

Why do Pastoralists in Mali join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation

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Abstract

From 2015 jihadist groups have taken control of the Mopti region in central Mali. We ask how such a radical development has been possible in a country previously praised as a bulwark against radical Islam in Africa. While the dominant literature on the crisis in Mali has a focus on how global political economic developments and international jihadist thinking and organisation relate to national dynamics, we take a materialist political ecology approach to explain the current situation. By focusing on the micro-politics of two land-use conflicts and how these conflicts are affected by the jihadist expansion, we seek to explain peasant (or pastoral) logics behind joining these armed groups. In particular, pastoralists seem to support the jihadist take-over, because of an anti-state, anti-elite and pro-pastoral jihadist discourse, because they have become increasingly fatigued and disgruntled by a predatory and corrupt state, and because the development model imposed by the state and international donors has not responded to pastoral priorities. Rent-seeking by government officials has been especially intense in relation to conflicts over pastoral land, environmental management and the fight against desertification. This happened while the international community continued to praise Mali as a model of African democracy.

Introduction

In January 2013, Mali hit international headlines when jihadist forces moved south after having conquered northern Mali in 2012, before the invasion was stopped at the battle of Konna in the Mopti region of central Mali (11–18 January 2013) by combined French and Malian troops. However, since reconquering northern Mali, the French, Malian, African and UN forces (MINUSMA)¹ still only manage to control the towns, while the state and its representatives are largely absent from rural areas apart from some occasional military road blocks and patrols along roads.

In addition, jihadist violence has since 2015 spread from the north to the Mopti region where most of the rural areas are controlled by various armed groups. While state officials started to withdraw from the region from 2012 for security reasons, jihadist groups have since 2015 gradually been replacing the state and expanding their authority and influence in the area. Simultaneously, while allowing this development to take place, rural populations to some extent either support or tolerate the presence and installation of these armed groups despite the general fright caused by jihadist violence.

In this paper, we ask how such a radical development has been possible in a country that has previously been praised internationally as a ‘bulwark against radical Islam in Africa’ (Economic Intelligence Unit 2002) and as a model for tolerance, democracy and secularism in the Muslim world.

Soares (2005, 2013), however, points out that although these views have been common among international actors, they are largely simplistic and misleading, and that there is a long history of multiple complex and shifting Muslim identities in Mali. This history includes both Maliki and Wahabist traditions (International Crisis Group 2017).

The current scholarly literature on the recent political development in Mali has generally focused on how global political economic developments and Islamist thinking and

¹ MINUSMA are the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali that was established by Security Council resolution 2100 of 25th April 2013. The aims are to ensure security, protection of civilians, support the national political dialogue and reconciliation, and assist the reestablishment of State authority, the rebuilding of the security sector, and the promotion and protection of human rights.

organisation relate to national dynamics. This literature has discussed the largely overlapping topics of international jihadism and its tributaries in the country (Huckabey 2013, de Castelli 2014, Harmon 2014, Lounnas 2014, Walther and Christopoulos 2015), drug trafficking and hijacking of hostages as sources of funding for armed groups (Daniel 2012, Lacher 2013, Detzi and Winkleman 2016), the dynamics, politics and history of the Tuareg rebellions (Cline 2013, Zounmenou 2013, Bøås and Torheim 2013, Bøås 2015), the current crisis in the national democratic system and the weakening of the state (Gonin et al. 2013, Baudais 2015, Ba 2016), the international military intervention and possibilities for peace and stability (Cristiani and Fabiani 2013, Galy 2013, Hanne 2014, Ping 2014, Boeke and Tisseron 2015, Boeke and Schuurman 2015, Wing 2016), the complex and changing Islamic national landscape (Soares 2013), and the Malian crisis as a fallout from the Libya conflict (Shaw 2013, Solomon 2013). While most of these contributions highlight a combination of factors, and some also stress the complexity of understanding the Malian crisis (Lecocq et al. 2013), we have grouped the various contributions above according to what we see as the main themes emerging from this literature.

While these contributions give a rich background to the current political crisis in Mali, we would argue that a focus on the local political context, and in particular the political ecological context, is necessary in order to more fully explain the expansion of jihadism in the country. This local context is, however, generally neglected in the large and rapidly increasing scholarly literature on jihadism in Mali and West Africa in general. There are, however, some exceptions. Ibrahim (2017) who stresses the importance of including the local context in the analysis, points out that ‘ideology is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the development of a jihadist insurgency’ (Ibrahim, 2017, 10) and that ‘African jihadist movements are first and foremost local movements that arise from local social and political dynamics, and their struggle is primarily geared toward addressing local – not global – grievances’ (8). Dowd and Raleigh (2013, 498) have made a similar point, saying that ‘violent Islamist groups emerge in and are shaped by distinct domestic contexts and issues, a feature that is obscured by a totalizing narrative of global Islamic terrorism’, while Dowd (2015) conclude that grievances² and political marginalisation drive the emergence of jihadist groups in Kenya, Nigeria and Mali. Lecocq et al. (2013) also stress the importance of understanding

² According to Williams (2003: 131) a grievance ‘rests upon the claim that an *injustice* has been inflicted upon undeserving victims. Grievances are normative protests, claiming violations of rights or rules.’

the local context to explain the Malian crisis including how corruption is enmeshed in the administrative and political system, which they argue are often missed by outside observers. They also add that support to jihadist groups may be more a function of clan and class than religious conviction.

