Every year, the women of Selofara in Mali in Central West Africa offer libations to bush spirits (jinew, sl. jine) living under the Maribayasa tree. This visually unassuming shea tree is located on the outskirts of the village, the area where the world of bush spirits meets that of human civilization. This chapter argues that in Selofara, Maribayasa continues to be libated because of the women's recognition of their dependence on bush spirits (jinew) which, along with the site of the tree, cannot easily be defined by analysts or participants as either Muslim or non-Muslim. For the women of Selofara, the profitability of artisanal gold mining depends on the benevolence of the bush spirits, who are the guardians of the which is conceptually located in the bush. Since these spirits are notoriously capricious, women's livelihoods are as well. One year, the spirits may be in a generous mood and provide many miners with a windfall, the next year the spirits may be stingy because of a human transgression causing (financial) suffering in many families. At Maribayasa, spirits are asked to provide women with gold, to refrain from causing accidents and to protect those who are in the proverbial bush (for instance, children who are traveling). This concerns mostly the women's mining site of Musodugu where women do surface mining independently from men. Requests to spirits are done through libations to Maribayasa which stands in the liminal area between the civilized village and the bush that is the domain of bush spirits. Since people need resources from the bush, and because bush spirits tend to enter the village, especially at night, people must protect themselves by appeasing these creatures. Arguing that the continuation of the Maribayasa libations is not a result of Selofara's supposed isolation from national and regional centers of Islamic power, this chapter shows that a definition of Maribayasa as a Muslim or non-Muslim site is contingent: it depends on local applications of current regional and global debates on definitions of being Muslim. While the definitions of practices and identities as Muslim or non-Muslim are shifting in increasingly fragmented ways, a large group of women continues communal libations and pledges in adjusted form at Maribayasa. Though defying the calls for cessation from the local imam and others who define it as a non-Muslim practice, Selofara women themselves are convinced this is the only way they will be able to feed their children and thereby conform to Allah's will.

Maribayasa is the name of a nondescript shea tree (Figure 23.1), chosen for its location on the ritually productive outskirts of Selofara, a mid-size Maninka village of 1,500 souls (but only seven large families) in the Mande region of Southern

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1 This argument is often made in debates on the relative non-Muslim attachments of people on the Mande plateau which overlooks Selofara. See for example Stephen Wooten, “Antelope Headdresses and Champion Farmers: Negotiating Meaning and Identity through the Bamana Ciwara Complex,” *African Arts* 33 no. 2 (Summer 2000): 18–33, 89–90.

2 During my research in the community of Selofara, no individual went to Maribayasa to dance and repay the spirits for their concession to her wishes. Villagers told me someone had come from another village to dance here in the previous year, but I have never witnessed such an event. I will therefore limit myself to a description and analysis of the communal sacrifices.

Mali. It is also the name of the ritual complex which is attached to this tree and similar sites in other Maninka communities. As a women's site of sacrifice and divination, Maribayasa is rarely mentioned in the extensive classic literature on Maninka or Bambara initiation societies, which focuses mainly on men's associations. Though the practice has been abandoned in some Maninka villages as a result of pressure from Islamic renewal movements (see below), in many locations women nonetheless continue to sacrifice and pledge at Maribayasa or variations thereof. Besides Maribayasa, women can sacrifice collectively at Dugunba, while men used to do their sacrifices at Nyamatintintin. These trees have in common that they are located in the liminal space between village and bush, where the domains of people and bush spirits meet. At these trees people can ‘meet’ bush spirits to demand certain favors or to thank them for granting requests. At the time of fieldwork (2010–2011), men had ceased to sacrifice at Nyamatintintin. Instead they sacrificed animals in Islamic fashion on the mining site of choice at the beginning of the season. Women were barred from these ceremonies but they were part of the work teams mining the pits on these sites (placer mining).

This chapter indicates the consequences of a structural opposition of the village and the surrounding bush in Maninka conceptualizations of space. In the organization of mining, the village with its households, public square, mosque, stores, and gardens is separated from the uncultivated bush by a liminal space in which several trees are located at which people can bring sacrifices to bush spirits. One of these trees is Maribayasa. As a sacred precinct that has not been designed and built but instead chosen in the bush, Mariabayasa becomes specifically marked during the described ritual related to gold mining but stands idle (as a regular unmarked tree among many) for the rest of the year. Since the village and bush areas occupy inconsistent spaces (bush spirits enter the village at night, fields are cut out of the bush) and are not perceptible through particular built or natural markers, but are instead marked by the participants’ movement through, in, and out of the village, I will apply an anthropological analysis to the spatial configuration of Maribayasa and to its classification as a Muslim or non-Muslim site.

This chapter is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Selofara and surrounding villages. Data were collected through observations and interviews. Unlike the broad range of literature available on famous architectural sites like Djenné, little to no research has been published on Maninka architecture or building practices, and this newly literate society has no local written literature or archival material appropriate to this part of the study. As the material object under discussion is a tree in the bush


5 I studied Maribayasa and the sacrifices at this and other sites as part of my doctoral fieldwork. This research project took place in Selofara and the commune of seven villages of which it is part from January–March 2010 and July 2010–August 2011. As a student of socio-cultural anthropology I studied the social organization of artisanal gold mining in the region, covering themes like mining technology, spatiality of mining sites, sacrifice, mobility, and the agriculture/mining economy. A variety of methods were used: observations, formal and informal interviews, surveys and archival work. In the course of this fieldwork I attended numerous sacrifices which were intended to appease jinew. This chapter is primarily based on direct observations, recordings and photographs of the sacrifices at the women’s gold mine, and at Maribayasa in Selofara on March 2–3, 2011, as well as on open interviews conducted with elderly women (i.e., those who are allowed to speak about such important and sensitive issues) after the event. I thank fellow student of artisanal mining Mahammadou Keita for accompanying me during these interviews.


7 The French colonizers rarely mention the Bakama area as it was too isolated and uninhabited to be significant.