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## Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

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### ABSTRACT

Violent clashes between Fulani and Dogon have recently escalated in the Seeno plains in central Mali. After failing to defeat a “jihadist” insurgency dominated by Fulani, the Malian army has sponsored and trained a Dogon militia, which has systematically attacked Fulani villages, and again caused counterattacks. In addition, internal conflicts within Fulani and Dogon society have emerged. This demonstrates the complexities of the current crisis in Mali and how simplistic narratives about its causes are unhelpful. It also shows how views of the enemy as “terrorists” or “jihadists” are dangerous and able to further fuel violent conflicts.

### KEYWORDS

Mali; farmer-herder conflicts; Dogon; Fulani; jihadists

### Introduction

At 4 am on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2019, an armed group of Dogon traditional hunters<sup>1</sup> attacked and killed 175 Fulani villagers in Ogossagou village in the Seeno plains in central Mali. About half of the casualties in this horrid attack were children. It immediately made international news headlines and was reported as another example of African “ethnic violence”. But, since Dogon primarily identify as farmers and Fulani<sup>2</sup> as pastoralists,<sup>3</sup> the violence also was presented as resulting from classic tensions between farmers and herders. Media reports often add that these old conflicts are exacerbated by climate change and population growth leading to increased natural resource scarcity.<sup>4</sup>

Ogossagou village in fact consists of two separated sub-villages – one Fulani (Ogossagou Peul) and one Dogon (Ogossagou Dogon). From the 19<sup>th</sup> century Fulani military power dominated the plains and chased the Dogon in the area back to the nearby escarpment where most of the Dogon population lived. Those who did not want to abandon their farms had to accept to become integrated into Fulani society as *Rimaybe* – “slaves” or “servants” of the Rimbe (Fulani of higher status). After the French colonial power took control over the area early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially after Mali’s independence in 1960,

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Dogon gradually moved down again from the nearby escarpment to farm on the plains below (Petit, 1998).

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020, Ogossagou was tragically again attacked by Dogon militia. This time 31 Fulani villagers were killed. These two assaults are, however, not unique, although the former stands out with its high number of casualties. According to data from ACLED (Armed Conflict Locations and Event Data), 60% of deaths caused by violence in Mali in 2019 were found in this dry savanna belt below the Dogon Escarpment and Plateau (called the *Seeno*, see Figure 1) (cited by International Crisis Group, 2020).<sup>5</sup>

According to our local sources in the *Seeno*, by mid-May 2020, 212 Fulani and 90 Dogon settlements (villages and hamlets) had been destroyed, burned down and abandoned in the area. Organized attacks by Dogon hunters supported and trained by the Malian army have led to counterattacks on the hunters and on Dogon villages carried out by Fulani groups usually said to be “jihadists”.

In this article, we aim to explain the background of this violence between Dogon and Fulani in central Mali. Our point of departure is that violence needs to be seen in its wider political-economic and historical context with a focus on access and control over land and natural resources. In such a study of the materiality of natural resources governance and politics, the dialectic of actors and land represent the main object of study. This type of materialist political ecology moves, however, beyond studying conflicts as simple causal chains with resource scarcity having negative consequences for livelihoods and again leading to migration and conflicts (Peluso and Watts, 2001). While climate change and population growth may play a role, in addition to religion



Figure 1. Central Mali.

in the case of jihadist violence, we argue that the current conflicts in the Sahel can only be fully understood by including a political ecology framing with a focus on the material politics of land governance in a historical and political economic context (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2021).

As a pioneer in studies of the political ecology of farmer-herder conflicts, Bassett (1988) saw these conflicts as “responses in context”, while Turner (2004) also used political ecology in his critique of the scarcity narrative that widely informs perceptions of farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel, and stressed that these conflicts should be understood as more than just resource conflicts. In a similar vein, Benjaminsen and Ba (2009) studied a long-standing farmer-herder conflict in the inland delta of the Niger river in Mali, with a focus on the power relations associated with the rent seeking and marginalization that fueled such conflicts. Furthermore, Benjaminsen et al. (2012) combined a study of another farmer-herder conflict in the inland Niger delta with a quantitative analysis of 820 land use conflicts in central Mali during 1992–2009 correlated with rainfall trends over the same period. The analysis gave little substance to claims that climate variability is an important driver of these conflicts. Instead, the study argued that the main causes of conflicts were agricultural encroachment impeding livestock mobility, a political vacuum during the transition from military rule to democracy in the early 1990s that provided space for opportunistic behavior among rural actors, and rent seeking among government officials. Also, a number of other case studies from African drylands have found that the scarcity lens leads to a narrow reading of farmer-herder clashes – e. g. Hagberg (2005), Moritz (2006), Witsenburg and Adano (2007), Kevane and Gray (2008), Benjaminsen, Maganga, and Abdallah (2009), and Akov (2017).

In addition, scholars have pointed out that there is in practice more cooperation than conflict between farmers and herders in the Sahel, and that most conflicts are peacefully solved (Moritz, 2010). Cooperation is expressed through for instance cattle entrustment, resource sharing, trade, friendship and intermarriage (Bukari, Sow, and Sheffran, 2018).

The background to the current crisis in Mali since 2012 and the subsequent rise of a “jihadist” insurgency has been extensively described and discussed in international scholarly and journalistic writings. This insurgency has led to various armed groups taking control over the northern and central parts of the countries except the urban areas (for more on the background to this crisis, see for instance Gonin, Kotlok, and Pérouse de Montclos, 2013; Lecocq et al., 2013;; Bøås, 2015).