Mixing such a local with a global approach, Marret (2008) calls Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) a ‘glocal’ organisation stressing its mix of local and global interests and practices, while Boeke (2016) stresses that AQIM is both a terrorist and an insurgent organisation rooted in a global radical jihadist ideology as well as in local and national grievances. This dichotomy is also pointed out more generally by Kalyvas (2003) who argued that often civil wars are driven by an interaction between political aims and private grievances.

In this paper, in order to help fill in the picture and to further explore local grievances, we suggest shifting attention from primarily studying links between global and national political, economic and religious dynamics, to the political ecology of land and natural resources governance with a focus on the Mopti region in central Mali. In this particular context, such an approach implies studying peasant rationalities in relation to the politics of natural resource access as well as how shifting authority and power relations impact on this access. Hence, the questions we address in this paper are how local populations relate to the installation of jihadist groups in the region, why so many pastoralists in particular join these groups, and what the impact of this new authority may be for the many land-use conflicts in the region.

In answering these questions, first, we argue that the rural peasantry, and especially pastoralists, tend to support the jihadist groups, because of an anti-state, anti-elite and pro-pastoral jihadist discourse, because people have become increasingly fatigued and disgruntled by a predatory and corrupt state, which extracts rent from the rural peasantry, and because the development model imposed by the state has not responded to pastoral priorities.

Examples of rent-seeking include land-use conflicts not being resolved, because local officials and judges have received payments from both parties to support their claims, leading to a lack of adjudication, as well as the practices of the Forest Service of for instance randomly fining women collecting fuelwood and herders grazing livestock.

The result of this growing anti-government sentiment is that many young men, and in particular Fulani pastoralists, have joined various armed groups labelled 'jihadist' in the Mopti region. Second, by investigating the local consequences of increased jihadist authority for the management of land and natural resources, we focus on two case studies of land-use conflicts. While there are many land-use conflicts to choose from, we selected these two, because one is inside the delta and the other outside. In addition, the former is an old conflict that one of us has previously studied (Ba 1996), while the latter has recently emerged with the jihadist invasion.

In both cases, we see an escalation of the tension between the conflicting parties, although in the first case there is a temporary settlement, while people from both sides have joined armed groups to receive military training. We also see that a main driving factor behind the land-use conflicts is the power vacuum left behind after state withdrawal, first in the transition to democracy in the early 1990s and more recently with the jihadist expansion. The cases also clearly demonstrate the links between land-use conflicts and armed groups, and that alliances and conflicts are structured by material interests with deep historical roots in controlling land and resources, rather than by a radical Islamist agenda.

In terms of the methods used, the second author of this paper is a Fulani from the Mopti region who has been able to visit the region and talk widely to people there after the jihadist takeover in 2015. In addition, based in Bamako, he is informed about recent developments and current thinking among people through regular phone conversations with various stakeholders in the region. In December 2016, we also carried out 12 in-depth interviews together in Bamako with individuals from the Mopti region with particular insights into the political situation in the region. These were Malian academics, Fulani intellectuals, local politicians from the region, one former minister, and a few local actors with detailed knowledge about the land-use conflicts discussed. We have also collected consultancy reports and available unpublished reports on recent developments in central Mali, and we have analysed a recorded speech by Hamadoun Koufa who is considered to be the overall jihadist leader in the region. Obtaining reliable information on jihadist activities and motivations is difficult. One has to proceed carefully and not make it widely known that one is seeking such information. This impacts on the number of interviewees available.

In the following sections of the paper, we first present the contradictions between an international view of Mali as a model for democracy in Africa, and internal debates and critiques of a corrupt national political and bureaucratic system. Thereafter, we give a brief background to the jihadist presence in Mali before discussing land-use and land-use conflicts in the inland delta of the Niger river from a historical perspective, as well as the recent emergence of jihadism in the delta. Finally, we explore the impact of jihadism on two land-use conflicts and how these conflicts serve to recruit people, especially pastoralists, into various armed groups.

Mali as a model of African democratic development and its internal critiques

In March 1991, the military and single party government of Moussa Traoré was overthrown after demonstrations and popular unrest culminated in a *coup d'état*. A transitional government was established and the process of democratisation started. In a short time, a number of public forums were organised where there were frequent calls for decentralisation of environmental management and severe criticism of the state's abuse of power in this field (Benjaminsen 1997). The state was frequently criticised for abusing power, especially the paramilitary Forest Service that had been considerably strengthened during the 1980s and given a mandate to be heavy-handed in its fight to stop desertification. In particular, there was a demand to devolve land and resource rights and responsibilities to rural communities.

In 1992, a referendum on the new Constitution, presidential elections, and elections for the National Assembly were held. The new government headed by President Alpha Oumar Konaré was inaugurated the same year. In this transitional period in the early 1990s, there was much optimism in Mali about prospects for the country's emerging democracy, despite a conflict that had broken out between the state and Tuaregs in the north.

President Konaré was re-elected for a second term in 1997, and in 2002 the leader of the coup in 1991, Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), was elected president, and again re-elected in 2007. Especially this peaceful transition of power combined with a widespread liberty of expression, testified to by a large number of newspapers and radio channels, led Mali to become a poster child for African democracy (Pringle 2006). As van de Walle (2012, 1) states, prior to the crisis in 2012:

Mali had been widely viewed as a relatively successful case of democracy in a low-income country ... and Western donors in the country generally praised the democratically-elected government and its development programmes.

As an example of this view, The World Bank's 2007 Country Strategy Paper (International Development Association and International Finance Corporation 2007, 9) held that:

Mali's political structure promotes stable, democratic institutions. There is a strong tradition of consensus in Malian politics and the country is considered one of the most politically and socially stable countries in Africa.

