

Conflict or symbiosis? Disentangling farmer-herdsman relations: the Mossi and Fulbe of the Central Plateau, Burkina Faso

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INTRODUCTION‡

Conflicts between farmers and herdsman are certainly not new phenomena: they already occurred at the time of the biblical patriarchs.¹ In West Africa, conflicts over the use of scarce natural resources between farmers and herdsman are said to be on the increase.² The occurrence of such conflicts is generally attributed to growing pressure on natural resources, caused by population increase, the growth of herds and the extension of cultivated areas outpacing population growth. That such conflicts appear to oppose two ethnic groups – generally Fulbe herdsman³ *versus* a population group of farmers – is explained by the fact that not only has overall competition over natural resources increased due to a saturation of space, but that

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¹ cf. Genesis 4: 1–8.

² M. Benoit, *Nature Peul du Yatenga. Remarques sur le Pastoralisme en Pays Mossi* (Paris, 1982); Y. Diallo, 'Les Peuls, les Sénoufo et l'état au nord de la Côte d'Ivoire. Problèmes fonciers et gestion du pastoralisme', *APAD Bulletin* 10 (1995), pp. 35–45; Y. Diallo, *Problèmes écologiques, malaise paysan et situation du pastoralisme dans le nord de la Côte d'Ivoire*, Paper presented at the Colloquium 'Pastoralism under Pressure', Leiden, 13–15 June 1996; S. Diarra, 'Les problèmes de contact entre les pasteurs Peul et les agriculteurs dans le Niger Central', in T. Monod (ed.), *Pastoralism in Tropical Africa* (London, 1975), pp. 284–97; A. van Driel, 'Rapports changeants entre éleveurs et agriculteurs; quelques implications pour une politique visant une agriculture durable. Le cas spécial de Karimama et de Malanville', in P. Ton and L. de Haan (eds.), *A la recherche de l'agriculture durable au Bénin*, Amsterdamse Sociaal-Geografische Studies, 49 (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 127–31; J.-M. Fotsing, 'Problèmes fonciers et élevage Bovin en Pays Bamiliké: exemple du Nord de Bafou (Ouest-Cameroun)', *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Développement* 20, (1988), pp. 43–52; L. de Haan, A. van Driel and A. Kruithof, 'From symbiosis to polarization? Peasants and pastoralists in northern Benin', *The Indian Geographical Journal* 65, 1 (1990), pp. 51–65.

³ Cf. M. de Bruin and H. van Dijk, *Arid ways: Cultural Understanding of Insecurity in Fulbe Society, Central Mali* (Amsterdam, 1995), for a recent detailed description of Fulbe.

at the same time a balance between the two groups has been broken. The convergence of production systems, as a result of farmers engaging in cattle breeding and herdsmen in agriculture, entailed the disappearance of both ecological and economic complementarity between the two groups – a process that is said to have been accelerated by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ The interpretation of these conflicts depends on the – sometimes implicit – assumption that formerly, in an often unspecified epoch in the past, relations between farmers and herdsmen could be conceived of in terms of symbiosis – a relationship based on mutual dependence and mutual advantage with implied complementarity in the ecological and economic spheres.⁵

Such observations have been made with respect to the Mossi farmers and Fulbe herdsmen of the Central Plateau in Burkina Faso. However, case material will be presented that suggests, at least with respect to the specific case of the Mossi and Fulbe, a different and, at some points even opposite, interpretation. First, it has been found that even though there are certain local settings⁶ in which relations between Mossi and Fulbe seem to be strained and conflict-ridden, there are others where these tensions seem almost absent, in spite of the fact that production systems equally tend to converge, and pressure on natural resources is no less. Second, if conflicts over natural resources are displayed on the public stage as conflicts opposing Fulbe *versus* Mossi, this does not necessarily call for the interpretation that relations between Mossi and Fulbe are deteriorating. It has indeed been found that mutual and publicly employed hostile discourse may go hand in hand with a multiplication of friendly dyadic relationships crossing the boundaries of the groups. It appears that conflicts over natural resources between Mossi and Fulbe may be staged as ethnic conflicts by the actors

⁴ S. Cissé, 'Sedentarization of nomadic pastoralists and "pastoralization" of cultivators in Mali', in *The Future of Pastoral Peoples*, Proceedings of a Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, 4–8 August 1980 (Ottawa, Ont., 1980), pp. 318–24; C. Frantz, 'Contraction and expansion in Nigerian bovine pastoralism', in T. Monod, *Pastoralism*, pp. 338–53; de Haan *et al.* 'Symbiosis'; J. J. Kessler and H. Breman, *L'Évolution des systèmes de production agro-pastorale par rapport au développement rural durable dans les pays d'Afrique Soudano-Sahélienne*, Document prepared for FAO, pp. 141–7; H. D. van de Mandele and M. Roëll, *Ressources Sahélo-Soudaniennes. Région du Baoulé: système transhumant* (Bamako, Wageningen: Projet de recherche pour l'utilisation rationnelle du gibier au Sahel, 1995), pp. 66–8; C. Rabot, 'Transferts de fertilité et gestion de terroirs. Quelques points de vue', *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Développement* (1990), pp. 27–8.

⁵ Cf. de Haan *et al.*, 'Symbiosis', p. 62.

⁶ The term 'local setting' refers to a setting where natural resources are shared by Mossi and Fulbe. It may be a village territory where both Mossi and Fulbe are inhabitants of that village (e.g. one or more Fulbe wards in a Mossi village), as it may also be the territory of a Mossi village without Fulbe inhabitants but where Fulbe from neighbouring villages use water, pastures and/or farm land.

involved to conceal quite different tensions, namely tensions caused by differentiation internal to the Mossi community which are thus externalised. Finally, historical data show that there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that strife over natural resources has become either more frequent or any different in substance since the beginning of the twentieth century, rendering the assumption of a previously existing symbiosis problematic.

The aim of the present article is twofold: first to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of relations between Mossi and Fulbe; and second, to answer tentatively the question why the, in our opinion simplistic, view, which conceives these relations as progressively deteriorating from an initial symbiotic situation, has succeeded in imposing itself as mainstream. The issue has some practical relevance, as mainstream views tend to inform and influence policy. With respect to Mossi–Fulbe relations, mainstream thinking implies the disappearance of the ‘utility’ of one group for the other. Policy-makers may overlook the still existing or recent tendencies that draw Mossi and Fulbe to one another, and thereby unwittingly reinforce ethnically divisive tendencies which equally exist.

Below, we first elaborate the mainstream interpretation of conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe. We then briefly present some of our case material with a first, superficial, interpretation. Next, some results from our studies in two different local settings, the villages Ziinoogo and Zincko, are further discussed. This analysis concludes with an alternative interpretation of the conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe, and an assessment of the diversity and complexity of the relations between the two groups. Finally, an attempt is made to ‘disentangle’ the reasons for the prevalence of the mainstream interpretation.

