in honourable ways of living and to improve their social position so that they can eventually drop out of '*frùd al-îarám*'. '*Frùd al-îarám*' thus provides the funds that eventually lead to a 'moral' life: boundaries between 'legal' and 'illegal' ventures are fluid and distinctions between legal and illegal trade are largely meaningless.

'Struggles over encompassment' (Chapter 4) focuses on genealogies and their importance for both records of social distinction and the establishment of histories of connectivities during a period when old ascriptions (such as 'noble') are losing their importance and are increasingly being replaced by modern ascriptions (such as 'white-skinned'). Such modern ascriptions are enforced by contemporary nation states such as Algeria, which confer Algerian nationality easily on 'white' Malians who ask for it. Established Saharan hierarchies as expressed in genealogies are challenged by contemporary hierarchies that are defined by modern nation states. Chapter 5, on 'Universal law and local containment', again starts, like the preceding chapter, in the precolonial period and depicts development to the present day. It shows how laws were administered in the past and illustrates how an increasingly powerful state has become central for its administration today. 'Settlement, mobility, and the daily pitfalls of Saharan cosmopolitanism' (Chapter 6) sums up the overall argument of the book. On the basis of a colourful comparison of Adrar, Tamanrasset and Gao, as well as the Malian border town of al-Khalil, and their respective 'ghettoes' of foreigners, migrants and traders, Scheele shows that these Saharan cities should be seen as 'nodes of intensity in an overlapping matrix of connectivity'. In this matrix, regional supply, maintenance of social networks, the fragility of settlement, problems of outside dependence, aspirations to moral autonomy and the shifting boundaries of wilderness and civilization change fast and transform social life in these Saharan cities in extremely dynamic ways.

Judith Scheele's book can be regarded as a masterpiece of Saharan ethnography and social anthropology. It is brilliantly written and thrilling to read, an academic page-turner and an impressive piece of research that is going to be a must-read for anybody interested in Saharan studies.

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ANDREAS DAFINGER, *The Economics of Ethnic Conflict: the case of Burkina Faso*. Martlesham: James Currey (hb £45 – 978 1 84701 068 1). 2013, 224 pp.

In this book, Andreas Dafinger presents an anthropological analysis of social relations between Bisa/Mossi farmers and Fulbe herders in northern Burkina Faso. These relations have long been reported as being conflictual, and are usually explained as the consequence of natural resource competition (over grazing land and water in particular) in an ecologically harsh environment. Dafinger shows how the image of conflict reflects a public discourse that hinges on the mobilization of ethnic stereotypes. By looking at everyday, inter-ethnic relations instead, Dafinger uncovers a more complex reality. Farmers often develop friendships with herders (and vice versa), and behind the ideology of ethnic distinctiveness actually lies a social world in which people from different socio-ethnic backgrounds actively engage with each other. Thus, the book associates with a literature suggesting that ethnic categories are socially constructed ones and that ethnic boundaries are permeable.

A major question remains: how should these friendships be interpreted? Dafinger sides with collective action theory (a specialized version of rational choice theory; pp. 146–8), arguing that cross-ethnic friendships emerge not as a union of like-minded individuals based on shared values or world views, but chiefly as strategic alliances revolving around the control of natural resources. Dafinger's argument runs as follows. As elsewhere in the Sahel, farmers store their wealth in cattle. To avoid kinship demands for wealth (the Bisa/Mossi society being egalitarian), they entrust their cattle to the custody of their Fulbe friends – to be retrieved at an appropriate time, for instance when cattle prices are high. Fulani, in turn, have no land titles and so they access farming land through farmer friends. Through these liaisons, farming herders also obtain an advantage vis-à-vis migrating herdsmen. The farmers are highly motivated to chase away wandering herders, which reduces competitive pressures for farming herders. Bisa/Mossi–Fulbe social relations are therefore seen as exchange relations based on mutual self-interest.

At this point, a sense of unease creeps up on the critical reader. Certainly, Dafinger's interpretation helps us to understand why ethnic distinction is so pronounced in this part of Africa. Ethnicity is communicated with the purpose of removing from public view what must maintain private: the 'concealed economy' of northern Burkina (pp. 12–14). However, a major problem is that the book offers inconclusive evidence for this. On pp. 96–101 and pp. 127–30, for instance, the case is presented of Noël, a Bisa butcher living in town, and Guieba, a Fulani herder living in the vicinity. Noël entrusted cattle to Guieba but later retrieved some of them without consulting the herder. A conflict ensued that spiralled out of control, resulting in a court case. The judge dismissed the case for lack of evidence. Importantly, the men did not break off relations, but continued their entrusting practice as before. Dafinger concludes: 'This story underlines that the transfers of goods and services across the ethnic border are framed in terms of gifts and mutual friendships' (p. 129). Although I subscribe to this conclusion, it is difficult to see an immediate link to rational choice/exchange theory.

