

**The London School of Economics and Political
Science**

*Building political relations: cooperation, segmentation
and government in Bancoumana (Mali)*

Luca Giuseppe Pes

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Declaration

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Abstract

A stable and peaceful country by West African standards, Mali uneasily fits the paradigm of a 'failed state.' While government and development agencies tend to interpret Mali's stability as the outcome of successful institutional reform, foreign scholars and local intellectuals emphasise the power of enduring traditions and their adaptation to changing conditions in Malian society. Critically assessing both views, this dissertation explores political relations and practices in post-colonial Mali in a rural locality of Mande, the region south-west of the capital Bamako. The work draws on 18 months of field research in the rural municipality of Bancoumana to document an intensely mediated form of government resulting from the dynamic process of grouping and of building cooperative relations in everyday social life.

I examine how projects broadly intended to deepen state control such as the 'framing' of resident and migrant populations by the state, the betterment of the land, the recognition and the registration of 'traditional' rights, among other practices of bureaucratic 'fixing' are dealt with in the locality. The analysis links their history to processes of fission and fusion of social groups, where the interventions may exacerbate tensions or, instead, create solidarity among different village factions. Thus, the practices and processes of government in the locality are able to successfully fill the gap between the state and other agencies, and society. Contributing to the anthropological tradition studying law, politics and the state in Africa, the dissertation links recent trends in the anthropology of the state, and of more specific regulatory domains such as land development and taxation, to a reanalysis of the traditional chestnut of the anthropology of West Africa, a 'segmentary style' of social organization.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Shining democracy or failed state?

Compared to other countries of the West African region, Mali is a peaceful place. Unlike in bordering Côte d'Ivoire or nearby Liberia, there is neither civil war nor widespread political violence. Its social and political landscape is commonly seen as one of the most stable and reliable in West Africa, in contrast to neighbours such as Guinea, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. Processes of accumulation of wealth and social stratification accompanying the exploitation of natural and economic resources (minerals, land and agricultural produce) did not result in violent conflicts or in the criminalization of the state, as happened in Nigeria and Sierra Leone (Bayart et al. 1999:1, 92; Reno 1995, 1998).

The only important security concern in the recent past – the Tuareg 'rebellion' in the mid-1990s – was successfully turned by the Malian political class into an opportunity to reinforce the structures and presence of the state on its territory. Separatist proposals in the north of the country have provided the initial ground for 'decentralization reform,' channelling to Mali considerable amounts of international aid (Seely 2001:506). In more recent times, the alarm concerning the presence of the mysterious terrorist group 'Al-Qauida of the Islamic Maghreb' (AQIM) has been similarly exploited by the military and political establishment supported by the United States rather than it releasing violent insecurity (Keenan 2009).

On the eve of the fifth consecutive round of 'free and fair' elections and of a major constitutional reform, the Malian institutional environment is certainly among those in

Africa most trusted by the international community.¹ Without any embarrassment about the tone of patent paternalism, official publications of USAID (the American development agency) refer to Mali as ‘a poster-child for democracy’ (USAID 2002, quoted in Soares 2006); or, to put it in the words of the representatives of the two largest donor countries: ‘an extremely good pupil’ and ‘a shining example of democracy.’²

Similar statements pointing to Mali as a ‘success story’ of institutional development and state-building sound at best ironic, considering Mali’s discouraging poverty record and its general state of economic dependency. Mali is the ninth poorest country on earth, followed only by Niger and Burkina Faso in the region (UNDP 2010). It has the fourth greatest net migration rate in Africa (-5.23 migrants/1,000 population) and one tenth the citizens living abroad (CIA World Factbook 2011). It is one of the most prominent recipients of international aid, accounting for more than one half of the government expenditure and one tenth of the gross domestic product (WB 2011). Moreover, pointing at Mali as a model democracy is also limited to an appreciation of an ‘apparent’ institutional environment, hiding less praise-worthy aspects such as corruption, lack of ‘good governance’ and the like, that officials are generally ready to acknowledge in more private assessments of how state and power work in the country.

In short, one might discard such views on the grounds that they do not reflect empirical reality. And yet Mali’s social and political environment *is* peaceful compared to the rest of the region. Over the last two decades, perhaps only Ghana, Senegal and Benin have enjoyed a similar reputation. This hardly resembles the context of what development studies and political scientists call ‘failed states’ (Reno 1998; Rotberg 2004).

What explains such a peaceful condition? Is it the outcome of institutional reform backed by development agencies, as claimed by the political establishment? Is it

¹ The constitutional reform foresees the creation of a second Parliament chamber whose members will be elected by local authorities (*collectivités territoriales*, i.e. municipalities, districts and regions). Rumours that this reform was a disguised tentative by the President of the Republic Amadou Toumani Toure to amend the two-mandates constitutional limit to his office (as it happened in Burkina Faso in 2010) proved wrong.

² The first statement is by EU chief of delegation Irene Jorges and the second by USAID director Alex Newton. They have been collected in a filmed interview by the researcher and published in the documentary movie *The Good Pupil: Mali and US*, Paris: Blackout, 2006.

explained by the power of enduring ‘traditions’ and the subtle processes of their adaptation to changing conditions in society, as has been maintained by some intellectuals? Broadly speaking, this thesis offers an answer to these questions from the perspective of a rural locality of Mande, the region south-west of the capital Bamako. While providing evidence to support an interpretation of Mali as a peaceful and relatively stable political environment, my study of political relations in Bancoumana offers critical insights on the country’s reputation as a ‘good pupil’ of development institutions and a ‘model democracy’ in West Africa. Political relations and practices, I shall argue, reflect the intensely mediated character of government in the locality, filling the ‘grey area’ between the state (among other agencies) and society. In supporting this argument, my analysis combines the anthropology of the state – and of more specific regulatory domains such as land development and taxation – with an awareness, traditionally central in the political and legal anthropology of West Africa, of a ‘segmentary style’ social organization.

Extraction and dependence: a first impression of state and society in post-colonial Mali

Depending on one’s point of view, Mali’s peaceful condition can be either acknowledged or dismissed as a mystification. While on the one hand an appreciation of the politico-economical outlook of the country reveals that it does not escape processes of extraction and economic dependence affecting the whole region, on the other, similar circumstances have not prevented neighbouring countries from being plunged into far greater levels of social and political violence. Perhaps such things are disguised in Mali, hiding below the surface of a seemingly peaceful state of affairs. Perhaps, this country is an exception to the more generalized perception that most states in West Africa have failed in terms of the basic conditions and responsibilities of a sovereign government. And yet, how do relations between power, law and society in Mali compare to those of its more evidently troubled neighbours and, more generally, to other ‘postcolonial’ contexts?

To describe Mali as a postcolonial context is to employ a characterisation in general use by anthropologists working in Africa and elsewhere. In fact, many of the circumstances

briefly reviewed below have led authors such as Mbembe (2001) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) to talk about ‘the postcolony’ in a fashion clearly transcending geographical and political boundaries. However, the Malian socio-political landscape fits that paradigm only uneasily, if at all. The image of ‘the postcolony’ is a generalization, inadequate for making sense of Malian society.

While richness in natural resources is a common variable explaining the political instability of places like Nigeria (oil), Niger (minerals and recently oil), and Sierra Leone (diamonds), Mali does not represent a clear contrast in this regard. It would be misleading to think of Mali as poor of similar resources. Gold-mining – accounting for an astonishing 33 percent of the gross domestic product and 70 percent of exports – is clear evidence that the Malian economy is heavily dependent on the exploitation of its natural resources (EIU 2011:7). Mali is indeed one of the largest gold producers in the world, second only to Ghana in the region. Operated by foreign multinational companies in the south of the country, mining ventures in Mali are not intrinsically ‘better’ than in many other African countries, nor do they generate greater revenues for the local population.³ With the exclusion of a tiny elite of wealthy businessmen and politicians – dubbed *le Pouvoir* in the capital Bamako – ordinary citizens are blatantly denied the returns of such forms of wealth. They are instead excluded and dispossessed, brutally expelled from their land and forbidden local economic activities, including artisanal, small-scale extraction of gold: a practice dating back to medieval times, and once the main economic base of the Mali Empire. Comparable situations, including deportation of the populations of entire villages, occurred with the infamous dams sponsored by the World-Bank (Bonavita 2000; Pottinger 1998).

Further evidence of Mali’s similarity to its neighbours, and its connectedness to regional and global economies, is provided by the agricultural sector, overwhelmingly the most important aspect of the economy.⁴ The main cash crop is cotton, second only to gold for the total revenue generated by exports (EIU 2011:6). Cultivated in many parts of the

³ For a case study of two Malian gold mines (Morila and Kalana), see Keita et al. (2008). See also Panella (2010), on the local economies of artisanal gold mining in Mali and elsewhere, and the documentary movie by Robert Nugent, *End of the Rainbow*, Trans Europe Film, 2007.

⁴ Despite this is evident to any analyst of Mali, agricultural output for self-consumption does not figure in official statistics based on the gross domestic product, where the rubric ‘agriculture’ accounts slightly less than ‘services.’

country, cotton generates important revenue for Malian households (unlike the countries on the coast, in Mali, there are virtually no plantations). The harvest is bought by a ‘para-statal’ agency, the *Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles* (CMDT), at a subsidized price and with a monopoly. Far from developing a textile industry, the CMDT sells cotton in almost unrefined form on the international markets. Despite being the third largest producer in the world, Mali is forced to sell its cotton at a loss. Cotton prices are set by the United States – through subsidies paid to American growers. The CMDT is in the process of being privatized, leading to diminished production and lower returns to the farmers, with direct consequences on householders’ poverty.⁵ Seen from the perspective of the production of a global commodity and its crucial role in the national economy, Mali is not very different to more ‘troubled’ countries like Côte d’Ivoire (cocoa and coffee), Niger (minerals and oil), and Burkina Faso (cotton).

Prospects for the other part of the agricultural sector – food production – are even gloomier as a consequence of the global food crisis of 2008, among other factors. Mali does not produce enough to be self-sufficient: 12.5 percent of imported goods are foodstuffs, equalling nine percent of the gross domestic product (EIU 2011:6). Rice is the second cash crop after cotton. In contrast to cotton it is mostly sold on the domestic market, and is therefore crucial for covering Mali’s food production deficit. The government, however, has recently adopted measures gearing rice production toward exports, while relying on imports of cheaper qualities of rice from East Asia. The launch of the government program *Opération riz* was accompanied by massive loans of productive land to foreign investors in the Niger inner delta, with no other commitment than expanding the area of irrigated agriculture of the *Office du Niger*, a French early-colonial project which was abandoned at less than one tenth of the envisaged surface (Van Beusekom 2000; Filipovich 2001).⁶ The deals so far concluded by the government left foreign investors free to take the entirety of the harvest out of the country. Rice, therefore, is following a similar fate to cotton, as a result of land-grabbing ‘joint

⁵ On the history and political economy of cotton production in Mali, originally developed to the benefit of the French textile industry, see Roberts (1996).

⁶ See also Chapter Two in this thesis. For an overview of land grabbing in Mali, see <http://farmlandgrab.org> (last retrieved 11 October 2011). As with gold exploitation, there are virtually no academic articles on this crucial and ongoing aspect of the Malian political economy.

ventures' between the Malian state on the one side and, on the other, foreign banks and corporations based in Libya, China and the Gulf states.

What kind of relations between the state, power and society might one expect in Mali, given such exploitative conditions? The regional and global connectedness makes it certainly naive to think of it as an exceptional context. Despite praise for its institutional infrastructure, Mali as a state is no more 'sovereign' than the rest of its neighbours. As put by Bayart et al. (1999:20), a sovereign state in such conditions resembles to a 'legal edifice which is the partner of multilateral institutions and Western governments,' and which is set apart from 'the real fabric of society.'

In Mali, as elsewhere, the state can be understood as a façade, hiding a public-private network of power-holders who constitute the true ruling class (Bagayogo 1987). Their economic base lies in the extraction of agricultural produce and natural resources, now including crucial means of livelihood such as arable land. Through such lucrative practices, political relations have been reconfigured into a widely studied form of government known as neo-patrimonialism (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Englebert 2000). The configuration of power thus described by anthropologists and political scientists is one characterized by social stratification and increasing polarization of society into 'haves' and 'have nots,' and by the exercise of power increasingly by private means (Bayart 2009:263).

Neopatrimonial models can certainly be of use in interpreting many issues in the Malian political economy. Yet, in contrast to many of its neighbours, this power configuration has not plunged Mali into social and political violence, massive social exclusion and instability. From the perspective of the rural locality addressed in my thesis, the vast majority of those excluded from power and from these niches is perhaps increasingly poor, but not destitute. Doubts thus arise about Mali's resemblance to many of its neighbours and with postcolonial contexts more generally.

In his collection of essays *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe (2001) problematizes the autonomy of the African state in the post-colonial period. He argues that the style of government in contemporary Africa is still best explained by its connections to the experience of colonial rule. As a political paradigm, the postcolony is characterized by

the proliferation of forms of ‘private indirect government,’ which share with the political condition of colonialism the violent dehumanization of the subject (Mbembe 2001:80-82). Mbembe’s concept of private indirect government recalls the widely observed phenomena of atomization of power and of privatization of sovereignty and the state, resulting from the transformation of ‘informal’ economic and political relations into rather formalized niches of power (see also Hibou 2004; Bayart 2009). According to Mbembe, the distinctive way in which power is administered in contemporary Africa is captured by the notion of ‘discharge,’ a process occurring when,

the functions supposed to be public, and obligations that flow from sovereignty, are increasingly performed by private operators for private ends. Soldiers and policemen live off the inhabitants; officials supposed to perform administrative tasks sell the public service required and pocket what they get (Mbembe 2001:80).

In the edited volume *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) describe as ‘postcolonial’ those political contexts characterized by the proliferation of legal practices and claims, coupled with a paradoxical increase of social and political violence. Such a seemingly contradictory relation between law and disorder is ascribed to the neoliberal condition of permanent ‘transition’ (to democracy, good governance, civil society and the like), characterized by outsourcing the coercive, social and economic functions of the state. Although explained through a different historical trajectory, the result is similar to Mbembe’s: the fragmentation of sovereignty into public-private networks of power, where the line separating ‘legitimate’ exercises of power from illegality is extremely blurred.

Considered in the light of the anthropological tradition studying law, politics and the state in Africa, the paradigm of ‘the postcolony’ appears an abstract idea, at times contradicting ethnographic analysis. Sharing such a generalizing concept, the approaches of Mbembe and Comaroff and Comaroff seem to obscure, rather than to clarify, past and present accomplishments in anthropology.

Studying the state: political relations and practices in Africa and beyond

Mali’s reputation of ‘model democracy’ is not upheld by informed political analysis. This image also contrasts sharply with most recent academic scholarship focusing on the state and political relations in Africa, some of which has been referred to above

(page 16ff). If anything, the broad range of approaches on this subject, spanning from political science (Bayart 2009; Reno 1995, 1998) to analyses of postcolonial subjectivity (Mbembe 2001), tend to depict African political landscapes as violent, extractive or even criminal. However, and as I observed above (page 14), such characterizations do not readily apply to Mali. If extractive relations and economic dependency provide considerable opportunities for political power, just as elsewhere in Africa, in the case of Mali this has not meant the descent of society into political violence. The reason for this, however, is not necessarily the outcome of political and institutional reform at the level of the state. I would argue instead that a more convincing explanation of the peaceful character of Mali is to be found by scrutinizing the ‘grey area’ between state and society. More particularly, my analysis will focus on the intensely mediated processes of government in connection to the ‘segmentary style’ social organization of a locality like Bancoumana.

A closer consideration of the relationship between state and society will serve the double purpose of identifying a body of literature relevant to my work and of clarifying the terrain of political relations addressed more broadly in this thesis. How have anthropologists investigated the nature of the state, the political system and its connection or non-connection to ‘ordinary society’? How has the political domain been distinguished from the wider social environment?

Literature on the state and political relations in Africa has stresses the observation that the state is rooted in society. Various combining anthropology with political science, authors including Bayart (2009), Bayart et al. (1999), Reno (2011), Roitman (2005) have convincingly explored the social ‘embeddedness’ of the exercise of political power in Africa. In his studies of warlordism, corruption and state politics in Sierra Leone, for example, Reno (1995, 1998 and 2011) puts an emphasis on the economic underpinning of this, resulting in the lack of a public/private division which would characterize the African state. Adopting a significantly different style of analysis (often inspired by Michel Foucault), Roitman’s study of regimes of fiscality in the Chad basin (2005) shows a preoccupation with a result of such lack of distinction, but on a more ideational or knowledge-oriented level. These diverse approaches share the aim of documenting the ways African states are rooted in society and, in the case of Roitman, in a specific

regulatory domain (fiscality). They provide evidence of the fact that states, in Africa or elsewhere, are not homogeneous entities and that from an anthropological or sociological perspective they cannot be studied separately from social practices and institutions.

Authors, often adopting perspectives similar to Roitman's (e.g. Mitchell 1991, 1999) claim that the 'embeddedness' of the state in society results in continuity rather than rupture. These accounts insist on the porosity of the boundary between state and society, something that is elusive and ideological in character. According to Mitchell (1991:90), the elusiveness of such boundary is an inherent character of the ideology of the modern state, a distinguishing element of political modernity: the gap between state and society is only a projection of the 'idea of the state.' According to alternative approaches discussed below, the boundary between state and society is established contextually and negotiated in the domain of political relations; in the work of anthropologists such as Roitman and Mitchell, this is in fact produced through various symbolic and ideological techniques, engendering – according to Mitchell's terminology – a 'state-effect' (Mitchell 1999:76; see also Roitman 2005:49).

Objecting to the over-generalized and imprecise character of postmodern analyses such as Roitman's and Mitchell's, anthropologists of development like Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2003; see also Bierschenk 2010) argue that we need a more grounded, possibly even more 'old-fashioned,' sociological analysis, which explores the nitty-gritty of institutional arrangements. While I agree with these authors' reaction to Foucauldian approaches to the anthropology of the state, the next section will argue that simply exploring state and quasi-state institutions (as these authors do) is not enough for understanding political relations and practices in Bancoumana. What is needed is a perspective focused on practices.

I draw here on the work of scholars such as Falk Moore (1978), who by exploring 'semi-autonomous social fields' helps to illuminate arenas that exist between the state and society. Moving on from the work of Falk Moore and other scholars of the Manchester school, we can end up with a less methodologically individualist, more 'practice theory' (Ortner 1984) approach to political life, in which practices and processes assume much greater importance. This allows us to 'get to the state' through

the study of political practices: an approach commensurate with that of Christian Lund, who looks at domains which, although constructed as apolitical, nonetheless have ‘institutional ramifications’ (Lund 2006:697). Using this diverse range of literatures enables one to avoid saying that ‘everything is political,’ or that ‘the state is pervasive throughout society,’ as maintained by authors on the African state; but it acknowledges, nonetheless, that there *are* practices which ramify more broadly, thus becoming in some sense ‘institutionalised’ or part of the political (the point is expanded in the next section, see especially page 25).

Finally, understanding the political process requires that one revisits how anthropologists of West Africa have explored ‘segmentary’ societies. The concluding section of this literature review (page 26ff) will investigate this topic, with particular reference to the Mande region and the practices of ordinary grouping. Set on this ground, my analysis of political relations in Bancoumana will cast a new light on the ‘segmentary style’ social organization with which anthropologists of West Africa were once particularly familiar. But let me start by reviewing some important contributions to the (sociologically grounded) literature on the ‘embeddedness’ of the state in Africa.

The state in society

In all domains and political contexts, it is difficult to ascribe the exercise of authority to ‘the state’ as a coherent institution. The most obvious reason for this is simply that in most empirical analyses the state turns out to be merely an abstract idea. The multiple layers, branches and agencies constituting the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state (the ‘state-system’ as opposed to the ‘state-idea’) can hardly be attributed a single agency and intentionality. This is all more evident in the context of African states, in which it is normal to observe functionaries and state agencies at all levels pursuing competing agendas at cross-purposes with each other (e.g. Blundo et al. 2006).

The complexity of the state has been analysed by sociologists and political scientists more than by anthropologists, who have only recently claimed to have turned to the state as an object of study (Gupta and Sharma 2006). Taking the lead from Abrams (1988), anthropologists have begun to explore the complexity of modern states in their relationship with ‘other forms of power.’ One of the most popular targets of these

analyses has been the Weberian conception of the modern state as a compulsory association with a territorial basis characterized by a legal-bureaucratic rationality. According to Weber, the modern state is characterized by a system of administrative and legal order, which 'claims binding authority, not only over the members of the state, the citizens [...] but also to a very large extent, over all action taking place in the area of its jurisdiction' (Weber 1964:156).

Reacting to the rather uncritical reproduction of the Weberian model in much of the anthropological literature, some authors began to demonstrate that modern states do not look or act in the same way everywhere. Statehood is not defined by one same logic – 'modern' or 'rational' – and nor is this uniform for all domains of state authority. States are the product of substantive cultural factors, of the history and the economy of particular places, and not only of bureaucratic rationality uniformly applied to society. In a challenge to general socio-legal constructs propounded by law and political science, anthropologists have argued that the quasi-universal diffusion of the modern state and its pervasiveness in different domains of social life do not necessarily entail a greater uniformity of political practices (e.g. Hansen and Stepputat 2001).

One way anthropologists have done this is to explore how modern states interact with other forms of power often referred to as 'informal' politico-legal practices enrooted in 'non-state' institutions. Authors adopting such a perspective address the social and political reality in which the state is embedded through the study of empirically specific domains of social life in particular places. This results in contextual analyses of the boundary between the state and society, variously emphasising its porosity and its shifting character according to different places, times and social domains.

A significant move forward in such analysis was provided by authors including Fuller and Harriss regarding India (2001), and Biershenk and Olivier de Sardan regarding West Africa (2000, 2003). These authors show that the boundary between state and society cannot be drawn in the abstract; rather, every exercise of the political authority of the organization called 'the state' entails the negotiation of such a barrier with other power instances in society, and thus must be studied in particular contexts. In other words, despite the fact that state and society are intimately connected, there is

nonetheless a gap between the two – the nature of which must be explored empirically, even sociologically.

There is a paradoxical situation in African contexts such as Mali. Authors who write on the African state point to the ‘rhizomic’ or ‘shadow’ nature of the state in society (Bayart 2009 and Reno 1995, respectively); but anthropologists exploring this question in more particular contexts point to the fact that the connection between the state and society also entails a gap or disconnection (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2000, 2003; Fuller and Harriss 2001). As observed from the perspective of my field-site Bancoumana, the state is interrelated with, but is simultaneously distinct from, a complex plurality of other practices and institutions bearing explicit connection to the exercise of authority. For example, a variety of ‘traditional’ institutions such as the village council (see Chapter Two and Chapter Four), the elders’ assembly of the *gwatiguiw* (see Chapter Six), the vigilante group of the *tontiguiw* (see Chapter Five), do have explicit claims to the exercise of public authority in the locality. The political legitimacy of such groups is variably connected to that of state institutions: while legitimacy is established by contrast or opposition to the state in some circumstances, it may also closely connect to the exercise of state power in others (the point is expanded later in this section).

Methodologically, however, my analysis tries to avoid a too rigid and limiting focus on institutions inhabiting an abstractly defined political domain. Rather, my reading of political relations in Bancoumana is based on the analysis of social processes of cooperation, segmentation and government, and aims at showing how political relations are built by ordinary people while operating in a variety of domains of their social life. On the one hand, such an approach is necessitated by the fact that, like elsewhere in Africa, in Bancoumana there is a variable number of political actors, whose legitimacy is not established in any fixed and clear-cut way. On the other hand, my approach intends to foreground an aspect of crucial importance for the understanding of political relations in and beyond Africa: under the scrutiny of an *empirical* analysis, the prerogatives of different power holders, as well as their relationship to ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ groups, ‘state’ or ‘non-state’ institutions are constantly shifting and can never be assumed as statically or neatly defined.

The jurisdiction (i.e. the legitimate reach of the actions) of political actors in Bancoumana does indeed vary, being the object of shifts and constant negotiations. No matter what their relationship with the state (official/unofficial), or the degree of formalism of their actions (formal/informal), the boundaries of political organizations vary from one domain of social life to another. For example, the regulating of many agricultural and ecological practices connected to the use of the land in Bancoumana (Chapter Four and Chapter Five) is exercised by local, ‘traditional’ authorities with remarkable autonomy from state control and institutions; on the contrary, the role of those *same institutions* in the domain of taxation (addressed in Chapter Six) reveals a much greater connection to the state. Moreover, while political relations in these domains generally result in a rather harmonious state of either separation (agriculture) or institutional cooperation (taxation), more conflicting relationships emerge from the analysis of political projects concerning the development of inhabitable and agricultural land (Chapter Two): here, the legitimacy of local political institutions is defined rather by their sharp opposition to the state, which has led in the past to acrimonious conflicts and violent confrontation within and beyond different village factions.

As has been argued elsewhere (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), in Bancoumana, political projects intended to deepen state control and manufacture a clearer border between the state and society are consistently mediated and occasionally resisted by local social forces. Almost inevitably, then, they produce unforeseen consequences, blurring the boundary between their ‘failure’ or ‘success’ (Ferguson 1990). Most of the material analysed throughout the thesis will confirm that such view holds true with regard to the whole political project of ‘democratization’ of Mali: an agenda set by the state among other planners, such as foreign ‘donor’ countries and international NGOs, and pursued by various means, including decentralization (involving the establishment of municipalities like Bancoumana), ‘participatory development’ practices and, increasingly, the involvement of migrants in the ‘development’ of their places of origin (see Chapter Two).

While the use of migrants’ remittances in the development of their home-towns is by no means a recent phenomenon, the channelling of such money by state services, foreign donors and international NGOs in operations branded as ‘co-development’ is a

relatively new concern. Over the last few years, the Malian state – through the Ministry of the Malians Abroad and with the political and financial support of the European Union – has deployed very noticeable and consistent efforts in the ‘framing’ of transnational migrants, especially by channelling migrants’ remittances (hence controlling the flow of such money) in initiatives of ‘co-development.’⁷ Similar policies provide a good illustration of the new objectives of the Malian state in the age of transnational migration and financial capitalism. ‘Co-development’ provides the Malian state with a device to govern its transnational migrant population, a new type of fiscal policy through which the state aims to control the monetary flows generated by its migrant citizens (the point will be better understood when set against the historical background provided by Chapter Two).

Both from an analytical and a methodological point of view, I am interested in documenting how projects broadly intended to deepen state control (including migration, but certainly not limited to that) are handled within the locality: in particular, how they connect to processes of fission and fusion of social groups, for example by exacerbating the tensions or, instead, by creating solidarity among different village factions. To refer again to migration, for example, I suggest that political relations in Bancoumana cannot be understood without taking into account the role played by various types of migrants (e.g. seasonal, semi-permanent, urban, transnational) as well as by their associations, which happen to be increasingly involved by the state and development agencies in initiatives of ‘co-development.’ Rather than confining migration to a particular chapter, however, I provide specific analyses of its impact on and its functions *within* the body social. While such particular assessments of migrants’ involvement demonstrate that the political system cannot be assumed to operate in isolation, they also reveal that, from the perspective of a rural locality like Bancoumana, migration is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, one that can hardly be ‘put in a box’ and addressed with the same ethnographic method I employed for the main subject of my analysis. Apart from requiring a different set of methodological tools (e.g. multi-sited ethnography), to address migration as a problem in itself would fall beyond the

⁷ An illustration is provided by the internet site <http://www.codeveloppementmali.org/> (last retrieved 20 October 2011), containing an archive and an official description of co-development initiatives in Mali.

purpose of my analysis; I rather examine the effects of different forms of migration on local political organization.

Similar to migration, another theme illuminating how state and development projects are handled in the locality, is the complexity occasioned by the use of written documents among other bureaucratic practices of ‘fixing.’ While bureaucrats expect devices such as plans, paper documents and written registration to organize and make more governable social life, an observation of how such things work in practice often suggests greater levels of uncertainty (Scott 1985, 1998; Bernstein 2003, 2010). While such a situation may prevail on the ground, however, the higher echelons of the bureaucratic organizations conceiving plans may be provided with greater legibility and eventually control of social practices – or they may consider having achieved such objectives while in practice they did not. We will see these tensions when considering efforts by the state and other ‘developers’ to parcel out the land according to bureaucratic criteria of efficiency and ‘rationality’ (Chapter Two and Chapter Four), as well as with relation to tax collection (Chapter Six).

To conclude, let me clarify the contours of the political field by briefly summarising the perspective adopted in the analysis of political relations in Bancoumana. The political nature of local institutions (either of state or non-state kind) cannot be assumed a-priori, since ethnographic analysis reveals that the character of these is not neatly and stably defined on the ground. In Bancoumana, groups and social organizations which do not appear at first sight to be political may, and often do, exercise political power of a non-state variety. This further complicates the picture of political relations, since it questions assumptions concerning what constitutes the political field and which institutions, actors and practices it encompasses. Consideration for this further aspect of the gap between the state and society suggests that it is not in terms of *institutions* – by distinguishing which are ‘political’ and which others, instead, are ‘social’ – that we can solve the problem of identifying the political field. What is needed here is a perspective centred on *practices*, showing how political relations (some of which may be thought as underpinning ‘institutions’) consist, in fact, of ordinary aspects of social life, which define in turn the political domain (Lund 2006:690).

Just as the contours of the political as a field of study are blurred, so in the same way is the distinction between law, politics and society; indeed what we are looking at is not a bounded field, inhabited by institutions with specific characteristics, but a field of practice. Looking at the organization of social life in specific domains, with a particular focus on the grouping dynamics as described in the next section, will provide the necessary evidence to show that the boundary between state and society cannot be drawn in the abstract. Rather, because such a barrier entails multiple negotiations of political authority, an empirically-based understanding of political relations (including those surrounding and ‘making up’ the state) is likely to render a picture much closer to reality.

Anthropological views on the openness or semi-autonomy of social groupings in Mande

It is my claim that through an analysis of political – and social – relations in one locality, I can provide a way of understanding why Mali looks different from many of its neighbours. The answer predominantly offered to this query in assessments by state and development officials has already been alluded to: well designed and well implemented reform, aimed at developing a strong institutional environment, made Mali different. Intellectuals have suggested, in contrast, that the answer is rooted in Malian culture and historical traditions. Peace, they maintain, has resulted from the fluid and harmonious relations among ethnic groups, as expressed in joking relations and other social institutions.

Among the strongest supporters of this position figure, for example, a group of Malian and Guinean intellectuals gathered in the “N’Ko movement” (Conrad 2001), some of whom have important connections to the political establishment in Mali (Amselle 2004:22). Their view, emphasising ‘the power of tradition,’ is commensurate with that of some anthropologists and particularly with those working in the Mande region (e.g. Cissé and Leynaud 1978; Tamari 1997), which includes Bancoumana. This is the area that had once been the heart of the Mali Empire and is seen today as the home of Mande people: a cluster of ‘ethnic groups’ including the Mandinka – to whom belong the people of Bancoumana, bearing the patronymic Camara – as well as other groups (Soninke, Bambara, Dyula and others). A brief socio-historical sketch of this region will

provide us with a better understanding of the key themes in the social anthropology of Mande.

Despite nonexistence as such in official topography, Mande is commonly understood as the region comprised between the source of the Niger River (a mountainous area in the north-west of Guinea) and the area south-west of the Malian capital Bamako. As documented by historians (Niane 1984; Ajayi and Crowder 1985) this area was the original nucleus of expansion of the Mali Empire. Between the 13th and the 15th century, this legendary West African pre-colonial state stretched east-west from present day Niger to the Atlantic Ocean, and north-south from the Sahara desert to the Niger River. The extraordinary quantity of gold reaching the Mediterranean coasts of Africa from Mali is recounted by numerous written sources (Arabic, German, Portuguese, English, Italian, see Levitzion and Hopkins 2000; Masonen 2001), notably mentioning the sumptuous pilgrimage to Mecca of king Mansa Musa I (c. 1312 – c.1337).

The early stages of the foundation of the Empire and its subsequent expansion are recounted in the epic of Soundiata Keita, who is credited by the oral tradition as being the first Emperor (*Mansa*) of Mali (Johnson et al. 2003; see, more generally, Cissé and Kamissoko 1988, 1991; Jansen 1995; Camara 1996). The recitation of this famous tradition is the exclusive domain of bards in Mande (an endogamous professional group of people called *jeliw*), and a commonly spoken and researched aspect of Mande culture, perhaps especially so in modern Mali given that some *jeliw*, among other singers of Malian culture, are artists of global reach.

Besides being researched by historians and ‘traditionalists’ (as Malian intellectuals often call themselves), the epic of Soundiata works as a sort of foundational myth for Mande: it narrates wars and alliances between different clans (all identified by patronymics which are still in current use), it traces the genealogies of ruling and defeated groups, establishing kinship and quasi-kinship relationships; finally, the epic refers to a complex and almost open-ended system of social differentiation comprising many categories of people, like ‘freemen’ warriors (*horonw*), ‘slaves’ by capture (*jonw*) or by descent (*wolosow*), professional groups (*nyamakalaw*), including various other denominations such as bards (*jeliw*), blacksmiths, potters and woodcarvers (*numuw*), leatherworkers (*garankew*) and others.

Similar ways of classifying people, based on patronymic name, descent, quasi-kinship relations and the like, are of ordinary use in a place like Bancoumana – no matter whether people relate them to oral traditions or not. The ‘system’ of social differentiation resulting from the employment of such categories is far from simple and clear-cut; moreover, it is rendered particularly subtle by the multiple ways-of-being and of addressing each other that people employ in ordinary social interaction, with the result of reproducing similar distinctions in implicit and non-verbalized ways. Despite its open-ended and not rigidly bounded character – or perhaps precisely because of that – such a system can only be understood as a complex and articulated scheme of social differentiations cross-cutting with each other. While people do often make a point of *being unequal* – especially so, when they need to express their unity, which is based on complementarity (see page 31 below) – it is virtually impossible for a disinterested observer to classify people into bounded groups and then order these into ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ ranks of society, as French administrators and ethnographers did in a blunt colonial fashion (on the most famous among these figures, Maurice Delafosse, see Van Hoven 1990; more generally, see Grosz-Ngaté 1988).

It should be no surprise by now to acknowledge that since early times anthropologists working in Mande paid relatively higher attention than others to the complex system of statuses and social differentiations talked about by their informants – who, incidentally, tended to over-represent the coherence of such system of social differentiation and to ground it in a mythical and ‘invented’ past (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965; for a critique, van Beek 1991). Likewise, it is not surprising that, in more recent times, Mande anthropologists have turned to studies of historical depth with the aim of ‘decolonizing’ such categories, while showing their ongoing and perhaps increased importance in everyday life in modern Mali (see references below).

Among the mostly read and researched topics of recent anthropological literature on Mande is the fluid character of the social groups based on status and identity (Conrad and Frank 1995; Amselle 1998; Schulz 2000). Over the last 20 years, Mande studies have provided a powerful cultural decolonization of concepts like ‘caste,’ ‘slavery’ and ‘ethnicity,’ while also combining a narrow regional focus with themes discussed in wider anthropological circles, such as agency and the rediscovery of history in

anthropology (e.g. Perinbam 1997; Silla 1998; Soares 2005; Mann 2006). While I deem such studies indispensable for understanding the Mande social context – in particular the subtle and articulated system of social differentiation – I shall argue that Mande anthropologists have shown a surprising lack of interest for studying how such fluid and complex dynamics of social grouping impact on political relations.

Mande anthropology has offered insightful analyses of ‘notable’ social distinctions, like the three categories mentioned above, with a recurrent focus on the occupational groups called *nyamakalaw* (see page 27 above; McNaughton 1993; Frank 1998; Hoffman 2000; Schulz 2001). Less attention has been paid, instead, to the ordinary ways of grouping considered in this thesis as mattering crucially for the analysis of political relations. This fact is particularly surprising considering that for earlier anthropology of West Africa, the socially mediated character of government and the analysis of political systems were the main subjects of analysis (Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1940; Fortes 1945).

My enquiry concerns the mobilization of people into social groups based on matrilineal and patrilineal descent (maternal and paternal groups, see Chapter Three), age and generation (classificatory siblings, fathers and sons, see Chapter Five), anteriority of settlement (first-comers and late-comers, see Chapter Four), among other things. Although the ideological foundation of groups of descendants, peers or settlers has often emerged in ethnographic analyses of Mande, the relevance of such groups for the analysis of political organization has been generally overlooked. More particularly, the openness and flexibility which characterize processes of ordinary grouping in my analysis have been relatively unexamined by recent ethnographic works on the region.

How do ordinary groups based – inter alia – on age, descent and anteriority, differ from those formed by mobilising ‘notable’ identities, like caste, slave descent and ethnicity? Is the openness of such groups a distinguishing character and how it can be defined? How are these dynamics conceived of in Bancoumana? How do people express them in vernacular terms? With the aim of further defining and clarifying the subject of my analysis, let me address these questions in order. By showing how distinctions based on descent, age, anteriority are commonly employed as means for achieving cooperative ends, I emphasize the everyday relevance of grouping dynamics in Mande.

The exploration of ordinary processes of grouping in a variety of domains of daily life in Bancoumana (development, household, land, agriculture and taxation) reveals a pervasive and recurrent ideology of complementary opposition. Such an ideology, which one often finds expressed in a ‘segmentary’ idiom, has been described by Sahlins (1961) as an ‘ideology of predatory expansion.’ It is with such an idiom of segmentation and such an inclusive and ‘open’ ideology that West African anthropologists – and Mande specialists in particular – seem to have lost familiarity in recent times. Discourses drawing on complementary oppositions and distinguishing ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’ may engender less encompassing barriers than those consequent to the manipulation of categories deeply rooted in the historical (and particularly colonial) past, such as caste, slavery and ethnicity, but the actual results in terms of mobilization of people around group identities are not dissimilar. My characterization of, and focus on, ‘ordinary groupings’ aims at drawing attention to the relevance of segmentary dynamics in daily life rather than to distinguish between different types of social groups, although groups may differ in the degree to which they are corporate entities.

Beyond the recurrence of a segmentary idiom, ethnographic analysis of ordinary grouping in Bancoumana reveals the open character of social groups. From the point of view of an individual social actor, what is open is often the possibility of casting oneself (or one’s group) in multiple ways. To put it another way, individuals draw – sometimes simultaneously, at other times exclusively – on multiple identities and on claims to membership of different social groups. For example, within a residential unit in Bancoumana (a compound), individuals exploit differently the rules of descent according to the particular claim they may want to frame. There is often room for insisting on membership in a multiplicity of groups: of same-mother and same-father descendants and on various levels of patrilineal descent, larger or smaller than the compound (see Chapter Three, in particular on page 109).

Not only individuals but also collectivities cast themselves strategically into open groups: for example, my host compound *Messerejanna* (see methodology and Chapter Three) can be conceived of as a single descent group comprising the descendants of its founder or as constituted of two or three smaller descent groups, corresponding to

maternal or paternal groups of patrilineal descendants.⁸ Descent groups larger than the compound (see methodology and Chapter Six) should also be considered, adding to the complexity of one's identification into descent groups.

Crucially, however, the issue of strategic grouping goes well beyond the domain of descent – itself not a domain constituted rigidly around clear-cut rules of patrilineal descent. For example, Chapter Two on the dichotomy of insiders and outsiders in the field of development and Chapter Four on the complementary opposition between first-comers and late-comers will illustrate that a 'segmentary' logic is at play in these fields too and that ideologies of complementary opposition produce comparable results in terms of inclusiveness (Sahlin's predatory expansionism) and openness of social groups.

It emerges from the analysis of the ethnographic data that, in playing out one's membership of multiple social groups, there is often considerable room for ambiguity, a recurrent aspect of both individual and collective agency in Bancoumana. Instead of adopting a perspective centred on individual social actors, however, I focus on the fact that the groups of which individuals strategically claim to be the members allow for – and indeed are characterized by – such openness.

The open character of social groups is the other face of the ambiguity of individual agency outlined by literature on Mande social relationships (e.g. Conrad and Frank 1995). Group 'openness' is a consequence of the fact that both individual and collective social actors make circumstantial use of their membership of larger entities – sometimes emphasizing their similarity and calling for unity and cooperation, at other times insisting on difference and calling for division and competition. As the complementary statuses of uterine and paternal brotherhood, to which I will now turn, such 'segmentary' logic draws on the domain of kinship relations (according to descent rules) yet operates more widely in society.

All over Mande, people employ the vernacular kinship concept of *badenya* (uterine brotherhood, literally 'mother-childness'), referring to the need of grouping for cooperative ends and, more generally, to group solidarity. In the Mande worldview, this

⁸ As detailed in Chapter Three, compound residents are the descendants of the two wives of the founding ancestor and of three of their sons.

notion is in permanent tension with the opposite paternal half-brotherhood (*fadenya* or ‘father-childness’), evoking instead a sentiment of rivalry, competition and selfishness. Although *badenya* is more consistently valued and invariably evoked in positive terms, its opposite *fadenya*, with its association with heroic behaviour, nonetheless has very positive connotations (McNaughton 2008; Wooten 2009). In short, these vernacular concepts are employed to stress different but related aspects of social relations, including individuality and rivalry (*fadenya*) as well as social harmony and collectivity (*badenya*).

As several Mande specialists have convincingly shown (Bird and Kendall 1980; Jansen and Zobel 1996; Hoffman 2000), the tension between *fadenya* and *badenya* is central to the local understanding of social relations, defining a particular aesthetic of action (Hardin 1993; McNaughton 2008). The two concepts should be seen in a continuum rather than in opposition. It was expressed by Wooten thus:

[mother-childness and father-childness] are not polar opposites, but rather complementary elements of a complex whole. Depending on timing and context, individuals and groups may accent either element of this integrated cultural model. They are interrelated in tension and stably lodged in the Mande worldview (2009:20-1).

This thesis is concerned with processes of grouping and of building cooperative relations. By such processes, the people of Bancoumana cast themselves – or are cast and represented by others – into social groups, pursuing a wide range of purposes and activities. Addressing how cooperative relationships are built (and undone) in a range of ordinary domains of social life, my analysis suggests that dynamic processes of segmentation are key to the understanding of political relations in Bancoumana. An examination of how ‘soft’ distinctions (in comparison to the ‘notable’ identities mentioned above) are mobilized in the constitution of social groups will reveal that the logic underpinning processes of grouping in a ‘segmentary style’ prizes ambiguity and the possibility to cast oneself in multiple legitimate ways. Thus, segmentation allows groups not to be ‘frozen’ into fixed entities, for example into institutions recognised by state law, while mediating in important ways bureaucratic control by the state and other agencies. Finally, the particular style of grouping of the people of Bancoumana allows them to resist economic processes of transformation – again by mediating these forces, as we shall see.

A non-urban Malian town

Bancoumana is a rural municipality (*commune rurale*) located at 60 km from Bamako, on the road connecting the Malian capital to Siguiri (Guinea) and bordering the Niger River. The municipality is formed by the village of Bancoumana – approximately 8,300 people – and by 13 other villages and smaller settlements, where the rest of the population lives, totalling 22,000 residents.

Being positioned mid-way between Bamako and the border with Guinea, the region of my fieldwork plays a significant role in the border economy connecting the Guinean capital and port-town of Conakry to land-locked Mali and its capital Bamako. Among other signals of this fact, is the long line of shops bordering Bancoumana's main street and surrounding the market square, selling flash lights, transistor radios, portable phones, music and video cassettes, cuckoo clocks and prayer clocks, fake hairs, detergents, and the like. The ready availability of such goods reflects the village proximity to Bamako and to the Guinean border, and stands in contrast with the weekly cadence of the market fair (taking place every Monday), where the sale of cattle and locally produced food attracts nonetheless considerable numbers. The traffic with Guinea was undergoing a period of crisis when I entered the field, due to the recent tarring of an alternative route, connecting Siguiri to Bamako (the Sibi-Narena road), but cutting-off my field-site. In 2010, Bancoumana's road was eventually asphalted; not having returned since 2008, I cannot say whether this had led to a recovery of commerce.

Despite being uniformly spoken as a 'village' (*dugu* in Mandenkakan, *village* in French), Bancoumana has many of the characteristics of a small town, including a population of remarkable size, the presence of administrative services and the already mentioned market fair, which attracts both buyers and sellers from a vast area including the capital Bamako. The biggest centres in nearby municipalities (Kangaba, Sibi, Narena, Djoliba) hardly surpass 5,000 inhabitants, making of Bancoumana the most populous settlement of the region south-west of Bamako. Compared to the localities mentioned above, however, my field-site presents a much less 'urban' outlook due to the recent failure of the plan of 'squaring' inhabitable land (the procedure of plotting described in Chapter Two). Moreover, urban infrastructure such as tap water, sewage

and electricity are absent, while it is not uncommon to find them in much smaller places (including all the neighbouring centres referred to above). The exceptional lack of such infrastructure suggests that tensions inevitably accompanying similar developments – regularly prospected and planned but never achieved – could not be overcome in Bancoumana (see, in particular, Chapter Two). This crucial aspect for the understanding of local political relations will emerge at various points of the thesis and will be the object of further analyses.

With the size of a town, but without the look and feel of urbanisation, Bancoumana is nonetheless an administrative centre of some importance. Such a status is prominently signalled by the two storey building hosting the rural municipality (the only construction of this kind), which is located right at the entrance of the village along the main road to Bamako. Other visible state-infrastructure lie at a short distance, on the same eastern side of the village. The health centre (*centre de santé communautaire*) consists of a large and recently enwalled compound hosting three cement buildings: the doctor's practice and pharmacy (one resident doctor is assisted by a practicing doctor/nurse), the mid-wifery and the quarters of a medical project monitoring malaria. Since the establishment of this project in the mid-2000s (see methodology), the site has not only been entirely refurbished, but also connected to two electricity-generators powering air conditioning, laboratory research instruments, computers, printers and satellite-internet connection. Despite the sad irony of the lack of *medical* equipment – the project provided an ambulance instead, for driving urgent patients to Bamako – this research facility stands as a very unusual place in Bancoumana.

More modest, state-related buildings are the headquarters of the 'para-statal' agency for agricultural development (*Office de la Haute Vallée du Niger*, see Chapter Two), and a small police station, made of two rooms and a shed bordering the road, which is permanently staffed by two policemen taking turns from nearby Sibi. The presence of state buildings and infrastructure is completed by two public schools – one on the east, the other on the west of the village – providing education up to secondary level (9th year of education). The two schools are staffed with approximately 20 teachers and pupils exceed 1,000. Following the model of French school and administration (see also Chapter Six), most teachers come from elsewhere in Mali, sometimes from distant

locations. Like other state officials (*fonctionnaires*), they normally reside in the village for a limited time – one or two years – before being transferred elsewhere. Although numbers may seem large, Bancoumana’s school pupils only constitute about one-third of the school-aged population, which includes other villages in the municipality. The classes of both schools are critically over-populated, averaging numbers of 80-90 pupils per classroom (the Ministry of education sets the limit at 50) and reaching 197 in one case. Both the low rate of school attendance and the crowding of classes have direct repercussions on literacy in the locality; they also severely limit the chances for Bancoumana’s pupils to further pursue their studies in Bamako or elsewhere (see, in particular Chapter Three and Chapter Five).

Methodology

I first visited the village of Bancoumana in June 2005, collecting material for my Master’s dissertation, and shooting a documentary movie with a crew of Malian and Italian friends and university colleagues.⁹ One year and a half later, in February 2007, I started my fieldwork, which ended in December 2008. By that time, I had conducted 18 months of research in the village, while the rest of the time was spent either travelling or in the capital Bamako.

Since the first day of my stay in Bancoumana, I lived in the *Messerejanna* compound as a guest of Makan Camara, a man in his sixties, and his family, including his older brother and compound headman Nanamori Camara. In this relatively populous family setting, which will be described in Chapter Three, I was given a room in a mud-brick house on one corner of the compound (see map on page 86), furnished with a plastic deckchair topped by a straw mattress and a kerosene lantern light. I was normally the sole occupier of the room, although for variable periods of time I shared it with either of the two French speaking family members (Adama and Bakari, see Chapter Three), who

⁹ The dissertation, entitled *Land Tenure and Socio-political Structure in Bancoumana, Mali*, was submitted to the Anthropology Department, London School of Economics and Political Science, in September, 2005 in part fulfillment of the requirements for the MSc Law, Anthropology and Society. The documentary movie has been mentioned in note 2.

did not have a room of their own in the compound and who were my nearly-constant companions during the first months of fieldwork.

My affiliation with the Messerejanna compound, and particularly with my most direct host Makan Camara, was not the product of chance. First, I was recommended by a friend and researcher who had previously sojourned in the locality – Amadou Keita, who was also a member of the film crew in 2005. The connection with this Malian researcher facilitated my access to the field, while also reinforcing the relationship between Keita, a middle-class Bamako dweller, and my hosts in Bancoumana. Greetings, congratulations and condolences were frequently exchanged through me going and coming back from the capital city. On one occasion during my stay, Keita also paid a visit to my hosts in the village.

