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Malian women shuttle traders: LIBERALISATION, AUTONOMY AND (MIS)TRUST IN THE MALI-DAKAR CORRIDOR

Gunvor Jónsson*

ABSTRACT

Recent infrastructural developments in Senegal severely impacted on the livelihoods of female *bana-banas* from Mali, a group of mobile traders operating in the Mali-Dakar corridor: transportation costs significantly increased, travelling became a more exhausting experience, and fatal accidents became more frequent during journeys. Why did the *bana-banas* continue these arduous journeys? Why was their physical presence required in Dakar, and why did they not rely more extensively on social networks to facilitate their transnational trade? The analysis reveals that recent infrastructural transformations had led to an increasing commercialisation and disarticulation of Malian trade networks in the Senegalese capital; and, due to personal circumstances, the women were often cut off from the support of extended kinship networks. However, unlike general expectations of how networks evolve under conditions of neoliberalism, the *bana-banas* had not turned to personalised relationships of micro-level trust. The paper discusses the conditions of autonomy, flexibility and limited trust which characterised the *bana-banas'* livelihoods and necessitated these women's continued mobility from Mali. The paper contributes to the growing literature on social networks and trust by exploring how transnational trade does and does not work at this historical moment and in the context of gendered constraints.

INTRODUCTION

For nearly a century, Malian women have travelled on the passenger train that connects the capitals of Mali and Senegal, transporting and trading goods all along the line (cf. Jones 2007, Lambert 1993b, a, 1998a, Lambert de Frondeville 1987, Laurent 2007). Up until

* **Gunvor Jónsson** is Departmental Lecturer in Migration and Development at the Oxford Department of International Development (University of Oxford). She obtained her PhD in Anthropology from SOAS. A book manuscript based on her thesis is currently under preparation, tentatively entitled, *Terminus. Malian Women, Mobility and Trade in Dakar*. Email: gunvor.jonsson@geh.ox.ac.uk.

recently, the only way for the majority of Malians to access the Senegalese capital, Dakar, and its harbour was by taking the train. The roads that lead to the border between the two countries were only fully asphalted in 1999 on the Senegalese side, and in 2006 on the Malian side (Choplin and Lombard 2010: 5). Since the end of colonialism, the Dakar terminus train station served as a hub for a dynamic network of both settled and mobile Malians in the Senegalese capital, including traders, migrants, and visitors. In the 1980s a profitable wholesale and retail market emerged at the Dakar terminus, trading foodstuffs and handcrafted goods from Mali. Many of the women who conducted commerce along the Dakar-Niger railway line began acting as suppliers and middle (wo)men for the Malian traders at the terminus market. Later, some of these female shuttle traders, colloquially known as *bana-banas*, began selling their own goods at the Malian market.¹ The *bana-banas* also brought goods in the opposite direction, including beauty products, medicines, fashion items (clothes, leather shoes and wallets), and everything made out of plastic, such as buckets and sandals, which they purchased at the nearby markets of Sandaga, Tilèn, and HLM.

However, when I arrived in Dakar in 2013 to conduct fieldwork, the passenger train that the *bana-banas* had travelled on was no longer running and the flourishing Malian market at the terminus no longer existed. In 2003, under pressure from the World Bank, the Malian and Senegalese governments privatized the formerly State-owned rail network (Jones 2007: 108, Lesourd and Ninot 2006, Munié 2007). In 2009, the Senegalese passenger train running between the Malian border and Dakar was discontinued. In the same year, the Malian market at the Dakar terminus was bulldozed by Senegalese authorities.

Nonetheless, the *bana-banas*, who had previously deployed the passenger train, continued incessantly to travel back and forth, now by bus, between Dakar and their homes in Mali. The transformations of Senegal's infrastructural landscape, whereby rail was suppressed in favour of roads, meant however that transport costs to and from Mali increased significantly; that travelling on this route became a more exhausting experience; and that accidents - sometimes fatal - became more frequent. Why did the *bana-banas* continue to make such arduous journeys? Why was their physical presence required in Dakar, and why did they not rely more extensively on social networks to facilitate their transnational trade? This paper seeks to answer these questions by focusing primarily on the *bana-banas'*

autonomy and relationships of trust and mistrust that characterised these women's mobile livelihoods. In doing so, the paper sheds new light on how transnational trade does and doesn't work in the context of neoliberalism and in the light of specific gendered constraints on trade strategies.

During the whole of 2013 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork amongst Malians in Dakar using a mix of French and Bamanankan to carry out conversations, interviews and participant observation. Like the general Malian population, most of my informants were Muslim and part of the Mande populations of West Africa who share related languages and cultural heritage. Most of the female *bana-banas* I encountered were financially in charge of their own households and the majority were single – unmarried, divorced, or widowed. I carried out extensive periods of participant observation among the *bana-banas* from Mali, and also with the female traders working at the new Malian markets that had emerged after the market at the Dakar terminus was demolished. However, I decided not to travel with the *bana-banas*, since my fieldwork coincided with the war in Mali. Six days after my arrival in the Senegalese capital, on 11th January 2013, French and African troops launched a military intervention to halt rebels advancing on the capital from the north and occupying territory along the way. The *bana-banas* I met were, however, largely un-fazed by security alerts issued by the media and authorities during the conflict in Mali, and they continued their journeys to Dakar unabated. The Malian conflict was concentrated in the north of the country, not the southern and western parts, including Kayes and Bamako, where most of these women hailed from. As my informants liked to point out, the distance between Dakar and Bamako (see map below) is shorter than the distance between Bamako and Kidal, the strong-hold of the rebels in northern Mali.