Moreover, according to van de Walle (2012, 1), 'even as late as May 2012, the USAID website still praised the country as "one of the most enlightened democracies in Africa".' And as noted by former American ambassador to Mali, Robert Pringle (2006, 37), 'Mali has assumed new importance in America's eyes, not only because it is democratic but also because it is a 90 percent Muslim country in a rough neighborhood.'

These views are in stark contrast to how many Malians experienced the political-administrative system in the country, especially from the early 2000s (Ba 2008). While the rural peasantry has complained about the rent-seeking behaviour of local administrators and the courts for several decades (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009), it seems that large-scale corruption in the political system increased during the presidency of ATT. At least, these are claims frequently made in the national press. In addition, two books published anonymously in 2006 and 2007 repeated these claims and presented long lists of examples of such corruption (Le Shinx 2006, 2007). The books' author, who still remains unidentified, clearly was well-informed and had access to sensitive information. Consequently, this internal debate in Mali took place at the same time as the country was praised internationally as an African success story in democratic development. The reasons for this 'policy failure of significant proportions' (van de Walle 2012, 3) are beyond the scope of this paper, but an international interest in keeping Mali as a major aid recipient country owing to an increasing securitisation of development in the Sahelian countries including the threat of climate change, seems to have played a role.³

³ But see Benjaminsen et al. (2012) for a critique of the link between climate change and security in the Sahel.

Brief background to jihadist presence in Mali

Jihadist presence in Mali began as a spillover from the civilian war in Algeria that had started in 1991 after the Islamists had won the first round in democratic elections and a military coup had stopped a second round. This led to the emergence of Islamist guerrillas, which the military government took almost a decade to destroy – or to convince to give in through a general amnesty. However, the salafist organisation *Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat* (GSPC) did not surrender, and in 2003 it extended its presence to northern Mali. After the attacks on 11 September 2001 and the US invasion in Iraq in 2003, the GSPC also changed from an ‘Islamist-Nationalist’ organisation to one joining a global jihad (Lounnas 2014), and in 2007, the organisation announced its allegiance to Al-Qaeda and became AQMI (*Al-Qaïda au Maghreb Islamique or Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb - AQIM*) (Daniel 2012, Harmon 2012, Lounnas 2014).

Ibrahim (2017, 8) points out that there are three main commonalities among such jihadist groups:

First, Islam is at war with the West and its local allies in Muslim societies, and militarily confronting the enemies of Islam is a religious duty. Second, the nation-state system, state institutions, and democracy are un-Islamic and need to be replaced with the system based on the Caliphate and Sharia law. Third, Muslims can be declared ‘apostates’ or ‘unbelievers’ if they commit major sins, and in which case they can be legitimately targeted with violence. These three ideas are the quintessence of jihadism, a global ideology that has motivated and justified jihadist insurgencies around the world.

Since its installation in northern Mali, AQIM managed to strengthen its economic position especially through the kidnapping of foreigners and receiving millions of Euros in ransom, but also through the involvement in large-scale smuggling of cigarettes and drugs (Daniel 2012, Harmon 2014, Lounnas 2012). By 2011, this had made it possible for AQIM to build up a core unit of almost 500 men in northern Mali in addition to local individuals who have been paid to undertake various assignments for the organisation. While most of the fighters in the core unit have been Algerians, there has been an increasing attempt to also include Malians (Lounnas 2014).

Simultaneously, following NATO's bombing of Libya and the killing of Gaddafi in October 2011, between 1000 and 4000 Tuareg soldiers in the Libyan army had returned heavily armed to Mali (Keenan 2013). This sparked a new Tuareg rebellion that soon managed to occupy the northern towns of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. With lack of resources and low morale, the Malian army soon fled back to Bamako and instead committed a short-lived coup led by Captain Sanogo on 21 March 2012 (Giraud 2013).

In addition to AQIM, the rebel forces consisted of the Salafist groups Ansar Dine⁴ and MUJAO (*Mouvement pour unicit  et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*),⁵ in addition to secular Tuaregs fighting for autonomy for Azawad within MNLA (*Mouvement National de Lib ration de l'Azawad*). However, from June 2012 the MNLA became increasingly marginalised by the jihadists because of lack of resources (Giraud 2013). In addition, the MNLA soon became unpopular among the local population due to its looting of local businesses (Harmon 2014, B as 2015).

With the marginalisation of the MNLA and a retirement to its stronghold in Kidal, the rebel troops moving south in January 2013 consisted of fighters from AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO. This led the Malian President to call Paris for help, and on 11 January, 4000 French troops and 1500 vehicles stationed in Chad were dispatched to Mali (Hanne 2014). At the village of Konna in the Mopti region, the French forces managed to push back the rebel troops and advance to take back control over the towns in northern Mali. However, from 2015, jihadist groups have moved back into the Mopti region, this time not through a large-scale collective invasion, but by a piecemeal infiltration of smaller armed groups. These groups tend to stay 'in the bush' and occasionally visit villages to give their orders or to assassinate people who they see as collaborators with the government or the army.

Since we argue that in order to understand these recent developments, a political ecology perspective may be useful with a focus on the local politics of land and environmental governance in the area, we next move on to introduce a short history of land use in the inland

⁴ This is a Tuareg-based jihadist organisation lead by Iyad Ag Ghaly originating in Kidal and demanding autonomy for Azawad (northern Mali) and that Mali becomes an Islamic state.

⁵ This a rather vague Salafist organisation with unclear leadership, but with a base mostly among Songhay and Fulani and with an origin in AQIM.

delta of the Niger river, which covers most of the Mopti region. This is important in order to understand the background to land-use conflicts in the region.

