Ara Dreams: One Malian Woman's Reflection on Fertility, Islam, and Dream Interpretation[1]

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Abstract

The perception that fertility problems are entirely a women's issue abounds throughout contemporary southern Mali. While the increased accessibility of biomedical clinics in rural areas has slowly started to challenge this perception, many women continue to take special measures to protect and boost their fertility in order to safeguard their marriages. Drawing from stories and the dreams of a young mother, Ara Bagayoko, this paper explores the widely understood relationship between dreams and female

1 A special thank you to Ara Bagayoko for allowing this very personal episode in her life to be published. Tal Tamari and Richard McGregor were both instrumental in the early phases of my writing this article and helped me to find sources and learn more of the history of dream interpretation in Islam. And thank you to Andrea Brigaglia for encouraging me to turn my attention to writing up this article formally, highlighting the agency that women have in seeking an understanding of their dreams and fertility. I would like to extend additional thanks to the anonymous reviewer who offered helpful and positive suggestions for revision, which included expanding and adding more information to the version at hand rather than theorizing. And thank you to a kind acquaintance who, when I introduced myself as an academic with a biographical slant, said: "Scholars have a way of taking fascinating life stories and making them totally bland and formulaic." This has remained in my mind as representing a lingering public perception about the value of work that biographers in the academy do. I am thankful to the editorial board of *Islam in Africa* for ensuring that this slice of forthright biography has a chance of avoiding such a fate.

fertility in the town of Ouélessébougou. Here I highlight the manner in which Ara has consulted a local, literate, male dream-interpreter who uses Islamic dream manuals in order to promote conception, prevent miscarriages, and avoid infant mortality. This holy man (mori) dispenses ritual prescriptions while candidly predicting the fate of women's wombs. By considering the content of dreams as well as their analysis, this paper reviews the role of Muslim dream interpretation in ensuring female reproductive health.

Introduction

When I was a young girl, growing up in large family, my father had one rule for our breakfast table: do not talk about your dreams. I inherited my father's attitude about listening to dreams, and felt annoyed and imposed upon, while performing fieldwork, whenever people in Mali brought up their dreams in conversation. I always tried quickly to change the subject back to "reality." So it is fitting to start this paper by noting that I never expected that I would feel compelled to write about dreams. Moreover, I am surprised to find myself writing a paper on female fertility in southern Mali. Dreams and fertility are two subjects that seemingly stood far outside of my interests and reach, with the former too grating and the latter too intimate.

My relationships with middle-aged women in Ouélessébougou (a town in the Koulikoro region located about seventy kilometers south of Bamako) took the longest to develop. By the time I had the conversations that led me to write this article, I had traveled annually to Ouélessébougou for eight years and had long abandoned the idea that I would ever make a close female friend there who was about my age. As far as women my age went, I had "friends," but these relationships continually fell short of my expectations; someone, myself included, always had their guard up for one reason or another. However, during the summer of 2015 I developed a meaningful friendship with a woman who was also in her early thirties and who described herself with a smile within moments of first meeting her as "a little bit of a feminist." Her name was Aramata (Ara) Bagayoko.

On this particular trip I decided to make an effort to speak in French rather than Bamanankan for at least one hour per day. I budgeted to pay someone to set time aside for me because people in Ouélessébougou do not normally use French in everyday conversation. Realising that this type of job would typically go to a man, I deliberately put feelers out for a female Francophile. Within a day of someone suggesting Ara, whom I had known casually through mutual friends for years, I rode my bike to her house and we set up arrangements to meet daily at about three o'clock to speak together in French. She told me to pick a new topic for each meeting and to study the appropriate vocabulary before arriving for our meetings. Over the course of the summer we exhausted a long list of subjects: these included television, cooking, gambling, politics, exercise, hobbies, ghost stories, childhood games, medicine, education, prisons, holidays, first aid, sports, feminism, death, books, crime, job interviews, death and animals.