In January 2013, a French military intervention in central Mali managed to push back a jihadi movement toward the south. But since 2015, state officials have been leaving the central Mopti region for security reasons and insurgency groups have gradually been able to replace the state and expand their authority and influence. In particular many Fulani pastoralists have joined the armed

insurgency due to a general feeling of marginalization and because they are attracted by a jihadist anti-corruption, anti-elite and pro-pastoral discourse (De Bruijn and Both, 2017; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019; Jourde, Brossier, and Cissé, 2019).

In this article, we analyze the background and the causes of the recent violent conflicts between Dogon and Fulani in the Seeno plains in central Mali. It is based on online sources on the current political situation in Mali, a review of published research on this situation and its background, data on the conflicts (number of villages attacked, dates, casualties etc) received from different local sources, and interviews with 16 resource persons carried out in Bamako in August 2019. Of these were one researcher, one leading politician, one national Islamic leader, one local imam, and one local extension worker. In addition, five interviewees were Dogon and six were Fulani – all of whom were from the Seeno. These latter interviewees were selected because they hold key positions in Dogon or Fulani society such as in cultural organizations<sup>6</sup> or are particularly knowledgeable about the situation and the background to the conflicts. In addition, one of us (Boubacar Ba) is a Fulani from the inland delta of the Niger river with an extensive network in central Mali, in particular among the Fulani, but also among Dogon. He is the Founder and chair of a Malian NGO *Eveil* that has trained 200 para-legal field workers, of whom 60 are women, among the local population in the delta and the drylands around, including in the Seeno. The diversity of ethnic and social groups was sought to be represented among these field workers. Twenty of them are currently employed to carry out continuous surveys of the security situation and submit weekly reports. In addition, mobile phones are used for follow-up information about specific events. Among these 20, there are eight Rimbe, five Dogon, three Rimaybe, one Diawando (the Diawambe (plural) are Rimbe who are traders), one Filinkiriyabe (marginalized pastoral Rimbe, see endnote 10), one Dafing (who are sedentary farmers in the Seeno), and one Bozo (ethnic group specialized in fishing along the Niger river). The knowledge and reports from these field observers represent a unique source of information that has greatly facilitated access to essential and sensitive information.

That one of us is a Fulani may, however, also potentially have biased the analysis, which is a risk we have made an effort to minimize. For instance, during the writing of this article, we sought additional information and verification from a number of resource persons originating from different groups in central Mali including the 20 field observers. Finally, the analysis builds on and draws from our previous joint research on farmer-herder conflicts, land governance and violence in central Mali (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2009, 2019).

We argue that instead of framing these conflicts in apolitical terms mainly as ethnic conflicts or as resulting from increased resource scarcity caused by

climate change and population growth, these killings can be understood as the products of insurgency and counterinsurgency. In fact, a counterinsurgency of Dogon militia, consisting of traditional hunters trained and armed by the state, in addition to former army personnel, have replaced the Malian army that has largely lost control over the region to various “jihadist” groups during the last few years. More recently, however, many Dogon have formed a counter-movement against the violent Dogon militia, and instead promoting peace and negotiations with Fulani groups including “jihadists”. This has led to an internal conflict among Dogon. At the same time, there are fights for control over pastures between armed groups dominated by Fulani and associated with Al Qaeda on the one hand and the Islamic State on the other. Such webs of conflicts demonstrate the complexities of actors and interests in Mali, as opposed to simplified media and policy narratives.

In the remaining sections of this article, we first give a background to land relations in the Seeno plains including a timeline of the recent Fulani-Dogon conflicts. Thereafter, we critically discuss perspectives from the scholarly literature on scarcity as a cause of conflicts, before we analyze the violence as results of a state-sponsored counterinsurgency.

### Land relations and governance in the Seeno plains

The Dogon are said to have originated in today’s southern Mali in an area south of Bamako and moved during the Mali Empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century to settle in the Bandiagara Escarpment either to escape being converted to Islam by Fulani or because of external conflicts within their own lineages (Petit, 1998; Brandts, 2005). The oral history tradition says that they built their villages in the rocky escarpment with a view over the Seeno plains to be safe from slave raids by Fulani, Tuareg and the Mossi and Songhoy kingdoms.

However, in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Dogon were able to move down to the plains to farm, especially in the Madougou area, which is also called *Ourokorohi* meaning “old villages”. But later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were chased back to the escarpment by a Fulani expansion originating in the delta. Dogon who did not want to leave their farms subsequently became enslaved as *Rimaybe* (Petit, 1998).

In the escarpment and on the plateau above, soils are poor and good farmland is scarce, but with the establishment of French colonial rule in this area from 1905 many Dogon felt safe enough to start the move down again to the plains below to farm (Gallais, 1975; Petit, 1998). Increasingly, they established cultivation hamlets and opened up new fields (Nijenhuis, 2009). In fact, to the Dogon the plains have historically represented both a “lost Paradise” and a “promised land” (Petit, 1998).

According to Van Beek (2005: 47):

At an ever-increasing pace the Dogon swarmed out into the newly opened areas, making fields and founding villages. . . . in the first decades of the century, the Dogon quickly filled in the empty spots on the map, first along the present border with Burkina Faso with its better soils, and then on the sandy plains closer to the escarpment.