Historical background to land-use in the delta

The inland delta of the Niger river, which is also locally referred to as ‘Macina’, is the largest wetland area in West Africa. This is a vast floodplain that in good years covers up to 30 000 km². For centuries, the area has provided rich resources for rice cultivation, fishing and pastoralism.

The pastoral system in the delta is based on livestock grazing the dry season pastures during December–June combined with the use of dryland pastures outside the delta in the rainy season. From the beginning of the rainy season in June–July, many delta pastoralists move northeast or northwest before they return to the delta in the dry season.

The main fodder resource in the delta is *burgu*, which is a plant that grows on deeper water than paddy rice. Paddy fields have during the last decades expanded enormously at the expense of *burgu* (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009). This can partly be explained by decreased levels of flooding in the Niger river, especially as a result of the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s as well as the construction of the hydropower dam downstream at Sélingué that was completed in 1982 (Turner 1992, Cotula and Cissé 2006).

The current land tenure system in the delta is based on the principles introduced by invading Fulani warriors in the 14th century, the so-called Ardobé (Ba and Daget 1962). The Ardobé ‘provided floodplain land to subordinates for farming, which led eventually to the bounding of their spheres of influence into *leyde*’ (Turner 1999, 110). Furthermore, the Ardobé introduced local chiefs (*jowros*) to manage the *leyde* (sing. *leydy*). The *jowros* who were noble Fulani (*rimbé*) pastoralists were ‘owners of grass’, and accordingly responsible for the management of pastures in these territorial units.

In 1818, Islamic clergymen mobilised a jihad and conquered the delta region through the leadership of Cheikou Amadou. This resulted in the establishment of an Islamic theocratic state, the Dina, based in Hamdallahi south of Mopti. The Dina codified and formalised many of the resource management principles and rights introduced by the Ardobé. For instance, through this codification, the *jowros* were formally granted the authority to

manage the leyde, rights to burgu fields were defined, and a list of livestock entry routes in the delta was established in order to keep farmers' fields at a distance (Gallais 1967). All users of burgu pastures paid a fee to the jowros and a clear ranking of herds was established, deciding the order in which they would enter the burgu areas.

In 1893, the French defeated the Toucouleur who in 1862 had conquered the Dina, and in 1895 the French Sudan was established as a colony. The principles of spatial organisation and resource management inherited from the Dina were sustained by the French administration (Barrière and Barrière 2002). Hence, the jowros in general maintained their role as managers of pastures. The French also agreed that the jowros were entitled to receive rent from the users of burgu pastures.

In 1960, Mali gained its independence, and the country's first President, Modibo Keita, was inspired by socialist ideas of industrialisation and agricultural modernisation. Pastoralism was looked upon as an obstacle to development in general. An aim of the Keita government was to convert pastoralists into 'productive' citizens by taking up farming (Benjaminsen and Berge 2004). The socialist government also saw the jowros as feudal landlords and generally tried to undermine their authority.

After a *coup d'état* in 1968 and the establishment of the military government of Moussa Traoré, the position of jowros was gradually rehabilitated, and towards the end of Traoré's reign, before he was toppled in 1991, the jowros had again become powerful local actors through alliances with officials of the single party.

Since the jowros have worked closely with what is seen as corrupt government officials, they have become increasingly unpopular among many common Fulani. In addition, as pastoral leaders and defenders of pastoral rights, jowros have been losing power during the last few decades, because of development policies favouring agricultural expansion at the expense of burgu pastures and livestock corridors (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009). These processes are associated with a general marginalisation of pastoralists in Mali, which was one of the key causes of the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s (Benjaminsen 2008).

A large part of the loss of burgu pastures to rice fields in the delta is caused by the development activities of the parastatal organisation *Office Riz Mopti* (ORM). ORM

was established with World Bank funding in 1972 as one of several sector-orientated state development agencies. Its main focus has since been to expand the area under controlled flooding for rice cultivation in parts of the delta. This means constructing a series of dykes with weirs to control the water level and canals to distribute the water to fields.

Land-use conflicts in the delta take place among farmers, herders and fishers. Studying 820 such conflicts that appeared in the Court of Appeal in Sévaré during 1992–2009, Benjaminsen et al. (2012) found that 70% of the cases were disputes among farmers occurring when two or more individual farmers claim rights to the same field, disagree about borders between fields, or disagree about the management of communal fields. Conflicts between farmers and herders only represented about 12% of the cases, but these were larger disputes between opposing communities and therefore with more serious consequences for a larger number of people.

Benjaminsen et al. (2012) concluded that three structural factors are behind these conflicts. First, large-scale agricultural encroachment has impeded the mobility of herders and their livestock as well as their access to key pastures. This has happened through livestock corridors being blocked because of rice cultivation encroaching on burgu pastures. Second, after military dictatorship was overthrown in 1991 and multiparty democracy established from 1992 including a decentralisation reform, a temporary withdrawal of the state led to a political vacuum that spurred many actors to follow opportunistic strategies in order to secure access to land and resources. Third, corruption and rent-seeking among government officials tended to hinder the resolution of conflicts, because as long as the conflicts were ongoing, the parties continued to use bribes to keep the government on their side. This was the situation before the conflict in northern Mali escalated and spread into central Mali from 2015.

The emergence of jihadism in the delta

During 2015-2017, more than 30 community leaders in the Mopti region were assassinated by armed men arriving in villages on motorbikes. This has quickly become one of the signature actions of jihadist groups in the region, giving a clear message to local leaders not to cooperate with the army or the state administration. Armed men on motorbikes also arrive in villages at irregular intervals and read statements and give orders before quickly disappearing. Our interviewees told us in December 2016 that there is no village in the delta without

jihadists and that they are also partly funded by villagers who secretly pay ‘*une dime*’ (a tithe) to the jihadists.