One day near the end of the summer I suggested that we talk about dreams. "Dreams?" Ara sounded rather surprised, which was unusual because she always accepted any topic I picked. "Why dreams?" I smiled and rolled my eyes at my own idiocy and told her that I had dreamed the night before that I had returned to the United States to find another woman living in my house with my husband and dog. Ara laughed and assured me that my dream was merely the result of nerves about returning home soon, and so I should not let it get into my head and spoil my last week in Mali. "But this isn't to say dreams aren't important," she prudently qualified. "In fact, dreams are often the best reflections we have of reality."

By this time of the summer, Ara and I had grown close enough to be able to give each other our honest opinions and our friendship could sustain occasional disagreements. I thanked her for the reassurance but told her I did not necessarily agree that dreams reflect reality. I said that, although my dream bothered me, I thought that the relationship between dreams and reality is probably more obscure than we think. Ara and I then had a series of conversations, mostly in French, in which she told me a variety of stories in order to persuade me that dreams (Ara always used the word

"*rêve*") did, indeed, reveal hidden realities and that people had agency in which they could follow through on the consequences that their dreams might have within their living realities. During our conversations she told me about her own experience with dream interpretation, combined with a story about nameless women who abound in Ouélessébougou's folklore. All of the dreams dealt with issues of fertility or infant mortality.

Drawing from Ara's experiences, together with stories she had heard about another woman's dreams, this paper sets out to demonstrate the importance of dreams for women, in both Islamic and West African contexts. This paper also highlights the agency that women take in seeking out dream interpretation and independently performing sacrifices in order to ensure that dreams do not lead to their, or their children's, demise. This paper documents the way that dreams indicate the concerns with which young woman are so often burdened in their waking lives in Mali. It also adds to the existing literature on the way that scholars can learn about social attitudes and transformations through an investigative analysis of dreams.[2]

In order to achieve these aims, I have organized the content of this paper into four additional sections. After a brief consideration of the methodology that I used to write this article, section two describes the way that Ara thought about and shared dreams historically, drawing from both indigenous and Muslim perspectives. The third section begins by presenting some legendary dreams of women that have made their way into local lore; this is followed by the content of Ara's dreams. I then turn to the ritual prescriptions that Ara sought out to calm frightening suspicions about her own health and fertility, and the well-being of her children. To conclude, I review the significant relationships between the interpretation of dreams and daily social life for Ara, and perhaps many more women in Mali and beyond.

2 Andrew Strathern, "Melpadream interpretation and the concept of hidden truth," *Ethnology*, 28, 4, 1989: 301-315.
David Chidester, "Dreaming in the contact zone: Zulu dreams, visions, and religion in nineteenth-century South Africa," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 76, 1, 2008: 28.

Methodology and the Uniqueness of Ara

Although she was always surrounded by her husband's family, Ara said that she considered herself to be somewhat of a loner. She grew up in the small village of Kandia, in Koulikoro's neighboring Dialakoroba commune, and Bamanankan was her native tongue, although she had a talent for language and learnt French very quickly as a young student. Marriage took her to the town of Ouélessébougou, where she has pent her entire adult life.

For various reasons, Ara did not connect deeply with or trust many of the people in her close social and family circles. Also, she had nobody from her immediate biological family living near her. One of the most sensitive issues that we often discussed left Ara living constantly in an unenviable and defensive mode; this was her relationship with her sister-in-law, who lived with Ara in her compound and had no children of her own. Ara's sister-in-law had been attempting to persuade the family to force Ara to give her youngest daughter away to her to raise. Ara refused and found such practices, which prevailed widely in the past and to an extent even now, totally old-fashioned. Ara was well educated, intelligent, thoughtful, and had a career as a schoolteacher for young children.

