214 pp. 24 black-and-white illustrations and a bibliography. 15 euros.

Geert Mommersteeg’s book Dans la cité des marabouts [In the City of the Marabouts] is the French translation of a book first published in Dutch (In de stad van de marabouts, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1998), itself based on an excellent doctoral dissertation defended at the University of Utrecht in 1996.¹ The thesis was based on fieldwork carried out in the Malian city of Djenné (in English, sometimes also spelled Jenne), with interruptions, from 1985 to 1989. The French version adds a final section (161–81) presenting some aspects of the author’s more recent fieldwork, especially as conducted in 1994 and 2007, and an updated bibliography. It also benefits from a preface by Constant Hamès, a specialist in Islamic, especially West African, magic, and an afterword by Joseph Brunet-Jailly, a French social scientist long associated with the city, who has coordinated much research about it.

Though Djenné was the subject of several important scholarly publications in the opening years of the twentieth century, this was followed by a long lull. Since the 1970s, it has been the site of major archeological and art historical research. Geert Mommersteeg was one of its first ethnographers, and the first to do systematic research on Islam there. In the past three decades, research has been undertaken concerning numerous facets of the city’s culture, including music, social structures, religious transformations, and especially—Geert Mommersteeg has been one of the contributors—urbanism and architecture.

As suggested by both archeology and oral traditions, Djenné and its immediate area include some of the oldest urban sites in West Africa. The city has been a major trading and Islamic religious center since at least the fifteenth century (as documented by written sources). It has long been famous for its mosque, considered a very ancient one because believed to be located on the site of the city’s first mosque, though in fact the present building (erected with French support) dates only to 1907. Djenné was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1988, and a Dutch-funded

program for restoration of about a hundred of the city’s old houses was launched in 1996. More recently, the Aga Khan Trust has been involved in the restoration of the mosque.

The present book, like its Dutch-language predecessor, is a highly personal statement, condensed (or, in some instances, expanded) from certain sections of the doctoral dissertation, for a general public rather than a specifically scholarly one. As such, it allows glimpses into the author’s fieldwork practice, presenting his own and his interlocutors’ individual reactions and feelings, with frequent insights into religious beliefs and acts as they play out in daily living. However, it provides little background information about Djenné, except in the very useful final section, which reports on the rapid social, technological, educational, and even religious changes that have taken place in the city over the past twenty years.

Geert Mommersteeg was fortunate to have, as his principal fieldwork collaborator, Boubacar Kouroumansé, whose name is cited throughout the book. Member of a lineage of hereditary, Bozo-speaking masons, Boubacar Kouroumansé, in his twenties at the time, has since then been recognized as one of the most skilled masons in Djenné. Prominently involved in the restoration projects, he has also led several groups of masons abroad, including one to build a small Djenné-style mosque inside the Clayarch Gimhae Museum (specializing in architectural ceramics) in South Korea. Boubacar Kouroumansé has since also collaborated with many other researchers, and is repeatedly cited in Trevor H. J. Marchand’s *The Masons of Djenné* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Geert Mommersteeg’s book provides substantial information about Islamic education, both the initial level, consecrated to the recitation, copying, and memorization of the Koran, and the more advanced level, focused on the reading (with comprehension) of key Arabic texts. The description of the process of learning how to read is particularly interesting. As has since been confirmed by other researchers, working in several regions of West Africa, the advanced level involves the oral translation, into a local language, by the teacher, of works written in Arabic. Nevertheless, I would quibble with Mommersteeg’s description of this process as “word for word” translation. As he also states, “after having read a few words, the marabout immediately translates them” (62–63). In fact, these improvised translations are based on syntactical units. Mommersteeg insists on the significant presence, in the city, of students from other areas of Mali, and contrasts the living and learning patterns of in- and out-of-town students.

Concerning all these topics, however, the specialist reader should turn