One morning in July 2016, villagers found banners with the same message suspended in five village mosques in the central delta. The unsigned message read:

We are not your enemies. We are your brothers. Who are your enemies? It is MINUSMA, the Malian army, the coalition forces against Mali. We ask you to act against them when it is still possible. If not, it is you who will lose at the end (translated from Arabic via Fulfulde⁶ and French).

Even though no groups have taken responsibility for the killings or for these messages, they are generally associated with the so-called *Katiba Macina* also referred to as *Le Front de Libération du Macina* (FLM), which again is thought to be led by Hamadoun Koufa. This jihadist group released its first video introducing itself in May 2016.

Koufa is a typical ‘jihadist entrepreneur’ defined as someone who translates a global jihadist discourse to a local context reflecting social and political demands (Ibrahim 2017). He is said to have been born in 1961 in Nianfunké as Hamadoun Sangaré. From the 1980s, he became known in the Mopti region for his eloquence and poetry. He travelled around the region to preach, and in the early 2000s, he also spread his message through a local radio station, which boosted his regional fame. In his preaching, he increasingly attacked religious leaders, traditional elites and the state administration (Thiam 2017).

Koufa’s relationship to the Dina seems to be ambivalent. On one hand, he has apparently never publicly criticised Cheikou Amadou or renounced Qaddiriya Sufism associated with the Maliki school that was at the basis of the Dina. So, to some extent, he seems to present himself as someone who is maintaining and building on the heritage of this Fulani theocratic state and its jihad (Thiam 2017). On the other hand, he has also become more radical over time, and in 2004, he is said to have visited Pakistan and to have joined the *Jamaat Tabligh* movement.

⁶ The language spoken by the Fulani.

A speech given by Koufa in 2015 gives an idea of his ideology and motivations.⁷ The speech is given in Fulfulde and contains three sections. The first deals with the issue of jihad. We here summarise the main content of the speech:⁸

Jihad is an Arabic term meaning to accept to fight for the installation of Islam on this Earth. This implies the installation of the Dina against the infidels. The partisans of jihad are Allah's children and they are superior to others. The fighters of jihad suffer but will have a better life in the beyond. Jihad is the will and aspiration of Allah and his prophet. According to well-founded definitions in the Sharia, jihad includes controlling one's soul and its passions and fighting Satan, the infidels, hypocrisy and the incredulous.

The second section deals with the link between jihad and the non-believers in particular the foreign forces who have occupied Mali since January 2013:

Mali has been aggressed for some years by European invaders, in particular the French, who came to help the Malian army at Konna and attack jihadists who intervened on Allah's soil on this land. We are convinced that this implies a re-colonisation of Mali by white people. It is necessary to fight them with all means based on jihad to stop them from establishing themselves (on this land). Their intervention in Mali justifies our jihad. These white people exploit our resources and profit from the rent of everything that is sold in Mali such as gold, cement and fruits. They profit from the weakness of the state and of our leaders to destroy this country. These are our adversaries and number one enemies. I repeat that our main enemies are France, MINUSMA and the Malian army. There should be no free gifts for these three categories of actors. We should not spare them and we should use every means to destroy them or kill them when there is an opportunity. We will do this in the name of jihad. This is justified by jihad, which is the will of Allah and his prophet. There are also those who are responsible for complicity or who give information about our positions in the field. They shall not be spared or be allowed to escape. It is necessary to use all means to assassinate them and stop them from hitting back. The formula to

⁷ We managed to obtain a memory stick with the recorded speech by Hamadoun Koufa from a community leader in the Douentza District. It has been translated by the authors from Fulfulde via French.

⁸ These are not exact quotes word by word, but rather translations of the meaning of central parts of the speech. We have indented these words to distinguish Koufa's speech from our own text.

use against them is to cut off their head by separating it from the body. This is the best response to their revolting acts against jihad and Islam.

The third section of Koufa's speech concerns communication and cohabitation with local populations:

Our only response to the non-believers' occupation of Mali is jihad. It is necessary to conceal oneself and be confounded with local people by using all strategies to convince them and persuade them of the well-founded necessity to refuse white people's invasion. It is necessary to spread essential and brief messages by telephone and in village discussions. Our fight is not directed against the peaceful populations who are victims of the bad governance by the state including a bad administration and a corrupt justice system. We can also add the behaviour of the judges and the agents of the Forest Service who are condemned in the whole region. These agents are condemned by local populations because they are recognised predators.

In this speech, Koufa shows the resemblance between their fight to the struggle against colonisation by referring to the presence of MINUSMA and the French army as 're-colonisation'. He also links this military occupation to economic exploitation and colonisation, pointing out that this takes place on Allah's soil, implicitly referring here to the Dina. In addition, he justifies a violent jihad by declaring the necessity to fight a corrupt state and a state-employed elite. In particular, he refers to a corrupt justice system, which is well known in Mali and in particular in the delta (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009), and to state forest agents in the Forest Service who are armed and in uniform. These agents are widely seen as displaying a predatory behaviour through taxing or imprisoning for instance random women wood collectors or herders who are accused of causing desertification (Benjaminsen 1993, 1997, 2000). Despite a long-standing anti-desertification policy by the government and international organisations, the Sahelian landscape has, however, been 'greening' since the droughts of the 1980s (Dardel et al. 2014).