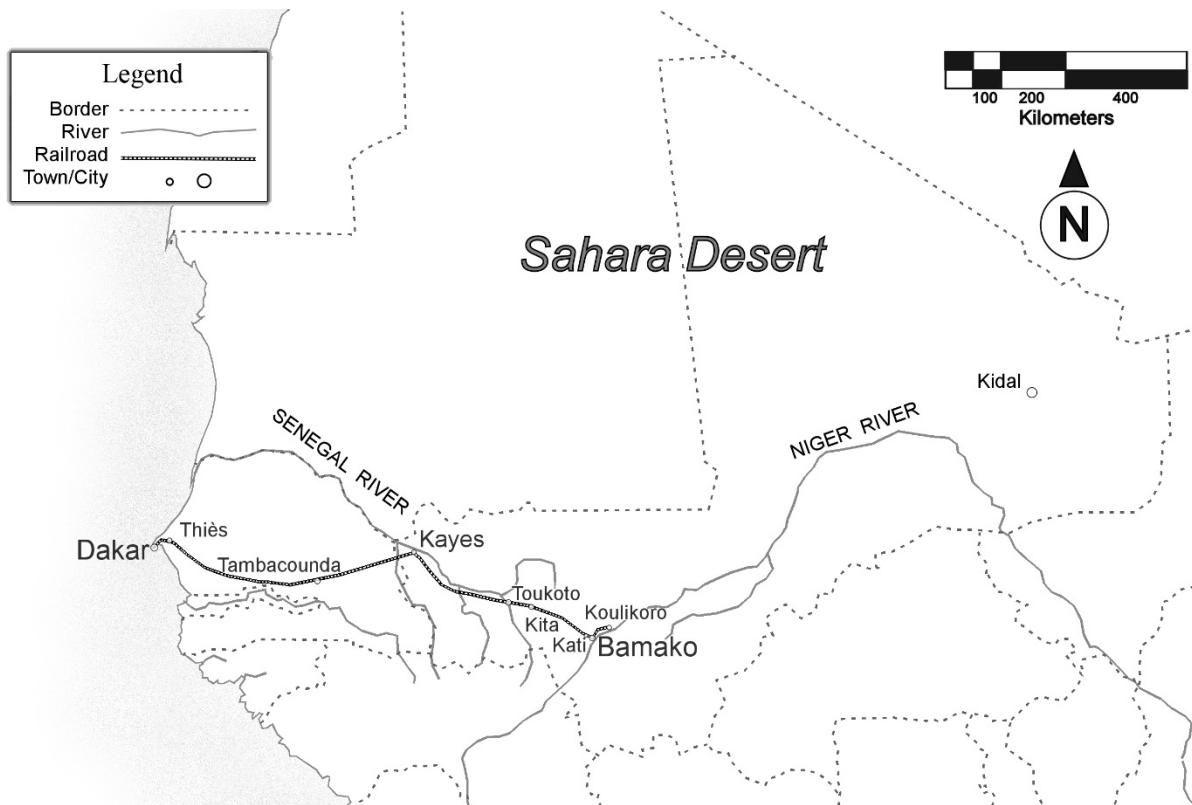


Figure 1: Map of the Dakar-Niger railway (Map copyright 2017 by James A. Jones, Ph.D. Used with permission).

Conceptual framework: Trade, trust and female autonomy

Studies of West African traders have been notable for their emphasis on the embeddedness of economic behaviour, analysing the significance of social networks and ethnic and religious identity in particular in constituting successful trading networks and institutions (Amselle 1985, Cohen 1969, Diouf 2000, Ebin 1992, Gregoire and Labazee 1993, Meagher 2010). Certain groups have used ethnicity as a basis for forming trading networks, including the Soninke, Joola, Hausa and Igbo (Amselle 1977, Cohen 1969, Manchuelle 1997, Meagher 2010). In the modern era, the *Mouride* and the so-called *Wahabiyya* are two branches of Islam that have been closely associated with trade in the region and beyond (Amselle 1985, Ebin 1992, Warms 1992, 1994, Whitehouse 2012). Trading partners' membership of the same group (usually ethnic, kin, or religious) forms the basis of characteristics-based trust, and may provide sanctioning mechanisms in case of betrayal, including the loss of reputation and ostracising from the group (Humphrey and Schmitz 1998, Overå 2006, Zucker 1985). In regional contexts where the state is weak or absent, trust is an important means of ensuring compliance with contractual obligations in the absence of reliable legal mechanisms (cf. Carrier 2017, Fafchamps 1996, Fafchamps 2004, Humphrey and Schmitz 1998). Reliance on characteristics-based trust has been particularly common among West African male traders involved in long-distance trade (Amselle 1985, Cohen 1969, Diouf 2000, Ebin 1992, Gregoire and Labazee 1993, Warms 1992, 1994).

Scholars have noted, though, that under conditions of contemporary globalisation and neoliberalism 'traditional' trade networks based on ethnicity, kinship or religion are increasingly giving way to more rational and instrumental networks, coupled with greater reliance on ICT (cf. Fafchamps 1996, Humphrey and Schmitz 1998, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Molony 2009, Overå 2006). Humphrey and Schmitz (1998: 39-40) argue that in developing countries the foundation of trust among traders is changing from characteristics-based (meso-level) to process-based (micro-level). In other words, trust in kinship and other groups is eroding and instead, trust increasingly develops through first-hand experience of exchange and repeated transaction over a period of time – that is, a more personalised form of trust in friends and colleagues (cf. Overå 2006: 1304, Zucker 1985). For example, in her study of Ghanaian traders Overå (2006: 1304) noted that economic success increasingly depended on an ability to participate in “instrumentally-

activated personal networks” which, unlike ethnic networks, are not structured and permanent but are activated when needed for specific purposes and must constantly be cultivated in order to last (cf. Fafchamps 1996: 442 and 444). In Overå’s (2006) example, repeated communication and interaction was therefore required to establish trust and enforce contracts, and mobile phones played a central role in this (ibid: 1304). While trade relationships in Africa tend to be established face-to-face, communications technology can play an important role in maintaining relations of trust and keeping customers, especially over long distances where constant interaction would otherwise be costly and time-consuming (ibid, Molony 2007: 77, 2009: 294-6).

