

The need to travel: Malian women shuttle traders, autonomy and (mis)trust in neoliberal Dakar

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Introduction

For nearly a century, Malian women have travelled on the passenger train that connects the capitals of Mali and Senegal, transporting and trading goods all along the line (cf. Jones 2007; Lambert 1993a; 1993b; 1998; Lambert de Frondeville 1987). Until recently, the only way for the majority of Malians to access the Senegalese capital, Dakar, and its harbour was by taking the train. The roads that lead to the border between the two countries were only fully asphalted in 1999 on the Senegalese side, and in 2006 on the Malian side (Choplin and Lombard 2010: 5). Since the end of colonialism, the Dakar railway terminus served as a hub for a dynamic network of both settled and mobile Malians in the Senegalese capital, including traders, migrants and visitors. In the 1980s a profitable wholesale and retail market – known as ‘the Malian market’ or ‘the station market’ – emerged at the Dakar terminus, trading food-stuffs and handcrafted goods from Mali. Many of the women who conducted commerce along the Dakar–Niger railway line began acting as suppliers and middle (wo)men for the Malian traders at the market. Later, some of these female shuttle traders, colloquially known as *bana-banas*, began selling their own goods at the Malian market.¹ The *bana-banas* also took goods in the opposite direction, including beauty products, medicines, fashion items (clothes, leather shoes and wallets) and a variety of plastic items, such as buckets and sandals, which they purchased at the nearby markets of Sandaga, Tilèn and HLM.

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

Nonetheless, the *bana-banas* who had previously made use of the passenger train continued to travel back and forth regularly, now by bus, between Dakar and their homes in Mali. The transformation of Senegal’s infrastructural landscape, whereby rail was suppressed in favour of roads, meant, however, that transport costs to and from Mali increased significantly; travelling on this route became

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¹The word is derived from the Wolof *baana-baana*, which supposedly means ‘for me, for me’ (French: *pour moi*) (N’diaye Corréard 2006: 56–7). *Bana-bana* is used for many kinds of itinerant and informal traders in Senegal.

a more exhausting experience; and accidents – sometimes fatal – became more frequent. Why did the *bana-banas* continue to make such arduous journeys? Why was their physical presence required in Dakar, and why did they not rely more extensively on social networks to facilitate their transnational trade? This article seeks to answer these questions. In doing so it sheds new light on what neoliberalism does to trust and extended family networks in West Africa, and how this brings about novel degrees of autonomy for certain, already underprivileged women. The article contributes to the growing literature on social networks and trust by bringing in a gendered perspective that this literature tends to lack.

Research on women in West Africa has tended to emphasize the complementarity of the genders and a communitarian ethic, where women in particular are associated with cooperation and social harmony (De Jorio 2009; Fall-Sokhna and Thiéblemont-Dollet 2009; Grosz-Ngaté 1989; Hoffman 2002; Sieveking 2007). Contrary to the Western diagnosis of patriarchy, scholars have argued that Mande women have domains of power, which are largely associated with the domestic sphere and women's reproductive and care practices. Women consider themselves complementary, not subordinate, to men since they (ideally) derive power from controlling and performing these domestic activities (Hoffman 2002; cf. Koné 2002; De Jorio 2001). However, this ideal 'complementarity' of the genders appears to be challenged when Malian women go out in public to trade and travel. Most of the female *bana-banas* I encountered were in financial charge of their own households; the majority were single, many of them unmarried divorcees and widows who had entered the shuttle trade at a mature age as they could no longer rely on the financial support of spouses or extended families. While travelling was valued by some of the *bana-banas* as a positive experience and a way to learn about other places, this was not a motivation for taking up this mobile livelihood. Rather, abandonment, self-reliance and other aspects of marginalization and autonomy tended to propel women into this occupation. Their situation reflected a wider context in which, following structural adjustment, socio-economic crises and transformations mean that women's autonomy has been expanding, while the structure of extended families – which provided some measure of social and financial support – has been gradually disintegrating (Antoine and Dial 2003; Grange Omokaro 2009; Rondeau 1996; Rondeau and Bouchard 2007). The lack of economic opportunities means that men are increasingly unable to live up to the masculine ideal of establishing independent households and providing for their families. In turn, women now participate more actively in the capitalist economy and contribute more to household budgets. Hence, marriage is often postponed and conjugal unions are less stable than before (Antoine and Dial 2003).

The article begins by examining the history of the evolution of Malian women's commerce in the Dakar–Bamako corridor. Contrary to what might be expected, the analysis shows that liberalization and concomitant socio-spatial transformations have not facilitated the *bana-banas'* transnational shuttle trade but rather have undermined the infrastructure and networks these women traders relied upon. The subsequent section analyses the *bana-banas'* increasing alienation from ethnic- and kin-based networks by examining particular gendered constraints on trade and travel. On this basis I argue that the *bana-banas* were in a double bind: they derived their livelihood from their independence but, at the same time, being autonomous and highly mobile women, they were socially

stigmatized. Their marginal social position limited both their possibilities and their desires to establish close relations with other traders and middlemen in Dakar. These observations lead to an examination of the *bana-banas*' need for flexibility and disembeddedness, questioning the assumption that networks and trust are essential to this form of trade. Instead of establishing relations of trust in Dakar, which might have facilitated their trade from a distance, the *bana-banas* continued travelling frequently to and from Mali.