The second reason for my affiliation to Makan Camara lies in the particular office that he held in the village. Makan was in fact the headman (*Premier Conseiller*) of a semi-traditional institution called the village council (see especially Chapter Six). Acting as a deputy of the village chief – whose office was vacant in Bancoumana – he had a customary duty to receive foreigners like Keita and myself. Therefore, on the day I arrived in Bancoumana, it was to him that I offered the usual ten kola nuts in sign of respect. I was accompanied to his ‘chatting place’ (*sigiyoro*) on the market square, where I was told that I would be his guest. I was then accompanied to the compound called Messerejanna, where I was introduced to the family headman Nanamori.

As it will emerge from subsequent chapters, the Messerejanna family is a relatively prestigious group in Bancoumana, holding considerable political influence and power, and descending from allegedly first-settler Camara people (the clan and patronymic associated with Bancoumana). Signalling this fact, a few years after I left the field-site, compound headman Nanamori has become village chief – while Makan has kept his position of village first-councillor – ending a dispute among different factions and stake-holders started in 1991, with the death of the previous village chief Nassira Camara.

Despite their local political prestige, however, my hosts were not amongst the wealthiest people by the standard of an administrative and commercial centre like

Bancoumana. Unlike other families, Messerejanna could not count on salaries or other regular cash income (migrants' remittances, income from trade, pensions and the like). Moreover, family members did not possess a large number of heads of cattle – a common form of investment and symbol of wealth. Finally, unlike richer compounds living from a combination of income sources (remittances, trade and cattle), Messerejanna was heavily dependent on human-powered agriculture: all the active men and women residing in the compound were full-time farmers, growing both subsistence crops (millet, sorghum, maize, rice and peanuts) and cash crops (onions, beans and mangos).

As expected, language has been a rather challenging aspect throughout the research. Although I was fluent in French, I entered the field with only a preliminary command of Bambara (the more widespread version of Mandenkakan spoken in Bancoumana), which I learnt through private tuition in London. During the first eight months of fieldwork, I spent most afternoons in the company of Alassane Maiga, a shopkeeper and respected religious teacher (he was the deputy imam of one of the five mosques of Bancoumana), who agreed to teach me Mandenkakan.

Maiga was a foreigner, native of the Gourma region near Timbuktu, and had settled in Bancoumana approximately thirty years ago. Both his religious status and his condition of long-term foreigner made of him a much respected personality in the neighbourhood (the surroundings of his house and his shop). The location of my language tuition – the veranda of the shop – was indeed a successful chatting place, frequented by many of Maiga's friends who became my first informants after the members of my host family. Most of his friends were neighbours, inhabiting the eastern side of the village along the road toward Bamako (see page 34 above): a direction in which the village is expanding, where most newcomers like Maiga are settled. Maiga's shop was also set in a convenient location, next to the building hosting the municipality, which I frequented assiduously since the beginning of my fieldwork.

I soon became a regular frequenter of various chatting places other than Maiga's shop, all of which were set along the main road and around the market square. These are shaded spaces where groups of friends – invariably males and generally members of the same adult generation – gather frequently and spend time together chatting and drinking

tea. Some are set in front of shops and work-places (the municipality, the local radio station, the para-statal agency for agricultural development), while others, especially those frequented by elder people, are located in more quiet corners of the village. As soon as my language skills improved, I got used to visiting many of these places on a daily basis, gathering information, asking questions and taking part in conversations.

Although my preferred method of inquiry was ordinary conversation, I was occasionally invited to go and ask some elder people about subjects of my interest and research. Thus, at various times during my fieldwork, I collected oral accounts, such as those concerning the foundation of Bancoumana (see Chapter Four).¹⁰ In doing so, I was normally in the company of a member of my hosting family (Adama or Bakari) or of another French speaking informant. In some cases I tape-recorded the accounts and then paid some friends in Bamako to translate them. I never had a research assistant in the village and no money was ever paid in return for information.

The last method I employed was a survey. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I became acquainted with a number of doctors based at the local health centre and working for the above mentioned U.S. funded project monitoring malaria. This initiative – vernacularly known as *projet palud* and established for more than two years when I started my fieldwork – consisted in studying the incidence of malaria in infants in the village as well as testing a number of vaccines on a sample of 200 young children, half of whom were inoculated a placebo solution.¹¹ Due to its statistical nature, the study was based on an accurate and regularly updated dataset of the entire resident population of Bancoumana, in order to measure the incidence in relation to the sample. I was kindly given access to these data – a census, given that it covered the *entire* population – which I have further elaborated as explained below.

In the census conducted for the malaria project, each individual residing in Bancoumana was given a nine figure identification number codifying the following information: a)

¹⁰ Accounts of the foundation of Bancoumana were collected from ‘*Damafin*’ Lamine Sinaba (blacksmiths’ headman in Bancoumana) and ‘El Hadji’ Messere Camara. Other elder informants include ‘*Karamogo Gueman*’ Camara, Makan Camara, Modibo Diabaté, ‘*Kempes*’ Camara and Alassane Maiga.

¹¹ The project, based at the University of Bamako and funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health among other donors, bears the official name of Malaria Research and Training Centre. See <http://www.malariagen.net/node/197> (last retrieved 11 October 2011).

area of residence: the village was subdivided into four areas, to be surveyed by different people; b) compound: within each of the four areas, each residential unit was given a progressive number based on its location; c) conjugal unit: within every compound, each married couple and children was given a progressive number; and d) individual: each individual was given a three figures number indicating his position within the conjugal unit (husband, wife or children). In addition, the census recorded full names, dates of birth and sex of all residents.

Some of these data have been employed directly in my research, for example in analysing compound size and density (page 98), the frequency of patronymic names (page 127) and the age of particular individuals (page 208). More generally, however, the presence of an accurate data set and the availability of five trained surveyors in charge of keeping these data up to date presented the opportunity to collect further information.

Over a period of three weeks towards the end of my fieldwork, four surveyors of the malaria project conducted a compound-based survey on my behalf, gathering information to which I will refer throughout the thesis. In particular, the 446 respondents (all the compound headmen of Bancoumana) were asked to describe themselves as either ‘first-comers’ of ‘late-comers’ in relation to the ‘original occupation’ of the village, as well as to indicate their ‘hosts’ in case of late-comer status (the meaning of all words in inverted commas is discussed in Chapter Four). Moreover, respondents were asked to cast their compound into larger groups based on descent in classificatory sense, hence including forms of affiliation such as hospitality, dependency and the like.

By the time my survey was conducted (at around the 15th month of fieldwork), I had acquired first-hand knowledge and experience of the complexity as well as the subtleness of the system of social differentiation explored by many contributions to the anthropological literature on Mande (some of which were referred to above) and elsewhere in Africa (Lan 1985; and Kuba and Lentz 2006). Therefore, I was fully aware that social distinctions based on criteria such as ‘prior occupation’ and ‘descent’ do not define bounded groups of people. Yet, ever since an early stage of fieldwork, my interest for how people build cooperative relations drew my attention to the recurrent

use of such categories and classifications in the making (and unmaking) of social groups. Hence, in order to achieve a sense of how such processes occurred on a scale of more than 8,000 inhabitants, I seized the opportunity to survey a number of affiliations based on prior occupation and descent as detailed above. Chapter Five will further clarify my intent in conducting such survey, while also reflecting on the reasons which make problematic and only partially successful similar efforts to ‘map’ descent-based affiliations among other things (see especially Kuper 1982).

Chapters outline

Providing the historical background required for understanding the present-day relation between the central state and the local municipality, **Chapter Two** addresses a series of land developments in Bancoumana’s recent history (1944-2008). Comparing a sequence of ‘failed’ attempts to boost rice production with more recent plans to ‘square’ the village-site into a regular series of land-plots, the analysis enlightens historical changes and continuities in the way development agencies, including the state, have targeted the land farmed and inhabited by the people of Bancoumana. I shall emphasize, more particularly, the long term relevance of *indirect* ways of governing the land by changing forms of state in Mali (late-colonial, independent, developmental and decentralized) and provide evidence of a shift in the means and the agenda of the current, decentralized form of state in ‘developing’ its territory. Originally aimed at gaining control of the domestic agricultural production, plans for land development by the state have started targeting inhabitable land as a condition for the reproduction of a growing migrant population.

The square plots envisaged in the recent plans to develop inhabitable land are associated with concrete houses and simple family structures exemplified, as we shall see, by the restricted sociality of the migrants who financed most of the operation. In sharp contrast to this imagined state of affair, **Chapter Three** illustrates the existing and far more complex modes of organizing space and kinship relations in an actual compound in Bancoumana. The chapter describes the domestic setting of the Messerejanna compound, the living quarters of my hosts, with a focus on the way its inhabitants group for various purposes. Crucial insights on grouping dynamics are firstly presented

through the analysis of the main spaces and activities in the courtyard, focusing on the use and disposition of buildings, and on daily, ordinary practices related to the preparation and consumption of food, such as husking, cooking, collecting kitchen fuel and eating together. Following that, family sub-groups are addressed by analysing their organization in two or three descent lines according to the particular view the individual takes on patrilineal descent. Overall, the analysis identifies a tension – as well as a room for strategic manoeuvre – between maternal and paternal groups of patrilineal descendants.

In Bancoumana, the ‘land is to rule.’ **Chapter Four** focuses on land as an attribute of political leadership and an enduring symbol of the legitimate exercise of political authority. Through the historical narrative of the founding of the village, I illustrate how the principle of anteriority in land occupation is used to create a distinction between two groups of villagers with different rights and opportunities in accessing land: first-comers and late-comers. Such distinction constitutes the base of a socially codified system of ‘hospitality’ allowing first-comers to incorporate late-comers while regulating the latter’s access to resources and adapting it to changing circumstances. However, there is not a clear-cut dichotomy between first-comers and late-comers, hosts and guests, but rather an extremely subtle status distinction. Moreover, through a case study of a dispute involving two late-comers, Traore and Diarra, I show that ‘hospitality’ is only one strategy employed by latecomers to secure their interests. Another way, not necessarily alternative to the former, is to resort to a written document issued by the Mayor: the *attestation de vente*. Despite the fact of involving two latecomers – one of whom literate and able to resort to an *attestation de vente* – the case shows that support from one’s host lineage was still crucial in securing land at the time of my fieldwork in Bancoumana. Negotiation of both litigants’ status and relations of dependence proved to be more effective than the written attestation signed by the state representative and produced by the defendant in order to resist the claim on land he purchased two decades ago.

Chapter Five deals with age-based associations in Bancoumana and their role in farming, illuminating crucial aspects of collective agency in relation to age groups and beyond. The first part of the chapter introduces age groups emphasizing their important

agricultural role as well as their connection to the political domain, a linkage that has been previously stressed by much of the literature dealing with age-based associations in the region and in Africa more generally. The core of my analysis, however, targets one particular age group – the Sina kari – and concentrates on the exchange and the performance of group-farming labour. A detailed description of one day farming the fields with the group will show that speaking of a ‘structured’ kind and commensality contribute significantly to the definition of the work setting. In particular, different patterns of interaction between the farming group and its ‘hosts’ (landlords) distinguish less commoditised forms of work from more ‘disembedded’ economic exchanges (gift form commodity).

The analytic emphasis on structured speaking among other aspects of the performance of group farming also serves to interrogate the open and flexible character of groups. Age groups like the Sina kari operate according to a rather flexible configuration: despite a strong sense of membership to the same cohort (emphatically played out in some circumstances), members can split into separate groups for the performance of specific tasks. In the case of the Sina kari, two groups bearing the same name and farming on the same day of the week (hence underplaying their difference) were in fact quite deeply divided along lineage membership lines. One of the two sub-groups also found an ingenious way to appoint an alternative chief without challenging too openly the legitimacy of Sina, the age-group headman officially appointed by the elders.

Chapter Six focuses on the most important local tax paid on a yearly basis by Bancoumana residents: the *Taxe de Développement Régional et Local* or TDRL. A successor of the colonial head tax, TDRL is due to the local state administration (the municipality) according to the records resulting from a registry, listing imposable people and properties for each *chef de famille* who is entitled a *carnet de famille*. The chapter starts from an analysis of Bancoumana registry of the *carnets de famille*, focusing on the way information is updated (handwritten) and the tax is calculated every year by the secretary general of the municipality.

The payment of the tax constitutes an exercise of negotiation and mediation between the municipal bureaucracy and other local political actors. The analysis of mediation does not simply reveal the power balance among different local political actors endowed with

contrasting legitimacies in collecting tax money; most importantly, it unveils a process of interaction between, on the one side, the written bureaucratic culture of state administration and, on the other, different ways Bancoumana residents group into extended family networks and lineages. The dynamism and flexibility of similar processes of grouping are reinforced by their 'oral' nature: grouping dynamism is 'frozen' by written registration aimed at administrative as well as cognitive purposes. The literacy skills upon which written registration is based, however, can also be used for setting up a 'screen' between bureaucratic practices such as tax collection and their intended target. The mediation of village councillors – keeping written records, but refusing to disclose them to the municipality – appears crucial to this regard: it protects the local political process against 'fission' by written registration, ensuring communication with the local state authorities while challenging bureaucratic control.

Chapter Two

Developing farming and inhabitable land

Introduction

The ‘betterment’ of land is an enduring concern of states and other developers, in Mali as in other parts of the world; one traditionally generating much conflict and misunderstanding between planners and beneficiaries (Ferguson 1990:262-3; James 1988; Moore 2000). Since the French colonial administration launched a series of ‘small-scale’ agricultural developments in the region, the land farmed and inhabited by the people of Bancoumana has received such attention. This chapter analyses a series of land developments in Bancoumana’s recent history (1944-2008) with the aim of exploring their connection to political and socio-economic relations in the locality. Providing the historical background required to understand the present-day relation between the central state and the local municipality, the analysis will also shed light on historical changes and continuities in forms of government. I shall emphasise, more particularly, the long term relevance of *indirect* ways of governing the land (despite the French *direct* rule) and provide evidence of a shift in the means and the agenda of the Malian state in ‘developing’ its territory: originally aimed at gaining control of the domestic agricultural production, plans for land development by the state have started targeting inhabitable land as a condition for the reproduction of a growing migrant population.

The first part of the chapter addresses the history of the Bancoumana rice plain, which was the object, until the mid-1980s, of several projects aiming at ‘developing’ rice production. During that period, physical infrastructure such as dikes and canals were built, the ground was levelled by means of both motorized and animal traction, and agricultural production was organized through the establishment of institutions providing farmers with training, tools of production, and services such as credit and marketing. All such efforts, however, ended in a revolt against plans to distribute the allotments. The chapter will then address the more recent affair of the plotting of

inhabitable village land, which was aimed at urbanizing Bancoumana by reorganizing the space according to a grid plan. The first phase of this process – preliminary to a bureaucratic procedure required by state law – was prompted by the newly established municipality in the year 2000. It was suddenly dropped, however, due to another revolt by one faction of the village.

While today the first set of agricultural developments is perceived as belonging to the past, there is a widespread – though publically unspoken – sense that village land plotting ought still to happen and that, sooner or later, the village will be presented with new opportunities for it. It is uncertain, however, how and when the different agencies to be involved might overcome their disagreement. Mention of disagreement in either set of developments is taboo: discussion of the actual dynamics that led to failure and of the composition of opposing factions is frequently diverted and always avoided in public conversations.

The comparison between these two cases, as well among the different stages in the longer history of the rice plain, provides insights on the way land and development were – and still are – understood and governed by different agencies. Various meanings of land, contrasting ideas and misunderstandings about its use and distribution are disputed by different groups of actors such as state representatives, bureaucrats, farmers, ‘traditional’ land owners, and both transnational and urban migrants.

Watering the crops and ‘fishing’ the fields in the dry season

Compared to the drier localities in most of the region, water in Bancoumana plays a greater (and rather peculiar) role in the local economy, although certainly not the one envisaged by the state and other agencies aiming at developing irrigated rice production as this chapter will describe. In consequence of the irreversible state of decay of the rice plain caused by these projects, Bancoumana farmers produce today only negligible quantities for rice, most of which is used for domestic consumption and does not reach the market. However, the system of canals originally designed for flood-controlled irrigation serves new purposes having considerable impact on the economy, such as the growing of cash-crops during the dry season (from November to April) and the catching

of fish. Introducing these features of the present-day local economy – an unexpected legacy of development intervention in Bancoumana – is crucial to understand the historical record of ‘failures’ of projects of agricultural development targeting Bancoumana’s rice plain (addressed in the next section).

After the end of the rains, in September-October, streams from the Mande hills continue to supply Bancoumana’s system of canals, where – depending on their size and depth – it progressively dries or stagnates until the advent of new rains in May-June. Thanks to the remnants of this canal infrastructure, those having land bordering a waterway can grow vegetables and fruit for part or the whole length of the dry season, depending on the location of their land. Some of these dry season crops like salad, tomatoes, cucumbers and watermelons are grown in ‘gardens’ (*nakow*), i.e. relatively small pieces of land, either bordering a waterway or equipped with wells, where no other crops are normally cultivated. Along with some fruit (mangoes, bananas), garden produce is normally sold in small quantities in the local market, providing a considerable number of households – and especially women – with moderate amounts of cash.

Other dry season crops, instead, are grown on larger surfaces, often the same fields farmed during the rainy season (*forow*). The fields are irrigated with small, movable motor-pumps – a common sight on the racks of the bicycles criss-crossing the countryside during the rainy season – for growing oranges, mangoes, bananas and, above all, onions. Cash crops such as these are grown in large quantities by Bancoumana farmers, to be either marketed in Bamako or sold (in bulk) to wholesale buyers visiting the countryside at harvest time with large trucks.

In Bancoumana, onion growing is a very common entrepreneurial activity. It requires a certain capital for the initial investment in seeds and chemical fertilizers, as these two inputs are indispensable for growing vegetables of marketable size and on portions of the same fields that have just been harvested. Onion is planted shortly after the harvest of other crops, hence the land cannot rest and be fertilized by the cattle grazing. Onion growing also requires a motor-pump, which is normally shared by the members of the

same compound (see Chapter Three) along with a weekly amount of money for buying petrol over a period of three to four months.¹²

Onions are grown almost exclusively by men – a fact connected to the necessity of the above mentioned capital investment – and most of the work is done individually. The solitary nature of onion growing stands in sharp opposition to the way work is organized for most other crops (certainly those producing comparable harvests): millet, sorghum, maize, rice, peanuts and the like are all farmed by groups (see Chapter Three and Chapter Five). In the case of onions, people associate into groups only for buying wholesale seeds and fertilizers, or for borrowing the money to purchase smaller quantities of such inputs. Neither the household nor farming associations (see, respectively, Chapter Three and Chapter Five) play any considerable role.

Finally, onion farming is a particularly demanding activity. Perhaps, this is because this crop is grown at a time of rest in the agricultural cycle (so is traditionally defined the dry season), and also because of the solitary nature of work outlined above. Despite the great amount of effort required, however, returns are not great, improving only if the harvest is stored and marketed months later.¹³ Young men (those who do not leave the village after the farming season) re-plant onion every autumn, grumbling and hoping for better prices on the following year. In fact, many do not see such activity as an option: for unmarried or recently married people, for example, to grow onions is the most common way to accumulate enough cash for paying (or completing the payment of) their bride-wealth (see also Wooten 2005).

A second and highly unexpected legacy of the development of irrigated agriculture in Bancoumana is the abundance of fish and the popularity of fish-catching practices. This is somehow a more social (and also pleasurable) activity than farming onions, since it is mostly done into groups. Just as with onions, however, fish constitutes an important

¹² A common investment in onion farming at the time of my fieldwork required the following amounts of money: from 100,000 to 150,000 CFA Francs (£130-£200) for fertilizers; from 20,000 to 50,000 CFA Francs (£25-£65) for a box of seed, depending on quality and kind (red, yellow or white onion); approximately 50,000 CFA Francs (£65) for petrol, for watering the crops once a week during three to four months.

¹³ Returns are highly variable. During my fieldwork, for example, onion prices swung from 50 CFA Francs/Kg (£0.07) to 400 CFA Francs/Kg (£0.53) depending on the time of the sale. So far as I could judge, however, 100,000 CFA Francs (£130, net in relation to the costs) would be an average figure for the harvest of one person.

item of trade in Bancoumana, one which has attracted women entrepreneurs coming specifically from Bamako to buy fish from many different farmers, reselling most of it straight away in the local market.

In the final part of the dry season, water begins to dry in the canal infrastructure and people organize fishing groups supplying both their households and sellers in the local market with the product of their catch. Fish traps, made of net and flexible wood, are placed inside the small canals surrounding the fields and looked after daily to discourage thieves; but the most effective way of fishing is a collective catch in isolated tracts of the canals, where the fish has arrived with the floods and has remained trapped in pools separated by dried tracts of canal.

Fish catching of a collective kind is also the object of regulation by ‘traditional authorities’ such as the cohort of people serving as a vigilante group (these will be seen in Chapter Five). By decision of such a group, the fishing season is declared open and whoever is found catching fish in the canals before this announcement can be fined. Both men and women – but especially the latter – gather in groups of several tens of people and catch fish by means of nets, conical traps, lances, machetes and other instruments: while some hold long nets isolating one area of the canal and progressively narrowing the spot, others catch the fish trapped inside.

In Mande, like in other areas of West Africa, fishermen and farmers normally constitute distinct groups, often distinguished by patronymic name and specializing in either of the two activities – which also provides the ‘social infrastructure’ for their trade (Koenig et al. 1998; Koenig 2005). Thus, the fact that the Camara people of Bancoumana (a patronymic traditionally associated with agriculturalists) fish on their own fields is something which is often, and with some humour, remarked by their neighbours. Because of their main occupation as farmers, however, Bancoumana residents refrain from fishing on the Niger River nearby – and often from canoeing or swimming; activities for which the fishermen people known as the Somono who live on the bank of the river are better qualified.

Rice cultivation and the legacy of its development

The location of Bancoumana is one particularly suitable for flooded rice cultivation. On the north-western side of the village, the ground slopes slowly for approximately 40 km (about ten metres in height difference), conveying water from the Mandé hills towards the Niger River. Average rainfall is about 1,000 mm between May and October (and proximate to zero for the rest of the year).¹⁴ A vast plain area, of more than 2,000 hectares, separates the village from the river, about four to seven kilometres to the south-west. During the rainiest part of the year, abundant streams flow into the river, flooding the plain area where rice is cultivated.

Colonial agronomists used to complain that, before the arrival of the French, farmers of the Upper Niger Valley – the part of the river where Bancoumana is located – made little effort to alter the environment in a way that would have allowed the cultivation of rice (Guernier 1949; Guillaume 1960a).¹⁵ Later on, experts working for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) assumed that rice was not normally grown in the area and played no role in the diet of the local people (Anders 1981:57). Yet, as studies have suggested, rice has been grown in this area since c. 1500 BC (Portères 1950; Linares 2002) and Mandé farmers have sophisticated knowledge of rice farming techniques, through which several varieties of rice have been domesticated and adapted to the particular environment of the Upper Niger Valley.

Several local varieties, belonging to the species *Ozyra glaberrima*, are still cultivated today, albeit increasingly challenged by Asian varieties of the other rice species (*Ozyra sativa*) and by a hybrid variety known as ‘New Rice for Africa’ (NERICA).¹⁶ Some varieties cultivated in Bancoumana are adapted to grow in dry conditions, similar to millet and sorghum, and unlike maize which is a more water-demanding crop, distributed for only a few centuries in West Africa. Other varieties – wet and floating –

¹⁴ Source: *Office de la Haute Vallée du Niger* (OHVN, see later in the text) for the years 2001-2003 (last data available online). See http://www.maliagriculture.org/services_tech/OHVN/ (last retrieved 26 October 2011). In 1959, Guillaume (1960:59) reports 1,100 mm for the same area.

¹⁵ The *Haute Vallée du Niger* is that part of the river Niger flowing from the north west of Guinea to Bamako. Further areas across Malian territory are: the ‘pre-deltaic’ (up to Segou), the ‘inner delta’ (around Djéne and Mopti), and the ‘post-deltaic’ (before the lake region surrounding the Lac Débo).

¹⁶ It is ironical that one of these local varieties is called *Ozyra Barthii*, after the German explorer Barth who is credited with its ‘discovery’ in 1853; the same variety was then brought to the Americas by African slaves and diffused through their labour (Littlefield 1981:98).

are employed on flooded terrains, where farmers have to make careful decisions according to different conditions of depth and timing of submersion, moisture and type of soil, and the like. Farming techniques too have been adapted for many centuries to changing conditions and largely 'uncontrolled' conditions. Along with the trial and adaptation of new varieties such as NERICA, the most recent of these has been the degradation of the plain's surface consequent to unsuccessful development intervention.

Rice cultivation in the Upper Niger Valley has traditionally developed in places like Bancoumana according to specific techniques designed to take advantage of floods and other natural environmental features. It was only in the latter period of French colonial rule, however, that this and similar places were 'developed' according to a particular kind of agricultural knowledge prescribing, among other things, very particular transformations of the natural environment, such as the construction of dikes, canals and ground-levelling; and requiring specific technology and farming techniques, such as irrigation, the ox plough, and exogenous crops such as the 'paddy' rice from East Asia and, more recently the NERICA. Similar 'developments' in agricultural production also implied the establishment of institutions aimed at disciplining farming labour, with the power to regulate agricultural production and to purchase of the entirety of the harvest.



Figure 1. Satellite view of Bancoumana's rice plain

The area bordered in white indicates the flooded rice plain developed by the French between 1944 and 1949. The area bordered in black corresponds to the irrigated polder first developed by the government in 1964 and then re-developed by the USAID-funded *Operation Haute Vallée* started in 1978. The *Koba River*, a non-perennial tributary of the Niger, borders the left (western) side of the developments. Source: Google Earth

AMENAGEMENT RIZICOLE DE BANKOUMANA

CASIERS A & B DECOUPAGE

Echelle 1/25.000

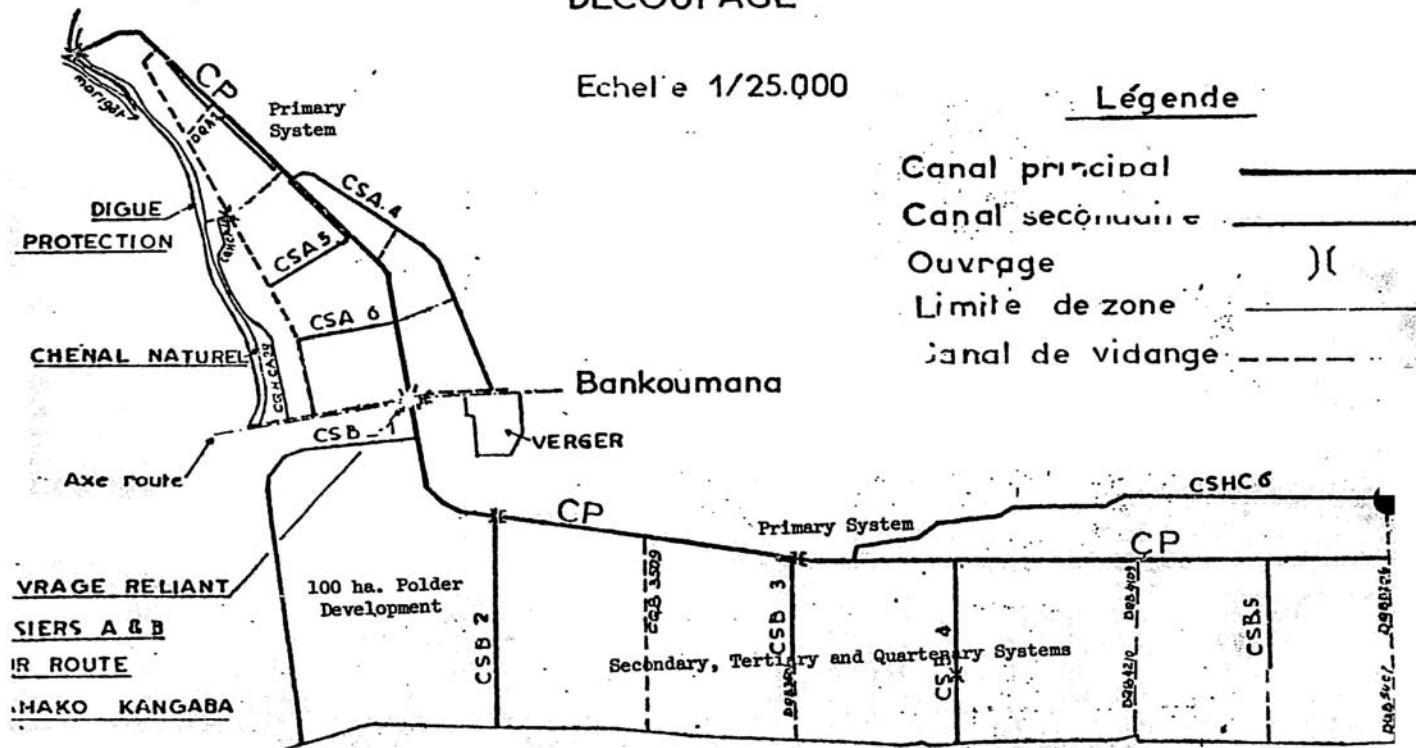


Figure 2. Development of the irrigated rice polder (1964)

The plan, corresponding to the area bordered in black in Figure 1, shows the irrigation system to be re-developed by the USAID in 1978, including the 100 hectares 'demonstration area' described later in the text. Source: USAID, 'Rehabilitation of the Bankoumana irrigated polder,' 1981

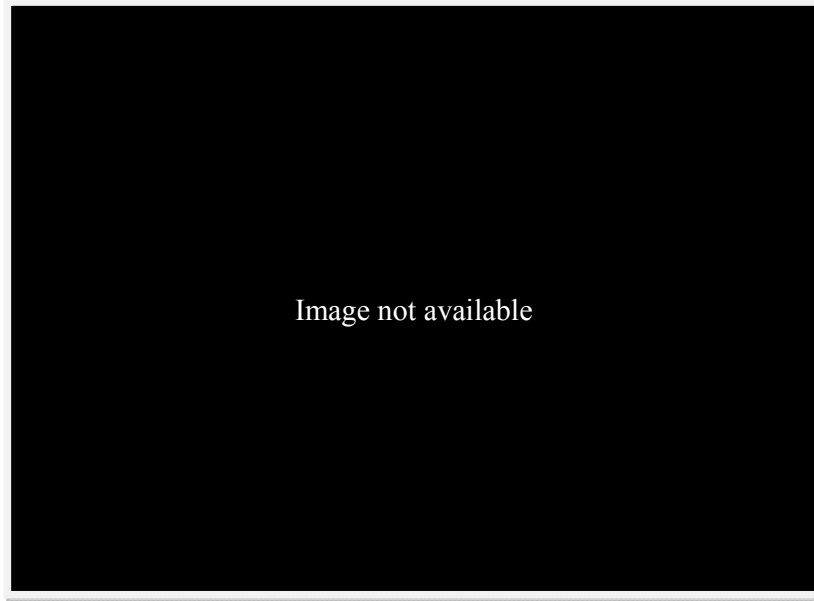


Figure 3. This image, 'The floodgate built by the French in 1944-1949' from the Encyclopédie coloniale et Maritime (Guernier 1949), has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.

Developing the rice plain

Since colonial times, three waves of transformation of the rice plain have occurred. For the sake of clarity, I shall outline them in this subsection, before turning to a more contextual analysis showing ruptures and continuities in a larger historical frame.

Between 1944 and 1959, the French colonial administration caused a long canal backed by an embankment to be dug containing the flood of the Niger River southbound (see Figure 1). On the western side of the plain, the tributary of the Niger River 'Koba,' literally 'main stream,' was damned with a cement structure allowing for control of the flood coming upstream from the Niger (see Figure 1 and Figure 3). Through a shorter canal departing from the dam (barely visible in Figure 1, in correspondence with the floodgate), water was conveyed into the rice plain allowing the submersion under controlled conditions of approximately 1,700 hectares.

This rudimentary infrastructure (which was cost-effective, as we shall see later) was designed by the agricultural division of the French colonial administration (*service de l'agriculture*) and executed by means of forced labour – presumably recruited locally and not deported as the French used to do for larger-scale developments (like the *Office du Niger* mentioned in Chapter One; see also page 59 below). Despite the infrastructure

still visibly affecting the flooding of the plain and its landscape today, this initial development of Bancoumana's rice plain stands as a small-scale and rather rudimentary intervention, when compared to the system of irrigation (as opposed to controlled flooding) aimed at by the following projects.

In 1964, the first independent government of Mali – the socialist regime of Modibo Keita – prompted a major new land development in Bancoumana aimed at increasing rice production. Five hundred hectares were developed on the northern side of the plain, on the slightly drier area between the French colonial development and the village (see Figure 1). One hundred and fifty additional hectares were then developed on lands bordering the Koba tributary on the east of the village. Through new gates located on this different place (indicated in Figure 1), the Koba alimented a canal-infrastructure made of a deep perimeter-canal crossed by smaller canals in a grid-like formation, as can be seen in Figure 2 above. Unlike the colonial development, the land to be irrigated by this system was levelled (by mechanical means) and divided into paddies measuring 3.5 hectares each: an unusually large size which, together with poor levelling, was subsequently deemed the reason for its failure, only to be replicated in a following project funded by the USAID as I will later document (page 56).

This second development was realized by the Malian *Genie Rural* (the state engineering agency) with the support of the North Vietnamese government – like Mali, a former territory of the French colonial Empire. In particular, the latter provided the huge tractors of Soviet production that the Malian technicians employed for levelling the land, as my elder informants still recalled in 2008. Following the overthrow of Modibo Keita, by a coup supported by France that brought to power General Moussa Traore, further financial and technical assistance for the management of Bancoumana's agricultural infrastructure was provided by France's *Bureau pour le Développement de la Production Agricole* (BDPA). The insistence of the French agronomists working for this organization and trying to persuade Bancoumana's farmers to grow rice and, later, onion is still somehow jokingly remembered in the village (see page 61 below).

The 1964 development consisted of a significantly different intervention from the previous and original one. On the one hand, it aimed at a greater control of water, one closer to irrigation than to controlled submersion. On the other, unlike the French

colonial development, it involved the squaring and demarcation of the fields into rice paddies, necessary to contain water keeping the crops uniformly submerged. The allocation of the 160 rice paddies led to acrimonious conflicts in the village, which eventually culminated in a ‘rebellion’ that is recalled by my informants as having drawn the army to Bancoumana and caused the imprisonment of a large part of the male active population for a period of four months.

Since the raking up of old disagreements is taboo in the village (see also later in this chapter), I could not find detailed information concerning the events, but I understood that plans for division and allocation of land were finalized in 1971 by the *Genie Rural* and involved consultation of a semi-traditional institution known as the village council (see Chapter Six). In a document called *plan parcellaire*, land plots were numbered and allocated to 160 different ‘families’ (USAID 1978:73) – presumably compounds, since these are the ordinary units of mobilization of labour. A contract book (*cahier de charges*) was signed by the headman of each of these families, by which certain conditions were agreed, including the payment of fees for the use of water and of 50 kg of paddy rice per hectare in order to retain the right to use the land. According to my informants, the allocation of paddies was contested by some village-faction against others, but it was ultimately against some aspects of the management of the project (the payment of fees for the use of water and the like) that greater numbers of people revolted, threatening the local bureaucrats of the *Genie Rural*, destroying means of measurement, landmarks and documents. Such actions precipitated the arrival of the army and, plausibly, ‘the revolt’ that is still remembered along the lines mentioned above.

It is interesting to know, at this stage, that the USAID officials who started the subsequent and third project aiming at the ‘rehabilitation of Bancoumana’s irrigated rice polder’ (in 1978) seemed to have been in the dark about the tensions having surrounded – and probably having rather violently ended – the previous development of the rice plain only seven years before. Despite occasional mentions of the *plan parcellaire* drawn by the *Genie Rural* and of the involvement of the village council in the distribution of land to families, the several thousands of pages of the USAID project *Operation Haute Vallée* (1978-1988) do not make any mention of past problems

concerning the distribution of land, nor do they envisage the possibility that such instances may arise in the future.¹⁷ However, along with the reiterated ‘technical’ failures, for which past developments were repeatedly blamed (inaccurate calculations, mismanagement, bad planning and the like), the redevelopment prompted by the USAID will be abandoned precisely because of the lack of cooperation by farmers (USAID 1982:21).

This third and last development of Bancoumana’s rice plain was operated by a newly created para-statal agency – the *Operation Haute Vallée* – financed almost entirely by the USAID. The ‘rehabilitation of Bancoumana’s irrigated rice polder’ was one of eight objectives of the USAID project, which aimed more generally at improving cash crop production in the Upper Niger Valley area as well as the infrastructure necessary for the commercialization of crops. While a large part of the US\$20,000,000 budget was allocated to the construction of roads (including two roads departing from Bancoumana, toward Sibi and Niame), approximately one tenth of that sum was spent to restore Bancoumana’s plain from its state of deterioration.¹⁸ Relying consistently on the data and knowledge of its ‘local partners’ (the para-statal *Operation Haute Vallée* and the *Genie Rural*), USAID project documents repeatedly blame ‘technical’ failures of past developments (uneven levelling, excessive size of the paddies and the like), paying little attention to the equally important social dimension of the management of the plain.

Despite the time and money spent on this project component, the USAID redevelopment of Bancoumana’s rice plain by the USAID ended at an early stage. While maintenance and recovery of the infrastructure of the whole perimeter was carried out, the plan envisaged the creation of a ‘demonstration area’ of 100 hectares, divided into 30 plots of three hectares each. It was intended that, unlike in the 1964 development, the land would be levelled by the farmers themselves using animal traction provided by the project through a subsidized credit scheme. Technical failures concerning such idea were remarked as soon as operations started, in particular: the

¹⁷ Project documents are now available online through the portal <http://dec.usaid.gov> (last retrieved 26 October 2011).

¹⁸ To the project ‘Operation Haute Vallée’ (1978-1988, n° 6880210) followed another ten-years project by the USAID (n° 6880233, named ‘Development Haute Vallée’) worth \$US29,500,000.

chosen variety of oxen turned out to be too weak, the soil heavier than expected, and the amount of water provided by the Koba River only about half that initially calculated.

As put by Simpson (1999:129): ‘after stinging critiques of the project’s early performance [...], the project was extended and amended several times before it reached USAID’s ten-year statute of limitation on project funding [...].’ More particularly, one of the evaluations commissioned by USAID referred to the project component of the Bancoumana irrigated rice polder as a ‘complete failure’ (Bloch 1986:128). The report argues that,

Dispossessing [the farmers] means changing the social structure of the village and region in ways that are obvious to everyone but project planners, it seems. The Bancoumana polder in Mali, to be rehabilitated by USAID, has failed for this reason, but also for a more subtle one: the village leaders apparently fear that, if the first perimeter succeeds, the government will come back and take more land, and distribute it to outsiders (Bloch 1986:13).

The ‘fear’ that land would be distributed to outsiders was rightly pointed out by the report: we shall see later in the thesis (Chapter Four) that the control of – and the capacity to give access to – land is a crucial aspect of the exercise of authority in Bancoumana, one mattering in important ways for the capacity to mediate political relations, that is for the constitution of ‘political person’ (see also Chapter Seven). Since the ‘failure’ of USAID’s plans in the mid-1980s, the more than 2,000 hectares suitable for rice cultivation in Bancoumana have not been the object of ambitious efforts of development, except for a few relatively small-scale projects for the cultivation of bananas and sugar cane.

As a result of these events, the state of the rice plain deteriorated even further, to the point that rice cultivation is today possible only on scattered areas and under increasingly uncontrolled conditions due to the progressive deterioration of the infrastructure. In such conditions only low-yield varieties of rice can be grown, producing an average of 0.8 tonnes per hectare as opposed to the three tonnes envisaged by the USAID development. Moreover, as a consequence of the uneven terrain and its extraordinary deterioration, cultivation can be conducted only on a small-scale (one-two hectares). This picture explains overall why most of the rice produced in Bancoumana is consumed locally, lasting in the granaries of a normal household for no more than a few months, while only negligible amounts can be marketed.

The deterioration of infrastructure paralleled the diminishing control of the state over agricultural production and commercialization. As the conclusion of this chapter will suggest, this can be interpreted as a somehow necessary and hence conscious disengagement of the state from national agricultural policy. What is clear, though, is that such state disengagement is consistent with the new role Mali tends to play in the global economic system: as a supplier of migrant labour, rather than agricultural produce, and as a consumer – not a producer – of food supplied from elsewhere at more competitive prices.

The picture emerging is complex, but suggests that the development of Bancoumana's rice-plain reflects broader changes in the relation between the changing form of the state (colonial, Malian and developmental) in relation to Bancoumana. This requires framing my story in a broader historical perspective.

Rice production in historical perspective and the 'framing' of agriculture by the state

After the Second World War (WWII), the laying out of agricultural land for rice production along the Niger River became an increasingly important concern for colonial administrators of the French Sudan (now Mali). Following instructions from Paris, colonial administrators wanted to increase crop exports from French Sudan to other regions of the Empire, in particular to neighbouring colonies on the West African shores, which in turn specialized in the production of crops for export to the metropolis. The *Encyclopédie Coloniale et Maritime* provides an example of such plans. In the section on agricultural hydraulics in French Sudan, we read,

Over the past few years, a particular effort has been made, in [French] Sudan, in order to increase rice production up to a scale which can not only satisfy, jointly with sorghum and millet, the needs of local consumption, *but that can also sustain a flow of exports toward neighbouring territories*; Senegal mainly, but also Guinea and Ivory Coast have oriented their agricultural production toward produce destined to the Metropolis: peanuts, bananas, cocoa, coffee, palm oil, etc., or toward supply of local industry (Guernier 1949:338).¹⁹

¹⁹ My emphasis and translation.

A decade later, a report by the ‘general inspector of agriculture’ working for the French government interpreted in the same vein the colonial policy aimed at transforming French Sudan into a granary for the colonies on the shores,

At the moment when the development of urban centres and the partial abandonment of subsistence agriculture by producers of peanuts in Senegal, coffee and cocoa in Ivory Coast, motivated a considerable increase of imports of foreign rice [...] it came naturally to the mind *the project of substituting these imports with local production, making, in this way, the somnolent economy of [French] Sudan to participate in the expansion of the shore areas* (Guillaume 1960b:54).²⁰

The objective to increase rice production in the French Sudan was explicitly set by the metropolitan government in the administration of the French colonial empire, becoming an important priority in the aftermath of WWII. Various models of agricultural development were available, differing with regard to the amount of investments in infrastructure and to the time during which results were to be produced.

By WWII, the expensive and lengthy model of agricultural development exemplified by the *Office du Niger* had already been implemented for more than a decade and was judged to be not cost-effective by the French metropolitan government. This large scale development was established in the 1930s in the central Niger delta, where the agronomist Emile Bélime had envisaged developing a fully irrigated surface of nearly 2,000,000 hectares for the production of cotton, in order to supply the French textile industry. Such a project would have involved a population of some 1,500,000 people, over three times the population of the inland delta, or more than 30 percent of the entire population of Mali at the time (Filipovich 2001:241). Finally, less than one tenth of the land envisaged by the project was actually developed (90,000 hectares), involving nevertheless the construction of two large dams, at the price of thousands of lives of forced labourers displaced from Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta) and the equally forced resettlement of some 30,000 farmers (Filipovich 2001:239). As mentioned in Chapter One (page 15), at present, a private company formed by investors and the governments of Mali and Libya is in the process of realising another tenth of this colonial project (100,000 hectares) with no other publically agreed intent than ‘producing rice’ as part of the demagogical campaign of the Malian government ‘*Opération riz.*’ This leaves open

²⁰ My emphasis and translation.

the possibility of exporting the entire harvest – when high global prices make it profitable.

To return to the colonial era, perhaps as a consequence of the change of policy by the French government with regard to this grandiose project (in government correspondence, failure was acknowledged by the mid-1940s), colonial policies for agricultural development turned towards a different kind of intervention, centred on adapting farmers' knowledge and techniques to small-scale, cost-effective developments. This approach was championed by the agronomist Pierre Viguiet – a fierce opponent of the project of the *Office du Niger* – gaining full financial and administrative support after WWII (Van Beusekom 2000:93). Viguiet's model informed the 27 small-scale developments (*aménagements*) realized between 1944 and 1959 in the Upper Niger Valley, where approximately 25,000 hectares were developed for rice production, including Bancoumana's rice plain (Guillaume 1960b:56).

The influence of the views propounded by Viguiet on the agricultural developments along the Niger River is acknowledged by the French inspector mentioned above (page 59) – and later the Ministry of Agriculture – in the following way:

Viguiet's book [*La Riziculture Indigène au Soudan Français*, 1939] outlined an overall conception of agricultural developments along the river, envisaging infrastructure proportionate to the hydraulic regimes and to the rainfall of the different sectors of the Valley. The program envisaged [by the book] is still at the heart of the development works realized in the former territories of Guinea, Sudan [nowadays Mali] and Niger since 1945 (Guillaume 1960b:55).

The rice plain of Bancoumana, settled between 1944 and 1949, was one of such agricultural developments in the Upper Niger Valley. Operations consisted of laying out submersible land suitable for rice production, through the relatively simple infrastructure described above: a long embankment containing the flood from the Niger southbound and a floodgate allowing controlled submersion of the plain (see page 53). Thanks to this infrastructure, the plain was submerged in a more controlled way by sending water into the canal through a floodgate located on the affluent Koba river. Unlike irrigation, partial flood control did not necessitate the squaring and levelling of land, and consequently the creation of plots to be allotted to the farmers.

According to Viguier's views as outlined above, however, the development of agriculture should not have relied on expensive agricultural infrastructure, but rather on farmers' training and organization (*encadrement*). This training was aimed at profiting from the use of lands submerged under the new, controlled circumstances. For example, farmers were advised about the appropriate rice varieties for each differently submerged part of the plain; they had to be trained in the use of both ox plough and fertilizers that, in turn, gained ground through subsidized credit schemes. Shortly after these developments, they will be trained to grow onions and other complementary cash-crops during the dry season.

Such an insistence on dry season farming is still remembered today, when people call 'Lafari' – with tongue in cheek – a particular quality of white onion after the nickname of a Frenchman (presumably a BDPA agronomist), who allegedly spent a decade in the village attempting to make people grow this particular variety. One vivid memory of this man among my informants is the way he had of teasing the elderly during the dry season, when they were spending most of the day chatting while sitting on the traditional high benches (*gala*) in the shade of a tree: by miming the gesture of sawing the leg of the bench, *Lafari* invited them to employ the dry season instead for farming onions. Looking at present day Bancoumana, his invitation seems to have been largely accepted, although by a much younger generation and despite the fact that the white onion bearing his name is not the most cultivated variety.

As shown above (page 45), the growing of dry season cash-crops and particularly onion constitutes an important legacy of the projects of re-developing the rice plain in Bancoumana. Considered the particular efforts put by the state (French colonial and then Malian) in the 'framing' of agricultural production in the region, the pedagogical function performed by people like *Lafari* appears as an element of crucial importance, one balancing the technical failures and the hardship of developing or rehabilitating agricultural infrastructure. Things such as agronomic literacy, training in the use of the ox-plough, and growing cash crops were deeply embedded in the infrastructure of Bancoumana's rice plain and yet have survived its decline. They represent the most enduring legacy of the 'development' of agricultural production in the Upper Niger Valley.

The emphasis on the development of agriculture continued as a major concern of newly independent Mali, although with the objective of controlling the domestic agricultural economy (as the state's domestic production) rather than marketing its surpluses, as in French colonial West Africa. In 1958, the agronomist Viguiet was appointed director of the Malian Institute for Rural Economy (*Institut d'Economie Rurale*, still the most important institute for agronomic research in Mali). Although he had to leave office and returned to France four years later because of diverging opinions with one part of the Malian political establishment, his ideas remained widely influential, as testified by the fame of another of his books – *West Africa seen by a farmer* (1960) – which for a long time was distributed by the Malian government to all local state representatives (Van Beusekom 2000:93). His model of agricultural development, although more indirect and decentralized than others, has nonetheless provided the state with effective means of controlling agricultural production, hence the means to impact on local production and its social organization in places like Bancoumana. A crucial part of the effectiveness of such control, however, was due to the French grip over the market of cash crops, rather than to the model in itself.

Under French rule, rice plain development in Bancoumana avoided the question of land ownership and distribution of the fields was never attempted.²¹ On a larger scale, the colonial power controlled agricultural production through the market of cash crops and did not need to engage the question of land tenure. This was both an indirect way of ruling farmers – perhaps anticipating later models of decentralized governance – and a realistic attitude toward the ‘development’ of land for agriculture or other purposes. In the case of the rice plain in Bancoumana, French colonial administrators seemed to rely entirely on the locally established system of land tenure, demonstrating a greater awareness of the centrality of such issue than subsequent developers such as USAID (see page 57 above).

