFRICAN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

For Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal, life-course rituals are currently provoking transnational debates on ethnic and religious identity. In Guinea-Bissau, these two identities are thought to be one and the same—to be Mandinga is to ‘naturally’ be Muslim. For Mandinga immigrants in Portugal, however, the experience of transnationalism and the allure of ‘global Islam’ have thrust this long-held notion into debate. In this article, I explore the contours and consequences of this debate by focusing on the ‘writing-on-the-hand’ ritual, which initiates Mandinga children into Qur’anic study. Whereas some Mandinga immigrants in Portugal view the writing-on-the-hand ritual as essential for conferring both Muslim identity and ‘Mandinga-ness’, others feel that this Mandinga ‘custom’ should be abandoned for a more orthodox version of Islam. Case studies reveal an internal debate about Mandinga ethnicity, Islam and ritual, one that transcends the common ‘traditionalist’/’modernist’ distinction. I suggest that the internal debate, although intensified by migration, is not itself a consequence of ‘modernity’ but has long been central to how Mandinga imagine themselves as both members of a distinct ethnic group and as practitioners of the world religion of Islam.

Introduction

After completing my weekly lesson with Alaaji Darame, a Mandinga Muslim healer from Guinea-Bissau who owns and operates a Qur’anic school in central Lisbon, I stop at Morabeza restaurant for dinner. Morabeza is located in Lisbon’s ‘Mourish Quarter’ in the basement of a commercial center dominated by immigrants from Portugal’s former colonies. Owned and operated by Muna Ali, a woman of Fula and Lebanese descent from Guinea-Bissau’s northeastern town of Gabu, Morabeza is one of Lisbon’s most popular Guinean restaurants. At all hours of the day, immigrants from Guinea-Bissau gather there to socialize, watch the latest news reports from Africa and savor their favorite
culinary delights from home. After ordering a plate of rice and peanut sauce, I begin reviewing the latest Qur’anic verses added to my notebook when Basiro Mané, a Mandinga man in his early twenties, one of Morabeza’s regular customers and one of my most loyal informants, joins me at my table. Exhausted from another day’s work of hauling bricks and buckets of cement at his construction job in central Lisbon, Basiro orders a plate of rice and sauce and glances at my open Qur’anic notebook. In a mischievous tone, I ask him if he can read the verses. ‘Of course I can’, he responds, in a defensive tone. ‘I studied the Qur’an in the village as a young boy, but I no longer have the time for such things.’ As for many Mandinga immigrants in Lisbon, the stress and strain of life in Europe often leaves Basiro too busy to study the Qur’an, pray five times a day, and attend Friday prayer at Lisbon’s central mosque. ‘Are you a Muslim?’ I ask Basiro, in an equally mischievous tone. He extends his open hand across the table and states confidently, ‘The proof is on my palm.’ This typical gesture is a reference to the bulusafewo, the ‘writing-on-the-hand’ ritual, which Mandinga and other Muslim children in Guinea-Bissau and elsewhere in the Senegambia undergo before beginning Qur’anic study. ‘Ah ha’, I say to Basiro in approval, upon examining his hand. For beyond the rough and callused skin of an immigrant laborer, and irrespective of his recent suspension of religious practice, Basiro’s Muslim identity remains permanently inscribed on his body. For Basiro, as for many Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal, the Qur’anic verses written on the hand with ink during the writing-on-the-hand ritual are a permanent stamp of identity as a Mandinga person and of dedication to the global religion of Islam.

In this article, I show that for Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal, life-course rituals—which engage and inscribe bodies—are currently provoking transnational debates on ethnicity and religious identity, two facets of identity that are sometimes convergent and at other times conflicting. Since the introduction of Islam in the Senegambian region centuries ago, Mandinga have conflated ethnicity and Islam, such that to be Mandinga is to be Muslim. But as more and more Mandinga leave their homeland to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, to pursue Islamic education or to seek opportunities in Europe, they are becoming increasingly aware of how Islam is practiced outside of West Africa. This heightened awareness has led them to question or revise their understanding of what constitutes ‘proper’ Islamic beliefs and practices, and to separate ‘African’ practices from ‘Muslim’ ones. Such reflexivity is intensifying divisions between men and women, elders and youth,
and between those who emphasize their belonging to the umma, the global community of Muslims, and those who prefer to remain rooted in Mandinga ‘custom’. The contours of this debate extend from village West Africa to the urban spaces of Europe, and even to Mecca, Islam’s spiritual center.

My primary concerns in this article relate to recent work conducted by anthropologists in what is often referred to as the ‘new’ African diaspora—African immigrants and refugees living in Europe and the United States (e.g., D’Alisera 2004, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Rasmussen 2003, Stoller 2001, van Dijk 1997). Scholars working in transnational settings have examined the complex ways in which migration and displacement articulate with issues of identity, homeland and one’s changing place in an increasingly globalized world. But as the study of Africa has moved ‘beyond the village’ so to speak, the more ‘traditional’ topics of ethnicity and religion have often been displaced by the more ‘modern’ (secular) concerns of politics and economics. This article contributes to the work of those scholars who have attempted to carve a space for the study of religion in transnational settings (e.g., D’Alisera 2004; van Dijk 1997), demonstrating the continued, even renewed, importance of religion in the shaping of identity when people move between homeland and host country.

In examining the internal debate over ethnicity, Islam and ritual among Mandinga immigrants in Portugal, I focus on one life-course ritual in particular, the bulusafewo, or the ‘writing-on-the-hand’ ritual. In so doing, I adopt what Hutchinson (2000: 56) terms a ‘vectorial’ approach, one that explores the circulation of key substances or objects between people and groups and its implication for reinforcing or remaking social boundaries, categories and identities. Anthropologists working in African societies have addressed at length the relationship between the body and identity, especially the role of bodily substances in structuring different forms of relatedness and belonging (e.g., Jackson 1989; Lambek and Strathern 1998). These scholars’ findings have had their most direct influence on the anthropological study of kinship. Among many Mande groups, for example, siblings who emerge from the same womb (i.e., those who share the same mother) are thought to have a closer emotional relationship than those who do not (see Bird and Kendall 1980). This biological relationship has profound social and cultural consequences, shaping how people think and feel about one another and how they act toward one another. In many Islamic societies, breast milk is thought to play a special role in shaping identity. It creates ‘milk kinship’ among biologically unrelated infants (see Boddy 1989;
100; Delaney 2000: 136; Khatib-Chahidi 1992), transmits the life-sustaining force of baraka (Creyghton 1992: 44) and passes on from mother to infant personality traits and idiosyncratic behaviors (Riesman 1992: 121).

Relatively few scholars today, however, have explored how bodily substances and their implication for identity-making articulate with the processes of transnationalism and globalization. Hutchinson (2000) examines how Nuer in the Sudan understand the ‘new’ substances of money, guns and paper, by comparing them to blood, thought to be the source of all human and social energy. In his work in the Kagera region of Tanzania, Weiss (1992) shows how the Haya attempt to both understand and exert control over the social transformations brought about by commoditization by grounding them in the immediacies of bodily experience. Haya children who develop the new disease of ‘plastic teeth’, which appeared around the same time as AIDS and symbolically parallels the disease, are said to die if they do not have these teeth surgically removed.

But before applying Hutchinson’s ‘vectorial’ approach to understand the internal debate about ethnicity, Islam and ritual, it is first necessary to provide some ethnographic background to the Mandinga people, both in Guinea-Bissau and in Portugal, and to the writing-on-the-hand ritual itself.