The evolution of women's commerce in the Dakar–Bamako corridor

The phenomenon of female shuttle traders in the Mali–Senegal corridor is not a product of recent liberalization but dates back nearly a century. In fact, unlike other instances of shuttle trade, the *bana-banas*' participation in commerce in this corridor *declined* during the era of structural adjustment, as the following analysis reveals (cf. Bredeloup 2012; Haugen 2013; Peraldi 2005). During 2013 I conducted anthropological fieldwork among Malians in Dakar using a mix of French and Bamanankan to carry out conversations, interviews and participant observation. Like the general Malian population, most of my informants were Muslim and part of the Mande populations of West Africa who share related languages and cultural heritage. I undertook extensive periods of participant observation among the *bana-banas* from Mali, and also with the female traders working at the new Malian markets that had emerged after the market at the Dakar terminus was demolished. However, I decided not to travel with the *bana-banas*, since my fieldwork coincided with the war in Mali. Six days after my arrival in the Senegalese capital, on 11 January 2013, French and African troops launched a military intervention to halt rebels advancing on the capital from the north and occupying territory along the way. The *bana-banas* I met, however, were largely unfazed by the security alerts issued by the media and authorities during the conflict in Mali, and they continued their journeys to Dakar unabated. The Malian conflict was concentrated in the north of the country, not the southern and western parts, including Kayes and Bamako, from which most of these women hailed. As my informants liked to point out, the distance between Dakar and Bamako (see Figure 1) is shorter than the distance between Bamako and Kidal, the stronghold of the rebels in northern Mali. Given the absence of research about the women traders at home in Mali, the picture presented in this article might be incomplete and some of my conclusions provisional.

West African women first became 'railway merchants'² as early as the 1890s, taking advantage of their husbands' access to railway passes to travel to town

²I borrow this term from James A. Jones, who distinguishes between three types of railway merchants: merchants who used the train to reach stations along the line where they could buy and sell goods from local residents; local residents who did not travel on the train themselves, but had their own commercial networks that accumulated products to sell at the station and distributed products acquired from travelling merchants; and merchants who used the train to transport wholesale goods which they supplied to other merchants (Jones 2007: 103).

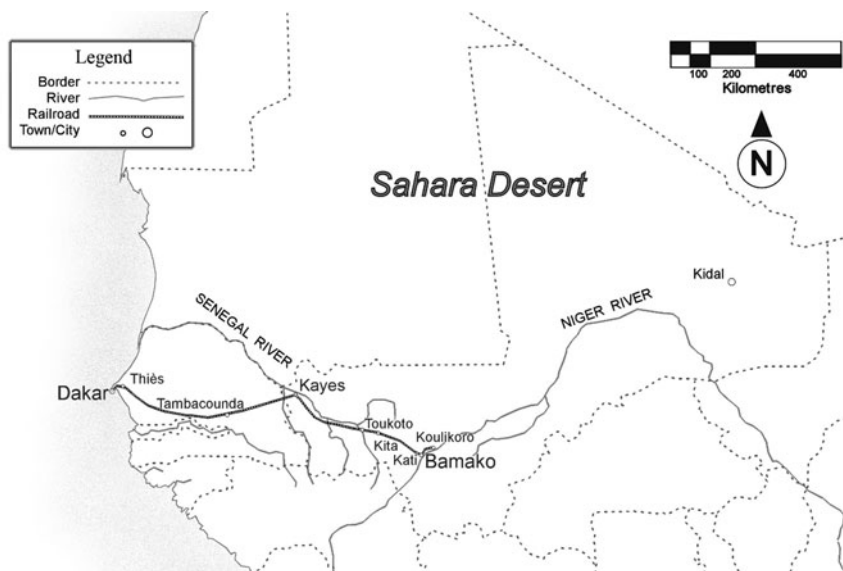


FIGURE 1 Map of the Dakar–Niger railway. Map © James A. Jones, 2017. Used with permission.

to buy better food than the railway supplied.³ In the 1920s and 1930s, the wives of railway employees began engaging in long-distance trade (Jones 2002: 5; Lambert 1993a: 42). Railway trade was progressively feminized during the postcolonial socialist regime in Mali when several women were promoted in business by their husbands or a civil servant relative with connections to power; some educated women also used the opportunity of being close to the ruling elite to access business (Lambert 1993a: 44). The trade grew considerably during the droughts of the 1970s, when families were forced to diversify their income-generating strategies and women increasingly used the train to conduct trade (*ibid.*).

Different measures implemented during the period of liberalization, initiated as part of structural adjustment programmes in the early 1980s, deterred the small railway traders, to the advantage of dominant male and female traders who possessed large sums of capital (Jones 2007: 107; Lambert 1993a: 45–6). When Mali joined the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and adopted the CFA currency in 1984, prices doubled, which led to a decline in female traders on the train: since Senegal and Mali now had the same currency, raw products from Mali became less competitive in Dakar and numerous female traders had to change to other circuits that were more favourable than the Dakar–Bamako one (Lambert 1993a: 45; cf. Jones 2007: 107).