MAINSTREAM INTERPRETATIONS OF CONFLICTS BETWEEN MOSSI AND FULBE

On the Central Plateau of Burkina Faso, Fulbe settlements are interspersed among Mossi villages. The Mossi are by far the most numerous population group, with 82.5 per cent of the Plateau’s population.⁷ They are generally known as a farming population,

⁷ C. L. Delgado, *The Southern Fulani Farming System in Upper Volta: A Model for the Integration of Crop and Livestock Production in the West African Savannah*, African Rural Economy Paper no. 20 (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, 1979), p. 17.

practising a millet and sorghum based subsistence agriculture. The Mossi population is internally differentiated according to origin (Dogon, Fulse, Ninise), occupation (notably blacksmiths), and socio-political position (*nakombse*). Originally non-Mossi population groups were progressively incorporated in the Mossi kingdoms when, from the fifteenth century onwards, *nakombse*, migrating to the north from Gambaga in northern Ghana, imposed their political rule.⁸ Fulbe make up about 7 per cent of the Plateau's population,⁹ and cattle herding would, until recently, have been exclusively their domain.

In particular, the northern part of the Central Plateau, where our fieldwork took place, has long been a contact zone between Mossi and Fulbe. On the one hand, the Mossi kingdoms of Yatenga and Boussouma extended northward up to the territory controlled by Fulbe, notably the Djelgodji chieftaincies. On the other hand, Fulbe already lived in the northern Mossi kingdoms as early as the seventeenth century,¹⁰ and at some places their presence may even have preceded the arrival of the Mossi *nakombse*.¹¹

As already mentioned above, it is generally maintained that relations between Mossi and Fulbe on the Central Plateau are deteriorating, and have become increasingly characterised by conflict over natural resources.¹² Here, as in publications on the relations between Fulbe and other farming population groups in West Africa, a sometimes implicit assumption is the former existence of symbiotic relationships.¹³ Mossi and Fulbe are supposed to have complemented each other, first, in their exploitation of mutual exclusive ecological niches.¹⁴ During the

⁸ Benoit, *Nature Peul*, p. 34; E. P. Skinner, 'Labour migration and its relationship to socio-cultural change in Mossi society', *Africa* 30 (1960), p. 377.

⁹ Delgado, *Southern Fulani*, p. 17.

¹⁰ M. Izard, *Introduction à l'histoire des Royaumes Mossi*, vols. I and II. *Recherches Voltaïques*, Nos. 12–13 (Paris, 1970), p. 244.

¹¹ Benoit, *Nature Peul*, p. 40.

¹² Benoit, *Nature Peul*, p. 39; Delgado, *Southern Fulani*, pp. 125–6, Kessler *et al.*, *Evolution*, pp. 44–5; B. Lekanne dit Deprez, *Social Diversity, Intervention and Common Property Resources; Mossi Villages and Land Management (Burkina Faso)*, Paper presented at the Fifth Common Property Conference: Reinventing the Commons, 24–28 May 1995, Bodo, Norway, p. 9; J.-Y. Marchal, *Yatenga (Nord Haute-Volta): la dynamique d'un espace rural Soudano-Sahélien* (Paris, 1983), pp. 156–7; G. Serpantie, G. Mersadier, L. Tezenas du Montcel and Y. Mersadier, 'Transformations d'un système agropastoral Soudano-Sahélien (Bidi, Nord-Yatenga, Burkina Faso)', *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Développement* 20 (1988), p. 36. Except for the study by Delgado, which goes a long way, no other work looks in any detail at the relationships between Mossi and Fulbe. These are most often touched upon only indirectly.

¹³ E.g. Benoit, *Nature Peul*, p. 132; E. H. van Haften and F. J. R. van de Vijver, *Psychological Consequences of Environmental Degradation*, Publications de l'Antenne, no. 20 (Ouagadougou Wageningen: Antenne Sahélienne, 1995), p. 15; Lekanne, *Social Diversity*, p. 2.

¹⁴ A concept borrowed from F. Barth, *Process and Form in Social Life. Selected Essays of Fredrik Barth*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 181: '[Niches are] positions in a biotic food web, or, from man's point of view, potential sources of organic energy.'

rainy season, Fulbe herds grazed the non-cultivated pastures, which may have involved transhumance, while during the dry season herds also grazed the stubble of harvested fields, thus bringing the farmers the advantage of manuring in return. Second, economic complementarity would have existed because of the specialisation of each of the two groups in one sector of activities: agriculture *versus* livestock raising. Whatever cattle Mossi possessed would have been entrusted to Fulbe herdsmen, the latter receiving, in return for the herding, milk and a number of heifers. At the same time, exchange relationships permitted each group to complement its diet, through the barter of meat and milk for millet and sorghum.

The complementarity characteristic of symbiosis is now said to have disappeared. This is generally attributed to the extension of cultivated areas by Mossi – notably into the formerly sparsely cultivated bottom lands – under the combined pressure of population growth, cash cropping (mainly cotton and groundnut) and plough agriculture, thus restricting grazing areas and access to water resources and salt lands for Fulbe with their herds.¹⁵ Complementarity in the exploitation of natural resources has turned into competition. Next, a convergence of production systems has occurred. Both Fulbe and Moose are said to have turned increasingly into agro-pastoralists, combining agriculture and livestock raising. In fact, Fulbe had already taken up farming as early as the nineteenth century.¹⁶ If Mossi, who formerly did not own cattle or entrusted them to Fulbe, increasingly raise cattle themselves, this would constitute a major recent change on the Central Plateau. Benoit even suggests that it is one of the main causes of the destruction of complementarity and mutual dependence, and the ensuing polarisation of relations between Mossi and Fulbe.¹⁷ Mossi engagement in cattle raising would have been facilitated by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, as in particular during those periods the terms of trade for cattle with respect to millet and sorghum deteriorated and Fulbe were forced to sell relatively more animals in order to meet their subsistence needs in grains. Kessler and Breman observed that it was mainly farmers with cash at their disposal who were able to buy this livestock, and that certain farmers thus enlarged their herds enor-

¹⁵ M. Benoit, *Introduction à la géographie des aires pastorales soudaniennes de Haute-Volta* (Paris, 1977), p. 43; Benoit, *Nature Peul*, p. 39; Lekanne, *Social Diversity*, p. 2; Marchal, *Yatenga*, pp. 156–7. This extension of cultivated areas is said to have been accelerated by the extensification of farming practices, the latter caused, among other things, by the clearing of increasingly marginal land for farming.

¹⁶ G. Mersadier, 'Localité et village administratif: origines et conséquences d'une inadéquation', Paper, 1991.

¹⁷ Benoit, *Nature Peul*, p. 132.

mously.¹⁸ Marchal, for his part, maintained that, because they migrated to the south during the droughts, many Fulbe returned the cattle which had been entrusted to them to their Mossi owners.¹⁹ The majority of these cattle would not have been entrusted to other Fulbe remaining behind.

