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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHEN THE RIFLE REPLACES THE SICKLE, PEASANT MUTATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF CONFLICTS IN CENTRAL MALI

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to examine the relationship between the peasantry and armed groups during conflicts in the Dogon region of central Mali. The study highlights, on the one hand, the contexts in which armed conflicts occur and, on the other hand, the socio-economic relationships between populations and armed groups. Thus, these conflicts are initially perceived as a source of despair and destruction of the socio-economic activities necessary for the survival of peasants. Secondly, the conflicts, through attacks on the population, the burning of entire villages, ripe fields and crops, and the prohibition of agricultural activities, have broken the dynamics of the region's rural economy. However, the relationship between armed groups and rural populations is also evolving from normative sharing to economic and social exploitation.

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INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of armed conflicts has not left the academic and institutional world indifferent. Conflict resolution institutions and institutions dedicated to research and publications on various aspects of conflict resolution have proliferated throughout the world (Rashid & Niang, 2021). Several studies have been conducted on the typology of conflicts, their causes and consequences, and their manifestations (Hoeffler, 2004; N'Dimina-Mougala, 2007; Tratnjek and Guerre, 2013; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2019, Soré et al, 2021). However, one of the main limitations of these studies is that they focus more on the causes and consequences of conflicts, neglecting the contexts that produce them (Rashid & Niang, 2021). While peace and security issues are acute around the world, it is clear that they do not arise uniformly or with the same challenges in all areas. The complexity of the issue can be seen in attacks, violent demonstrations, the actors involved and their demands, etc. Depending on the context, in some regions, these acts are classified as terrorist acts, social and political demands such as demands for independence (in Mali, Ethiopia, Senegal, etc.), etc. In other cases, the opposition is classified as civil war (Rwanda), armed conflict (Mali), etc. The common denominator in these situations is the use of violence as a means of protest. However, they are also classified differently depending on the actors involved, their location, the type of negotiations, their mode of operation, and the means used. When it comes to Africa, there is a wealth of literature on conflicts. This continent is characterized as a theater of conflict and emergency situations due to armed conflicts (Hugon, 2001). This conclusion is based on the number of countries in conflict, the number of deaths,

etc. According to Hugon (2001), the 11 countries¹ in conflict on this continent recorded between 3.8 and 8.8 million deaths, or 2.4 to 4.3% of their population, estimated at 155 million inhabitants in the 1990. A recent study by the University of Hamburg's "Research on the Causes of War" working group, published in 2020, concluded that Africa is the region of the world most affected by armed conflict. This conclusion is reinforced by the findings of another study by the Center for Strategic Studies in Africa, which estimates that 16 countries are currently in conflict. This study links the existence of armed conflicts in Africa to the inability of African political systems to accommodate participation, dissent, and power sharing. These discourses do not highlight the contexts that produce conflicts, nor do they pay enough attention to what is happening on the ground during periods of conflict, both economically and socially. Most often, socio-economic studies of conflicts focus on the consequences (deaths, financial costs, arms and drug trafficking, etc.). While these consequences are real and worrying, the contexts that produce these conflicts deserve more attention in studies on conflict and peacebuilding. These contexts offer one of the keys to a better understanding of conflicts and peacebuilding processes. It is therefore important to know what are the structural reasons why armed conflicts arise against the peasantry?. The approach favored in this research is inductive. The choice of this approach is justified by the fact that in the collection of data, our initial research question serves as a starting point and is gradually developed as the research progresses. This empirical study involved s with residents, displaced persons, former hostages, herders, farmers,

¹ Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rwanda, former Zaire, Congo

traders, and non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders during unstructured interviews and field observations conducted between October 2021 and January 2022. The research method used was a case study, and the case considered was that of Bandiagara.

Context, study area, and data collection: This article is based on a case study research project focusing on the Mopti region. However, here we focus on the case of the Dogon Country, which plays an important role in the local economy of the region.