From the village to the metropole: Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal

The Mandinga people trace their heritage to the Mande heartland (located in present-day Mali) and are the fourth largest ethnic group in Guinea-Bissau, making up roughly thirteen percent of the country’s estimated population of 1.4 million (CIA 2005). The Mandinga I know in Guinea-Bissau are subsistence farmers of rice, millet, corn and manioc. Many also are merchants, Qur’anic teachers and Muslim healers. Although Mandinga live in all regions of Guinea-Bissau, including the capital city of Bissau, they are most numerous in the northern Oio region, where I conducted much of my fieldwork. Indeed, in the Mandinga language, this region is referred to as Mandinka la bankoo, or ‘the land of the Mandinga people’.

In Lisbon, Guineans make up part of the expanding Lusophone African community from Portugal’s other former African colonies: Cape Verde, Angola, Mozambique and São Tomé. The Portuguese sociologist Fernando Machado (1994) identifies three waves of immigration to Portugal. The first wave, which began prior to 25 April 1974 (the
date marking the end of Portugal’s fascist regime), included a privileged
group of students and skilled laborers, who were of mixed Portuguese
and African ancestry. The second wave of immigration corresponded
with the independence of the former colonies (1974-1975). It consisted
primarily of political refugees and war veterans (antigos combatentes) from
Guinea-Bissau, who aligned themselves with the Portuguese during
Guinea-Bissau’s war of liberation, fighting against the PAIGC (the
The third and largest phase began in the early 1980s and comprised
unskilled laborers who found jobs in construction and public works.
According to Machado (1994: 112), it was not until this time that
Portugal became ‘a country of immigrants’.4

Along with other Muslims from Guinea-Bissau, the Fula and Beafada
peoples, the Mandinga are among the most recent immigrants to
Portugal, with most arriving after 1990 (Machado 1998: 49). The
Mandinga community in Lisbon is dispersed, with some people living in
rented apartments or rooms in central Lisbon and others living in
neighborhoods in many of Lisbon’s surrounding suburbs. Many of these
neighborhoods are settled almost entirely by Africans from Portugal’s
former colonies. Some of the neighborhoods in these suburbs are known
locally as barracas (or ‘ghettos’), a term that refers to the small, shanty-
town structures typical in some areas. Another form of barraca com-
prises abandoned or unfinished apartment complexes—many of which
lack plumbing, electricity, and even doors and windows—into which
African immigrants move, a phenomenon termed salta parediu (‘build-
ing jumping’) in the Kriolu language. Although both the Portuguese
and many African immigrants tend to view this housing style nega-
tively, conversations with my informants in Lisbon reveal a number of
advantages to life in the barracas. Aside from the economic advantages
of free housing or significantly reduced rent, the barracas offer the free-
dom to perform domestic activities, such as cooking and laundry, out-
doors, as is customary in Guinea-Bissau. Living in the barracas also
allows African immigrants to hold life-course rituals away from the crit-
cal gaze of their Portuguese ‘hosts.’ Indeed, many Portuguese continue
to struggle with the reality of a ‘multicultural’ Portugal, where an increas-
ing number of people from the former colonies are choosing to make
a permanent home.5

The Mandinga men I know in Lisbon make their living primarily
as construction workers, musicians, shopkeepers, street merchants and
Muslim healers. These healers, called moooro (sing.) in Mandinga, treat
clients—Portuguese and African alike—for a variety of problems and
afflictions, ranging from drug and alcohol addiction to cheating spouses. Many of my female informants work as cleaning ladies for businesses or in private homes. Others earn their living by traveling regularly to West Africa (usually Dakar) or Saudi Arabia to purchase clothing in the latest styles and other goods, which they sell to African immigrants in Portugal. Many women have opened restaurants in Lisbon and surrounding areas, where Guinean clients savor *kumida di terra*, or ‘food from the homeland’. Still others work as full-time wives and mothers or assist their husbands with their Muslim healing businesses, by booking appointments or serving as translators.

Several organizations or ‘clubs’ unite the dispersed members of the Mandinga immigrant population in Lisbon, the largest being the *Badim Clubo*, or the ‘Maternal Kin Club’. First and foremost, the *Badim Clubo* acts as a rotating credit association, providing members with funds to start a business, to purchase last-minute airline tickets to Guinea-Bissau to attend a funeral, or to make the Mecca pilgrimage. But the *Badim Clubo* is also an important social organization, whose functions are organized primarily around life-course events, such as infant name-taking rituals, writing-on-the-hand rituals, initiation ‘coming out’ ceremonies, and *alaaji bunya* ceremonies (which mark the yearly return of the Mecca pilgrims). In addition to life-course events, *Badim Clubo* members join together to celebrate Islamic holidays, such as Gaamo (the Prophet’s Birthday) and the end of Ramadan. Occasionally, the *Badim Clubo* also sponsors secular social events, such as African concerts and fashion shows.7

*Breast milk, blood and baraka: bodily substance and identity formation*

While conducting fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, I learned at an early stage that many Mandinga consider ethnic and religious identity to be one and the same. In short, being Mandinga is synonymous with being Muslim. Indeed, my informants often found my initial attempts to delimit the boundaries between these two identities as perplexing. Questions such as, ‘Before Islam, how did you do this?’ or ‘Is this a Mandinga belief or a Muslim one?’ were often met with blank stares from my hosts. I soon realized that most Mandinga do not envision a time ‘before Islam’, nor do they see Islam as something external that was once unknown to them. In the eyes of many, ethnic identity (being Mandinga) and religious identity (being Muslim) have long been fused (see also Ferme 1994, Launay 1992 and Riesman 1998 for similar cases in other parts of West Africa). Furthermore, life-course rituals have long provided
the expressive means through which Mandinga affirm their belonging simultaneously to a distinct ethnic group and to the umma, the global community of Muslims. This being said, how does one become a Mandinga Muslim? The answer to this question requires a more in-depth examination of Mandinga notions of ethnic and religious identity and, more specifically, of the role of bodily substances in configuring them.

Mandinga maintain that new life is created when the sexual fluids or ‘blood’ of a man and woman ‘mix’ during sexual intercourse and Allah breathed life into the fetus during the third month. When I inquired about the roles of male and female ‘blood’ in the physical molding of the child, my informants agreed that the father’s ‘blood’ eventually forms the hard parts of the child, such as the bones, while the mother’s ‘blood’ forms the soft parts, such as the flesh and hair. When I asked about the specific contributions of the roles of these gendered substances in shaping ethnic and religious identity, however, explanations were more complex and contradictory. Initially, my informants explained that the father’s ‘blood’ plays the primary role in shaping ethnic identity. The paternal contribution is embodied in one’s clan name (i.e., one’s last name), which is said to officially designate ethnicity. A person with a Mandinga clan name, for example, usually defines him- or herself and is certainly defined by others as Mandinga. From this perspective, religious identity follows automatically. If a person is Mandinga, he or she is considered to be Muslim since all Mandinga people in Guinea-Bissau are imagined locally as Muslims, irrespective of the degree to which they adhere to the doctrines and practices of Islam.