These plains had up to Dogon colonization been used seasonally by Fulani pastoralists who see themselves as the owners of pastures under the authority of the Boni Fulani chiefdom that stretches south from Boni town to also include the sandy plains of the Seeno (Van Dijk and De Bruijn, 1995). While Dogon since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have transformed vast stretches of pastures to farmland, Dogon farmers would, in some occasions, pay a bundle of millet after the harvest to local Fulani sub-chiefs in recognition of ownership (Nijenhuis, 2009). For several decades, the new settlements were, however, not seen as problematic by the Fulani as land was thought to be abundant.

This prompt colonization has been said to be a result of Dogon “land hunger” linked to their initial land scarce situation at the escarpment in addition to population growth (Gallais, 1975; Petit, 1997). The Dogon population increased from about 100,000 in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to at least 300,000 in the early 1970s, according to Van Beek (2005). Following the population census of 2009<sup>7</sup>, the Mopti region then had slightly over 2 million inhabitants of whom 43% were Dogon (and 23% Fulani). This gives a total Dogon population at the time of about 875,000 (and of 468,000 Fulani in the region).

Moreover, the replacement of the hoe by the plow in the 1990s facilitated further expansion of farming in the area, which led to a doubling or even tripling of field sizes (Nijenhuis, 2009).

The rapid land use change can also be associated with a change in power relations between the Fulani and the Dogon:

In the nineteenth century, the Fulbe dominated the Dogon, even enslaving many of them. In the course of the twentieth century, however, Fulbe dominance decreased and power differences have since become less clear. In colonial and post-colonial state law, livestock keepers are disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* farmers since customary rights to land are recognized, whereas pasture rights or territorial rights are not. Sometimes the Dogon (and *rimaybe*, the former Fulbe slaves) have become more powerful than the Fulbe because of their larger numbers and their relationship with the state apparatus is better. (Nijenhuis, 2009: 77)

Although the balance of power may have shifted from the Fulani to the Dogon over time, the Fulani are still thought to feel a sense of superiority, “which seems to keep hampering the Dogon in their dealings with them” (Van Beek, 2005: 66).

In some cases, Fulani may oppose the expansion of farmland, especially when traditional livestock corridors (*burtol*), that were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are blocked (De Bruijn and Van Dijk, 2005). But since farming has usually been supported by the administration of both the colonial and Malian

state at the expense of pastoralism, Fulani pastoralists have seldom been able to prevent pastures from being taken over by cultivation (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2009).

This situation has resulted in an increasing number of conflicts over land in the Seeno. Such conflicts occur between Fulani and Dogon, but also within each of these groups (De Bruijn and Van Dijk, 2005). Conflict resolution may take place with the help of elders or Muslim scholars and usually people have only taken these conflicts to court in the last resort. De Bruijn and Van Dijk (2005: 258) interestingly added – not that long ago – that “(v)iolent conflicts are rare compared to other areas in West Africa”.

As the last few years have shown, this is unfortunately no longer the case. In the following, we try to trace the recent history of these conflicts between Dogon and Fulani in the Seeno. The timeline is based on written sources as well as interviews with resource persons carried out in Bamako in August 2019.

After Mali's independence in 1960, an increasing number of Dogon from the escarpment descended to the plains to request access to land from Dogon and Fulani who were already settled in villages. During the colonial period, the French had ruled through the Fulani chief in Boni who had been *Chef de Canton* over this area including the Seeno (Sangaré, 2018). But the independent socialist government of Mali followed both an anti-feudal and anti-pastoral policy (Benjaminsen and Berge, 2004; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2009). This policy encouraged farmers to cultivate new areas without asking traditional authorities for permission.

Land conflicts started to emerge in the 1970s and 80s. The first violent conflict took place in Tolodié, which is both the name of a village and a pastoral area. In 1975, a large livestock development programme (*Opération de développement de l'élevage dans la région de Mopti*, ODEM), with the World Bank as the main funder, had started to dig a total of 11 wells in the Seeno, including one in Tolodié. Pastoral development through improved access to water was the aim of the programme. But by making water permanently available in larger parts of the plains, the water development programme led to a further influx of people to the area. The water rights remained, however, unclear. Discussing the impact of this programme, Van Dijk and De Bruijn (1995: 84) found that since “anyone may use these water sources, herdsmen with livestock and cultivators in search of well-manured land from all over the region settle near these wells . . .”.

While Tolodié had been a pastoral area, the new well also attracted Dogon from the escarpment who settled to establish hamlets and over a few years transformed the area into an agricultural zone. This led Fulani pastoralists to demand the state administration to accept the creation of a *harima* (a pasture reserve for milk cows that do not follow the annual migration). This was agreed, but not respected by farmers who continued to encroach on these



pastures. Over time, a conflict emerged that the leader of the pastoral village of Mbana took to court – a case he won in 2002. However, the court decision was not implemented by the administration, due to corruption (see Benjaminsen and Ba (2009) for details on the mechanisms of corruption linked to issues of land governance in central Mali).

One Dogon even continued to cultivate in the interior of the *harima*, and one day in August 2002, he was found assassinated. In the night after his body had been discovered, Dogon in the area met, and the next morning they entered Mbana and killed the village chief and seven other people.

After this attack, local Fulani mobilized to evict all Dogon from the Tolodié area, which was an eviction that was accepted by the local administration at the time. But in the following years, Dogon managed to gradually move back to farm in the area.

A few years later, in 2017, some Dogon, without the authorization of the local Dogon village chief, started to demand fees from Fulani herders for grazing around their hamlets. One Dogon also encroached on the *harima* with his fields. On the 17<sup>th</sup> June 2017, when visiting the local market with his son, he was killed by some Fulani (others refer to them as “jihadists”).<sup>8</sup>

This led a group of Dogon to organize an act of revenge, which resulted in the burning down of Fulani hamlets and the killing of 40 Fulani in the Tolodié area. The next day, Fulani burned down Dogon hamlets and killed six Dogon.