At the time of its original development, Bancoumana's rice plain reflected the dominant French policy on agriculture, centred on small-scale, cost-effective interventions and

²¹ If this is generally true, one of the members of the Guillaume hydro-agricultural enquiry in the Upper Niger Valley refers, in his report, to a number of difficulties in attributing developed land for rice cultivation for the villages of Banancoro and Kangaba (Millot 1959:23).

relying on farmers' knowledge, locally available technology and established rules of land tenure. Land was not reallocated on the basis of any principle aiming at increasing production or agronomic efficiency. Such an indirect way of controlling the local agriculture was perhaps made possible by the fact that the colonial state was controlling agricultural produce on a higher level, through incentives and regulations of the cash crops market in West Africa and in the other territories of the French Empire (Cissé and Jacquemot 1981:28-31), and, more directly, by owning shares of the largest companies marketing colonial produce (*Maisons de Commerce*). The hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that this indirect ruling attitude started to collapse right after independence. Mali's first independent government attempted to keep a degree of control of agricultural production and to make use of the available agricultural infrastructure and developments of colonial origin in order to reinforce the economy of the country; but, as in the rest of Africa, the constraints of economic dependence created by colonialism proved hard to overcome and the government of Modibo Keita collapsed as noted above (page 54).

As part of the new agenda of controlling domestic agricultural production for building the state and an independent economy, in 1960, the government commissioned a demographical survey of the Upper Niger Valley (Leynaud 1962; Cissé and Leynaud 1978) addressing the issues of mobilization of labour and agricultural production in general, with the aim of figuring out how a selected number of village-level 'traditional' institutions (of the kind analysed in Chapters Three and Five of this thesis) could be turned into elements of a socialist mode of production. In Bancoumana, Keita's government also nationalized 150 newly developed hectares north of the main road (see Figure 1). Collective work on the land expropriated by the government is still remembered. Farming was organized through cooperatives established on a village level (*Groupements Rurales de Secours Mutuel et de Production*) and integrated in the ruling party structure (the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*, RDA). Produce was stocked in storage buildings on the market square. In Bancoumana, the first consequence of Modibo Keita's violent overthrow in 1968 was the *de facto* restoration of farmers' rights on the state-owned part of the rice plain, which in fact subsequent governments could never claim back.

In 1972 a para-statal agency for rural development was launched by Moussa Traore's government with the support of USAID. It was part of the new regime's politics of agricultural development centred on the number of *Operations de Développement Rurale* (ODR): the semi-autonomous, para-statal and foreign-financed agricultural development structures introduced above.²² The main characteristic of ODR, as seen in the case of the *Operation Haute Vallée* (OHV), was their capacity to receive funds from foreign financial institutions such as the *Fonds Européen de Développement* (FED) and the USAID. In 1970-73, 86.7 percent of Mali's budget for agriculture was funded by foreign donors and mainly channelled to the ODRs (Cissé and Jacquemot 1981:34). Another aspect of ODRs was that they were conceived of as enabling the development of cash crops for export, buying yield surplus from farmers and generating revenue for the state and ODRs.

ODRs were initially concentrated on the development of single crops (tobacco at the OHV), but then started to promote 'integrated development,' i.e. development based on agriculture, both for local consumption and for cash, but in the context of a wide variety of interventions such as constructing and maintaining roads, increasing agronomic literacy, running health programs and the like (Cissé and Jacquemot 1981:111). According to Simpson, 'in 1978, the USAID assumed financing for development activities in the OHV, and over the next 20 years would invest nearly \$US50,000,000 in helping to expand the portfolio of services offered to rural households within the OHV zone' (Simpson 1999:66; see also note 18).

Developing reproductive land: the village plotting project

The revolt surrounding plans for developing Bancoumana's rice plain has not been the only one in the recent history of the village. In the early 2000s, another rebellion took place, this time against the project of 'squaring' the village and plotting habitable

²² The ODR were established by Ordonnance 24 mars 1974. Most important ODR includes: the *Office du Niger* (transformed in ODR after its establishment in colonial times), the *Office des produits agricoles du Mali* (OPAM), la *Compagnie Malienne des Textiles* (CMDT) and the *Office de la Haute Vallée du Niger* (OHVN). By the 1980s, about 30 ODRs were in place. See Cissé and Jacquemot (1981:36, 111). On ODRs, with specific reference to OHVN, see also Koenig et al. (1998:90-98) and Simpson (1999:65-79, 129-31).

spaces. This happened during the first term of office of the newly established municipality (1999-2004) and coincided with a broader shift in the agenda of the Malian state in ‘developing’ its territory. If, in the post-independence political order, land development was used by the state as a means to gain control of the domestic agricultural production, and hence targeted farming land such as Bancoumana’s rice plain, in the more contemporary ‘neo-colonial’ setting attributing to African countries the role of suppliers of migrant workforce, land development started to be directed against *inhabitable* land, as a means for the state to control the conditions of the reproduction of a growing migrant population.

As I was told, in the early 2000s, one faction of the village – which I later identified as headed by the people of Soridiana, one of the three lineages in Bancoumana – rose up violently against this particular development of village land, destroying documents, plans and drawings, and chasing away the topographers and the technicians, who by that time had already spent three months working in the locality. In contrast to the uprising over the rice plain, this time no one was imprisoned, although one part of the population, mobilized by the Soridiana lineage, violently confronted two other lineages, the Kolonwulena and Farana and the municipal staff.

As the main institution around which the land-plotting procedure was centred, the municipality was supported by one faction of the village (Kolonwulena and Farana) against the other (Soridiana): while Mayor Adama Camara could end his mandate – indeed he would be elected in this office for a second time in 2009 – the secretary general of the municipality had to leave the village shortly after the disorders, feeling unsafe in Bancoumana. In 2004, after the election of Mayor Issa Traore – who was in office during my fieldwork – a sharp disagreement between the same two camps persisted, although in inverted form, Soridiana supporting the municipality (and the new Mayor Traore) and the two other lineages opposing it.

The rest of this chapter will recount the unsuccessful attempt to plot inhabitable land in Bancoumana; first by introducing the plotting procedure and its legal-bureaucratic framework, and then by describing what actually happened in the village when plans had to be implemented and land ‘squared’ into plots. The analysis will emphasize the

role played by urban and transnational migrants in financing the operation as well as the attempts by other groups to influence the outcomes of the procedure.

The legal and bureaucratic framework

The plotting of village land – locally referred to as *lotissement* – is a procedure of ‘municipal land subdivision’ envisaged by state law. It is defined as ‘the voluntary creation of a grid plan [*tissu parcellaire*], consisting of dividing a territory into several plots [*parcelles*] for use as habitation, gardens, offices, social and cultural buildings, or industrial or commercial establishments.’²³ The shape of the plots is not specified by the law, but the requirement of comprising urban infrastructure like roads and the sewage system (explained below) is interpreted by the planners as a preference for square plots aggregated into bigger square blocks delimited by intersecting roads.

The plotting procedure as attempted in Bancoumana serves two ends. On the one hand, it is a means of urban transformation and planning, by which a space such as that of a village or a neighbourhood is reshaped into regular series of blocks intersected by roads. This confers what is locally considered an urban look. On the other hand, plotting works as a procedure of collective land entitlement, whereby the land occupied by each compound is registered in the name of individuals in ‘formal’ land titles issued by the state. In fact, Malian law does not recognize property rights in the absence of such a procedure. Any lands not registered in the cadastre (*immatriculées*) are legally owned by the state. This principle, deriving from French law, is known as *principe de domanialité*.

As will be explained in greater detail in Chapter Four, it is possible for an individual holding a land title in ‘traditional law’ to seek a formal entitlement issued by the state (*titre foncier*), but the required judicial and administrative procedure is very costly and, in any case, limited to one person at a time. Plotting constitutes a kind of collective alternative to this individual procedure of entitlement, allowing the state, while

²³ *Décret N° 184 PGRM du 26 juin 1985*, article 1. This law details the procedure foreseen by *loi N° 82-122/ANRM du 4 février 1982* concerning ‘*les principes fondamentaux relatifs aux conditions d’attribution des terres du domaine privé de l’Etat*’; and *loi N° 85-83/ANRM du 22 juin 1985* concerning ‘*l’institution des servitudes administratives en matière d’urbanisme*.’ See Djiré (2007).

recognizing the prerogatives of existing traditional owners, to register large blocks of land (in the land registry) by one single procedure – ‘purging’ traditional law, in Malian legal jargon. Plot holders may later turn to the land registry and more easily obtain a formal entitlement, notably by avoiding the long and very uncertain phase of the contradictory enquiry (*enquête commodo et incommodo*, see Chapter Four).

Because of the ineffective nature of the principle of state ownership of all unregistered land, which is far from representing the reality in most parts of rural Mali, the procedure of plotting works through an equally fictive mechanism, in which the state pretends to transfer land to the municipality which, in turn, proceeds to subdivide it into plots to be allocated to the inhabitants. In practice, however, things proceed in exactly the opposite way. Under the supervision of the municipality, the inhabitants of a locality agree on the sub-division of the land (which is already under their control) into plots. This normally happens by setting up a committee including ‘traditional land owners’ and village authorities like the village council, similar to what we have seen with the allocation of paddies on the rice plain.

From an abstract procedural point of view, it is imagined that all land has owners, albeit in ‘traditional law,’ and that one main task of the committee is to translate their prerogatives into the field of state law – or at least into a language of individual rights compatible with subsequent recognition by state law. Such an assumption fails to understand the way headmen in Bancoumana control, but do not ‘own,’ large amounts of land: by virtue of their position in lineage structures, in the capacity of administrators more than owners (Gluckman 1965:75ff). It also fails to understand the way land is accessed and distributed to both groups and individuals mainly by recurring to an idiom of dependency, hence by articulating property relations around inclusion rather than around exclusion as in ‘modern’ western law, where property is defined as the right to exclude others (*ius excludendi alios*; Okoth-Ogendo 1989:10). It should not be surprising, then, that committees of the kind put in place by plotting procedures end up functioning more as sites of ‘invention’ than of recognition, of individual prerogatives on the land; and that they end up allocating and redistributing the land according to local power relations involving lineage structures, notabilities and other stake holders.

With the help of topographers, the land is measured and plans are drawn for each plot and for the whole territory sub-divided in this way. The municipality then submits a formal request to the Ministry of Territorial Administration (*Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale*), which, after further bureaucratic processes involving the Ministry of Urbanization, approves the plan by issuing a certificate. In this way, the legal fiction of the land's transference from the state to the individual plot owners is made real. For localities of the size of Bancoumana (above 5,000 inhabitants), the plan must also include the presence of urban infrastructure such as roads, electricity, tap water and a sewage system, without which approval will not be granted. Therefore, the outcome of the plotting procedure is not only the issuing of a series of certificates by the Ministry attesting urban status of the settlement (for example, the *certificat d'état de réalisation des travaux de viabilisation*), but also the fact that land will be legally registered and customary law will be considered 'purged' in the sense explained above. The connection necessitated by the law between urbanization and formal registration of entitlements can turn the plotting of populous villages like Bancoumana into a much-contested process.

The initial stages of plotting in practice

Sometime early in the term of the first Bancoumana Mayor Adama Camara (1999-2004), moves were made to launch a procedure of plotting all inhabitable land in Bancoumana. The initiative apparently received general support, also considering that in the years immediately following 1999 – when municipalities were finally established through decentralization-oriented reform – there were high expectations and a certain enthusiasm for the role that these local institutions would play in similar procedures involving state administration. In the wake of the creation of locally elected municipal authorities, there were hopes of transforming the village into an urban space: one supplying a settlement of more than 8,000 residents like Bancoumana with modern infrastructure such as a sewage system, drinkable water and electricity. Because of the connection between urbanization and plotting outlined in the previous section, similar facilities are commonly expected outcomes of plotting procedures and may explain initial popular support. Difficulties arise, however, when it comes to putting the procedure into practice.

Although plotting is an administrative procedure mainly carried out by state agencies – from the local municipality to the Ministry of Territorial Administration – the funding of the preliminary operations in Bancoumana, involving measurement and planning, was interestingly provided by both transnational and urban migrants, native to the village. The strongest supporters of the initiative were the migrants living in Paris and gathered in an association called *Bancoumana Jigui*, literally ‘the treasure’ (or wallet) of Bancoumana.²⁴ In 2002, the 36 members of this association offered Mayor Camara a trip to France to arrange their financial support for the preliminary operations of plotting. According to the president of the association (Chaka Camara) migrants gave Mayor Camara 9,000,000 CFA Francs (£12,330) collected between them, in part as an advance toward the acquisition of 42 plots – each worth 140,000 CFA Francs – and in part as loan towards expenses for starting the administrative procedure of *lotissement*.

Adopting a practice already observed in other plotting projects in rural municipalities in Mali (e.g. Djiré 2007), the Mayor had solved the problem of funding the preliminary phase of a plotting project. He had done so by establishing a system of ‘reservations’ of land plots that, should the procedure succeed, he would have some power to distribute in the future.²⁵ Of course, such a system of reservation is informal – and many of the practices involved are illegal when done by a public official like a Mayor – but this is the way many such procedures work in Mali and it was by no means hidden or contested by my informants, who instead all acknowledged and confirmed such support by private individuals (in this case transnational migrants) for the village plotting.

More funds were expected from – and some must indeed have been provided by – urban migrants, in particular by those settled in Bamako and gathered in the *Association pour le Développement de Bancoumana* (ADB). Among the people in this association figure some well-educated and well-connected cadres in Malian politics and administration,

²⁴ The members of this association are also part of a larger one, gathering migrants from the Mande area to the Paris (*Ile de France*) and numbering more than 400 people. In late April 2008, responding to my request to know more about the association, *Bancoumana Jigui*’s president, Chaka Camara, invited me to interview him in his two-storey house in Bamako (one of the three he built in the capital). The numbers given in the text concerning migrants’ involvement in the plotting procedure were collected on this occasion.

²⁵ Similar unofficial practices put in place by the Mayor will be addressed in Chapter Six with regard to the system of fictitious money orders and anticipated withdrawal of money that the municipality is entitled to by the central administration.

such as a prominent member of the second biggest national party (Modibo Camara, member of the *Union pour la République et la Démocratie*) and a high-ranking official at the Commission for Institutional Development attached to the Prime Ministry (Kalifa Diakité), who also serves as president of the migrants' association.

Perhaps because their connections with the central administration would have played a crucial role in the later stages of the plotting process, the price for the reservation of one housing land plot by urban migrants was lower: it was set by the Mayor – with the agreement of the committee which was introduced later – at 100,000 CFA Francs. Plots should have been located in a different part of the village from those reserved by transnational migrants, albeit in an equally new settlement area to be laid out along the main roads, where housing space would have been further expanded. The municipality secretary general Tounkara (see Chapter Six) set up a waiting list for the reservation of such plots.

Urban migrants did not lend to the Mayor (nor were they requested to do so) an additional sum of money as transnational migrants did: both their position as wealthy and influent people in the village, and their connections with the central state administration in Bamako were valuable assets that could be traded in the system of reservation and advance payments set up by the Mayor. On the one hand, some of these people were key for building consensus in the village in support of the plotting (among them is Modibo Camara, mentioned above). On the other hand, the technicians required for drawing the first tentative plans and the initial measurements were found through urban migrants' connections and, according to the president of the association Diakité, they accepted the exceptionally low offer of 16,000,000 CFA Francs to conduct the topographic study, whereas the bids of competitors ranged from three to four times such amount. By mobilizing their influence and connections, together with some money, urban migrants were able to reserve tens of plots in the system of reservations put in place by the Mayor, in addition to the 42 reserved by transnational migrants.

In 2003, a group of topographers and other technicians spent three months working in Bancoumana: paid, lodged and fed at the expense of the municipality, using migrants' money. Some informants also reported that it was likely that money from the starting endowment granted by the state to the municipality (*dotation de décentralisation*) had

been misappropriated by the Mayor and used for the preparatory phase of plotting together with the money received from the migrants. This seems plausible considering that, by the end of the term of the first Bancoumana Mayor in 2004 (only 5 years later the creation of the municipality), the budget was in a negative balance of 5,000,000 CFA Francs.

The phase following the topographical study should have seen the fulfilment of the project. The plotting of Bancoumana ended at this early stage, as will be explained below. But it was intended that precisely this preliminary phase was crucial for building a consensus at the lowest level, mainly because the following stages would have required such a large amount of money – for example to cover the construction of roads and of the sewage system – that public funds would be necessary (including those of international ‘donor’ agencies).²⁶ Should the plan be submitted and approved by the Ministry, the grip of most of the local actors would at this later stage diminish significantly.

The reason why the leading role of the municipality in the process was accepted by Bancoumana headmen lay in sheer pragmatism. Similar to what we will see in Chapter Six concerning taxation, the administrative nature of the procedure, which involves the state bureaucracy and local state representatives (such as the Sub-Prefect and the Prefect) from very early stages, made such pragmatism necessary. The involvement of migrants in both funding the preliminary phase and conducting the topographic study was a pragmatic necessity, considering the insufficient funds that a village such as Bancoumana would be able to collect for funding a topographic study required for bureaucratic purposes. In the course of the preliminary phase, however, the involvement of actors such as the representatives of the three lineages and village notables designated as ‘land owners in traditional law’ (actors not recognized by state law, for lack of a better translation) has been crucial. As anticipated above (page 67), a committee was set up, representing these figures and confronting municipal officials and representatives of the local state agencies and services (the so-called *services techniques*).

²⁶ For a detailed example in the case of the plotting of Sanankoroba, a village in the peri-urban area of Bamako (approximately 25 km from the Capital), see Djiré (2007).

The committee was presided over by the head of my host compound, Nanamori Camara (see Chapter Three), one of the oldest and most respected members of the Soridiana lineage (at the time, Nanamori was the third man in order of seniority within Soridiana). The most immediate task of the committee was to advise topographers on the mapping of the allotment, notably on the shaping of compounds into blocks. The committee had to decide which compounds would be affected by such operations and how they would have to be compensated. The existing passages and little streets dividing one compound from the other and connecting different areas of the village were to be laid out in a grid plan and the series of new perpendicular streets, partly deriving from the existing paths, were meant to crisscross the three roads intersecting in the village – the main road Bamako-Siguiri (Guinea) and two secondary roads towards Sibi and Niamé (see the map on page 131).

Another main task of the committee was to compensate those whose compounds would be affected by the operation with new land plots in a different part of the village. A resettlement area (*zone de recasement*) was foreseen at the northern edge of the village, along the road towards Sibi. According to all my informants, however, the committee members went beyond that principle of compensation, by establishing that, more generally, each married man residing in Bancoumana had a right (without charge) to one plot of land, 20x25 m in size, regardless of the number of his wives. Although I have not been able to check this information, it is plausible that the ‘married men’ to whom my informants were referring were indeed the *chefs de famille* as defined in Chapter Six, i.e. those married men paying the head tax for their dependents (these are on average twice as numerous as Bancoumana’s compounds, see page 191).

Because in the normal settlement pattern several nuclear families share the same compound (see Chapter Three), the committee established that each compound should be measured and the measurement divided according to the number of *chefs de famille*: if it resulted that the compound had less than 500 m² (20x25 m) per *chef de famille*, a proportionate extension of land ought to be allocated in the resettlement area. If a compound was reshaped in laying out the block, then the land would be reallocated to the family in the resettlement area on the same general principle. The secretary general of the municipality and one municipal councillor were in charge of revising data from

the last national census, dating back several years (see Chapter Six), to establish the exact number of compounds (*cours*) and *chefs de famille* (each defining a *ménage* in Malian census nomenclature).

Apart from the resettlement area, two other new village areas were planned. The first was a *cité des ressortissants* (migrants' quarter). The Mayor wanted a special area on the fastest expanding edge of the village – towards east, where the municipality building is also situated – to be reserved for plots that the international migrants financing the entire operation had bought in advance. Within such area, a 'commercial zone' was also envisaged but not further detailed.²⁷ Finally, a series of plots in a third area were to be allocated by the municipality following the waiting list mentioned above, which included many Bamako migrants. As we have seen, the price of 100,000 CFA Francs to be given in advance for each of the land plots in this area would have contributed to financing the entire operation.

Three months after the commencement of the work of the topographers, drawing plans and demarcating the land for measurement as advised by the committee, one part of the committee, including its president Nanamori, withdrew its support for the municipality and the whole project collapsed. A violent confrontation took place among different factions of 'autochthonous' people (see Chapter Four), pitting the Soridiana lineage against the other two. Markers were taken off, plans were destroyed and technicians driven away.

Apart from being told of these actions, I was not able to learn further details. All my informants referred to this incident in terms of an uprising involving the destruction of documents and the clearing of markers from land. The silences my questions met with at different times with different informants clearly suggest that, as in the case of the 'revolt' for the rice plain, this is a taboo subject. Most informants speak freely and from various angles, of what was envisaged by the project of plotting and, even more fluently, of their expectations and their views on the aesthetics of plotting the land. But

²⁷ When asked about this point, the president of the Paris migrants' association expressed a concern that such a plan might fuel envy between villagers and migrants.

any account of what happened when the project collapsed, and why, leads to an abrupt end of the discussion by reference to the popular uprising in the terms reported above.

Silence about what happened – beyond the destruction of documents, markers and the driving away of technicians – may indicate the existence of serious divisions among autochthonous people who are still living today in the same community. Various hypotheses on why the Soridiana lineage suddenly withdrew its support could then be advanced, although most of them could not be discussed with the majority of my informants. Conversations that I progressively collected in the course of fieldwork pointed clearly at either a sudden or strategic change of attitudes of the Soridiana lineage as voiced by its headman ‘El Hadji’ Messere Camara.

According to most people I spoke with, the withdrawal was simply a matter of personal vengeance of Messere against the Mayor Adama Camara for having unexpectedly betrayed his son (Oumar Camara) who was elected in the same party and should have become Mayor, according to an understanding between the two. Right after having been elected councillor, Adama resigned from the party and successfully ran for the office of Mayor as an independent candidate.²⁸

Other informants’ suggestions are less personal and direct, arguing that both Messere and his lineage had granted their support to plotting in return for the Mayor’s promise to endorse Messere’s claim to succeed as village chief, by changing the custom that reserves chieftaincy to the Farana lineage by a system of ‘taking turns’ among the most senior members of the three lineages (see also Chapter Four). Finally, a third version presents Soridiana’s withdrawal as caused by the disagreements of other lineages on all the claims and requests of compensation that Soridiana members advanced in the committee in charge of redistributing plotted land.

What is missing in this picture – and which I will now turn to explore – is how the supporters of the project of squaring Bancoumana’s land into a grid plan, including urban and transnational migrants, viewed such scheme and how they reacted to its collapse.

²⁸ In Malian municipal elections the Mayor is chosen among the councillors and by their vote.

The decentralized funding of the municipality and migrants' agenda

Recourse to migrants' money, either from single individuals or from migrant associations, is a common way to finance many actions of 'development' in Bancoumana – called *projets* in local jargon. The migrant association in Bamako, for example, is regularly asked by the village council to pay the amount of money that the village is in turn asked for by NGOs or 'donor' agencies offering to bring a project to the village. Such consideration is presented by most NGOs as a necessary sign of participation of the local population; it usually consists of ten percent of the total budget, but amounts vary depending on the investment and can be also paid in kind.

In some cases, the village council manages to replace such monetary contribution by manual labour for the construction of a building and by the right to use some land, should the project need a place to be situated. In such instances, age groups (see Chapter Four) can be asked to construct the building or to provide workforce of some other kind (*kari baara*, see page 165). During my fieldwork, both a shea butter factory and a micro-credit bank were started by Malian NGOs operating in Bancoumana through such an arrangement. In other cases, however, the village council or the municipality simply requests migrant associations or individual migrants to provide the sum of money which the village is asked to raise among inhabitants as proof of their participation. This was, for example, the case for a project of water conveyance (started during my fieldwork, but never realized) and of the refurbishment of the health centre, to which I was told urban migrants contributed.

In the context of limited public funds, rural municipalities such as Bancoumana – just like the Malian state on a larger scale – turn to migrants' associations in order to fund many of their schemes or, as is increasingly the case, in order to attract development projects by flagging up the possibility of involving migrants in operations of 'co-development.' In other words, the function of public institutions like the municipality of Bancoumana seems to have shifted towards the role of brokering between desired development projects and migrants' associations supplying capital for said projects. The Mayor's skills are valued accordingly, so that the best rewarded qualities are connectedness and capacity to attract donors, and the village migrants among them. It is

therefore not surprising that both Mayors elected so far in Bancoumana are entrepreneurs with a similar ability to connect the village to the outside.

On the other hand, external ‘donor’ agencies, like the migrants mentioned earlier, have their own agenda and private interests, which clearly emerged in the village plotting affair. A decade after the advent of ‘democracy’ (with the overthrow of President Traore in 1991), elective municipalities were created by the decentralization reform, in 1999, and became progressively involved in land matters. Despite the fact that the central state did not intend to transfer power in this domain to the newly established municipalities (it retained, for example, the principle of *domanialité* mentioned on page 66 above) Bancoumana migrants and many others knew that the biggest opportunity to acquire land had just presented itself. The mix of money, influence on the locality and connections to the central administration of the state, which these people possessed in variable proportions, would clearly impact on the way land could have been acquired and redistributed by a plotting procedure.

Like any other group of people involved in the plotting project, migrants had their own views on what the goals of that process were and how they could profit from it. When sharing with me his views on the plotting affair, Chaka Camara (the President of the Bancoumana migrants to France) first emphasized the infrastructural advantages of the project, but then turned to an interesting discussion of the social consequences – positive in his view – of such a reorganization of the habitable space. Overall, I was struck by the squared aesthetics that Camara like many others seemed to attach to plotting; in his particular case, however, I was more surprised to learn that the square aesthetics was valued because it was thought to create new – in his view, more desirable – models of sociality.

In Camara’s view, a primary aim of a successful plotting procedure would be to enable further infrastructural developments beyond blocks and intersecting roads. He mentioned the examples of public lighting, which would likely accompany electricity supply for private use. He also mentioned the sewage system, which would likely accompany a system of potable water supply. Both – he said – would be possible in the village provided that the territory had been squared into a regular series of blocks divided by intersecting roads, able to be used by vehicular traffic, in an urban style. He

pointed out that opportunities for attracting donors willing to fund ‘developments’ in the village had been already missed because plotting had not been realized. Camara suggested that a squared ‘urban look,’ combined with the remarkable size of the Bancoumana population, would increase the chances of drawing donors’ attention to the necessity and urgency of these and other infrastructural developments.

Having addressed the idea of plotting the village space in order to bring modern facilities and infrastructure (a recurrent belief among my informants), Chaka shifted to his next concern:

It is mostly a question of having a nice house. Otherwise you cannot even bring in a friend. If you come to the village for a weekend you may want to bring a mate and relax, but there is neither a nice room where he can sleep nor a quiet place where you can rest.

His vision of a ‘nice’ and ‘quiet’ house evokes, not simply square aesthetics, but separation from the noisy sociability of most Bancoumana’s compounds (of the kind described in Chapter Three).

Having spent more than three decades in Paris as a car-factory worker, Chaka is now retired. Together with his wife and four children, he divides his time mainly between Paris and Bamako, where he owns three houses, in part used by his siblings, and in part rented out. But he also comes regularly, usually on weekends, to Bancoumana where he was born and raised and where his extended family lives. His family compound is located in Bali, a hamlet a few kilometres east of the village (see Chapter Four).

In Bancoumana, Chaka has a plot on the eastern edge of the village (the most recently constructed), which was entrusted to him more than two decades ago by Soridiana headman El Hadji Messere – in recognition of the offering of the customary ten kola nuts, as with any land seeker. On that land, Chaka has built a long house in concrete, consisting of six rooms in a row, which he leases to the group of doctors working for the malaria project hosted by Bancoumana’s health centre (see page 38). An additional room is kept for Chaka’s usage, when he comes to the village. Chaka spends his nights in the family compound in Bali and the larger part of the day in Bancoumana, commuting in his car between his six-room house and his chatting places on the market square. As with many compounds in Bancoumana, the courtyard is enclosed by a low mud-wall.

In the same conversation, Chaka went on to compare his situation to that of Modibo Camara, the wealthy and successful urban migrant already mentioned as one of the members of the migrants' association in Bamako (page 70). Modibo built a large independent house in concrete, not far from the one rented by Chaka on the eastern edge of the village. Chaka admired both the fact that Modibo was regularly visiting his family in Bancoumana like himself, and the fact that he had built such a beautiful independent house where he was able to spend the night in comfort.

Modibo's house consists of one apartment for his own use – a bedroom, a detached bathroom and a living room equipped with colour TV, very frequently used in his absence by an open group of siblings and friends – and two guest-rooms, where both the driver and the housekeeper (the nearby shop owner Maiga, see also page 37) sleep when Modibo is not present. The house is built on a spacious lot, including a garden farmed by the housekeeper, some young trees and a shaded chatting space under a hut, all enclosed by an unusually high concrete wall with two iron gates, one for the car and the other for pedestrians.

Modibo comes quite regularly to Bancoumana at weekends. He arrives by car with his driver and spends the day between his family compound, in the central part of the village, and his modern house at the edge of the village, where he sleeps at night. He always circulates in his car which can be seen going back and forth several times during the day on the main village road.²⁹ Most evenings, when Modibo returns after visits to his extended family compound, he finds people gathered in front of his house enjoying the food, tea and hospitality that he provides until late every weekend. One or two women are hired to cook rice with some meat (bought the same day at the market), tea is prepared by the gatekeeper Maiga and the driver, recorded music is played loudly in one corner of the courtyard by a group of youths hired by Modibo. Both the performance and the hi-fi system are powered by his petrol-propelled power generator – a luxury in Bancoumana, because of the cost of fuel. All this constitutes a very different kind of sociality from the one experienced in an extended family compound – no matter

²⁹ Spending most part of the day moving around the village, driving around – often in a new, shiny vehicle, car or motorbike – is a habit common among the migrants I met in Bancoumana visiting or temporary returning to the village.

how many wealthy migrants may be part of it. Chaka might have been referring to this kind of sociality when comparing its situation to that – to be aspired to, in his view – of Modibo.

Expectations of other citizens

Lamine Tounkara served as municipality secretary general in Bancoumana from 1999 – when the municipality was instituted – until 2006. He was born in Kenyeroba, the nearby Keita village that is part of Bancoumana municipality, and lives today in nearby Kangaba serving as the district secretary general. In 2006, he had to leave Bancoumana as a consequence of both his bitter relationship with the new Mayor Traore, who was elected in 2004, and the feeling of being unsafe in Bancoumana, after the failure of the land plotting project and the consequent tensions created. In his opinion, the primary goal of plotting was to change the way housing land plots were increasingly marketed in recent times. As he explained to me, he did everything to convince the village elders that plotting was their chance to market the land ‘in good order,’ putting an end to land sales increasingly concluded in ‘secret, anarchic and illegal ways’ at times of financial shortages before yields (*période de soudre*).

According to Tounkara, plotting would have increased the value of land, as a consequence of the fact of becoming accessible to people in Bamako and to transnational migrants; then, the need for cash that was driving people to sell the land for little money, at predictable times (of financial shortage) and often without informing their kin, could have been satisfied more effectively by the more public and secure way of marketing plotted land.

Tounkara himself wanted to set an example by telling the elders that he himself would not have bought any land in Bancoumana until the plotting procedure concluded. He described to me how having served six years in a village without having been offered any land (by acquiring it for money) may sound very odd; it signifies, in his view and the view of his entourage, that a problem has occurred.

At the time of the plotting, he informed the elder headmen of Bancoumana that the ‘only’ reward for his involvement in such a delicate procedure – in which land is

redistributed with the necessary involvement of the municipality – would have been in four adjacent plots should the procedure reach its final stage. He then told me that he had planned, after the end of the project, to sell two plots in order to fund the construction of a building on the other two. Instead, after the failure of the project, Tounkara had been forced to move to Kangaba when he started to feel unsafe in Bancoumana.

However, Tounkara made clear – to the elders at the time of the plotting and to me a few years later – that because everybody knew that he could have easily afforded to buy some land in the village, and that he would hardly be refused, given his position as public official, he meant to refuse *explicitly* the ‘illegal’ way of marketing land. By this attitude, he was aiming to promote the plotting project. Towards the end of the same conversation, however, he told me that, after the failure of the plotting project, he asked my host and village first councillor Makan Camara for some land, but he then had to leave the village to take up service in Kangaba at the district bureau.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this chapter has addressed two sets of developments of Bancoumana’s land, with a particular emphasis on the political and economic context in which they took place. A closer look to the implementation of such plans, including the unexpected consequences of their ‘failure’ in the case of the rice plain, revealed an ambivalent attitude of the village with regard to the ways some components are eventually resisted while others succeed: solidarity towards the exterior – either in receiving or rejecting development initiatives – is paralleled by internal fragmentation. In both cases, however, the inward-facing and the outward-facing side of the village cannot be neatly distinguished: indeed, crucial roles connecting the village to wider instances were played by people such as local project agents, state representatives, urban and transnational migrants.

A major similarity between the two cases consisted in their having caused a great deal of conflict both among different factions in the village and against project staff. Conflict among different village factions was engendered by the prospected reallocation of land

by project agents, as well as by anxieties concerning its alienation to foreign people – a theme that we will see re-emerging in Chapter Four. The revolts that marked the decline of both developments, however, mainly targeted the bureaucracy of the projects, involving the destruction of plans and documents and physical confrontations which resulted in the expulsion of technicians. Both originated from people claiming to have been disadvantaged in prospected land distribution or to have been denied compensation for land allegedly belonging to them.

Revolts also expressed the fear that bureaucrats would be ‘captured’ by distant interests: should the projects succeed, land would have been allocated in unfair and undesirable ways, because such people were part of moral and monetary economies different from the one largely based on subsistence-oriented agriculture. Tensions between different factions of the village were brought to the surface – and, to a certain degree, exacerbated – by both developments; especially in the case of the rice plain, however, antipathy was then redirected against project agents and the bureaucratic apparatus, and solidarity re-established between the initially warring factions. Such dynamics illustrates a ‘segmentary’ logic, by which tensions among village factions are constructed as an expression of complementary opposition, with the result of redirecting disagreement against a strategically defined group of ‘outsiders,’ while projecting solidarity among a community of ‘insiders,’ imagined along similar lines (see also Chapter Four).

A major difference, I argue in turn, has been represented by a shift in the specific domain that the state (among other agencies) attempted to control through the government of land. The developments described in this chapter targeted different types of land: the first type being reserved for agricultural production, the second for habitation, hence related to the reproductive domain. In the two decades separating the relative events, the agenda of the Malian state shifted accordingly from an emphasis on controlling domestic production (agriculture) to the control of an increasingly mobile population (migration). The latter includes efforts by the state and other ‘developers’ to channel migrants’ money towards the purchase of land and, more generally, to frame migrant people as ‘co-developers’ of their places of origin. Such a shift in the agenda of the state in governing land reflects the new functions that Mali acquired in a wider

political economy since the 1990s: the way the state relates to the ‘outside’ (i.e. its role in larger, more globalized economies) shifted from the supply of agricultural produce to that of migrant labour.

So far, in rural Mali, the state has mostly had an indirect control of land. Both housing and agricultural land have never been directly taxed and this is still the case today (for all lands not registered in the cadastre). As we will see in greater detail in Chapter Six, taxes are paid per capita and on a variety of movable objects of property like ploughs, tractors, oxen, cows, donkeys, carts, bicycles, motorbikes, rifles and the like, but not on land. Moreover, with the establishment of municipalities in the late 1990s (decentralization), the state has also carefully avoided drawing official borders between the newly established municipalities. In fact, such an act would have resulted in endless disputes among villages and other polities, ultimately contesting the authority of the state over the land. If the difficulties in taxing land are related to the resistance against bureaucratic control, this does not imply that attempts to control land were not pursued by other means: the ‘development’ of agriculture and that of habitation.

Chapter Three

The Messerejanna compound

Introduction

Descent is an important organisational principle of domestic life in Bancoumana. As in other parts of the world (Laslett and Wall 1972; Launay 1978; Hart 1982, 1985), and along with other aspects related to kinship and genealogy (lifecycle, seniority, gender and the like), the fact of integrating one or another group of descendants has important consequences on one's position within the household, entailing different sets of constraints and opportunities in life. This chapter explores the domestic setting of the Messerejanna compound, the living quarters of my hosts in Bancoumana, with a focus on the way its inhabitants group for various purposes. I analyse the ways descent is employed as a device for mobilising the household workforce, organizing everyday activities and building cooperative relations. Moreover, the analysis identifies a tension – and a room for strategic manoeuvre – between maternal and paternal groups of patrilineal descendants.

Crucial insights on grouping dynamics are firstly presented through the analysis of the main spaces and activities in the courtyard, focusing on the use and disposition of buildings, and on daily, ordinary practices related to the preparation and consumption of food. In contrast to what we have seen in the previous chapter, where the village space was imagined, in operations of land development, as organized in square plots, associated with concrete houses and simple family structures (exemplified by the restricted sociality of migrants like Chaka and Modibo), this chapter illustrates the existing and far more complex modes of organizing space and kinship relations in an actual compound in Bancoumana.

In the Messerejanna compound, there are places for sharing food, for greeting each other, for husking cereal, for playing, chatting and working both inside and outside the courtyard. A detailed description of household spaces and the way they are used shows

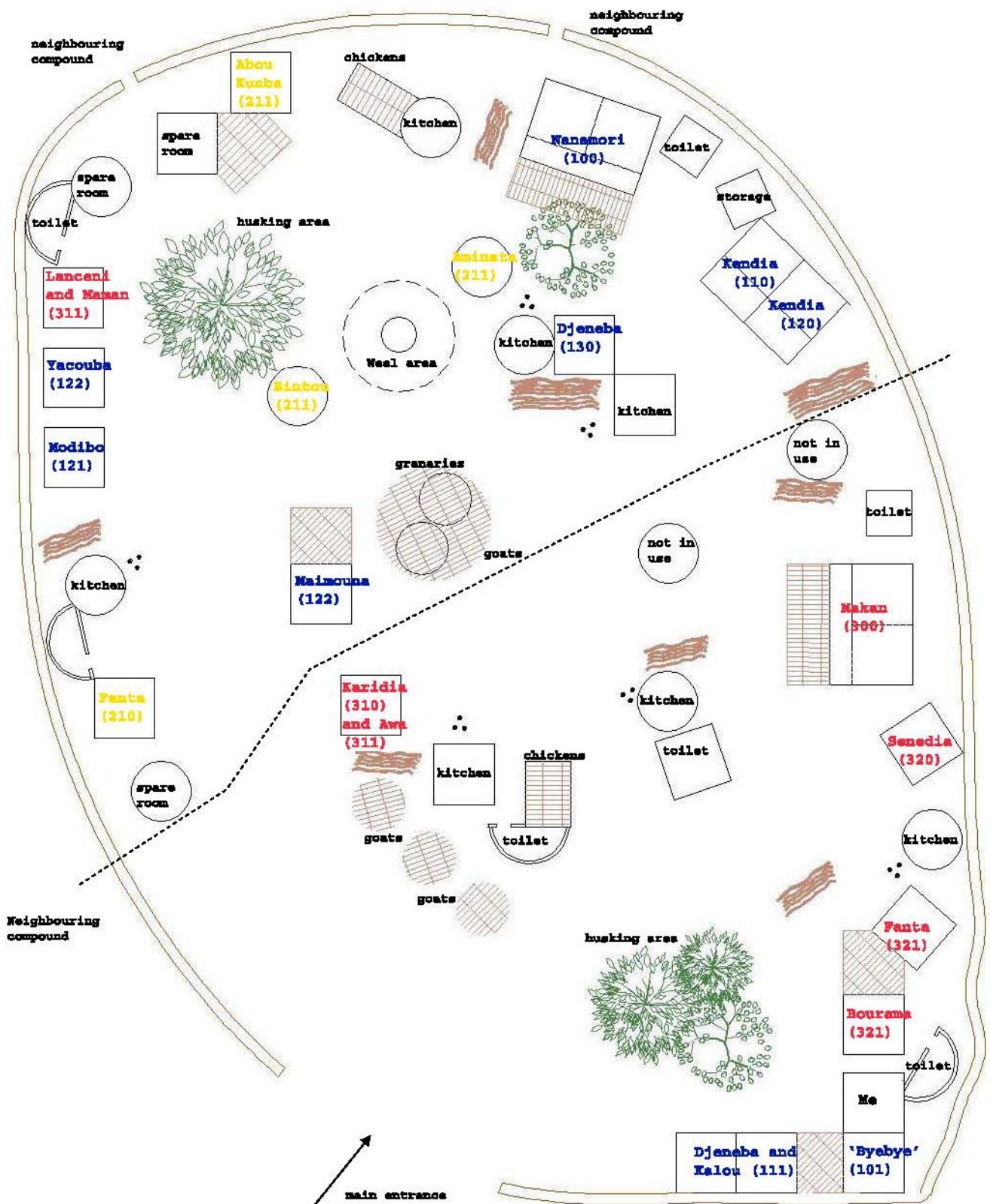
that, beyond serving particular purposes, domestic spaces incorporate and reflect social relations (Moore 1986). A closer look at the organization of productive activities (farming, collecting wood, building houses, and the like) suggests that such ordinary practices are mainly conducted by family sub-groups organised on the principle of descent. Moreover, the often gendered nature of domestic places and their codified use express crucial distinctions among various members of the compound.

By introducing the people of Messerejanna, the second part of the chapter illustrates important inequalities. There are differences between the various branches of the family, as well as between individuals positioned differently, in accessing opportunities. Descent, however, does not univocally determine position, nor the groups established upon such organising principle are fixed and bounded entities (see Cohen and Comaroff 1976). Approximately 50 residents of the compound, spanning over three adult generations, can be grouped into two or three descent groups and a variety of sub-groups, depending on the perspective individuals take on patrilineal descent. While all being part of the same compound, descendants of the same mother constitute a group called *babon* (house of the mother), and those of the same father identify themselves in a *fabon* (house of the father).

When identifying his or her relationship to the previous generations, every compound member simultaneously belongs to multiple groups and sub-groups. When grouping, individuals can draw on two opposite feelings: *badenya* – being the children of the same mother, an expression of kinship; or, alternatively, *fadenya* – evoking a sentiment of rivalry among the children of the different wives of one father (see also page 31 above). The life histories provided in this chapter show that compound members make a *strategic* use of these different ways of grouping and describing themselves when framing particular claims. They enact different strategies and they clearly enjoy different opportunities to work or study, marry sooner or later, migrate or stay, cultivate and farm or do business and the like.

‘The house of Messere’

Every compound in Bancoumana (*lu*, pl. *luw*) is known by the name of a headman, sometimes a living elder man, but more frequently an ancestor of the resident family members. *Messere ka lu*, or Messerejanna as stated by the plaque at the entrance of the courtyard, is ‘the house of Messere the tall.’ It is inhabited by the descendants of the late Messere Camara, more precisely, by his patrilineal descendants (all those resident in Bancoumana) and their affines.



Map 1. The Messerejanna compound

Three groups of patrilineal descendants are identified by different colours. A line separates the two main family subgroups headed by patriarchs Nanamori (100) and Makan (300). The three-digit number below each name indicates the marital and filial status (but for the two patriarchs, husband and wife bear the same number for the sake of simplicity). For example, Yacouba (like his wife Maimouna) bears the number 122, because he is a member of the first patrilineage [Nanamori (100)], child of his second wife [Kendia (120)] and second in order of seniority, following his full brother Modibo (121). The brown symbol indicates piles of firewood as discussed in the text.



Figure 4. Husking area and other spaces in the Messerejanna compound

Located in the oldest part of the village (south), Messerejanna is bordered by three other family compounds (see Map 1), which are said to have been united until Messere and his brothers established separate compounds.³⁰ Similar to other courtyards in this area, Messerejanna is shaped as an irregular oval, measuring 50 to 70 m. The space is enclosed by a series of short mud walls connecting or simply surrounding many buildings of varying sizes and functions. There are houses, kitchens, toilets, storerooms, granaries, and roof shelters for chickens, sheep and goats. Clusters of tall trees located at opposite sides of the courtyard shade the areas where women gather for the husking of corn and cereals (see Figure 4).

As can be observed in Map 1 above, the majority of Messerejanna buildings are houses of either circular or square shape (named and numbered after their occupant).³¹ The disposition of houses in the compound tends to reflect the two ways of grouping addressed in this chapter: by maternal and paternal groups of patrilineal descendants referred to as ‘the house of the mother’ (*babon*) and ‘the house of the father’ (*fabon*). The use and disposition of facilities such as kitchens and toilets further substantiates this observation, underlying the significance that everyday activities and material practices have for the formation of groups. Let us start here from the use and disposition of buildings in the courtyard.

Houses are numerous because they are individual: every married person, man or woman, has one. Recently married couples may share the same habitation for some time: this is the case of Lanceni and Maman [311], in the upper left side of the map. House construction is a strongly emphasized marital duty (especially when children are born), thus it is normal for the spouses to live in two close, but separate buildings as soon as the husband can afford the construction. In a polygamous setting like Bancoumana, this spatial organization leads over time to the formation of clusters of houses within the same courtyard, as can be observed in the disposition of the

³⁰ Although they might have been founded at different times, today in Bancoumana, there are six compounds (including the four mentioned here) claiming to have split from ‘one [common] kitchen’ (*gwa kelen*): the association between kitchens and maternal groups, symbolizing common dwelling, is explained on page 90 below.

³¹ In some cases, these could be called huts (small dwellings made of natural material such as clay, wood and straw), although I prefer to employ generally the term houses, translating the uniform term *bon* in Mandenkakan.

households of the two patriarchs Nanamori (three spouses) and Makan (two spouses), and of their eldest resident son Abou *kunba* (two spouses). The three patrilineages are highlighted in different colours in Map 1. Furthermore, as suggested by the dotted line crossing the middle of the compound in Map 1, the spaces belonging to the two patriarchs and their descendants are quite clearly distinguishable, Nanamori's branch inhabiting the north-west side of the compound, while Makan's the south-east.

There are two exceptions to this pattern in Messerejanna, deserving further explanation. Lanceni [311], who has been already mentioned, is the son of Makan [300], but resides on Nanamori's side of the courtyard. This can be explained by the fact that he was newly married at the time this map refers to: in fact, the spouses were given a spare house (which Lanceni, a skilled mason, refurbished) rather than building one of their own. The second exception is Djeneba and Kalou's house [111], in the south-east corner of the map. Their case is explained by a more complex set of factors, including the fact that Kalou is not a resident member in the compound (he migrated to Spain) and that Djeneba has a tense relationship with her maternal group (indeed, the whole of Nanamori's branch of the family). While the example of Lanceni constitutes an exception to a seemingly well-defined pattern of settlement, the case of Djeneba and Kalou shows the extent to which principles can be adapted to practical considerations (instead of being rigidly applied). Even considering exceptions and flexibility, however, the disposition of houses at the two sides of the compound suggests a visible separation between the two patrilineages of Nanamori and Makan.

Understanding patterns of habitation and use of the courtyard is facilitated by considering that a daughter-in-law normally shares the same kitchen facilities with her husband's mother and her unmarried daughters if still residing in the compound.³² This fact reinforces the spatial and more generally material dimension of maternal groups of uterine brothers, their spouses and children (*babon*), all being attached to the same mother (*ba*). The disposition of kitchens can be observed in Map 1 as well as that of their indispensable fuel – firewood – whose collection is both a marital *and* filial duty.

³² Young girls are often sent to relatives in town, coming back to the village only at the age of marriage, when they will enter their husbands' compounds.

Firewood is stocked outside kitchens for everyday use and shared by groups of women attached to one mother as described above.³³ The collection of this fuel is indispensable for cooking everyday (and warming houses at cold times). Wood is cut in relatively distant areas of the bush and transported by donkey cart to the compound, where it is stacked and seasoned, drying after exposure to the weather. These activities are performed by every working man in the compound independently: each son and/or husband is expected to provide the kitchen shared by his mother and wife with firewood. In order to assure the necessary provision of dry wood, this fuel is collected several times a year and more intensely around the beginning of the wet season, when little time will be left for individual, non-agricultural work such as this.

Finally, the connection between maternal grouping and the organization of everyday working activities around kitchens in the compound corresponds to the denomination of maternal groups: apart from *babon* ('the house of the mother'), a group of uterine brothers is also called *gwa*, meaning kitchen, fireplace. Other chapters in the thesis will illustrate how this term also designates one level of the 'lineage structure' of Bancoumana (see in particular Chapter Six) as well as the political institution of the group of elders called *gwa-tiguiw* (the suffix *-tiguiw* meaning headmen).

As they do kitchens, house clusters also share toilet facilities. These are roofless spaces, usually built on the edge of the enclosure wall, allowing bath water draining outside the toilet area. Toilet walls, however, are purposefully built as high as an average person's shoulders, not concealing the entire figure of a standing adult, so that it is difficult to escape the nearly constant visibility of communal life in the compound. Just as by the presence of personal firewood stocks, the privileged status of the two patriarchs – Nanamori and Makan – is signalled by the fact that both have 'modern' cement toilets (squared), with high walls hiding the entire body.³⁴

³³ It can be observed in Map 1 that the two patriarchs – Nanamori and Makan – both have a provision of firewood next to their houses. This is used for warming their dwellings at cold times, especially at night and in the early morning, and for preparing hot drinks such as herbal infusions and soluble coffee.

³⁴ Ironically, the construction of the toilets of the two patriarchs of Messerejanna was funded by *Plan International*, an NGO self-portrayed in its website as a 'children's development organization.'

Daughters-in-law take turns sweeping the toilet grounds and heating and bringing bathwater to all the toilet users two or more times a day. Women also sweep the interior and the exterior of houses and the shaded spaces several times a day.