I soon learned, however, that there is a situational component to ethnic and religious identity at work among the Mandinga, which complicates the above model. In some contexts, for example, people may emphasize the maternal contribution to identity, formed not by ‘blood’ but breast milk. Like blood, breast milk is thought to shape identity and relatedness. Unrelated infants who drink from the same breast become ‘milk kin’ (Khatib-Chahidi 1992) and are prohibited from marrying one another. Breast milk is also commonly evoked when explaining anomalous identities. In Portugal, I met a Manjaco (an ‘animist’ ethnic group, most of whose members have refused Christianity and Islam) man who was drawn to Islam and wanted to convert. When I asked my Mandinga informants about him, they told me that the man had nursed from the breast of a Muslim woman when he was a child and was thus ‘unable to resist Islam’.
The role of maternal substance is more commonly evoked in Portugal, where the ability to affiliate oneself with multiple ethnic groups (and global religions) is more appealing and advantageous. On one occasion at a Fula funeral in Lisbon, I was surprised to see one of my key informants from Guinea-Bissau—a Mandinga woman with whom I first started working in 1996 and who had recently come to Portugal as a war refugee—speaking fluent Fula. This woman had always defined herself as exclusively Mandinga, and she took pride in her ‘deep’ (meaning pure, untainted by outside influences) knowledge of Mandinga language and culture. I had never seen her socialize with other Fula in Guinea-Bissau, nor did I know that she was able to speak the Fula language. When I asked her how it was that she spoke such fluent Fula, she responded, ‘I nursed at my mother’s breast’. Because her mother was Fula, she too was Fula, since this identity was transmitted to her ‘through the milk.’ In Guinea-Bissau, this woman had given up her career as a traditional circumciser in favor of becoming a merchant, selling clothing from Dakar in Bissau. In Portugal, her newly embraced ‘multiethnic’ status allowed her to expand her business by attending life-course rituals and other events held by both Mandinga and Fula immigrants.\(^8\)

The substance-based model is further complicated by life-course rituals, which add another dimension to Mandinga identity. Although in Guinea-Bissau ethnic and religious identity are first and foremost thought to be a matter of substance (acquired at birth or shortly after), the proper development of these identities is contingent on participation in three life-course rituals: name-taking, circumcision and writing-on-the-hand. These rituals are obligatory in Guinea-Bissau; one cannot be Mandinga (or Muslim) without them. Bodily substances also figure prominently in these rites. In the name-taking ritual, an infant is said literally to ‘receive’ a name when a holy man whispers it into the infant’s right ear. The holy man also imparts upon the child baraka, or Muslim blessings, delivered physically through his breath or spittle. Muslim identity is further inscribed on the body during circumcision when the foreskin and hood and/or tip of the clitoris is removed. This ritual is said to ‘purify’ children, making their prayers acceptable by God (see Johnson 2000). In the writing-on-the-hand ritual, the primary focus of this article, children literally ingest the word of God by licking Qur’anic verses written in ink from their hands.

It is thus impossible to juxtapose ‘substance’ and ‘action’ models of Mandinga identity. Indeed, these two models are complementary and overlapping, and the ambiguity surrounding them informs the internal,
transnational debate surrounding ethnicity, Islam and ritual, which I discuss at length later.

The writing-on-the-hand ritual

The writing-on-the-hand ritual is performed once in a Mandinga child’s life, ideally at age seven. This ritual is the next milestone in a child’s religious development following the name-taking ritual, when he or she receives a Muslim name. During the writing-on-the-hand ritual, a holy man dips a fountain pen into black ink and writes the opening verse of the Qur’an on a child’s palm. He then adds a pinch of salt to the ink and instructs the child to lick the mixture from his or her hand, with three strokes of the tongue. After the child has literally ‘ingested’ the word of God, the holy man points to each letter of the Arabic alphabet, written on a wooden slate used in traditional village Qur’anic schools. He utters the name of each letter and instructs the child to repeat it. Relatives and friends join in the recitation and make offerings of money and kola nuts, often placing these directly on the child’s head. Finally, munkoo—pounded rice flour sweetened with honey—is distributed to all relatives and guests present, officially marking the end of the ritual. Finally, everyone celebrates the children’s new status by sharing a meal.

Despite its unmistakably Islamic character, the writing-on-the-hand ritual is more of an ‘African’ ritual than a ‘Muslim’ one. Although children throughout the Muslim world usually begin learning the Qur’an at age seven (Denny 1994: 271), I have found no documentation of a ritual accompanying this anywhere in the Muslim world. Although the specific origins of the writing-on-the-hand ritual are uncertain, the Mandinga appear to have adopted the practice from the Jakhanke, a related Mande group known for being powerful Muslim clerics and educators. Indeed, the Jakhanke ritual described by Lamin Sanneh (1979: 187) is almost identical to the ritual that Mandinga practice today. Mandinga in neighboring Senegal and Gambia also hold writing-on-the-hand rituals for their children today.

The writing-on-the-hand ritual operates on metonymic logic, meaning that it treats an object or body part in a ritual manner in attempt to mimic—and eventually produce—broader effects. This logic is operative elsewhere in contemporary religious practices throughout West Africa. For example, Songhay sorcerers in Niger ingest a heavy paste made from magical powder and water in order to ‘fill’ them, both physically and metaphorically, with knowledge and power (Stoller and Olkes 1987:
55). This logic continued to operate with the spread of Arabic literacy in West Africa. Muslims in West Africa today commonly drink the medicinal mixture of ink and water collected when Qur’anic verses are washed from wooden writing slates. Jack Goody (1968: 230) explains that in ‘drinking the word’, people internalize and embody the otherwise external power of the written text.10

Two crucial substances in the writing-on-the-hand ritual—salt and rice flour—might be considered ‘key symbols’ (Ortner 1973). Both fall into the category of ‘white things’, deemed sacred among the Mandinga. Although the association of white with goodness and purity can be found in indigenous African religions (see Turner 1967; Jacobson-Widding 1979), it is also common in Islam. White is thought to be pleasing to God and the Prophet Mohammed, and Muslim healers encourage clients to give ‘white things’ as ritual offerings (deemed necessary through divination) or as charity. Both practical and symbolic properties of salt contribute to its importance. First and foremost, Mandinga acknowledge that people and animals are dependent upon salt for daily life. In the village of Bafata-Oio where I conducted my research, salt production is central to the village economy. In the dry season, women strain the mud of the lowlands and collect the brackish water, which they arduously distill into salt. They later sell the salt in large, plastic bins in the nearby town of Farim or at the region’s weekly rotating market. Salt produced locally is thought to be superior to salt imported from Portugal sold in stores and shops, and local salt is preferable both for cooking and for use in rituals. Mandinga also recognize the practical cleansing properties of salt, and they use it (along with sand) to polish silver bracelets and rings, especially those worn for protective purposes.

Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal consider salt to be a ‘strong’ substance that is ‘good for the head.’ When I asked one man in the village of Bafata-Oio about the use of salt in the writing-on-the-hand ritual, he made an analogy to my hand-held tape recorder, which I used often in conducting interviews. In his words, salt’s ‘strength’ literally ‘recorded’ the Qur’anic verses into a child’s head so that he or she would remember them always. One Muslim healer in Portugal described salt as offering an important moral lesson for humans. Consider the following excerpt from an interview that I conducted with him in Lisbon in 1999:

M.J.: Why do you put salt on a child’s hand during the writing-on-the-hand ritual, and why is salt good for the head?
I.N.: We put salt on the hand because salt is in everything. It is good for the head because a little bit goes a long way. How much salt is in the ocean?

M.J.: A lot.

I.N. That’s right. There is a lot of salt in the ocean because God put it there. Now, when you cook rice, how much salt do you add to the water?

M.J.: Just a little bit.

I.N.: That’s right. You add a little bit because you are a human being, not God.