This violence in Tolodié in 2002 and 2017 are considered key events leading to the subsequent escalation of Fulani-Dogon violent conflicts. Another key event was the Dogon attack on Sari on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012. Sari is a village situated between Koro and the border to Burkina Faso. In this attack, 350 huts were burnt, 774 cattle taken and 21 Fulani villagers killed in addition to several injured (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019).

At the root of the Sari conflict lies a contestation about a cattle corridor being blocked by farming. This case has also for several years been dealt with by the courts – first the primary court in Koro and then the appeal court in Sévaré – without any resolution, although judgments have been in favor of the Fulani pastoralists being recognized as the first comers in the area. Sari village is said to have been founded by Fulani before the Macina Empire (1818–1862).

The extent of Dogon farming in the area increased in particular after Mali's independence, whereas farmland gradually tended to block the pastoralists' movements and access to pastures.

While the attack in Sari was ongoing, the village chief had called the paramount Fulani chief in Boni for assistance. This request was, however, declined. Boni was at that time occupied by the Tuareg-dominated largely secular rebel group MNLA (*Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad*), which the chief in Boni was allied with. His refusal to assist Sari was interpreted as a betrayal of common Fulani, not only in Sari. This act further reinforced an existing cleavage between Fulani elites and “common” Fulani,

and it pushed many Fulani pastoralists into the camps of jihadist organizations. The lack of support to Sari when help was called also later motivated jihadist groups (*Mouvement de l'Unité du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO) and *Front de Libération de Macina* (FLM) – also called *Katiba Macina*) in 2016 to attack the Fulani elite in Boni.

The conflict in Sari and its consequences demonstrate the cleavage within Fulani society between traditional elites and more common pastoralists (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019; Jourde, Brossier, and Cissé, 2019). At the same time, it is a representation of a classic farmer-herder conflict over control over space. In addition, this farmer-herder conflict has developed into a confrontation between the Malian army supporting Dogon militia and jihadist groups that many Fulani pastoralists have joined. The Dogon have a strong position in the army with about 25% of the personnel originating from this ethnic group, while Fulani from the northern and central regions of Mali only represent 0.5% of army personnel.

These different lines of conflict and alliances also illustrate the complexities of the various local conflicts in Mali as opposed to simplified narratives about ethnicity, climate change or population growth as drivers of conflicts.

### **Scarcity as a cause of conflicts – and its critique**

In the media, among policy-makers and in popular scientific writings, scarcity of natural resources is often said to be at the root of violent conflicts in the Sahel. These ideas follow the Environmental Security School in seeing “demand-induced scarcity” (caused by population growth) or “supply-induced scarcity” (caused by environmental degradation) as the main drivers of conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1999). In addition, since the early 2000s, with growing concerns for global warming, the anticipated impact of anthropogenic climate change on the security of societies and livelihoods have led to increased international attention to the “securitization of climate change” (Brown, Hammil, and McLeman, 2007) where the main idea is that climate change has become a security issue, for instance through increased supply-induced scarcity causing violent conflicts.

This climate security narrative is reflected in the notion of “climate wars” (Dyer, 2010; Welzer, 2012) where climate change leading to scarcity is either seen as a main cause of wars and violent conflicts, or alternatively as an underlying factor creating declining food production, increased land degradation, growing health risks, and more people on the move. Hence, “the consequences of climate change will reinforce and deepen survival problems and the potential for violence; they will interact with political, economic, ethnic and other social-historical factors and may also lead to open use of force” (Welzer, 2012: 75).

This thinking is in line with numerous other security analysts writing on this topic and it is frequently referred to as a “threat multiplier” resulting from a collision of political, economic, and environmental disasters (Parenti, 2011). However, increased international attention to the securitization of climate change is found in particular among policy, military and NGO actors, while relatively few researchers advocate this idea (Selby and Hoffman, 2014).

The climate-conflict narrative has been extensively criticized in the quantitative literature (e.g. Nordås and Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan, 2008; Buhaug et al., 2015). A recent collective analysis by a number of leading quantitative scholars in the field (Mach et al., 2019) also found that state capacity and level of socioeconomic development generally represent the main causes of conflicts, while climate variability potentially only play a secondary role in influencing the risk of armed conflict within countries.

At a conceptual level, critics of the Environmental Security School also argue that the term “scarcity” tends to be defined so vaguely and broadly that it loses its meaning (Gleditsch, 1998; Fairhead, 2001; Richards, 2005). Since armed conflicts are almost without exception about control over land, such conflicts will necessarily have a resource dimension. However, it does not follow that this dimension explains the conflicts.

Moreover, Mehta (2001) demonstrates how “scarcity” is a socially constructed concept that is often used purposely to achieve certain political objectives. In a similar vein, Scoones et al. (2019) point out that scarcity narratives are not merely descriptive storylines, but are constructed, proliferated and adopted with a purpose. They are used actively to legitimize certain policy interventions.

Several actors, both Sahelian governments and international organizations, may find it more convenient to adhere to a general and largely apolitical climate-conflict narrative rather than more complex explanations of conflicts involving political struggles at various levels from the local to the international. Journalists, politicians and climate activists may also find the climate-conflict narrative attractive as a media-friendly and simple story that can be easily reproduced without the need of detailed knowledge, rather than making an effort to understand the political, economic and historical context and complexities of local grievances and national politics in the Sahel.