Yet even at work she had reason to be wary of her colleagues and found it difficult to relax fully. Ara has been victim to some of the tawdry norms that govern life and employment in Mali. She was the only female teacher at the school where she worked, which was about five kilometers deep in the forests of Ouélessébougou. The men she worked with treated her respectfully, but she knew that attitudes often change quickly or that a new, male teacher could be brought in at any moment who might have a sexist attitude toward her. She also did not like the school very much, as the commute meant that she needed to take her family's sole motorcycle away from town, leaving everyone else to ride bicycles or walk. On one occasion Ara sought employment closer to home at a more prestigious school in town that offered higher pay. The schoolmaster who interviewed her asked about her marital status. She said she was married. He then asked if she had children and she replied "yes." Ara then told me of the embarrassment of her potential boss looking her up and down several times and at last

asking, "So would two times be acceptable?", an insinuation that any job offer would include the expectation that Ara have sex with her boss twice. Ara said nothing in response, but stood up, slunk out of his office, and did not inquire further about her application. Later she learned that a young, pretty, and single woman from Bamako had been given the position.

All this background is intended to show that Ara was unflinchingly honest about her experiences and personality. In speaking about dreams, fertility, sex, birth control, and rearing children she never hesitated to tell me the full truth from her perspective. Her words and memories trace the happiness, frustrations, and the emotions that mark the experience of all humans. Despite certain universalities of her experiences, she identified strongly as a Malian while simultaneously noting that she did not act in ways that a "typical Malian woman" might. When I asked what she meant when she said she was not a "typical Malian woman" she offered, for example, that she hated attending weddings and avoided involvement at any cost. Other women I knew would spend months obsessing over details of weddings they were involved in organizing. Although she feels that she runs against the cultural grain, Ara gives us a glimpse into the life of a woman. Whether or not she represents "Malian women" properly, or if such a category even exists, is for the reader to determine. Nevertheless, the following content offers new and original findings for researchers to consider about women and the way that Islamic dream interpretation surrounds Ara's perception of fertility and reproduction.

The reports that follow are the outcome of a series of conversations that Ara and I had about the topics of dreaming, interpretation of dreams, and rituals. These conversations all took place at her home in French, with occasional segments spoken in Bamanankan, during the summers of 2015, '16, and '17. She told me about many other people, particularly a dream interpreter with whom she often consulted, but I never met any of the actors described in these conversations, apart from Ara. I inquired about meeting the dream interpreter, Mouli Samaké, but was told he had an eccentric and very private personality and would probably not appreciate a visit from a white female researcher, especially if he suspected that I was looking for an interview. In any case, one article is

not sufficient to provide a summary and description of people's lives and dream lives in respect of the whole town; therefore, keeping a close focus on Ara makes methodological sense. Consequently, what follows is a one-on-one account of what Ara said to me regarding the role that dreams have played in her life thus far.

Dreaming in Islam and African Indigeneity

Despite the importance of dreaming in Mali, scholars who research in Mali have not written about it in any significant depth, which represents an oversight. It is understandable why anthropologists would not immediately think of building a project around dreams, as they have been trained to become interested in what is real, solid, and directly observable. Writing about dreams posed an admitted problem in my mind initially insofar as I felt that it was akin to writing fiction; it was far from the rules of participant observation, as I understood them, to write about things that actually never happened, as if they had. Yet I have changed my mind as I have waded into the literature on dreaming and religion and considered my conversations with Ara more thoroughly.

Most significantly, Bulkeley has argued persuasively that the connection between religion and dreams is a topic that has not been fully developed by scholars in the field of religious studies.[3] My own research in Mali affirms Bulkeley's stance, as the literature covering the region offers only passing reference to the significance of dreams, but does not include much by way of content or any other compelling details. This represents a truly significant oversight in the study of religion, for two main reasons. First, Edward B Tylor most famously used dream studies to create and advance the field of religious studies. Although the field has moved beyond Tylor's stances, his work on dreams offers persuasive insights into how the soul and the verity of dreams is approached. Second, anyone familiar with the history of religion in Africa, knows that dreaming has provided the impetus for countless new religious movements and personal religious callings across the continent.

3 Kelly Bulkeley, "Dream-sharing groups, spirituality, and community," *Journal of Religion and Health*, 35, 1, 1996: 59-66.