Ibrahim’s explanation defines salt as a part of God’s creation that is essential to human life. Placing salt on a child’s hand during the writing-on-the-hand ritual might be interpreted as a reminder of God’s creative powers and the responsibility of humans to respect them. More importantly, placing a bit of salt on a child’s hand might be taken as a reminder about the limits of human agency and, thus, about the importance of humility. God acts on an awesome scale, one that humans could never approximate without ‘spoiling’ their endeavors, as my Mandinga informants would say. But what humans do—even though small or insignificant—is important in the eyes of God. Salt is ‘good for the head’, then, in that it reminds children that their efforts in Qur’anic school—sacrifice, patience and hard work—although small when compared to God’s work, are important nonetheless. Like salt in rice water, a little bit goes a long way.11

Like salt, rice flour is said to be ‘good for the head.’ Specifically, rice flour contains honey, which is thought to ‘open’ the head. Because Mandinga consider honey to be effective in aiding students with their studies, it is used in a variety of local ‘medicines’ for success in school examinations or for rapid acquisition of foreign languages. When I approached a Mandinga healer in the capital city of Bissau in 1996 for help in learning the Mandinga language, which I was studying in Bissau early in my fieldwork with the help of a private tutor, he supplied me with ‘language medicine’—a concoction of water, herbs and wild honey. He assured me that drinking one spoonful of the concoction daily would ‘open’ my head, allowing me to acquire the Mandinga language quickly and effortlessly. The rice flour sweetened with honey eaten by young Qur’anic students during the writing-on-the-hand ritual is said to be particularly effective in facilitating the memorization of Qur’anic verses.12

Although pounded rice flour sweetened with honey is made and distributed at many Mandinga life-course rituals, Maria biscuits—imported from Spain and purchased in large boxes—provide a common substitute in Portugal. When I asked my Mandinga informants the reason
for this substitution, they explained that it is too difficult to make munkoo in large quantities in Portugal. Whereas Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau commonly use large wooden mortars and pestles to pound rice, these cannot be transported to Portugal. Members of the immigrant community use a smaller version of the mortar and pestle, which makes it more time-consuming to make large quantities of pounded rice flour. Practical constraints aside, however, traditional rice flour must be made for the writing-on-the-hand ritual, even in Portugal. Indeed, during my fieldwork I observed that this was the only Mandinga life-course ritual in which Maria biscuits were not substituted for munkoo.

My informants in Lisbon explained that there is simply no substitute for bulusafe munkoo (the rice flour used in the writing-on-the-hand ritual), which is the ‘strongest’ (i.e., most powerful) type of rice flour. Specifically, it is thought to possess magical healing properties. Considering this, guests commonly take some bulusafe munkoo to relatives or friends who are unable to attend the ritual, especially if these people are suffering from an illness or some other affliction or are facing extraordinary challenges in their work or study (e.g., examinations). In Guinea-Bissau, Mandinga acknowledge another ‘magical’ use for bulusafe munkoo. A bit of the substance placed (without anyone seeing) in the rafters of one’s house is said to offer full protection from fire. One informant explained that even if the entire village were to burn, a house protected with bulusafe munkoo would not catch fire.

When I asked my informants about the ritual purpose of the writing-on-the-hand ritual, they explained that first of all it initiates children into Qur’anic study. As one woman in Lisbon explained, ‘When Europeans enroll their children in school, they write on papers. We write on our children’s hands.’ In preparing children for the difficult pursuit of Qur’anic study, which involves the memorization of texts over a number of years, the writing-on-the-hand ritual is thought to produce physical transformations in the body: it purifies the child by ‘opening’ the head, ‘cooling’ the heart and ‘steadying’ the spirit. Furthermore, it pardons the child’s social transgressions, often described to me as ‘sins’, providing a clean start, so to speak, as he or she begins Qur’anic study. Such transformations of body, mind and spirit are thought to be necessary not only for success in studying the sacred texts of Islam, but, more generally, in living one’s life as a Muslim. The child is not the only one to benefit from the purifying effects of the writing-on-the-hand ritual. My informants explained that when a holy man writes the first half of the alfaatiya (the opening verses of the Qur’an) on the child’s palm, God pardons the sins of 100 of his or
her maternal relatives. When he writes the second half on the child’s hand, God pardons the sins of 100 of his or her paternal relatives.

Like other Mandinga life-course rituals, such as circumcision, the writing-on-the-hand ritual inscribes religious identity on the body. In the name-taking ritual (kulliyó), a child is first invited to ‘take up the path’ that God has chosen for him or her. In the writing-on-the-hand ritual, Mandinga parents actively ‘place the child on this path.’ The writing-on-the-hand ritual also marks a fundamental cosmological transformation. The rite is said to initiate children into a life-long relationship with angels (malayikoo), who become their spiritual and moral counselors. Although the Qur’anic verses written in ink on a child’s palm gradually fade and soon disappear altogether, they are thought to remain forever visible to angels. Acting as one’s ‘witnesses’ in the afterlife, these beings are said to record a child’s lifetime actions and intentions, both good and bad, on giant wooden slates and to report them to God on Judgement Day. Mandinga claim that angels ultimately determine whether or not a person should be allowed to pass through the gates of heaven. As one informant explained:

Angels are beings in the service of God. Their job is to deliver messages to people and to act as intermediaries between God and humans. Every person has two angels that guide and protect him or her. The angels record the actions and intentions of humans during their lives on earth. The *malayika bulubaa* ['right angel'] sits at a person’s right side and records his or her good deeds. The *malayika maraa* ['left angel'] sits at a person’s left side and records his or her bad deeds. When you are about to do something bad, the angel reminds you that if you do that thing, it will be recorded, so that you will reconsider it. The angels record everything on giant wooden tablets and report it to God upon one’s entrance to the next world.

On the day of a writing-on-the-hand ritual, angels are said to descend from heaven, filling the room in which the rite is scheduled to take place. Despite their presence, however, they remain completely invisible to their human counterparts. Until children have their hands written on, they are said to have little contact with angels, since they are deemed too young to know the difference between right and wrong. The new relationship between children and angels instigated by the writing-on-the-hand ritual brings with it new responsibilities not only to the children but to their parents as well. Parents must work to keep the channels of communication open between children and angels, avoiding those situations or activities that are said to threaten or completely block this communication. For example, Mandinga believe that angels fear dogs and refrain from delivering messages to humans whenever and wherever dogs are present. For this reason, Mandinga are
reluctant to keep dogs in their houses. When I inquired about the origin of this belief, one informant in Bissau explained:

A long time ago, the [Mandinga] people realized that for an entire week no one had received a message from an angel. The people did not understand why the angels had refused to bring them messages, and so they began to worry. One day, Fatumata, the Prophet Mohammed’s first daughter, was sweeping her house when she ran into a small dog. She decided to put the dog outside, and that night the angels returned and spoke with the people in their dreams. That is when the people realized that angels fear dogs. From that day on, the people refused to let dogs into their houses and refrained from eating their meat.

As angels are also thought to fear female nudity, Mandinga discourage it (especially below the waist) around the domestic space, so as not to further deter angels from delivering God’s messages to human beings. Once children have had their hands written on, people must refrain from waking them, since this is thought to interrupt any messages that angels might be transmitting to them, messages offering advice or commentary on past or future actions and intentions. Before the relationship with angels is established, Mandinga commonly wake sleeping children, indeed even newborns, either to greet guests who arrive at the compound or to do chores (see Gottlieb 2004: 176-177 for a discussion of waking sleeping babies among the Beng of Côte d’Ivoire).