In a historical perspective, the new “climate reductionism” can be compared to the “climate determinism” of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hulme, 2011). As in the heydays of climate determinism when the agency of colonial subjects was reduced to being a product of African climates, there is also a particular focus on Africa in today’s climate reductionism.

The Sahel, which is regularly claimed to be subject to widespread desertification, is often highlighted as the most prominent example of a close link between scarcity and conflicts. This region was also pointed to by the Norwegian Nobel Committee as the prime example of the link between

climate change, scarcity and conflict when former US Vice President Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

The climate-desertification-conflict narrative on the Sahel consists of two elements; that climate change leads to drought and desertification, which in turn lead to scarcity, and that this scarcity causes migration and the emergence of new conflicts, or triggers existing, latent conflicts (Benjaminsen, 2016).

Since it is largely rainfall that drives the dynamics of Sahelian ecosystems, global warming might in the long run lead to desertification – if it reduces rainfall. Despite a general uncertainty about rainfall trends and projections in the Sahel, Biasutti (2013) finds that most climate models conclude that the rainy season will be “more feeble at its start” and “more abundant at its core” with the ongoing global warming. Hence, the overall trend seems to be toward wetter conditions, but with rainfall more concentrated in time and with higher average temperatures.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1950s were exceptionally humid, while the 1970s and 80s were dry. Since the 1980s, there has been a partial recovery of annual rainfall. Soon after the drought of the 1980s, studies using satellite images indicated a fast re-greening of the vegetation cover (Tucker, Dregne, and Newcomb, 1991). Subsequent research on longer time series have later confirmed the overall greening in the Sahel (Olsson, Eklundh, and Ardö, 2005; Fensholt et al., 2006; Dardel et al., 2014; Brandt et al., 2016; Benjaminsen and Hiernaux, 2019).

This greening is also observed in the Seeno plains and on the Dogon Plateau as demonstrated by Brandt et al. (2014) who detected a trend of re-greening with increased tree cover in the area over the period 1982–2010 associated with annual rainfall increases.

Hence, while the existence of supply-induced scarcity in the Seeno may be questioned through re-greening, there is still an element of demand-induced scarcity due to population growth. The Dogon’s “land hunger” has historical causes and is the result of a historically produced land scarcity in Dogonland (escarpment and plateau). For centuries, they were cornered in this rocky and land-sparse area, because of the danger of being captured as slaves if they descended to the land-abundant plains below.

After this threat disappeared, and encouraged by a policy environment favoring farmers more than pastoralists, Dogon have been colonizing the plains and, in many places, transforming a pastoral landscape into farmland. This has led to increasing competition over space, especially where key pastoral land units are encroached upon, such as *burtol* (livestock corridors) and *harima* (pastures for milk cows). Hence, pastoralists have often been losing this competition due to an unfavorable policy environment.

### Insurgency, counterinsurgency and communal violence

For decades, the rural peasantry in Mali, and especially pastoralists, have complained about the predatory behavior of state and traditional elites (Turner, 2006; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2009, 2019; De Bruijn and Both, 2017; Jourde, Brossier, and Cissé, 2019). Rent-seeking by government officials has been particularly intense in relation to conflicts between farming and pastoralism often leading herders to feel disempowered and marginalized when access to key spaces is lost.

The various insurgency groups have benefited from, and exploited, this general feeling of injustice and marginalization. Many pastoralists therefore support or have actively joined “jihadist” groups, because of an anti-government, anti-elite and pro-pastoral jihadist discourse (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019).

There is a certain plasticity when it comes to the existence and organization of the armed groups in northern and central Mali. Since “alliances form and collapse at a high rate between a myriad of armed groups, which, to complicate matters, may rebrand themselves under new acronyms” (Desgrais, Guichaoua, and Lebovich, 2018: 656), it is difficult to give a good, and durable, overview of these groups.

Nevertheless, three main armed groups took part in the jihadist take-over of northern Mali in 2012; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and MUJAO, which managed to respectively control the towns of Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao (Sandor and Campana, 2019). With the French intervention in January 2013, MUJAO disintegrated with some elements leaving for Niger, some joining Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s *Al-Mourabitoune* (a splinter group from AQIM), while others later joined *Katiba Macina*<sup>9</sup> – a sub-group of *Ansar Dine* that was established by Hamadoun Kouffa in the Mopti region in 2015 (Sandor and Campana, 2019). A core unit within MUJAO also continued to operate as such in the Seeno–Gourma area. In addition, a group that calls itself *l’Etat Islamique au Grand Sahara* (EIGS) (the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) has recently popped up in the Gourma, and in November 2016 Ibrahim Malam Dicko left the *Katiba Macina* to establish an armed group in Burkina Faso – *Ansarul Islam* – which has since carried out attacks primarily against military targets (Desgrais, Guichaoua, and Lebovich, 2018). This unit operates along the Mali-Burkina border including in the Seeno area.

After a conflict in late 2019 between pastoralists from the Seeno and *jowros* (traditional leaders) from the delta, a number of militants from Seeno left the *Katiba Macina* to join EIGS. Pastoralists from Seeno and the other drylands around the delta have usually paid higher grazing fees than those from the delta to access the valuable dry season *burgu* pastures. Traditionally, these pasture fees were merely symbolic to acknowledge the *jowros*’ rights to manage

pastures, but during the last few decades fees have become increasingly high and unaffordable to many pastoralists who have complained about the rent-seeking of traditional elites in collusion with state administrators and politicians (Turner, 2006; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2009). From 2016 to 2018, *Katiba Macina* abolished all fees to *burgu* pastures in the delta, but re-instated some smaller fees again in 2019 after a request from the *jowros*.