Under pressure from the World Bank, the Malian and Senegalese governments privatized the Dakar–Niger railway network in 2003. The railway had been in decline for decades as the two countries had largely stopped investing in it and

³I am grateful to James A. Jones for pointing this out in correspondence (29 May 2014).

equipment had become obsolete (Lesourd and Ninot 2006: 108). After a tender, a twenty-five-year concession was won by a Franco-Canadian consortium under the name Transrail (Jones 2007: 108). This consortium closed down most of the railway system, with devastating consequences for the traders and other people making their living from the railway line (Beaudet 2006; Munié 2007). The new owners invested minimally in railway equipment (wagons and tracks), dismissed more than 600 railway workers and closed two-thirds of all stations (Beaudet 2006; Jones 2007: 108; Munié 2007). This contributed to the impoverishment of rural areas adjacent to the line, where, for over a century, life had been organized around the stations, as villagers had traded their produce with travellers and railway workers' families (Beaudet 2006; Magassa 2018).⁴ Although the concession was won in exchange for an operating agreement to ensure passenger services, Transrail did not consider this profitable and after privatization the service began to decline (Munié 2007). The last passenger train in Senegal reportedly ran in 2009 (cf. Coulibaly 2009; Martineau 2013).⁵

In 2003, the gradual decline of the Dakar–Niger railway and the improvement of the roads linking Mali and Senegal prompted one pioneering female *bana-bana* from Mali to establish the first bus route for passengers travelling between Bamako and Dakar. She went on to start up her own bus company in 2006, and other companies servicing the route emerged over the next three years. Certain buses became known unofficially as the '*bana-bana* buses'; rather than competing with the mainstream buses in terms of passenger comforts, such as air-conditioning or legroom, they obtained loyal and regular customers among the *bana-banas* by catering specifically to their transport needs.⁶

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

⁴See Quentin Laurent's 2007 short film *Dakar Terminus*.

⁵The concession with Transrail was terminated in December 2015 and the company was replaced by the newly established Dakar Bamako Ferroviaire. The two governments each entered into agreements with China Railway Construction Corp (International) Ltd to repair and reconstruct their respective sections of the line. See 'New operator for Dakar–Bamako railway', *Railway Gazette*, 23 March 2016; 'Mali signs \$1.5 bln rail deal with China Railway Construction', Reuters, 26 December 2015 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/mali-china-cn-railway-const/mali-signs-1-5-bln-rail-deal-with-china-railway-construction-idUSL8N14F06320151226>>, accessed 10 May 2019. At the end of December 2017, the Malian passenger train between Bamako and Kayes started running again (Magassa 2018; see also 'Revoilà à nouveau le train voyageur sur l'axe Bamako–Kayes', ORTM TV1, 27 December 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3aBHLsFnnM>>, accessed 10 May 2019).

⁶*Bana-banas* could sometimes get cheaper tickets on these buses and some companies offered the tenth bus journey for free. The *bana-bana* buses strived to transport most of the women's goods, and would also arrange for separate transport of goods by truck if there was insufficient space on the bus. Even if the women were not travelling along with the bus, they could still ask the bus drivers to take their goods across the border, and the women would then reimburse the driver the customs fees once their goods had arrived.

when the passenger train stopped running. While some *bana-banas* stopped their transnational trade altogether and ‘retired’ in Mali, others pursued alternative destinations such as Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire or Guinea Conakry. Some *bana-banas* decided to settle permanently in Dakar and trade from a market stall or a shop.⁷

Although the former passenger train had had frequent and sometimes fatal accidents, the number of casualties did not decline after the transition to buses. This reflects a general problem in most of Africa, where road accidents are a major source of fatalities and injuries (Lamont 2012).⁸ One of the worst accidents during my fieldwork involved one of the *bana-bana* buses: about half of the passengers died, including the driver and his two apprentices, after the bus crashed into a stationary truck. Apparently, the driver had objected to departing that day because he was too tired, but his boss in Mali had insisted over the phone. Communal transport in Senegal has become increasingly privatized over the past decades and hence is largely driven by commercial interests and fierce competition, instead of the provision of a public service meeting the needs of the general population (Choplin and Lombard 2010; Lesourd and Ninot 2006). The economy of speed on Senegal’s national highways thus reflects the wider shift in the political economy of the region, towards privatization and liberalization of the state (cf. Diop 2013).

The *bana-banas* knew that there were certain risks involved in travelling, but the journeys were essential to their livelihoods and there was little they could do to change the conditions of travel, apart from putting their fate in the hands of God. This did not mean that they were oblivious to the risks of travel; on the contrary, the women often mentioned the possibility of death whenever we discussed their journeys. One morning when the *bana-bana* Nana⁹ was preparing to leave and was sitting surrounded by all her luggage, I asked what she normally packed for the journey to Dakar. She replied that she always brought two sheets, explaining: ‘If a man travels from Bamako to Dakar and he dies on the way, they will ask people to look through his luggage to see if there is any sheet, to wrap the body before the burial. What will you do if you didn’t bring a sheet?!’