Debating ethnicity, Islam and ritual in Portugal

I have argued that in Guinea-Bissau, the writing-on-the-hand ritual and other Mandinga life-course rites are thought to be crucial in shaping both ethnic and religious identity, two identities that are often conflated. For Mandinga immigrants in Portugal, however, the relationship between ethnic and religious identity and the role of life-course rituals in shaping these has been unsettled and is currently the subject of lively debate. Some Mandinga in Portugal still consider the writing-on-the-hand ritual to be at once ‘African’ and ‘Muslim’, and they continue to advocate the practice of the rite in Portugal. While conducting fieldwork, I noticed that writing-on-the-hand rituals in Portugal are often more elaborate than those in Guinea-Bissau, with ‘normative’ aspects of the ritual—such as dress, food and capturing the moment through film or photography—taking on exaggerated importance. Other Mandinga immigrants in Portugal, however, equate the writing-on-the-hand ritual with adobo, or Mandinga ‘custom’, contradictory to ‘true Islam.’ Adherents of this latter view feel that ‘African’ rituals should be abandoned for a more orthodox practice of Islam, as in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Muslim world.
I suggest that the current debate surrounding ethnicity, Islam and ritual in Portugal must be understood against the backdrop of the experience of transnationalism and what D’Alisera (2004: 9) terms ‘global Islam’. Leaving their homeland to seek new opportunities in Lisbon has challenged Mandinga to reconfigure their relationship to their former colonizers and to re-imagine their place in the ‘new’ Europe and in the world at large. And it is in their attempt to integrate into Lisbon’s wider Islamic community—dominated by Muslims from North Africa, South Asia and the Middle East—that Mandinga have come to realize, often for the first time, that Islam as they know it differs markedly from Islam as practiced outside of Africa.

Pnina Werbner’s work on ritual among Pakistani immigrants in Manchester sheds light on the cultural elaboration of the writing-on-the-hand ritual as practiced in Portugal. She notes (1990: 335) that when immigrants perform rituals outside of their ‘natural’ contexts, they reinvent cultural categories and extend symbolic meanings, aligning them with novel experiences and predicaments in the new setting. In Guinea-Bissau, Mandinga value religious over secular education, and all Mandinga children, whether they live in remote villages or in the capital city of Bissau, attend local Qur’anic schools. Few Guineans (and even fewer Muslims) have much confidence in the formal educational system in Guinea-Bissau, especially given that teachers may go months without being paid and often hold strikes and cancel classes as a result. The Mandinga I know in Guinea-Bissau have never expressed to me concern that their children are foregoing opportunities by attending Qur’anic school rather than the ‘official’ Portuguese school.11

The situation is markedly different in Portugal, however, where educational opportunities far exceed those in Guinea-Bissau. All of the Mandinga parents I know in Lisbon send their children to Portuguese schools and they take pride in their ability to provide their children with the benefits of a European education. New educational opportunities bring with them, however, some unintended consequences. Because of demanding school schedules, Mandinga children in Lisbon spend the majority of their days in the company of kristos—a Kriolu word meaning non-Muslims, in this case, increasingly secularized Roman Catholics, who hold an entirely different set of values and orientations. As a result of long hours of instruction in Portuguese, Mandinga children often refuse to speak Mandinga or Kriolu at home, preferring to speak Portuguese even with their parents, most of whom do not speak the language.

Demanding schedules also leave Mandinga children with little free time to study the Qur’an in Lisbon, and attending Qur’anic school is
further complicated by socio-economic factors. While the mosque is located in central Lisbon, most Mandinga immigrants live in the city’s suburbs, situated anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour away by bus, commuter train or ferry. Parents are often too afraid to allow their children to make the journey on their own, and acquiring a monthly transportation pass is costly. Many of my informants in Lisbon often express concern that their children are losing their language and culture—in their words, ‘forgetting who they are’—as a result of the new challenges of life in Europe. For many disillusioned immigrants, the continued practice of Mandinga ‘custom’—exemplified by ‘traditional’ life-course rituals—offers a potential solution to this problem. Indeed, I suggest that the cultural elaboration of the writing-on-the-hand ritual in Lisbon might be interpreted as a creative response to the challenges posed by the experience of transnationalism.

The attempt to integrate into Lisbon’s multicultural Muslim community presents further challenges, which are experienced most dramatically at Lisbon’s central mosque. The mosque is dominated by what my informants call Indianus (‘Indians’, or South Asian Muslims) and Arabes (‘Arabs’, or Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East), who hold positions of power there. Many Mandinga immigrants complain that they do not ‘feel at ease’ (fi ka a vontadi in Kriolu) at the mosque, and some have even faced discrimination or harassment at the door on Friday prayer days or on major Islamic holidays. Those with little formal Qur’anic education or knowledge of Arabic, especially women, feel intimidated by Indianus and Arabes, who often question Mandinga women’s knowledge of Islam and even their identity as Muslims. As one woman explained:

If you could see the mosque on big prayer days [Islamic holidays], you would not believe it. Sometimes there are fights at the door! The Indians think they own the mosque, but the mosque is for all of us, not just for them. They stand at the entrance and ask African women for I.D. One day an Indian asked me to show him [documented] proof of my conversion to Islam. I told him that my ancestors converted to Islam centuries ago and that they didn’t keep records back then. He told me to recite the alfaatiya instead. I was so angry that I forgot the words.

The dream of integration is further shattered by the harsh reality that non-African Muslims and the Portuguese alike categorize Mandinga immigrants in Lisbon as pretos, or ‘blacks’, rather than as ‘Muslims’. As a response to such estrangement, many of my informants adopt a critical view of the central mosque, describing Friday prayer as more of a weekly fashion show than a sincere act of worship. In their eyes, attending mosque is simply an opportunity to display one’s success as
an immigrant and one’s status as a ‘modern’ Muslim. As one informant explained, ‘Mosque-goers show up for prayer in fancy cars, don the latest clothing styles from Mecca, and fill their wrists with gold for everyone to see.’ Using Friday prayer as an opportunity to establish their reputation—to ‘build their name’ in the wider Islamic community, as my informants put it—they ‘forget’ their relatives in Guinea-Bissau, preferring to make their own lives in Lisbon ‘sweeter’ than to send remittances to their relatives back home.

Such disillusioned Mandinga prefer to pray, celebrate rituals or Islamic holidays, and study the Qur’an in their private homes or in the context of ‘club’ events, where they can practice Islam on their own terms. Rather than seeking out formal Qur’anic educational opportunities for their children as they would in Guinea-Bissau, immigrant parents rely on informal instruction—the daily experience of being raised in a Mandinga (and therefore, Muslim) household and participating in life-course rituals and other local events in the immigrant community, all of which retain a distinctively ‘African’ flavor. Indeed, many have simply abandoned the dream of being cosmopolitan Muslims. They prefer instead to ‘remember where they come from’ and to embrace their ‘African-ness’ by strengthening their allegiance to aadoo, or Mandinga ‘custom,’ exemplified by life-course rituals.

But not all Mandinga immigrants in Lisbon have abandoned the dream of integration into Lisbon’s wider Islamic community. For those who have studied the Qur’an formally for many years, have a knowledge of Arabic and have made the pilgrimage to Mecca (mostly men, who make their living as Qur’anic teachers and Islamic healers), the quest for becoming ‘cosmopolitan’ Muslims is a continuous source of personal empowerment. More specifically, contact with non-African Muslims and the knowledge of Islam as practiced outside of Guinea-Bissau have increased their knowledge of the umma—the global community of Muslims—and their desire to belong to it.