One key issue of a project such as this one is to examine historical origins in order to understand why Ara places such significance on her dreams. Here, indigeneity and Islamic influences are quite obviously at play together. This section takes care to review the role of dreams in the Islamic tradition as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa in order to understand more fully what compels people to have their dreams interpreted and (often) carry out costly sacrifices that interpreters prescribe for them.

Within the field of African studies, reports have repeatedly surfaced regarding the way some Africans have turned to dreams as a way of shedding light on difficult situations, especially during emotional times. We learn, for example, from Chidester's analysis of JG Jung's travels in southern Africa, of a case in which the inability to dream, or dream-loss, represents a spiritual crisis experienced by people living under oppressive conditions. Chidester recounts an emotional exchange that Jung recorded after speaking with an African ritual specialist: "I remember a medicine man in Africa, who said to me almost with tears in his eyes: 'We have no dreams anymore since the British are in the country.'"[4] Thus, loss of dreams can amount to a total feeling of powerlessness and a loss of humanity.

Generally speaking, in the context of Islam, dreams have carried significance since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. For example, the Prophet's dream of drinking milk from a vessel and then passing the milk to 'Umar has given rise to interpretations regarding transmission and succession.[5]Descriptions of dreams abound in the literature of the Near East and North Africa. According to a review by Marlow, the Prophet Muhammad endowed dreams with a theological dimension, saying that after him "true dreams" would be the only channel for prophecy. Consequently, throughout the history of Islam, dreams have been used to support conflicting theological and political arguments, and have even been used to justify the building and expansion of new dynasties.[6]

4 David Chidester, p. 27-53.
5 Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge triumphant: the concept of knowledge in Medieval Islam.* (Boston: Brill University Press, 1970), p. 80.
6 Louise Marlow, "Introduction," in *Dreaming across boundaries: the interpretation of dreams in Islamic lands* (Boston, Massachusetts: Ilex Foundation, 2008).

Masquelier conducted studies in West Africa which showed how phenomena such as dreams and rumours, the unrealistic nature of which initially made me wary of this kind of research, make their way into ordinary life; having done so, they assume a reality of their own which is evident in the way they compel people to act.[7] In Mali, dreams carry a significant yet personal weight that is so often heavily tied to religion. Dreams can offer, for example, an indication that the dreamer is experiencing proper spiritual development. Ancestors figure prominently in dreams, and also figure predominately in Islam and in practices considered by residents as pre-Islamic. Bamana people make up the prominent ethnic identity in Ouélessébougou and are historically known to have communicated with ancestors on a regular basis. For example, in writings from yesteryear, *An Essay on the Religion of the Bambara*, Germaine Dieterlen recounts Bamana men sticking pieces of wood into the ground to symbolize their paternal uncles; compound chiefs lean against these pieces of wood for symbolic and literal support while participating in daily social interactions. Apparently, farmers would also tap their hoes against the wood before leaving for their fields in order to show ancestors their tools and make them feel included in daily life. Living relatives, moreover, present their ancestors with raw millet before and during germination periods to procure their blessings for soil fertility and rainfall.[8]

In recent decades, Islam has become further entrenched in village culture and as a result, many of the practices written about in the late twentieth century have slowly fallen into disuse. Even so, ancestors remain an indispensable part of daily life. They visit and offer counsel to their progeny in dreams and these occasions tend to be construed as a positive sign that the dreamers are earning enough merit (*baraji*) through Muslim practices on behalf of the deceased while they await their day of judgment in the grave.[9] Ara demonstrated much less concern regarding

7 Adeline Masquelier, *Women and Islamic revival in a West African town.* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 153.

8 Germaine Dieterlen, *Essai sur la religion Bambara.* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1951), p. 251-252.