Pastoralists from *Seeno* and similar drylands around the delta rejected, however, to comply with this decision to again pay grazing fees arguing that the holy Quran says that pastures are a free gift from Allah. This led the *jowros* to complain to the *Shoura* (the committee of leaders) of *Katiba Macina*, but the decision that fees should be paid was maintained. This again resulted in dryland pastoralists leaving *Katiba Macina* to join *Dawlat il Islamia*, which is a new group established in late 2019 that has become part of EIGS.

In late 2019 and early 2020, there were violent confrontations between *Katiba Macina* and *Dawlat il Islamia*, the former affiliated with Al Qaeda and the latter with The Islamic State, over grazing rights to *burgu* pastures. This illustrates our argument about the politics of materiality driving violent conflicts in this area. According to local sources, these confrontations inside the delta led to 22 deaths in November and December 2019, and between January and May 2020 even more violent clashes in the delta took place leading to 120 fighters losing their lives. A new series of intra-jihadist violence subsequently happened in the *Seeno* as well as in the delta between July and October 2020 resulting in about 30 deaths. *Katiba Macina* has mostly been prevailing in these fights and managed to push back the partisans of *Dawlat il Islamia*. This latter group is essentially composed of *Wuwarbe*, *Senonkobe* and *Filinkiriyabe* Fulani from the drylands around the delta<sup>10</sup> in addition to some *Tolobe* Fulani from Niger and *Jelgoobe* Fulani from Burkina Faso.

In addition to fighting over grazing rights to *burgu* pastures, there are disagreements between *Katiba Macina* and *Dawlat il Islamia* about whether to work with locally elected mayors, to allow schools, and how to split the booty taken from the army and from enemy militias. *Dawlat il Islamia*, having joined EIGS, is against working with mayors and allowing schools.

Many young Fulani men with a pastoral background have joined the various insurgency groups in central Mali. With the help of mobile phones, they organized themselves into a social movement from late 2014, and voiced their feelings about marginalization to state and international organizations asking them to listen to their grievances (De Bruijn and Both, 2017). But after meetings in Bamako, this was not followed up in any tangible way.

Subsequently, some members of the movement changed their tactics from peaceful negotiations to more violent protest. Especially, the youth became part of the jihadist groups which subsequently entered the region to fight for their cause. Today, these young men are seen as a threat, but neither their opinions nor their reasoning are heard – let alone understood (De Bruijn and Both, 2017: 784)

Previously, from August 2012 to January 2013, various armed groups had controlled parts of central Mali and been able to reestablish security locally. Some of these groups also communicated through mobile phones and videos combining messages about radical Islam and marginalization of pastoralists that attracted many young Fulani men, some of whom also joined jihadist training camps in the area (De Bruijn and Both, 2017).

In an insightful contribution to explain why Fulani young men join jihadist groups Cissé (2018) mentions three causes: 1) Human rights violations by the army combined with the predatory behavior of state representatives (judges, foresters, gendarmes) as well as by some traditional leaders (see also Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019); 2) after the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, armed Tuareg moved from the north into traditionally Fulani-controlled pastoral areas in the central Mopti region, and joining jihadist groups has therefore been a way to push back Tuareg from the area; 3) an opportunity to reinstate Fulani hegemony in central Mali by building on the proud memory of the Macina Empire of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Insurgency groups have been able to take control over northern and central Mali partly because of a weak national army. The Malian army is seen by international observers to be poorly and badly trained, unmanaged, under-equipped, under-resourced, and inadequately led (Tull, 2019). When the jihadists started to take over the northern regions in early 2012, the Malian army soon fled back to Bamako and instead committed a short-lived coup led by Captain Sanogo on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012 (Giraud, 2013).

Since the French helped to take back control over the northern and central regions, the army has been frequently accused of human rights abuses such as summary executions (Tull, 2019). The Fulani in particular have felt targeted by the army, because there is a widespread conception, especially within the army, that the Fulani are generally jihadists (Ibrahim and Zapata, 2018). This has caused concerns that there is an emerging “Fulani question” similar to the “Tuareg question” further north (Thiam, 2017; Sangaré, 2018), which also resonates with a discourse of “Fulanisation” in Nigeria that “links pastoralism with Islamization and terrorism in a discursive chain to produce a compelling ‘regime of truth’ about insecurity” (Chukwuma, 2020: 67; see also Eke (2020)).

The lack of skills, resources, leadership and moral within the Malian army resulting in lack of success in fighting the insurgency has led to political support for militias that may add to the army’s counterinsurgency operations. In an African context, this is not unique to Mali. According to Boisvert (2015: 274–275):

Pro-government militias have been used in several African conflicts to supplement collapsing armies and to pursue tactical and strategic goals that conventional armed forces are unable to perform. . . . Weak democracies and states dependent on foreign aid may want to rely on militias to avoid being held accountable for violence against populations. . . . This leads militias to become some of the worst human rights perpetrators, often with state consent.

In addition, militias are less expensive, more flexible and have better local knowledge than national security forces. Such close relationships between militias and government forces do not, however, necessarily mean that the militias are merely government puppets (Boisvert, 2015). They often have their own agendas and interests guided by local politics.

In Mali, militias have often been used in times of crisis to support the armed forces (Diallo, 2017). During the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s, a militia – *Ganda Koy* – based in the sedentary population of Songhay ethnicity was formed in 1994, which had close links to the military. In addition to self-defense, *Ganda Koy* had a clear aim of terrorizing civilian Tuareg (Lode, 1997; Benjaminsen, 2008). Its leadership consisted of former army officers who even wore Malian army uniforms during actions (Boisvert, 2015).