For many, this experience has profoundly altered the way they imagine themselves both as Mandinga people and as practitioners of the world religion of Islam. Muslim identity is not acquired ‘naturally’ simply through being Mandinga. It is not transmitted through the bodily substances or conferred ‘magically’ through Mandinga life-course rituals. It is contingent upon the affirmation to live one’s life according to the doctrines and practices of Islam, as defined in Saudi Arabia. This includes, most importantly, praying five times daily, attending Friday mosque, upholding the taboo on pork and alcohol consumption and fasting during Ramadan. This ‘new’ model also emphasizes the meaning
of the written word (i.e., Arabic literacy to ensure the accuracy of Qur’anic interpretation) over its ‘magical’ properties, such as placing Qur’anic verses into amulets, which are tied to people, animals and objects to ensure protection.

Since these diverse viewpoints are best captured in actual voices from the field, I now present case studies of two Muslim Mandinga healers in Portugal. In teasing out these healers’ complex and often contradictory attitudes to the writing-on-the-hand ritual, I hope to expose the internal debate over ethnicity, Islam and ritual among the Mandinga, a debate that transcends classic ‘traditionalist’ and ‘modernist’ categories. In so doing, I hope to reveal the inherent complexity involved in the making of Mandinga identity.

Is the writing-on-the-hand ritual ‘Islamic’? Case studies from Portugal

Ibrahim is the president of the Badim Clubo, a popular Mandinga immigrant women’s association in Portugal, and a Muslim healer who lives in central Lisbon. He treats clients—African and Portuguese alike—for a variety of problems, including barrenness, unsuccessful employment, and drug and alcohol abuse. Ibrahim is from a long line of especially powerful healers in Guinea-Bissau. But unlike many of his relatives whose training never extended beyond the simple memorization of Qur’anic verses, he takes pride in his ability to read and write Arabic and, more importantly, to translate Qur’anic verses into the Mandinga language so that their ‘deep’ meanings can be revealed to others. As he is only in his mid-thirties, Ibrahim feels that he is too young to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, though he looks forward to making it one day. Although he attends Lisbon’s central mosque regularly, he spends more time planning and attending Badim Clubo events with his fellow Mandinga immigrants. Indeed, despite Ibrahim’s outward dedication to Islam and his knowledge of Arabic, he advocates the continued importance of Mandinga ‘custom’ in Portugal and emphasizes its complementary rather than contradictory relationship to Islam.

In Ibrahim’s view, traditional life-course rituals are essential for transforming people simultaneously into Mandinga persons and ‘true’ Muslims. When I asked him to comment specifically on the role of the writing-on-the-hand ritual, Ibrahim defined it as an ‘obligatory rite.’ He explained that it is the responsibility of all Mandinga parents to hold three rituals for their children in order to ensure that they grow up to be ‘true’ Muslims—the name-taking ritual, the writing-on-the-hand ritual, and circumcision. Furthermore, Ibrahim, like many other Mandinga in
Guinea-Bissau and Portugal, contends that all of these rites can be found in the Qur’an, Islam’s most sacred text.

For Ibrahim, the experience of living in Portugal has only intensified his belief that ‘traditional’ Mandinga life-course rituals confer simultaneously ethnic and religious identity. In Ibrahim’s view, one of the primary ways in which the writing-on-the-hand ritual confers ‘Mandinga-ness’ is by socializing Mandinga children into their own education system, their own indigenous ‘ways of knowing’. This is especially important in Portugal, where Mandinga children attend the ‘white people’s school’ rather than Qur’anic school. Ibrahim explained:

In the white people’s school you dress up in a suit, tie and jacket, and you sit at a desk. When the teacher says, ‘it is one,’ you stand up and say, ‘No, teacher, it is two.’ In our school [Qur’anic school], we sit on the ground. If your teacher is sitting here, you take your shoes off over there before you come and sit down. You light a fire, and you learn to write verses from memory onto wooden slates, while mosquitoes bite you.

Ibrahim’s comparison of these two educational systems underscores the problematic nature in Mandinga society of challenging or questioning elders and other authority figures. Indeed, many of my Mandinga immigrant informants complain that their children who were born and raised in Lisbon do not respect their elders and refuse to take orders from them. Such behavior is practically unimaginable in Guinea-Bissau and is highly reprimanded in the rare case that it occurs. Frustrated and ashamed parents are quick to blame their children’s obstinate behavior on the European educational system, which emphasizes critical and independent thought over deference and humility.

Ibrahim’s comparison also highlights the cultural significance attributed to ‘suffering’ (sabaroo) in Mandinga society. For Mandinga, ‘suffering’ a difficult situation—enduring it with a calm and patient spirit—is a sign of social maturity and is linked to the enhancement of self. Farmers must endure hours of hard labor if they are to weather the hungry season; women must ‘suffer’ the pain of childbirth before becoming full adults; and initiates must endure the physical pain of circumcision if their prayers are to be ‘heard’ by God. Qur’anic study is no different. Before young students can recite by heart the sacred texts of Islam, they must ‘suffer’ through hours of memorization in difficult circumstances, without the comforts of chairs and electricity.

At the time of my 1999 research, Ibrahim had two young daughters, and he was planning to hold writing-on-the-hand rituals for both of them. In emphasizing the continued importance of this Mandinga ‘custom’ in the new setting, Ibrahim removed his passport from his
Like Ibrahim, Bacar also makes his living as a Muslim healer. He runs his own healing business out of his home in Queluz-Belas, located twenty minutes by commuter train from central Lisbon. Bacar also attends weekly Friday prayer at Lisbon’s central mosque. Although he belongs to the Saabo Nyimaa—a Mandinga immigrant association in Lisbon and a rival group to the Badim Clubo—Bacar feels that his time is better spent at the mosque, associating with Muslims from all over the world. Bacar has traveled to Saudi Arabia several times to study Arabic and to make the Mecca pilgrimage. As a result of his first-hand experience of Islam as practiced by ‘Arabs’, Bacar is confident in his knowledge of ‘true’ Islam, and he often criticizes his rival healers in Lisbon—including Ibrahim—for their ignorance of Arabic and of the ‘deep’ meanings of the Qur’an.

When I asked Bacar why Mandinga practice the writing-on-the-hand ritual, he explained that the elders invented the tradition a long time ago as a form of ‘Islamic propaganda’. It sparks young children’s interest in Islam by encouraging them to study the Qur’an. In filling young children with pride in their religion, Bacar explained, the writing-on-the-hand ritual, ‘gives Islam power in Africa’. But according to Bacar, the writing-on-the-hand ritual is a Mandinga ‘custom’, not a Muslim one, and the Qur’an makes no mention of the ritual. He explained:

Deep in the Qur’an, [the writing on the hand ritual] is not there. As Muslims, we should do those things that the Prophet Mohammed did. This is what we have to follow. Those things that he did not do, we should not follow them. The writing-on-the-hand ritual is not in the Qur’an. The Prophet Mohammed never did it. It was the angel—the one you call Gabriel—who taught the Prophet Mohammed to read. But he never wrote on the Prophet’s hand! If the Prophet’s hand was never written on, then why do we insist on writing on our children’s hands? You won’t find the writing-on-the-hand ritual practiced in any Arab country because the Prophet Mohammed never did it.