In a situation where pressure on natural resources is mounting,²⁰ and where the 'utility' of each ethnic group for the other is said to be disappearing as a consequence of the convergence of production systems, it seems plausible that conflicts over natural resources should come to follow ethnic lines of division,²¹ all the more so if one takes into account the relatively marginal position of Fulbe with respect to rights to land and other resources (in particular water) on the mostly Mossi-controlled village territories.²² At first sight, this seems also to be the case in one of our research villages, Ziinoogo, in the north-west of the province of Sanmatenga (department of Namissiguima). Conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe, mostly with respect to cattle entering fields and access to wells and pools, are an almost daily issue in village affairs. Both Mossi from Ziinoogo and Fulbe from two nearby settlements maintain that there were fewer conflicts in the past. Fulbe explain the increase in conflicts by referring to the saturation of space: extension of cultivated areas by Mossi and the fact that fields are nowadays more dispersed than before and increasingly situated in bottom lands, rendering access to pastures and water points more and more difficult: 'Mossi are people who destroy the *brousse*. Everywhere they cut trees to make their fields. They prevent us from having space and pastures for our cattle. But if there is no *brousse*, a Fulbe cannot live, the *brousse* is life,' a Fulbe elder explained. Both Mossi and Fulbe also maintain that, chiefs excepted, Mossi rarely owned cattle before the independence of Burkina Faso in 1960. Mossi interest in cattle is of recent date, and the fact that Mossi keep cattle at their compounds is, according to Fulbe, adding to the tension between the two groups, in particular because they reserve part of the crop residues from their fields for their own animals:

¹⁸ Kessler *et al.*, *Evolution*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Marchal, *Yatenga*, p. 582.

²⁰ Next to already mentioned factors, it should be added that the overall growth of cattle herds, for Fulbe as for Mossi, constitutes another important pressure (cf. for instance, Benoit, *Nature Peul*, p. 22).

²¹ Cf. also F. Barth, 'Enduring and emerging issues in the analysis of ethnicity', in H. Vermeulen and C. Govers (eds.), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity. Beyond 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries'* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 11–32.

²² Cf. M. Breusers, 'Conflict and Friendship: Changing Relations between Moose Farmers and Fulbe Herdsmen in a Context of Growing Land Scarcity', Paper presented at the European Social Science and History Conference, Noordwijkerhout, 9–11 May 1996.

When I was young, there were no problems between Mossi and Fulbe. We were invited by Mossi to come with our cattle on their harvested fields. Nowadays, there are more people and among them some ill-educated Mossi. Now it happens that Mossi either sell millet stalks or feed them to their own animals. (Fulbe elder)

According to Fulbe, the decreasing availability of pastures and stubble for their cattle is a major cause of conflicts. Whereas, in the past, cattle herds would leave their paddocks only early in the morning to go and graze, Fulbe nowadays regularly bring their animals to the pastures during the night, in particular towards the end of the rainy season. It has been ascertained that the main reason for this change has to be sought in the growing scarcity of pastures and the increasing competition among Fulbe over pastures. The same competition would be at play with respect to the access to stubble on harvested fields. Herdsmen would be in a hurry to have their cattle graze it and it was acknowledged that this hurry sometimes provoked accidents: 'There is a lack of food for our animals. And, who comes first is best served. Some of us are then in too much of a hurry. You know, it is not for nothing that our cattle sometimes enter the property of others' (Fulbe elder).

Mossi from Ziinoogo agree with Fulbe on two points: that relationships between the two groups had previously been better, and that Mossi have only recently started to own cattle. Although it is admitted that fields are more numerous and more scattered over the village territory than before, the idea of a scarcity of space is vigorously dismissed by Mossi:

The Fulbe can use the whole space between here and the next ward [some 7 kilometres away] to let their cattle graze, but that is not what they do. Each time they look for the grasses in between and near to the fields. And with their herds of often some hundred animals, accidents cannot but happen. We have a large *brousse*, and the only reason that there are problems is because the Fulbe want to provoke us. (Mossi elder)

Stories by Mossi about Fulbe who, sneakily and on purpose, let some of their cows graze in millet or sorghum fields are numerous. Still, despite this apparent disagreement between Mossi and Fulbe on causes, there seems to be much confirmation here as well for the thesis that growing pressure on natural resources combined with a convergence of production systems has put a strain on the relationships between the two ethnic groups.

It has to be stressed that the presentation up to this point has been based mainly on accounts, by both Mossi and Fulbe, which were expressed while other persons of 'their own group' were present and

which may rightly be referred to as ‘public’ or ‘frontstage’ discourse.²³ It will be shown below that the picture changes radically if privately expressed accounts are also considered. To conclude this section, a case of cattle herded by Fulbe entering a field sown by a Mossi is briefly presented, as much as possible according to the way in which it was publicly staged. In the next section, privately expressed comments on this particular case will be taken into account.

At the end of the 1994 rainy season, Charles, a Mossi farm head from Ziinoogo, spent the night near his millet and bean field, in order to chase away herds that might come and graze. He fell asleep and woke up only after cattle had already entered his field. As soon as the children who herded the animals noticed Charles they ran away. Charles followed the cattle to their paddock at the nearby Fulbe settlement. The next day, early in the morning, he went to see their owner, Yero, to inform him about the damage which the cattle had caused to his crops, and to settle the compensation. Several other men from Ziinoogo attended this gathering, among them the village’s *délégué*,²⁴ but one man from Ziinoogo, Ousmane, took the lead in this ‘judgement’. He said: ‘At first Yero denied that it was a herd that had entered the field and maintained that it had only been one cow. But after some talking back and forth, he admitted that it had been several animals and the affair was quickly settled.’ Ousmane at first demanded a sum of 25,000 CFA, to be paid by Yero to compensate for the damage to the crops. After some negotiating, the fine was finally set at only 6,500 CFA, to be paid within ten days. Charles himself said afterwards that he was satisfied with the outcome of this ‘judgement’. After twelve days the money had not yet been handed over and Charles visited Yero to ask for it. Yero said he had not yet succeeded in gathering the complete sum. He paid 6,000 CFA that day. Charles said a few months later: ‘There still remains 500 CFA to be paid, but I will not complain about it.’

An important aspect of such gatherings, where a Fulbe herdsman is ‘put to trial’ for his responsibility with respect to crop damage caused

²³ Cf. W. P. Murphy, ‘Creating the appearance of consensus in Mende political discourse’, *American Anthropologist* 92 (1990), pp. 24–41.

²⁴ From 1983 until 1987, the *délégué* elected by the villagers presided over the so-called CDR (Comité de Défense de la Révolution). He acted as the intermediary between villagers and the administration. During that period, it was formally prohibited for village chiefs to handle conflicts like those between Mossi and Fulbe. Sankara wanted to break the authority of the ‘feudal’ chieftainship. Only since Sankara was deposed by Compaoré in 1987 has the authority of village chiefs and other customary local responsables been gradually re-acknowledged by the administration, and nowadays they are again allowed to intervene in local jurisdiction and to act as intermediaries between villagers and administrative institutions.

by cattle, is the fact that the whole Mossi community is generally unanimous in condemning the Fulbe, and in demanding apologies and compensation. In the same way, a single and closed front is shown by Mossi when cattle herded by Fulbe are chased away from wells and pools during the dry season.

NEW FINDINGS

The invention of a symbiotic past

Two related questions are addressed here, namely, to what extent were relations between Mossi and Fulbe ‘symbiotic’ in the past, and if conflicts occurred, what were they about? Therefore, we will attempt a glimpse at the relations between the two groups during the colonial period. That this will be merely a glimpse is due to the fact that accounts by Mossi and Fulbe actors themselves of their past relationships seem to a large degree to be informed by their respective present-day interests, and do not give many clues for answering the questions posed here. Hence, our ‘reconstruction’ is based for the most part on only one source, namely, documents in the colonial archives of the former ‘Cercle de Kaya’. In general, these documents give little information on the relationships between Mossi and Fulbe, but with one exception, the records of the Kaya Customary Law Tribunals, which provide a relatively good overview of cases involving Mossi and Fulbe, and their respective frequencies between 1920 and 1950.