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

⁷This move from mobility to immigration was not merely a consequence of the recent infrastructural transformations. Over the past years, many of the women who had been travelling back and forth on the train had in fact ended up getting married and settling permanently in Dakar.

⁸One Malian man, who was practising as a GP in Dakar, claimed that the main problem with bus journeys was not road accidents but the lack of hygiene; in particular, the food and water consumed by the passengers could cause cholera and diarrhoea, which easily spread among passengers. Medical emergencies during journeys that were not dealt with quickly enough frequently turned into fatalities.

⁹All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of informants.

Malian *bana-banas* now came to Dakar to buy, not to sell.¹⁰ The goods purchased by *bana-banas* in Dakar were generally industrially manufactured and imported products. Mali is landlocked and depends greatly on maritime traffic for its international trade, primarily through the port city of Dakar.¹¹ Dakar offered the *bana-banas* a wide range of commodities, at a relatively low price. In addition to imported goods, the women purchased mass-produced consumables supplied by Dakar's factories. Dakar is also known for its fashion, and tailored and ready-made garments were another prized commodity in which Malian *bana-banas* often traded. 'Small' *bana-banas* (referred to as '*petites bana-banas*')¹² would usually buy clothes, shoes, jewellery and cosmetics; processed and tinned food; cooking utensils; and household implements. Those with greater trade capital would purchase larger volumes of wholesale commodities, for example dried fish, bicycles, rice, gas, cement or salt.¹³ Small *bana-banas* would commonly carry out between one and three trading trips a month, and the number of Malian *bana-banas* in Dakar increased around Tabaski (Eid al-Adha) and Ramadan, when there was a high demand for food and clothes for these religious celebrations.¹⁴

It is difficult to estimate the extent to which neoliberalism has resulted in small-scale trade between Mali and Senegal shifting into the hands of an elite of large-scale traders. There are clear indications that large-scale trade between Mali and Senegal is increasing, particularly imports to Mali from Senegal (see Table 1). It is worth noting that, in parallel with the trade conducted by *bana-banas*, 'virtual' trade was being carried out between Dakar and Bamako: some Malian women trading in import and export did not need to go to Dakar, but instead conducted their entire business from Mali. These were women who could afford to order

¹⁰A small number of *bana-banas* continued to supply the scattered new Malian markets in Dakar, giving their goods in 'credit' to the market traders, who would sell them for the *bana-banas* in return for a bonus. Their goods were usually traditional handmade and agricultural products from Mali and sometimes neighbouring countries, including hand-dyed *bazin* cloth, aphrodisiacs and herbal remedies, seasonal and dried fruit, bowls made from calabashes, handmade soap and shea butter. Some *bana-banas* – usually those selling Malian *bazin* cloth – sold their goods themselves, either by walking around the streets, sitting in a fixed location on the pavement, or selling from a stall at a temporary fair in Dakar.

¹¹The Malian state has in fact been granted a section of the port in Dakar (the '*Zone Malien*' at pier number 8 where containers arrive; goods in bulk destined for Mali arrive at pier 3), as well as a truck park on the outskirts of the Cap-Vert peninsula (the '*Parking Malien*' in Rufisque). Senegalese law does not apply in these zones, and foreign goods imported via Dakar and transited through Senegal to Mali are not subject to Senegalese customs duty. However, I only heard of one female *bana-bana* who was involved in this formal import business.

¹²The 'small *bana-banas*' had several clients in Mali who were small-scale retailers, and who therefore required a great diversity of goods in relatively small quantities. Some *bana-banas* were acting as brokers, buying on behalf of one or more clients in Mali. This type of arrangement was called '*la commande*', referring to the fact that the clients in Mali would order (*commander* in French) specific goods from the *bana-banas*. Some *bana-banas*, including Fatou and Nana, had a few regular, relatively wealthy clients in Mali, some of whom were trading wholesale. Other *bana-banas* purchased goods that they themselves were planning to sell from a market stall or a shop back in Mali.

¹³Dakar has its own cement factory, SOCOIM, and salt is produced at Lac Rose outside Dakar and in Kaolack. Gas imported from overseas arrives at Dakar's mineral port.

¹⁴Some traders were '*bana-banas d'occasion*': they became *bana-banas* only before big celebrations such as Tabaski and Ramadan.

TABLE 1
Evolution of the traffic of goods from 2008 to 2012, to and from Mali.