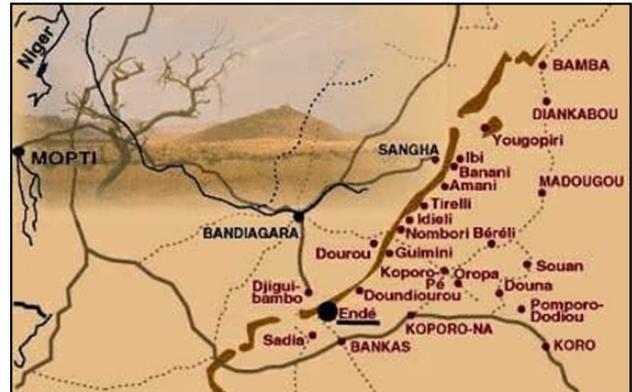
Structure of the local economy in Bandiagara: The economy of the Bandiagara district is based mainly on agriculture, crafts, trade, and tourism. Agricultural activities mainly involve cereal crops, cash crops, and market gardening. The main cereal crops are millet, sorghum, and fonio. Cash crops include peanuts, shallots, wandzou, cowpeas, and sesame. The tubers are potatoes, cassava, and sweet potatoes. Practiced almost throughout the plateau, market gardening mainly involves shallots, which are the cash crop par excellence.

Annually, the number of production cycles can reach three, but two cycles are most common. This activity provides the population with significant income, enabling them to improve their food security. Other market garden crops include tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, cabbage, beets, peppers, eggplant, etc. Livestock farming, which is traditional and exclusive, is not very developed in the district due to the very rugged nature of the surrounding terrain. The species raised are cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and poultry. Practiced in a traditional manner, crafts combine informal subsistence and survival activities with semi-commercial activities, including tanning, masonry, pottery, mechanics, jewelry making, metalwork, dyeing, etc. Due to its location in the heart of the Dogon Country, Bandiagara's economy is also based on the tertiary sector, particularly trade and tourism, which has unfortunately been very agrarian for the past decade. However, trade is highly developed and is mainly dominated by local agricultural products (processed or unprocessed shallots pass through Bandiagara), manufactured goods, wild foods, forest products, fishery products, handicrafts, etc. In terms of handicraft production, bogolan made in Bandiagara is highly prized in Bamako, Kayes, and other European, American, and Asian cities. The Bandiagara market is important for the sale of agricultural, livestock, and handicraft products. The informal sector, which employs many women, is involved in retail trade.

In addition, the urban municipality has a twice-weekly market (Monday and Friday). These markets are very busy. The market is managed and governed directly by the municipality. The main market in the district is Bandiagara (the district capital). Secondary markets include Kendié, Dialo, Ningari, Borko, Kani, Sangha, Dourou, Goundaka, etc. These markets interact with each other on the one hand and with regional and international markets on the other. Imports mainly consist of rice and fish, mainly from Mopti, millet from Koro and Bankass, and various items from Bamako, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. Shallots are almost exclusively an export product. This raises the issue of the economic dependence of the population on this production.

Data collection: Data was collected in several localities in the Dogon Country over a period of four (4) months through observations and unstructured interviews in the field. As part of the interviews, we surveyed a total of more than 120 respondents, including farmers, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, members of armed self-defense groups (Dana- Ambassagou), former hostages, traders, herders, artisans, and teachers. The method used in the study is that of a case study. We considered the case of the Dogon Country as a socio-political and secular arena (Olivier de Sardan 1998), the understanding of which can provide valuable insights into conflict prevention in Mali, but also into peacebuilding. In choosing the locations, we gave priority to those that had suffered severe attacks. We ended up collecting data in six (6) locations in the Dogon Country (Bandiagara, Doucoubo, Degumberé, Doundiourou, N'Djombo Leye, and Bankass). Given the sensitivity of the subject, we first had to spend about two (2) months observing the situation on the

ground in order to get closer to the actors, to understand the realities experienced by the different communities and try to interpret their behaviors, actions, living conditions, and the economic interests that bind them or divide them, and to build trust with these actors in order to benefit from their collaboration.



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Figure 1. Presentation of the study area

Divergences and shifts in the conflict: For most Malians, the conflict in which Mali finds itself was initially a matter of Tuareg separatists through the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). However, the general opinion expressed on the ground reflects a generalization that we find simplistic, even reductive, in terms of explaining this conflict, which is ongoing, changing in form and demands, but above all spreading gradually across the entire territory.