However, the pattern of transformation of networks and trust described above did not appear to apply in a straight-forward manner to the Malian *bana-banas*. Instead of increasingly relying on personal contacts and communications technology, these women continued their frequent, and both costly and risky, journeys to Dakar, where they conducted their businesses in a relatively autonomous fashion. This suggests that the women’s networks had evolved in ways that were different to what is commonly expected under conditions of neoliberalism. Molony argues that the success of contractual agreements at a distance ‘is conditional on the parties being able to depend (to a greater degree than in more developed economies) on social networks and personal trust, revolving around personal exchange based on long-term personal relationships’ (Molony 2009: 297). Conversely, this suggests that the *bana-banas*’ continued need to travel to conduct trade reflected an inability to form dependable personal relationships and trust others, an argument which the following analysis explores further. However, rather than arguing that the *bana-banas* had failed to develop “functional networks” (Meagher 2005) the analysis examines how social relationships and the organisation of trade had changed in the light of increasing liberalisation, and how this had impacted on the *bana-banas*’ mobile livelihoods.

Following structural adjustment in Mali socio-economic crises and concomitant social transformations has meant that women’s autonomy is expanding, while social and financial support from extended families is diminishing (Antoine and Dial 2003, Brand 2001, Grange Omokaro 2009, Rondeau 1996, Rondeau and Bouchard 2007). The lack of economic opportunities has meant that men are increasingly unable to live up to the masculine ideal of establishing independent households and providing for their families. In turn, women

now participate more actively in the capitalist economy and contribute more to household budgets, and are increasingly educated. Hence, marriage is often postponed and conjugal unions are less stable than before (Antoine and Dial 2003). Many of the contemporary female *bana-banas* were divorcees and widows who had entered the shuttle trade at a mature age, since they could no longer rely on support from their extended families. Living in isolation from extended families the *bana-banas* had more freedom to travel compared with other Malian women who were more directly caught up in local patriarchal arrangements and whose mobilities were more strictly controlled and limited (cf. Freeman 2007, Koné 2002: 28, Lesclingand 2004: 38). But while travelling was valued by some of the *bana-banas* as a positive experience and a way to learn about other places, it was not a motivation for taking up this mobile livelihood. Rather, abandonment, self-reliance and other aspects of marginalisation and autonomy tended to propel women into this occupation: mobility was a necessary livelihood strategy for these socially marginalised women who had few sources of support to draw upon.

It is important to note that the social rules and regulations that apply to male traders do not necessarily apply in the same way to women traders, who may be subjected to different social and moral constraints than men (Clark 1994, 2003, cf. Meagher 2005: 231). Being a female *bana-bana* carried a social stigma: amongst many Malians I met it was generally not well considered for a woman in her reproductive age to be unmarried and “roaming about” (cf. Findley 1993, Guilmoto 1997, Porter 2011, Rodet 2009). In West Africa, women’s autonomous migration and mobility tends to be construed as a potential threat to the socio-economic structure of patriarchal families and communities (Guilmoto 1997, Hertrich and Lesclingand 2003, Lesclingand 2004, Ouedraogo 1995, Sauvain-Dugerdil 2011). While long-distance trade and travel tends to be construed as prestigious for Malian men, leading to social mobility and status, this is not necessarily the case for mature Malian women (cf. Dougnon 2013, Jónsson 2012, Whitehouse 2012). Indeed, many Malians thought that the female *bana-banas* were prostitutes.

The paper is divided into three sections. It first outlines the evolution of Malian women’s commerce in the Dakar-Bamako corridor, focusing on the transformations of the material infrastructure upon which the *bana-banas’* commerce depended. The analysis then focuses on how recent neoliberal shifts impacted on the ways in which *bana-banas* organised their

trade in Dakar. The analysis highlights the *bana-banas'* increasing alienation from ethnic- and kin-based networks. Finally, the paper considers why these recent changes had not led the *bana-banas* to shift towards "micro level" and "process based" trust. In doing so, the analysis focuses particularly on the need for flexibility and disembeddedness to engage in this mobile livelihood, and questions the assumption that trust is essential to this form of trade.

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S COMMERCE IN THE DAKAR-BAMAKO CORRIDOR

The phenomenon of female shuttle traders in the Mali-Senegal corridor is not a product of recent liberalisation but dates back nearly a century. In fact, unlike other instances of shuttle trade, the *bana-banas'* participation in commerce in this corridor *declined* during the era of structural adjustment (cf. Bredeloup 2012, Haugen 2013, Peraldi 2005). West African women first became railway merchants as early as the 1890s, taking advantage of their husbands' access to railway passes to travel to town to buy better food than the railway supplied.² In the 1920-30s, the wives of railway employees began engaging in long-distance trade (Jones 2002: 5, Lambert 1993a: 42). Railway trade was progressively feminized during the post-colonial socialist regime in Mali when several women were promoted in business by their husbands or a civil servant relative with connections to power; some educated women also used the opportunity of being close to the ruling elite in order to access business (Lambert 1993a: 44). The trade grew considerably during the droughts in the 1970s when families were forced to diversify their income-generating strategies and women increasingly used the train to conduct trade (ibid).