It also seems very likely that conflicts between Mossi (or other farming populations) and Fulbe before 1920 were no different. Indeed, Marchal presents several examples. He cites the commandant of Ouahigouya, who wrote:

A small incident has occurred on the border of the Cercle of Koury, between the Samos of that territory and a few Fulbe of the Cercle of Ouahigouya. A scuffle took place between some of them; one Samo and one Fulbe got killed. This affair arose after Fulbe herds caused damage in the Samos’ fields; also, one must not see in this incident any political problem, but simply a case which is the concern of indigenous jurisdictions... These quarrels, for that matter, between Fulbe and neighbouring Samos... are not rare. Undertaking frequent trips in these regions will be the safest means to prevent these natives from settling justice for themselves and to oblige them to come to see us to settle their disagreements. (1908)²⁵

Just as happens every year at this period, many disputes arise regarding the crops. A few scuffles break out among the natives, mainly between Fulbe and

²⁵ J.-Y. Marchal, *Chroniques d'un Cercle de l'A.O.F. Recueil d'Archives du Poste de Ouahigouya (Haute Volta), 1908–1941*, Travaux et Documents de l'ORSTOM, no. 125. (Paris, 1980), p. 28.

Mossi; the former leaving their cattle passing through the crops of the latter, who are little tolerant and ready to shoot arrows at the animals. Very severe orders have been issued and some punishments have been imposed, in order to halt these commotions. (May 1909)²⁶

Despite numerous daily disputes between the natives, in particular between Fulbe and Mossi about damage caused by herds, the state of mind of the populations has remained satisfactory. (August 1911)²⁷

What strikes one most here is the fact that such conflicts are presented as having been daily business. Later on, the archives of Kaya expressed a similar ordinariness with respect to conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe over crop damage caused by cattle. For example, for the years 1939–40, the commandant of Kaya commented on the functioning of indigenous justice:

There is nothing particular to report concerning justice of first instance. Criminality in the Cercle seems to have decreased this year. Crimes which have been recorded most are blows and injuries which entailed death unintentionally, scuffles between Fulbe and Mossi on the issue of destruction of crops, disputes between Mossi often after having drunk.²⁸

In 1949, reporting on a case of crops damaged by cattle, which had escalated and led to the murder of a Mossi by a Fulbe, the commandant noted: 'Both [Fulbe] deny having had the intention of killing, which is probably correct for these quarrels which end up by a few blows with sticks are frequent and in general don't have serious consequences.'²⁹ What the archives reveal then is not so much that relations between Mossi and Fulbe were better in the past, but rather that they were frequently accompanied by beatings and shootings. Next to the bare fact of the frequency of conflicts, it also appears that the competition over natural resources between cattle herding, an activity associated with Fulbe, and millet cultivation, associated with Mossi, is not of recent date either. In a case from 1938, where this time a Fulbe was killed by a Mossi, one Mossi witness stated:

Six days ago, in the morning, I went to our field and I found that damage had been caused by cattle. I went to fetch my brother T. at his field and took him with me to look at the damage. He then wanted to go to the Fulbe paddock. I told him: 'Don't go there. The Fulbe are looking for trouble because several times already we have told them to leave the village or else to take good care of their animals to prevent them from causing damage.' My brother did not listen to me and he went to the paddock. He came back.... While we were talking, A. [Fulbe] arrived, accompanied by his brother I. We told A.: 'We

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁸ Bilan de deux ans d'administration dans le Cercle de Kaya, Kaya 1940.

²⁹ Rapport à Monsieur le Procureur de la République, Kaya, le 14 November 1949.

already told you to leave this village where you are strangers or to keep your cattle well to prevent them from damaging the crops. We are going to see the chief of the Canton ... to submit a claim for compensation or to obtain from him that he makes you leave.' Then A. said: 'The cattle do not damage the millet, they fertilise the soil.' T. said: 'You will pay for the damage.' After which the fight started.³⁰

From an early date there is also the suggestion that Mossi fields impinge on tracks for Fulbe cattle, and, during the dry season, that problems arise over access to water resources. In 1927, for example, a fight between a Mossi and a Fulbe was brought to court, where the Mossi stated: 'I was cultivating my millet field, when a cattle herd led by the Fulbe passed across my property', to which the Fulbe responded: 'He wanted to prevent me from passing along with my cattle which were following a cattle track along his field. The cattle did not damage his crops.'³¹ Marchal cites the commandant of Ouhigouya in November 1911:³² 'We mention nevertheless that the Fulbe, who have kept us very busy during the whole rainy season, because of the pastures being more or less "captured" by the Mossi farmers, are harassing us now with complaints against the same Mossi who are forbidding herds access to their wells.'³³

From this short overview, it is clear that the tensions between Mossi and Fulbe during the colonial period, as they come to the fore from court records, were little different in content from those that are publicly displayed nowadays. Nor, very probably, was their frequency. As is also the case nowadays, it may be assumed that only a fraction of the conflicts ever reached the court in Kaya; in those days too, an attempt was first made to come to an agreement between the actors directly involved. If agreement was not reached, the case was brought before the Mossi village chief and the local Fulbe chief, and if a solution was still not found, the case was taken to the Canton chief. Only if the latter could not settle the conflict was it brought to the court in Kaya. This holds for so-called 'civil cases'; in 'criminal cases' where violence was involved, possibly with fatal casualties, the colonial administration could intervene directly. Moreover, it may be noted that because of the repressive nature of the colonial administration, the threshold towards the colonial court was probably higher than it is presently towards the administrative court.

In short, there is *no indication* that 'symbiotic' relations ever existed

³⁰ Procès-Verbal d'interrogatoire, 25 July 1938, Kaya.

³¹ Régistre Tribunal du Premier Degré 1923-7.

³² Marchal, *Croniques*, p. 52.

³³ Cf. also Régistre Tribunal de la Subdivision de Kaya, 1925.

between Mossi and Fulbe. From the earliest days of colonial rule, well before population growth and extension of cash crop areas had an impact, and well before the moment at which Mossi turned to keeping cattle themselves, reports exist of conflicts between the two groups. These conflicts were about issues which have not lost their relevance today, and which point to an existing competition over natural resources. The image of two ethnic groups exploiting mutually exclusive ecological niches in some far-away time may thus very well be just an illusion. One may wonder why, in a situation where pressure on natural resources was indisputably less than today, relations between Mossi and Fulbe were nevertheless characterised by conflict and competition. It may have been because Fulbe, as there were fewer fields, were relatively less ‘careful’ in herding their cattle. This relative ‘carelessness’ may also be explained by the fact that Fulbe at that time were less sedentary than today, practised more transhumance, and had less sustained contact with their Mossi neighbours. Today’s conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe, just as seems to have been the case in the past, may be an expression of competition over scarce natural resources, but as such they tell little about the professed end of complementarity between the two groups, or about the direction in which their relations might evolve.