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

Figures obtained in March 2013 from Entrepôts Maliens au Sénégal (EMASE) in Dakar. Note: The totals are as provided by EMASE but those for 2011 and 2012 do not accurately reflect the import/export figures listed.

several truckloads of goods, pay for brokers and intermediaries to organize the purchase and transport of goods, and transfer money for their orders via the bank. If, for any reason, they needed to go to Dakar, they would take the plane. Engaging in such 'virtual' trade by relying extensively on ICT and on employees and intermediaries in Dakar, instead of travelling back and forth, required significant social and financial capital, which female *bana-banas* did not possess.¹⁵

Since the demise of the Dakar–Niger passenger train, it has become more expensive and cumbersome for small-scale shuttle traders to transport goods to and from Dakar: compared with the more spacious train, the buses on which the *bana-banas* travelled had relatively little room for luggage, and trade commodities therefore often had to be transported separately by truck, constituting a significant additional cost. Moreover, if the *bana-bana* was not vigilant, the people handling the goods during the loading and unloading of trucks would simply throw them into the truck or onto the ground, which meant that packaging and goods could easily be broken. The women's goods were sometimes damaged if they were loaded together with other kinds of items. For example, Fatou wanted to buy a large amount of rice but worried that lots of other things would be loaded into the same truck; this could easily tear the rice bags, causing them to spill. To avoid such problems, *bana-banas* had to be present to oversee the loading of their goods and some even accompanied the truck driver back to Mali. To reduce transport costs, some *bana-banas* colluded with truck drivers to illegally overload trucks after they had been filled with their formally allowed cargo. These *bana-banas* would then travel in the truck, taking care of negotiations with and bribes to officials. This arrangement was one of the more troublesome aspects of the *bana-banas'* trade, one that gave the women a negative reputation among business people and officials dealing in the more formally regulated sectors of the economy.

¹⁵Class thus appears as a lens through which to read the development of networks and autonomy among women traders in this region. Examining how class distinctions among women (traders) are produced by or pre-exist neoliberal changes in the region is a pertinent topic for further research.

The increasing precarity and decline of the *bana-banas*' commerce was also linked to recent spatial and infrastructural transformations of the trading landscape in Dakar. In the days when the passenger train was still running in Senegal, the *bana-banas* had collaborated and interacted closely with the market traders at the Dakar terminus: they used to supply the market traders with goods and also sold their own goods at the market, and many *bana-banas* used the market space as a temporary home during their stays in Dakar. After the passenger train was replaced with transport by road, the *bana-banas* were no longer propelled into the same social and commercial space as the Malian market traders. They arrived on buses in a different part of the city, and they no longer socialized or slept at the terminus during their stays in Dakar. The neoliberal policies that closed down most of the railway system thus contributed to an increasing disembeddedness of female *bana-banas* from ethnic and kinship-based trade networks in Dakar (cf. Granovetter 1985; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Relatively few *bana-banas* acted as suppliers to the traders at the new, scattered Malian markets that had recently emerged in the vicinity of the old terminus. Truck drivers transporting the *bana-banas*' goods were reluctant to continue all the way into the congested city centre of Dakar, where the new Malian markets were located, preferring instead to unload in the northern suburbs. Due to competition over the limited market space and the high cost of renting stalls, very few *bana-banas* were able to retail their own goods at the new Malian markets and were instead obliged to sell them through the market traders. This tied the *bana-banas* into unattractive credit relations: they would obtain the revenue for their goods only after market traders had sold them, and these payments were usually returned slowly and in small portions after much persistence and impatient waiting by the *bana-banas*.

Several scholars have noted that, under conditions of contemporary globalization and neoliberalism – such as those described above – ‘traditional’ trade networks based on ethnicity, kinship or religion are increasingly giving way to more rational and instrumental networks, coupled with greater reliance on ICT (cf. Fafchamps 1996; Humphrey and Schmitz 1998; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Molony 2009; Overå 2006). Through the long-term process of nurturing relationships with regular trading partners, who may become friends, a relation of trust tends to emerge (cf. Haugen 2013: 29; Humphrey and Schmitz 1998: 38–9). Trust thus increasingly develops through first-hand experience of exchange and repeated transactions over a period of time: that is, a more personalized form of trust in friends and colleagues (cf. Overå 2006: 1304; Yüксеker 2004; Zucker 1985). However, this pattern of transformation of networks and trust did not appear to apply in a straightforward manner to the Malian *bana-banas*, as the following section of this article clarifies. Instead of increasingly relying on personal contacts – including relationships with other *bana-banas* – these women continued their frequent, and both costly and risky, journeys to Dakar, where they conducted their businesses in a relatively autonomous fashion.

Patriarchal constraints and the marginalization of mobile women traders

Oumou had collaborated with *bana-banas* for decades and had herself travelled back and forth on the passenger train with her mother before the former

Malian market had been demolished. When I discussed with Oumou why the *bana-banas* travelled frequently instead of relying on intermediaries in Dakar, she told me:

If they stayed in Mali, they would lose money. But if they come here, they can go and see new goods and negotiate a good price. The intermediaries [in Dakar], they won't look for the best price. They don't give a damn – even if it's expensive. Aha! If the *bana-bana* comes here, she can compare the prices, to find the best one. That way, she herself negotiates, and she can make new orders. But if she leaves it to the intermediary, he can cheat. He can ask the trader to sell him something at CFA 500 but ask him to write CFA 1,000 on the receipt. That way, the *bana-bana* will never know what he did, because he can show her the receipt where it's written. They have lots of strategies like that – there are a lot, a lot!