Different measures implemented during the period of liberalisation, initiated with structural adjustments in the early 80s, deterred the small railway traders, to the advantage of monopolising male and female traders who possessed large sums of capital (Jones 2007: 107, Lambert 1993a: 45-46). When Mali joined the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and adopted the CFA currency in 1984 prices increased 100% which led to a decline in female traders on the train: since Senegal and Mali now had the same currency, raw products from Mali became less competitive in Dakar and numerous female traders had to change to other more favourable circuits than the Dakar-Bamako one (Lambert 1993a: 45, cf. Jones 2007: 107).

Under pressure from the World Bank, the Malian and Senegalese governments privatised the Dakar-Niger railway network in 2003. The railway had been in decline for decades as the States had largely stopped investing in it and the equipment had become obsolete (Lesourd and Ninot 2006: 108). After a tender, a 25-year concession was won by a Franco-Canadian consortium under the name Transrail (Jones 2007: 108). Once the opportunities for financial speculation were quickly exhausted, this consortium closed down most of the railway system, with devastating consequences for the traders and other people making their living off the railway line (Beaudet 2006, Munié 2007). The new owners invested minimally in the railway equipment (wagons and tracks) and dismissed more than six hundred railway workers and closed two thirds of all stations (Beaudet 2006, Jones 2007: 108, Munié 2007). This contributed to the impoverishment of rural areas adjacent to the line where, for over a century, life had been organised around the stations, as villagers had traded their produce with travellers and railway workers' families (Beaudet 2006, Magassa 2018, cf. Laurent 2007). Although the concession was won in exchange for an operating agreement to ensure passenger services Transrail did not consider this profitable and after privatisation the service began to decline (Munié 2007). Presumably, the last passenger train in Senegal ran in 2009 (cf. Coulibaly 2009, Martineau 2013).³

In 2003 the gradual decline of the Dakar-Niger railway and improvement of the roads linking Mali and Senegal incited one pioneering female *bana-bana* from Mali to establish the first bus route for passengers travelling between Bamako and Dakar. She eventually started up her own bus company in 2006, and other companies servicing the route emerged during the next three years. Certain buses became unofficially known as the "*bana-bana* buses": rather than competing with the mainstream buses over passenger comfort, like air-conditioning or leg-room, they obtained loyal and regular customers among the *bana-banas* by catering specifically to their transport needs.⁴

The aisle inside the buses used by the *bana-banas* was normally so packed with luggage that passengers could not move but were crammed into their seats during the nearly two days of travel. A female *bana-bana* describing her bus journey complained, 'Your feet are so swollen you'd think you had *elephantiasis*. Even your entire body, it hurts, because you don't move'. The few stops on the route were mostly at checkpoints and border posts, where the travellers would be harassed by corrupt officials. This exhausting experience had deterred

many *bana-banas* from continuing to travel on this route and many gave up their journeys to Dakar when the passenger train stopped running. While some *bana-banas* stopped their transnational trade altogether and “retired” in Mali, others instead pursued alternative destinations like Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, or Guinea Conakry. Some *bana-banas* decided to settle permanently in Dakar and trade from a market stall or a shop.⁵

Although the former passenger train had had frequent and sometimes fatal accidents, the number of casualties had not declined after the transition to buses. This reflects a general problem in most of Africa where road accidents are a major source of fatalities and injuries (Lamont 2012).⁶ One of the worst accidents during my fieldwork involved one of the *bana-bana* buses: about half of the passengers including the driver and his two apprentices died after the bus crashed into a stationary truck. Apparently, the driver had objected to departing that day because he was too tired, but his boss in Mali had insisted over the phone.

The *bana-banas* knew there were certain risks involved in travelling; but the journeys were essential to their livelihoods and there was little they could do to change the conditions of travel, except from putting their fate in God. This did not mean that they were oblivious to the risks of travel – to the contrary, the women often mentioned the possibility of death whenever we discussed their journeys. One morning when the *bana-bana* Nana⁷ was preparing to leave and sat surrounded by all her luggage I asked what she normally packed for the journey to Dakar. She replied that she always brought two sheets, and explained, ‘If a man travels from Bamako to Dakar and he dies on the way, they will ask people to look through his luggage to see if there is any sheet, to wrap the body before the burial. What will you do if you didn't bring a sheet?!’

It is difficult to estimate the extent to which neoliberalism has resulted in small-scale trade between Mali and Senegal shifting into the hands of an elite of large-scale traders. There are clear indications that large-scale trade between Mali and Senegal is increasing, particularly import to Mali from Senegal (see Figure 2). It is worth noting that, in parallel with the trade conducted by *bana-banas*, there was a “virtual” trade being carried out between Dakar and Bamako: some Malian women trading in import and export did not need to come to Dakar, but conducted their entire business from Mali. These were women who could afford to

order several truck-loads of goods; pay for brokers and intermediaries to organize the purchase and transport of goods; and transfer money for their orders via the bank. If, for any reason, they needed to come to Dakar they would take the plane. Engaging in such “virtual” trade and relying extensively on ICTs, employees and intermediaries instead of travelling to Dakar required significant social and financial capital, which female *bana-banas* did not possess.

Figure 2: Evolution of the traffic of goods from 2008 to 2012, to and from Mali (Figures obtained in March 2013 from *Entrepôts Maliens Au Senegal (EMASE)* in Dakar).