The externalisation of tensions internal to the Mossi community

It is common knowledge that Mossi cattle owners on the Central Plateau regularly entrust their cattle to Fulbe herdsman. Whereas it was already very difficult, in the village Ziinoogo, to assess Mossi actors’ assets in goats and sheep, among other things because of the widely spread practice of entrusting them to kinsmen, it was even more difficult, if not impossible, to do so with respect to cattle. Indeed, although it was possible to discuss the issue of cattle in general terms and with reference to others, preferably not living in the village of Ziinoogo, silence tended to reign whenever questions were asked about an actor’s own assets in cattle, the one or two bulls possibly fattened at his compound excepted. Still, as fieldwork progressed and as it became possible to tie bits and pieces of information together, it appeared that most of the cattle owned by Mossi were entrusted to Fulbe. This entrustment took place within the framework of particular and institutionalised friendship relations called *zoodo*.³⁴ The basis of such

³⁴ Cf. also S. Lallemand, *Une Famille Mossi*, Recherches Voltaïques 17 (Ouagadougou, 1977), pp. 347–60.

friendship is trust between the two partners, and while cattle are very often an important element of the relationship, it extends well beyond the domain of cattle and also beyond purely economic exchanges. First, the entrustment of millet by Fulbe to their Mossi friends is a common practice. Shortly after the harvest, Fulbe who have the means to do so buy large quantities of millet and stock it at the compounds of their Mossi friends. In the course of the following year, they come to collect it little by little. Next, Fulbe may be involved in naming and marriage ceremonies³⁵ of, respectively, children and daughters of their Mossi friends, and thus build a kind of fictive kin relation with these Mossi. Finally, a friendship relation between a Mossi and a Fulbe may also go beyond the two initial partners, as the Fulbe can become a friend of the Mossi's 'house' and *vice versa*.³⁶

In their publicly employed discourse, Mossi who entrust cattle to Fulbe do not differ in any way from other Mossi. Fulbe are depicted as not to be trusted, likely to be thieves, physically weak, disrespectful of any authority and uncivilised 'people of the bush'. This public discourse furthermore contrasts millet with cattle. Mossi stress their identity as millet farmers, claiming that neither entrusting cattle to Fulbe nor keeping cattle at their compound constitutes part of their 'tradition' (*rogem mika*, lit.: 'what one finds at birth'). Cattle herded by a Fulbe that enter a millet field sown by a Mossi are generally commented on in terms of 'the house of the Fulbe entering and eating the house of the Mossi'. The opposition between cattle and millet equally comes to the fore when farm land is allocated by one Mossi to another. For instance, a man from a neighbouring village had asked permission to farm a plot on the territory of Ziinoogo. When an elder went to designate the place for this plot, he told the applicant, 'I prefer the well-being of men to that of animals, so you can choose the borders of your field according to your possibilities', thus expressing that the applicant was allowed to clear what he needed, for otherwise the grasses growing there would only benefit cattle.

Mossi who had entrusted their cattle to Fulbe even went as far, in public, as to strongly advise against entrusting animals to Fulbe, saying, for instance, that 'it would be better to eat your money than to entrust the cow you bought to a Fulbe, as there will always come a moment when the Fulbe comes to tell you that your cow is dead'. Comparing such public discourse with the fact that cattle are

³⁵ Fulbe are considered by Mossi to possess expert knowledge on matters of fertility.

³⁶ Cf. Breusers, *Conflict and Friendship*.

nevertheless entrusted to Fulbe, one obtains a rather schizophrenic image of Mossi cattle owners. An explanation is found when privately expressed comments – or what may be referred to as ‘backstage discourse’³⁷ – is taken into account. The above cited case between Charles and Yero was commented on in the following way by the eldest son of Ousmane, who had taken the lead in the settlement of this particular conflict, when I met him *outside* the village, in the provincial capital Kaya:

You know, not everyone in Ziinoogo is on bad terms with the Fulbe. Nor is it true that we in Ziinoogo have no cattle with Fulbe. It is just that we have to hide our cattle from the [others]. If they find out about our cattle they might curse us and our cattle would perish or our harvests might fail. ... If Fulbe come to let cattle drink at the pool of Ziinoogo, the people of Ziinoogo join together to chase the cattle away. Still, it happens that among those chasing the cattle, there are men who know very well that among the cattle they are chasing some belong to themselves. Nevertheless, they participate, as the others are very attentive: if they notice somebody who does not participate, they will think that person has cattle among the animals they are chasing and they might curse that person. With respect to damages to crops caused by cattle, things are similar. There too, we participate in chasing cattle away even when some of the animals are ours. Still, we do not really beat the animals, we try to simulate. Do you remember the affair between Yero and Charles? ... There were animals of my father in that herd. At the judgement, which took place the following morning, my father was among the first to demand a compensation of 25,000 CFA. He did so only because at such judgements it is important to do like the others, to show a common front with the village. The night following the judgement, Yero came to see my father secretly. My father paid him and told him: ‘Here you have my contribution.’³⁸

At the Mossi village, accumulated wealth is more or less exclusively constituted by cattle, for the most part entrusted to Fulbe herdsmen. While this entrustment practice may be partly explained by the fact that Mossi do not always have enough labour available to combine cattle herding with farming, that Fulbe are considered to be experienced and capable herdsmen, and/or that the herding of many cattle would possibly implicate taking up a pastoral way of life which is looked at with contempt in Mossi society, a much better understanding is obtained by taking into account that Mossi feel the need to hide their wealth from fellow-villagers.³⁹ Moreover, and

³⁷ Cf. Murphy, ‘Creating the appearance’.

³⁸ The Mossi cattle owner is expected to pay a sum proportional to the number of animals he owns in the herd.

³⁹ Cf. among others Frantz, ‘Contraction and expansion’, p. 342; M. M. Horowitz, ‘Ethnic boundary maintenance among pastoralists and farmers in the Western Sudan (Niger)’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 7 (1972), 105–14; M. M. Horowitz, ‘Herdsman and husbandman in

importantly, this also helps to understand better the particular way in which conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe are staged as well as the substance of these conflicts.

On the one hand, a Mossi is not supposed to try to find out what his fellow-villagers possess, and even if he has found out he is not supposed to talk about it. On the other hand, displaying one's wealth is equally not done and is rather dangerous because, by doing so, one would probably arouse another person's envy and risk being cursed. There is a Mossi proverb, 'a poor man has to have a heart', meaning that a poor man has to be envious, for otherwise he will not force himself 'to search [for his own wealth]' and he will not be respected by the wealthy either. Consequently, it has been ascertained, that if one does not hide one's wealth it will not be possible to get along with one's fellow-villagers.⁴⁰ Cattle, wealth *par excellence*, have thus 'naturally' to be hidden. The herds of Fulbe constitute a very appropriate hiding place, not only because Fulbe are experienced and capable herdsmen and because the entrustment offers them a number of advantages too (a heifer every three years, milk, a part of the sale price if the Mossi owner decides to sell an animal), but all the more so because they are generally esteemed to be reliable accomplices. Indeed, in spite of the hostile public discourse, employed by Mossi cattle owners as well, the latter stress that their secret is safe with Fulbe.⁴¹ As one Mossi cattle owner said, relations between the two groups are not what they seem at first sight:

We, Mossi and Fulbe, do insult one another, harshly even, but each knows of the other that these are only false insults, only words. In reality, we do understand one another very well. The insults serve to avoid arousing suspicion with the others.