Figure 5. Compound work
Clockwise: sweeping the ground, preparing shea butter and beating millet.

House uses and interiors

The size and internal layout of houses differ among compound members and typically vary according to one's gender and age. Among the over twenty houses in Messerejanna, only those of the two patriarchs – Nanamori and Makan – consist of three rooms, completed by a large shaded space in the front (a cover of stems and straw suspended over a structure of branches). Both the exterior and the interior of Nanamori's and Makan's houses look very similar. Apart from being of comparable size (three to four times a single room), they consist of a solid construction of *banco* (mud-bricks plastered with adobe),³⁵ roofed with corrugated iron sheets. These houses are also clearly identifiable by the iron entrance door (all others have wooden doors), invariably locked when the occupants absent themselves from the compound, usually heading to the mosque for the evening prayer or to chatting places bordering the market square.

The internal space of the two elder men's houses in Messerejanna is organized in three rooms. One is a private room, furnished by a wooden bed with a straw mattress topped by a mosquito net. Clothes, personal belongings and money (in cash) are kept in the compartments of old furniture leaning against the wall, or in trunks and other containers leaning on the floor. Apart from its occupant, the room is entered by no other person than one of his wives sweeping the ground. As with the adjacent storage room, the private room is extremely dark: daylight enters from an iron shutter serving as window, too tiny to prevent a man (and high enough to prevent a child) from getting through.

The second room is slightly smaller and serves for storing food provisions and for keeping agricultural work tools: hoes, machetes, pickaxes, shovels, etc. Other objects are kept in the room, so that both their use and their user is necessarily acknowledged by the elder: these are valuable personal possessions of the people of his patrilineage, such as bicycles and motorbikes, and important items for shared use, such as a motor-pump used to irrigate onion fields (see Chapter Two). While cereals for preparation of everyday meals are kept in separate granaries, with the keys kept solely by the

³⁵ *Banco* is the term coined by the French (possibly from some local language), the actual term in Mandenkakan is *bogo*.

compound headman, the storage room of both elder men in Messerejanna contains extra stock, to which the respective wives and daughters-in-law have access. Salt and sugar are bought at the market and stocked in the storage room, separately for each of the two patriarchs.

The third room of the male elders' houses in Messerejanna is the entrance room or vestibule. This more lighted and ventilated space can be inhabited during the day. Every morning, all adult residents of the compound (including elder women) are expected to enter this space to greet the elders and receiving their blessings for the day. Later in the day, the vestibules are used for prayer or simply as sitting places, where guests are received and conversations take place. While all other indoor spaces of the houses in the courtyard are rather intimate spaces, elders' vestibules are suitable places for conversation, also being more discreet than the shaded spaces in the courtyard. They are also unique to the elders: the houses of younger, working-age people have no such spaces.

In contrast to elder people, the working men and women of the compound do not inhabit their houses during the day, save occasionally for daily prayers or in case of illness. Apart from the fact that this category of people is normally busy with working activities inside or outside the courtyard, houses with no vestibule are inappropriate places for conversation and even for taking a rest during the day. People do that under the shade of a tree or in places specially conceived like the shaded spaces in front of men's houses. As previously noted, shaded spaces are simple structures of thick branches stuck in the ground, topped by thinner branches and covered with stems and straw, often occupying a space as large as the house in front of which they are built (see Map 1). This area may also be enclosed by screens of stems or of straw and used for sleeping outside during the hottest part of the dry season. During the day, sheds constitute a place more open and social than the house, but similarly personal. Sitting in a shaded space such as this is considered almost a required condition for leisure and conversation in the village space (*dugu kono*), which in this way is clearly distinguished from the fields and bush.

In the same way as for the two patriarchs, the houses of three elder women in Messerejanna are equipped with an entrance room, but they have no storage rooms. The

food provisions which these women often have in comparable quantity to men (sacks of cereals, peanuts and shea nuts) are stored in their sleeping room together with all other belongings. The entrance room does not serve as a sitting and chatting space – as in elder men’s houses; instead, it is used as a sleeping room for the grandchildren. As can be seen in Map 1, the houses of the two oldest wives of compound headman Nanamori are equipped with vestibules [Kendia (110) and Kendia (120)], while a third woman on the left of the map [Fanta (210)] has two buildings, one of which serves as a sleeping room at the grandchildren’s disposal.

Elder women’s vestibules as well as the front of their houses are very social spaces, especially for women taking a rest after their turn in the kitchen and for children getting together with their siblings. There, or around the external kitchen space, children eat together with their grandmother and mothers when they are in the courtyard (as they may have lunch in the fields when farming). Children sleep together in the grandmother’s house, unless they are too young or too old: under the age of 4-5, they sleep in their same sex parent’s house; from 10-12, they may share a room with siblings of the same sex. It is within such groups of women and children where the relations of uterine brotherhood (*badenya*) sustaining maternal groups are cultivated. This feeling of bonding, accompanied by a duty of cooperation, is then countered by the other aspects of brotherhood, *fadenya*, entailing a sense of competition among half-brothers.

Food preparation and commensality

At two different sides of the Messerejanna compound there are small areas of shading trees, where women beat cereals (one is pictured in Figure 4 above). The sound of mortars resonates at almost any time in the courtyard. Mortars and pestles of different sizes are amassed in the husking area. During the day, this space is always populated – if not by women, then by children playing. This area is also often loud, because of women singing, chatting and speaking without restraint: while beating cereals, women often indirectly address their husbands or the compound’s men in general, who can hear women’s discussions but are not allowed to reply in such circumstances.

Mortars reflect different times and eras of the compound's life, because every new bride at the time of marriage brings in one new set of mortar and pestle with her bridal trousseau. These tools are important because many ingredients of Mande cuisine need to be crushed before use (some dishes may also have the same ingredients only crushed in different ways): leaves to make sauces, fish to be prepared in fish-balls, shea nuts for making butter etc. In such work, a married woman is helped to a great extent by her sisters-in-law (husband's unmarried younger sisters) and also – especially for a period after marriage – by her own younger sisters or peers, who can come in their older sister's compound to offer help to the new wife in both domestic and agricultural activities.

Cooking is a strictly female domain. The preparation of common meals requires all married women of working age (five in the compound) to perform kitchen duties two days in a row. Beside communal meals, however, each maternal group also provides some extra food, especially at night. Thus, many women, including those who are not in charge of common meals anymore, spend some time in the kitchen every day preparing extra food for their children and mothers-in-law. Hence, if the husking areas are very social places during the day, the area around external kitchens and mothers' houses are so at night.

The woman in charge of the communal kitchen wakes up before sunrise to prepare the millet soup (*moni*) that is consumed for breakfast. It is then divided into several bowls. One is brought to the group of working men (those who will set off for the fields), gathered in one group comprising the two patrilineages. The meal is consumed rather quickly and silently, since it is normally impolite to have a discussion while eating. Eating will not commence until the most senior person in the group has begun, or has invited others to do so: '*ai bissimila.*' Younger brothers serve themselves after their older siblings (and sons after fathers) and do not eat faster than the rhythm of their elders, in a sign of respect; moreover, they will eat only moderately and stand up before the others, thanking God – '*a barika,*' to which everybody replies: '*a barika ye Allah ye,*' i.e. 'thanks be to God.' Water is drunk afterwards from one or more common bowls.

In Messerejanna, the working men's breakfast is served every morning in front of Makan's house (see Map 1). During the farming season, it is in this place and directly after the consumption of the meal that the working program of the day is decided. Under discussion may be what to do in which field – for example, whether some will go planting in one field and others will plough another or whether a field needs to be weeded by all working together. Such decisions may depend on the weather and on the number of people available for work on a particular day.

Other eating groups in the morning are those gathering in front of the elder women's houses or inside their vestibule during the coldest season. Grandmothers provide their grandchildren and daughters-in-law with boiled rice soup (*seri*), fried millet-balls and some leftovers warmed from the night before. Mothers-in-law cook or heat these things inside their kitchens (the early morning is considered too cold for the use of external kitchens) while feeding the youngest children.

Because commensality is such a central element of life in a compound, the eldest only can normally eat alone or perhaps with the only company of a beloved grandchild: a distinguishing sign of seniority. As for the opportunity to have discreet conversations in the vestibule, the possibility to eat separately starkly contrasts with the near constant companionship among younger members of the compound.

When, during the farming season, men spend their day on the fields (from about 7:30 am to 3 pm), the lunch is brought there. Those women who are not themselves farming bring the bowls, carried on the head in the late mornings. Such tasks may also be left to some unmarried daughters of the compound, when they are not at school. Although they help their mothers and sisters-in-law, in fact, unmarried daughters do not have a turn in the kitchen and, most importantly, they do not have to go farming or to contribute to other productive activities in the interest of husbands or mothers-in-law. Unlike the unmarried daughters of the compound, married women go to farm gardens and peanut fields every day, unless engaged in other domestic activities, such as sweeping and washing clothes, duties which every woman performs in the courtyard for her nuclear family.

‘The people of Messere’

Messerejanna – ‘the people of Messere the tall’ – comprises more than 50 compound residents, spanning over three generations. Compound headman Nanamori Camara is the second of nine sons born to the late Messere and his three wives (genealogies will be provided on pages 102 and 106 below). He was 84 years old at the time of my fieldwork. Since the death of his father in 1959, Nanamori has been the head of the family. Assuming patriarchal responsibilities at a rather young age – 33 years old – allowed Nanamori the privilege of delegating agricultural work and duties to his younger brothers, while himself starting a small business in the market square. This has created some resentment among his classificatory sons, who constitute the bulk of the workforce in the compound and once explained his remarkable thinness to me as the evident sign that he never had to work like his younger brothers.

Today, of the nine sons, only Nanamori and his younger brother Makan are still living in Messere’s compound in Bancoumana. Two others had settled there but have since died. The rest of the siblings moved from Bancoumana to Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire during the 1950s and 1960s, like many other farmers from the West African savannah who migrated in that period to integrate into the workforces of large plantations of peanuts in Senegal, and of coffee and cocoa in Côte d’Ivoire. Their descendants still reside in those countries, although only one of the seven brothers of Nanamori and Makan is still alive: Seydou, settled in Côte d’Ivoire in the compound of his late older brother Mamourou (see Figure 7 and below). Shortly after my departure from the field-site, the two sides of the family settled in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire celebrated a somewhat infrequent marriage between classificatory siblings. Getting married on his first visit since his departure for Europe eight years before, one of Nanamori’s sons married one of Mamourou’s daughters, who moved to the Bancoumana compound from Côte d’Ivoire.

Messerejanna is relatively populous compound by Bancoumana standards. The average population density in the village is in fact 19 individuals per compound.³⁶ This figure rises to 28 individuals per compound, considering only the families of reputed ‘first-

³⁶ Source: my census data, showing 8,387 residents in 446 compounds.

settler' descent (according to a distinction explained in Chapter Four). However, Messerejanna is still considerably more populous than that: it is one of the fewer than 30 families in Bancoumana which have more than 50 resident members (among these, six have more than 100 members). Therefore, the fact that Messerejanna is an 'autochthonous' family explains only in part its remarkable size; further elements addressed later in the thesis will suggest that the people of Messere are, perhaps not rich, but a relatively powerful and prestigious group.

As typified in West African anthropological literature by the idea of 'wealth-in-people' (Miers and Kopytoff 1977, Guyer 1995), a headman who manages to keep united a large extended family within his compound is seen as a very powerful and prominent person, controlling a large group of people who, as it is said in Mande, 'all work for him.' Messerejanna headman Nanamori clearly is an influential person when judged by this standard. At the time of my fieldwork, Nanamori was the headman of *Manfindensela*, a wider lineage group (*gwa*) comprising six compounds: a rather unsurprising position, considering his age and 'autochthonous' status. His power and political standing, however, seem to have greatly increased during the years following my departure from the field-site, when Nanamori first succeeded as the headman of *Soridiana*, one of the three lineages comprising Bancoumana and then, in June 2011, became village chief.

Family sub-groups: different strategies and opportunities

Eight elder people, two men and six women, make up the oldest generation of Messerejanna's residents (see pages 102 and 106 for their genealogy). They are Nanamori and his three wives, his younger half-brother Makan and his two wives, and the wife of a third and deceased younger brother of Nanamori – Massama – called Fanta. Similar to what was observed in the analysis of residential and associational patterns, sub-groups of household members can organize themselves in two or three descent groups, depending on the perspective one takes on patrilineal descent.

In fact, if one looks at the sons of Messere – the present generation of classificatory fathers in the compound – three groups are likely to emerge: namely, the descendants of

Nanamori, Makan and the late Massama. Such a view of patrilineal descent identifies a group called ‘the house of the father’ (*fabon*). However, both Nanamori and Massama were born from the same mother (first wife of the late Messere), while Makan was born from the second wife. Hence, when people identify on the basis of these maternal groups of patrilineal descent (*babon*, ‘the house of the mother’), two groups rather than three are likely to emerge: one headed by Nanamori, including Massama’s descendants, and the other by Makan. Compound members do in fact make a strategic use of these different ways of grouping and describing themselves when framing particular claims. This also happens at all lineage levels, notably in defining family headmen and other authorities in lineage politics, where strategic grouping of same-mother descendants as opposed to same-father descendants matters in similar ways.

The descendants of Nanamori and Makan have played different roles in family life and economy and clearly have had different opportunities. As I will now turn to show, considering those who farm the land as opposed to family members who have been given permission to migrate demonstrates a certain imbalance: for example, while three out of four of Makan’s sons farm, only one out of five of Nanamori’s sons does. Let me illustrate this point in some more detail.



Figure 6. Nanamori Camara (crossing women working in the courtyard)

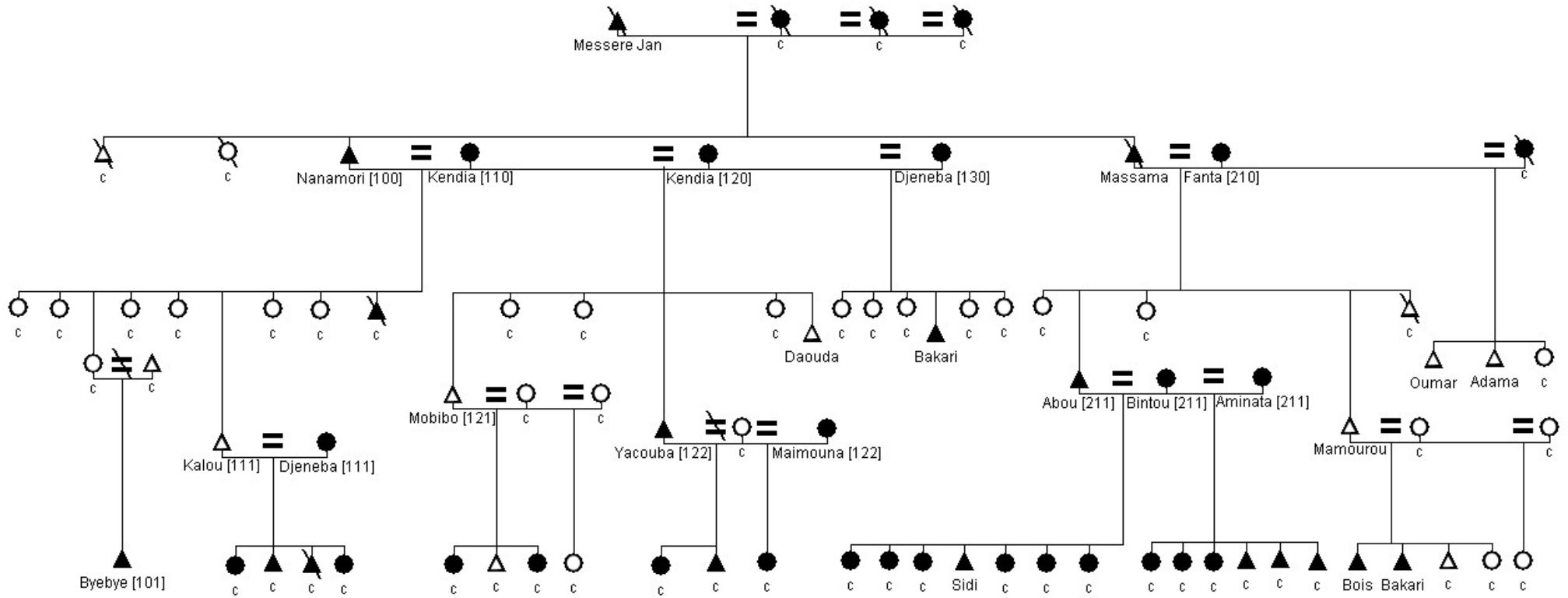


Figure 7. Genealogy of Nanamori's branch of the Messerejanna family.

People residing in the compound (at least during the farming season) are indicated in black; non-residents (because of marriage or migration) in white. Barred symbols indicate deceased people. The numbers in squared brackets allow locating people in Map 1 above. The other branches of the family, descending from the two other wives of Messere Jan, are shown in Figure 9 below. For the sake of simplicity, only the people mentioned in the text are named in the genealogy.

Nanamori's branch

The two and only transnational migrants in the family, Kalou and Daouda, are both sons of Nanamori. Their oldest brother, Modibo [121], spent years in Libya, but was eventually pressured by his father to assume the responsible role of the firstborn son, to return instead of continuing on to Europe. Moreover, the only university student, Bakari, is the youngest and most beloved son of Nanamori; recently, he could afford to buy a motorbike by living in his sisters' house in Bamako through saving for his expenses as a student.³⁷ Hence only one of Nanamori's sons, Yacouba [122], is a permanent resident and farmer in the compound.

While migration is often motivated by one's unfavourable position within the family, it is also sometimes constrained thereby. As clearly typified in the epic oral tradition – from the epics of Soudiata Keita to village foundation stories (see Chapter Four) – it is the younger brother who migrates, while the older brother takes on familial responsibilities (Jansen and Zobel 1996). However, given the hierarchical divisions of roles within the family, important motivators for younger brother to migrate also constitute an objective constraint on older brothers to take the same action. The case of Modibo, the firstborn and future head of Nanamori's lineage, who has been successfully pressured to abandon his project to migrate to Europe, is not only revealing of important tensions between Nanamori's and Makan's descent groups, but it also emphasizes important structural constraints for the compound as a whole.

As a young migrant in Libya, Modibo envisaged the opportunity to turn that experience into a longer and more dangerous project, but he had to return to Mali after having been successfully discouraged by the family in Bancoumana. Individual motivations, here, have intersected with compound and sub-compound group strategies. Moreover, the 'structural' constraints that are usually balanced against individual motivations seem to have been of different and contrasting order in the case of Modibo: while he was pushed by conventional structural-economic forces to migrate, he was also expected to take on the role and responsibilities of future family head.

³⁷ University students normally receive a monthly stipend from the government.

Modibo is now settled in Bamako where he has to run separate businesses in order to survive: trading bananas in the early morning and running a small shop in the central market until late in the day. Although he is not well-off at all, the fact of working with money engenders some envy in his younger brothers farming in Bancoumana. Like many urban migrants, Modibo finds it especially troubling keeping contact with the world of the village, particularly because of gossip or misconceptions about the town and the un-matchable expectations (especially of financial support) to which urban migrants are held. For this reasons, Modibo visits Bancoumana mainly for festivities, rarely paying more than occasional visits. Two of his daughters live in the compound, where they are raised by their grandmother while going to school in Bancoumana.

During our conversations, Modibo expressed his frustration at not being allowed to migrate; unless at a high social price, as his father would never give his consent. He also spoke resentfully of Kalou and Daouda, his younger brothers, who have migrated to Spain and Italy respectively, but who are providing very little support for the family and ‘behaving like children,’ because they are incapable of saving money for durable projects, such as the house in the suburbs of Bamako, which Modibo has been building for many years, having received no support from Kalou (his classificatory brother) and only modest help from Daouda (his uterine brother), who recently bought the door and window frames.

Hence, among the sons of Nanamori, at least three – two from Europe and one from Bamako – are in positions of supporting the family, especially in cases of sudden and important events or particular occasions. In June 2008, for example, at a very intense period of ploughing the fields on the beginning of the farming season (before the heavy rains start), the only adult ox of the family fell ill and had to be killed and the meat sold for a small amount of money. As it was necessary to raise 120,000 CFA Francs (approximately £160) in few days, as well as pay for half a day of tractor ploughing (25,000 CFA Francs, £34), both migrant sons – Kalou and Daouda – sent the necessary money. More pleasant occasions during which migrants’ remittances are expected are religious festivities (a sack of sugar for the Ramadan fast, a goat for the greater Eid or Tabaski) or celebrations such as marriages.



Figure 8. Makan Camara (on his way to the Mosque for the Friday prayer)

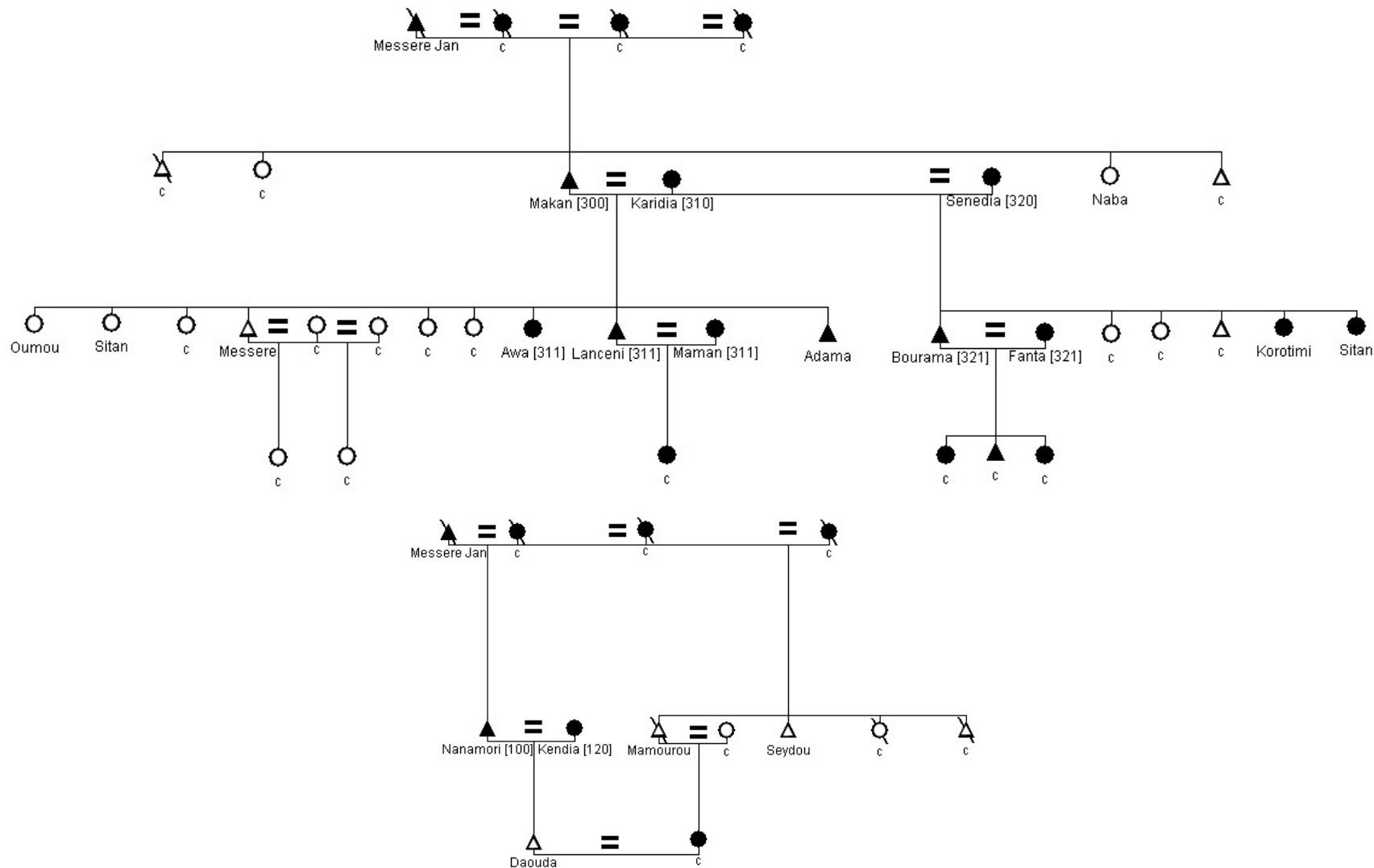


Figure 9. Genealogies of Makan's and Seydou's branches of Messerejana

As in Figure 7 above, black symbols indicate compound residents and the numbers in squared brackets allow locating people in Map 1. White symbols indicate non-resident people (either because of marriage or migration). Barred symbols indicate deceased people. For the sake of simplicity, only the people mentioned in the text are named in the genealogy.

Makan's branch

Makan's sons appear to have fewer opportunities: not only for migration – it is very unlikely that one of their half-brothers would finance any travels – but also in obtaining Nanamori's consent (in form of blessing, *dubabu*) for carrying on particular businesses which may subtract time from the work of the compound. The eldest of Makan's sons, Messere, joined the army and settled in Segou (a town 200 km north-east of Bamako). He benefits from both a salary and the opportunities of formal employment in the army. A few years ago, for example, he went to Liberia as part of the Malian army contingent mobilized against Charles Taylor; with the money saved from this occasion he could afford to buy a motor-pump (for irrigating the onion crop, as described in Chapter Two), a black and white television and a battery for the compound in Bancoumana. More recently, during my fieldwork, he went to Germany for two months as part of an army training in mechanics, a move that could have lasted for several years; however he did not pass the first selection.

Messere provides important support to Makan's branch of Messerejanna. The extent of his actions, however, is limited, both by the fact that he is unlikely to be promoted in the Malian army and by his having married a second wife (he also has two children). Over the years, however, his support to the family in Bancoumana has not been only financial. In fact, he paid for the education of his youngest brother Adama, who joined him and his wife in the military camp in Segou where he was completing his secondary education. Messere's support to his younger brother's education is in stark contrast to the behaviour of his brother Modibo [121]: as we have seen above (page 104), rather than supporting the family by hosting in Bamako his younger brothers, Modibo had in fact sent two of his school-aged daughters to be raised in his home compound in Bancoumana.

Once he graduated, Adama moved to Bamako and finished high school, lodging with other relatives: first with his older sister Oumou, and then with his father's younger sister Naba, whose house was nearer the school (see genealogy in Figure 9). Adama and Bakari – Nanamori's youngest son – are today the only schooled family members and the only fluent French speakers. Despite that, Adama has not missed a single farming

season in Bancoumana and, even at other times of the year, he is an active member of the compound.

Until recently, Lanceni, the brother in between Messere and Adama, was living in Bamako in the house of his older sister Sitan (see genealogy in Figure 9). He was working as a skilled builder for a daily salary of 1,500 CFA Francs (£2): a sum covering little beside his basics living expenses, considering that every day he needed to subtract one third of such salary for the transport and another third for food. During my fieldwork, he returned to Bancoumana to get married and, since then, he had to take on the duty of supporting his mother, residing and farming for the compound. Now that he is married in Bancoumana, Lanceni works as a builder only during the non-farming season, when he leaves for Kayes: a town in western Mali, where the building sector boomed as a consequence of migrants' remittances from France. After four or five consecutive months working in better conditions and for a better salary than in Bamako, he returns to the village for the farming season. Many other villagers of his age either do the same thing as him or during the dry season perform other income-generating activities, like farming onion (see Chapter Two).

With the marriage of Lanceni during my fieldwork, a new maternal group was constituted around the figure of his mother Karidia (see the genealogy in Figure 9). In fact, before his marriage and return into the compound, neither of his brothers (Messere and Adama) was settled in Bancoumana. This situation was slightly unusual, because mothers, who are often in the position to influence the decisions concerning their sons, generally tend to keep at least one married son at home, in order both to control and be supported by dependent kin (son, daughter in law and their children). Karidia tolerated, for a limited period of time, the absence of all her three sons. In fact, she relied on both their financial support and the work of an adult unmarried daughter, Awa (who is Lanceni's twin). Because she was afflicted by deafness during her teen years and did not get married, Awa actually provided her mother with the work of a daughter-in-law, while also being able to support her financially as a successful food-seller in the market place. In comparison to the other women of the compound, Awa enjoys the freedom of not having marital obligations, such as her service in the communal kitchen, and child-rearing obligations.

When Lanceni's marriage took place, his wife Maman [311] entered the compound, allowing a maternal group to be properly constituted around her mother-in-law Karidia. Awa is of course very much part of the group, which, to all purposes, works typically as expected: the married son is responsible for constructing buildings (houses, kitchens, goat and chicken shelters), and cutting and transporting the firewood; his wife, helped by her unmarried sisters-in-law, will have her turn in the communal kitchen and will be responsible for most of the domestic activities (husking, cooking, cleaning, washing, sweeping, child rearing), while allotting the time needed for farming, collecting fruit, doing some commerce at the market. Such activities are, however, often carried on in association with others and not in the exclusive interest of the maternal group. Instead, her mother-in-law will spend most time farming (both gardens and peanuts' fields), providing extra food (cereals and fish, during the dry season) and rearing children.

Makan's lineage is completed by the oldest of his second wife's sons Bourama [321]. He grew up in Bancoumana where he always farmed for the compound. Despite his young age (29 at the time of my fieldwork), and because his only older brother Messere is absent (in Segou), Bourama has seniority. I will try to illustrate below in relation to his older sibling Abou, the most senior member of his generation, the ways in which such position of senior descendant among the compound residents is embodied. In July 2008, Bourama was invited by a development project to spend one month in France and he had to broach the subject in a gingerly and strategic manner with the compound headmen so not to receive a firm refusal by him: although he was accused of 'just wanting to escape the farming season,' he was able to leave with Nanamori's blessing. His participation in a development project (a touristic camp on the river) is also raising some concerns, because of the time it takes away from Bourama's participation to the compound labour.

The branch of the late Massama

Massama – the youngest of the present generation of classificatory fathers – died about ten years ago. His wife Fanta [210] is still alive and resides in the compound, together with a part of their descendants (see genealogy in Figure 7). In similar cases, where the wife outlives the husband, it is a common occurrence for a younger brother to inherit

the wife of the deceased.³⁸ However, the two surviving brothers of the deceased were both older brothers. Therefore, neither Nanamori (the uterine brother) nor Makan (the classificatory brother) could remarry Fanta, taking support of her and ‘including’ her descendants. These facts help to interpret the relative autonomy of this branch of Messerejanna from the two patrilineages of Nanamori and Makan.

As can be noted in Figure 7, Massama left four sons (and three daughters): two from the marriage with Fanta (Abou [211] and Mamourou) and two from a deceased second wife (Oumar and Adama). The last two have lost contact with Messerejanna, having migrated to northern Africa a few years before my fieldwork. Of the two sons of Fanta, Abou resides in the compound, while Mamourou has moved to Bamako. Although he never visited Bancoumana during my fieldwork, two of his sons (Bois and Bakari) are still being raised in the compound, and contribute to the workforce.

In comparison to the rest of the members of his generation, Massama’s first son Abou (called *kunba*, i.e. the older) seems to enjoy relative autonomy from his classificatory fathers Nanamori and Makan. He is well respected and trusted by his brothers and he is allowed a fair amount of independence, particularly concerning agricultural activities, which Abou manages in cooperation with his youngest classificatory father Makan.³⁹ To a certain extent, Abou has taken on his late father’s role: despite the fact that his two classificatory fathers are still living in the compound and that they are one generation above him, neither of them could have inherited Massama’s wife Fanta, so the obligation to care for her was taken by Abou himself, hence figuring as his father’s successor.⁴⁰ From the alternative point of view of maternal patrilineal descent considered above, however, he can be considered part of the group of Nanamori’s descendants, because his father, Massama, was born from the same mother as Nanamori.

³⁸ The levirate allows the widow to stay in the compound close to her children (and supported by both her sons and mothers-in-law) while reaching her seniority in a religiously accepted way. In fact, for a woman to die unmarried is seen as inappropriate by religious customs.

³⁹ Abou’s farming skills and social standing will be further analysed in Chapter Five in relation to his role in age groups associations. See in particular page 182ff.

⁴⁰ As it will be explained in Chapter Six, unlike all other members of his generation, Abou also pays the head-tax for his dependents (including his mother Fanta). This is another sign that his lineage is not entirely dependent on Nanamori’s.

The particular status that Abou seems to enjoy within the compound may be explained from various vantage points. Certainly, part of his autonomy stems from the possibility he has of choosing strategically between being included in the group of Nanamori's descendants, as opposed to Makan's descendants, or figuring as the representative of a third group: identifying, in the first case, in a *babon* group and, in the second, in a *fabon* (see on page 100). Other elements seem to be salient as well. For example, he is the eldest of his generation and so the principle heir after his classificatory father Makan. In addition, he is widely renowned as a successful farmer; he is respected as a husband of two wives and a father of thirteen children; he is a very active member of his age group (see Chapter Five). All these aspects seem to indicate that his particular status can be explained as a combination of both subjective and objective elements contributing to the social construction of his seniority

Abou, who was born in 1964, is the oldest among his classificatory brothers and therefore the headman of the compound's workforce mainly represented by his generation. In relation to his younger brothers, he appears to enjoy a very well respected status of seniority. This is, of course, supported by the genealogical fact of being the oldest brother, but a series of other elements show that his seniority, although necessarily entailing mature age, is constructed in rather more sophisticated ways. Abou's seniority may be amplified by the unusual age gap between him and his closest brothers residing in the compound: Yacouba (son of Nanamori, see genealogy in Figure 7) immediately follows Abou in order of seniority, but was born nine years after, in 1973; the following compound resident in order of seniority – Bourama – was born in 1980, thus he has 16 years of difference.

Other elements apart from age signals Abou's senior status. For example he is the first in his generation to marry two wives and is the father of a considerable number of children (almost one half of all resident children). He has also been a successful migrant, working for several years in Libya during the 1980s, and coming back to Bancoumana, where – like others having passed the rite of passage of migration – he is credited with knowledge of life and experience.

Compound workforce

The compound workforce is mainly provided by the generation below that of the three classificatory fathers – Nanamori, Makan and the late Massama. Some of their sons are adult men, married, residing in and working for the compound with their nuclear families (four out of 14: Abou, Yacouba, Bourama and Lanceni). Some have their spouses and children in the compound while being on migration (Kalou); some others are younger and unmarried (Bakari and Adama). The rest of the sons of the three patriarchs, however, is not actually part of the compound workforce, since they are settled in Bamako (two people) or elsewhere (five people), some married and some others not. Most married sons (five out of eight) have their wives and children in the compound. They all reside and work there, except for Kalou who is on migration in Spain. Two other sons (Bakari and Adama), aged about 20, are unmarried students, living for most of the time in Bamako, but returning to Bancoumana for the farming season. A third unmarried young man – Bourama, nicknamed ‘Byebye’ – lives in and works for the compound, although his case is peculiar because he is related to the family from the maternal side.

Although Byebye [101] is one generation below the classificatory sons of the compound, to some extent he is considered to be one of them. In reality, he is the son of a daughter of Nanamori, who divorced from Byebye’s father and then married a second time. A few years ago, when he reached the age of a young boy, he decided to move into his mother’s native compound. Here, he is more likely to be considered one of the sons, instead of a grandchild. It is not only because of his age (18 years old), but also because his genealogical position is somehow weaker than that of his mother’s brothers, that Byebye is given a lot of work, farming like an adult and yet told what to do like a boy. His situation is also biased by the fact that – as I gradually came to understand – it is very unlikely that his descendants would be allowed to settle within his mother brothers’ compound, where he decided to settle for the time being: should, in the future, one of his sons take the office of the headmen of the compound, rule would pass

through the mother's line.⁴¹ The expected course of things will be, instead, that when Byebye gets married, he will be given a piece of land (either by the paternal or maternal side of the family), where he can settle in a new domestic space.

In the same workforce-generation, there are six wives. Only the oldest brother, Abou, has two wives, while his younger brothers have one each. Two other women, unmarried daughters of Makan, could also be counted in this generation. One is Awa, who is Lanceni's twin and, as mentioned before, has not yet found a husband. The other is Korotimi, aged about 15, who is also affected by a health problem (epilepsy) and works for her mother Senedia [320] and her sister in law Fanta [321].

Child workforce

The third and last generation of compound residents is made up of about 30 children, among whom only the eldest three participate in agricultural and related activities (Bois Massama, Sidi and Bakari, see Figure 7). While Sidi is Abou's own son, the two others are the children of his younger brother residing in Bamako, as mentioned above (page 110).

In Bancoumana, young boys carry on important work not performed by adults. The work of children is not only a help for adults, but it is also a constitutive element of childhood, a normal part of their education and a process of socialization. The fact that all the children aged six to 14 are in principle obliged to go to school – eight hours a day, five days per week, from October to June – has important repercussions. The obligation to go to school, however, is neither followed by everybody nor practically enforceable, given the very poor existing school infrastructure (see Chapter One, page 34). Moreover, children do work during school holidays (and some may work during time off the school), which tend to be fixed by the Ministry of Education every year according to the farming calendar.

⁴¹ The nickname 'Byebye' sounds ironic to this extent. However, it was explained to me by saying that Bourama often disappeared when his older brothers wanted to charge him with work: an understandable behavior considered that he was given more work than all.

One of the main jobs carried on by children is to look after animals. Young boys (approximately five to ten years old), for example, are responsible for leading sheep and goats to pasture around the compound during the dry season. Then, during the farming season, they drive them off the cultivated land or they tether them in shaded spaces where they are fed. Older boys (approximately ten to 15 years old) drive cows and oxen to more remote pastures, looking after them the entire day, particularly during the farming season, when animals should be kept off cultivated land. Every morning and evening, herds have to be driven in and out of the enclosures and cows have to be milked. All these activities are carried out by children.

Children are also sent to oversee the fields where mangoes (or other fruit) mature in order to discourage thieves, while their older brothers appear at particular times to bargain with the women who collect fruit and sell them at the market. Other young boys are sent to oversee rice and millet fields, keeping off and hunting birds with their slings, for an entire month before harvesting. Both these surveillance activities – in particular the latter – begin every day at sunrise (6 am) and end at sunset (7 pm).

A summary of the workforce composition in Messerejanna would be the following. Out of 51 residents, there are about 13 adults, six men and seven women, in the generation that is currently spending considerable working-time in the interest of the compound. Considering that four members of the youngest generation (Byebye, Bois, Sidi and Bakari) also provide significant work, the active workforce represents one third of the compound population. As shown in the genealogies in Figure 7 and Figure 9, however, such resident workforce represents only a fraction of the living daughters and sons of Nanamori, Makan and Massama, many of whom reside elsewhere because of marriage or migration. In fact, of the 14 living sons, only eight reside in the compound during the farming season at least; of 27 daughters, three are still unmarried and living in the compound, while six daughters-in-law have entered.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the domestic setting of Messerejanna, the living quarter of my hosts in Bancoumana. It described the main spaces in the courtyard and their use by

residents engaging in ordinary activities, crucial for the functioning of the domestic domain, such as food preparation and commensality. The analysis of this material has illuminated grouping dynamics by focusing, in particular, on sub-groups of paternal and maternal patrilineal descendants (*fabon* and *babon*) and on the corresponding, opposite feelings of mother-childness and father-childness (*badenya* and *fadenya*).

Through the analysis of the different branches of ‘the people of Messere,’ we have seen that family subgroups trace their descent according to two or three descent lines depending on the particular view that is taken of patrilineal descent. The life histories provided clearly illustrate that position in the household – in genealogical and related terms, such as lifecycle, seniority, gender, and the like – entails very different sets of constraints and opportunities.

Groups of uterine, paternal and classificatory siblings emerging from the analysis of the genealogy of the three branches of Messerejanna are consistent with the groups previously identified in relation to the use of space and the organization of domestic activities (page 90). This demonstrates that descent, along with other elements determining one’s position within the household, matters in important ways for the organization of the domestic domain. However, rather than being defined by abstract rules (of descent or other principles), the domestic domain is constructed around material practices and activities like those described in this chapter: some of them consist of productive activities, like food preparation and wood collection; others are less directly so, for example commensality and the disposition of houses in space, but consist of practices similarly important for the organization of compound life.

The material presented in this chapter shows that a compound and a family like Messerejanna are composite entities, made of individuals simultaneously integrating different sub-groups, notably the maternal and paternal patrilineal descent groups becoming visible in relation to the different activities and practices defining the domestic space. Moreover, compound members make a strategic use of these different ways of grouping and describing themselves when framing a particular claim. For these two combined reasons, a compound like Messerejanna would be only inadequately represented as a homogeneous entity: the activities occasionally spoken as characterizing one same domestic domain – that of the household or the compound as a

homogeneous entity – are in fact carried out by a combination of smaller groups, whose functioning leaves some room to individual strategy and accommodates practical considerations.

The exceptional positioning of Djeneba's house, reflecting the tense relationship with her in-laws, provided one case of adaptation of settlement principles to practical considerations. Another such case, showing the more strategic facet of grouping dynamics, was offered by Karidia tolerating the absence of all her male sons from Bancoumana (until the marriage of her son Lanceni). This was an unusual situation, in which no maternal group was constituted around an elder woman and it has been explained by the (equally rare) possibility for Karidia to rely on work and financial support of her adult but still unmarried daughter Awa. This was a crucial factor allowing her to afford to educate her cadet son Adama to university level in the distant town of Segou, supported by his oldest brother Messere.

In the economy of Messerejanna, there are evident efforts to foster equality among the different sub-groups, especially among the uterine groups (of maternal patrilineal descendants). This is attested, for example, by the system of these groups' taking turns in the compound's common kitchen. It is also attested by patterns of commensality by which, for example, the working men of the compound belonging to different patrilineages eat together and discuss the work to be done on the fields every day. However, the individuals integrating such sub-groups, especially those of paternal descent, clearly find themselves in unequal positions and face different constraints and opportunities in life.

In addressing the organization of the domestic domain, this chapter does not suggest that such a domain is bounded in any way. At various points, ruptures in the homogeneous organization and representation of domestic activities have been noticed. One such instance was provided by married women being helped by their kin and age mates (not residing in the compound) for the preparation of common meals. Another was the 'invisible' work of unmarried daughters, and even their financial support as showed in the case of Awa: allowing her brothers Adama and Lanceni to study and work abroad, her hard work contributed to alleviate the burden of collective labour already unfavourable to Makan's branch of Messerejanna.

Chapter Four

‘We All Are Foreigners’: political leadership, anteriority and the idiom of hospitality in accessing land

Introduction

This chapter focuses on land as an attribute of political leadership, analysing how it is claimed, negotiated and accessed by groups and individuals in different circumstances. Through the historical narrative of Bancoumana’s foundation, it illustrates how the principle of prior arrival, or anteriority, in land occupation is used to create a distinction between two groups of villagers – ‘autochthonous’ and newcomers – with different power and opportunities in accessing land. Such a distinction constitutes the basis of a socially codified system of hospitality allowing first-comers to incorporate late-comers while regulating and, to a certain extent, negotiating the latter’s access to resources.

On the one hand, the analysis highlights the crucial role played by idioms of dependency for understanding local political processes through which access to resources is negotiated; on the other, it demonstrates the powerful and enduring character of land as crucial attribute of political leadership in Mande and a symbol of its legitimacy. The multiple ways in which the sense of belonging to the ancestral land can be played by different people and the changing circumstances that can be accommodated in this process, also show the limits and the inconsistencies of conceiving the land univocally as a productive resource, a commodity and an object of property, as the state and other ‘developers’ often do (see Chapter Two).

The difference between first-comers and late-comers is not clear-cut, but a subtly performed status distinction. The performance of the respective roles consists of employing a particular idiom of dependency and hospitality, a whole set of attitudes and behaviours. Similar to other status distinctions like slave descent, the one based on anteriority is employed in a cautious and circumstantial manner. After a few generations, the ‘facts’ of being descended from a late-comer or a slave become blurred,

especially since foreigners are not immediately recognizable by family name (like the descendants of captives, they can also take their host family name over time). Therefore, the possibility that some may discredit a family line by claiming the foreign origin of its ancestors is left open in many cases.

More than a precise set of rules, hospitality is an idiom shared by both first-comers and late-comers in Bancoumana, with different but complementary interests. It is commonly agreed, in principle, that while first-comers aim at controlling their guests' access to land and at incorporating them in their lineage, late-comers aim at gaining access to land and maintaining it in a legitimate and effective way. However, hospitality in practice can be more contested. Through a case study of a dispute involving two late-comers, Traore and Diarra, it will be shown that this is merely one strategy employed by late-comers to secure their interests. Another way, not necessarily alternative to the former, is to resort to a written document called the *attestation de vente*, signed by the Mayor of the municipality.

This leads to an analysis of one avenue through which village site land is perhaps becoming increasingly fungible (i.e. marketed in return for cash) and commoditised in Bancoumana. This is due to a variety of factors, which can be generally related to increasing demographic pressure: the population of Bancoumana has almost doubled in the last ten years.⁴² Among the factors explaining this demographic boom, there are the village's location (at only 60 km from the capital Bamako) on a road that was soon to be asphalted at the time my fieldwork took place, the presence of commercial opportunities attracting new settlers (especially the weekly market fair) and, finally, the establishment of important public services and infrastructure requiring bureaucratic staff, like the municipality, the school, the health centre and various development projects (see also Chapter One).

People always say that it was these categories of people (shopkeepers, bureaucrats, schoolteachers and the like) who had first started to buy land in return for cash in

⁴² Last available national census (RGPH 1998) shows for the whole municipality of Bancoumana (comprising 13 other villages): 19,138 residents. The number of residents in previous censuses was 10,130 in 1978 and 8,571 in 1976. Between 1987 and 1998, the population grew at a rate of 5.6 percent per year.

Bancoumana. Initially they bought it from other foreigners, notably bureaucrats being transferred to another village selling to their successors the land that had merely been entrusted to them by their hosts. It then became common also for more ‘autochthonous’ people to sell land to strangers. In this way, the idiom of hospitality became connected in a more complex way to the sale of land in return for money. As the case of Traore and Diarra I examine below will show, although it is uncommon to buy land from one’s direct host, who has instead an obligation to provide the foreigner with land, the host’s indirect involvement in his guest’s land purchase normally does add an important element of security to the transaction, making the sale more publically acknowledged.

Since the establishment of the local municipality in the late 1990s, some of such transactions were registered with the Mayor issuing a written *attestation*. Despite such an *attestation*, in the case examined, the land was successfully claimed back two decades later by an older brother of the seller, who claimed to have been absent and unaware of the sale. What played a crucial role in influencing the final outcome was the above mentioned participation – or lack of participation – of the litigants’ hosts at the time of the sale (and, later, when the dispute took place).

Traore, a retired bureaucrat, had bought the land at the time without the involvement of his host, who was for this reason unable to undertake an effective defence. Diarra’s older brother, a more ‘embedded’ late-comer than Traore, was successful in invoking his host lineage support during the dispute and got his land back.

Despite the fact that this dispute involved two late-comers – one of whom was literate and resorted to an *attestation de vente* – in this instance, first-comers’ support and hospitality proved to be more effective. Negotiation of status and relations of dependence took precedence over written documents. As we shall see, the increasing involvement of the Mayor and the municipality does not necessarily imply greater control by the state in land matters.

Incorporation through hospitality

The first piece of information I received in Bancoumana on the subject of land conveyed the idea that its control pertains to ‘those who cleared the bush’ (*mogow*

minna ye tou teké) or to ‘those who (first) settled’ (*mogow min nana ka sigi yan*, literally ‘the people who came to sit down here’). By such expressions, referring to a real or imagined original occupation of land, people express a general agreement that anteriority confers special rights over land. Although the definition of first-comership becomes problematic and subject to a certain degree of contention, the distinction between first-comers and late-comers was central to the way many of my informants approached land issues during my fieldwork. Thus, it seems worth starting from the uses of – and the meaning attached to – this dichotomy.

When I approached the theme of land, people told me that the territory used by Bancoumana villagers belonged to the lineages of first-comer descent.⁴³ While land is designated by the expression *dugu-kolo* (literally, ‘the bones of the village’),⁴⁴ the headmen of the first-comers’ lineages are called *dugukolotiguis*, a term that expresses material and spiritual control of the land, implying a power to redistribute and hence a chieftaincy over the land (the suffix *-tigu* means chief or headman). Late-comers (*dunanw*, foreigners) are entitled to a piece of land only through their participation in the particular system of ‘hospitality’ (*jatiguiya*), which incorporates them into a host lineage of first-comers, while at the same time serving as a reminder of their ‘foreignness’ through the generations.

Accordingly, one element emphasising first-comer status is the right to have guests, that is the publically recognized capacity to attract foreigners and to become their host, incorporating their relatives and descendants through fictive kin relationships. In the locality, the descendants of first-comers are definitely more likely to play the role of *jatiguiw* (hosts to foreigners), although there are rare cases of newcomers being the hosts of subsequent newcomers. Both will be indirectly attached to the host of the first, however, who is normally a first-comer.

⁴³ In Mandenkakan there is no verb expressing ownership of the land. The verb to have, to own (*nin be ale bolo*, literally ‘this is in his/her hands’) which is employed for objects, it is not used in relation to the land; nor is the verb *ka mara* (to control, to rule, from which the patronymic Camara originates), which refers to the control of people rather than objects.