The Forest Service was established in the former French colonies as a paramilitary organisation with a primary mandate to enforce conservation of natural resources and stop desertification through a system of permits for use and fines for rule violation (Benjaminsen 2000, Davis 2016). Influenced by the rise of sustainable development agendas in the 1980s and to impress donors of foreign aid, the colonial forest law was revised in 1986 and made

even more severe, introducing extremely high fines compared with the income level in Mali (Benjaminsen 1993, Ribot 1995). This led the Forest Service to become a key vehicle for ‘decentralised plunder across the country’ (Poulton and Ag Youssef 1998, 27). State foresters generally justified their plunder of rural people by stressing the importance of halting an alleged advancement of the desert. Forest agents were also allowed to keep a percentage of the fines collected, in addition to all the fines they collected informally without receipts, which further encouraged their rent-seeking behaviour (Benjaminsen 2008). The strong position of the Forest Service within the Malian state administration was facilitated by a powerful international desertification discourse, supported by development aid donors (Adger et al. 2001).

In 1982, Mali signed a structural adjustment agreement with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to cut public spending. This led to a reduction in the number of civil servants in all sectors, except in forest management where the number of forest officers in the districts increased many-fold from the mid-1980s (Poulton and Ag Youssef 1998). The presence of a ‘forest police’ in villages and pastoral areas was seen by the government and by aid donors as necessary in order to stop the claimed widespread desertification.

The predatory practices of the Forest Service resulting from this powerful position led it to be placed at the top of rural people’s hate list throughout Mali. During 2012–2016, at least 10 state foresters were reported to have been killed by jihadists or local people in the Mopti region.⁹ As a native of the delta, Koufa also targets state foresters in his speeches. He clearly knows which buttons to press in order to get sympathy and support for his cause among ordinary people in the region.

In other speeches, Koufa has accused religious and traditional elites of collusion with corrupt government authorities. While he is critical of the jowros’ collusion with corrupt state officials, he does not question their right to manage pastures. But he does not allow the jowros to cooperate with the state or to collect any fees from pastoralists.

Corruption is one of the main topics in Koufa’s speeches where he calls for a more egalitarian and just society (Thiam 2017). Such a message of equality and justice is also attractive to

⁹ Based on information from several interviewees.

subordinate classes such as the Rimaibé (low caste Fulani) and the Bella (low caste Tuareg). Koufa's narrative is seen as pro-pastoral, favouring ordinary Fulani pastoralists against the power of traditional elites such as the jowros. Since the withdrawal of state institutions from the delta, the authority of the jowros has been reduced. This has reportedly led to decreased tension and conflicts around some burgu pastures.

The entry of livestock into the delta in November 2016 may serve as an example of this increased sense of justice, especially among pastoralists in the delta. In 2016, this important annual event was controlled by jihadist groups and not by the state. Every year, livestock and their herders return from the dryland pastures in November to enter the rich wetland pastures in the delta and stay there until next rainy season. When hundreds of thousands of livestock enter the dry season burgu pastures during the course of a few weeks, there is need for careful organisation, including specifying the entry dates and order of each individual herd. This event has usually been administered by the traditional managers of pastures, the jowros, in cooperation with state representatives. Herders usually pay fees per head of livestock to the jowros at the various entry points. On the entry dates, key politicians and public administrators have tended to show up to claim their shares of the income (Turner 2006, Benjaminsen and Ba 2009). These fees are so unpopular among the pastoralists that they represent one of the reasons why many pastoralists have joined jihadist groups (Kornio 2016). In November 2016, however, the state representatives and politicians were absent, and the jowros were told in advance by the jihadists not to collect any fees. In this way, the jihadists managed to play on anti-government and anti-elite feelings among the pastoralists and to gain more sympathisers.

Koufa was in 2016 believed to control about 200–300 fighters, but with the number increasing since then, many of these combatants seem to fight primarily for social reasons such as defending their land rights or pastoral livelihoods. In the Seno (the dryland areas between the delta and Burkina Faso), these people include Fulani herders who first joined MUJAO and later Koufa's group to seek protection against self-defence groups of Dogon farmers who sometimes receive support from the army (see the case of the Sari conflict described below). The jihadists also have numerous supporters and informers in the delta.

In addition, among the fighters there are some true believers in a radical Islamist message, while others again are motivated by the payments of about 150,000 FCFA (around 230 Euros)

for being recruited. Finally, some also join these groups because of human rights violations such as summary executions committed by the Malian army against pastoralists and Fulani. Many Fulani feel they have been a target population by army operations in central Mali. This has led to concerns that there is an emerging ‘Fulani question’ similar to the ‘Tuareg question’ further north (Thiam 2017). This means that ethnicity seems to increasingly become an issue and a factor in the Malian crisis. Many Fulani have an increasing feeling of marginalisation, disempowerment and exclusion similar to what many Tuareg have felt since independence (Benjaminsen 2008). There are claims made by Fulani organisations both in Mali and Burkina Faso that the Fulani are targeted in particular by state violence. Since the Fulani increasingly feel marginalised, they have also joined jihadist groups in central Mali in larger numbers than any other ethnicity.

The impact of jihadism on two land-use conflicts

We now proceed to briefly describing the recent impact of the installation of jihadism in the delta on two existing land-use conflicts.

Soosoobé versus Salsalbé

This is an old conflict over a burgu pasture between two Fulani groups (Soosoobé and Salsalbé) that are based in neighbouring leyde situated in the central parts of the delta. The Salsalbé leydy was established by the Ardo before the Dina, is managed by a jowro, and is associated with the old Fulani elite of landlords. The Soosobé leydy was created by the Dina by taking a piece of the Salsalbé leydy and allocating it to five families of learned Muslim scholars (Ba 1996). Hence, this leydy is not under the authority of a jowro and is used by common non-elite Fulani. Since the Dina, the borders between the two leyde have not changed.