A concern to maintain egalitarian relations in West African communities in general,⁴² or in Mossi communities in particular,⁴³ has been pointed out before. However, the findings presented above show that it is important not to confuse a community's rhetoric of egalitarianism

Niger: values and strategies', in Monod, *Pastoralism*, pp. 387–405; and Monod, *Pastoralism*, p. 148, for discussions on the issue of why populations of farmers entrust their cattle to herdsmen, cf. also Breusers, *Conflict and Friendship*.

⁴⁰ Compare also J. and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination. Studies in the Ethnographic Imagination* (Boulder, 1992), p. 138, who observe with respect to cattle owned by South African Tswana: 'Any display of stock wealth was believed to invite plunder and ritual attack.'

⁴¹ Cf. for more details, Breusers, *Conflict and Friendship*.

⁴² E.g. C. Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meat and Money. Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 65.

⁴³ E.g. J.-M. Kohler, *Activités agricoles et changements sociaux dans l'Ouest-Mossi* (Paris, 1971), pp. 69–70.

with a description of actual social relations.⁴⁴ Indeed, the success of some Mossi, especially in migration enterprises in the Ivory Coast and animal husbandry, and to a lesser extent in trade and agriculture, has entailed socio-economic differentiation, expressed mainly in cattle, a durable asset which is visible to all if kept at one's own compound. A 'pragmatic egalitarianism' would have been impossible to maintain, were it not possible to entrust the larger part of one's wealth to Fulbe. By 'hiding' cattle with Fulbe, ostentatious display of socio-economic difference is avoided; socio-economic differentiation is covered up. Mossi cattle owners are thus able 'to behave as if we were all equal here'.⁴⁵ The gatherings whereby a Fulbe herdsman is 'put to trial', to establish a fine to be paid for crop damage compensation, or the chasing of Fulbe herded cattle from water points by the Mossi village community as a whole, may be interpreted in terms of a ritualised affirmation of the Mossi community's boundary, i.e. 'the mask presented to the outside world'.⁴⁶ In this way, Mossi cattle owners stress their community membership. They indeed '[mask]... reality [thus] contributing to the maintenance of social relations in their customary form over the longer term'.⁴⁷ Lies and deception are thereby acknowledged devices to conceal the reality of intra-community differentiation, and inherent tensions become externalised.

These findings demonstrate that conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe as they are publicly staged can only be fully understood by taking into account differentiation within the Mossi community. What happens cannot be reduced simply to a conflict over scarce natural resources by two opposing ethnic groups. Underneath the publicly staged 'ethnic' conflicts, alliances exist which cross the boundaries of the ethnic groups. One might moreover hypothesise, regarding the fact that only since about 1960 have Mossi begun to accumulate cattle, that dyadic friendly relations between Mossi and Fulbe, involving the entrustment of cattle, have even multiplied. With respect to the mainstream interpretation of conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe, it may be further remarked that certain changes of production systems of both Mossi and Fulbe towards agro-pastoralism have not eradicated the specialisation of each group: cattle are mostly the domain of Fulbe, millet still mostly Mossi domain. In this sense, a mutual dependence continues to exist.

⁴⁴ Cf. also A. P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester, Sussex, 1985), p. 33.

⁴⁵ Cf. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, p. 33; this attitude may also help to explain the results of agricultural censuses, on the basis of which the large majority of Mossi farms are classified into one single category (cf., for instance, Ministère de l'Agriculture et des Ressources Animales 1996).

⁴⁶ Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, p. 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

The village of Zincko: a case of friendly coexistence

Research recently conducted in Zincko supports the above findings. Its purpose was to analyse changing relations between Mossi and Fulbe, due to increasing pressure on natural resources. The research consisted of two sub-studies, one particularly focusing on Fulbe,⁴⁸ the other on Mossi.⁴⁹ Zincko is a relatively large village in the province of Sanmatenga, some 30 kilometres to the west of Kaya (department of Mané). The village, as conceived of by its inhabitants, is composed of several wards, among which are the Fulbe wards of Kouibanka and Pasbaore. Administratively, however, the latter two do not belong to Zincko, but constitute a separate village. The Mossi population includes, among others, Yarsé⁵⁰ and blacksmiths, while Kouibanka and Pasbaore are inhabited by Fulbe and their former Rimaibé 'slaves'. The Fulbe maintain that they have decided to settle and to integrate cropping activities into their production system because of the growing pressure on natural resources.

The Fulbe situate their arrival at the village over nine generations back, and claim to have been there even before the Yarsé of Zincko. On their arrival, they asked for and were allocated land by the Mossi chief. The rights to land thus obtained were later in a certain sense officialised when the administration attributed to Kouibanka the status of village. No longer do the Fulbe seem to be perceived as strangers, and no problems regarding their control rights to land appear to exist. Just as at Ziinoogo, at Zincko too the relations between the two ethnic groups appeared to constitute a complex social web, which had developed during the many years that the two communities had been neighbours. In contrast to Ziinoogo, however, Mossi and Fulbe at Zincko explicitly emphasise the existence of friendly relations between them. Yarsé and Fulbe are thereby engaged in more intensive relations than other Mossi and Fulbe, because Yarsé and Fulbe have their religion, Islam, in

⁴⁸ E. S. Nederlof, *L'Agriculture et l'élevage: une étude sociologique sur le changement des relations entre Mossi et Peuhl à cause d'augmentation de la pression sur des ressources naturelles à Zincko (Burkina Faso)*, Antenne Sahélienne, 01 BP 5385 (Ouagadougou 01, Burkina Faso, 1996); E. S. Nederlof, *Une étude sociologique sur le système de production et l'organisation sociale chez les Peuhl de Zincko (Burkina Faso)* (Antenne Sahélienne, Ouagadougou, 1996).

⁴⁹ T. Ouedraogo, *La dynamique des relations entre Peuhl et Mossi: ses implications sur la gestion des ressources naturelles dans le village de Zincko (Département de Mané, Province de Sanmatenga, Burkina Faso)*, Rapport d'étude provisoire, Antenne Sahélienne, Ouagadougou, 1996.

⁵⁰ The Yarsé constitute a population group which once held an important part of caravan trade in the region. Nowadays, they are most often equated with 'Muslim traders'; see M. Izard, 'La politique extérieure d'un royaume africain: Le Yatenga au XIXe Siècle', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 22(3-4) (1982), 384; and Izard, *Gens du pouvoir, gens de la terre: les institutions politiques de l'ancien Royaume du Yatenga (Bassin de la Volta Blanche)* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 66.

common, which is an extremely important factor in their life. Mossi and Fulbe are also tied through kinship. Although inter-ethnic marriages are rare and although we did not encounter marriages between Fulbe women and Mossi men at Zincko, we did find some cases of a Mossi woman being married to a Fulbe man. Such marriages may take place, for instance, when a Fulbe chief benefits from the ‘gift’ of a woman by a Mossi chief.⁵¹ And not only, as mentioned above, may fictive kin relations be established between Mossi and Fulbe when the latter have been involved in naming or marriage ceremonies of the former, it also happens that a Mossi girl, named by a Fulbe, is later married to a Fulbe.