⁴⁴ While *dugu* means village in a spatial, territorial sense, the noun *kolo* indicates materiality and substance. When it stands alone, *kolo* means the structure of the human body, i.e. the bones. For the literal translation offered in the text, see Hampaté Ba (1972:77). See also Delafosse’s etymological dictionary (1929:141-3).

To make reference to one's capacity for having many guests is one way of accounting for either individual or collective prosperity. But different kinds of success in hostship are achieved in distinct ways. A significant part of the social prestige of the Soridiana lineage head El Hadji Messere, for example, came from being the most successful *jatigui* of Bancoumana. He was the host of 47 out of the 280 late-comers' compounds of the village. Of those late-comers' compounds which were specifically nested within the ambit of his lineage, Soridiana, he was host to more than half.⁴⁵ In contrast to his success in sheer weight of numbers, the Kolonwulena lineage as a whole was often spoken of as being particularly able to capture political offices and other income opportunities in the village because of the high number of literate foreigners it had been able to attract.⁴⁶

A welcoming attitude toward newcomers and their incorporation through an established system of hospitality can be explained in relation to a variety of historical, demographical or socio-economic circumstances. In a context characterized by warfare such as 19th century Mande, for example, foreigners might have represented a valuable resource for defensive reasons and perhaps also for the slave trade (Jansen 2005:261). Similarly, in a phase of consolidation of an agricultural hamlet into a permanent village settlement, subsequent-arrivals may have contributed to strengthening the settlement's autonomy in respect of the inhabitants of the original locality (Lentz 2006:14). In other words, a general model of wealth-in-people is observable, although this concept needs to be adapted to acknowledge wider social, political and economic variables changing over time (Guyer 1995; Miers & Kopytoff 1977). A closer analysis of hospitality in the locality, however, suggests further observations.

⁴⁵ Source: my census data.

⁴⁶ Although different informants generally perceived that Kolonwulena attracted more strangers while Soridiana did not, data collected in my survey shows a remarkable equilibrium: in fact, the Farana lineage has 92 guest compounds, Soridiana has 95, and Kolonwulena 91. However, when one looks at the *proportion* of first-comer and late-comer compounds within each lineage, the popular perception is confirmed: 70 percent of Kolonwulena's compounds are late-comers, while the proportion decreases to 62 and 58 percent respectively for Farana and Soridiana.

Guests and dependents in Bancoumana

The socially well-codified system of hospitality (*jatiguiya*) in Bancoumana today regulates access to land as well as providing it. It limits access to land for late-comers and foreigners, defending the privileges of first-comers and even discouraging non-productive usage of the land. In particular, it defends village land from being accumulated by urban and transnational migrants or by outsiders who may be interested in acquiring land for marketing and speculative purposes. The kind of thing this was intended to guard against can be seen in the case of a native of the nearby village of Samako who is ‘Spanish’ – as migrants to that country are usually called – and quite openly known as a cocaine dealer. During my fieldwork, he acquired a large plot of housing land in Bancoumana (about 50x80 m) and started investing the returns of his business in the building of a hotel, which was to be the first in the region.

Moreover, both the social institution and the language of hospitality provide first-comers with a way of dealing with increased fungibility of land and the growing need for cash: under some circumstances, in fact, a buyer may be presented – or may equally cast himself – as the seller’s guest or tutee. In this light, *jatiguiya* appears as the particular idiom – at times shared, at times contested – by which first-comers and late-comers negotiate the use of land, both as a ‘productive resource’ (when labour is provided) and as an object whose control shows one’s membership and inclusion in the political community.

By interpreting a context characterized by a need for cash on the one side and increased fungibility of the land on the other in terms of supply and demand, it might appear that there is a dichotomous opposition between first-comers, who have large holdings of land, and late-comers, who have money. Although this might indicate a trend, it is nonetheless too simplistic, especially since not all late-comers are equally rich. Late-comers have arrived at a succession of different moments and under very different circumstances; not all can afford to buy land. First-comers, likewise, have variable incomes, and also have variable rights to land, depending on their level of political influence and leadership. When considering the foreigners’ claim to land in Bancoumana, we may ask whether ‘hospitality’ today plays not only a function of

incorporation of these people, but also provides a morally accepted idiom for commercialization and monetization of land.⁴⁷

However, despite the fact that hospitality may be given new and more monetary meanings, it seems that in Bancoumana, as in other parts of Africa, the land represents – still, or with renewed vigour – an important attribute of political leadership and a powerful symbol of its legitimacy (Berry 1993:111, 125; Goheen 1992:392). So just as land belongs to first-comers, political offices are said to be in principle reserved for the descendants of first-comers. This concern is particularly present in relation to those offices with the capacity to represent the village in the wider world, notably elective authorities such as the Mayor and the councillors.

Monopolies of this kind, however, are more aspired-to than real. Bancoumana's Mayor at the time of my fieldwork – Issa Traore – was not a first-comer descendant, a fact that greatly concerned many 'autochthonous' Camara headmen. A common way to depict one's foreign status – as many people told me in conversations touching upon Mayor Issa Traore – is to say that one is not *yankai*, i.e. of 'the people from here.'⁴⁸

Although it cannot be said, then, that foreigners and their descendants are in practice excluded from access to both land and political offices, the distinction between first-comers and late-comers is relevant as a normative dimension, as was evident from my discussions with informants. Contradictorily, however, the distinction may often be invoked by late-comers themselves as a way to determine access to resources and public offices. By emphasizing their own late-comership, foreigners can claim membership of village society. To insist on one's dependent status is a strategy for claiming membership, one that is commonly performed in Mande (Jansen and Zobel 1996). This is usually done by employing the language of kinship relations – no matter whether 'real' or fictive – and by recalling reciprocal obligations. There is a complex repertoire of protocols to be employed by the various categories of dependent men (cadets, caste-men, newcomers) according to different circumstances. All strategies aim at showing

⁴⁷ A similar phenomenon has been observed by Jean Pierre Chauveau in the Gban region in Côte d'Ivoire with reference to the changing meaning of a comparable hosting institution called *tutorat* (Chauveau 2006).

⁴⁸ An equivalent word referring to native status is *dugulen*, probably meaning 'a son of the village' or 'village people.'

respect while providing the basis for claiming membership, material benefits and, most importantly, actual rights: for example, to the use of land, including its transmission and redistribution, or to political offices.

Among the villagers, the statuses of first-comer and late-comer cannot easily be manipulated or explicitly contested. The general condition of dependency implied by being a foreigner and by other social positions, such as those of slave and caste, is rarely acknowledged in public or openly utilized. When addressing a newcomer, for example, a first-comer descendant would tend to foster a sense of membership by emphasizing that everyone has been a newcomer: *an bee ye dunan ye*, ‘we all are foreigners.’ However, should the same two parties confront each other in a dispute, the distinction between first-comers and late-comers will start to enter into the discussion.

In conclusion, such distinctions are played out quite circumstantially, retaining their fluidity: they definitely matter, but they are never transformed into rigid social hierarchies of the kind often resulting from anthropological analysis (Amselle 1996:758). There is neither now, nor has there ever been, a clear-cut system of social standing, like the one created by colonial administrators and ethnographers around West African ‘caste’ (*nyamakalaya*) and other distinctions.⁴⁹

Memory of one’s origin (*ka bo*, to originate) and genealogy (*siya*, life-line or lineage) is part of a social knowledge that is preserved and, to a limited extent, manipulated by senior generations. There exists the possibility of discrediting a family line or, more plausibly, of downplaying some individual’s pretensions, by claiming the dependent status of his ancestors. However, the opportunity to adopt such behaviour depends on circumstances, and as such the threat of social discredit will usually suffice.

More than one adult informant discussing the relevance of genealogy expressed the idea that elders can make someone cry ‘by recalling his origins’ (*ka bujuru fo*). As another expression goes: ‘everybody knows the point at which he should stop’ (*bee n’i a joyoro*

⁴⁹ For an in-depth analysis of colonial construction and western perceptions of the professional classes of artists and other occupationally defined specialists such as blacksmiths, potters, leatherworkers and bards (all referred to as *nyamakalaw*, in Mande), see Conrad and Frank (1995) and Amselle (1998).

don); otherwise, sooner or later, he will be put ‘at the same place as his personality’ (*ka a n’a hakili iera nogona*).

Differentiations between (and within) the first-comer and late-comer categories

As in most societies, strict genealogical rules and principles exist in Mande society, but these rarely align with practice. What makes the Bancoumana case perhaps more complex than others in Sub-Saharan Africa is the complex system of status differentiation which accompanies and parallels these rules of prior arrival, land ownership and descent. This has occasionally been referred to as a ‘caste’ system (differentiating between freemen, professional groups such as blacksmiths and leatherworkers, and slaves), but the extent to which manipulation is possible – always within the rules – would seem to make this definition accurate only in the loosest possible sense (see Chapter One). Flexible or not, the classification of people with particular patronymics according to the professions they practice (or traditionally practiced) makes the negotiation of rules and genealogical principles doubly complex.

I here provide a brief statement of these rules as they are claimed to apply in the village, before demonstrating the negotiation of land and status that they occasion.

Land, in principle, belongs to ‘noble’ Camara men of first-comer descent. The patronymic (*djamu*) Camara is a necessary but not sufficient distinguishing feature of such men. What further defines the highest status in society are two additional features: being of ‘noble’ descent (*horon*, free-man) and being a first-comer, i.e. descendant of original settlers. All three criteria, in combination, are in principle prerequisites for access to land and political office in Bancoumana.

In fact, some people bearing the patronymic Camara are late-comers, having migrated to Bancoumana subsequent to its foundation and being unconnected to the founders other than via mythical ancestry (they claim to be descended from Kamandian Camara, one of the characters of the epics of Soundiata, see page 27 above). Others are slave descendants who have adopted their masters’ patronymic, but have not lost their lower status in society. And, finally, some people using Camara as their family name are caste men of a particular kind. These are known as Fune-Camara and are people considered

of particularly low status in society, having many traits in common with the more widely known professional groups dubbed as ‘caste’ in Mande and throughout West Africa more generally. The status of caste men other than Fune-Camara is usually indicated by the family name, although practices vary between regions. In the region of Bancoumana, for example, the patronymics Sinaba and Sinayogo are exclusively carried by blacksmiths, while the family name Kouyaté invariably identifies bards.

Thus, the principle ‘the land belongs to first-comers’ must be understood in context. Three groups are distinguishable: a) those who are entitled to both land ownership and political office; b) those who have access to political office, but not to land ownership; and c) a third group of dependent men who are entitled to neither, including blacksmiths, bards, leatherworkers, religious experts (*moriw*) and slave descendants.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *Moriw* (sing. *mori*, from Arabic *marbūt* or *murābit*) are religious experts, teachers and healers. They are also called *marabouts*, according to a French colonial denomination.

<i>Claimed status</i>	First-comers			Late-comers
<i>Legitimate claim</i>	Land and office	Office	First-comer status	Dependency/inclusion in host family
<i>Patronymic</i>	Camara (124)	Konate (19), Traore (12)	Sinayogo (3), Sinaba (6), Diakit� (3)	Fune-Camara (5), slave descendants (4)
<i>Status / professional specialisation</i>	Noble	Noble	Caste (blacksmiths, <i>moriw</i>)	Mediators, ceremony heads
<i>N Compounds</i>	124	31	12	9
<i>Proportion of first-comers in same-patronymic group</i>	69%	18%	8%	5%

Table 1. First-settlers' descendants in Bancoumana

The table shows the internal differentiations among Bancoumana's 176 compounds of first-comer descent. As explained in the text, not all of these do openly claim such status, nor do they have identical rights over land and political offices. The number of compounds for each patronymic (*djamu*) figures into brackets. Source: my census data; N=446.

As Table 1 shows, and as I stated earlier, only Camara people – and more precisely, only those among them who are of noble descent and first-comers – have a legitimate claim to both political office and land ownership. Some Traore and Konate families have access to political power but not to land. My discussion here focuses on the third category: those who are dependents on these families *are* also first-comers, but are *not* entitled to land or political power because they are neither of noble descent nor do they bear the Camara patronymic. By saying that they are late-comers, some of these groups are fudging their 'true' identity: that is, as slaves or caste people. Instead they are casting themselves as guests, showing that their dependence arises from their 'foreigner' status. Definitions are characteristically vague, however, with some among this latter group casting themselves in the first-comers group – as some blacksmiths and *moriw* compound did in my survey – and benefiting from this status when compared to both foreigners and Fune-Camara people.

The late-comer Fune-Camara (also called *funew*) carry the same patronymic Camara all over Mande, but they are socially distinct from the Camara of noble status (*horon*). Just like bards (*jeliw*), one of the main professional specializations of *funew* is mediation and ceremony mastery. In contrast to bards, however, each *fune* family today tends to be

rigidly connected to one particular ‘master’ *horon* family: *funew* perform public speeches on behalf of the master’s family and are asked to mediate disputes; they also receive a share of sacrificial meat and they connect to all members of the master family by joking relationships which also put them in the position of ‘telling the truth’ to their masters (*ka tina fo*), implying that they can ask for something in a way that it cannot be denied.

Historical enquires have suggested that they either immigrated to Mande in ancient times from Mecca or, more plausibly, that they were a group of nobles marginalized because of their Islamic religious identity in periods of disfavour towards Islam, such as that following the decline of the Mali Empire in the 15th century (Conrad 1995). Both hypotheses are supported by the popular term to address them as ‘*Macca horon*,’ i.e. the nobles from (or of) Mecca.⁵¹ The association of *funew* with foreigners and slave descendants is perceptibly stronger than it is with the professionalized groups called *nyamakalaw* (castes): despite their specialization, *funew* are not usually considered to be ‘caste men.’

Unlike the blacksmith and *moriw* compounds figuring in Table 1, some other compounds of dependent people (*nyamakalaw*, *moriw* and slave descendants), preferred to categorise themselves as foreigners, even though some evidence suggests that these have been settled in Bancoumana since the time of its foundation. First-comer status, then, has become a proxy for high status to such an extent that being low status automatically connotes being a late-comer or foreigner. Therefore, the number of dependent people indicated in Table 1 is not as reliable as the rest of the data, because slave-descendants are not marked as such. Instead they usually carry their patron’s patronymic and their origin is publically acknowledged only in specific occasions. In private conversations, Fune-Camara tend to present themselves as Camara of foreigner origin and late-comers, and to make no mention of their *fune* status.

On the basis of my informants’ knowledge, however, nine compounds can confidently be classified among the dependent families who settled at the time of founding, four

⁵¹ According to Diarra (1965), Bancoumana’s *funew* constitute a group of Camara people (whose status is not specified by the author) who immigrated, in the 1950s, from Faraba, a village south of the river. I had no confirmation of this fact during my fieldwork.

descendants of slaves and five *funew* (see Table 1). Dependent people, even if they are original settlers, tend to describe themselves as late-comers, since they do not want to publically acknowledge their dependent status. It is interesting to note, therefore, that both slave descendants and *funew* insisted on being described as foreigners (i.e. late-comers) in my survey. In fact, their social distinction emerges only at specific occasions, such as when particular kinds of public speeches are made or when people of different status are asked to act as mediators.

Further differentiation within the category of late-comers appeared in the course of a dispute described later in this chapter.

Problems of first-comership: village foundation stories

When the principle of pure occupation – the land belongs to first-comers – is realistically considered, a number of problems inevitably arise. Were villages such as Bancoumana always founded on no-man's land? Did the settlement founders receive or conquer the bush land to be cleared and settled on? Did they acknowledge any relation of dependence on, or did they affirm their independence from, any other group of people? It is clear that the process of village formation – similar to the processes of fission and fusion by which compounds split up and new compounds are created – operates through 'autochthonization' of foreigners as new foreigners are incorporated.

To a certain extent, newcomers can in fact 'autochthonize' themselves by hosting and creating new relations of dependence with subsequent newcomers. In the eyes of the latter, the former can legitimate their higher status through a series of narratives of first-comership and original occupation of the land: *aw bee ye dunanw ye*, 'we all are foreigners.'

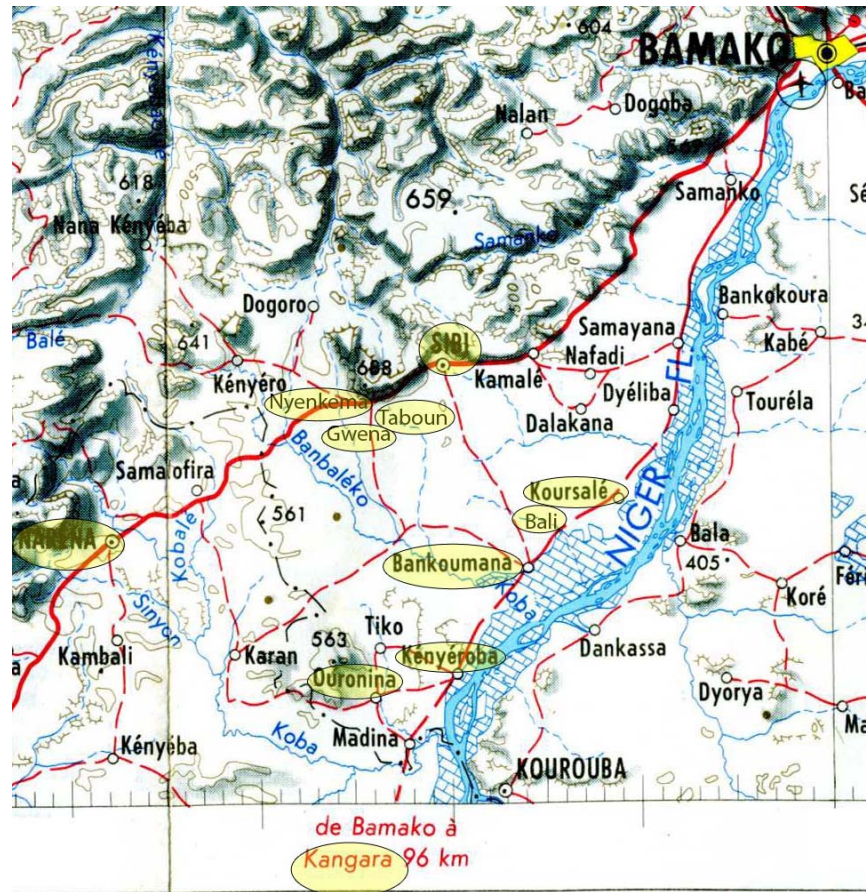
Property rights reflect relations of force but also need to be strengthened by persuasion, as lawyer Carol Rose has argued (Rose 1994). Force or violence per se cannot provide the legitimacy that is needed for continuous access to a resource. In other words, land claims – just like comparable claims to power and resources – are, to a certain extent, founded on persuasion and plausible narratives. In Mande, such a function is provided by village foundation histories as they are presented by oral accounts. Like similar

narratives elsewhere, these histories often legitimize the contemporary status quo (Jansen 1996; Lentz 2000). But that status quo may be more contested than such a statement implies.

One of the most striking recurrences in these stories is the migration-and-settlement pattern: the founders of a new village are typically reported to be younger brothers fleeing either the unjust behaviour of an older brother or warfare, and settling in a new locality after a journey through a variable number of hospitable villages that offered them protection and refuge. These histories are narrated by members of the senior generation for a variety of purposes, notably to ‘reveal’ landmarks, to justify the distribution of land or to advance particular land claims. It is therefore almost inevitable that the disparate versions of such stories recounted by different village groups rarely coincide.

Village foundation histories illustrate the tension between first-comers and late-comers and, in particular, show how settlement narratives provide a practical solution to the logical problems posed by first-comership. The following history of the founding of Bancoumana exemplifies that tension. It draws on the few available literary and archival resources, as well as on oral accounts collected during my fieldwork.⁵²

⁵² Apart from my elder informants credited in note 10, useful information concerning the foundation of Bancoumana and other Camara settlements were provided in a conference on the origins of Sibi given by anthropologist Seydou Camara (himself a native of Bancoumana) at the *Centre Culturel Français* in Bamako (November 30th, 2008), as well as in personal communications with the conference speaker. All other literary and archival resources are acknowledged in the text.



Map 2. The Mandé area, south-west of Bamako

Source: *Institut Géographique National* (Paris), 1964. Scale: 1/1.000.000. Some villages have been added to the original map (Nyenkema, Gwena, Taboun and Bali), therefore their position might be less accurate. Kangaba – spelled ‘Kangara’ – falls slightly out of the picture, south of Madina. Villages mentioned in the text are highlighted.

The narrative of Bancoumana’s foundation

According to the locally established oral traditions, the village of Bancoumana was founded by three brothers carrying the same patronymic Camara, in the following order of seniority: Kolonwulen, Soridian and Faran. Their living descendants today are the three ‘autochthonous’ Camara lineages (*kabilaw*): Kolonwulena, Soridiana and Farana. Every resident in the village is necessarily attached to one of these, either as descendant or as guest.

The popular characterization of Bancoumana lineages, as previously discussed by Diarra (1965), employs the idiom of kinship relationship, when speaking about the characters differentiating the three groups of descendants. Similar to the way younger brothers are often described, the Farana lineage (the cadet branch) is described as the most dynamic, best connected to the wider world; while the Kolonwulena (the descendants of the older brother), just like an older brother in chief of the familial compound, are characterized as particularly welcoming to foreigners and as having great promptness in incorporating them (see also note 46 above).

According to elder Lamine Sinaba, the three founding brothers were accompanied not only by their families, but by a few other families carrying the other first-comers' patronymics Konate and Traore, and by clients and slaves (see Table 1 on page 127). The three brothers had left the village of Nienkema after the death of their father (see Map 2) and migrated to Makandiana (next to Sibi in the map) and then to Bali and Sobé. The former was a small village that still exists today as a hamlet, a few kilometres east of Bancoumana, and the latter an agricultural hamlet nearby which has now disappeared. It was after that migratory journey that either the three brothers or their descendants settled in Bancoumana. In each of those temporary places, diviners made sacrifices in order to establish whether the group of migrants would be allowed to settle permanently and find prosperity, but each time it was indicated that they ought to move on.

When they reached Bancoumana – Sinaba's story goes on – the priests asked for a human sacrifice. The blood of a young man of the cadet branch Farana was offered on the sandy square which still exists on southern edge of the village, in front of the 19th century mud-brick mosque. This place is where today the *tontiguiw* (the age group in charge of policing the village, see the next chapter) hold court and punish those who are attached to 'the tree of shame' (*molobalini*). The sacrificed blood of the young man mixed with the soil of the new location was spread all over the area on which the village subsequently expanded. Animal sacrifices producing heaps of feathers were blown by the wind over the same area, indicated that the site was favourable and the settlement

would grow and reach great prosperity. Reportedly, the Farana lineage was granted the village chieftaincy because of the blood offered in this foundational sacrifice.⁵³

As one might expect when grappling with a different sense of historicity, and with myths of origin in general, to understand *when* such foundation of the village took place is far from straightforward. When explicitly asked for an account of Bancoumana's founding, informants like Sinaba refer mainly to historical events that took place in the late 19th century. However, when confronted with conflicting claims by other groups, the relationship of Bancoumana first-comers' descendants with their land may be presented as established much further back in time. Such vagueness thus may serve to strengthen particular claims to originary status, though not without disputation.

The historical context of the foundation

Considering the historical events widely referred to in accounts of the foundation of Bancoumana, the time when the settlement was established has to be set in the late 19th century, after the attacks on and the consequent destruction of Nyenkema – the village Bancoumana settlers left – by the army of El Hadji Oumar Tall. This jihadist army operated from the 1850s until 1883, when it was defeated by the French.

Nyenkema was a Camara village located somewhere in the area between Sibi and Narena (see Map 2) and built close to the Mande hills for defensive reasons. Neighbouring villages were Taboun and Gwena, which still exist, although not in their original sites. Nyenkema, having been destroyed, no longer exists, nor have its ruins been found. Jansen (2005) suggests that it is, in fact, the same as Taboun – probably the most ancient and prestigious Camara settlement in the area. Similar to other villages of the region, in 1943, after the French conquest and the end of the Oumar Tall's *jihad* (involving warfare and slave raids), Taboun was moved from the area close to the Mande hills to its present day locale close to the main paved road Bamako-Sibi-Narena.

⁵³ Similar findings are reported by Diarra (1965) and by Camara (2006:147), but most of my informants would not agree that the village chief must be a Farana lineage member. Indeed, as explained in Chapter One (page 36), in 2011, the office of village chief has been taken by a Soridiana lineage member, my host Nanamori Camara.

The founding of Bancoumana must have been prior to 1883 for another reason: when Samori Toure began the war of opposition to the French (ending in 1888), the village is known to have been the border between the two camps, and the Camara to have been its inhabitants (Person 1968:387). Although Bancoumana was not among the allies of Samori in the war of opposition to the French, the village had been saved by him because his mother was a Camara (Person 1963:126; 1968:399, 408), unlike other villages that were raised to the ground.

The 19th century was characterized by extreme warfare in Mande, in particular after the 1850s, when the rule of the Kangaba chiefdom was challenged from several sides. In the second half of that century, there were at least four armies raiding the same territory and fighting for different purposes such as religious conversion (*jihad*), colonization, control of the land and slave-raiding. There was the army of the Kangaba chiefdom, on the Niger river, under the leadership of Mambi Keita and the Toucouleur empire army, settled in Mouroula, north-west of the Sibi-Narena region, and led by El Hadji Oumar Tall and then by his son and successor Sheikh Ahmadou Tall. More significant in resisting French penetration between 1883 and 1888, there was the army of Samori Toure. Finally, there was the French army which, advancing from Kita, first defeated the *jihadists*, destroying their fortress in Mouroula in 1883 (under Commander Desbordes), and then, under the command of Vallière, pushed Samori south of the river, destroying the palace of the ruler of Kangaba, Mambi Keita, the principal ally of Samori in the area. The French took definitive control of Mande in 1888 (Jansen 2005).

Other oral historical sources, however, recount that a village called Bancoumana already existed at the same location before the arrival of the Camara. Jan Jansen's Keita informants, for example, report that Bancoumana was founded by Nankoman Keita (or by one of his sons) who had left the village of Nyagassola (west of Narena in Map 2), then migrated to Kong, in Côte d'Ivoire (at the time an important religious centre), and founded Bancoumana on his way back to Mande (Camara and Jansen 1999:50, 62-71).

According to this version, the ancestors of the present-day Camara inhabitants of Bancoumana were settled in Sibi and, being in need of land, they asked the Narena Keita for territory. The latter directed the Camara toward their Keita brothers in Kenyeroba, to whom they had entrusted (*ka kalifa*) that land. Then, addressed by

Kenyeroba, the Narena Keita agreed to give Bancoumana land (*ka dugukolo d'a ma*) to the Camara (Camara and Jansen 1999:69).

The use of the founding narrative in present disputes

The version of the founding story offered by my informants in present-day Bancoumana does not directly contradict the one above. It claims, however, that the Camara were already inhabiting the area when the Keita arrived. More precisely, the ancestors of the actual settlers of Bancoumana were settled in Bali when the Keita arrived on their territory.⁵⁴

In this case, in order to claim that the Camara were already inhabiting that area of the Niger Valley before the Keita, it was emphasized to me that the three founding brothers were, imprecisely defined, the descendants of Kamandian Camara and of his older brother Masa Dan, two of the characters of the epic of Sundiata said to have lived during the Mali empire in the 13th century. Although a Malian academic researcher, Seydou Camara, suggests that the three brothers were not the founders of the particular village of Bancoumana, they should nonetheless be considered close descendants of Kamandian, considering that in virtually all the Camara villages of the area (called *Sendougou*) the founding lineages claim their descent from the same three brothers (Camara 1999).

The perspective of the Keita – as reported by Jansen (Camara and Jansen 1999:50, 62-71) and partly by Camara (2006:152-3) – and that of the Camara people, differ significantly and are at times contradictory. In fact, in these accounts, Nankoman and his descendants are said to have conquered the territory by driving the Camara away with guns, weapons that they had acquired in Côte d'Ivoire and that were unknown to their opponents. Then – the Keita narrative continues – the Camara, who were actually settled in Bali and not in Bancoumana, found refuge in the Mande hills by settling in Sibi and Nyenkema (or founding those villages). The migration pattern referred to by the Keita is the precise reverse of the one offered by my Camara informants.

⁵⁴ Interviews with Lamine Sinaba, November 2007, and Seydou Camara, October 2008.

The opposing views of the Camara and the Keita concerning their relationship with the territory and the foundation of Bancoumana are not limited to accounts of the past. They have their use in present-day land claims and inter-village disputes. Today Bancoumana is surrounded by two Keita villages with conflicts regularly arising between the Keita and the Camara.⁵⁵

On the east, there is the village of Coursale (see Map 2), with which Bancoumana has at least two longstanding and ongoing disputes concerning both the control of bush-land in between the villages and fishing rights over a number of natural pools; on the western side, in turn, there is the village of Kenyeroba, against which Bancoumana has two other ongoing disputes concerning the payment of taxes and, again, fishing rights. Since Kenyeroba was included in the municipality of Bancoumana at the time of the decentralization reform (in the late 1990s), villagers have always refused to pay the head tax to the Camara.⁵⁶

A greater tension between the Camara and the Keita also reverberates in these disputes: in fact, some descendants of the latter are traditionally considered the Mande political chiefs (*mansaw*) because of their descent from the Emperor Soudiata Keita, while the former are traditionally reputed land priests (*somaw*).⁵⁷

Although it is a topic of conversation that many informants prefer to circumvent, Bancoumana rivalry with the two surrounding Keita settlements, which are probably more ancient, should be interpreted in relation to the lack of evidence of control, by the Camara, over that land prior to the foundation of Bancoumana in the late 19th century. According to written sources, in this period, the polity of Kangaba played a significant role in the founding of Bancoumana. Camara (2006:152-154) reports that in a conflict between the Bali Camara and the Coursale Keita, Mambi Keita – the chief of Kangaba –

⁵⁵ This is documented in colonial archives for 1897, 1931 and 1947 (Camara 2006:153-4).

⁵⁶ As documented in Chapter Six, in 2008, only eight percent of the due amount of head tax could be collected in Kenyeroba. The tax collector reported to me that that was a success, since no tax at all was received from Kenyeroba in previous years.

⁵⁷ One of the functions attributed to the Soundiata epics is to put in relation all Mande patronymics or *djamuw*, either by establishing joking relationships among ‘cousin’ lineages or by setting roles and divisions of labor distinguishing clans (Conrad 2006; Camara 1999:63ff; Tamari 1991). Curiously, all sources prior to this oral history dating back to the 13th century, such as the written accounts of Arab travelers do not make any reference to the existence of *djamuw* (Seydou Camara, personal communication, December 2008).

offered military support to the Camara, who were the maternal uncles of the former Kangaba ruler. On their way back to Kangaba by river, three of his sons were killed by the Keita people of Kenyeroba. In revenge, in 1882, Mambi Keita, in alliance with Samori Toure, destroyed Kenyeroba and decapitated almost the entire population on the plateau of Kurukanfuga, next to Kangaba. Shortly after these bloody events, the Camara people of Sibi (also settled in Gwena and Nyenkema), looking for new cultivable land, turned to Mambi Keita, who gave them the territory between Coursale and Kenyeroba, the site of Bancoumana.⁵⁸

Thus, according to this version, the Camara had founded Bancoumana by settling on a territory that was given to them by a Keita ruler, in between two Keita places: the ruins of Kenyeroba and the village of Coursale. But then, the survivors of the Kenyeroba massacre, who had taken refuge in Ouoronina (another Keita village today included in the municipality of Bancoumana), asked Mambi's permission to reconstruct Kenyeroba. Mambi gave his consent and annexed from the Bancoumana Camara all the land between the ruins of Kenyeroba and the Koba River (see Chapter Two). The Camara, however, retained fishing rights over two canals (called *Trakajan* and *Kokoma*), situated on the ground now returned to the Kenyeroba Keita. The annual collective fishing, with the Bancoumana Camara mastery of water, was (and still is) an occasion for conflict between the two villages.

Many speak today of the elders in Kenyeroba as the 'true' masters of the land Bancoumana occupies and, reportedly, in case of any instance of higher importance concerning land, it is they who are consulted and who can reveal landmarks, not the elders in Bancoumana. Whereas one often hears that, in Mande, while the Keita have the monopoly over political power, the Camara are the priests of the land, holding a spiritual power over the natural resources in general, as in the case of control over water within Kenyeroba territory.

⁵⁸ Seydou Camara (2006:153) cites ANM (*Archives Nationales du Mali*), Rapport Politiques n°44, 1931, subdivision de Bamako. Together with one half of the section *Rapports Politiques* (II E), the document is today inaccessible to researchers by decision of the Director of the Archives. According to historian Soumaila Sannogo, whom I met in the archives, that decision has been taken in order to prevent investigation into the origins of the prestige of the relatively large number of families which have been turned from low to ruling class status by the colonial administration (personal communication, Bamako, November 2008). This is only another example of historical accounts being used in day-to-day power claiming and counter-claiming in a modern, urban setting.

Let me summarise the argument relating to the foundation stories and their use. Concerning the distinction between first-comers and late-comers and the actual employment of these categories, three aspects have emerged thus far. Firstly, whether a group of people is identified as first-coming depends on the choice of a ‘pivotal event’ (Bledsoe and Murphy 1987:124-25). The founders of a village are by definition newcomers, having left one place and settled on new lands that are unlikely to have been uninhabited, or unclaimed, prior to their arrival. Even admitting the fact that the Camara were given the land by a Keita ruler – who had just destroyed and killed the population of a rival Keita village – the relation of dependency originating from this act is still contested, depending on how much emphasis the storyteller chooses to place on different elements of his account of the past.⁵⁹

Secondly, social boundaries defining the group of first-comers are, to a certain extent, blurred and contestable. A distant and, at least in part, mythical past is evoked in order to justify territorial claims with the clear intent to legitimate land use and occupation in present-day disputes. The oral transmission of (unrecorded) village foundation narratives leave considerable room open for historical manipulation, as demonstrated by the opposite migratory and settlement pattern offered by Camara and Keita informants with regard to the foundation of Bancoumana. It will be noted in the conclusion that, in territorial claims such as this, the boundary between first-comers and late-comers appears much more open to manipulation than in land disputes between ‘private’ subjects might do, requiring mobilization of a more recent past and involving people whose status and ‘place in society’ is less easily contestable.

Thirdly, farming and ecological patterns widely diffused throughout West Africa push villagers to establish agricultural hamlets (*bugudaw*), which may transform into villages over time, especially by the incorporation of foreigners, i.e. subsequent newcomers. These established settlements may also revert into agricultural hamlets some time later, as in the case of Bali reported above. Therefore, it remains very hard to determine whether (and when) a seasonal settlement, to which farming land has perhaps been

⁵⁹ See also, with reference to Western Cameroon, Goheen’s analysis on changing interpretations of historical events, selective recalling of historical past and changing meanings attached to gifts and to signs of political subordination (Goheen 1992:95ff).

entrusted by others, has transformed into a less dependent polity with ‘legitimate’ claims over a territory.

It was observed in the introduction that, in Bancoumana, the principle of anteriority in land occupation underpinning dependent relations between first-comers and late-comers is in the process of becoming connected in more complex ways to sales of land in return for money. This occurrence is further complicated by the fact that people often resort to written, semi-legal arrangements in order to secure land transactions (*attestations de vente*) and that these paper documents increasingly involve the local administration of the state (municipal officials) in land disputes.

For this reason, in order to pursue our discussion on accessing land in Bancoumana, we now have to turn to analysing the rapidly growing market of land in return for money and the role of the local administration of the state. The principle of anteriority of occupation and the idiom of hospitality articulates in complex ways with the growing importance of monetary land sales and the involvement of local bureaucracy, imposing constraints on them, but also opening new opportunities. As will be observed in the conclusion, cash and local bureaucracy do not straightforwardly equate to ‘the market’ and ‘the state.’

Sales of land and the use of paper documents

The land today is increasingly marketed in return for cash. If this happens only occasionally for farming land, it has become standard practice when a newcomer tries to acquire some compound land in Bancoumana. In doing so, people make an increasing use of written documents, sometimes entirely handwritten; more often by filling a simple form headed *attestation de vente* available (in photocopy) at the municipal office. The parties involved in the sale, along with a number of witnesses and the village first councillor, head of the village council,⁶⁰ sign the document, which is then ‘legalized’ (*légalisé*) by the Mayor. Official state law does not require the signing of an

⁶⁰ For detail on the village council, see later in the text (page 151) and Chapter Six.

attestation de vente in order to legally transfer land or any other property; however, in practice, this is the way people use these documents.⁶¹

Following the model of French civil law, Malian state law requires all land to be registered in the *registre domanial et foncier* in order to dispose legally of it or to obtain a mortgage. If an entitlement already exists on a particular land plot being sold, the law requires a notary to draft a document allowing the buyer to update the record in the land registry concerning the particular plot. Unlike in continental Europe, however, most land in Mali does not figure in the *registre domanial et foncier*, because no *de facto* owner ever asked for its registration, nor was it demarcated or mapped with a plot plan, as would be required for registration.

When someone wants to have his property legally recognized by the state he has to go through the procedure of entitlement established by article 75 of the *Code Domanial et Foncier*. This long and costly procedure starts by getting a geometer to demarcate the plot and to draw up a plan, which is submitted to the Prefect along with the application and various other documents. A public land inquiry then follows (*enquête commodo et incommodo*). An agent of the district land registry must go to the locality to register declaration and to minute any discussion regarding the site (Djiré 2007:7).⁶² Before such a visit takes place, an announcement must be published in the national daily newspaper *l'Essor*. Village authorities (i.e. the village chief and his advisors) and the Sub-Prefect sign the minutes (*procès verbaux de palabre*) and the administrative certificate.

After the payment of a tax and provided that there are no counter-claims, the Prefect will grant a concession (*concession rurale*) for a five-year period, provided there is an undertaking to put the land into productive use. At the end of this period, a commission verifies that the land has been put into productive use and the concessioner is finally entitled to possession with a land title (*titre foncier*) after payment of a fee. A study conducted in the peri-urban area of Sanakoroba (Djiré 2007) has estimated the total cost

⁶¹ One may hesitate to call it state 'legal practice' (e.g. Mathieu 1997), since state law professionals such as lawyers and judges are not involved at all in the kinds of land sales practiced in Bancoumana.

⁶² The competent district land register office for Bancoumana is in Kati.

of the procedure of land registration to be four times greater than the cost of the actual plot.

As already observed by Keita (2003), in Bancoumana, virtually no land is registered through this process. From a query to the district land registry in Kati, it resulted that only seven land titles had been issued on lands in the village area since 1946.⁶³ Three are state-related land plots: two hosting the buildings of *Office de la Haute Vallée du Niger* (see Chapter Two) and another one the house reserved to the director of Bancoumana's school. The rest of the plots are registered in the name of two urban migrants: an anthropology professor born in the village (Seydou Camara, see note 52), who registered a plot of compound land, and a businessman (Charles Camara). The latter managed to register an extension large enough to include some agricultural land surrounding his isolated house on the bank of the river, about seven kilometres away from Bancoumana. This is the only land title including some farming land issued in the immediate surroundings of Bancoumana – possibly without prior knowledge or consent by local elders.

Only a few exceptions to this pattern emerge when considering the entire territory of the municipality: for example, seven hectares of farming land near the village of Kenyeroba are registered in the name of former secretary general of the municipality Lamine Tounkara (see page 79 above), and a few other registered plots can be found around the village of Samako.

Registered land sales in practice

The fact that there are virtually no formal land titles in Bancoumana, however, does not mean that land sales are completely unregistered and that the local bureaucracy of the state is not involved in these. As noted above, people have started resorting to a written document legalized by the Mayor and archived by the municipality: the *attestation de vente*. Even though there is a substantial legal difference between this and the transfer of

⁶³ The registry contains all land titles issued in the district of Kati. Volumes IX to XVII, covering the period between 2005 and 2008, had to be searched manually, for several days at the end of my fieldwork. The content of previous volumes, covering the period 1946-2005, has been transferred to a computer database and thus has been more readily accessible.

a proper land title, this practice is significant. As noted by Keita (2003), it is reasonable to believe that the use of the *attestation* increased considerably after the institution of the rural municipalities in 1999. Keita also notes that, even before the institution of the municipalities, similar papers were signed by Sub-Prefects: a finding that will be confirmed in the analysis of the dispute between Traore and Diarra (see later in this chapter).

The *attestation* is envisaged by the law as a means not to transfer property, but to certify someone's identity by acknowledging his signature as authentic. All sorts of documents can be legalized in this way, which is indeed one of the main sources of revenue for Mayors and their delegates when they manage to pocket the required fee. This pocketing of proceeds is a current practice in rural municipalities like Bancoumana, where 'legalizations' are rarely registered in bounded record books, as is required by law. The only guarantee that the Mayor will not divert the fee is that receipt must be issued to the budget secretary (*Régisseur des recettes*, who holds receipt booklets), but the Mayor may overcome this obstacle since he has both disciplinary and economic forms of pressure over municipal officials. The Mayor keeps the official stamp of the municipality which is used to legalize documents and – as many public and private officials do with various kinds of stamps in Mali – he is likely to have it on him when he leaves the office building, either for fear that it may be improperly used by others or falsified, or for legalizing documents 'privately' (when out of office).

In a land sale document legalized by the Mayor, for example, it is neither guaranteed that the seller is the actual owner nor that he has the right to dispose of the land. However, in rural areas like Bancoumana where the land is not registered by the state and where buyers can reasonably rely on social recognition of the seller's ownership, this document is used *as if* a legal means to transfer property.

Despite the fact that the *attestations* are issued by a public official, it is impossible to know how many such transactions are conducted every year in Bancoumana. On a land sale of 150,000 CFA Francs (approximately £200, the average price for a 20x30 m

housing land plot), the municipality claims a fee of 10,000 CFA Francs (£15).⁶⁴ Data held by the secretary general indicate an average of 11 *attestations* per year between 1999 and 2008, but this number is unreliable. In fact, the Mayor is rumoured to hide the vast majority of documents of this kind in order to claim the legalization fee for himself.

One copy of the *attestation de vente* is kept in the municipal archives, unbound and unregistered, under the supervision of the secretary general. As I was told by former secretary general Lamine Tounkara, a bounded registry of the *attestations de vente* was established only in 2005, one year before his resignation. When I conducted my field research, however, no traces were found of such a registry: the *attestations* (those that have not disappeared) still being kept by the secretary in normal, unbound files.

This informality of arrangement, together with the Mayor's influence over his underlings, increases the difficulty of assessing the number of sales. The three members of staff of the municipality (the *Secrétaire Général*, the *Régisseur des recettes* and the *Régisseur des dépenses*, see Chapter Six for more details) are chosen by the Mayor from a list of public officials established on district basis. The Mayor reports on them to the head of the district and virtually, in practice, holds the power to fire them. Moreover, the Mayor also disposes of various financial means to delay the payment of their salaries. During my stay, the salary of municipal staff was delayed for more than seven months on average. If the Mayor manages to put pressure on the secretary general or reaches an understanding with him, *attestations* can be removed from the file after the receipt has been issued. One reason the Mayor can keep the document in his home is in case a dispute arises and he is requested to show it by the litigants. In sum, from what I observed in the files kept in the municipal building, documents were entirely missing for the years 2003, 2005, and 2006; most of the transactions were unlikely to have been

⁶⁴ This is 7.5 percent of the price. Although I have not been able to check the legislation, it seems unlikely that this percentage is required by state law. More plausibly, it is the outcome of an agreement between the Mayor and the village authorities, headed by the village council, who often negotiate the price of such services. This occurred, for example, in relation to identity card photocopies (documents most demanded in 'legalized' form by various state agencies), which was 'agreed' by local authorities at 2,500 CFA Francs.

registered. The frequency of registered land sales from one year to another appeared not to follow any intelligible pattern.⁶⁵

Land sales and hospitality

Since people have started resorting to paper documents in land sales, particular kinds of land disputes have emerged. The most recurrent scenario is when a seller's kinsman claims that the person who sold the land was not entitled to dispose of it. Typically, an older brother of the seller will claim to have been unaware of the transaction at the time it took place. It is claimed to be unacceptable that a single person take an action such as selling the land: although the headman of a group may, in principle, dispose of the land rights of its members, such power is often contested.

Different agencies are called upon to settle land disputes and, although the involvement of state authorities such as the Mayor and the municipal officials, together with the use of written documents, may seem a recent phenomenon, it represents in fact continuity with the practices of land dispute settlement of colonial times, when the *Commandant de Cercle*, and later the *Chef d'Arrondissement* (today the first has been suppressed while the second is the Sub-Prefect), were very much involved in such matters (Keita 2003:23).

Both buyer and seller use *attestations* as a means to sell land while keeping fellow lineage members, who may claim to have some right to it, in the dark. Amongst the seller's kin, for example, it may be contested that the seller is the individual with the power to dispose of family land. Even if he is recognized as having the right to act in this way, it may be disputed whether he correctly disclosed information both to those who are most directly concerned (for example his younger brothers) and to those holding customary – although not always effective – control over the land, notably the elders of the lineage.

⁶⁵ Three transactions were registered for 1999, five for 2000, five for 2001, 31 for 2002, six for 2004, 12 for 2007, 15 for 2008. Such variation in the quantity of land sales is not supported by qualitative findings, since all my informants suggested a steady increase of attestations over the last years.

In this sense, the *attestation de vente* offers the seller the opportunity to market family land with a degree of security accepted by the buyer, even if he fails to disclose his intentions to all those who would be normally required by local, traditional law to show their agreement.⁶⁶

In the same way, the document may offer the buyer a relatively secure way to acquire land, while also avoiding an ostentatious display of wealth before members of his extended family, who may claim a right to use the newly bought land. In cases like the one presented below, a buyer who is a late-comer in the village resorts to the *attestation* in order to bypass his hosts' involvement in the sale. In this case, the written land sale disrupts the language of hospitality by introducing the possibility of receiving some land without involving one's host, leading to a kind of land sale that literate informants described to me (in French) as '*secret et anarchique*' (secret and anarchic, see page 79 above).

Secrecy is in fact one of the most recurrent concepts associated with written land sales in Bancoumana, just as with other actions related to money, no matter whether the monetary gain is real or merely hoped for. In the case of land sales in Bancoumana, the fact of resorting to writing is perceived by most informants in a strikingly different way than in Western legal culture, where the more secure and long-lasting effects of the written over the oral form are almost a matter of common sense (*verba volant, scripta manent*) also acknowledged by the law requiring the written form for valuable transactions. The hidden character of the written, formal document gives it a very different character from that entailed in such transactions. Here, it is the secrecy that is intended to achieve fixity, whereas transparency would render it subject to possible dispute. But even its formality may further unsettle, rather than 'fixing,' ownership. As shown by various analyses of land reform in a variety of African contexts, the recourse to written documents and the enforcement of land titling may often result in further insecurity of tenure (Shipton and Goheen 1992:316ff; Platteau 1996; Lund 2001:151ff).

⁶⁶ Agreement here refers generally to the consent of various peoples, from younger brothers to the lineage elders, in very different positions in relation to both the seller and the piece of land in question. The binding nature of their agreement, or the efficacy of their eventual disagreement, varies accordingly. For example, the agreement of an older brother (especially if living in the same compound) would be perceived as more required and more binding than that of a younger brother.

Despite attempts at concealment, when either a buyer or a seller resorts to the *attestation* in order to conceal such a transaction from his kin, he is normally unable to avoid facing the social consequences of his choice. Disputes frequently arise in these cases, usually involving claims of land restitution, either within the buyer's or the seller's lineage or both. Given that claims about lack of information are an often-used pretext, one never knows in such disputes whether the claimants were actually informed of the sale or not. Further it is not certain whether customary law truly requires agreement of the whole family and, if so, with what degree of effectiveness. In other words, all these issues are the subject of constant negotiation and all are evoked by the litigants in very circumstantial ways.

A written document such as the *attestation* may give an extremely unreliable degree of security to both the seller and the buyer (depending on who may later contest the sale and try to claim back the land), but it is at any rate better than nothing in many cases. Ultimately, it offers a way to circumvent some restrictions on access to land (and its possible non-agricultural uses) in the locality established by customary law, adapting the local land tenure system to the increasing need for money. Such a use of the written document was particularly favoured by literate, late-comer informants during my fieldwork, as the case study below illustrates.

A land dispute between two different types of late-comers

Cheickneba Traore is a retired official in his late 60s, who spent the last part of his career in Bancoumana working for a government project on adult literacy (*baliku kalan*). He arrived in the village more than 20 years ago to take that office. At the time, he had just lost his entire nuclear family (wife and children) in a boat accident near Segou, where he was serving as Sub-Prefect (a respectable post in the Malian administrative career). He moved to Bancoumana, accepting the undoubtedly less prestigious position of *baliku kalan* agent. After a few years, he re-married. His new wife, Djeneba Coulibaly, an educated woman, employed in Bancoumana by the local para-statal agency for agricultural development (OHVN), bore him two children. At the time of my fieldwork one was studying in Bamako while his younger brother was living

in Traore's compound in Bancoumana with a few other siblings (classificatory brothers) of his age.