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Global figures (in tonnes)	1,447,820	1,620,916	1,997,586	2,360,630	2,332,868
Import by rail	207,503	230,572	245,830	206,356	171,838
Import by road	1,171,088	1,339,574	1,681,812	2,050,257	2,016,142
Export by Rail	52,644	39,580	29,315	43,181	70,266
Export by road	16,585	11,190	20,628	52,322	68,556
Export overseas (mainly cotton)	34,839	21,350	28,987	66,258	61,002

At the same time, it has become more expensive and cumbersome for small-scale shuttle traders to transport goods to and from Dakar, since the demise of the Dakar-Niger passenger train: compared with the more spacious passenger train the buses, which the *bana-banas* travelled on, had relatively little room for luggage, and trade commodities therefore often had to be transported separately by truck, constituting a significant additional cost. Moreover, if the *bana-bana* was not watching, the people handling the goods during the on- and off-loading of trucks would just throw them into the truck or onto the ground, which meant packaging and goods could easily break. The women’s goods were sometimes damaged if they were loaded together with other kinds of items. For example, Fatou Fall wanted to buy a large amount of rice but worried that lots of other things would be filled into the same truck which could easily poke holes into the rice bags, causing the rice to pour out of the bags. To avoid such problems, *bana-banas* had to be present to survey the loading of their goods and some even accompanied the truck driver back to Mali.

To reduce transport costs there were some *bana-banas* who colluded with truck drivers to illegally overload trucks after they had been filled up with their formally allowed cargo. These *bana-banas* would then travel along in the truck, taking care of negotiations with and bribes to officials. This arrangement was one of the more troublesome aspects of the *bana-banas'* trade that gave the women a negative reputation among business people and officials dealing in the more formally regulated sectors of the economy.

Most *bana-banas* were unable to deploy the freight train, because it only transported goods by the wagon-load.⁸ I did discover though that unofficially, the freight train manager had a “friendly” arrangement of transporting smaller quantities of goods on behalf of a few customers – mainly his wife and friends. Women with close ties to large-scale traders could also add smaller quantities of goods to these traders’ shipments on the freight train. However, such forms of informal collaboration were not available to most *bana-banas* who did not have strong personal ties to other Malians involved in railway commerce and transport. Agnès Lambert’s research conducted on the railway in the 80s shows that in the past, kinship ties to railway employees, officials and other railway traders facilitated entry into the railway trade; and female railway merchants actively encouraged future generations to follow in their footsteps, bringing along their daughters on the train to show them how to trade (Lambert de Frondeville 1987, Lambert 1993a, b, 1998b, Poitou, Lambert de Frondeville, and Toulabor 1992). In contrast, many of the contemporary *bana-banas* travelling to Dakar were divorcees and widows who had entered the trade at a mature age, since they could no longer rely on support from their extended families. This situation reflected a wider context where women’s autonomy was expanding, while the structure of extended families - which provided some measure of social and financial support - was disintegrating.

RESTRUCTURING OF MALIAN TRADE NETWORKS IN DAKAR

Before the Malian market in Dakar was bulldozed, it was relatively easy for a *bana-bana* to bring along a load of goods on the train and then sit down at the terminus and sell them and in turn, use the profit to purchase items from the nearby markets in the city centre to bring back for sale in Mali. This option was no longer available and moreover, demand for the Malian goods in Dakar had declined after the market had disappeared and the traders

dispersed. Hence, the majority of the Malian *bana-banas* now came to Dakar to buy, not to sell.⁹ The goods purchased by *bana-banas* in Dakar were generally industrially manufactured and imported products. Mali is landlocked and depends greatly on maritime traffic for its international trade, primarily through the port city of Dakar.¹⁰ Dakar offered the *bana-banas* a great range of commodities, at a relatively low price. In addition to imported goods, the women purchased mass produced consumables supplied by Dakar's factories. Dakar is also known for its fashion, and tailored and ready-made garments were another prized commodity that Malian *bana-banas* often traded in. "Small" *bana-banas* (literally referred to as "*petites bana-banas*") would usually buy clothes, shoes, jewellery, and cosmetics; processed and tinned food; cooking utensils and household implements. Those with a bigger trade capital would purchase larger volumes of wholesale commodities, for example dried fish, bicycles, rice, gas, cement, or salt.¹¹

The *bana-banas* purchasing goods in Dakar were sometimes acting as brokers, buying on behalf of one or more clients in Mali. This type of arrangement was called '*la commande*', referring to the fact that the clients in Mali would order (*commander* in French) specific goods from the *bana-banas*. Some *bana-banas*, like Fatou and Nana, had a few regular, relatively wealthy clients in Mali, some of whom were trading wholesale. The smaller *bana-banas* had several clients in Mali who were small-scale retailers, and who therefore ordered a greater diversity and smaller amounts of goods. Finally, some *bana-banas* were purchasing goods that they themselves were planning to sell from a market stall or a shop back in Mali. Small *bana-banas* would commonly carry out between one and three trips a month. The number of Malian *bana-banas* in Dakar increased around Tabaski and Ramadan, when there was a high demand for food and clothes for these religious celebrations.¹²

Oumou had collaborated with *bana-banas* for decades and had herself travelled back and forth on the passenger train with her mother before the former Malian market had been demolished. When I discussed with Oumou why the *bana-banas* travelled frequently instead of relying on intermediaries in Dakar, she told to me,

If they stayed in Mali, they would lose money. But if they come here, they can go and see new goods and negotiate a good price. The intermediaries [in Dakar], they won't look for the best price. They don't give a damn - even if it's expensive. Aha! If the

bana-bana comes here, she can compare the prices, to find the best one. That way, she herself negotiates, and she can make new orders. But if she leaves it to the intermediary, he can cheat. He can ask the trader to sell him something at CFA 500 but ask him to write CFA 1,000 on the receipt. That way, the *bana-bana* will never know what he did, because he can show her the receipt where it's written. They have lots of strategies like that – there are a lot, a lot!