Other government friendly militia in Mali are *Ganda Iso* that was established in 2008 to protect Fulani from the Ansongo area against Tuareg attacks, and GATIA (*Groupe Auto-défense Touareg, Imghad et Allié*) created in 2014 and consisting of Tuareg with a background from the Malian army.

The army has acknowledged that it has provided training and logistical support to these militias (Boisvert, 2015). According to Charbonneau (2020), the French Barkhane force also works with these groups in their anti-terrorism efforts in Mali. This has provided the various militias with increased power and further exacerbated inter-community tensions.

According to Ibrahim and Zapata (2018: 14), militias are often created by community leaders “to compensate for insufficient protection from state security forces and thus guarantee protection from violence by rival groups.” Some communities are also allied with jihadist groups to get protection as well as military training and access to weapons, and some communities encourage young men to join these groups (Ibrahim and Zapata, 2018).

*Dana Amassagou* is the latest addition to pro-government militias in Mali. It is usually referred to as a Dogon militia consisting of traditional Dogon hunters as well as former army officers and soldiers of Dogon ethnicity, but also mixed with some combatants who are of Bambara ethnicity.

This militia was established in December 2016 to protect the Dogon population against jihadist attacks (Bourgeot, 2019). In 2018, *Dana Amassagou* experienced a boost in its operational power when it started to receive support from the state after an initiative from the prime minister at the time. The support included automatic hand weapons (e.g. Kalashnikovs) and RPG grenade launchers. This state support also allowed *Dana Amassagou* to set up several training camps in the *cercles* (districts) of Bankass, Koro, Bandiagara, Tominian and Douentza.<sup>11</sup>

The aim of *Dana Amassagou* also changed over time from defending Dogon villages to actively attacking Fulani villages. In 2018, the militia reportedly started to systematically attack Fulani villages through setting fire to buildings



and chasing the civilian Fulani away. Since Fulani are seen as associated with jihadist groups, this operation may be understood as a state-supported form of counterinsurgency. Several thousand Fulani have, as a result, fled to Burkina Faso to seek refuge.

Hence, while jihadists in Mali generally kill individuals who oppose them or who cooperate with the army or state administration, but usually do not attack the civilian population, the strategy of the government-friendly militia “is not to confront the jihadists who are responsible for the attack but rather to aim at soft targets – in this case, Peul civilians. Also, sometimes armed groups take advantage of the context of conflicts to settle old accounts and disputes, including conflicts over natural resources” (Ibrahim and Zapata, 2018: 18).

The active state support to *Dana Amassagou* continued until April 2019 when public criticism and demonstrations in Bamako led President Keita to replace the prime minister. A new government approach followed including ordering the militia in February 2020 to take down five roadblocks in the Seeno.

While today’s military interventions in Mali, through the UN’s MINUSMA mission and the French Barkhane operation in particular, should be understood as expressions of counterinsurgency politics (Charbonneau, 2019), the flip side of these endeavors is the government’s support to and use of militias for such counterinsurgency. The active state support to *Dana Amassagou* may have stopped, but during 2018–19 this support escalated Fulani-Dogon violence and increased communal tensions to a level that seems beyond repair for several decades.

Interestingly, however, a Dogon counter-movement, *Dana Atem*, was established in 2020 that condemns the violence perpetrated by *Dana Amassagou* and that instead has supported direct negotiations with Fulani and “jihadist” groups. In these local negotiations without state involvement, jihadist groups have set the condition to expel *Dana Amassagou*, to ban arms locally, to introduce sharia-based family laws and taxes, and a ban on any contact with the Malian state and army (Ba and Cold-Ravnkilde, 2021). While the foreign military intervention is allied with the Malian army responsible for serious human rights crimes, which again has supported violent militias such as *Dana Amassagou*, the emergence of these locally initiated peace deals further demonstrates the complexities of actors and interests in conflicts in Mali, as opposed to simplified media and policy narratives.

As Charbonneau (2017: 421) points out, a key question for actors intervening in Mali should be: Who is the enemy? “It is not enough to claim that there exist some terrorists that must be destroyed. There are, indeed, multiple problems in distinguishing terrorists from non-terrorists in Mali . . .”.

Simplified views of the enemy as “terrorists” and “jihadists”, and their associated solutions largely based on the use of military force, are not helpful to solve the current crisis in Mali. When such views are combined with

simplistic narratives about ethnic violence or conflicts driven by climate change or population growth, there is a basic analytical flaw that needs to be corrected in order for development and security endeavors to be able to contribute to a peaceful and sustainable solution to the crisis.

## Conclusions

Farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel tend to be presented by external observers as either driven by ethnicity or by increasing resource scarcity caused by climate change or population growth – or a combination of these factors. While these elements may be relevant, which we also see in the case of Fulani-Dogon violence in Mali, narratives about ethnicity or scarcity also serve to simplify explanations of conflicts and to gloss over their more complex root causes linked to historical and contemporary land relations.

We therefore argue that in order to more fully understand such land struggles that escalate into violence, it is necessary to study the material politics of land governance in a historical context. This will lead to explanations that move beyond simple causal chains where the Sahel is seen as an arena with decreasing resource scarcity affecting livelihoods that again trigger migrations or conflicts.