Like every foreigner, Traore was given a host, Namakan Camara,⁶⁷ who provided him with the village land plot where he built his house in a modern style: iron roofed, painted and made from concrete bricks, looking like the houses of other salaried, schooled persons in Bancoumana. Similar to other salaried people in the village, Traore soon realized that by farming one field he could support his family while saving the salary for consumption goods or other activities. He started looking for a piece of land for farming.

There are many and various reasons why foreigners like Traore, who were able to make a living from their salary, try to acquire some farming land in Bancoumana, either by borrowing it from their hosts or by buying it with or without the agreement of the latter. The most obvious reason is to make an investment, allowing them to re-sell the land in case they have to move elsewhere. Others relate to other aspects of the integration of a foreigner in the village. Salaried people generally do not like to show that they have money and that they are making a living without even touching the land. Moreover, by having their children farm they benefit from free labour while giving them an education and a life-style that helps them to conform to local standards. Not least, many literate newcomers also like to show that the knowledge they have acquired through schooling and working, combined with their ability to afford the price of fertilizers, gives them better harvests than non-schooled farmers. In this light, the desire to be seen 'to be farming as everyone else does' may have motivated a literate foreigner like Traore to buy a plot of agricultural land in Bancoumana.

As is the case with other salaried officials, instead of asking his host for land, Traore preferred to buy a plot when he could afford it, from a farmer who was not related either to him or to his host, but was a neighbour in need of some money. Moreover, rather than asking his host to act as intermediary in the sale, Traore bought his field without informing him about the transaction between himself and his neighbour Jidjigui Diarra.

⁶⁷ There are no exceptions in the village: all 252 late-comer compound headmen who have been interviewed for my survey were able to indicate their *jatigui* (host).

His choice is likely to have been related to a desire to distance him from his host family (in order to avoid the tradition of the guest and his descendants farming in the interest of the host) and to affirm his financial independence. The decision, while it may have achieved these ends in the short term, resulted in a land dispute 20 years later.

Jadjigui Diarra is a late-comer like Traore, but one in a rather different position: one which did not permit the claiming of similar rights to the land. While Traore is a literate outsider who moved to Bancoumana to assume his office, Diarra's family settled there earlier and has a well-established social role as blacksmiths of the Soridiana lineage.⁶⁸ Diarra – the oldest among his co-resident brothers – is, and was at the time of the sale a compound headman. He is also well known because of his role as town crier. Almost every evening at sunset time, his loud voice, anticipated by a series of beatings on his drum, shouts public announcements, such as decisions taken by *tontiguiw* or summonses for members of a particular age group (see Chapter Five) for public interest works to be held the next day.⁶⁹

At the time of the land sale, Diarra and his nuclear family were left alone to take care of his mother, all his younger brothers having migrated to Côte d'Ivoire. Confronted with the duty of taking care of her and with no support from his brothers for the farming of the family fields, Diarra decided to sell two hectares of his agricultural land to Traore for 50,000 CFA Francs (£70).

A written document was produced and signed by a number of witnesses, among them the headman of the seller's lineage, El Hadji Messere (see page 121 above). Being a *nyamakala* (caste man) attached to the Soridiana lineage, it is very unlikely that Diarra could have sold or borrowed his land without the consent of the head of his lineage: dependent men are, in fact, expected to show that they received the land from their

⁶⁸ Although I was told that Diarra's family was one of blacksmiths, his patronymic would be exceptional in Bancoumana, associated with that professional specialization. All blacksmith compounds are in fact Sinayogo or Sinaba (see page 127ff above). It might be that the family immigrated to Bancoumana from a place where they were socially considered as blacksmiths and they kept that status, or that they were of lower status – *nyamakalaw* or captives – and they are now addressed as blacksmiths. On the fluid and dynamic nature of these social distinctions, see Conrad and Frank (1995); see also Chapter One (page 28ff).

⁶⁹ Diarra's role as town crier, along with public announcing during ceremonies, message-carrying and inter-mediation in general, requires lower caste status and would not be performed by people of noble descent.

patrons and, in principle although not in practice, they are not supposed to be allowed to practice farming, as they have another professional specialization.

Moreover, thanks to his connections in public administration, Traore managed to get the sale document signed by the Sub-Prefect of Sibi, i.e. the competent administrative authority (government representative) before the office of Mayor was created. Although not unusual at the time, the written form of the transaction and the Sub-Prefect's involvement can be related to both Traore's connection to the public administration (he was a former Sub-Prefect) and his literate late-comer status in the village. As explained below, however, Traore was unable to make any use of such written document in the course of the dispute, not even in front of the Mayor who objected that it was not 'legalized,' i.e. registered and stamped by a public official after payment of a special tax (not simply signed as had the Sub-Prefect).

In 2008, toward the end of my fieldwork, a younger brother of Diarra returned from the Côte d'Ivoire to settle in Bancoumana. After some time, he informed Traore that his family was now in need of the field that had been sold to him 20 years earlier by his older brother Diarra. He professed that, having been absent at the time of the sale, he had not been in a position to give his consent to the sale of family land. Now that he was back and needed to support his family, it was his right to claim it back.

Traore turned to the seller Diarra, who seemed to take his side against his younger brother, but also said he did not know what to do, given that his younger brother was refusing to acknowledge his authority as head of the family.⁷⁰ He repeated to Traore that, at the time of the sale, he had given the due information to his host lineage headman in front of witnesses. He also affirmed that all his younger brothers had agreed to sell the land in order to support their aged mother, given that Diarra was the only member of the family who had not left Bancoumana. Indeed, he added, all his younger brothers, including the litigant, would have been compelled to take that same decision to sell, given the migration of the majority of the family's farming workforce to Côte d'Ivoire.

⁷⁰ Different from what was observed above (p.144), in this case, it is a younger (not an older) brother returning home from migration and trying to claim back the land that was sold by his family.

My informants, who were friends of Traore (the buyer), commented that during the last two decades the younger brother of Diarra (the seller) had visited his family in Bancoumana at least four times, but had never previously contested Traore's property.⁷¹ They shared with Traore the feeling that Diarra's younger brother was short of money rather than having any deep desire to start farming: having realized that land was now more fungible than at the time of the sale, he was trying to claim the field back in order to re-sell it. Now, they commented, a two hectares field is worth 500,000 CFA Francs (£700), i.e. ten times the price paid by Traore.

These friends also noted that by claiming back Traore's land at this moment, Diarra's younger brother was hoping to take advantage of the death of El Hadji Messere, the headmen of the Soridiana lineage who, by witnessing the sale, had approved his caste man Diarra's decision (Messere died in April 2008, shortly after the dispute arose). My informants stated that if Messere had still been alive this dispute could have never progressed, and would have been settled within the seller's lineage in favour of Traore: both because Messere had witnessed and agreed to the sale of Soridiana land and because of his well-known mentoring and protective attitude toward foreigners (especially literate people), more even than to his own direct dependents.

By the time the dispute started, Traore was getting older and increasingly ill. At the beginning of the agricultural season in May 2008, his illness required him to spend an entire month in Bamako for hospital treatment. Diarra's brother took advantage of his absence to move from words to deeds and had a section of Traore's field ploughed. When he recovered and returned to the village, Traore was very discouraged and told me that his case had been 'turned down by village authorities.' He lamented that the dispute could have been settled within their host lineages (in particular within Soridiana, the lineage of the seller), but that authorities within the lineages had been very dismissive for several reasons.

Within Traore's lineage (Kolonwulena), his host regretted that he was not in a position to defend him, because he had not been properly involved at the time of the sale. This

⁷¹ The case of Traore raised a significant concern among his friends, who also played a remarkable role in reaching the final settlement, see later in the text (page 152).

lack of involvement was also blamed *ex post facto* by Traore's friends as the mistake which had lain at the origins of the whole dispute: if his *jatigui* (host) had been involved in the sale or at least informed in advance, Traore could have relied much more on his support in the dispute.

In the seller's lineage, in turn, the death of El Hadji Messere and the transitional period of his succession was certainly taken by Diarra's family as an opportunity to claim back some land. Furthermore, Fadensé 'Suruni' (the short), who was expected to succeed Messere as Soridiana lineage headman after a period of mourning of four months, did not have the same reputation as mentor and protector of literate foreigners. Finally, as Traore commented, his status as a foreigner had meant a failure by the 'traditional authorities' – who could have settled his dispute by discouraging his opponent's claims – to take the matter seriously enough and to deal with it timeously.

Unable to have his case settled by lineages, Traore turned to the village council, an hybrid institution which acts as an interface between, on the one side, the more lineage-based powers holding control of the land such as the *gwatiguiw* (extended family headmen) and the lineage headmen (*kabilatiguiw*) and, on the other, the 'official' political authorities with little control of land issues such as the Mayor and the municipal councillors.⁷² In June 2008 he paid a visit to Makan Camara – my host, who served as village first councillor (*Premier Conseiller*). The latter probably informed the other village councillors, but he was unable to do more than to summon Diarra and his brother. He heard from them, but then declared that, as such a dispute exceeded his competence, he was unable to settle it.

Traore was invited to turn to the municipality which gave him, in his view, the last possible chance of having his case settled.⁷³ It is uncertain whether the Mayor was

⁷² This institution is made by 13 representatives of the three lineages: five members each for Soridiana and Farana, and three members of the less numerous Kolonwulena lineage. More on the village council and on its history as institution created by the colonizers in order to collect head-tax and re-invented today as 'traditional' in Chapter Six.

⁷³ Going to court (*tribunal de première instance*) is possible, but rarely practiced when the disputed land is not registered in the *registre foncier*, although in this case the judge is fully competent to settle the dispute being assisted by two assistants (*assesseurs à la coutume*) who are in charge of advising the judge on 'traditional law' (*coutume*). Apart from the high costs of the procedure (increased by diffused corruption), the decision is unlikely to be enforced without a more 'local' agreement between the parties and their lineages.

involved, but I suspect that Traore avoided this official's involvement because he knew a bribe of a considerable sum would be required to settle the matter in his favour and that this investment would be risky, considering that the Mayor's term of office was about to expire. Instead, Traore spoke to one of the three deputies assisting the Mayor (*adjoints*) – perhaps placing a certain reliance on the commonality of their official positions – who tried to negotiate an arrangement between the two parties. The deputy heard from both and tried to convince Traore to return the field to the Diarra, for a sum larger than the original price, with Diarra's promise that the field would not be re-sold so long as Traore lived ('under Traore's eyes,' as I was told).

While Traore was close to accepting the conditions suggested by the deputy, his friends played a significant role convincing him to resist. They felt extremely concerned by the case, not only because of friendship ties, but also in their capacity of educated late-comers and farmers of land that many of them had bought with their salaries. As well as providing Traore with daily advice – *ka ladilikan d'a ma*, a significant expression of friendship in Mande – his literate late-comer friends took the case of Traore as an example of the fact that strangers can always be dispossessed of the land in Bancoumana and that transactions are never certain, no matter how much money was paid and documents exchanged.

From then on, the agricultural season was almost finished and the field remained uncultivated, except for the part ploughed by Diarra's brother: this was another reason that persuaded Traore not to capitulate so quickly. When I left Bancoumana, in December 2008, the dispute was still ongoing, but an agreement was then reached at the start of the following agricultural season. The field was split equally by the parties (one hectare each) without any further monetary compensation. However, municipal elections were held in May 2009 and a new Mayor, Adama Dantouma Camara, took office along with a new set of deputies. This delayed the production of a written document signed by witnesses (by some of his friends, for Traore) and legalized by the Mayor. When this finally occurs, it is not unlikely that the dispute may be revived, resulting in a different outcome.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this chapter has suggested that land is an important attribute of political leadership in Bancoumana and that the control of access to it through rules of ‘hospitality’ expresses the legitimate rule of a group of ‘autochthonous’ Camara people. On the one hand, the socially codified system of *jatiguiya* (hospitality) provides an ideological apparatus justifying the primacy of first-comers and their sentiment of belonging to the ancestral land. On the other, such a system results in a relatively clear and non-negotiable social distinction between this group of Camara first-settlers and other non-autochthonous, and non-Camara people. The principle of anteriority of settlement, coupled with the right to rule reserved (in principle) to Camara people of ‘noble’ descent, underpin such distinction limiting in very practical ways access to land and to political power.

The distinction between first-comers and late-comers, however, is not as clear-cut a dichotomy as it might seem at first sight. Rather, it is a status distinction performed in complex ways (subtly, and often tacitly). A closer look at the various kinds of guest and dependent people in Bancoumana, some of whom may have settled a long time before and may also be autochthonous without openly claiming such status (see Table 1), has suggested that the categories of first-comer and late-comer are, in fact, internally diversified.

The analysis of the dispute between Traore and Diarra shows not only that not all late-comers are equals, but also that the mobilization of one’s relations of dependence is crucial in securing one’s access to land. Timing of the dispute – taking advantage of the death of the lineage headman who had witnessed the original land sale – is extremely significant at this regard. More generally, the use of the distinction between first-comers and late-comers has been described as highly circumstantial, being deployed with a variable degree of intensity depending on context and particular stakes.

Although the line between ‘the people from here’ and others is strongly articulated in society, some room for strategic manoeuvre appears to exist. It is important to observe, however, that the multiple ways in which this dichotomy can be handled and performed, and the blurring of the boundary between the two, seem to constitute a much more

important skill now than it did historically. We observed such a strategy being consistently employed in the village foundation narrative, clearly aimed – in the context of present-day disputes – at legitimating Bancoumana as a polity controlling its own territory. We can now conclude that similar manipulations of past events would be less successful in disputes between people whose status in society is less easily contestable or manipulable, because such a status is grounded in a relatively recent, still remembered, and therefore less negotiable past.

The idiom of hospitality provides one example of subtleness in handling the dichotomousness of categories such as first-comers and late-comers, and in consequently performing social distinctions based on status. The analysis reveals more than a set of rules – more or less rigidly applied – through which the elite group of autochthonous people tries to control late-comers' access to land, while also granting to the latter some legitimate access to an important productive resource. More importantly, I have shown that by referring to the rules and principle of hospitality, social actors in Bancoumana articulate political relations of dependence using a single idiom, a whole set of attitudes and behaviours shared to an extent (although contested) by people in structurally different position such as first-comers and late-comers.

Since land is an attribute of political leadership and an important symbol of legitimate rule, it is clear that dependent relations concerning access to it, as well as the use of this important resource, are of crucial importance for the understanding of the local political process in Bancoumana. However, the last part of the chapter, involving the dispute between Traore and Diarra, has made clear that 'hospitality' is only one strategy employed by late-comers to secure their interests. Another way, not necessarily an alternative to the former, is to resort to a written document called *attestation de vente*. In the dispute between the two late-comers, negotiation of the litigants' status and relations of dependence with 'autochthonous' people seemed to be pitted against written documents. The involvement of the Mayor and the municipality, however, suggests that the recourse to written legal-bureaucratic instruments such as the *attestations de vente* may, in the future, affect Bancoumana's land tenure system.

The analysis of these atypical legal instruments, conceived originally for the purpose of certifying one's identity, but used in practice to secure land transactions, has introduced

some complexity into the picture presented at the beginning of the chapter: rules and principles of hospitality are in fact mobilized through – and occasionally against – such written documents.

On the one hand the meaning attributed to hospitality seems to be undergoing a process of change: from managing access to land as a non-commoditised resource crucial for both productive and political relations to a socially accepted way of selling the land as a commodity. On the other hand, however, the increasing involvement of municipal authorities in (perhaps increasingly frequent) land sales does not automatically imply greater state control over land. Indeed this occurrence has been questioned by showing the lack of effectiveness of the state's complex, bureaucratized system of land registration. Apart from being extremely costly, state control over land seems to be successfully resisted by Bancoumana as a semi-autonomous polity. In Chapter Six we will see the same thing happening in relation to the collection of taxes.

Chapter Five

Group Farming: the exchange and performance of agricultural work

Introduction

In the local agricultural economy of Bancoumana, work is normally shared and undertaken by mostly same-sex groups. Working groups (also known as ‘work parties’ in the anthropological literature, e.g. Saul 1983) are constituted for disparate tasks and can take a variety of forms, from the compound – the most common unit mobilizing labour analysed in Chapter Three – extending to various other associations of kin, neighbours, friends and the like. Among these, cohorts of ‘people circumcised together’ or groups of people of similar age, sometimes called ‘regiments’ or ‘age-sets,’ play a significant role both in terms of the energy they put into agriculture and with regard to their local reputation.

Working groups can be understood in different ways: from an economic point of view, for example, they consist of arrangements of work-sharing or of exchange of labour in return for a payment (in money or ‘in kind’); but they can also be considered as social entities, offering solidarity and mutual help, and acting as the elements of a larger socio-political configuration. Age groups in Bancoumana present all these aspects. They have many traits in common with more provisional sharing arrangements, such as associations of people aimed at accessing agricultural credit, buying fertilizers, selling crops after harvest or farming onion fields during the dry season, and yet are recognized as distinct from these.

Age groups attracted my attention because analogous associations are widespread in Africa, having been studied by an older generation of anthropologists interested in ‘social structure’ and socio-political institutions (see below for a brief review). My own concerns are also political in character, but in a different way. The analysis will focus on one particular age group – the Sina kari – numbering people of my own age and also

including three of my host family members: Lanceni, Bourama and Abou (see Chapter Three). Although my participation was not requested, as was probably appropriate for a temporary guest and a researcher, I was associated with the Sina kari and I intermittently joined it for farming and various other activities during my fieldwork

In the description of the Sina kari working day, special emphasis will be put on the repertoire of behavioural codes and patterns which give age-group farming a ritual character, and which distinguish various kinds of farming in formal terms. A particularly prominent aspect of codified behaviour is played by structured speaking. By showing how these aspects matter crucially for the performance of particular kinds of work in Bancoumana – not entirely commensurable to money, i.e. where work is not entirely commoditised – this chapter will more broadly illuminate important aspects of collective and political agency.

Weeding together

Along with other groups, such as gatherings of friends (*grins*) and farming associations (*tonw*), age groups meet a considerable part of the local demand for group workforce in Bancoumana. The presence of a variably sized group of farmers working in one field is especially needed at bottleneck periods in the agricultural cycle and for particular tasks such as weeding during June to September, the rainiest months. At this time, weeds grow particularly fast, hindering the development of crops and needing to be removed in order to have a good harvest.

Short of resorting to expensive herbicides, there are no mechanized methods of weeding in Bancoumana. The use of ox ploughs, which in other areas is adapted to weeding, is limited by the uneven way most fields are seeded in Bancoumana: even when seed-drills are employed (i.e. seeds are not planted by hand, as is also the case), the spacing between rows is not regular enough to allow for the use of weed-ploughs.

At both ends of the agricultural cycle (April-May and October-November), age groups may also be in great demand for sowing, labouring, harvesting and processing the harvest. All these activities benefit greatly from being performed in a short time by a large group rather than by a smaller number of labourers over a longer period. In the

case of weeding, which this chapter addresses in detail, one of the needs for unusually large groups of labourers (sometimes the whole compound workforce) is that fields need to be weeded more intensely and repeatedly during the first stage of growth of the cereals. Furthermore, if all weeds are eliminated at the same time, crops can develop uniformly and their growth will not be affected differently for different areas of the field. After a certain stage in their growth, crops do not benefit significantly from weeding.

The work provided by age groups in Bancoumana can take various forms. Two of these which relate to farming – ‘*bonda baara*’ and ‘*contrat*’ – will be analysed in some depth in this chapter. A different kind, unrelated to farming and referred to more generally as ‘*kari baara*,’ will be also briefly discussed. A detailed description of one day of farming the fields with the Sina kari will foreground elements such as speaking and commensality, showing the crucial part they play in defining the particular kind of interaction between the farming group and its ‘hosts’ (the landlord family), hence distinguishing one kind of kari farming from another.

‘The people circumcised together’ as social institution

After puberty, all Bancoumana residents, irrespective of any difference in descent and status, integrate by joining age-based groups called kariw (sing. kari). Differentiated by sex, these groups are widespread in Africa and elsewhere. They have attracted the attention of anthropologists for a considerable time (as far back as Radcliffe-Brown 1929). In particular, they have been widely researched in relation to political organization in both East and West African societies.

Starting from Evans-Pritchard’s and Fortes’ seminal classification of African political systems as divided between the poles of ‘state’ and ‘stateless’ societies (1944), age groups have been studied comparatively. By raising the question of how they fit with the models of political organization based on lineage and descent, age groups present anthropologists with an opportunity to nuance the rigidity of descent theory in studying societies allegedly ‘without a state.’ Authors following Evans-Pritchard maintain that age groups play a complementary role in political organization in relation to lineage, given that descent is the primary principle of political organization. Others, like

Middleton and Tait in *Tribes Without Rulers* (1958), argue that age groups are the elements of a different, more egalitarian type of political system to be distinguished from the type based on lineage.

The subsequent debate gave rise to a number of cross-cultural analyses, general theories and comparative studies of age and age groups in Africa and beyond (Eisenstadt 1954; Stewart 1977; Bernardi 1985). It also divided West African anthropologists, insisting on the overwhelming importance of lineage and descent (e.g. Paulme 1971) from East Africanists, who observed instead that age groups were more fundamental institutions in the societies studied by them (Baxter and Almagor 1978).

In Bancoumana, age groups are described as being formed on the basis of the common experience of circumcision (*bolokoli*, literally ‘washing of the hands’): a key marker distinguishing phases in the life course. While this is considered to turn boys into young men, girls’ status does not change to that of a woman (*muso*) until she marries (Arnoldi 1995:153). In Bancoumana, young people (both boys and girls) are addressed with the same term *kamalen* when circumcised but unmarried. Unlike the formation of age groups, circumcision has lost today some of its meaning as a rite of passage: it is rather interpreted as a religious practice (associated with Islam) and in many cases it is performed at an earlier age than that which marks the association of young people into age groups. The association with circumcision, however, is still an important element of age group characterization and identity, as illustrated by the fact that kariw are defined as ‘the people circumcised together.’

As documented by earlier anthropology of the Mande area, the formation of age groups marked the end of a village-wide ceremony of circumcision (Leynaud 1966; Cissé and Leynaud 1978). Nowadays, children in Bancoumana (both boys and girls) normally are circumcised within the first ten years of age, while in the past this operation was performed at the age of puberty (around fifteen years) within the same ritual context of age group formation.⁷⁴ The operation is done in small groups or even individually, often by a doctor at the local health centre. The cohorts in which young boys and girls (both

⁷⁴ For a recent account of a circumcision ceremony in Mande assessing its change over time, see Jansen (2009:116-118).

are circumcised) are grouped by decision of the lineage elders, in turn, may be formed even ten years later than circumcision: at around the age circumcision is reported to have been practiced in the past.

So, in contrast to the past, being circumcised ‘together’ means today at around the same period of time, no longer in a single, village-wide ceremony. Despite this, the periods of time immediately before the operation and, even more, the aftermath, are marked by collective practices and celebrations. Groups of neighbours, kin and friends whose children are circumcised at the same time share some of the expenses families incur in similar circumstances. It is not uncommon, however, to find children whose circumcision was isolated and not followed by particular celebrations, especially among people recently settled in the area.

Every group of men is associated with one or more groups of women on a day in which elders proclaim that groups have been formed. Male age groups can be associated to more than one female group (*kari-musow*), because they are less numerous than female ones. This is explained by differences in the activities male and female groups normally engage in, requiring groups of different size (not by demography as suggested by some informants). Although some of them suggested that female groups were more numerous because there were more women than men in the village, this interpretation is challenged by my census data, numbering the resident population of Bancoumana in 4040 men and 4299 women (48 and 52 percent respectively). While the main occupation of female groups is preparing, cooking and transporting food, which can be done in small groups or by clusters of groups, male groups mainly engage in farming, an activity benefiting from larger groups of labourers, particularly for weeding.

This discrepancy between numbers of male and female groups is likely to be recent. People remember equal numbers of associated *kariw*, and complain that age groups have been progressively understaffed by schooling and migration. While female groups simply became smaller in size, the frequency of male *kari* formation had to be slowed down, because of the need for cohorts of men large enough to farm effectively.

Pointing to the different frequency with which male and female groups are formed, some informants remarked that, while two full brothers (sons of the same mother) may

find themselves in the same age group – a fact perceived as an anomaly, since it disrupts the egalitarian relationship among the same age group members – this is never the case for full sisters. In fact, it should be noted that, unlike men, many women marry outside the village and many others who become members of a female age group come from elsewhere. For this reason, it is much more unlikely for full sisters to integrate in the same group.

Emphasizing the limited nature of available agricultural group work in Bancoumana, the elders also refer to a ‘custom’ which would require a new age group to be constituted every three years. Although it seems unlikely that groups were formed after such an interval of years in the Gregorian calendar, this information suggests the following rationale: that the sons of the same mother would be unlikely to integrate in the same age group. Indeed, this occurrence is an image frequently evoked when complaining about the slowing rhythm of kari formation. Migrants and students beyond secondary school are excused from kari work (even for the time they reside in the village). Both are often attributed a status of ‘hero-rebel’ implying the suspension of many of the obligations required of age-mates (Bird and Kendall 1980:22). In consequence, age groups are understaffed and it now takes more time to constitute a cohort numerous enough to farm the fields.

Particularly ‘rosy’ versions of the past are likely to be evoked in these discussions. However, beyond the historical/chronological accuracy, these claims highlight the important role played by dynamics such as schooling and migration in the understaffing of age groups and the disruption of values such as egalitarian membership, which now conflicts with the rules of seniority to be observed between full brothers.

<i>Kari name</i>	<i>Known members/observations</i>	<i>Year of birth</i>	
Tamba kari	El Hajj Messere (only surviving member, who died in April 2008)	1905	} Senior/‘retired’ groups
Banjugu kari	-	-	
Lamine kunba kari	-	-	
Mambi kari	-	-	
Lamine gnemé kari	-	-	
Tantan kari kunba	-	-	
Tamba kari	Host compound head Nanamori	1926	
Kaba Lamine kari	-	-	} <i>Tontiguiw</i> : age groups coordinators and village police
Adama kari	Host and village first councillor Makan Camara	1939	
Tantan kari	-	-	
Shaka kari	-	-	
Shebou kari	-	-	
Adama kari	Holding the <i>tontiguiya</i> (see in the text) until early April 2008	-	
Moussa kari	Host compound brother Abou. This age group succeeded the Adama kari as <i>tontiguiw</i> in early April 2008	1965	
Lamine kari	Host compound brother Yacouba	1973	} Junior/‘active’ groups
Sina kari	Host compound brothers Bourama and Lanceni	1980, 1982	
Jah kari	Host compound brothers Bakari and Adama. This and the following group are considered ‘too young’ for kari work (see in the text).	1985	
Solimaw kari	The kari of the ‘[just] circumcised,’ a generic name indicating the most recently formed age group	-	

Table 2. Chronological list of age groups

The cycle of age group formation and the relations among the members

The order of succession of age groups (see Table 2) allows every individual to be ‘located’ in time according to his age and in relation to other people belonging to a different generation. Therefore, as in other settings (James 1996:34ff; 1999:110ff), the cycle of kari formation provides one way in which people account for the passing of time in Bancoumana. Of course, there are other time markers, like the Gregorian and the Muslim calendar, concurring with this temporality; but the cycle of kari formation gains particular relevance in many circumstances in which rules of seniority are mobilized, such as the way interlocutors should address themselves, the possibility to joke or tease each other, or the particular deference one may or may not be expected to show to the other. In similar instances age – and its consequences for social relations – is understood in generational terms and according to the cycle of kari formation, rather than in Gregorian years.

Age group members are bound to each other (and to the members of the associated groups of opposite sex) by strong and life-long-enduring bonds of solidarity. The relationship implied by these bonds is often characterized by employing a kinship idiom. In particular, members of the same age group are spoken of as twins (*fla*): a central concept in Mande cosmology (Tamari 2001; Dieterlen 1959).

The twin term is significant for two reasons. First, it implies that group members are peers and therefore rules of seniority are suspended. This means that, among the people of one same age group, there are neither ‘older’ or ‘younger’ brothers, nor classificatory ‘fathers’ and ‘sons’: all the members should consider and address themselves as equals with respect to age, as if age was calculated not in Gregorian years but in cycles of kari formation. One exception to this principle, regarding the appointment of the group’s headmen, will be analysed later.

The second aspect of relevance is that the term twin establishes a fictive kinship relation of the strongest kind, because twins are necessarily children of the same mother (*badenw*). This evokes the strongest possible social bond in Mande: the sentiment of uterine brotherhood by which two members of the same age group are expected to

support one another and to keep conflict and disagreement far from their relationship (see Chapter Three).

As shown in Table 2, in 2008, there were 18 age groups in Bancoumana. Two-thirds of these (12 groups) were of senior status, i.e. there were no longer engaging in group farming, nor in non-agricultural work of the *kari baara* kind described below. Considering their condition of ‘retirement,’ people evoke membership in one or other of these groups mainly when principles of seniority have to be used.

Codes of seniority implied by membership in a particular age group matter in determining the order of the speakers, the length of time allotted for their speeches, and the eloquence that can be expected from them, on occasions such as group discussions, ceremonies and other political rituals (receptions, inaugurations, etc.). In such circumstances, it is normally expected that the right to speak circulates from youngest to oldest, within different classes of speakers, and from lower to higher status: first, dependent and ‘caste’ people and then people from ‘noble’ descent.

The inter-generational order reflected by age groups is also of importance in determining how people should politely address each other using titles such as ‘older brother’ (*koro*) and ‘younger brother’ (*dogo*), or ‘father’ (*fa*) and ‘son’ (*den*), common modes of address which determine the appropriate register of a conversation.

It has been reported to me that, while forming age groups in more recent years, disputes have arisen in order to determine the oldest classificatory father, i.e. the headman of the group (see below in this chapter) due to the fact that have people resorted to birth certificates, issued by the local municipality on the basis of the registry of the *cartes de famille* (see next chapter). Similar to other kinds of ‘chiefs’ or headmen, notably the village chief (*dugutigui*), this office is spoken of as pertaining to the oldest man of the most senior generation, but competition among various candidates is the normal case. Similar to what was noted in the last chapter with reference to land, this issue suggests that resorting to written bureaucratic documents does not necessarily solve conflicts by clarifying otherwise disputable facts: it can also increase conflict and uncertainty.

The six younger age groups (‘juniors’ in Table 2) play a considerable role as the village collective workforce, particularly for farming. They are sometimes addressed as a single

cohort as *la jeunesse* (or *dugu ton*, village group in Mandenkakan): a term reminiscent of the short socialist era under Mali's first President Modibo Keita (1960-1968), when the state tried to incorporate into the one party organisation these 'traditional' institutions and agricultural cooperatives (Amselle 1978; Cissé and Leynaud 1978).

The use of kinship concepts and terms of address is pervasive, but complex. First, members of the same age group are commonly referred to as twin siblings. Second, the relationship between people in a set of groups (such as the seniors) is one of brotherhood as structured by age: therefore, the respective members will address each other as 'older brother' and 'younger brother,' but will not think of themselves as from the same mother. Finally, the relationship between junior and senior age groups is treated as one of (classificatory) fathers and sons, and, in this case only, also furnishes terms of address.

The passage to seniority

The passage from junior to senior status is not an abrupt one; instead it is marked by a liminal status called *tontiguiya*. Among other things, the position of oldest among the group of juniors (or, conversely, of youngest among the 'fathers') confers on the kari of *tontiguiw* a power to control all junior age groups and the right to act as the village 'police,' including administering fines and punishments. All male age groups succeed to this position for a number of years, while no comparable functions are attributed to female groups.

There is no regular interval of years for the passage of *tontiguiya* from one group to another: some group may hold it for a variable number of years depending on the formation of new junior age groups and ultimately on the elders' decision. By acquiring senior status, the age group of the *tontiguiw* symbolically returns the power to the elders, who will then entrust it to the following age group.

The power of directing all junior age groups can encompass different things. It can consist, for example, of organizing cohorts of young people – usually less numerous than kariw, but based on age group membership – who will do some collective work, like the construction of a building. This is referred to as *kari baara* (literally, 'work by

the kari'). During my fieldwork, this was the case for some buildings that were required as the village contribution towards the establishment of various development projects.

Kari baara may also consist of the preparation of a village reception, as I witnessed in April 2008, when the President of the Republic (Amadou Toumani Toure) paid a short visit on his way to the neighbouring village of Kangaba. On this occasion two age groups (the *tontiguiw* and the group that will succeed to them) provided more than 100 kg of rice and were involved in the slaughtering of animals and the organization of the reception.

The *tontiguiw* also hold the power of policing the village (and fields), holding court, administering fines and sanctions including lashing people held responsible for serious offences. This happens on the little square on the southern edge of the village, where the founding sacrifice is reported to have been made and where the *tontiguiw* gather in assembly, next to the ruins of the most ancient mosque. As I witnessed on two occasions during my fieldwork, the offender is tied to a wooden pole called 'tree of shame' (*malobalini*) and lashed. The very tense and dramatic situation surrounding this punishment on both occasions I witnessed – with the offender being dragged, handcuffed all over the village and imprisoned in various places before being lashed and chased from the village – was theatrically managed by the *tontiguiw* in front of a public of hundreds of young men and women, while no other people were allowed to intervene.

By charging money fines, the *tontiguiw* collect significant amounts of money. They seize wandering animals and forbid people to fish or collect fruit at specific times when such activities are not allowed. The power of the *tontiguiw* of policing the village and the bush collide at some point with that of the 'hunters' (*donsow*) who also patrol the bush and the village at night. They are members of the association called *donso ton*, which, in contrast to age groups, men join on a voluntary basis.

The *tontiguiya* passes from one adult age group of *tontiguiw* to the one immediately following by decision of village elders, as indeed happened in April 2008 during my fieldwork. As expected, the transition occurred during the dry season – a period of relative rest in the agricultural cycle – requiring less intense action for the *tontiguiw*,

whose powers are often connected to the local practice of agriculture, notably the protection of crops from wandering animals.

The moment the transition of the *tontiguiya* takes place, however, is set by village elders rather than occurring after a precise, set number of years as claimed by previous anthropology in the Mande area (Dieterlen 1955, 1959; Leynaud 1966). According to these and other authors of the school of Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, all over the Mande area circumcision ceremonies took place at regular intervals of seven years, determining a longer cycle of 49 years (seven times seven). The great cosmological significance attributed to this numbers, along with the method of these early French ethnographers, has been disputed by later anthropologists like Jansen and Van Beek (2000).

As was observed with reference to the interval in the formation of new age groups, it is unlikely that the succession of *tontiguiw* occurs after a precise number of years (or after a precise number of new groups are formed): what is crucial is to maintain a certain equilibrium between the formation of new cohorts and the ‘retirement’ of others. This mechanism allows elders to maintain the age groups as viable institutions, thus bolstering their own influence and control, while also coping with reductions in the local agricultural workforce, mainly caused by schooling (students are exempted from kari work) and migration.

A day with the Sina kari

One day in early August 2008, the Sina kari was due to weed a millet field. At around seven in the morning, a number of people were entering my host compound to gather on the clay space facing the single-room dwelling of Abou. Two benches were arranged in an ‘L’ shape on carefully swept ground.

A very large pot of millet porridge (*moni*) was set on the ground, covered, at equal distance from the benches. The bicycles of the dozen or so people present were leaning on the wall of the adjacent house, with machetes fitted in the frames and hoes tied on the luggage racks. Kari members were in a quiet yet talkative mood. The combination of a friendly gathering of young men with the slow rhythm of the housekeeping activities

being performed – by women – all around in the compound gave this occasion its particular character.

Abou was sitting in front of his home with everyone else, chatting and welcoming the few late-comers. Plastic spoons, freshly washed in the kitchen, were brought by some children.⁷⁵ Abandoning the benches, we crouched down all around the pot, each holding a spoon in his right hand. The cover was gently opened by Abou, emitting heavy steam. Some sugar was poured in. ‘*Ai bissimila*’: having thanked God and those present, everyone dipped his spoon into the pot to stir the still-too-hot contents before tasting the meal. The fellow diners were talkative and lively during the meal, acting rather differently from how they did at more ordinary meals shared between the compound’s members.

While everyday meals are consumed by the family members of different generations eating from one pot (see Chapter Three), in this case, all the fellow diners were about the same age and unrelated by close kinship ties and co-residence. The group was able to eat only about a third of the extraordinarily abundant meal, which – I came to know later – had been prepared with more than 20 kg of millet. Sated, one fellow dinner after the other gave thanks: ‘*A barika*’ – the rest of the group replying ‘*a barika ye Allah ye*’ (‘Thanks’ – ‘Thanks be to God’).

The rather relaxed atmosphere created by chatting and commensality was interrupted by Abou’s voice addressing those present. With a slight change of register compared to the ongoing conversations, he reminded the group whose field the kari would be farming that morning – information probably already known to most of those present. His communication was met by some acquiescing comments, to which followed an – again chatty – exchange of information concerning which kari members were expected to turn up later that morning and who, in turn, would be absent and for what reason.

My host brother Bourama, also one of the kari members sharing the food, seized the occasion to let us know that he would not take part in farming because both his hands were injured on his recent trip to France (see Chapter two). Since his hands were only

⁷⁵ These are colored plastic spoons, deep like a ladle, but with a short handle like a spoon. All age groups have stocks of such spoons to be used at breakfast before setting to the fields.

superficially scratched, the context of his self-justification at the group breakfast suggested that his absence from work right after he had returned from France was, to an extent, expected. His unusual behaviour during the following weeks – not eating and farming with the rest of the family – later confirmed this observation.

Following these communications, some men expressed uncertainties about exactly which field was being worked and where it was located; these were answered by intervening explanations which lengthened the conversation even more. While they were still speaking, people began to stand up and prepare to leave, arriving at the field in sparse order. A few bicycles and small motorbikes were already there, parked under a tree by the time I reached the field.⁷⁶

The group of farmers was more numerous than at it had been at breakfast: another dozen people – all members of the kari – had joined the others at the field. About 25 young men in total had started weeding the millet field. This, I was told, measured two and a half hectares and had indeed been entirely weeded by the kari by the end of the day. Two members of the family of the ‘landlord’ (*forotigui*) were also present in their role as ‘hosts’ of the farming group (both characterizations will be explained below). These men were two younger brothers of compound headman Mamadou Camara, who was in turn absent. As frequently happens in Mande, he let his ‘deputy’ younger brothers organize the hospitable reception of the kari.

The group – including the two hosts and me – hoed in a row, advancing simultaneously along as many furrows as the members. Weeds were scraped by the hoes, picking rhythmically at the ground all around the millet stems. Weeding hoes, with their larger and rather sharp scoop designed for scraping and their short handle, require that one assume an inclined posture. The effect of the hoeing action is to swing the workers forward as they move across the field. Occasionally, the workers showed off their skills by taking sets of parallel rows while races to weed the furthest were called by people shouting and inciting each other.

⁷⁶ These are called *jakartas*, from the place of their manufacturing.

The work of the kari was extremely energetic. Compared to everyday hoe-farming it was more pleasant, despite also being vigorous and demanding. While advancing in a row, people were often jeering and scoffing at one another, shouting, inciting or praising. Such a way of talking jokingly while weeding contrasted sharply to the moderate way of talking, alternated with gasps and silences, that characterize everyday household farming. In the course of farming, almost every working man was met by humorous comments, also addressing – with a more formulaic language – the kari as a whole, the landlord family, the village, the Camara, etc.⁷⁷

About two and a half hours after work started, a pause was called. The same large pot containing the millet porridge we had had for breakfast was brought to the field by Abou's wife, accompanied by other young women from the same compound. The group of food caterers was also met by teasing comments (related to both them and Abou), with which they engaged very briefly before returning home. As at breakfast, women seemed not to be allowed to engage with the formulaic speaking interaction that accompanied kari activities, perhaps because of the gendered division of work, or because they were not age mates of the corresponding female group.

The group of farmers, including the landlord family members, gathered in the shade under one of the trees right on the field.⁷⁸ Some sat on the back side of the scoop of the hoe; others just crouched on the ground. Besides the fact that the ground is likely to be humid during the rainy August, to sit directly on the soil would be considered rather dirty and inappropriate. As had been the case for breakfast, the millet porridge was uncovered and sipped with short-handled ladles. However, since this time the group was too numerous to all fit around the large pot, people were taking it in turns to consume their portions. The workers could then rest for a while, sucking sweets that were distributed to all in equal number. The time to go back to work came soon.

Farming carried on for about two more hours. The end of the working day was called when another group of women, this time from the compound of the hosts of the kari,

⁷⁷ Camara is the most widely distributed family name associated with the ruling clan in Bancoumana (see Chapter Four).

⁷⁸ Save for rice fields, which are located on the flooded part of the countryside, all fields normally have several trees in the middle.

brought the lunch. This group of women was again met by jokes – especially since one of them unfortunately slipped on the muddy ground while carrying a lunch pot on the top of her head – but again engaged in little verbal exchange, just as they had done previously.

Under the same tree as at the mid-morning break were set several pots containing rice (*kini*) and meat (*sogo*), this time of standard size.⁷⁹ The meat juice from an additional pot was poured on the rice and everyone ate until he was satisfied. An abundant quantity of this main course was left over. Then the one pot of meat was uncovered and its contents were divided with care into equal portions, which were then handed to each of the participants.

The aftermath of the meal presented an occasion for the hosts and the guests to thank reciprocally each other. This consisted of rather more structured and formulaic speaking.

Structured speaking and other codes of hospitable behaviour

It was Abou who first addressed the hosts in the name of the kari: ‘the group worked as hard as it could’ – he said – ‘and for the whole day.’ To this he added that the hosts were really to be thanked for the quality of their hospitality, as confirmed by the food they had graciously provided and, even more, by having slaughtered an animal. The older of the two hosts – Abou *jan* (the tall) – replied by thanking the kari and by praising its members for the work they had done on that morning.

As usual in this kind of conversation in Mande, Abou *jan*’s reply was addressed not to the previous speaker Abou *kunba*, but to the one who was expected to speak after him, in this case his younger brother Kalou. The latter expressed a similar gratitude towards the group while addressing the Sina kari as a whole. The word was passed this way to their ‘guests’ on that day, i.e. the kari members. The first to speak was one of the *nyamakalaw* (‘caste men’) of the group, followed by others who also gave their thanks.

⁷⁹ In contrast to the larger pots used for breakfast, about six/eight adult people can crouch around it.

Both the order of priority of the speakers and their location in space were clearly the object of consideration. The two hosts were facing the 25 guests; despite the fact that they had farmed together and despite the evident difference in numbers, they were not sitting among them.

In contrast to other instances of codified use of space associated with speaking (such as group conversations by the elders), people's placement was not rigidly determined. Such formality would have looked odd in an open space like a field. However, the positioning of the speakers clearly produced consequences for the 'quality' of speech and its effects on the listeners, who could experience the feeling of a proper circulation of the word between different points in space. Speech was launched and received, perhaps in rather unpredictable ways for less experienced listeners, but effectively engendering a feeling of circulation in space.

The content of such conversations is usually rather banal and repetitive – thanking, praising, blessing, etc. What matters for the participants, however, is its form. With variable degrees of codification, structure and use of formulas, the speech interaction that was occurring at the end of the farming day was constructed as clearly distinct from ordinary conversations. In its most structured utterances, it was rather similar to the speeches made by elders (the classificatory fathers of kari farmers) in discussion spaces such as vestibules. The people here, however, were younger and were performing a working activity in an open space. In Mandenkakan, such a codified way of speaking is called *kuma* ('the spoken word') and distinguished from *baro* ('chatting') which denotes instead more ordinary conversations in which linguistic codes, patterns and formulas play a less prominent part.

In the account of a setting such as this day of kari farming, the analytical description of all the material elements that appear to support and to surround the spoken words risks hindering the combination of lively and immaterial aspects experienced by the participants. The 'good quality' of these aspects, including how verbal interaction was performed, is reflected in the way people comment on occasions such as the Sina kari farming day. As people remarked to each other at the end of that Saturday: '*kuma dyara*,' – 'the word has been pleasant, properly spoken.'

Group farming calendar

August is a typical bottleneck time for Bancoumana farmers. Around this time, fields have to be properly weeded in order to benefit best from the heavy rains which begin to fall at that time. While some compounds can afford to employ seasonal labourers in order to supplement the household workforce, others rely on the work of age-based and similar groups (called *tonw* or *grupuw*). In a compound like *Messerejanna*,⁸⁰ for example, the men (and women) who farm the fields on a daily basis – normally between five and seven – were insufficient in number to work the almost ten hectares that were cultivated by the compound members for the family's needs, especially at weeding time. In only one day, in contrast, an age group of the size of the Sina kari could weed one quarter of such an extension (two and a half hectares).

Considering that most fields need to be weeded two or three times in the span of four months, the advantages of this kind of group farming are evident. Weeding frequency can reduce to two for quicker growing types of cereals like 'three months' rice (*malo sabani*) and equivalent types of millet, provided that rain has not been too abundant. For the tiny minority that can afford the use of expensive herbicides in sufficient dosage, then one only session of weeding might suffice.⁸¹

Kariw are very busy for the whole length of the agricultural season and especially at weeding times. From July to October 2008, the age groups of working age regularly hoed fields once per week, giving the impression that their calendar was entirely 'booked up.' Although weeding usually stops in September, age groups are still frequently called upon in the following month for harvesting and husking. Some of them also own husking machines which are hired out (with or without kari workers) at harvest time.

Hired group work such as that performed by kariw is not only employed on family fields – known as *foroba* and farmed by the compound's workforce. In addition, age groups can also be hired for farming individual fields. These may be fields which have been entrusted by the household head to one member of the compound (either a man or

⁸⁰ This was my host compound (see Chapter Three).

⁸¹ Herbicides cost about 25,000 CFA Francs (£30) per hectare in 2008.

a woman) for the needs of a more restricted part of the family. These are called ‘servant fields’ (*jonforo*): a term echoing the ideological slant put on the fact of non-compound land allocated to individuals. As one might expect, though, benefiting from compound work is not as likely in this case. Resorting to a farming group is a common solution to the problem, especially for tasks like weeding, which require the highest possible number of labourers.

Wealthier people may have recourse to the more expensive but less socially binding solution of hiring day labourers for a variety of operations, from sowing to weeding. The ox-plough can be employed effectively for weeding, provided that the field is seeded in an extremely regular way (with the help of a seed drill) and that, as soon as the crops stem, young stalks are transplanted at a regular distance from each other. Despite the efforts of the local para-statal agency for agricultural development (OHVN) to promote this technique, however, the vast majority of Bancoumana farmers prefer to avoid such a time-consuming sowing phase. Most farmers carry on sowing by hand (with no transplanting) in order to spend as much time and energy as possible for weeding, which may include resorting to group farming by *kariw* or other groups hired specifically for this task.

<i>Week day</i>	<i>Group farming</i>
Monday (market day)	-
Tuesday	Lamine kari
Wednesday	Namasa ton (association of former banana cultivators)
Thursday	Moussa kari
Friday (holy day)	-
Saturday	Sina kari and Adama kari
Sunday	Donso ton (hunters' association)

Table 3. Weekly calendar of group farming

As for hired agricultural work, in turn, there is in fact little availability. As Table 3 shows, at the time of my fieldwork, only four age groups, including the Sina kari, and two other associations were each farming one day per week. The *Namasa* and the *Donso* groups farm on Wednesday and Sunday: in contrast to age groups, these are joined (by adult men) on a voluntary basis. They also have other group activities beyond farming, like operating a rotating credit fund in the case of the *Namasa ton*. Some other groups, including women's, do not figure in Table 3, although they also engage in group farming on a regular basis.

In 2008, the weekly schedule presented in Table 3 was followed for the whole length of the farming season. Groups farmed four days in the week. Since Monday is the market day, it is considered inauspicious to engage in agricultural activities and work of other kinds. Friday, in turn, is the day adult people gather at the central Mosque for mid-day prayers: although work is not prohibited – indeed much individual work, such as gardening or collecting wood, is done on Friday – proper agricultural work is suspended.

During my fieldwork, some requests for kari work were not responded to because of time constraints, suggesting that such groups are in high demand in Bancoumana. After

a certain stage in their growth, then, crops no longer benefit significantly from weeding. Striving to meet the high demand for their activities, age groups in Bancoumana offer two different forms of farming distinguished, among other things, by the exchanges and performances of work (and of words too, as we have seen above).

Different types of kari farming

The work of the Sina kari on Mamadou's field was of a kind referred to as *bonda baara*: this is 'work for a compound' (literally, 'in front of the door of the house').⁸² Since *bonda* denotes the house of the mother – the place associated with maternal grouping, see Chapter Three – such terminology evokes uterine brotherhood.

In this form of work, codified speech plays the most significant role. The landlord had paid the age group 5,000 CFA Francs (£10) and, most importantly, he provided an appropriate reception to the group working on his family field. This consisted in feeding the group of about 25 farmers with approximately 20 kg of millet porridge, three large pots of rice and one large pot containing the meat of one goat. Moreover, it required the landlord family to work together with the age group members, in order to host them properly.