Like most people pursuing an economic livelihood in West Africa, the *bana-banas* could not rely to any great extent on the legal system or other official regulatory mechanisms to enforce contracts (cf. Fafchamps 1996, Humphrey and Schmitz 1998). Tracking down a fraudulent intermediary and redressing any grievance through legal means was cumbersome and costly. In such environments, traders may instead rely on trustworthiness judged on the basis of the characteristics of sellers and intermediaries, such as their family background, ethnicity, or religious adherence (Humphrey and Schmitz 1998, Overå 2006, Zucker 1985). However, the female *bana-banas* were in certain ways cut off from these kinds of networks.

In the days when the passenger train was still running in Senegal, the *bana-banas* had collaborated and interacted closely with the market traders at the Dakar terminus: they used to supply the market traders with goods and also sold their own goods at the former market, and many *bana-banas* used the market space as a temporary home during their stays in Dakar. Since the passenger train had been replaced with transport by road the *bana-banas* were no longer propelled into the same social and commercial space as the Malian market traders. They arrived on busses in a different part of the city, and no longer socialized or slept at the terminus during their stays in Dakar. The neoliberal policies that closed down most of the railway system thus contributed to an increasing disembeddedness of female *bana-banas* from ethnic and kinship-based trade networks in Dakar (cf. Granovetter 1985, Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Relatively few *bana-banas* acted as suppliers to the traders at the scattered new Malian markets in that had recently emerged in the vicinity of the old terminus. Truck drivers transporting the *bana-banas'* goods were reluctant to continue all the way into the congested city centre of Dakar, where the new Malian markets were located, preferring instead to off-load in the northern suburbs. Due to competition over the limited market space and high cost of renting stalls very few *bana-*

banas were able to retail their own goods at the new Malian markets and were instead obliged to sell them through the market traders. This tied the *bana-banas* into unattractive credit relations: they would only obtain the revenue for their goods after market traders had sold them, and these payments were usually returned slowly and in small portions after much persistence and impatient waiting by the *bana-bana*.

Coinciding with the end of the passenger train service and the demolition of the Malian market in 2009, small Malian enterprises servicing the *bana-banas* began appearing in Dakar, combining provision of accommodation, transport of goods, and brokering services. *Bana-banas* who were new to Dakar would easily find accommodation via this system, and there was normally a truck parked outside the flats to transport the *bana-banas'* goods back to Mali. This proliferation of private enterprises catering to the needs of *bana-banas* implied a shift towards a commercialisation of Malian trading networks in Dakar, as monetary exchange was gradually replacing solidarity, patronage and gift-giving relations amongst Malians in Dakar (cf. Agier 1983: 107, Cohen 1965, David 1980: 172-178, Hill 1966: 350).

In 2009 Malian traders started appearing at the large suburban market in Pikine. These traders largely constituted a new wave of immigrants who had recently established themselves in the suburbs and who had relatively little to do with the Malians in the city centre of Dakar. This new wave did not (yet) constitute a strongly consolidated trade 'community' of its own and hence, did not provide an easy alternative for Malian *bana-banas* in search of dependable trading partners and middle-men. Theoretically, in such contexts of declining characteristics-based trust, an alternative way that transnational traders can minimize economic uncertainty is to engage in repeat trading with the same sellers and buyers (Yükseker 2004: 54). Through the long-term process of nurturing relations with regular trading partners, who may turn into friends, a relation of trust tends to emerge – what Zucker (1985) has termed process-based trust (cf. Haugen 2013: 29, Humphrey and Schmitz 1998: 38-39). Indeed, most of the *bana-banas* did have agreements with regular buyers in Mali whom they took orders from before going to Dakar to purchase goods. Meanwhile, far fewer *bana-banas* had any longstanding relationships with the sellers in Dakar.

THE TRICKS OF THE TRADE: FLEXIBILITY, TACIT KNOWLEDGE AND MISTRUST

Many of the Malian *bana-banas* were browsing and shopping in the same maze of streets, near the Sandaga market in the city centre, and often bumped into each other. *Bana-banas* often travelled and worked in pairs of two. *Bana-banas* would also share insights with each other and compare purchases at the end of a long working day, when they returned to their place of accommodation, or went to socialise at the *grin* (clique) which some of them had established outside the office of a Malian bus company. However, apart from the regular trading companion(s), relationships with other *bana-banas* in Dakar were not necessarily long-lasting or deep-felt; they largely lost relevance once these women were back at home in Mali. Relations amongst the female *bana-banas* were at times disloyal. The amount of malicious gossiping that took place amongst the women in the *grin*, behind the backs of other female *bana-banas* who also frequented the *grin* on a regular basis, was striking. For example, *bana-banas* would secretly chastise their female colleagues for failing in their relations with their close kin, disrespecting age hierarchies, attempting to seduce married men, or behaving in an arrogant manner. The female *bana-banas'* own frustrations over their social marginalisation and inability to fulfil powerful idealised notions of womanhood - especially in terms of female propriety and moral conduct, but also in the sense of a gender role ideally defined by motherhood and marriage - thus appeared to be projected onto their fellow female traders (cf. Brand 2001, Hoffman 2002, Schulz 2008).

Coming to Dakar and browsing shops and chatting with other *bana-banas*, helped the women stay up to date with the latest offers and new products. The women also used the opportunity of coming to Dakar to see if they might stumble upon a good offer; if they did, they might decide to invest in it. The *bana-banas* would perambulate the entire city centre by foot to compare prices in different shops and markets and learn about changing supply and demand for goods in Dakar. A skilled *bana-bana* would use such information to quickly respond to new opportunities and changes in the transnational market. Fatou was usually prepared to invest in a good bargain if she came across one. She once purchased several cooking pots and utensils after walking past them when she was out leisurely strolling the streets of Dakar. She proudly told me of the bargain, commenting, 'The *bana-banas* buy everything!' – implying that such flexibility was central to the *bana-bana* profession and was what made *bana-banas* successful.