Inter-ethnic economic relations and dependencies are diverse. Although there is no longer a strict distinction, in the sense that Mossi are only farmers and Fulbe only herdsman, the former still concentrate on agriculture, the latter on animal husbandry. Here too, then, Mossi entrust cattle to Fulbe. It is thereby stressed that confidence between the two parties is essential. Again, transactions in cattle are surrounded by secrecy, as people prefer not to publicly display their assets. At the same time, a lively trade, in millet and milk among other things, could be observed between the two groups. Crop residues on fields of the Mossi are grazed by Fulbe cattle, while Mossi appreciate the livestock’s manure to achieve higher yields. Fulbe borrow land for farming from Mossi and *vice versa*, and money loans are also current practice, often paid off with millet or livestock. The friendly relations between the two ethnic groups thus clearly seem to be economically favourable to both parties, and to permit the enlargement of the resource base which can be exploited by each group. However, in recent years, as millet has become relatively more expensive compared to milk, and as crop residues nowadays are sometimes sold whereas manure is not commercialised, it has to be noted that the bargaining position of Fulbe seems to have weakened.

Still, all this does not mean that there are no conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe in Zincko. Here too, Fulbe cattle enter Mossi fields and damage crops (though such conflicts may also arise between two Mossi or between two Fulbe). It also happens that Fulbe accuse Mossi of sowing their fields too close to a cattle track. It is, however, generally believed that conflicts are settled in a satisfactory way, either locally with the involvement of village elders, or, if this fails, at the level of the

⁵¹ Cf. Breusers, *Conflict and Friendship*, for some details on the integration of Fulbe chiefs in the Mossi political structure.

department administration. Finally, it is important to note that, in Zincko, such conflicts were certainly not perceived as being a recent phenomenon, but much more as something that has existed for as long as one can remember.

Thus, the case material from both Ziinoogo and Zincko⁵² suggests that it would be all too easy to conclude that conflicts between Mossi and Fulbe, as they appear on the public stage, are to be understood as ethnic conflicts resulting from the growing competition over natural resources between the two groups. Surely, there exists an important conflict between animal husbandry and agriculture. As Mossi are involved in animal husbandry and as Fulbe engage in agriculture, it may be noted here that this conflict exists simultaneously at several levels: for instance, at the level of the single farm, of the compound, of the Mossi community and of the Fulbe community. Within a farm, livestock and agriculture compete for labour, and at the level of the village limited space and resources have to be allocated both to fields and to livestock. This suggests that conflicts which oppose Mossi and Fulbe constitute only one aspect of a much more complex issue. The fact that Mossi present themselves to the ‘outside world’ as millet farmers – and Fulbe, for that matter, as cattle herdsman – tends to overaccentuate the ethnic factor, thereby obscuring the fact that competition over scarce natural resources is not only, and possibly even not mostly, *between* ethnic groups, but, importantly, also within them. At the same time, friendly inter-ethnic relations are hidden from view.

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR CONFLICTING VIEWS

With regard to relations between farmers and herdsman in general, a plausible answer to the question as to why our findings conflict with mainstream thinking on the issue could of course be that different areas experience different problems (population density, cattle density, fertility, rainfall conditions). It should also be stressed that the extent to which the ethnic groups involved have had a ‘common’ history is probably of the utmost importance. In contrast to northern Benin or the northern Ivory Coast, for instance, where Fulbe contact with sedentary farmer populations is of relatively recent date,⁵³ the Central

⁵² Similar findings to those obtained in Zincko are also reported by N. Lenselink, *L'Agriculture et l'élevage; les Mossi et les Peulh. étude sociologique sur l'utilisation et la gestion du Terroir de Tanghin, dans le village de Tagalla*, Rapport des Etudiants 76 (Ouagadougou, 1995), who studied relations between Mossi and Fulbe in the village of Tagalla.

⁵³ Diallo, ‘Les Peuls’; Diallo, *Problèmes écologiques*; van Driel, ‘Rapports changeants’; cf. also de Haan *et al.*, ‘From symbiosis to polarization’?

Plateau of Burkina Faso – or at least large parts of it – has been shared by Mossi and Fulbe for several centuries.⁵⁴

With respect to the conflicting views on the relations between Mossi and Fulbe in particular, other reasons have to be sought. It is, however, very difficult to trace where the mainstream view regarding Mossi–Fulbe relations originated and which empirical material supports it, as there are not many studies on the relationships between the two groups.⁵⁵ It may be, then, that the mainstream view succeeded in imposing itself because of, on the one hand, the colonial legacy and anthropological research traditions, and, on the other hand, a particular conception of the nature of ethnic groups.

Ranger emphasises the role of colonialism in Africa in immobilising populations, re-enforcing ethnicity and imposing a greater rigidity of social definition.⁵⁶ Under colonial rule, people were to be “‘returned” to their [invented] tribal identities; ethnicity was to be “‘restored” as the basis of association and organisation’. The French, for instance, had decided very early, at the end of the nineteenth century, to administer their African colonies according to local custom, which made it necessary to set out extensive surveys to gather information on the ‘traditions’ of colonised populations.⁵⁷ For the colonised people to be administered according to local custom, it was necessary not only to investigate these customs, but to fix them in one way or another for the local administrators to dispose of a body of jurisprudence. Wooten suggests that, as the region was in the midst of turmoil and transformation at the moment colonial rule was imposed, a rigid set of customs was probably often hard to find, so that in some cases ‘tradition’ had to be invented.⁵⁸ By the same means colonialism also brought a re-reinforcement of ethnicity or even the invention of ethnic groups.⁵⁹

Anthropologists are nowadays accused of having for too long studied ‘cultures’ as if they constituted bounded entities for research.⁶⁰ They

⁵⁴ Cf. Izard, ‘Politique extérieure’; Izard, *Gens du Pouvoir*.

⁵⁵ As mentioned above, in Delgado, *Southern Fulani*, and also, to a lesser extent, Benoit, *Nature Peul*, both however focusing on Fulbe.

⁵⁶ T. Ranger, ‘The invention of tradition in colonial Africa’, in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 248–9.

⁵⁷ S. R. Wooten, ‘Colonial administration and the ethnography of the family in the French Soudan’, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 33, 3, (1993), 419–20; J. L. Amselle, *Logiques Métisses. Anthropologie de l’identité en Afrique et Ailleurs* (Paris, 1990), 238–9.

⁵⁸ Wooten, ‘Colonial administration’, pp. 427–8.

⁵⁹ Ranger, ‘Invention’, pp. 248–9; Amselle, *Logiques Métisses*, p. 22.