The fact of being paid in kind and not in money – specifically in food that needs to be readily consumed, jointly by hosts and guests – has important consequences and meaning. Firstly, it tends to characterize group farming as interaction of a 'ritual' kind, whereby labour is only indirectly exchanged for money, and is not fully commensurable in monetary terms. Much acting and speaking are required in order to mediate the exchange of group labour for money. It will be observed later that the calculation of the labour of the kari members towards the group itself seems of a more commoditised nature, since absent people are required to pay a fee. As shown in this instance, however, the work of the group as a whole, vis-à-vis the outside world, appears less directly convertible into money, and less commoditised.

⁸² As explained later in this chapter, this normally consists of a compound of the *same lineage* as the group of laborers.

Another consequence of being paid in kind is that, in contrast to exchanges which can be 'settled' by monetary payment, ritual interaction of the *bonda baara* kind leaves both parties mutually obligated: the landlord toward the age group because the latter farmed his fields, and the age group towards their hosts for providing food and hospitality. Finally, the money paid to the group (about £10) is an almost symbolic amount: clearly not enough to be intended as monetary compensation for the two dozen workers. This aspect ultimately distinguishes the members of a farming group such as the Sina kari from a group of daily labourers.

The landlord paid not only a sum of money to the kari, but also for the food, including meat, and its preparation by women in his compound. All this was probably worth 20,000 CFA Francs (£30): a sum approximately corresponding to the daily wage of a comparable number of casual labourers (or to half a day of tractor ploughing as observed in Chapter Three). *Bonda baara*, however, consists of more than a monetary exchange, since the parties involved behave *as if* what they exchange is incommensurable. As described above, this type of group work entails speech, commensality and performance of a particular kind of farming characterized by the use of specific codes and patterns of interaction, such as structured speaking, both between hosts and guests and among the farmers themselves, as illustrated by the ritual joking and the showing off of individual skills during the day with the Sina kari.

All the different aspects distinguishing this kind of activity from others are undoubtedly difficult either to categorize or to commensurate in monetary terms. However, they have in common the fact that they are enacted in a performance of work which prominently relies on ritual codes (compared to other forms of work), including codified interaction among so-called 'hosts' and 'guests,' and formulaic speech.

The ritual dimension emerging from the performance of speech among other codes in group farming of the *bonda baara* kind may be pushed further by emphasizing its predominantly 'oral' character. Reference to measurements and accounting are kept to a minimum. The portion of the field to be farmed by the kari is not agreed in advance with the owner, neither in form of a specific measurement (a number of hectares) nor as an approximate extension. Instead, the kari works at its own rhythm for the conventionally established length of the working day (from 7-8 am to 2-3 pm).

Similarly, there is no established measure of money payment concerning the hospitality of the kari: normally, this would include the payment of a sum of money and the preparation of food for the kari according to their hosts' means. The standard is flexible, although proper hospitable behaviour entails overabundant portions of food – which *cannot* be consumed entirely, as during festivities – and, in particular, the slaughtering of an animal (normally one goat).

Group farming 'by contract'

All these features differentiate the farming described above from the alternative way age groups farm in Bancoumana: 'by contract.' There is no Mandenkakan word referring to this more commoditised form of kari work, instead the French *contrat* is used. In this case, the age group is hired by the landlord for a specific agricultural task. In contrast to *bonda baara*, the landlord will not be expected to provide nourishment for the group; he will pay, instead, a more consistent sum of money agreed with the kari averaging 25,000 CFA Francs. The precise piece of land to be farmed is agreed in advance between a representative of the group (see below) and the landlord, who may meet on the field before agreeing on the extension of land to be farmed 'as seen.' Farming does not necessarily take the full length of the working day.

Breakfast – and lunch if necessary – is prepared by women of the associated female kari (kari-*musow*), who are provided with cereals bought by their male counterparts to which is added the 'price of the sauce' (*nasongo*), a sum of money presented as for buying ingredients, but in fact also a form of payment. The food prepared on such occasions is supplied in large quantities, although both the meal and the atmosphere of its consumption hardly compare to the *bonda baara* setting. Notably, while in that case over-abundance of food clearly is a sign of hospitality, here it would be perceived as unnecessary, or wasteful. On such an occasion, there would be no reason to slaughter an animal and, consequently, to consume a meat dish like the one that was eaten by Sina kari members.

Bonda baara and *contrat* entail comparable amounts of money flowing from one party to the other: in *bonda baara* the sum spent on hospitality – or what is often thought of as 'in kind' – is the equivalent of what, in *contrat*, is paid more overtly in exchange for

work, hence constituting a more commoditised exchange. What distinguishes the *bonda baara* setting, then, is a codified pattern of social interaction in which speech and other elements play a crucial role in mediating the economic exchange; so participants can pretend and behave *as if* their labour were not being exchanged in return for money.

Hospitable behaviour involves exchange of hospitable words such as thanking and praising, the good quality of the meal and the slaughtering of animals. As experienced through the senses of a participant observer, this kind of work is more than surrounded or accompanied by words: the exuberant quality of words performed in *bonda baara* is what confers great seriousness and meaningfulness on the various social and material exchanges involved in group farming.

The administration of fines and money by the *tombolomaw*

The relative lack of references to written practices and culture in the setting of kari farming should not be overemphasised. It was noted earlier that, despite the performance of elements connected to the domain of orality, some type of group farming makes explicit recourse to measurements and prices – two aspects classically connected to written culture (Goody 2010). Moreover, in the very setting of *bonda baara* farming, I observed a limited recourse to writing in the form of a book-keeping activity.

When the first break from work was called in the fields, the names of those present were roll-called, both absent and attending people being registered in a notebook. Since those absent are fined, such recourse to writing is connected with the collection and administration of money. This not only plays a particularly important role in the functioning of age groups in Bancoumana, but also has significant consequences on their organization.

A day of unjustified absence from communal work costs each member of the group a ‘tax’ of 750 CFA Francs (£1). The French verb *taxer* is the vernacular term often employed in Mandenkakan in this instance, as well as in other instances, of fines collection. It is no coincidence that such an amount of money corresponds to the daily casual work wage in Bancoumana. This indicates, in fact, that individual labour of age

group members is measured and exchanged in monetary terms, at least to a greater extent than the work of the groups overall as observed above.

Every age group gives some of its members the task of collecting these fines, alongside hearing justifications and more generally solving disputes and enforcing group decisions. Higher fines, punishing misconduct of kari members – no matter whether related to the group activities or not – are also administered. The money thus collected, together with the income generated from farming and other kari activities (like letting mills and husking machines), goes into the kari coffers. The powerful role played by those in charge of collecting and keeping the money – the *tombolomaw* – is connected with basic literate skills such as book keeping.

As in most such associations, the administration of the communal fund is a crucial aspect of group life. Money is spent, lent or invested by age groups throughout the year, and kariw have significantly different reputations concerning their wealth, their ability to generate, collect and administer money. Small sums of money can be gifted or lent to a member on occasions such as marriages and funerals; greater sums are spent for buying food for public festivities (e.g. sugar during the Ramadan fast) and village receptions (e.g. the reception for Mali's President) and even invested by better-off groups in trading cereals, buying from the same local farmers on whose fields they harvested the crop. These activities can be done either for the benefit of their members or for market speculation.

All actions connected to the administration of money are carried on by the *tombolomaw*, who are likely to keep written notes and consult their most skilled and schooled friends on accountancy matters. Book-keeping aids the effective collection of fines in a number of ways, for example by allowing those who are short of money to delay their payments without losing the record of how much they owe. Moreover, performing acts referring to written records, like roll-calling on the fields, provide *tombolomaw* with a disciplinary power echoing that in school. Similar aspects may have reinforced the *tombolomaw*'s authority over time, hence altering the hierarchical relations, organization and functioning of age groups in Bancoumana. Another, perhaps more important aspect of hierarchy in this office is that its higher ranks are occupied exclusively by 'first-comers,' as will be explained shortly.

However, even when agricultural work is more commoditised and monetised, as in *contrat* farming, the clients of the kari may be chosen and prioritised according to criteria such as the client's position in his lineage, kinship affiliation or status distinction, as against the time of the request or the amount of money offered. Although writing appears to have reinforced the *tombolomaw*'s authority, the social nature of work prioritisation has perhaps made it unnecessary for kariw in Bancoumana to keep particularly accurate records concerning the calendar of their work.

The *tombolomaw* are sometimes spoken of as the men counterbalancing the kari headman, the other authority described in the concluding section. In contrast to the headman, who is chosen by the elders, *tombolomaw* are designated by the kari members themselves. In respect to their fellow members, they can be either sons or fathers in classificatory terms; however, they are chosen from among the ranks of those who are spoken of as the descendants of the first-settlers of Bancoumana.⁸³ Therefore they are in some respect separate from the rest of the group, which includes late-comers and strangers who have resided since some time in the village.

The number of *tombolomaw* differs in each age group, but is always distributed according to lineage membership. Most groups have six: two for each of the three lineages (Kolonwulena, Soridiana, Farana). However, some other groups have different and even variable numbers, resulting in a rather flexible organization of authority. The equal balance among the two most populous lineages – Soridiana and Farana – is always observed, while this cannot always be the case in relation to the less numerous Kolonwulena, who are entitled to fewer representatives in some of the groups.⁸⁴ Flexibility in group organization, authority and shape will emerge more clearly in the conclusion as an important aspect in relation to the headman.

Compared to other domains such as tax collection (see next chapter), the recourse to writing seems fairly limited in kari farming. Notably, the forms of book-keeping and accounting used by age groups seem to have resulted in, or paralleled, fewer significant barriers in literacy. *Tombolomaw* are not particularly more schooled than their fellow

⁸³ This is the category of people described in detail in Chapter Four.

⁸⁴ As explained in Chapter Four, the three lineages have a population of 3,436; 2,873; and 2,005 respectively (or 41, 35, and 24 percent of the overall resident population).

kari members. After descent from first-comers, more significant for their appointment is their status and prestige, which seem to be not prominently affected by literacy and schooling; at least as long as age groups in Bancoumana perform such a crucial role in the agricultural cycle and economy. It was noted (page 161), on the contrary, that people pursuing their studies beyond secondary school (the highest level of education offered in Bancoumana) are excused – excluded, from another point of view – from age-group farming.

The comparison to the domain of taxation suggests that the relatively limited influence of writing on age-group farming bears a significant connection to the central role that age groups still play for hoe-farming in the local economy. In particular, despite the other tasks described above, including more commoditised forms of selling their agricultural labour, *bonda baara* does still constitute a major occupation for age groups, requiring remarkable amounts of time and physical energy without which local food production would hardly be sustainable.

True, the connection between age groups and hoe agriculture is far from univocally determined, and indeed evidence suggests it has gone through significant changes over time – including some commoditisation of labour that is now exchanged in return for money. However, the means of mediating such transactions – in more or less intense ways following the distinction between *bonda baara* and *contrat* – all seem to require a certain ‘embeddedness’ in the local social context and skills which are unlikely to be possessed by foreigners and outsiders.

Conclusion: the segmented and flexible organization of kariw

As emerged from the account opening this chapter, my host brother Abou was addressed as the representative of the Sina kari. Since all age groups are named after their headmen (see Table 2), I wondered what could explain the exception of the Sina kari and why I did not meet the man called Sina until some time later. The fact that Abou was about 20 years older than the rest of the members, then, was an apparent anomaly. In fact, I knew Abou as belonging to a different age group, namely the Moussa kari (see Table 2 and Table 3, on page 162 and 175 respectively). However, for

the reasons that I address in this section, every Saturday he was joining the age group of his 'younger brothers' (the Sina kari) for farming.

The first time I asked why the kari head Sina was not present to farm with our group on Saturdays, it was explained to me – rather evasively – that he had gone to Bamako for a period of time. Although this was true, Sina never joined 'his' kari. When he eventually returned to Bancoumana, he farmed instead with a separate group of people from the same age group. As I soon understood – and later discussed in more explicit terms with my informants – the Sina kari was spoken of as one, but there were actually two groups of people farming with that name. The existence of this division was not a secret, but it was not emphasised either (not only to me, of course, but also more widely).

Unsurprisingly, the dispute followed lineage divisions: the members of the Farana lineage were farming in one group, which included Sina, while those of Kolonwulena and Soridiana were in another. Both groups were called 'Sina kari' as were their members: another aspect, perhaps, of the subtleness/ambiguity which pervade a setting with little recourse to central registration based on formal, written and bureaucratic practices.

Every man in Bancoumana can be addressed with the name of his kari, since the people farming separately in this case could be – and they were – both referred to as Sina kariw (in the plural form, meaning people of the Sina kari). As a result, Sina's role as a headman (*kari-tigui*) was apparently undisputed. Further conveying a sense of unity, the two factions were both farming on the same day of the week (Saturday, see Table 3), although they were doing so on the fields of different clients, who normally belong to the same lineage as the group of farmers.

The Kolonwulena-Soridiana group, however, managed to find a diplomatic way of appointing another leader or representative, in the person of Abou. The fact of resorting to a distinguished member of an *older* age group has to be interpreted as a not too manifest way to oppose Sina, who had been legitimately appointed by elders as the headman of the whole kari and hence theirs too. Abou, a man in his forties, is a very respected character within his lineage Soridiana and has a reputation as a skilled and knowledgeable farmer. His activity in the Sina kari is made acceptable precisely by the

fact that he was older than the rest of the members by almost 20 years, hence clearly belonging to a different age set.

To find an alternative headman within the group of peers would have threatened both Sina's and the elders' authority, since only one headman is appointed by them for each age group and he has to play the role of the classificatory father and representative of the whole group. Such an attitude would also have been an evident sign of a dispute, a declaration that lineages were standing on separate sides. It would have been a very bold and undiplomatic statement, both towards the outside world and for the people directly involved: after all, these people had to cooperate in domains different from farming and, even more importantly, they may have to count more on each other in the future.

Other age groups in Bancoumana were also uniting or splitting into smaller sets when doing certain work, although the Sina kari was the only group doing this for farming: a sign of strong disagreement, although also suggesting how principles of chieftaincy and authority are subtly adapted to practical circumstances. When taking turns to work on the construction of the storage building mentioned above (page 165), the four age groups involved decided to rationalize their work by each dividing into four sets (so that one person had to work on the site once every other week). In another circumstance, two age groups – Lamine and Adama kariw, totalling about 200 people – were asked by the elders to travel together to the nearby village of Koursale to present their apologies for the fact that one villager had chased away his wife who was native to that village.

Age groups are flexible entities because the internal divisions are not established once and for all: their configuration may adapt over time and change according to various circumstances, including variable degrees of tension among the three lineages. The shape of a group may also depend on the particular tasks performed (construction of a building, for example) or by whom they have been requested to work, since a group may be united when requested to work by the elders in the interest of the village (*kari baara*), but separate for farming compound fields (*bonda baara*) and 'private' ones (*contrat*).

In conclusion, Abou's attendance at the Kolonwulena-Soridiana group offered a practical solution to the problems engendered by dissent within the Sina kari. Moreover, it was a strategic and diplomatic move by which one part of the group appointed an alternative leader, one that had to be respected by the kari headman Sina because of his age and reputation. Similar dynamics reveal how crucial the dimension of flexibility is in the functioning of such group, when this is not part of their very nature (which, as in the case of lineages, may be interpreted as ambiguous). Age groups seem to configure and re-configure according to the same 'segmentary style' unveiled in other parts of the thesis. They are constituted around a form of collective agency which generally praises unity, but operates separation or cooperation according to specific, adaptable and ever-changing circumstances.

Other elements in the organization of age groups and their activities in Bancoumana suggest that these associations are rather open and flexible entities. A similar conclusion is reached in other parts of the thesis in relation to other sets of people, like first-comers and late-comers (see Chapter Four), same-mother and same-father descendants (see Chapter Three), among others. As for these other groups, membership in a specific age association along with status among one's peers are elements played out circumstantially, suggesting that the strategic use and manipulation of one's position does open a significant space for individual agency.

My observation of age groups fits this general model, showing that social groups are ambivalent entities in Bancoumana, and that such ambivalence is crucial to their actual functioning. One person integrates simultaneously into several groups and sub-groups and stresses his membership to the one or the other as a matter of strategy and agency.

Perhaps the notion of 'practice' or 'practice-oriented behaviour' is suitable for capturing such aspects of individual and collective agency that emerged as crucial from my ethnographic enquiry. On the one hand, this concept allows for highlighting the gap between proclaimed rules (of age group membership and formation, for example) and actual behaviour, which may often be inconsistent with the rules. On the other, it allows the discovery that the inconsistency between the rules concerning age group's organization and actual, practically oriented and motivated behaviour can be played out with different results. Strategy and diplomacy are prominent elements of agency in

Bancoumana: in some circumstances, unity and harmony are performed, while dissent dominates in practice; in other instances, however, unity is enacted with more actual effect on the social structure, which practice contributes to inflect effectively.

Chapter Six

Ensuring Communication, Denying Control: the mediated process of tax collection

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the most important local tax paid annually by Bancoumana residents: the *Taxe de Développement Régional et Local* (TDRL). A successor of the colonial head tax, TDRL is payable to the municipality according to the records resulting from the registry listing taxable people and properties for each *chef de famille* (literally ‘family headman’), each of whom is entitled to request a small booklet (*carnet de famille*). Similar to the *impôt de capitation* in colonial times, the obligation to pay TDRL mostly weighs on the heads of family as resulting from written records listing taxable people and properties.⁸⁵ For the sake of simplicity, I will frequently refer to it as ‘the tax’ in this chapter. The local population calls it ‘the soul’s price’ (*ni songo*).

The chapter starts by addressing the crucial connection of TDRL with written registration by the state bureaucracy. I give an analysis of the Bancoumana registry of the *carnets de famille*, illustrating the way information is recorded and updated; then I go on to explain how TDRL is calculated and issued by the local state administration, before turning to details on the process of collection in 2008 and the main participants involved. The latter part offers an important insight into the functioning of the state local bureaucracy, emphasizing complexity and institutional plurality among political actors in different positions and with different agendas, both officially or in the shadow of administrative procedures.

Tax collection in Bancoumana is an exercise in negotiation between individuals, the municipal bureaucracy and other local political actors. The intensely mediated process

⁸⁵ Table 7 in the appendix to this chapter (page 221) contains detail on taxable people and properties under TDRL.

through which the TDRL was collected in the village in 2008 involved the village councillors – an institution established and overseen by state law with the purpose of ‘counselling the village chief’ – and elder notables (*gwatiguiw*), whose role, in turn, is unofficial from the perspective of state law and administration. While the latter were in charge of collecting tax money within the extended family networks that they represented (*gwaw*, sing. *gwa*), the village councillors were supervising the process of collection by keeping written records of the payments within each *gwa*; they then made the payments to the municipality.

Illustrating the way these extended family networks and their representatives (*gwatiguiw*) are implicated in the tax collection procedure, the analysis will show the flexible configuration of Bancoumana’s ‘segmentary lineage structure.’ Despite the great importance of lineage and descent in a variety of domains, the way I present this configuration is contingent both on the way my data was collected and on the precise time of the observation. As I will explain, this configuration does not constitute ‘the’ structure of lineage segments in Bancoumana, which cannot be registered in such a simplistic way without compromising their flexible and adaptable nature.

The key element in the relationship between the village council and the municipality – which had come into existence only in the late 1990s with the decentralization reform – was one of lack of trust and guarded – even tense – cooperation. The council refused to disclose its written records about taxpayers’ solvency, making it impossible for the state administration to control the collection process and, more importantly, to resort to legal proceedings against tax evaders.

The analysis of the mediated character of TDRL collection does not simply reveal the power balance among different local political actors endowed with contrasting legitimacies in collecting tax money. It also makes clear a process of interaction between the written bureaucratic culture of state administration and the different ways Bancoumana residents group into extended family networks and lineages. The dynamism and the flexibility of this process of grouping cannot be frozen without being misrepresented for administrative as much as for research purposes. Yet the setting is not one of pure ‘orality’ (see Goody 1987). Writing and, more generally, literacy are employed by the village council with the aim of setting up a screen between the state

written bureaucracy and dynamics of grouping by lineages. Very effectively, this interface ensures communication with the state, but denies it control.

TDRL and the registry of the *carnets de famille*

This local tax is the most important of the taxes paid by village residents. From the perspective of the majority of the population making a living off extensive, man-powered agriculture, TDRL represents the greatest sum of money extracted annually by the state. Consequently, it is the most important local revenue for the municipality, accounting for about 17 percent of its budget over the past ten years (the rest is mostly provided by the state and foreign donors).⁸⁶ One fifth of the revenue generated by TDRL is transferred to the district and the Region (15 and five percent respectively), the rest funds the municipal budget.

Another distinguishing feature of TDRL is its connection to written registration by the state administration, unlike other taxes collected locally.⁸⁷ The registry of the *carnets de famille* is kept by the local municipality and consists of more than 20 bound volumes containing data from last national census.⁸⁸ Volumes are pre-printed, but entirely filled out by hand. They are kept by the secretary general – one of the three trained municipal staff – and regularly updated and consulted by him. About half of the volumes concern Bancoumana as a village, while the rest pertain to the other 13 villages forming the municipality (*Commune Rurale de Bancoumana*).

While consulting the registry, I noticed a first instance of local practical knowledge affecting the bureaucratic practice of registration. The printed form of the registry allows for a division into neighbourhoods (*quartiers*) and the volumes concerning Bancoumana are divided accordingly into three sets. The three ‘neighbourhoods’

⁸⁶ Source: budget documents (2000-2009) on file with the researcher.

⁸⁷ See Table 8 in appendix to this chapter for an illustrative (non-exhaustive) list of local taxes different from TDRL with relative amounts. From the documents that were made available to me, I estimated that these local taxes other than TDRL account on average for six or seven percent of the overall municipal budget.

⁸⁸ The *Recensement Général de la population et de l'Habitat* (RGPH) is revised every ten years by the *Direction Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Informatique*. The last census was carried in 1998 (see Mali Government 1990). However, the enquiry for the 2008 revision had not yet begun when I left Bancoumana in late November 2008.

figuring in the registry, however, do not correspond to any geographical areas of the village; they refer, instead, to the three lineages (*kabilaw*) in which the population of Bancoumana is cast, by descent from one of the three brothers who allegedly founded the village two centuries ago (see Chapter Four). Mirroring the division of the population into three lineages, four volumes of the registry contain the *carnets de famille* of the Soridiana people, four volumes those of the Farana and three those of the Kolonwulena (the least populous lineage). Each of these eleven volumes is headed accordingly with the name of the lineage accompanied by a progressive number: ‘Soridiana 1-4,’ ‘Farana 1-4’ and ‘Kolonwulena 1-3.’

This registration according to lineage-based ‘neighbourhoods’ is surprising for two reasons. Firstly, neighbourhoods are administrative units of *urban* municipalities in Mali, while rural ones like Bancoumana – no matter how populous – are not to be further divided.⁸⁹ Secondly, and more importantly, such administrative divisions into ‘neighbourhoods’ do not reflect spatial arrangements on the ground. As observed in Chapter Three, the disposition of residential compounds in Bancoumana is not determined by lineage membership: people from different lineages may reside next to the other, while same lineage members may live far apart. While the ‘fission’ of large compounds into smaller ones makes it likely for neighbouring compounds to be genealogically related (at least for older parts of the village), no portion of the village territory is thought to belong to any of the three lineages.

Why, then, in the registry, was the population divided into ‘neighbourhoods’? A plausible answer is that a kind of compromise had taken place, whereby the local bureaucracy acknowledged the existence of lineages by adopting an urban-like classification. When registering *familles* and *chefs de famille*, the local state administration had, through a process of negotiation, recognized the presence of the three lineages. It is unclear whether this choice was taken at the initiative of the compilers of the registry – acknowledging that, in practice, the tax was collected within lineages – or, instead, whether they were somehow compelled to register people by lineage affiliation. As a result, however, families belonging to different lineages were

⁸⁹ *Code des Collectivités Territoriales*, articles 2 and 60.

registered as if they were settled into spatially different neighbourhoods. For this reason, the numeration of the *carnets de famille* bears no reference to location. Nevertheless, the order of registration has not been random: indeed, it prioritised prestige in lineage membership (see later Figure 10).

Formal registration of ‘families’ for administrative, tax-related purposes (or *familles*, as I will refer to them hereinafter) had to acknowledge the presence of ‘informal’ groups such as lineages – plausibly, because these groups mattered for purposes of tax collection. The consultation of the registry, however, also revealed the opposite process, whereby the formal categories employed in bureaucratic registration have influenced vernacular ones and created new groups. This happened with the definition of *familles* and *chefs de famille* as different from compounds and compound headmen, as I now turn to explain.

<i>Lineage</i>	‘Familles’	<i>Compounds</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Density of ‘familles’</i>	<i>Compound density</i>
Kolonwulena	195	135	2005	10.3	14.8
Soridiana	310	158	3436	11.1	21.7
Farana	307	153	2873	9.4	18.7
Total	812	446	8314	10.3 (average)	18.4 (average)

Table 4. Compounds and carnets de famille

This Table shows the distribution of *familles* resulting from administrative registration and actual compounds in the three lineages. While the average size of *familles* (fourth column) does not seem to differ significantly among the three lineages, the fifth column shows a greater variation of compound densities.

On my last visit to the secretary general’s office in October 2008, the records concerning Bancoumana showed 812 *carnets de famille*, i.e. corresponding taxpaying units. As shown in Table 4, however, the *familles* resulting from the registry do not correspond to actual compounds, i.e. the spatially defined, co-residential units which can be more intuitively understood as ‘families.’ At around the same period of time, compounds were in fact about one half less numerous than the *familles* registered for tax purposes. The discrepancy points to the crucial fact that virtually any married individual, man or woman, can be considered *chef de famille*, if only he or she requests

a *carnet de famille*, with the consequence of becoming accountable for the payment of TDRL of all the family members registered on it.

As a consequence of the formal registration of ‘families’ for administrative, tax-related purposes, in a compound there are normally several *chefs de famille* (as opposed to one person socially recognized as headman). Each *chef de famille* has dependents for whom he pays the head-tax, either related or unrelated to him. On average, there are two *carnets de famille* for every compound, and ten dependent people for every *chef de famille*, as opposed to 18 for every compound (see Table 4).

Paperwork: updating the registry, calculating and issuing TDRL

The registry of the *carnets de famille* contains tax-related demographic information regarding each family member as well as properties. Every year, the secretary general (known as the Segal and referred to as such hereinafter) calculates the amount of taxes due from every *chef de famille*. This is a long and painstaking task which requires the consulting of every page of the 20 volume register, the calculation of taxable amounts and their annotation by pencil in the margins of relevant rows and columns and, finally, the addition of these amounts (some of these pencil annotations are visible in Figure 10 and in the appendix to this chapter).⁹⁰

Written records are updated whenever the secretary general is asked to do so by the carnet holder, but more intensely during the last months of the year, when the tax is collected and forthcoming amounts (to be collected on the following year) are calculated. By late December, the Segal must calculate TDRL amounts for every carnet, in order to provide the exact figure in the municipal budget voted before the end of the year.

Updating obliges the Segal to hand-write corrections on the register and to copy on the corresponding carnet held by the *chef de famille*. While a copy of the carnet may be easily issued, records in the registry are progressively numerated in a bound volume; therefore, a blank page can be used only in cases where a new taxpaying unit is formed. If a member of the family has moved (for example, a daughter has married or a son has migrated), the corresponding entry will be crossed out with a red line and a notation in the margin in the same colour will specify to which other carnet the record has been moved (married daughter's case) or it will simply mention 'transferred' if residence has been moved permanently out of the municipality (migration).

Handwritten annotations and corrections are made for any other change affecting the payment of TDRL. Students, soldiers, persons over the age of 65 and women with more

⁹⁰ Only the yearly revision of the electoral registry takes the Segal a longer time. In this case, hundreds of pre-printed notebooks containing data from the census for electoral purposes (*Recensement à caractère électoral*) must be browsed page by page in order to identify all the residents who will be 18 years old before the next elections.

than four children are tax-exempt: the attainment of such statuses has to be registered at the municipality in order to qualify for exemption.

Figure 10 shows some of these annotations: some entries are crossed out with a red line, including that of Messere, who died some months before the picture was taken. For each entry which has been crossed out, a handwritten note on the last column on the right specifies whether the family member has died ('DCD' for *décedé*) or has moved to another carnet, as in the case of members 015 and 016 ('*résumé au N°...*'). The field '*N° de carnet de famille*' in the upper left corner also shows that numeration is a sign that local prestige matters in administrative registration: it is no coincidence that the first record of the 'Soridiana volume' of the registry is that of El Hadji Messere: the headman of that lineage. His carnet covers several pages – ending with two stapled, unbound sheets. It comprises 215 people figuring as dependents of the *chef de famille* (indicated by the initials 'CF').

Most volumes of the registry date back more than 10 years, beginning with the 1998 census. New volumes are started over time, reflecting both the growth of the population and the constitution of new *familles* (for tax purposes).⁹¹ Like the document in Figure 10, most pages of the register are filled with red lines, corrections and annotations of various kinds, including past TDRL calculations made by pencil in the margins. Occasionally, loose sheets are stapled at the end of the record.

Although the tax is both calculated and collected locally, the administrative process of legalizing and 'issuing' TDRL (known as *émission*) requires the circulation of documents among the different levels of the state administration, and it takes considerable time.

Since the register is hand-written, the tax is calculated by the Segal consulting every page and counting taxable people and properties with the help of a calculator. As a

⁹¹ Last available national census (RGPH 1998) shows for the whole municipality of Bancoumana (see note 42): 1,069 compounds (*concessions*) and 2,465 '*ménages*.' (Note that this is not the *village* of Bancoumana, for which there are no available national statistics.) Although I have not been able to check, the latter category of *ménage* is likely to correspond to the *famille* for tax purposes analysed in this chapter. If so, in 1998 there were 2.4 *cartes de famille* for every compound: a figure consistent with the data for the village of Bancoumana in 2008 that I have presented in this chapter. The average of 18 residents for every compound is also consistent with my findings (see Table 4 above).

result of this activity, the Segal produces two documents: one listing all carnet holders (*rôle nominatif*), the other cataloguing taxable persons for every village of the municipality (*rôle numerique*). Such lists are handed in to the district offices (in the town of Kati) to be computer processed. They are held for some time by the Prefect (the district chief). During this time the National Tax Services can review and revise the lists.

From the district, the two *rôles* are sent to the Regional administration in Koulikoro for approval by the Governor (the Region's head), after which documents are returned to the municipality and the operations of tax collection (*recouvrement*) can properly begin. In 2008, this happened in the month of June, more than six months after the TDRL amounts had been calculated by the Segal.

Tax collection in 2008: mediation and negotiation

In the two years covered by my fieldwork, the Segal updated the register with care and calculated the precise TDRL amount due by each *chef de famille*. However, the way the tax is actually collected in Bancoumana seems to undermine such bureaucratic zeal. One of the three trained municipal staff – the *Régisseur des recettes* – is officially in charge of collecting the tax directly from each *chef de famille*; however, this is not what happens in practice, where tax collection is a much more mediated and discontinuous process.

The *chefs de famille* do not pay the tax to the municipality as required by the law, but instead to the representatives of extended family networks called *gwaw* (sing. *gwa*). The headmen of these groups – the *gwa-tiguiw* – then transfer the money collected within their *gwa* to the village council, a 'semi-traditional' institution which is given by state law the function of 'helping the village chief in the exercise of his functions' (CCT, art. 70), including the duty 'to assist the municipal collector in the collection of taxes and the Mayor in the operations of registration' (CCT, art. 67).⁹² Only then does the village council remit the money to the municipality.

⁹² CCT stands for *Code des Collectivités Territoriales*, containing relevant legislation.

The crucial aspect of this mediated process of collection (in three stages) is that the municipality is given no details as to how much it is being paid by each *chef de famille*. When paying the tax collector, in fact, the only information disclosed by the village council concerns which of the three lineages is to be charged, with detail of any lower levels completely lacking. Correspondingly, the municipal collector issues three receipts, one in the name of each lineage. No receipts in the name of individual *chefs de famille* are issued (as is by law).

Despite the presence of relatively accurate and updated information in the registry of the *carnets de famille*, the municipality has no means of knowing how much is paid by each *chef de famille*. In this way, the state bureaucracy is disempowered from monitoring collection and, more importantly, from legally pursuing tax evaders.

The process of collection is not only mediated, but also remarkably discontinuous. In fact, money is collected in many successive collection rounds and paid to the municipality as a result of pressures and negotiations, after which further collection rounds and further payments may follow. In 2008, for example, four collection rounds had been made in the village, with the Segal making threats to the elders of his intention to bring in the army should they not comply. On that year, probably as a result of the Segal's obstinacy, the collection rate in Bancoumana was 31 percent. While this might not sound impressive, it was a remarkable result, when compared to 24 percent for the whole municipality (which included 13 other villages) and to the average of 13 percent over the last nine years (again this data applies to the whole municipality).

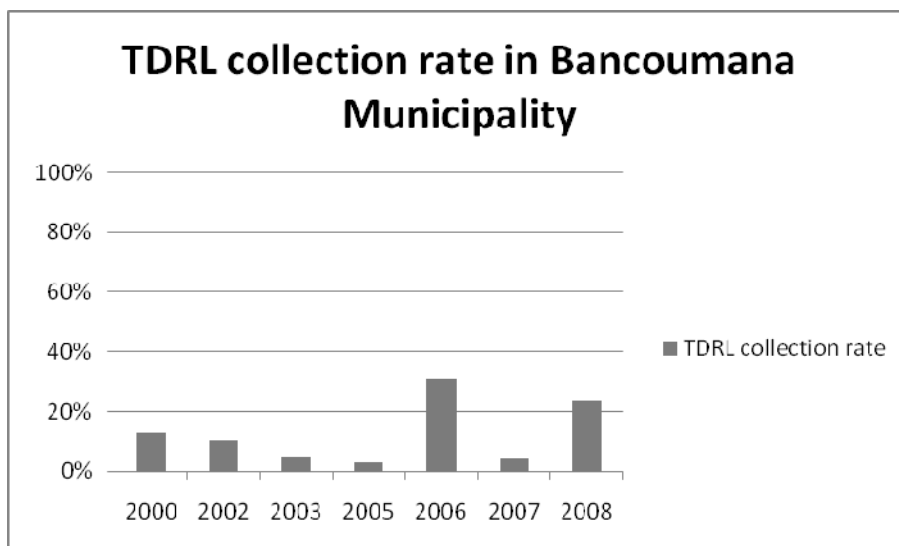


Table 5. Collection rate of the *Taxe de Développement Régional et Local (TDRL)*, 2000-2008

Source: municipal budget documents on file with the researcher. Years 2001 and 2004 are missing. The diagram shows proportions of TDRL issued and TDRL actually collected over the years. The greatest amount of TDRL in the municipality was collected in 2006: 31 percent (40 percent in Bancoumana). In 2007, instead, the average was lowered by the fact that no TDRL at all could have been collected in the villages of Bancoumana and Gonsolo. In other years, that has been the case of other villages (notably Ticko and Kenieroba).

The village council

Acting as intermediaries between extended family networks and the municipality, the village councillors play an ‘interface’ role in tax collection. Crucially, they are the only one of the three actors involved in the position to keep track of the ongoing payment of taxes by the *chefs de famille* (or at least by each group of families headed by a *gwatigui*).

After the tax is issued and ‘legalized’ (as described above), the municipality does not try to collect the tax on its own. Instead, the Mayor gives to the village council the list of taxable people and properties extracted from the registry of the *cartes de famille*. Such document (*rôle nominatif*) states how much is due by each *chef de famille*. With the help of a literate man, the councillors use this list both to request payments from the headmen of the extended family networks, and to keep track of the whole process.

While some other villages in the municipality return the list filled in with the amounts as collected from each *chef de famille*, this is not the case in Bancoumana, where the

village council refuses to disclose to the municipality any detail concerning the payment of taxes, except for the total amount each of the three lineages had paid.

During the four to five months period when the tax was collected in Bancoumana, the village council met weekly to discuss with – and collect payments from – the extended family heads. Meetings took place sometimes in vestibules (discussion spaces inside a courtyard), at other times in a shaded space on the market square. *Gwatiguiw* are likely to participate in these discussions, making it difficult to distinguish the assembly which receives some recognition by state law – the village council – from the elders who have in turn an unofficial role. Clear delineation is particularly difficult when the councillors meet in a vestibule, since such a space belongs either to a lineage or to an extended family, whose representatives – the *gwatiguiw* – will attend the discussion.

The role played by the village council is crucial in at least two aspects. The first is to keep written records, thus allowing *chefs de famille* to make successive payments and, more generally, to stretch tax collection over the longest possible period of time. Such use of written registration provides *chefs de famille* with a relatively secure and accountable way of delaying and dividing up their tax payments, while the village council protects them against the risk of being sued.

The second crucial aspect of the council's intermediary role is as a sort of barometer, forecasting for the elders and lineages the municipality's insistence on its need to collect tax, while also enabling them to resist such demands. During the time my observation took place, councillors reported to the elders all reminders, pressures and threats expressed by the Segal on different occasions. For example, two councillors attended a public meeting during which forthcoming TDRL amounts were announced and comments on the ongoing 2008 collection were made by the outraged Segal. Both before and after the meeting at the municipality, the two attending councillors met in a vestibule with elders and other members of the village council.

This communicative function allows for fine-tuning the intensity of the ongoing collection to the level of the pressure exerted by the municipal administration at different moments in time, especially during tense periods. Mediation grants a certain control of the tensions with the municipality. In 2008, the Segal's repeated threats and

ultimata to resort to legal proceedings, brought the tension to a remarkably high level. However, the councillors and the elders demonstrated perhaps greater control.

The extended family headmen

I have referred to lineage elders by evoking the presence of networks of extended families in Bancoumana or 'segments' of the three lineages. Who are these headmen and how are the networks they represent distinguished from each other? Does mediation in the process of tax collection affect the shape of extended families and the function of their headmen? As in other parts of this thesis, the search for a clear delimitation of similar groups, especially when based on kinship or quasi-kinship affiliation, is likely to produce contextual and circumstantial answers. In my analysis of local government in Bancoumana, vagueness emerges as one of the central features of the way people identify themselves in multiple groups and subgroups; and networks of extended families are no exception.

With such an important caveat in mind, I will nevertheless venture into a brief and merely illustrative analysis of the 'segmentary lineage structure' of Bancoumana. As the case of tax collection plainly shows, in fact, lineage-based groups and sub-groups play a very significant role: no matter how vague their definition and identity may be, they cannot be dismissed as if they were merely 'invented' by the researcher.

During my fieldwork, I conducted a survey of the whole resident population with the (perhaps simplistic) aim of mapping lineage membership and patrilineal affiliation between different courtyards. Instead of revealing 'the' lineage structure of Bancoumana, however, this exercise has taught me that extended family networks are flexible entities and can hardly be identified with clear-cut groups. As pointed out by critiques of 'descent theory' (see Kuper 1982 for a review), the determination to map 'segments' into 'territory' (or specific spaces as showed below) can be misleading.

My census data show 45 'extended family networks' (*gwaw* or *dubaw*) and as many of their headmen (*gwatiguiw*). This number, however, is only a likely figure which requires further explanation. If asked, most compound headmen have no hesitation in casting their compounds into groups larger than their residential unit and smaller than

their lineage. However, since lineage segmentation occurs at many levels, asking questions such as: ‘to which extended family network does your compound belong?’ or ‘with which other compound does yours farm?’ would be sure to yield inaccurate data. Extended family networks lack spatial or material referents, particularly inasmuch as the people claiming to be part of one of such groups live and farm separately. When I consulted Modibo Diabate, my assistant who was serving as chief surveyor in a health project monitoring malaria in Bancoumana, all the questions we could imagine ran the risk of producing incomparable answers, revealing all the shortcomings of the idea of mapping descent groups.

Determined to identify the *gwaw* despite their rather immaterial character, I finally decided to ask my survey’s respondents – all compound headmen in Bancoumana – to define how their compound (*lu* or *du*) fitted into a larger entity (*du-ba*, great compound) on the basis of how it was grouped and represented in a specific space called vestibule (*bulon*). The question, however, had to be further specified by the example of marriage, ultimately asking: “to whose vestibule does this compound go when one of its daughters marries, by whom is it represented and within which group of represented people”?

Although responses were biased by the reference to marriage, the only way I could find to overcome the problem of the immateriality (and consequent incommensurability) of extended families was to link them to vestibules as material spaces. Similar to the compounds as residential units, in fact, vestibules consist of actual buildings and discussion spaces particularly relevant for marriage arrangements and celebrations.

More or less extended family groups may constitute themselves around different grades of patrilineal descent for various purposes. Furthermore, segmentation can also be ambivalent. A segment or family group may stand alone in a given situation (say, tax collection) and merge into a larger group in another (marriage). Therefore, not only the 45 *gwaw* and *gwatiguiw* surveyed in my census might have been involved in tax collection. This number only refers to lineage grouping as reported by my census respondents confronting a simulated case of marriage in their compound. It represents perhaps a likely figure; however, to consider this figure as ‘true,’ even in a real and specific domain such as marriage or tax collection, would not do justice to the flexible and adaptable ways segmentation occurs.

The role of the village council and the *gwatiguiw*

'Elections'

Village chiefs and the council assisting them were originally created by colonization, drawing on pre-colonial political institutions such as 'the councillors of the ruler' (*kangorosigi*). After independence, their functions were firstly regulated by the short-lived federal government of Mali and Senegal (the Sudanese Republic, 1958-1960) and then by a statute issued in 1977. Since the early 1990s, with the project of decentralization of Malian administration, they have been the object of further regulation by the *Code des Collectivités Territoriales* (CCT) of 1995, then by Law No.06/0124 of 28 June 2006 (on the civil registry), and by several other administrative sources (*décrets* and *arrêtés*).

Depending on the size of the village population, the village council is composed of 5 to 11 members, whose election is supervised by a local state representative (either the Mayor or the local representative of the district chief, the Vice-Prefect). The mandate of the councillors is for five years and no specifications are made by the law concerning their re-election.⁹³ However, the Bancoumana councillors had not been forced to seek re-election since 1988. Indeed, three councillors had died when I arrived in 2007 and three were elderly men (one in his eighties, two others in their late sixties). This echoed the situation throughout the country, where no elections had been held since the 1980s.

The village council has thus been an institution rather neglected by Malian administration in the last two decades, despite development aid-giving organizations' increasing mantra of decentralization throughout the 1990s, which, translated into local idiom, proclaim the need to return power to its home (*'fanga segina so'*). Showing perhaps an increased tendency to connect to the central state, it is important to note that things were changing precisely around the time of my stay. In mid-2008, the Ministry for Territorial Administration launched a campaign for village council renewal

⁹³ Art. 70 CCT states that councillors should be 'elected in general assembly of the people having the right to vote in the village [*Assemblée générale des électeurs du village*], presided by the representative of the state at the rural level [the Sub-Prefect].' The list with the names of the councillors thus elected is 'established [*fixée*] by decision of the representative of the state at the level of District [the Prefect],' who also has the power to discharge them.

(*renouveau des Conseils de Village*). The timing was significant, since the Ministry publically acknowledged that such renewal was taking place in anticipation of the municipal elections of April 2009. Unsurprisingly for the observers of Malian politics, the campaign was conveniently framed as a further step in administrative and political decentralization and in revitalising grassroots institutions.

As far as I could observe, the renewal of the village council in Bancoumana did not consist of an ‘election’ but of a lengthy bargaining process ending with the nomination of the new councillors by the headmen of extended family networks. Following a calendar established by the Ministry, from 15 June to 15 July 2008, Sub-Prefects made visits to villages and towns, in order to supervise the alleged ‘election’ of the new councillors according to law.⁹⁴ In Bancoumana, where this visit took place in early July 2008, the supervision consisted of the Sub-Prefect being given the list of names agreed by lineage elders.

The new councillors were then expected to be appointed officially only by a decision of the Prefect, although such a decision was still awaited in Bancoumana when I left five months later. The renewal of the village council also reduced the number of Bancoumana’s councillors from 13 (of which three had died by 2008) to 11, adjusting it to the administrative law in force at the time of the election.⁹⁵ Only two members of the former council were re-confirmed in their position.

Given such a patently rusty set of institutional arrangements, I now turn to explore what, if not elections, affects the choice of village councillors. This will be done by looking at the composition of the newly elected village council of Bancoumana and comparing it with the previous composition. From this comparison, and the analysis more generally, three key factors emerge: position in the lineage, literacy and the status of ‘younger brother.’ The resulting picture of the village council is entirely consistent

⁹⁴ These visits, called *‘tournées’* are clearly evocative of colonial past. See the edited volume by Francis Simonis (2005) addressing the connection between power, administration and mobility in French colonial West Africa.

⁹⁵ The older composition of Bancoumana’s village council perhaps exceeded the limit set by the law (although I was unable to find the law in force at the time of their designation, in 1988). In 1995, the number of village councillors was set by the CCT ‘from 5 to 7’ (art. 70) and then amended by subsequent legislation into 5 to 11. See Government of Mali, *Communiqué du conseil des ministres du mercredi 5 mars 2008*, <http://www.sgg.gov.ml/Ccm/ccm5mars08.pdf> (last retrieved 26 August 2010).

with the role we have seen this institution playing in tax collection. The council can perhaps be best characterized as: a) representing the interests of first-comer people; b) able to effectively deploy literacy skills; and c) comprising ‘deputy headmen,’ i.e. people who are of senior status, but subject to their elder brothers’ authority.

<i>Segment of Soridiana lineage</i>	<i>Patronymic name</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>N.extended families (gwa)</i>	<i>N.compounds (lu)</i>	<i>First-comers / late-comers (ratio)</i>	<i>Representative in the old village council?</i>	<i>Representative in the new village council?</i>
<i>Messerela</i>	Camara	Noble	3	72	12/60 (0.2)	X	X
<i>Bomboila</i>	Camara	Noble	4	23	13/10 (1.3)	X	X
<i>Selila</i>	Camara	Noble	2	12	8/4 (2)	X	X
<i>Morila</i>	Diakite	Caste (<i>moriw</i>)	1	11	3/8 (0.4)	-	X
<i>Noumoula</i>	Sinaba	Caste (blacksmith)	3	11	9/2 (4.5)	X	-
<i>Konatela</i> ⁹⁶	Konate	Marriage partners	3	10	8/2 (4)	X	-
<i>Traorela</i>	Traore	Marriage partners	3	19	13/6 (1.6)	-	X

Table 6. Distribution of Soridiana councillors according to internal lineage differentiation and related factors

Lineage distribution

The new composition of the village council, after its re-election in 2008, was the outcome of negotiations held within lineages and extended families, which started as soon as the decision of the Ministry had been broadcast on the national radio. A comparison with the former council shows that both versions clearly reflected the division between the three lineages. In the ‘old’ council of 13 members, five councillors were Soridiana, five Farana, and three Kolonwulena. A similar pattern (four-four-three), although slightly increasing the representation of the less populous lineage, was followed in designating the 11 members forming the new village council.

⁹⁶ 18 other compounds which responded to belong to the same segment ‘konatela’ are members of the Farana lineage and not of Soridiana.

As documented in the previous section (page 200), lineages were further divided into segments, which were reflected in councillors' designation, as additional detail on Soridiana members will make clear.

According to my enquiry into the 'segmentary' kinship affiliation in Bancoumana, the people of Soridiana can be grouped into seven 'vestibules' (*bulon*, sing.), representing the extended family networks (as explained above) listed in the left column of Table 6. These can be further subdivided into 19 *gwaw*, i.e. the extended family networks which we have seen playing a key role in the collection of taxes; and, finally, in 158 compounds, comprising both first-comer and late-comer people (see relevant column in Table 6).

The proportion of first-comers and late-comers within each vestibule proved highly variable, despite the fact that, looking at the lineage as a whole, late-comers decidedly outnumber first-comers. Despite this fact, shared by all three lineages in different proportion,⁹⁷ each of the seven vestibules of Soridiana (their headmen, more precisely) traces its origin to Bancoumana's first settlers. Since late-comers are incorporated at the level of compounds – each late-comer compound has a first-comer hosting compound – it is virtually impossible for larger groups, such as 'vestibules,' to originate from a late-comer compound. Of course ruptures in the logic of this system of representing descent might occur in the future, but for the time being all the vestibules of Soridiana identify as a group of descendants of first-comers.

How were the divisions of these seven extended family groups mirrored in the old and new councils respectively? The three Camara branches clearly prevailed, being represented by one member each in both. The other four, in turn, found limited place: in the 'old' council, among the five representatives of Soridiana, there was one member from 'Morila' and one from 'Traorela' (one specialized and one 'marriage partner'). In the new council – with lineage representatives shrunk to 4 – the only non-Camara member was from 'Noumoula.' As was explained to me by my host Mekan Camara

⁹⁷ The ratio for Soridiana is 66 first-comer compounds and 92 late-comers, i.e. the lineage has 58 percent of late-comers. The proportion is even more favourable to late-comers in the other lineages: the 152 Farana compounds comprise 59 first-comers and 93 late-comers (61 percent); the 135 Kolonwulena compounds comprise 42 first-comers and 93 late-comers (69 percent).

when commenting on the new council composition, the four non-Camara branches were given one place to be shared between ‘specialized’ people (*marabouts* and blacksmiths) and ‘marriage partners’ (Traore and Konate first-comers).