On 15 January 1936, the first violent conflict between the two groups took place, leading to about 60 people being injured. No one was killed, thanks to the fact that firearms were not used. As a result of this dispute, the colonial administration established a written agreement signed by the two parties in 1939 giving the Salsalbé the first priority to use the burgu pasture and the Soosoobé the right to use it as a secondary user. In practice however, this arrangement was never accepted by the Soosoobé, but forced on them, first by the colonial administration with the help of gendarmes, and after 1960 by the administration in Mali. In the early 1990s

with the turbulent times in Mali involving a Tuareg rebellion in the north, transition to democracy, the implementation of a decentralisation reform and a general weakening of the state – this conflict surfaced again. The political vacuum that emerged in this period led several actors in cases of past or potential conflicts to take opportunistic action in the hope of being able to appropriate land and resources (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009). This was the situation on 6 December 1993, when Soosoobé herders took control of the burgu pastures that were the cause of the conflict, referring to the *tarikh* (a historical document) from the Dina giving them rights to the pasture. The next day the two groups clashed, resulting in 29 dead and 42 injured people in the two communities (Ba 1996).

Interviewing people in the two communities after this tragic event, Ba (1996) found that they both largely accused the state administration for the conflict, since every time there was a change of administrator, the right-holders had to bribe this official in order to keep the official favourable to their claims.

More recently, one of our interviewees in December 2016 had been mayor in Soosoobé during 1999–2009. He said they had to bribe the judge in the primary court in Mopti several times in recent years in order to keep control over the burgu pasture. For instance, in 2010 they paid him 5 million FCFA (about 7600 Euros).

However, in 2014, the jihadists emerged in the area for the first time, and in November 2016, they sent an unsigned letter in Arabic to the two communities. The letter said that they did not want to see any gendarmes or army in the area and that people should follow the tradition of the Dina and let their livestock graze peacefully. The Soosoobé interpreted this as support for their claims and responded, confirming that they could not let go of what had been allocated to them by Cheikou Amadou. Clearly the signal given by the jihadists was a support for Soosoobé priority to the pasture, also given their generally critical approach to the jowros.

The practical implication of this was that in 2016, only livestock from Soosoobé were allowed to enter the litigant pasture. We were told by interviewees from the two communities that as long as there is no state intervention in the conflict, it will continue like this. So, while the colonial government and the administration of the Malian state gave priority to the old Fulani elite, the jihadists have in practice changed access to the pasture in favour of a larger group of non-elite pastoralists.

According to our informants, people from both Salsalbé and Soosoobé have since 2015 joined the jihadists in order to receive military training and be prepared for future clashes between the two groups. Some of the jihadists who have arrived to the area are from Niger; others are from the northern parts of the delta around Niafunké.

After 1993, tension between the two communities had continued including bribing of government officials by both parties, to solicit their support. The conflict was also dealt with by the court at various levels without any solution, but with considerable expenses for the two sides in terms of bribes to the judges and their entourage. During the last few years before the arrival of the jihadists, tension accelerated, despite efforts by traditional and Islamic authorities to intervene for a peaceful settlement. To add to this tension, Hama Founé Diallo from Soosoobé has created a self-defence militia allegedly including 300–500 men. He participated in the conflict in 1993 and thereafter left Mali for Liberia where he joined one of the rebel groups and fought with them for several years. Later he returned to Mali and decided to join the MNLA in 2012. According to interviewees, his ambition to integrate the Tuareg rebel forces was to learn from them and to create a Fulani component of the rebellion. Since 2016 however, there have been negotiations between Diallo's group and the government to find ways of integrating his group into the Malian army. At the same time, it is not clear where this group's loyalty lies and whether it also has links with Koufa's group.

This case demonstrates some of the current fluidity and volatility of political alliances, interests and armed struggles in central Mali. In addition, it shows the potential links between land-use conflicts and armed groups, and that alliances and conflicts are structured just as much – or perhaps more – by material interests in controlling land and resources with deep historical roots, than by a radical Islamist agenda. As pointed out by Ibrahim (2017, 11):

The dynamics of conflict and situations of insecurity have forced some communities in quest of protection to pledge allegiance to jihadist movements. This is particularly the case with Fulani pastoralists in northern and central Mali and in northeastern Burkina Faso.

In a similar vein, Sangare (2016, 1) says that:

in the Macina, transhumant pastoralists, not wanting to submit to the rules established by their traditional leaders (*dioros*) ... armed themselves and decided not to pay taxes for access to *bourgous* (forage crops). They are considered to be jihadists. Jihad thus appears as a simple instrumental option for objectives other than the dissemination of rigorous faith.

Sari: Dogon farmers versus Fulani pastoralists

The main violent event in this conflict took place on 22 May 2012 in the village of Sari in the Seno between Koro and the border to Burkina Faso. On this day, Dogon farmers attacked this Fulani village. The tragic result was, according to interviewees, that 350 huts were burnt, 774 cattle taken and 21 villagers killed in addition to several injured. In return, some Dogon were injured and one killed.

This conflict, which is about a cattle corridor being blocked by farming, has also for several years been dealt with by the courts, in this case the primary court in Koro and the appeal court in Sévaré, without any resolution although judgments have been in favour of the Fulani, because they are acknowledged as the first-comers in the area. Sari village was founded by Fulani before the Dina, while the Dogon moved down from the hills much more recently with the pacification of the area following the establishment of a colonial and later a Malian state. Over time, the Dogon cultivated increasingly more space to the extent that farmland started to block the pastoralists' movement and access to pastures. The Dogon had also become more numerous and had closer ties with politicians and state officials.