Like most people pursuing an economic livelihood in West Africa, the *bana-banas* could not rely to any great extent on the legal system or other official regulatory mechanisms to enforce contracts (cf. Fafchamps 1996; Humphrey and Schmitz 1998). Tracking down a fraudulent intermediary and redressing any grievance through legal means was cumbersome and costly. In such environments, traders might instead rely on trustworthiness, judged by the characteristics of sellers and intermediaries, such as their family background, ethnicity or religious adherence (Humphrey and Schmitz 1998; Overå 2006; Zucker 1985). Reliance on such 'characteristics-based trust' has been common among West African men involved in long-distance trade. Studies have emphasized the significance of social networks and ethnic and religious identity in constituting successful trading networks and institutions in this region (Amselle 1977; Cohen 1969; Diouf 2000; Ebin 1992; Grégoire and Labazée 1993; Warms 1992; 1994). However, as the previous section pointed out, the female *bana-banas* were cut off from these kinds of networks in certain ways.

When examining traders' ability to form dependable personal relationships and to trust others, it is important to note that the rules and regulations that apply to male traders do not necessarily apply in the same way to women traders, who may be subject to different social and moral constraints (Clark 1994; 2003; cf. Meagher 2005: 231). It is therefore necessary to consider the structures of power in which women operate and that restrict the kinds of tactics and strategies women can use. Agnès Lambert's research conducted on the railway in the 1980s shows that, in the past, kinship ties to railway employees, officials and other railway traders facilitated entry into the railway trade, and female railway merchants actively encouraged future generations to follow in their footsteps, bringing along their daughters on the train to show them how to trade (Lambert 1993a; 1993b; 1998; Lambert de Frondeville 1987; Poitou *et al.* 1992). In contrast, as noted earlier, many of the contemporary *bana-banas* travelling to Dakar had entered the shuttle trade at a mature age due to the lack of financial support from spouses and relatives.

Living in isolation from extended families, divorced and widowed *bana-banas* had more freedom to travel compared with other Malian women, who were more directly caught up in local patriarchal arrangements and whose mobility was more strictly controlled and limited (cf. Findley and Diallo 1993; Freeman 2007; Guilamoto 1997; Lesclingand 2004; Rodet 2009). However, being a female *bana-bana* carried a social stigma: among many Malians I met it was generally

not considered appropriate for a woman of reproductive age to be unmarried and 'roaming about'. While long-distance trade and travel tend to be construed as prestigious for Malian men, leading to social mobility and status, this is not necessarily the case for mature Malian women (cf. Dougnon 2013; Jónsson 2012; Whitehouse 2012). Indeed, many Malians thought that the female *bana-banas* were prostitutes. The association of female travel with promiscuous sexual behaviour is a long-standing one, as reflected in the early literature on female migration in West Africa (Pittin 1984; Sudarkasa 1977). Today, female migrants' sexuality continues to attract considerable public and political attention, for example in relation to human trafficking and the spread of HIV/AIDS (cf. Carling 2005; UNAIDS 2008). However, concerns with mobile women's promiscuity or sexual vulnerability sometimes mask a deeper anxiety about women's autonomy and mobility posing a threat to the socio-economic structure and ideal of patriarchal families and communities (Porter 2011; cf. Guilmoto 1997; Hertrich and Lesclingand 2003; Lesclingand 2004; Ouedraogo 1995; Sauvain-Dugerdil 2011).

In the face of such societal marginalization and stigma surrounding their mobile livelihoods, it might be expected that the *bana-banas* would form bonds of solidarity and trust among themselves. Indeed, *bana-banas* often travelled and worked in pairs, but, apart from this, relationships with other *bana-banas* in Dakar were rarely long-lasting or deeply felt; they largely lost relevance once these women were back at home in Mali. Some of the *bana-banas* had established a *grin* outside the office of a Malian bus company. The *grin* is a form of socializing widespread in West Africa, involving an informal group of peers who assemble, often on a daily basis, in a regular location, usually to engage in chatting, making tea, listening to music and playing cards (cf. Bondaz 2013; Brenner 1994; Masquelier 2013). Chatting (*baro*) and socializing in the *grin* helped the women cope with the occasional loneliness and hardships of their highly autonomous and mobile lifestyles. The *bana-banas* I met were highly assertive and independent women – their livelihoods required such an attitude. They had to be able to negotiate hard and to manage if a deal fell through, if their goods were stolen, or if they were cheated; they had to be able to endure being away from their children and to travel, work and live on their own. However, relations among the *bana-banas* were at times disloyal. It was striking how much malicious gossiping took place among the women in the *grin*, behind the backs of other *bana-banas* who also frequented the *grin* on a regular basis. For example, *bana-banas* would secretly chastise their female colleagues for failing in their relations with their close kin, disrespecting age hierarchies, attempting to seduce married men, or behaving in an arrogant manner. The female *bana-banas*' own frustrations over their social marginalization and inability to fulfil powerful idealized notions of womanhood – especially in terms of female propriety and moral conduct, but also in the sense of a gender role ideally defined by motherhood and marriage – thus appeared to be projected onto their fellow female traders (cf. Hoffman 2002; Schulz 2008). Economic competition among the female *bana-banas* under increasingly adverse conditions, as outlined in the previous section, most likely also factored into this bickering.