The general rule in Dakar was that you could always get an item cheaper than the first price that was quoted to you. To sidestep these initial negotiations, and quickly get a seller to reveal the lowest price an item would sell for, the *bana-banas* usually began negotiations by asking sellers for their “last price”, literally asking, ‘*las price*’ or ‘*las, las*’ – presumably an expression derived from English. This strategy of asking for the last price first and then testing how much further down they could negotiate that price resembles what Geertz referred to as the “intensity” of bargaining in the Moroccan bazaar that is, ‘the exploration in depth of an offer already received’ (Geertz 1978: 31). Geertz argued that such “intensive search” - bargaining in depth with one person - is due to the high heterogeneity of products, resembling buying a used car rather than a new car (considered a homogenous product) (Geertz 1978: 31). Indeed, apart from the price there were several other aspects to be assessed and negotiated when *bana-banas* were making a purchase (cf. Geertz 1978: 31-32): the women had to consider the quality, weight, colour, and size of items they wanted to buy, which meant they had to both see and feel the goods, and sometimes taste them or try them on. Moreover, negotiating involved the whole body, the senses, emotions, and contingency and therefore had to be carried out in person (cf. Nohria and Eccles 2000 [1992]). I sometimes noticed how calm and friendly *bana-banas* would instantly change character when entering a shop or a scene of negotiation, suddenly appearing intimidating, demanding and assertive. The possibilities of emotional manipulation, and the intimidation brought about by the women’s physical presence, were tactics that were frequently used by the female traders in their commercial negotiations. Polanyi’s idea of tacit versus codified knowledge is useful for understanding the *bana-banas*’ need for physical proximity during the browsing and bargaining process: codified knowledge refers to written sources and can easily be communicated and transferred over distance; tacit knowledge by contrast can only be acquired through observation, practice and learning (Torre 2008: 873). Tacit knowledge acquisition thus requires physical proximity and face-to-face interaction (ibid). If aspects like measurement, price, and quality are formally standardized then they can be codified and easily communicated, for example via ICT. In terms of small-scale trade in West Africa, such aspects were often subjective and changing, and highly negotiable, arguably representing a form of tacit knowledge.

Bana-banas generally retained minimal allegiance to any seller in Dakar, which allowed them to quickly change goods and suppliers (cf. Grabowski 1997). Intense bargaining was necessary every time: even if a *bana-bana* had been coming to Dakar for decades and tended to browse the same shops there was little expectation of loyalty – rational calculations of profit determined what and from whom the *bana-banas* bought. Most *bana-banas* constantly changed goods and suppliers, depending on for example agricultural seasons, religious occasions and availability of new products. At the heart of a *bana-bana*'s profession was the need to be flexible and able to respond to price fluctuation and adapt to changing supply and demand in the transnational market.

Being at the tail-end of global commodity chains the Malian *bana-banas* frequently depended on links with strangers who imported goods to Dakar, including Lebanese and Chinese traders. The *bana-banas* importing goods to Mali from Dakar thus by-passed the kinds of networks of bounded solidarity and enforceable trust based on kinship, regional and cultural ties, and reached beyond to establish links with other groups (cf. MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, Molony 2009: 289, Peraldi 2005: 77). This enabled them to access a wide range of goods and respond to changing supply and demand. However, it also meant that the *bana-banas* could not expect a cooperative attitude from the sellers in Dakar who had little incentive to engage in long-term relations with these mobile traders whom they knew would change goods at a whim and whom they could not easily hold accountable (cf. Grabowski 1997: 390).

While their social autonomy vis-à-vis kin and ethnic networks in some ways precluded access to trustworthy intermediaries and trading partners in Dakar, in some ways it also facilitated the *bana-banas*' flexible trading strategies, as they were not socially committed or economically tied to such actors (cf. Walther 2015: 605). The *bana-banas* were strangers - independent, socially marginal, and only temporarily engaged in physical proximity with economic actors in Dakar - and this came with certain economic advantages (cf. Shack and Skinner 1979, Simmel 1950 [1908], Skinner 1963). Being autonomous and mobile meant that *bana-banas* avoided the negative social capital and "identity economics" associated with trading in highly structured and permanent networks (Meagher 2010, Portes and Landolt 1996).

The women's mobile livelihoods as *bana-banas* stemmed in part from their alienation from ethnic and kinship networks and the forms of social control such relations were accompanied by. The *bana-banas* were often women who had slipped out of the patriarchal family structure and whose experiences of abandonment and circumstances of self-reliance were at odds with socially accepted forms of femininity. In this light, the flexibility and autonomy that characterised the *bana-banas'* businesses did not merely represent particular trade strategies; they were *dispositions* that these women had acquired on the basis of their lived experiences. The relative mistrust that characterised the *bana-banas'* commerce can thus be considered as indicative of a broader philosophy informing these women's interpersonal relations – potentially enabling greater tolerance and freedom than the trusting and controlling relations other Malian traders engaged in. As Matthew Carey argues, 'mistrusting tolerance' can be seen as "radically liberal in its acceptance of the other's right not be predictable (the key generator of trust) or reliable and not to be bound by the actions and assurances of its past self. Mistrust, rather than being the necessary enemy of tolerance and freedom, can also enable them" (Carey 2017: 40).