In the case of the Fulani-Dogon killings in the Seeno plains in central Mali, which have been going on for the last few years, a series of longer historical and more recent facts and processes have led to the current situation. First, in periods the Dogon have had to seek refuge in the land scarce Bandiagara escarpment and on the Dogon Plateau in order to avoid being captured as slaves if they descended to the land abundant savanna below. While Dogon managed to settle on the plains to farm in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were later chased back to the escarpment by a Fulani expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Dogon increasingly moved back again to the Seeno with French colonization, and especially after independence, when Mali's new socialist government followed an anti-feudal and anti-pastoral agenda that motivated and increased the speed of the Dogon migration to the plains. In addition, Mali's land policies and laws have continued to favor farming at the expense of pastoralism. This has encouraged the transformation of a pastoral landscape into farmland including the blocking of livestock corridors and encroachment on key pastures, which have led to the emergence of conflicts between farmers and pastoralists. In addition, access to pastoral land has often been lost through corrupt behavior by government officials and traditional elites, which has increasingly left herders with a feeling of disempowerment and marginalization.

After the emergence of a national crisis in Mali from 2012 and the jihadist take-over of the northern and central parts of the country, many Fulani

pastoralists have been attracted to an anti-government, anti-elite and pro-pastoral jihadist discourse. While Dogon had been increasing their power relative to the Fulani since independence until 2012, this power balance again began to shift back in favor of the Fulani with the arrival of jihadist groups in the area.

The creation of the Dogon militia, *Dana Amassagou*, that has attacked and killed a large number of Fulani villagers, can be seen as a response to this threat of a move back toward Fulani power that many Dogon fear would again leave them with a position as subordinates. In addition, since the Malian army has failed to defeat the jihadists, the state has supported the militia with heavy hand weapons and training to fight the insurgent groups in its place. Hence, the recent escalation of this farmer-herder conflict can be seen as a manifestation of the jihadist insurgency and its counterinsurgency.

Finally, while ethnicity and scarcity are clearly relevant in this case, these factors hardly explain the conflicts. We also see that there are conflicts among the Fulani – between elites and subordinates and between Fulani pastoralists adhering to different jihadist groups who fight over grazing rights. There is also a cleavage among the Dogon between a violent militia and a new organization seeking negotiations with Fulani and jihadist groups.

While the Dogon were historically trapped in a land scarce situation, this changed especially after independence. More recently, increased land-use has filled up space in the Seeno creating land scarcity, but this seems more to be a scarcity created politically through failed land governance by the state rather than being absolute physical scarcity. The Sahel, including the Seeno, has also been re-greening during the last few decades in contrast to popular media and policy presentations.

In addition to demonstrating the complex background to the current crisis in Mali and how simplistic narratives about its causes are not helpful for our understanding of this crisis, the case also shows how views of the enemy as “terrorists” or “jihadists” are dangerous and able to further fuel violent conflicts.

## Notes

1. The traditional role of hunters in Dogon society is to defend the village in general and to police the village territory outside the cultivated areas. This includes controlling wood cutting and the hunting of wildlife (interview with Mamadou Togo, President of *Ginna Dogon*, Bamako 07.08.19).
2. The Fulani are also referred to as Fulbe or in French – *Peul*.
3. Although Dogon mostly identify as farmers and many Fulani as pastoralists, most rural people in central Mali have diversified their livelihood strategies to reduce vulnerability. This means that many Dogon keep livestock and many Fulani grow millet in particular (Nijenhuis, 2009).

4. For instance, Le Monde (11.04.2019) reported that the Ogossagou attack was caused by resource scarcity following climate change and population growth, while Deutsche Welle concluded: “The conflict between Dogon and Fulani ethnic groups over resources in Mali has been exacerbated by climate change, population growth, an absentee state and Islamism” (<https://www.dw.com/en/mali-worse-than-anything-weve-seen-in-living-memory/a-49138496>).
5. ACLED data indicate that totally more than 2000 people were killed in this wave of violence only in 2019 and the first four months of 2020 (International Crisis Group, 2020). Furthermore, according to a local Fulani intellectual who keeps notes of attacks and violence in the area, from March 2013 to the end of June 2019, 948 people had been killed. His table of events and casualties includes around 80–90% Fulani villagers and the rest Dogon hunters, government officials and soldiers. It is, however, difficult to assess to what extent this distribution reflects reality (interview, Bamako, 10.08.2019).
6. These associations include *Association Malienne pour la Promotion de la Culture Dogon (Ginna Dogon)*, *Association des Resortissants de Bandiagara* and *Tabital Poullakou*.
7. Recensement général de la population et de l’habitat du Mali (RGPH): résultats définitifs, Tome 1: série démographique », Institut national de la statistique, novembre 2011.
8. There are different versions of this story. Some say that this Dogon had killed two herders from the Boni area who accused him of stealing livestock. Others say that he was an important hunter who was already organizing a Dogon militia to prepare attacks on Fulani.
9. Katiba in Arabic means “troop” or “battalion”.
10. The Filinkiriyabé originate mainly from the communes of Dangol Boré (in Douentza *cercle*), and the communes of Konna, Borondougou, Urrubé Duudé and Korombana (Mopti *cercle*). They migrate between the delta and the dry zones around. This is a conservative pastoral group with little formal education, and which has more recently been picked up by the jihadists. The Filinkiriyabé follow a similar migration pattern as the Senonkoobe pastoralists from Seeno and the Wuwarbe from Nampala (Niono *cercle* in the Segou region). A number of pastoralists from these groups, originating from the drylands around the delta, have joined Dawlat il Islamia.
11. This state support to *Dana Amassagou* is well known in Mali and also acknowledged by the Dogon interviewees.

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