Market Women and Their Urban Experience in Bamako, Mali: a Quest for Respectability and Social Recognition

Social and Cultural Anthropology

This thesis studies the urban experience of Malian market women. The aim is to show how these women, despite their poverty, are able to negotiate a social position for themselves in the urban structure. The practices used by marketers is examined, as well as the time and energy spent in order to assure the mastery of their urban situation.

Social relations are extremely important in Mali and especially in Bamako where the living conditions are hard. Having relations helps a person in all situations of daily life. A wide social network will make it easier to obtain for example an employment, an important paper, child minding, a train ticket free of charge, a place on the market, goods on credit, water from the pump, a clientele, or simply food for the day. It is therefore very important to hold a large capital of family-, friendship-, neighbourly-, and/or professional relations and market women are constantly struggling to establish and maintain social relations.

This study, based on fieldwork, shows that market women invest a large part of the money they earn from the marketplace in their social relations. The theoretical framework in this study is based on Pierre Bourdieu's analyse in terms of capitals and is used in order to show how women, by generously converting economic capital into social capital, accumulate symbolic capital in the form of bonya; prestige, social recognition, respectability, reputation and honour. This is done mainly through ceremonial events like marriages and baptisms, where the important gifts-givings take place. The fundamental Bamana notion of bonya runs throughout the entire work. In order to understand how this concept is linked to hierarchy and in what way it is structuring the entire society, the initial part of this study provides a thorough description of the caste system in Mali which still divides society into categories of unequal status. Apart from their trading activities, the family position of market women is discussed as well. Attention is given to how market women constantly negotiate their position on the one hand as traders and on the other as "proper" wives and "good" mothers.

The primary source of data for this study is fieldwork carried out during four months in Bamako, the capital of Mali. The methods used include participant observation and interviews with 22 women, of which 19 were vendors, and with 5 men.

Main references are: Bourdieu, P.; Clark, G.; Camara, S.; Godelier, M.; Weiner, A.

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