Although I cannot provide evidence at the same level of detail, it is plausible to assume that the equivalent sub-lineage divisions were significant in comparable ways in the designation of both Farana and Kolonwulena members of the village council. Membership of lineages and very extended family groups are thus two factors influencing the appointment of councillors. A further look at the composition of the new council, however, shows that literacy and the status of younger brothers were also factors of considerable importance.

Literacy and seniority

In the new council, each lineage had at least one literate member. Out of 11 councillors, four were either educated at school or fully literate (two of the Farana lineage and one each for Soridiana and Kolonwulena). Others were able to read and write, like minibus driver Kamissa Adama.⁹⁸ One of the four literate people – Kolonwulena member Banjugu Camara – was a retired school teacher from the Bancoumana primary school. When moves were made to appoint the councillors and determine who might serve as *Premier Conseiller*, Banjugu was rumoured as the favourite for this position. Eventually, it was my host Makan Camara, Soridiana councillor and former *Premier Conseiller*, who was confirmed in this post.

The competition between the two candidates that concluded with Makan’s confirmation as the village first councillor must be understood in relation to two factors. First, the vestibule headman (*bulon-tigui*) of ‘Messerela’ was the very influential El Hadji Messere. Messere had been responsible for the vacancy of the position of Bancoumana’s village chief, having successfully blocked the succession for more than two decades years with his insistence that ‘he and no-one else’ would fill it. However,

⁹⁸ Minibus taxis, commonly referred as SOTRAMA, are the most diffused means of public transport in Mali. They usually are vans, transporting 20-25 passengers and running on fairly regular journeys, although they can also be hired for specific transports, from marriages to commerce. The name derives from a short lived company established in Bamako long ago: the *Société des Transports du Mali*.

as already mentioned in Chapter Four, he died in April 2008, only three months before the renewal of the village council, which presented a chance for Banjugu.⁹⁹ Secondly, due to Messere's unrivalled 'wealth in people' – commonly framed as 'love for foreigners,' – 'Messerela' comprised an outstandingly high number of compounds when compared to other vestibules. Of the 72 Messerela compounds shown in Table 6 above (46 percent of all Soridiana compounds), 47 are Messere's direct guests (see also Chapter Four). This also explains the extraordinary number of late-comers in that vestibule (the greatest ratio of all). Such extraordinary representativeness, coupled with the social prestige derived from El Hadji Messere, were crucial determinants in the confirmation of the 'Messerela' councillor (my host Makan) as *Premier Conseiller*.

The intermediary function performed by the village council in TDRL collection requires a degree of literacy from at least some of the councillors. Acting as the interface between the village and the local bureaucracy, the council needs to have at least some literate members and these should better be evenly distributed among the various stakeholders (like the vestibules outlined above). Virtually all communications or requests from the Mayor to the councillors, for example, are written and in French. Moreover, some councillors are frequently requested to attend meetings at the municipality (like the one described later in this chapter), including those known as 'restitution sessions' and particularly favoured by development agencies willing to involve the local population or 'traditional authorities.' In many of these meetings documents are circulated, numbers often shown (on blackboards) and both written and spoken communication may be in French.

In one case, a moderately literate member of the village council (in its old composition) – Mahamadou Camara – was also elected as *municipal* councillor (serving from 2000 to 2004), an office requiring literacy skills since it is part of the bureaucratic administration of the municipality. As these examples show, literacy might not have been necessary for *all* village council members, but it is certainly a desirable quality for at least some of them, given the role of the village council. It is not by chance that each lineage chose at least one literate person to represent it on the council.

⁹⁹ In the land dispute analysed in Chapter Four, we have seen how Messere's death presented a similar opportunity for one of the litigants.

Another quality shared by Bancoumana village councillors and likely to influence their appointment is the status of classificatory younger brother and, sometimes as a result, their relatively young age when compared to lineage elders. It is significant that the council is often referred to as ‘the arm’ of lineage elders (*gwatiguiw bolo*), an expression that is frequently employed with reference to the status of younger brother (Jansen 1996; Jansen and Zobel 1996). Similarly, the (even younger) age group of the village ‘police’ (the *tontiguiw*, see Chapter Five) are spoken of as ‘the arm’ of the councillors.

In both the old and the new village council, five members rather than being compound heads (*lutiguiw*) in 2008, were the ‘younger brothers’ of such heads. A further member belonged to the junior generation (classificatory ‘son’). At the same time, only one old councillor and two among the new were at the head of an extended family, i.e. representing a *gwa* in their vestibule (*bulon*). Moreover, since the old council was appointed two decades before I collected my data, it is likely that some old councillors with chiefly status in 2008 (either as compound or extended family head) had achieved that only some time after their appointment.

The age of the councillors in both compositions supports the observations made so far, but also suggests that some changes occurred over time. Although I chose to focus on similarities, in order better to capture the function of the village council, differences between the two compositions of the village council are also significant. In 2008, when I conducted my survey of the population of Bancoumana, the average age of the newly elected councillors was 58, while that of the previously elected councillors was 37 (57 years old in 2008).¹⁰⁰ These numbers suggest a steep increase in age of the councillors: the newly established council is composed of people on average 21 years older than their predecessors. Despite this fact, however, their position in terms of seniority does not seem to have changed, since we have seen that new councillors (like the old ones) are predominately younger brothers, i.e. members of the senior generation (that of the heads of compounds and extended families) while, at the same time, subordinated to

¹⁰⁰ In the first average, there are three missing values (out of 15), since as many ‘old’ councillors had already died by 2008. In the second average, there is one missing value (out of 11), since councillor Mahamadou Camara resided in nearby hamlet Bali, not covered by my survey.

their older brothers. In conclusion, the almost 20 years of difference between the average age of old and new councillors confirms that seniority (the order of the generations) does still have precedence over age in the composition of both councils.¹⁰¹

This points to a last difference: while the old councillors were all members of first-comer compounds, two out of the 11 new councillors were late-comers (Adia Moussa Camara and Fali Traore, both from Farana). This fact suggests that the families of Adia Moussa and Fali achieved considerable social acceptance within their host lineage Farana: despite being late-comers, they are now the ‘representatives’ in the village council of one of the first-comer branches of this lineage. This is further confirmation that, as shown in Chapter Four, ‘autochthonous’ status is played out circumstantially and social distinctions based on the principle of anteriority in land occupation can be – although not always are – rather flexible.

The Segal (Secretary General): the backbone of local bureaucracy

Some of the references made so far to the secretary general of the municipality have already indicated both the importance of this administrative position and the strong character of its then incumbent, Gerôme Dakono. His involvement in the 2008 TDRL collection will give us an insight into the perspective of a local state representative and trained bureaucrat, while also elucidating why Bancoumana is often – and somehow frustratingly – described by bureaucrats, and more generally literate informants, as an extremely ‘problematic’ area, particularly with reference to the perception (or extraction) of taxes.

The Segal is one of three trained and unelected officials of the municipality.¹⁰² His position requires a higher rank in the Malian administration, and consequently more training and experience, than does that of his fellow officials. The secretary general is the most important state official after the Sub-Prefect (a government representative

¹⁰¹ A further, complementary suggestion may be that, in 1988 (at the time of first election of the village council), there were fewer literate elder people than in 2008.

¹⁰² Staff varies from one to five according to the size of the resident population of the municipalities. A fourth non-elected member of the staff in Bancoumana is the Mayor’s personal secretary. This is a local, literate woman, whose main occupation is the typewriting of documents.

rather than a member of the local administration like the Segal) and the only one based in Bancoumana, since the Sub-Prefect is based in nearby Sibi. While the latter is more of an itinerant figure – the true heir of the *Comandant* of colonial times (Simonis 2005) – the Segal is the backbone of the local bureaucracy.

While enquiring into the subject of tax collection, it became progressively clear to me that a deep sense of frustration was shared by the three trained municipal staff, as well as by other literate residents of Bancoumana (former bureaucrats and schoolteachers, now retired). In the view of these people, the remarkably mediated process of tax collection in Bancoumana was to blame for poor TDRL collection and the general lack of means and power of the municipality. They were partly right, of course, although I have demonstrated that mediation in tax collection, and particularly the refusal by the village council to disclose the written records concerning taxpayers' solvency, served the (perhaps greater) political purpose of erecting a screen between the 'segmented' grouping system and the state administration.

With the decentralization reform that Mali began to implement in the late 1990s, under pressure from the international community of donor countries and international financial institutions, the funding of local public services by the central state administration (including schools and local health centres) was made proportional to the TDRL collection rate. This system, known as '*droits de tirage ANICT*' (from the acronym of the state agency in charge of the distribution of funds) have a very negative effect on municipalities with very poor collection rates such as Bancoumana. To offer an example, if TDRL had been fully collected in 2008, the following year the municipality of Bancoumana would have received from the central state 24,000,000 CFA Francs (£32,300) in 'ANICT funds' for local investments. However, since only 24 percent was collected, only about one tenth of that sum had been received. As was shown in Table 5 above, the 2008 collection had been, nevertheless, the second greatest result achieved by the municipality since its establishment.

Completing this picture, in August 2008, the salaries of municipal officials in Bancoumana were paid seven months late; the Mayor was accused by his staff of having 'eaten' (*bouffé*) such money, which is part of the ordinary endowment of the state, through a system of fictitious money orders (*faux mandats*). The use of these is

allegedly widespread among Malian Mayors. Municipal money is withdrawn from the district cashier with a regular money order signed by the *Régisseur des dépenses*, but for fictitious purposes (which may or may not be disclosed to the *Régisseur*). A similar illegal practice of which Malian Mayors are often accused is to keep a secret registry with the district official in charge of the municipal cashier, allowing them to ‘borrow’ money.

While the two *Régisseurs* – Diakite and Kone – were resigned to the low collection rate and unhopeful about its improvement, the Segal Dakono showed remarkable confidence. I observed him on several occasions expressing himself with great assurance and perhaps even courage, particularly when addressing the village councillors on the topic of TDRL collection. The most memorable of such occasions has been already mentioned. It was during the presentation of the forthcoming municipal budget, when Dakono, who was in an irritable mood, launched into a tirade on the subject of the poor collection rate in the municipality. It was a theatrical performance, an odd mixture of gesticulation, shouting and table pounding, before an audience of 13 elderly men. Only two of these were village councillors in Bancoumana, as mentioned above, while the others were villagers and village councillors from other localities. But none were accustomed to be addressed in such a tone.

His attempts to explain to mostly illiterate people the content of a financial document became a veritable public performance.¹⁰³ It was met with silence from the audience of respected men. They let the Segal continue for about an hour before intervening – some discreetly, others more vociferously. Dakono spoke in Bambara, his mother tongue alongside French, and the only language understood by his audience on that day (Mandenkan speakers easily understand Bambara). He read several lists of taxable persons and properties for each of the 14 villages composing the municipality (including Bancoumana) and then ranked villages according to the collection rate, commenting on each of them (see the documents in appendix to this chapter).

¹⁰³ I later discovered that the public presentation of the budget is, in fact, a legal requirement in Mali: before the municipal council can approve the budget by voting, the law requires the village council to be ‘consulted’ and the document presented by the Mayor in a ‘public debate’ (art. 174 CCT). At each of these stages, the signatures of the persons present (alternatively, their fingerprint) are taken and later attached to the official transcript approving the budget.

His tone was loud as he shouted numbers and commented on issues related to tax collection and registration in every village, and it became increasingly outraged. When he turned to Bancoumana, he threatened that, should another payment of the TDRL not be made by the end of the month by the village council, the municipality would resort to legal proceedings. ‘The rôles will be sent to the Tribunal’ – he proclaimed. He mentioned that ‘the list’ had not been returned by Bancoumana’s village council and went on to speak of the upcoming involvement of the judiciary, the administration and the police. His evocation of the long journeys that the file (*le dossier*) had embarked on was extremely telling. It drew upon a geography of state institutions and administrative centres – ‘*juge*,’ ‘*tribunal*,’ ‘*Koulikoro*’ (the siege of the Region), ‘*Kati*’ (the siege of the district), ‘*Bamako*,’ ‘*gouvernement*’ – thus providing an effective characterization of the ‘local’ administration of the state in rural Mali.

While praising the neighbouring municipality of Sibi (a village ruled by Camara, like Bancoumana) for having achieved ‘a record’ in TDRL collection, Dakono shouted: ‘People there pay taxes because policemen *reside* there, knocking on the door and making people pay!’ Having been the capital of the former *arrondissement*, Sibi is indeed the residence of the Vice-Prefect and has a resident police force. Bancoumana in contrast has only a *poste de police* staffed by two men on different shifts from Sibi. Perhaps exploiting some rumours circulating in Bancoumana or just making his threats more convincing, Dakono explained that the municipality tried to ‘hire a policeman’ to enforce the TDRL collection, but the costs had proved prohibitive. One policeman had requested 4,000 CFA Francs per day of collection (£5) plus meals in return for his displacement from Sibi.

The Segal could not refrain from telling another story, that of a vice-Prefect from his hometown Kolokani (in western Mali), where he had served before being transferred to Bancoumana. Over several years, this Prefect had spent more money from his own pocket than what he was able to collect in his district, with the aim that taxpayers would eventually be convinced that tax was necessary. One detail of this story was extremely telling: the expenses enumerated by Dakono included the ‘renting of the Governor’s car,’ as the Prefect had no vehicle, and ‘paying for the policemen accompanying him and for their nourishment’!

By the end of the meeting, Dakono apologetically acknowledged that his speaking manner had been overly vehement, excusing himself by saying that he had simply aimed at mutual understanding between him and his listeners. His confidence surprised me as it was decidedly unmatched by the demeanour of other state officials I came to know. In the final month of my fieldwork I learnt that Dakono had applied for a transfer. When I asked him why, he explained to me that after only about two years in Bancoumana he felt that he was ‘getting nowhere with these local people.’ In his view, the illiterate farmers’ mentality coupled with the tensions in the village had posed too many obstacles for the local administration.

His situation was reminiscent of that of his predecessor Lamine Tounkara, whom I interviewed at around the same time in his new position of district Segal in Kangaba. In 2006, shortly after Mayor Issa Traore was elected, Tounkara eagerly awaited to be assigned elsewhere: he had to leave Bancoumana while he was still in his position of Segal, since – he told me – he was feeling ‘unsafe’ and unprotected by the newly elected Mayor as a consequence of the failure of the land plotting project (see Chapter Two).

The Mayor and the municipal staff: fugitiveness and mobility

Taxes were clearly a sensitive issue in Bancoumana. In 2007 the municipality could not collect TDRL at all in Bancoumana. In an administrative structure inspired by the French model, a temporary administrator (and an outspoken outsider) like Dakono can afford to act tough, paying relatively little attention to local power balances: in a matter of years he will be transferred to another administration, as a normal shift in his career. The Mayor, in contrast, is an elected official, likely to be more embedded in the locality and, almost certainly, a native. He might be expected to express himself less directly.

Issa Traore, Bancoumana’s Mayor at the time of my fieldwork, was a man under pressure. For one thing, in contrast to the local ideology of autochthony and anteriority, he was a non-Camara late-comer, although his family was locally settled from three generations (the time of his grandfather).

Mayor Traore played a considerable role in calming Dakono's temper concerning the TDRL collection. Mainly through inertia, he nevertheless showed an interest in preserving the status quo, including the intermediary system. In the face of the tensions surrounding TDRL collection and the pressures of his office, Bancoumana's Mayor responded by regularly eschewing his responsibilities.¹⁰⁴ His behaviour revealed the ambiguity and trouble of his position. Some aspects of his behaviour, notably his 'fugitiveness,' were humorously and bitterly mocked by many of my informants. His absences were often remarked on and talked about; by some, they were interpreted as a sign of cowardice and by others as a confirmation of the Mayor's embarrassment about 'standing in front of the population.'¹⁰⁵ Apart from being widespread among informants, this judgement of the Mayor as a coward was shared by the trained staff of the municipality and particularly by Dakono, whose relations with him were tense. The view of the Mayor as a pathetic and dishonourable character prevailed, in turn, among illiterate citizens.

On the day of the budget presentations, when the ongoing TDRL collection had been the subject of Dakono's vitriolic performance, Mayor Traore had been seen in his compound earlier in the morning. His absence from the event, however, did not surprise anyone in the audience. While speaking to me at lunch, some of the people present commented that the Mayor would have been embarrassed to eat from the same bowl as my fellow diners. Apart from evoking a metaphor for the misappropriation of funds widely employed in Africa, the reference to commensality here points to the Mayor's dishonourable character: as was noted in Chapter Three, eating together is among those ordinary activities in which one's 'place' in society, including moral judgement on one's behaviour, emerges more clearly.

Mayor Traore's attitude in front of the village councillors and the extended family heads was generally dismissive. To my knowledge – and for the duration of my fieldwork – he never met the village councillors or other elders, save on public occasions. Most of

¹⁰⁴ As in the rest of the thesis, I bear full responsibility for the judgments and the opinions expressed, including unquoted reports from my informants, and I do not expect any of my informants to get in trouble because of their opinions expressed here.

¹⁰⁵ In Mandenkakan, 'to stand in front of his people' (*nga-mogo*) evokes the combination of authority and prestige, which distinguished a headman from a mere power holder (*fanga*, meaning force and power).

these occasions were receptions of foreign ‘donor’ agencies, NGOs or state administrators, during which all local authorities, including the *autorités villageoises et notabilités* (Malian bureaucratic jargon for ‘traditional’ authorities), were expected to play a role while addressing one another deferentially. However, when it came to the ‘internal affairs,’ differences were noticeable. The Mayor never entered the compound of the village first councillor (where I resided) for the duration of my fieldwork. When information needed to be passed between the two authorities, which was a regular occurrence, it was either one of the *adjoints* (three members of the municipal council assisting the Mayor) or *Régisseur* Kone on his motorbike who went back and forth between the respective compounds in order to pass on messages.

Mayor Traore also seldom frequented the municipal building. He could be found in his office with some regularity only on Monday mornings, busy signing and stamping documents prepared by the Segal and typewritten by his personal secretary or in discussion with the municipal staff. He was often accompanied by one of the *adjoints* who were also regular visitors at the Mayor’s compound. Most of my conversations with him took place at his home; we also regularly talked at workshops and presentations (in Bancoumana, Bamako, Sibi) and occasionally in his car, when he offered me a lift to the Capital. The only common sight of the Mayor in the village was of him on his motorbike riding between the municipality and his compound. He split his time between his compound and Bamako, on the outskirts of which – at *Sebeninkoro* – he had a house, where he spent several days per week. Moreover, since he was running an entrepreneurial activity (well-drilling), the Mayor moved often between various working sites in the surrounding countryside.

Mobility was perhaps the main characteristic the Mayor shared with the two *Régisseurs*. These are the two trained municipal staff members subordinate to the Segal, and with specific competences. The municipality of Bancoumana is staffed by one *Régisseur des recettes* (of income) and one *Régisseur des dépenses* (of expenses). The naming of such positions invokes registration: an extremely relevant aspect of bureaucracy, as we learned from TDRL collection.

As noted, despite the presence of one member of the staff specifically appointed to the role of tax collector – the *Régisseur des recettes* – TDRL had never been collected

through its own agents by the municipality of Bancoumana. During the time covered by my fieldwork, the *Régisseur des recettes* was Diakite, a young man in his thirties undergoing his first work experience; he had just passed the public selection (*concours*) to join the public administration when I met him in Bancoumana. Of the three trained municipal officials, Diakite was the youngest and least experienced.

Over a lengthy period of time, I observed that Diakite did not perform any particularly active role in the collection of TDRL. His activities were limited to the material perception of money (also of taxes different from TDRL) and to the soliciting of payments from neighbouring villages. When I visited his office, he would at times be busy filling-in and registering receipts or keeping records. But, for the most part, he was working outside the office and was very mobile. Perhaps because he was the youngest of the staff, his main activity was handing over summonses (*convocations*) and communications (*communications*) issued by the Mayor.¹⁰⁶

Such errands made Diakite a regular visitor to many of the compounds and nearby villages. In fact, written communications preceded virtually any event held at or simply involving the municipality, from municipal council sessions to the presentation of development project and ‘restitution’ session of the kind illustrated above. Participation in such events, especially if involving the welcoming of outsiders, is likely to involve a free meal, abundant leftovers to be brought home by some of the participants and sometimes a *per diem* sum of money. Among other things, written invitations restrict the participants to similar events, distinguishing very precisely the involvement of the municipality. They are most often in French, despite the existence of two ways of writing the local Mandenkakan. My host Makan, in his qualification of village first councillor, probably received several written communication per week, although he was completely illiterate in French.

Mobility was definitely a characteristic feature of municipal action. The *Régisseur des recettes* Diakite rode a 125-cc motorbike, the only one owned by the municipality. A written notice posted right at the entrance of the municipal building stated that the use

¹⁰⁶ These documents were type-written by the Mayor’s secretary. They had the peculiar form of variably thin ‘strips’ of paper. In order to save paper, the same text – usually only a few lines – was copied three or four times on the sheet, which was then cut into strips.

of the motorbike was strictly reserved for activities related to the tax collection. It was hence for the use of Diakite, the only official specifically in charge of that task. However all other municipal agents, with the exception of the Segal Dakono, had personal vehicles.

The other *Régisseur* rode a Chinese 125-cc ‘Sanili’ motorbike, a not uncommon model, but clearly distinguishable from the popular 50-cc ‘Jakartas.’ The Mayor rode a Japanese 125-cc Yamaha DT, a much-sought-after motorbike – worth about £1,000 new, despite cheaper Chinese imitations – which he had bought from the local agent of a development project. He also owned two cars, one pick-up model, for transporting the material for well-drilling, and an old Mercedes for his regular journeys to Bamako. Inside the village, however, he drove his Yamaha DT.

The use of these vehicles by local bureaucrats was not as much a sign of their means or their prestige, as an indication of the necessary commuting related to the administrative and bureaucratic structure of the Malian state. As already mentioned, the allegedly ‘local’ administration comprises three levels and consequently three different geographical locations (Bancoumana, Kati and Koulikoro). Written communication is necessary between the three offices. This administrative organization is mostly inspired by the French model; it is run, however, under significantly different circumstances, either because of the scarcity of material resources (means and infrastructure) or because of the behaviour of its agents (patronage and ‘corruption’).

The case of the documents related to TDRL has shown that the material circulation of written documents and communications between the various levels of the ‘local’ administration (municipality, district and Region) involves a considerable degree of mobility by the local agents of the state. In the absence of any reliable and cost-effective communication infrastructure like the post (which virtually does not function in Mali), local administrators in rural areas are constantly on the move. Since colonial times, when the *tournées* of the *Comandants* were a distinguishing device of the French ‘power to administer,’ mobility is still a characterizing and enduring trait of state bureaucracy (Simonis 2005).

The critical voice of retired bureaucrats and other literate late-comers

I focused on the process of collection as was effectively practiced by various actors at the time of my observation and I was generally less interested in how this was experienced by some of the ‘critics’ among my informants, who certainly had good reasons for their discontent but did not play a large role in the collection process. The position of such informants is, nevertheless, revealing for the argument advanced in this chapter, and merits some discussion.

Most ‘critics’ among my informants were former bureaucrats, who chose Bancoumana for their retirement after having served for some time in the village (mainly state or development project agents). Consequently, aside from being schooled and bureaucratically minded, they were relatively recent late-comers to the village. Often such people reported to me that village councillors were ‘corrupt’ and that both they and the extended family heads were ‘stuffing’ their tax money, by transferring amounts lower than those collected to the municipality. I should add here that such accusations were entirely plausible, and they indeed suggest an analogy with some exploitative aspect of the relation between first-comers and late-comers illustrated in Chapter Four. As shown in that case, however, exploitation was just one side of the coin, while the other was perhaps compromise. It allowed both first-comers and late-comers to benefit from exchanging access to land in return for wealth (‘in people’ and social relations, apart from cash); and also gave security of tenure in return for compliance to the rules of hospitality or dependency.

Conclusion

This chapter has emphasized two aspects of tax collection as observed in Bancoumana: firstly, the role of bureaucratic registration and writing, both by the state administration and by the village council; secondly, the mediated nature of the collection process, negotiated by a variety of local political actors.

We can understand the mediation of TDRL collection in terms of institutional plurality. The municipality, the village council and the extended family heads were all involved in the collection process. Their relationship is one of lack of trust and tense cooperation.

On the one hand, such institutions are of a different character, and their actions are endowed with contrasting legitimacies; on the other, however, their division of labour in collecting the tax reveals a certain degree of compromise between power holders at different levels in the structure.

Plurality also characterizes the ‘internal’ composition of these actors involved in tax collection. The examination of the process of tax collection revealed that boundaries between semi-official institutions like the village council and ‘unofficial’ ones like the extended family heads may be difficult to draw. As the ‘election’ of the councillors has shown, then, the legitimacy of this institution is based on rather different grounds than that conceived by official law. Finally, as shown in the second half of the chapter, the organization called the state, even at its most local level, can hardly be represented univocally: local state officials such as the Segal and the Mayor have competing interests and significantly different agendas regarding the collection of TDRL and, more generally, the administration of the municipality

Negotiation and compromise have emerged as distinctive traits of the process of tax collection in Bancoumana: power balances may vary and are far from static. Addressing it as a process has enabled me to describe the collection and, more generally, the extraction and payment of taxes, as an aspect of political struggle. While from the perspective of the central state, mediation may enable the preservation of the status quo, in the locality all actors (including state officials) seem to have a stake in negotiating an outcome. This suggests that the process overall is dynamic rather than static or conservative.

The kind of mediation addressed in this chapter has also been that between the written bureaucratic culture of the state administration on the one hand and on the other, the multiple ways Bancoumana residents group into extended family networks for purposes related to the payment of tax – or its negotiation. The description of the collection process revealed that such groups connect to the ‘segmentary structure’ of the three lineages of Bancoumana. If dynamism, flexibility and even ambiguity in the determination of such groups make it almost contradictory to impute any kind of structure to them, group formation is perhaps better characterized in relation to a degree of ineffectiveness of state control based on written registration, matched by a

corresponding degree of effectiveness of local, socially embedded, knowledge and institutions.

Written registration can hardly capture such ways of grouping without ‘freezing’ and misinterpreting them. The determination of tax-paying units by the system of *cartes de famille*, which invokes the written bureaucratic culture of the state, certainly affects the process of collection in Bancoumana, but it is far from determining all the different routes it takes. A similar observation also applies to written registration for research purposes, as demonstrated by the case of my survey of the population of Bancoumana which aimed at mapping the lineage structure but only achieved a limited result.

Writing, however, is not the monopoly of bureaucracy. Records are kept by the village councillors tracking TDRL payments made by the extended family networks. The councillors’ recourse to writing may have served the purpose of erecting a screen between the ‘segmented’ grouping system and the written culture of the state administration. If this was the intention, however, it was not entirely realized. Family headmen were ‘duplicated’ by the system of taxation (envisaging the *chefs de famille* as compound headmen) and a similar dynamic may have affected the formation of extended family networks. Nevertheless, a practical – and politically very effective – result was achieved through the interface role of the village council: that of ensuring communication while denying control.

<i>Taxable categories</i>	<i>Amount of TDRL (in CFA Francs)</i>
Persons (are exempted: under-14, students, soldiers, mothers of more than 4 children, over-60, disabled, paupers)	1,500
Cows and oxen (labouring animals exempted)	250
Donkeys	100
Horses	800
Sheep and Goats	50
‘Traditional’ guns (<i>armes de trait</i>)	625
‘Modern’ guns (<i>armes perfectionnées</i>)	5,000

Table 7. Breakdown of the TDRL tax

The Franc CFA exchange rate is indexed to the EURO (1€ = 655,95 FCFA). Hence the head-tax amount of 1,500FCFA corresponds to £2.

<i>Non-TDRL taxes</i>	<i>Amount (in Francs CFA)</i>
Market-day tax on stalls	250/week (hangar frequently shared by several vendors)
Market-day tax on shops	750/month
Bicycle road tax	1,000/year
Small motorbike road tax	3,000/year
Car road tax	12,000/year
Transit tax for public transports	250/transit
Gravel and sand extraction tax	10,000/month
Gravel and sand transport tax	3,000F/lorry

Table 8. Non-exhaustive list of local taxes other than TDRL

The list includes only the taxes whose collection was at least attempted by the municipality during my fieldwork. A greater number of local taxes are envisaged by the law but no significant amounts are collected in practice. Those figuring in the budget in 2007, for example, were 22, most of which having generated no or little revenue when compared to TDRL.

**SITUATION DU RECOUVREMENT DU 17 JUIN AU 25
SEPTEMBRE 2008.**

<i>Rang</i>	<i>Village</i>	<i>Emission</i>	<i>Payé</i>	<i>Reste</i>	<i>Taux</i>
1 ^{er}	Missira	76.400	60.800	15.600	79,58%
2 ^e	Niaganabougou	417.425	330.300	87.125	79,12%
3 ^e	Kollé	1.073.675	507.600	566.075	47,27%
4 ^e	Téma	251.200	110.000	141.200	43,78%
5 ^e	Madina	183.350	70.000	133.350	38,17%
6 ^e	Bancoumana	5.660.075	1.778.350	3.881.725	31,41%
	Farana	2.181.175	835.350	1.345.825	38,29%
	Soridiana	2.413.000	715.000	1.698.000	29,63%
	Koléwéléna	1.103.000	228.000	875.000	20,67%
7 ^e	Gonsolo	798.100	192.625	605.475	24,13%
8 ^e	Nankilabougou	198.325	46.500	151.825	23,44%
9 ^e	Djiguidala	596.725	131.500	465.225	22,03%
10 ^e	Ouoronina	983.375	100.000	883.375	10,16%
11 ^e	Samako	1.572.850	145.000	1.427.625	9,23%
12 ^e	Kéniéroba	1.205.650	98.600	1.107.050	8,17%
13 ^e	Niamé	2.080.075	150.000	1.930.075	7,21%
14 ^e	Ticko	584.025	37.000	547.025	6,33%
TOTAL		15.718.350	3.758.500	11.959.850	23,91%
ARRIERES			240.075		
TOTAL GENERAL			3.998.575		

Bancoumana, le15-10.....2008

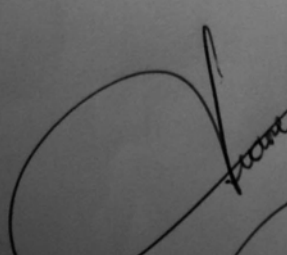



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Figure 13. TDRL amounts and status of the collection up to September 25, 2008

This document was presented for information by Segal Dakono to a public presentation of the forthcoming municipal budget on 21 October 2008. The dates reported in the heading presumably refers to the first and the last payment received. Villages are listed in order of solvency (*rang*, literally 'ranking'). The amount pertaining to Bancoumana is broken down to the three lineages, also showing important differences among them.

Région de Koulikoro
Cercle de Kati
Commune de Bancoumana

République du Mali
Un peuple- Un but- Une foi

ETAT RÉCAPITULATIF DE LA TDRL 2009

N°	Village	Nbre impto.	Nbre bovins	Nbre o/c	Nbre Asins	Arme Equins	Arme traite	Arme perfectionnée	Nbre Familles	Montant total
1-	Bancoumana	2815	903	174	139	2	28	25	812	5.426.950
2-	Djiguidala	266	212	49	12	-	4	1	67	470.150
3-	Gonsolo	409	155	27	13	2	13	5	51	740.625
4-	Kéniéroba	419	100	29	21	-	13	2	109	784.175
5-	Kollé	471	213	36	42	4	15	8	78	896.325
6-	Madina	96	72	55	6	-	2	1	11	182.600
7-	Missira	30	59	2	8	-	3	1	10	77.525
8-	Nankilabougou	110	11	3	4	-	4	1	22	197.800
9-	Niaganabougou	156	153	35	16	-	5	4	34	332.725
10-	Niamé	1189	419	17	32	-	9	8	89	2.026.925
11-	Ouoronina	594	129	112	12	-	15	3	30	984.425
12-	Samako	654	163	69	32	-	6	13	101	1.198.150
13-	Téma	81	49	4	9	-	1	0	30	165.475
14-	Ticko	167	44	14	7	-	5	4	15	301.025
Totaux		7457	2682	626	353	8	128	76	1459	13.784.875

Bancoumana, le 20 Octobre 2008

LE MAIRE



Figure 14. Breakdown of expected TDRL for the year 2009

This document read by the Segal to the public presentation of the forthcoming municipal budget on 18 October 2008. It shows expected amounts of TDRL for the year 2009 by quantity of imposable persons and properties for each village. Villages are listed in alphabetical order. Bancoumana is not further divided into the three lineages.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

The question I asked in the opening of this dissertation – ‘why Mali is different from neighbouring states’ – required an investigation of the field of government, and of the relationship between state and society. The key to understanding these issues in a Malian village, however, lies neither in stressing the ‘gap’ between state and society, nor in completely denying the existence of such a gap, but rather in documenting and analysing the dense political relations and practices of government of which village life is constituted.

Recent assessments of political relations in Africa have conceptualised or described the space between state and society as a ‘grey area’ rather than a gap (see Chapter One for a discussion). However, too many such analyses convey radically pessimistic, almost sinister, views of the political domain in Africa, depicted ‘solely as a form of criminality, or as imbued with personalistic connections which render it impossible for state authorities to advance the common good over a large scale’ (Klaitz 2005:615, referring to Bayart et al. 1999 and Chabal and Daloz 1999, respectively). Thus, African states are judged ‘shadow’ or ‘rhizome’ (Reno 1995 and Bayart 2009, respectively) and seen as ruled via ‘private indirect government’ in which formal and informal spheres of power are connected in complex and – by extension – unhealthy ways (Mbembe 2001). What these analyses are suggesting is that the space between state and society in Africa is occupied by obscure, morally ambivalent and ultimately ‘corrupt’ political practices (see also Englebert 2000). This is a patronizing and paternalistic vision resonating with that of western ‘donor’ countries and also of the development industry.

Countering such views, my enquiry has shown that processes of government intensely mediated by groups – social groups, as well as more overtly political actors, of both ‘state’ and ‘non-state’ kinds – constitute forms of political mediation crucial to the practice of the common good. Indeed, these groups also express a particular vision of the common good, different from that which prevails within the Malian state and

amongst other agencies of development. To substantiate my argument, I have intentionally drawn attention to – and re-engaged with – a consideration of ordinary grouping dynamics such as those observable in the ‘segmentary lineage,’ or ‘the compound’ once the traditional focus of the anthropology of West Africa. While this might be seen to give my analysis something of a functionalist feel, and while it might appear to convey an impression of the nature of social and political process which emphasises balance and equilibrium at the expense of conflict and rupture, this is not my primary intention. Nor, adopting a later paradigm in anthropological study, am I interested either in processes of compliance on the one hand or resistance on the other. What I have attempted, with my rather different emphasis, is to give an account of the very real processes entailed in political and legal processes, which are inextricable from the varied roles performed by the groups in question.

Diffused public authority

‘In Africa there is no shortage of institutions attempting to exercise public authority,’ claims Lund (2006:686). In Bancoumana, a diverse proliferation of political relations and practices characterizes the political landscape in important ways. While the degree of institutional plurality varies from one field of observation to another, the overall picture emerging from my analysis is one of disperse and diffused government. The state has neither the monopoly of public authority nor can it be assumed to operate as a monolithic institution. Observed empirically, and from the perspective of a rural locality, the decentralized bureaucracy of the state consists rather of a complex apparatus, whose officials and representatives do not necessarily operate in homogeneous ways. Examining this plurality, my enquiry has shown that a series of variably legitimated political actors – groups based on age and descent, the village council, the extended family headmen and the like – remove significant shares of government from the state. Thus, the people belonging to the age group called *tontiguiw* hold important policing powers (Chapter Five), the headmen of extended family groups collect taxes (Chapter Six), while the semi-traditional assembly called the village council mediates initiatives of land development involving distant migrants and the state administration (Chapter Two).

The ways such political actors relate to the state apparatus is a classic field of enquiry for political and legal anthropologists, one raising fundamental questions about the nature of government, and thus about the relationship between state and society (see Chapter One). We have seen these issues emerging when considering the legitimacy vis-à-vis the state of the groups that play crucial roles in political relations in Bancoumana. Relations to the state shift from one domain to another, and are also ambiguous or double-sided. In some circumstances the powers of local political actors are more closely bound to the exercise of state authority, as in the case of the village council collecting taxes on behalf of the municipality (Chapter Six). In other cases, however, assemblies such as the *gwatiguiw* and the *tontiguiw* operate more directly in opposition to the state, which is thus denied jurisdiction over matters such as punishing thieves or seizing wandering animals (Chapter Five). Political activity variously conduces to and legitimises formal governance, but also detracts from it, sometimes at the same time.

My detailed analysis of the fiscal domain (Chapter Six), normally considered a typical aspect of state authority, illustrates this ambiguity. On the one hand, local authority figures operationalize state power; on the other hand, however, they deny it. Fiscal authority cannot be exercised by the municipal administration without the involvement of the village council, an institution only grudgingly recognized by state law but extremely influential in practice. While allowing the state to exercise its fiscal authority, the village council also prevents the administration from enacting crucial forms of bureaucratic control, such as registration of taxpayers' solvency. As a consequence, the possibility for the state to resort to legal proceedings against tax evaders is foreclosed. Moreover, my analysis of tax collection has shown that the village council does not operate as a bounded, discrete institution: rather, the councillors represent the interests of a group of elder family heads (*gwatiguiw*), who nominate and control them, and who are their 'older brothers' in classificatory terms as well as in current terms of address. In fact, beyond a certain division of labour between different authority figures – the municipal officials, the village councillors and the *gwatiguiw* – the process of tax collection involves the mobilization of groups such as lineages and extended family groups. Ultimately, it is in *these* groups, rather than in the state-recognized *familles*, that the tax is collected.

Thus, because of such a shifting and double-sided relation to the state, any characterization of groups like the village council and the *gwatiguiw* as political actors of a 'state' or 'non-state' kind, or as 'traditional' or 'semi-traditional' institutions, inevitably results in inaccurate generalizations. In fact, the prerogatives of different power holders, as well as their relationship to other groups and institutions, are the object of shifts and constant negotiations. Irrespective of how their relations with the state might be described in general terms, or of the degree of 'formalism' of their actions, the boundaries of political organizations vary according to time and circumstances, and from one domain of social life to another.

It was as I gradually came to recognize the deeply mediated and dispersed character of such relationships – at once 'political' and 'social' in character – that my focus shifted from overtly political or state-related institutions and arrangements, onto those more apparently embedded in society, that is 'groups.' In a similar vein, analysts of economy in African settings have pointed to the interpenetration and interdependence of formal and informal economies (Guyer 2004). Legal anthropologists have likewise striven to overcome the dichotomy between state and non-state – and the dilemma of what constitutes 'the legal' – by focusing on the study of dispute processes, as 'moments of a certain kind of public visibility embedded in the context of on-going social relations' (Griffiths 1998:591). Along the same lines, claims Griffiths (2000:100), anthropological analysis of political and legal practices should focus 'on the social processes which are central to the construction of people's lives, rather than confining itself to the study of institutional forums or the formal framework which structures the relationship between common and customary law [...].' Building further on such an anti-formalist perspective, my understanding of political relations in Bancoumana has tried to avoid a too rigid and limiting focus on institutions as discrete entities inhabiting an abstractly defined political domain. My analysis has been centred, instead, on the social processes of cooperation, segmentation and government, which show that political relations are built by ordinary people while operating in a variety of domains of their social life.

Inclusive social structures, collective government, and the production of political persons

As I realized I would be moving beyond a focus on state and state-like institutions, it became clear that a broader conceptualization of government, as something including a wide variety of social processes, would be necessary. What is particularly interesting in this perspective is the collective dimension of government resulting from inclusive social groups and institutions. The importance of this aspect emerges from my reading of social processes which play a crucial role in the building of political relations in Bancoumana. Thus, my analysis highlights important dynamics of socialization of power.

Political authority figures – normally male elder family heads – act through inclusive social structures such as lineages and age groups; their capacity to mediate political relations depends on inclusion in such groups. Based on social differentiation (age, generation, status as first-comer or last-comer, descent and the like), and thus far from being egalitarian institutions in the modern liberal sense, lineages and age groups nonetheless operate as *inclusive* groups. Collective government is evident in the various means through which power is socialized, in particular the political ‘apprenticeship’ enabled by membership of age groups such as the one analysed in more detail in Chapter Five.

On the one hand, there are groups organized for the specific purpose of political authority, of a defined and particular type. The *tontiguiw* – the village police and judge, to an extent – provide one example of such a group. This age group is allocated particular functions of public authority for a limited period of time, until the cohort following in order of seniority takes over (all age groups succeed to the role of *tontiguiw*). Such a group comes close to being a recognized and defined political institution, albeit of a somewhat informal character.

On the other hand, age groups – including, but not limited to the *tontiguiw* – have a much more widely diffused social power. Organized in specific circumstances, but without defined and clear-cut arenas of jurisdiction, they hold important political functions. They operate, in fact, as a means of *diffusing* power, because they are both

cross-cutting and inclusive institutions. As we have seen, all Bancoumana residents, irrespective of any difference in descent and status, become integrated by joining these groups, whose capacity and reputation is connected to the ability of their members to unite, bypassing lineage and other divisions. Age-group members are peers, bound by strong and life-long-enduring bonds of solidarity. Like uterine brothers – ‘twins’ in their terms of address – they are expected to support one another and to keep conflict and disagreement far from their relationship. These groups do vital work, especially of an agricultural kind such as weeding, for which the largest possible cohorts are needed. They hold collective funds which normally increase with the size of the cohort (parallel to the group’s reputation, as I have mentioned above), and depend on the ability to farm the fields of the households ‘hosting’ group-farming performances.

Age groups also hold important powers of coercion over their members, fining and punishing them for misconduct, but more importantly they mark sociality in very strong ways: their activities require ‘embeddedness’ in the local social context and skills which are unlikely to be possessed by foreigners and outsiders and, in any case, can only be performed in the group setting. In other words, through codified social interaction (of a ritual kind) distinguishing active group members from people such as women, migrants and students, all exempted but also excluded from group work, age groups play an important part in shaping the capacity to mediate political relations.

In the exercise of such powers, age groups define important rules of sociality. They also regulate activities and ecological practices which have a significant impact on the local economy. As illustrated in Chapter Five, group farming is integral to the social organization of work, and more widely to cooperative processes and relationships in Bancoumana. The same is true for the powers of the *tontiguiw* in regulating fish-catching, the collection of fruit and the grazing of land by cattle during the farming season, when wandering animals can damage the crops. Most of the fish-catching, for example, is done by groups – by the whole village in case of the larger ponds mentioned in Chapter Three. Were people allowed to fish earlier and/or on their own, this would impact on cooperative dynamics and possibly on local economic and ecological patterns. Despite the other tasks performed by age groups, including commoditised forms of selling their agricultural labour (farming ‘by contract’), group farming of the

‘lineage’ kind (*bonda baara*, see Chapter Five) requires remarkable amounts of time and physical energy without which local food production would hardly be sustainable.

The building of political agency, that is the recognized capacity to mediate political relations, thus proceeds in a number of ways which are socially embedded. Hence, the production of ‘political’ persons is in some sense virtually indistinguishable from the production of ‘social’ persons. Social groups have specific practices, a series of highly codified and ritualized, hierarchical behaviours, evident in group-farming practices (Chapter Five), patterns of hospitality of the people framed as ‘late-comers’ (Chapter Four) and modes of dependence as determined by status and descent (Chapter Three). Political power of the more obviously recognizable type, such as that of compound headmen or lineage elders, is both personalized and diffused throughout various levels in society. In order to become such a political person, some ‘apprenticeships’ in socialisation are necessary: hence women and migrants, who are not allowed to participate in age-group farming, along with people who do not comply with the rules of hospitality, are denied such inclusion. A land dispute originating from non-compliance to the rules of hospitality was analysed in Chapter Four.

A major theme here intersecting that of the apprenticeship of codified, hierarchical behaviour is the social production of persons, along with their jural construction and their separation from ‘things’ (Mundy and Pottage 2004). In the case of land (Chapter Two and Chapter Four), as well as in the case of domestic and agricultural labour (Chapter Three and Chapter Five), we have seen how crucial is the capacity to give access to other persons through hospitable inclusion of people framed as ‘guests’ or dependents. The capacity to include people in such groups, and consequently to give access to power and resources under the group’s control, is a *personal* quality and, as such, it does not immediately result from the fact of holding a clear-cut, pre-determined function of public authority, that is an office: another abstract, jurally constructed entity. Rather, such capacity is based on one’s position in the social structure as defined by age, generation and descent among other criteria of ordinary grouping. Moreover, political personality does not follow such qualities mechanically: hospitality consists of codified behaviour, acceptance of rules of social interaction which define sociability and

ultimately inclusion into groups mattering in crucial ways for the definition of political relations.

The man-powered work processes of Bancoumana remind us of the fact – obfuscated, but still true in northern parts of the word – that land is not productive *per se*, but only inasmuch as it is a means whereby social relations of production (i.e. labour) are mobilised. In similar vein, hospitality has meaning and functions beyond that of giving latecomers access to the resources that belong to the group of ‘first-comers.’ It is a means to recognize political capacity and to include people, since resources such as land are not only ‘things’ but also integral aspects of ‘persons.’ Thus, giving access to land is an exercise of political authority, while receiving it denotes one’s inclusion in the group and, again, marks the capacity to mediate political relations.

‘Land is to rule,’ or the interplay of politico-legal and property relations

When land issues are considered in Africa, authors often imply that land is a resource, access to which can be gained via willing fealty to a political leader. Arguing against this, what I have tried to show in my analysis is that such approaches might miss a key insight. Land is not simply accessed via subordination/affiliation to political leaders, but it is an integral aspect of the production of political persons. What I have shown, especially in Chapter Four, is that land matters crucially in the definition of politico-legal sociality. One might observe, as Neale observed with reference to the Indian context: ‘land is to rule’ (1969:3). But given that ‘rule’ is here so diffuse and mediated in Bancoumana, one might go further and say that ‘land is to relate.’

Conceiving of land exclusively and univocally as a resource implies a jural construction of ‘things’ (property) as separated from ‘persons.’ That is, it presumes that land is initially discrete from subjects endowed with political capacity and legal personality, and can be owned or accessed by them. In the setting of Bancoumana, on the contrary, the land *belongs* to a group of people defining themselves as first-comers, as much as *they belong* to the land. Therefore, access to land is mainly achieved through host relationships, that is through codified, hierarchical relations of dependence grounded in a political economy of ‘wealth in people’ which prizes inter-personal, relational aspects

rather than investment in capital accumulation (Guyer 1995). As I explained above, it becomes apparent in such a setting that land has no value without labour and that the mobilization of the latter can hardly occur without embedded social practices and cooperative relations.

Hence the way land is accessed and labour mobilized, in other words the social organization of production, has been an integral aspect of my analysis of political relations. This has emerged particularly in my discussion of processes of transformation of land and labour into commodities and the way such processes are intensely mediated by groups of ‘autochthonous’ people, first-comers, age groups and lineages. Paralleling my reading of more overtly political mediation, the analysis of the transformative tensions in the domain of productive relations has shown that mediation of economic processes (of commodification) constitute another aspect of government. Thus, Chapter Two has shown that the forces channelled by plans to ‘develop’ both farming and inhabitable land in Bancoumana were mediated by such groups and resisted to an extent. Going further, local attempts to control and restrict migrants’ involvement in plans to plot the village-site land resulted, too, in the blocking of incipient class formation.

The group farming practices illustrated in Chapter Five provide another example of mediation of transformative economic processes. By performing the important productive and regulatory functions discussed above, and in particular by exchanging group-farming labour for hospitable reception on households’ fields, age groups play an active role in controlling economic processes of transformation of land and labour into commodities, hence limiting capital accumulation and its power to induce a ‘great transformation’ (Polanyi 1944). That farming groups are paid in kind and not in money – specifically in food that needs to be consumed promptly and jointly by ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ – has important consequences and meanings. Firstly, it tends to characterize group farming as interaction of a ritual kind, whereby labour is only indirectly exchanged for money, hence is not fully commensurable in monetary terms. As I documented, much acting and speaking are required in order to mediate the exchange of group labour for money. While the labour of the age-group members seems more directly convertible into money (absent people are ‘taxed’ by the group), the work of the

group as a whole appears of a less commoditized kind. What distinguishes group farming as a collective practice, then, is the codified pattern of social interaction, in which speech and other elements play a crucial role mediating the economic exchange. Participants can thus behave *as if* their labour were not being exchanged in return for money.

Conclusion

My interest in social grouping has not led me to abandon the state as a field of enquiry. Nor does it lead me to argue that its presence is unimportant. Rather, a focus on social grouping has allowed me to represent the 'grey area' between the state and society in a less implicitly sinister way than in the literature on 'shadow' African states and 'private,' neo-patrimonial practices. Government in Bancoumana is intensely mediated by open and flexible groups, reflecting dynamic processes of segmentation. By inclusion into such groups, ordinary people not only build cooperative relationships sustaining an economy of local food production, but they also mediate political relations, keeping a remarkable degree of control over the involvement of the state and other 'developers' in the organisation of their social and political life. Moreover, such groups mediate and partly control broader transformations. What is at stake is nothing less than the moderation of what one might gloss as modernising processes in the social and economic life of Bancoumana.

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