Bacar’s ‘reformist’ views, his desire to distinguish between ‘African custom’ and ‘true Islam’ as practiced in Saudi Arabia, have been shaped by his newfound participation in the umma, the global community of Muslims. According to Bacar, there are many ways to ensure that Mandinga children in Portugal continue to practice their religion, but African rituals should not be one of them. Bacar contends that the writing-on-the-hand ritual, like other Mandinga life-course rituals practiced in Lisbon, are simply ways in which Mandinga immigrants can ‘build their name’ in Lisbon’s immigrant community by displaying pub-
licly their fame, financial success, and (false) allegiance to Islam. Bacar believes that such unnecessary displays merely conceal deeper shortcomings in Muslim piety—one’s ignorance of the Qur’an and one’s refusal to follow God’s laws.

When I asked Bacar if he feels that Mandinga should stop practicing the writing-on-the-hand ritual in Lisbon, his views became more complex, even contradictory. He explained that just because people say that the ritual is unimportant or even un-Islamic doesn’t mean that they can (or will) immediately stop practicing it. ‘Many people continue to hold African rituals because they fear criticism from the elders’, Bacar asserted. ‘If you do not hold a writing-on-the-hand ritual for your children, the elders will accuse you of being a bad parent.’ But Bacar feels that the ritual itself is less important than the idea behind it—the responsibility of Mandinga parents to enroll their children in Qur’anic school. ‘My children haven’t had their hands written on’, Bacar told me, ‘but they go to Qur’anic school and are learning about their religion just the same.’

Bacar then told me about a ‘deep’ and much debated reason to continue the writing-on-the-hand ritual, despite its ‘un-Islamic’ nature. It is said to instill a fear in children of ‘falling from Islam’, of suspending one’s dedication to the religion, as exemplified by Basiro Mané’s case in the opening narrative of this article. This temptation is intensified in Portugal, where Mandinga immigrants are surrounded by non-Muslims and separated from the Islamic way of life. Specifically, the salt and ink that a child licks from his or her hand during the writing-on-the-hand ritual is said to safeguard against the breach of the Muslim taboo on alcohol consumption. Bacar explained:

> It is nearly impossible for people who have had their hands written on to develop an alcohol problem during their lifetime. If they begin to experiment with alcohol out of curiosity, once they get to a certain age they will stop drinking once and for all. If you see that someone develops a drinking problem, you will know that this person never had his or her hand written on.

Some of my Mandinga immigrants in Portugal have taken this one step further, stating that even a sip of alcohol subsequent to the writing-on-the-hand ritual would be ‘too strong’ for a child’s head, leading to insanity. This magical safeguard believed to be provided by the writing-on-the-hand ritual takes on renewed importance in Portugal, where the pressures of immigrant life and proximity to ‘Christians’ often compel Mandinga and other Muslims from Guinea-Bissau to experiment with alcohol for the first time. As one informant explained:
Many Muslims in Portugal start drinking because of worry or stress, but most of the time it is just influence from Christians. Once you come to Portugal you start hanging out with Christians who drink all of the time. You resist and resist, insisting that you are a Muslim and that Muslims don’t drink, until one day you just decide to have just one or two beers. Then you suddenly change your opinion on the matter.

But despite the allure of this ritual safeguard against ‘falling from Islam’, Bacar believes that refusing to drink alcohol—whether in Africa or Portugal—should reflect a deep and conscientious allegiance to Islam rather than a fear—created ‘magically’ through an ‘African’ ritual—of losing one’s mind. That being said, the stakes are high enough in Portugal that Bacar is not ruling out completely the possibility of holding writing-on-the-hand rituals for his own children. When I visited Bacar in summer 2003, his second wife, Aminata, had just given birth to a son, whom they named Abudu. Bacar told me that he was considering having all three of his children’s hands written on at the same time when Abudu turns seven.

Conclusion: global Islam and ‘magicality’

In her work in Morocco, Combs-Schilling (1989: 36) argues that innovations in ritual—and I would add, the debates surrounding such innovations—might be interpreted anthropologically as ‘forms of argument.’ In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate that the writing-on-the-hand ritual is currently provoking transnational debate about ethnicity and Islam. This debate reveals the complex ways in which Mandinga at home and in the ‘new’ diaspora continue to negotiate their identity as members of a distinct ethnic group and as practitioners of the world religion of Islam. Werbner (1990: 154) argues that the transfer of rituals away from their ‘natural’ context inspires participants to reflect consciously on their once ‘taken-for-granted’ features (see also Yalçın-Heckmann 1994).

For Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau, ethnic identity (being Mandinga) and religious identity (being Muslim) are convergent and overlapping; to be one is to ‘naturally’ be the other. In this model, ethnic and religious identity are transmitted through bodily substances, conferred ‘magically’ through life-course rituals and inscribed onto bodies. As Mandinga move between West Africa and Europe and attempt to integrate into a wider Islamic community, however, the once taken-for-granted assumption that to be Mandinga is to ‘naturally’ be Muslim has become unsettled and is currently the subject of debate.
I have demonstrated that many Mandinga who have been to Mecca prefer to abandon African ‘custom’ for a more orthodox practice of Islam. In this revised model, Muslim identity is not transmitted ‘naturally’ through bodily substance or conferred ‘magically’ through ritual. Rather, being a ‘true Muslim’ means aligning one’s beliefs and practices more closely with the Qur’an and the five pillars of Islam. As my informants put it, being a Muslim is a matter of ‘doing what the Prophet did’—that is, learning to read and write Arabic fluently, praying five times daily, upholding the taboo on alcohol and pork, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca.

This story is not a new one, of course. It has been told many times by anthropologists working in Africa (e.g., Lambek 1993, Launay 1992, Masquelier 2001) and elsewhere (see Geertz 1960, Bowen 1993 for similar studies in Indonesia). But, as the above case studies reveal, the internal debate over ethnicity, Islam and ritual in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal does not oppose ‘traditionalists’ and ‘modernists’ in a straightforward fashion. Ibrahim’s allegiance to Mandinga ‘custom’ and his belief in the substantive power of life-course rituals may appear to define him as a ‘traditionalist.’ Yet he turns to the Qur’an to legitimate the writing-on-the-hand ritual, convincing himself and others that there is a place for Mandinga ‘custom’ in Islam’s most sacred text.

Likewise, Bacar’s cosmopolitan desire to be a ‘modern’ Muslim—more specifically, his need to separate African ‘customs’ from Muslim ones—seems to define him as a ‘modernist’. Yet he is unable to relinquish completely the efficacy and importance of the writing-on-the-hand ritual, its power to prevent Mandinga in Portugal from ‘falling from Islam’ by protecting them from the influence of alcohol. Ibrahim is thus willing to remain ‘traditional’ only to the extent that this stance does not exclude him completely from participation in the umma.

For his part, Bacar is prepared to embrace ‘global Islam’ only to the point that his ‘Mandinga-ness’ remains firmly in place. Finally, the internal debate challenges one of Weber’s most widely accepted claims—as religions ‘rationalize’—in this case, as they become more systematic and closely aligned with text-based doctrine—they are expected to become less ‘magical’.16 But as the above case studies demonstrate, many Mandinga who profess to adhere to a more orthodox practice of Islam still acknowledge the ‘magical’ efficacy of Mandinga ‘custom’ and even expand its influence to fit their changing circumstances. In this case, global Islam and magicality are not exclusive categories but complementary and overlapping ones, and the creative
tension that exists between them is central to being Mandinga in the modern world.

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NOTES

1. Other works in anthropology stress the importance of body movement and the senses (e.g., Farnell 1994, Geurts 2002, Jackson 1989, Rasmussen 1999 and Stoller 1989). These works have important methodological implications for anthropologists, as they challenge the tendency of ethnographers to privilege the spoken or written over other forms of bodily experience.