9 Dianna Bell, "May God repay you: the Muslim tenet of *Baraji* in Southern Mali, West Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 45, 2, 2015: 150-169.

dreams from her ancestors, especially since both of her parents were still alive. Rather, the dreams that remained in her mind and carried seemingly coded messages offered her clues about her future and the future of her children. She could understand the dreams better by consulting with Mouli Samaké, the holy man or scholar (*mori*) living in the area who specialized in dreams. Ara felt that a hidden world of power, information, and entities manifests itself primarily through dreams. Therefore, whenever she had especially troubling or peculiar dreams, she felt the need to seek interpretation, especially because she had heard so many reports about women who met their demise by ignoring their dreams.

In Ouélessébougou, Ara trusted only Mouli Samaké. She told me that he had many books including some that she recognized as being written in the Latin alphabet; however, most of his sources were in Arabic, which Ara does not read. I asked myself the usual questions about the extent of Samaké's literacy and understanding of Arabic. I concluded by wondering what good would ensue if I tried to determine whether he passed a line of questioning about Islamic history and a test of his literacy and comprehension of Arabic literacy. The degree of his literacy really does not matter for the purposes of this study. If the women who consult him consider him to be an expert, then he holds expertise. In the view of others, he has knowledge of Arabic and Islam that gives him an air of authority, that gives women the confidence to visit him and tell him intimate details that they would normally not speak to a man about. The question of whether he could actually read and understand the texts that he thumbed through, in depth, is beside the point. The point is that women perceived that he actually did read and understand, and so they followed his instruction.

Ara explained to me that Mouli Samaké is an elderly male and that many women visit him and in return for his insights, offer him modest sums or gifts, according to their means. Ara saw this sliding scale of payment as one indication of the legitimacy of his scholarship. She would not think very well of a scholar who would set a specific and high price for offering insight (a trend that is increasingly happening in Ouélessébougou). Any person who has knowledge of Islam but then refuses to transmit it or

sells it for a set price encompasses both sin and greed. In contrast, Mouli Samaké makes himself readily available to anyone who needs help to make sense of a dream. He primarily uses the eighth century Islamic scholar Ibn Sirin's manual *Dreams and Interpretations*, which is a 25-section work that draws from *hadith* and the Qur'an to instruct scholars how to carry out dream interpretation.

Ibn Sirin is a curious character in Islamic history; he was born in 34/654, towards the end of Caliph Uthman's reign, and is considered to be the "eponymous founder of the Muslim dream interpretation" even though he probably did not write even one of the more than twelve manuals which he has been credited for authoring. In contrast, his instructions on dream interpretations were probably passed on through oral and local lore. Ibn Sirin was deaf, worked as a cloth merchant, and lived a life in which he stood out in his community for his piety. Early biographies on Ibn Sirin do not mention his ability to interpret dreams, while many dream manuals that ascribe authorship to Ibn Sirin contradict themselves by citing sources that date from after Ibn Sirin's death.[10] Even so, in Ouélessébougou, Ibn Sirin's work stands unchallenged and carries a cachet that makes his manual the definitive authority for dream interpretation.

Fertility, Rumours, Dreams and Interpretation

Ara was a natural and loving caregiver to her children. She played games such as hide and seek with them, always taught them new facts and shared information with them on world events. Thus, she worked hard to expose them to a diversity of thought even though they lived in a small town. She did not take her children for granted and recognized that they were, in many ways, the bedrock of her marriage. In Mali, childlessness was a source of severe stress and anxiety for couples, and, typically, the woman would be blamed and cast aside.[11] Husbands expect their wives

10 John C. Lamoreaux, *The early Muslim tradition of dream interpretation*. (SUNY Press: series in Islam, 2002), p. 19-21.

11 Viola Hörbst, "Male infertility in Mali: kinship and impacts on biomedical practice in Bamako," in Jonathon E Brockopp and Thomas Eich (eds.), *Muslim medical ethics: from theory to practice*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), pp. 118-137.

to bear them children, and failure to do so can be a cause for divorce, although the spread of medical knowledge is slowly changing people's attitudes about fertility treatments. Even so, when couples experience early problems with fertility the woman is nearly always blamed, initially. Pregnant women are usually very private concerning their condition and do not talk about it much, especially in public. When Ara was pregnant she also tried to hide this, and her mental self-awareness was always heightened as she worried about miscarriages or early infant mortality. She also perceived that these unfortunate occurrences could be seen as her fault, especially if she left something like a powerful dream unaddressed.