⁶⁰ Cf. T. H. Eriksen, ‘The cultural contexts of ethnic differences’, *Man*, 26, 1, (1991), 127–44; E. Tonkin, ‘West African ethnographic traditions’, in R. Fardon (ed.), *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 141.

are said to have contributed to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise,⁶¹ providing colonial administrators with what they desired, first by aspiring to coverage, i.e. to describing all African peoples, and, second, by focusing on systematisable features in their descriptions of cultures.⁶² It may be noted furthermore that French colonial administrators in particular were often at the same time ethnographers and received ethnographic training,⁶³ which entailed a particularly close relationship between anthropology and colonialism. The anthropological research tradition, then, has contributed to the widespread idea of one ethnic group being relatively isolated from another; to the idea that relationships between ethnic groups are 'poor' and 'single-stranded'. Thus, the way 'cultures' and 'ethnic groups' are conceptualised may already carry 'built-in' assumptions which suggest that where competition occurs over scarce natural resources, it will probably do so following ethnic lines of division. However, cultural and ethnic boundaries are not clear-cut, albeit they may appear as rather definite in public discourse.⁶⁴ In this respect it should be noted that 'invention of tradition' and 'reification of ethnic groups' have not been the projects solely of administrators and ethnographers. Tonkin, for instance, maintains that structural functionalist anthropologists' informants shared the researchers' concern to represent their society as structured and as ethnically distinct and different.⁶⁵ It has been widely accepted by both historians and anthropologists that what people present as ancient, 'traditional' practices can very well be invented, and that the novelty of certain practices tends to be disguised.⁶⁶ Regarding relations between ethnic groups, there is every reason to take Barth's advice to heart:⁶⁷

We need to recognise that the dichotomized cultural differences thus produced are vastly overstated in ethnic discourse, and so we can relegate the more pernicious myths of deep cultural cleavages to the category where they belong: as formative myths that sustain a social organisation of difference, but not as descriptions of the actual distribution of cultural stuff.

⁶¹ J. Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology makes its Object* (New York, 1983), p. 17.

⁶² Tonkin, 'Ethnographic traditions', p. 141.

⁶³ Wooten, 'Colonial administration', pp. 419–20.

⁶⁴ Cf. A. P. Cohen, 'Boundaries of consciousness, consciousness of boundaries. Critical questions for anthropology', in Vermeulen and Govers, *The Anthropology of Ethnicity*, pp. 59–80.

⁶⁵ Tonkin, 'Ethnographic traditions', p. 141.

⁶⁶ S. Hawkins, 'Disguising chiefs and God as history: questions on the acephalousness of LoDagaa politics and religion', *Africa* 66, 2 (1996), 202.

⁶⁷ Barth, 'Enduring and emerging issues', p. 30.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Mossi farmers and Fulbe herdsmen have lived together for a long time on the Central Plateau of Burkina Faso. Despite the fact that there are numerous examples of peaceful existence, there seems little doubt that there are and always have been conflicts between these two groups. We have questioned in this article the 'mainstream' interpretation of such conflicts which argues that, due to increasing competition for the natural resource base, tensions between the groups have been increasing. The underlying assumption of the 'mainstream' interpretation is that this is a rather new phenomenon, implying that we are leaving a period when there was a symbiosis between the two ethnic groups, and have now arrived in a period where things can only get worse. There is no reason to assume that competition for the natural resource base will decrease. On the contrary, and if this is the message that policy-makers receive, there is reason to develop policies which can be described as 'conflict-reducing'.

Little observes that following a line of reasoning which emphasises inter-group rather than intra-group differences and conflicts, policies might be suggested that further differentiate farmer and herder groups (e.g. a zonal policy not permitting cultivation above a certain latitude, as has been proposed in Niger). He concludes that solutions to land use conflicts are no less straightforward than are the causes for these conflicts. ... [They] must be perceived in a historical context and should be evaluated at several different levels, where potentially conflicting interests ... exist.⁶⁸

Bonfils for his part calls for a general stabling of livestock and for the end of extensive cattle herding, in order to realise an intensification of land use practice.⁶⁹ Like many others before him,⁷⁰ he supports a turn towards mixed farming by both farmers and herdsmen. This would mean focusing development efforts on the integration of agriculture and animal husbandry at farm level, with the introduction of ploughs, insertion of fodder crops into the cropping cycles, and increase of manure production. Such policy runs the risk of disregarding the fact that agriculture and animal husbandry are also, and significantly, articulated at the level of ethnic groups – as is obviously the case on the

⁶⁸ P. D. Little, 'Land use conflicts in the agricultural/pastoral borderlands: the case of Kenya', in P. D. Little and M. M. Horowitz (eds.), *Lands at Risk in the Third World* (Boulder, CO, (1987), 195, 207.

⁶⁹ Bonfils (1987).

⁷⁰ Cf. E. Landais and P. Lhoste, 'L'Association Agriculture-Elevage en Afrique intertropicale: un mythe techniciste confronté aux réalités du terrain', *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 26, 1–2 (1990), 217–35.

Central Plateau. One may wonder whether it would not be wiser and more promising, in terms of results to be expected, for policy to start explicitly from this articulation, and in particular from the friendly inter-ethnic relations involved.

Delgado pointed out almost twenty years ago that recognition of the diversity of relations between Mossi and Fulbe, and a linking up with their strong points, may constitute the basis for an economically promising policy. He made a case against policy supporting a transition to mixed farming for the particular case of the Tenkodogo region in Burkina Faso, also populated by Mossi and Fulbe. Instead, he proposed to strengthen each ethnic group in its specialisation, respectively agriculture and livestock. In doing so, he stressed the need to bolster the cattle entrusting system, existing in 'friendly' relations between the communities, with specific policy measures. He also suggested measures to increase the returns to herdsmen for entrusted cattle, to encourage the use of manure on Mossi vegetable gardens, and to improve herder access to purchased food grains. Thus, the advantages of the integration of crop and livestock production might be retained.⁷¹

In any event, when formulating and implementing policies, it will always be important to critically review the 'mainstream' interpretation. This is what we have attempted to do in this article, and we have come to the conclusion that we must differ from a number of essential underlying assumptions and observations of the 'mainstream' interpretation. We realise that we do so on the basis of a number of case studies. However, we argue that these findings give reason to seriously question the 'mainstream' interpretation of conflicts between herdsmen and farmers. First, we have shown that the notion of a former symbiosis between farmers and herdsmen on the Central Plateau is questionable. Archival evidence suggests that there has always been conflicts between herdsmen and farmers. But then there have also been conflicts within the groups themselves.

With careful evaluation it soon becomes clear that it is too simple to suggest a dichotomy on the basis of ethnic groups, and to assume that they have merely evolved on opposing sides considering the utilisation of natural resources. At face value, perhaps, that may be the case, but this would be a rather superficial interpretation of reality. Despite the fact that in earlier times Mossi were considered as farmers and Fulbe as herdsmen, this is no longer strictly speaking the case. We do agree

⁷¹ Delgado, *Southern Fulani*, pp. 124–32.

that both livestock and cropping activities compete for the same resources, but this cannot be translated into competition on ethnic lines, due to the uniformisation of production systems and other existing relations. While there do exist relationships which are in conflict, equally or even more important, there are relationships through friendship, kinship and religion. The social and economic networks between Mossi and Fulbe have become increasingly complex. As their interests are so interlinked, each has reason to be interested in the well-being and functioning of the other. This is well known in the villages, but often, due to social and cultural reasons, not acknowledged in public. One could argue that due to increasing pressure on the natural resource base, mutual interests between herdsmen and farmers have increased.

Why then, has the ‘mainstream’ interpretation of conflicts between herdsmen and farmers developed? We think a number of reasons are responsible for this. First, it appears to provide a rather obvious and clear explanation for some of the conflicts that have arisen. There are two main ethnic groups, both eager to use the same resource base, and hence one could expect conflicts along ethnic lines. Second, little attention has been given to the history of the relations between the two groups. The history of relations between farmers and herdsmen may differ importantly from one region in West Africa to another. In each case the local setting has to be taken into consideration. Finally, we also argue that scientific disciplinary traditions may have played a role in the creation of ‘mainstream’ thinking.