2. This paper is based on multi-cited ethnographic research conducted in 1996-97 and 2003 in Guinea-Bissau in the capital city of Bissau and in the village of Bafata-Oio and in 1999, 2001 and 2003 in Portugal with Mandinga immigrants and refugees.

3. In the 1981 census, immigrants from Guinea-Bissau numbered 1,126, making up 3.4 percent of the total population of African immigrants in Portugal, estimated at the time as about 45,000 (de Sainte-Maurice 1997: 55). These estimates, however, reflect only those Guineans residing in Portugal legally or those who participated in the census. Machado (1998: 17) suggests that the population of Guinean immigrants and children born in Portugal of Guinean immigrant parents might be more accurately estimated at between 22,000 and 23,000.

4. The most recent exodus of people from Guinea-Bissau to Portugal happened in 1998-1999 when a military junta, led by Ansumane Mané, attempted to oust João
Nino Vieira, who had been Guinea-Bissau’s president for over 19 years. I suggest that the refugees who poured into Lisbon to escape the resulting 11-month armed conflict might be considered a fifth wave of immigration.

5. In 1999 I met many African immigrants who had been living for years in the barracas rent-free and virtually undisturbed by the Portuguese government. When I returned to Lisbon for follow-up research in 2003, however, many changes had occurred. Some of the barracas had been torn down, and plans were in order to complete many of the unfinished apartment buildings. The government presented the African immigrants living in these buildings with two choices: remain in the apartments and pay a reduced rent once renovations were complete or find housing elsewhere. Although my informants living in the barracas were angered by the prospect of having to pay rent, most decided to stay because of lack of alternatives. Although most Guineans express the desire to return to Guinea-Bissau, the reality is that most do not, in fact, return.

6. In 1989 four Mandinga women in Lisbon founded the Badim Clubo to allow Mandinga women in Lisbon to ‘live together’. Badim is an orthographic variation of the Mandinga term baadim, which refers to siblings who share the same mother. Among Mande peoples of West Africa, maternal kinship is a powerful symbol of ‘oneness’, or equality, loyalty and affection, in contrast to paternal kinship, which implies difference and competition (see Bird and Kendall 1980, Jackson 1977, Ch. 8). Since the founding of the Badim Clubo, other similar organizations have sprung up over Lisbon, including the Siabo Nyima (‘Sweetness,’ a Mandinga men’s club), the Gente Rica (‘Rich People,’ a group for unmarried Muslims from Guinea-Bissau, primarily Mandinga, Fula, and Bafadara), and the Associação dos Muçulmanos Naturais a Guiné-Bissau em Portugal (the Association of Guinean Muslims in Portugal).

7. Such associations or ‘clubs’ are also common in Guinea-Bissau, both in the capital city and in the interior, and can be found among many different ethnic groups. See Gable (2000) for a discussion of the role of youth in enacting ‘tradition’ in one such organization—the ‘Culture Development Club’—among Manjaco in Guinea-Bissau.

8. For an interesting discussion of the politics of identity among Fula, Malinke and Bambara ethnic groups, see Amselle 1998. Amselle argues that these three ethnic categories, rather than constituting separate identities, are ‘onomastic emblems’ (1998:43) that people adopt or shed according to political contingencies.

9. According to Denny (1994: 271), boys throughout the Muslim world generally start Qur’anic study at age seven. Boddy (1989: 57) notes that Sudanese children are said to develop a minimal degree of ‘al’ (‘reason, self awareness, [and] the ability to recognize and follow Allah’s laws’) between the ages of five and ten.

10. Trachtenberg (2004: 122-23) describes similar methods of ‘transferring the word to the body’ practiced by medieval Jews. For example, scholars and their students would eat foods, such as cakes and eggs, inscribed with incantations and biblical verses to ensure their success, and school children were given these foods before their studies to ‘open their minds’. In the Middle Ages, Jews also applied magically-charged liquids to the hands and face for a variety of purposes. Marcus (1984: 36-37) writes that the medieval initiation ceremony for Jewish school children included the reading and symbolic eating of sacred texts written on a writing tablet. Marcus also compares this to the contemporary American practice of feeding school age children ‘ABC’ soup or ‘Alphabits’ cereal.

11. The ritual importance of salt is ancient and widespread and has been documented both in indigenous religions in Africa and elsewhere and in the monotheistic religious traditions. Among Semitic peoples, salt was a sign of ‘purity’ and ‘incorruptibility’, owing to its preservative qualities. The ancient Romans placed a few grains of salt on the lips of an infant on the 8th day after birth to chase away demons (Livingstone 1997: 1447-1448). Contemporary Christians use salt to make holy water, but in this case salt’s link to wisdom is emphasized over its anti-demonic qualities (see Latham 1982: 169-173 for an interesting discussion of salt and wisdom). The Ehing of Senegal
equate salt with semen, and salt plays an important ritual role in curing a child who has been made chronically ill by adulterous parents (see Schloss 1988: 106). The connections between salt and ‘blood’ (semen) made by the Ehing as described by Schloss may point to a possible indigenous symbolism of salt as used in the writing-on-the-hand ritual among Islamicized Mandinga.

12. Honey was also an important substance used in medieval Jewish initiation ceremonies for young students. Students were commonly given honey cakes as a reward for recitation, and the teacher would smear honey over the letters of a tablet onto which the Hebrew alphabet had been written, instructing the child to lick it off (see Marcus 1984: 1). Marcus further notes that the ancient Greeks associated honey with memory (1984: 145, n. 30).

13. The writing-on-the-hand ritual might mark the development of ‘social sense’, the point at which children are thought to possess awareness of self and others, are considered capable of making moral decisions and are held accountable for their actions (see Riesman 1998: 127-129, Richards 1982: 123 for discussions of social sense in Africa). Among Mandinga, the development of this awareness is gradual rather than abrupt, beginning with the writing-on-the-hand ritual and continuing through the initiation period, at which point it is more actively cultivated and refined.

14. This is a significant problem, considering the country’s already dismal educational system. Forrest (1992: 136) estimated that in 1990 only 36 percent of Guinea-Bissau’s children between the ages of 7 and 14 were enrolled in school full-time and only 21 percent were considered literate. See Forrest (1992: 134-138) for a discussion of education in Guinea-Bissau.

15. Ibrahim’s views on female circumcision, however, contradict his rather ‘traditionalist’ stance on the writing-on-the-hand ritual. Contrary to most of my informants (especially women) who feel that female circumcision is an ‘Islamic practice’ (see Johnson 2000 and forthcoming), Ibrahim is critical of the supposed link between female circumcision, prayer and Muslim identity. He argues that the practice is not in the Qur’an and considers it ‘optional’ rather than obligatory. Although Ibrahim’s wife was circumcised, he and his wife do not plan to have their two daughters, both of whom were born in Portugal, circumcised.

16. According to Weber (1951: 226), a particular religion can be considered ‘rationalized’ when it is divested of magic and when the relationship between God and the world is systematically unified with one’s own ethical relationship to the world. Weber did not conceive of rationalization and magicality in simple evolutionary terms, such that only ‘primitive’ religions are magical. His theory allowed for varying degrees of rationalization in the modern world, with class status being one determining factor (i.e., religions of the working class are usually more ‘magical’ than those of the upper classes). I am indebted to Alexander T. Riley for alerting me to this point. Although ‘class’ is not yet a factor among immigrants in Portugal, it certainly may be in the future.