NAVIGATING NEOLIBERAL TERRAINS

Ironically, liberalisation, regional integration, infrastructural development, and speed has not accelerated but rather deterred trade and travel for small scale shuttle traders operating in the Mali-Senegal corridor. Trading as a *bana-banas* has become an increasingly risky and costly endeavour and fewer women are now involved in this mobile livelihood. Recent infrastructural transformations have resulted in the *bana-banas'* growing alienation from the kinds of networks which might otherwise have allowed them to 'outsource' parts of their long-distance trade transaction. The growing deficit in trust meant that those *bana-banas* who continued trading in this corridor needed to travel frequently in order carry out and oversee most parts of the trade transaction themselves. Meanwhile, the *bana-banas'* limited reliance on trusted trade partners and middle-men was not merely due to recent transformations of infrastructure and networks; it was also related to the experience required to carry out the job of a *bana-bana*. The tacit knowledge involved in this volatile form of trade helps explain why these women's physical presence was required in Dakar.

Not only was the wider infrastructural landscape underpinning the *bana-banas'* mobile trade undergoing transformation in a context of economic liberalisation; the commercial terrain that these women navigated as traders was also characterised by constant flux, as potential goods and their quality were ever changing and uncertain. At the same time, the *bana-banas* were also navigating a changing social terrain which, under conditions of neoliberalism, was increasingly characterised by a “turning away from relational dependency and the gift to a preoccupation with autonomy and the money/commodity form” (Piot 2010: 9). In this light, the flexibility, intensive search, and tough negotiation strategies of the *bana-banas* revealed more than merely the particular economic practices involved in this trade. They revealed broader attitudes, embodied demeanours, and states of mind. These were dispositions that the *bana-banas* had acquired through the challenging forms of social navigation that characterised the lives of these autonomous women, as they were tactically moving within a wider, uncertain and changing environment (Vigh 2006, 2009, cf. Cooper and Pratten 2015).

While long-distance male traders have successfully activated kinship, ethnic and religious networks to facilitate their economic activities, the example of the Malian *bana-banas* highlights the need to consider the conditions of socially marginal and autonomous female traders engaged in mobile livelihoods, who need to travel long distances. Establishing institutional frameworks to regulate and facilitate small-scale economic transactions may reduce some of the need for mobility for *bana-banas* and other people whose economic livelihoods depend on travel. But regardless of technological and structural change human mobility will persist, and there is clearly a need to improve conditions under which people travel in the West African region. The recent changes to the landscape of trade and transport infrastructure in Senegal has benefitted a small elite of businesspeople engaged in “virtual” commerce from a distance. It’s time to address the transportation needs of small-scale mobile traders and commuters in West Africa.

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NOTES

¹ The word is derived from the Wolof *baana-baana*, which supposedly means, 'for me, for me' (French: *pour moi*) (Mino 2009, N'diaye Corréard 2006: 56-57).

² I am grateful to Prof. James A. Jones for pointing this out in a correspondence (dating from 29 May 2014).

³ The concession with Transrail was terminated in December 2015, and the company was replaced by the newly established *Dakar Bamako Ferroviaire*. The two governments each entered into agreements with China Railway Construction Corp (International) Ltd to repair and reconstruct their respective sections of the line

(Railway Gazette 2016, Reuters 2015). At the end of December 2017 the Malian passenger train between Bamako and Kayes started running again (Magassa 2018, ORTM TV1 2017).

⁴ *Bana-banas* could sometimes get cheaper tickets on these buses and some of these companies offered the tenth bus journey for free. The *bana-bana* buses strived to transport most of the women's goods, and would also arrange for separate transport of goods by truck if there was insufficient space on the bus. Even if the women were not travelling along with the bus, they could still ask the bus drivers to take their goods across the border, and the women would then reimburse the driver the customs fees, once their goods had arrived.

⁵ This move from mobility to immigration was not merely a consequence of the recent infrastructural transformations. Over the past years, many of the women who had been travelling back and forth on the train had in fact ended up getting married and settling permanently in Dakar.

⁶ One Malian man, who was practising as a GP in Dakar, claimed that the main problem with bus journeys was not road accidents but the lack of hygiene, especially of the food and water consumed by the passengers causing cholera and diarrhoea, which easily spread amongst passengers. Medical emergencies during journeys that were not dealt with fast enough frequently turned into fatalities.

⁷ All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of informants.

⁸ Depending on the type, each freight train wagon carried a maximum weight of either thirty or forty tons, which was far more goods than the average *bana-bana* could afford to invest in.

⁹ A small number of *bana-banas* continued to supply the scattered new Malian markets in Dakar, giving their goods in 'credit' to the market traders, who would sell them for the *bana-banas* in return for a bonus. Their goods were usually traditional handmade and agricultural products from Mali and sometimes neighbouring countries, including hand-dyed *bazin* cloth, aphrodisiacs and herbal remedies, seasonal and dried fruit (*fruits sec*), bowls made from calabashes, hand-made soap, and shea butter. Some *bana-banas* - usually those selling Malian *bazin* cloth - sold their goods themselves, either by walking around the streets; sitting in a fixed location on the pavement; or selling from a stall at a temporary fair in Dakar.

¹⁰ The Malian state has in fact been granted a section of the port in Dakar (the '*Zone Malien*' at pier number 8 where containers arrive; goods in bulk destined for Mali arrive at pier 3), as well as a truck park on the outskirts of the Cap Vert peninsula (the '*Parking Malien*' in Rufsac). Senegalese law does not apply in these zones, and foreign goods imported via Dakar and transited through Senegal to Mali are not subject to Senegalese customs duty. However, I only heard of one female *bana-bana* who was involved in this formal import business.

¹¹ Dakar has its own cement factory, Sokocim, and salt is produced at Lac Rose outside Dakar and in Kaolack. Gas imported from overseas arrives at Dakar's mineral port.

¹² Some traders were "*bana-banas d'occasion*": they only became *bana-banas* before the big celebrations like Tabaski and Ramadan.