Instead of relying on personalized relationships of trust in Dakar, many of the *bana-banas* turned to commercial solutions, reflecting Charles Piot's wider observations of neoliberal West Africa being characterized by a 'turning away from relational dependency and the gift to a preoccupation with autonomy and

the money/commodity form' (Piot 2010: 9). Coinciding with the end of the passenger train service and the demolition of the Malian market in 2009, small Malian enterprises servicing the *bana-banas* began appearing in Dakar, combining provision of accommodation, transport of goods and brokering services. *Bana-banas* who were new to Dakar would easily find accommodation in shared flats via this system, and there was normally a truck parked outside the flats to transport the *bana-banas*' goods back to Mali. This proliferation of private enterprises catering to the needs of *bana-banas* implied a shift towards a commercialization of Malian trading networks in Dakar, as monetary exchange was gradually replacing solidarity, patronage and gift-giving relations among Malians trading in Dakar (cf. Agier 1983: 107; Cohen 1965; David 1980: 172–8; Hill 1966: 350). The *bana-banas*' accommodation in privately rented flats reflected their desire for social distance and a degree of autonomy. Their ephemeral emplacement in these flats and in the *grin* was largely a choice that suited their lifestyles, allowing them to perform and develop alternative kinds of domesticity and gender roles that reflected their identities as single mothers, family breadwinners and independent traders.

The tricks of the trade: flexibility, mobility and the limits of trust

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

At the heart of a *bana-bana*'s profession was the need to be flexible and to be able to respond to price fluctuations and adapt to changing supply and demand in the transnational market. Coming to Dakar and browsing shops and chatting with other *bana-banas* helped the women stay up to date with the latest offers and new products. The women also used the opportunity to see if they could chance upon a good offer; if they did, they might decide to invest in it. The *bana-banas* would walk around the entire city centre by foot to compare prices in different shops and markets and learn about changing supply and demand for goods in Dakar. Many of the Malian *bana-banas* would browse and shop in the same maze of streets near the Sandaga market in the city centre, and they often bumped into each other. They would share insights and compare purchases at the end of a long working day, when they returned to their place of accommodation, or socialized at the *grin*. A skilled *bana-bana* would use such information to

quickly respond to new opportunities and changes in the transnational market. Fatou was usually prepared to invest in a good bargain if she came across one. She once purchased several cooking pots and utensils after walking past them when she was out leisurely strolling the streets of Dakar. She proudly told me of the bargain, commenting: 'The *bana-banas* buy everything!' – implying that such flexibility was central to the *bana-bana* profession and was what made *bana-banas* successful. *Bana-banas* generally retained minimal allegiance to any seller in Dakar, which allowed them to change goods and suppliers quickly (cf. Grabowski 1997). Intense bargaining was necessary every time: even if a *bana-bana* had been coming to Dakar for decades and tended to browse the same shops, there was little expectation of loyalty – rational calculations of profit determined what and from whom the *bana-banas* bought. Most *bana-banas* constantly changed goods and suppliers, depending on, for example, agricultural seasons, religious occasions and the availability of new products.

The general rule in Dakar was that you could always get an item cheaper than the first price that was quoted to you. To sidestep these initial negotiations, and quickly get a seller to reveal the lowest price for which an item would be sold, the *bana-banas* usually began negotiations by asking sellers for their 'last price', literally asking '*las price*' or '*las, las*' – presumably an expression derived from English. This strategy of asking for the last price first and then testing how much further down they could negotiate that price resembles what Geertz referred to as the 'intensity' of bargaining in the Moroccan bazaar: that is, 'the exploration in depth of an offer already received' (Geertz 1978: 31). Geertz argued that such 'intensive search' – bargaining in depth with one person – is due to the high heterogeneity of products, as when buying a used car rather than a new car (considered a homogeneous product) (*ibid.*: 31). Indeed, apart from the price, there were several other aspects to be assessed and negotiated when *bana-banas* were making a purchase (cf. *ibid.*: 31–2): the women had to consider the quality, weight, colour and size of items they wanted to buy, which meant they had to both see and feel the goods, and sometimes taste them or try them on. Moreover, negotiating involved the whole body, the senses, emotions and contingent events, and therefore had to be carried out in person (cf. Nohria and Eccles 2000 [1992]). I sometimes noticed how calm and friendly *bana-banas* would instantly change character when entering a shop or a scene of negotiation, suddenly appearing intimidating, demanding and assertive. The possibilities of emotional manipulation, and the intimidation brought about by the women's physical presence, were tactics that were frequently used by the female traders in their commercial negotiations. Polanyi's (1966) idea of tacit versus codified knowledge is useful for understanding the *bana-banas*' need for physical proximity during the browsing and bargaining process: codified knowledge refers to written sources and can easily be communicated and transferred over distance; tacit knowledge, in contrast, can be acquired only through observation, practice and learning and thus requires physical proximity and face-to-face interaction (Torre 2008: 873; cf. Elyachar 2012).