Instead, such observations point to a world of shared social life. Incidentally, this resonates with earlier anthropological work carried out in northern Burkina Faso, suggesting that factors other than strategic, self-interested considerations shape farmer–herder relations. As Dutch anthropologist Mark Breusers' work on the area has shown, friendships between farmers and herders extend well beyond the domain of cattle and also beyond purely economic exchanges. Breusers and other authors observed that Fulbe are often involved in naming and marriage ceremonies of, respectively, children and daughters of their Mossi friends. Hence, mixed friendships are seen here as associated with the intimate world of close kinship. Obviously this does not exclude the possibility that at times multi-stranded, cross-ethnic ties are mobilized for economic ends – entrusting cattle, or accessing agricultural land. Yet it also suggests that economic concerns do not necessarily determine these ties. Thus, looking at farmer–herder relations invites us to consider their social situatedness, a point that receives scant attention in Dafinger's analysis.

But the book also offers important insights. For instance, towards the end it briefly considers the role of African administrative elites in maintaining ethnic stereotypes with the purpose of securing overseas development funds – an area that is very relevant for understanding development policies. Also, it offers several valuable, critical reviews of state-of-the-art literature: one on ethnicity, offering a necessary antidote to radical constructivist ideas of ethnicity that overlook the very substance of ethnic distinction (pp. 75–84); and one on the anthropology of conflict, critiquing Max Gluckman and Victor Turner's eufunctional ideas on

social conflicts that emphasize their integrative social function (pp. 102–18). That, plus those parts of the book that steer clear of rational choice reasoning, present an interesting reflection of life behind the façade of ethnicity.

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AÏSSATOU MBODJ-POUYE, *Le fil de l'écrit: une anthropologie de l'alphabétisation au Mali*. Lyon: ENS Éditions (pb €24 – 978 2 84788 375 6). 2013, 316 pp.

A few decades ago, it was believed that learning to read and write structurally changes an individual's consciousness by developing cognitive and mental skills, and thus by increasing agency. The idea inspired not only development projects for adult education, but also emancipation movements such as Latin American liberation theology. The idea of the power of literacy education gradually lost dominance, and it is now common knowledge that the impact of reading and writing depends on contextual variables. Cultural, educational and political norms and ideas attributed to writing determine its impact. Hence, something often used in present-day analyses of literacy is the concept of the 'literacy event' – a term that invites researchers to an anthropological or ethnographic approach.

This concept of the literacy event is Mbodj-Pouye's analytical starting point in her study of the Malian village of Fana. She describes a wide range of texts produced by people who had acquired various literacy levels from school education (in French and/or Bambara), adult education in Bambara, or Koranic teaching in Arabic, or a combination of all three. The connecting historical 'thread' in this study is cotton, a product that introduced major changes to local agriculture and taught people systems of bookkeeping and record holding that they applied creatively in personalized genres, such as a (literary) genre called 'book of secrets'.

Mbodj-Pouye convincingly shows why people decide to write about a particular issue or event as well as which textual formats or literary genres they use, and her study presents a fascinating variety of texts that people write and keep. I most liked the individuals' notebooks, some of them published in full by Mbodj-Pouye. The books are not only rich 'literacy events' in themselves but also evidence of the high level of intimacy the author shared with her informants. In that respect, the study is a most welcome and inspiring contribution to Karin Barber's 'grand project' on 'everyday literacy' in Africa.

Mbodj-Pouye also discusses, although rather indirectly, *why* people write at all. She doubts (correctly) that writing changes the consciousness, thus rejecting the 'classical' – and false – 1970s and 1980s dichotomy between orality and literacy, although her suggestion that writing inspires individualization (and personal ambition through the Mande concept of *fadenya* (rivalry)) leans perhaps too heavily on the – typically Western – dichotomy of public versus private. For Mali, the qualities the author attributes to writing (keeping secrets, helping to document a personal account of an event) are also ascribed to memory and speech by those, such as griots, who take pride in oral knowledge.

However, the author gives another, rather more plausible, explanation for why people write, in a remark offered by one of her interviewees who said that writing 'favorise le progrès' (p. 166). Mbodj-Pouye notes that, with the decline in cotton production in the 1980s, literacy became a skill that people acquired with the idea of using it after a successful migration to town. This reminded me of James Ferguson's *Expectations of Modernity* (University of California Press,