I told Ara that it seemed logical that the mother's mental health could impact the child's well-being even *in utero.* However, I doubted politely whether the life of a child could hinge on clues from a dream: Ara disagreed. She told me a cautionary tale that has circulated around Ouélessébougou for years. In this tale, an unnamed woman had seven living children who were all healthy; the youngest was a toddler. One night the woman dreamed that she was inside her house with seven snakes. One by one the snakes in her dream started to die except for one. She sought out a dream interpretation through Mouli Samaké, who told her that all of her children were in imminent danger and that only one would survive unless the woman performed a certain sacrifice. The ritual sacrifice that the scholar prescribed would cost far more than what the woman could afford. It involved buying fresh milk, beans, and millet and giving the outcome of the sacrifice to those in need. Because the woman could not afford to make the sacrifice without taking on debt, she chose not to make it. Over the course of the next few years the woman watched her children die one by one; all from unrelated incidents. Illness, accidents and bad luck abounded and slowly her children passed away until she had only one child, as Samaké had predicted. By the time her second-to-last child had died, everybody in Ouélessébougou knew that she had received fair warning that this would be her fate for ignoring a sacrificial prescription. As Ara explained, the woman's social circle shrunk with the passing of each child, as she became increasingly regarded as irresponsible. When I asked if I could contact

the woman, Ara told me that she had moved to Selenge, a town about a forty-minute drive from Ouélessébougou; she had started a new life there. Although Ara could not even remember the woman's name, the tale of her misfortunes had lived on among mothers in town.

This type of cautionary tale helped to explain why Ara took dreams very seriously and why she would seek clarification when a dream troubled her. When she visited Mouli Samaké, she would tell him all the details of her dream and would often use the dreams to transition into discussing the joys and stresses of her waking life. Mouli Samaké is unhurried during visits and uses a combination of personal counseling and consultation with his manuals to decode common symbols and scenarios. Ara only visits Samaké if a dream remains in her mind for longer than a week. She said that most women frequent this man's house for similar reasons, and so he has come to be known for his ability to predict any issues that women will have with conception, miscarriages, and infant mortality. Sometimes the dreams can be warnings; in this event, then rituals or shifts in behaviour can avoid a bad prediction. On other occasions, though, women will learn that their fate is sealed and that, for example, a miscarriage is imminent no matter what they do.

Ara viewed dreams as one of the primary ways that she could protect herself and her children. Thus, if one of her children had a nightmare she would stay up with them for the rest of the night, before putting the child back to bed, she would ask them for details about their dreams while the dream was still fresh in their mind; she could then decide whether she needed to seek counsel about the dream on her child's behalf. I asked Ara whether she had experienced the truth of this man's interpretations as far as her own life was concerned. She told me that she had, especially on her first visit to Mouli Samaké; based on that experience, she would never question the scholar's abilities.

Back in 2005, about a year after Ara gave birth to her first child, she had a vivid dream that she was paddling to stay afloat in water. Scared, she looked around at her surroundings in the water and saw a black cobra and a red cobra on either side of her. She swam back and the two cobras started to fight. As the fight continued, the cobras

slowly dissolved and the water around Ara turned red. Ara could not stop thinking about the dream in the days that followed. Knowing of Mouli Samaké's reputation, she went, without consulting her husband or anyone else in her family, to hear his interpretation in private. As he consulted his materials, he told her that the dream was certainly predictive. She sat as he continued to study, and she waited for the diagnosis. After nearly an hour, Samaké put his materials to the side and turned to Ara. "You are pregnant," he said.