While their social autonomy vis-à-vis kin and ethnic networks in some ways precluded access to trustworthy intermediaries and trading partners in Dakar, in other ways it also facilitated the *bana-banas*' flexible trading strategies, as they were not socially committed or economically tied to such actors (cf. Walther 2015: 605). The *bana-banas* were strangers – independent, socially marginal, and only temporarily engaged in physical proximity with economic actors in Dakar – and this came with

certain economic advantages (cf. Shack and Skinner 1979; Simmel 1950 [1908]; Skinner 1963). Being autonomous and mobile meant that *bana-banas* avoided the negative social capital and ‘identity economics’ associated with trading in highly structured and permanent networks (Meagher 2010; Portes and Landolt 1996). The women’s mobile livelihoods as *bana-banas* stemmed in part from their alienation from ethnic and kinship networks and the forms of social control that accompanied such relations. The *bana-banas* were often women who had slipped out of the patriarchal family structure and whose experiences of abandonment and positions of self-reliance were at odds with socially accepted forms of femininity. In this light, the flexibility and autonomy that characterized the *bana-banas*’ businesses did not merely represent particular trade strategies; they were *dispositions* that these women had acquired on the basis of their lived experiences.

Mobile women navigating neoliberal terrains

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

Not only was the wider infrastructural landscape underpinning the *bana-banas*’ mobile trade undergoing transformation in a context of economic liberalization; the commercial terrain that these women navigated as traders was also characterized by constant flux, as potential goods and their quality were ever changing and uncertain. At the same time, the *bana-banas* were navigating a changing social terrain that, under conditions of neoliberalism, was increasingly characterized by the fragmentation of networks and a shift from dependence on patronage and kin relations to growing self-reliance for women. In this light, the flexibility, intensive searching and tough negotiation strategies of the *bana-banas* were not merely professional business practices required to carry out this form of trade. They reflected the kinds of dispositions – attitudes, embodied demeanours and states of mind – that these autonomous women had acquired through the challenging forms of social navigation that characterized their lives, as they were tactically moving within an uncertain and changing wider environment (cf. Cooper and Pratten 2015; Vigh 2006; 2009).

While long-distance male traders have successfully activated kinship, ethnic and religious networks to facilitate their economic activities, the example of the

Malian *bana-banas* highlights the need to consider the conditions of socially marginal and autonomous female traders engaged in mobile livelihoods, who need to travel long distances. Establishing institutional frameworks to regulate and facilitate small-scale economic transactions may reduce some of the need for mobility for *bana-banas* and other people whose economic livelihoods depend on travel. But regardless of technological and structural change, human mobility will persist, and there is clearly a need to improve conditions under which people currently travel in the West African region.

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Abstract

Recent infrastructural developments in Senegal have severely impacted on the livelihoods of female *bana-banas* from Mali, a group of mobile traders operating in the Mali–Dakar corridor: transportation costs have significantly increased, travelling has become a more exhausting experience, and fatal accidents have become more frequent during journeys. Why did the *bana-banas* continue these arduous journeys? Why was their physical presence required in Dakar, and why did they not rely more extensively on social networks to facilitate their transnational trade? This article examines the conditions of autonomy, flexibility and limited trust that characterized the *bana-banas*' livelihoods and necessitated their continued mobility from Mali. The recent infrastructural transformations have led to an increased commercialization and disarticulation of Malian trade networks in the Senegalese capital, and, due to personal circumstances, the women have often been cut off from networks. However, unlike general expectations of the ways in which networks evolve under conditions of neoliberalism, the *bana-banas* have not turned to personalized relationships of trust in Dakar, which might have facilitated their trade from a distance. The article contributes to the growing literature on social networks and trust by exploring how transnational trade does and does not work at this historical moment and in the context of gendered constraints.

Résumé

Des projets infrastructurels récents au Sénégal ont eu un impact considérable sur les moyens de subsistance des *bana-banas*, un groupe de marchandes ambulantes du Mali qui évolue dans le corridor Mali-Dakar : le coût des transports a sensiblement augmenté, les déplacements sont bien plus fatigants et les accidents mortels sont devenus plus fréquents lorsqu'elles voyagent. Pourquoi les *bana-banas* ont-elles continué ces voyages pénibles ? Pourquoi leur présence physique était-elle requise à Dakar, et pourquoi n'ont-elles pas utilisé davantage leurs réseaux sociaux pour faciliter leur commerce transnational ? Cet article examine les conditions d'autonomie, de flexibilité et de confiance limitée qui caractérisaient les moyens de subsistance des *bana-banas* et nécessitaient leur mobilité continue du Mali. Les transformations infrastructurelles récentes ont conduit à une commercialisation et une désarticulation accrues des réseaux commerciaux maliens dans la capitale sénégalaise et, en raison de leur situation personnelle, les femmes ont souvent été coupées des réseaux. Néanmoins, contrairement à ce que l'on pourrait attendre généralement des modes d'évolution des réseaux dans des conditions néolibérales, les *bana-banas* ne se sont pas tournées vers des relations personnalisées de confiance à Dakar qui auraient pu faciliter leur commerce à distance. Cet article contribue à la littérature croissante consacrée aux réseaux sociaux et à la confiance en explorant en quoi le commerce transnational fonctionne et ne fonctionne pas à ce moment historique et dans le contexte de contraintes genrées.