Typically, the violence took place following state withdrawal in 2012, in this case only two months after the *coup d'état* of Captain Sanogo. During the attack, the village chief of Sari called the village chief of Boni, who is seen as the paramount chief of this area, for help, which was declined. Boni was at that time occupied by MNLA, which the village chief of Boni was allied with. His refusal to assist the people in Sari was largely seen as a betrayal of common Fulani, not only in Sari, but also in Seno in general. This act further reinforced a cleavage between Fulani elites and the rest of the Fulani population, and it pushed many Fulani pastoralists into the camps of jihadist organisations such as MUJAO and Koufa's group (FLM). This led MUJAO and later FLM in 2016 to attack the Fulani elite in Boni.

The conflict continues currently between the Dogon associated with and supported by the army and the Fulani pastoralists who have joined MUJAO and FLM in large numbers. This statement by a Fulani pastoralist from Boni interviewed by Sangare (2016, 6)¹⁰ may represent widespread feelings among the Fulani in the Seno area:

We do not know the Macina Liberation Front. We are not part of it. The only feeling that animates us is that we can free ourselves from the yoke of the domination of our elites. We have long been subjected to all forms of exploitation by the administration in complicity with our elites. The occupiers (MNLA and MUJAO) have delivered us from this new form of slavery and they (the elites) want the weapons to be abandoned for good. ... We do not agree ! The crisis of 2012 has awakened us, we nomadic pastoralists. After the re-conquest, the army committed crimes on nomadic pastoralists and we were extorted a lot of money. That is why many of us are in the bush with weapons in the process of sensitizing the nomads to stay engaged and vigilant. As long as the army continues to arrest our parents, to abuse them and to transfer them to the prisons in Bamako, we too will continue our struggle.

So, what drives their engagement in the struggle is not liberation of Macina or being part of a larger jihadist movement. It is to end the domination by elites in collusion with the state administration, and to resist the army's violence and human rights abuse against pastoral communities. In accordance with repeated complaints among rural people in central Mali, this interviewee also makes reference to corruption (extortion of money).

Concluding discussion

We have argued and tried to demonstrate that in order to understand current expansion of armed insurgency in Mali by so-called jihadist groups, it is useful to include a political ecology approach. This means studying the politics of land and environmental governance and the impacts of these politics over time.

In Mali, rent-seeking among government officials is frequently reported to have become gradually more widespread since the democratisation process started in the early 1990s and smallholder farmers and pastoralists state that they have become 'milking cows' for elites (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009). One such example is that land-use conflicts have not been

¹⁰ Our translation from French.

resolved, because local officials and judges have received payments from both parties to support their claims, leading to a lack of adjudication.

Another frequently mentioned example among rural people is the practice of the Forest Service. This is an armed ‘forest police’ that has been feared because of a practice of randomly fining women collecting fuelwood and herders grazing livestock in the name of fighting desertification, while Sahelian landscapes have in fact been ‘greening’ since the droughts of the 1980s. The Forest Service was strengthened in the 1980s through the sustainable development agenda and the international desertification discourse that led to increased environmental aid to Mali boosting its rural presence and its capacity to fine people.

These practices of the neo-patrimonial state have over time created widespread resistance among Malian peasants, and in particular among pastoralists. In addition, pastoralists are disgruntled by development policies and programmes leading to loss of pastures and blocked livestock corridors. They feel that the state, and now also the army, is siding with farmers against their interests. This resistance could have taken many forms, but pastoralists in the Sahel are opportunists (Pedersen and Benjaminsen 2008). Hence, the entry of jihadist groups has created an opportunity for peasant or pastoral resistance to the state in Mali. As Byman (2013) puts it, failed democratisation risks playing into the jihadist narrative, and as Ibrahim (2017, 13) states, ‘some, perhaps most jihadists have found themselves within jihadists movements for situational and strategic reasons’. This resistance is more caused by political marginalisation than by a radical Islamist agenda. It may also be seen as an insurgency that to a large extent is a reaction to ‘green militarization’ defined as the use of military and paramilitary techniques in the pursuit of conservation (Lunstrum 2014). Scholars have also demonstrated how states may use conservation to repress insurgency (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). The case of jihadist groups in Mali, however, shows how militarized conservation over time may provoke insurgency.

In both cases of land-use conflicts that we investigated, we see an escalation of the tension between the conflicting parties. In the first case, however, there is a temporary settlement, while people from both sides have joined armed groups to receive military training. We also conclude that a main driving factor behind the land-use conflicts is the power vacuum left behind after state withdrawal, first in the transition to democracy in the early 1990s and more

recently with the jihadist expansion. The cases also clearly demonstrate the links between land-use conflicts and armed groups, and that alliances and conflicts are structured by material interests with deep historical roots in controlling land and resources, rather than by a radical Islamist agenda.

While anti-government and anti-elite feelings gradually grew among rural people in Mali after the outset of the democratisation process in the 1990s, the country continued to be presented by the international aid community as a model for African democracy development. This policy failure seems to be linked to an analytical failure of not noticing the emerging peasant resistance combined with an interest in maintaining aid to Mali linked to the securitization of development in the Sahel. Likewise, today efforts by the Malian government and the international community are bound to fail as long as the attention remains on fighting global jihadist groups rather than addressing the grievances of people related to access to land and natural resources.

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