Ara thought about her cycle, sex life, and the fact that she was still breast feeding, thereby curbing her fertility, or so she thought; she then told him it was impossible for her to be pregnant. He assured her she was indeed newly pregnant, but she would miscarry in the coming weeks. Shocked and upset, she pleaded for a ritual antidote. He waited for time to pass, so that Ara could begin to accept that she *could* be pregnant and so that she would relax and stop talking.

For readers interested in local symbolism, Ara's dream offers a confusing "mixed bag." It was explained to me that if a person has a specific problem on their mind and they dream of a snake on land (the bigger the better), then this is a positive sign that a solution will soon follow. When snakes appear in a dream out of nowhere then their symbolism becomes more difficult to interpret. Generally, large cobras on land or in trees are especially auspicious. However, as the snake shrinks in size, it becomes less likely that one's problem will be solved and it is more likely that a personal storm of some kind is brewing in the future. Ara's dream included two snakes, but it was set in water. Water tends to be an ominous sign, associated with *djinn* (*jinn* in standard Arabic). Ouélessébougou is landlocked and the Niger River does not pass through the town; I rarely met anybody who had grown up in the area and was confident about their swimming abilities. Thus, dreams about water tend to reflect anxiety and even the possible possession by *djinn*.

As Ara listened to the interpretation of her dream she felt powerless and defeated. She asked, "Tell me what to do to care for this child?" "You cannot. And you have done nothing wrong, you will do nothing wrong. But you will have a miscarriage."

Ara left Samaké's house feeling dismayed and heartbroken. In due course, her period did not come, which confirmed that she was pregnant. She did not tell anyone about her missed period, pregnancy, dream, or visit to Mouli Samaké. She decided to lead a stress-free approach to life, and waited. After almost two months she had a miscarriage which she concealed as much as she could. She chalked it up to the other women living in her compound that she was having a heavy, more painful menstrual flow than usual. She carried on with her life, eventually having four beautiful and healthy children without incident. The news that Mouli Samaké offered Ara was so personal and painful that it took years before she decided to go and see him again; she used that occasion only to greet him and to give him milk and kola nuts as a gift. They talked about her family, career, and health of her children and even joked a little.

Ara knew from friends that women in Ouélessébougou regularly visited Mouli Samaké to help with conception and to safeguard their pregnancies and young children. Many of these women were much more open about this than Ara cared to be. Ara did not want people to know about her miscarriage. When she went to see Mouli Samaké there was no mention of or reference to the dream she had shared with him years earlier; it remained a secret between the two of them, until Ara told me about her experience and granted me permission to write about it.

Conclusion

Although this dream and miscarriage was Ara's private ordeal to endure, she taught me that her experience was typical of a world of silent experiences taking place among the young women all around me. I started this article by mentioning that I did not have an easy time making female friends in Mali. I was naturally aware that I did not have middle-aged female friends, and noted that I was missing only one slice of the demographic. Thus, I related well to children, men of all ages, and elderly women. However, Ara's testimony about the importance of dreams shows that by failing to connect with women I overlooked more than just a simple demographic. Women such as Ara are the fountainhead in Ouélessébougou. By paying attention to just one woman

I learned of a world of dreams and agency in which women privately seek interpretations that give them the extra insight they need to carry their duties as mothers and ensure a new generation of healthy children in Ouélessébougou.

This article offers an entry point to thinking about dreams, religion, and fertility in southern Mali. I have offered an overview of one woman and how her particular dreams offered predictive knowledge. Yet there is more to dreams than just understanding one's fertility. As mentioned earlier, dreams can offer an invaluable opportunity to visit long-deceased ancestors. They also offer possible solutions to the many problems that one faces living hand-to-mouth in one of the poorest countries in the world. Because the subject of dreams by ordinary people has drawn so little attention, it seems appropriate to conclude this paper with the hope that other scholars will also listen to and document the dreams of those people whom they study. Although a researcher is unlikely to hear about a dream that led to something dramatic, such as a call to start up a new religious movement, this research shows that there is plenty to be learned about the realities we seek to understand, by considering the imaginary.