While the population seems to link the origin of the conflict to the return of Tuaregs from Libya in 2012 and the MNLA's demand for independence, opinions on the ground attribute the shift of the conflict to the Mopti region to the MNLA's alliance with other armed groups due to its powerlessness. During this research, we felt it was important to understand the local population's general opinion on the conflict in Mali by asking the following question: "What can you tell us about the conflict in Mali?" The open-ended nature of this question was deliberate and, in our view, should allow us to gather as much information as possible. Despite the diversity of responses, *the return of Tuaregs from Libya, the MNLA's powerlessness, its association with jihadists, France's assistance, etc. are recurring themes.* On this subject, a former hostage living in Bandiagara told us:

"At first, it only concerned the northern regions (Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal). It was a group of Tuaregs from Libya who had enough heavy weapons and were demanding autonomy, and that was the starting point of the conflict we are currently experiencing. In addition, it should be noted that there are also many other actors involved, such as the Salafist group, which are jihadists, Westerners (particularly France), and many other problems such as social (inter-ethnic), economic, and even political issues that have brought us to where we are today."

Aware of its powerlessness, the MNLA has forged alliances to assert its supremacy and achieve its goal; this is how the relationship between the MNLA and other armed groups on the ground is described. For example, one teacher states:

"(...) as the MNLA group was powerless to fight the Malian army in the north, it called on another group known as Salafists for a departure (Salafist-jihadists) who came from Algeria. The jihadists came from two groups solicited by the MNLA: Mohamed Ould Oumaha's Modiao-Dine group and Yad-agaly's Ansar Dine group. These two groups were initially based between Mali and Algeria and were involved in businesses such as car, drug, and arms trafficking."

This feeling of the MNLA's powerlessness seems to be shared by Malian public opinion. However, it is clear that the MNLA's struggle was for independence from the outset. So, the questions that arise are how a group described as powerless against the armed defense forces

dared to make such a claim. Who did it rely on to carry out its (military) operations and achieve its goal? What proposal did the MNLA make to its allies to get them to rally to its cause?

While it is difficult to answer these questions, the evolution of the relationship between the MNLA and its allies reveals what was left unsaid in the agreements. It would appear that the fundamental deal proposed by the MNLA to its initial allies (MUJAO-Dine and Ansar-Dine) was the introduction of Sharia law once the regions of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu had been conquered. This deal was accepted, but it would not last, according to a former hostage and resident of Bankass:

"(...) the MNLA lied to the other two groups, telling them that they must remain united to conquer the north because the charter of the Muslim religion is not respected in the three regions (Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal). But the MNLA's ultimate goal was to conquer these regions, which it calls 'Azawad'. When the other two groups (MUJAO-Dine and Ansar-Dine) realized what the MNLA was up to, they gave up on the conquest. That was the beginning of a conflict between the MNLA and the other two groups."

The MNLA-MUJAO-Dine-Ansar Dine coalition will quickly turn into a conflict of interests. The question that needs to be asked is: what significant changes along the way justified a split that turned allies into adversaries to be defeated at all costs? Similarly, what justifies such competition between armed groups? What is so important about this territory? Opinions differ and are not sufficiently reconcilable. For some, it is a question of independence, while others are fighting in the name of religion and the establishment of "sharia law"; not to mention the economic stakes: control of local resources (Grosclaude et al, 2014). Thus, the MNLA lost ground to the Mujao-Dine and Ansar-Dine groups between 2012 and 2013. These armed groups quickly became a nuisance, not only because of their violent practices, but also because of their rhetoric focused on religion, injustice, and opposition to the West. Paradoxically, they became even more of a nuisance by attacking the symbols of the religion in whose name they claimed to be fighting, as well as the symbols of the state and the administration. Once these two-armed groups (jihadists) had the northern regions (Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal) under their control, they threatened to march on Bamako via the central region of Mopti. The priority was therefore to stop them, but also to neutralize them and thus enable Mali to regain control of its entire territory. This required the intervention of the French army. The following account by a teacher gives an insight into the French intervention at the time:

"An appeal was made to France to dislodge the jihadist groups in the north. This intervention led to a strengthening of the MNLA, which had abandoned the field to the jihadist groups. At the same time, Amadou Koufa's group emerged and the conflict took on new dimensions, to the point where we are now talking about inter-community conflicts."

This account reveals the proliferation and ramification of armed groups on the ground. Initially, the objective of the French intervention was to reconquer the entire Malian territory in general and the Kidal region in particular. However, upon its arrival, the central element, Kidal, remained unrecoverable. At the time, Kidal seemed to be of particular interest to France, to the point that the MNLA was considered a group or even a partner to be favored over the initial agreement with the Malian state, which was to recapture all of its territory (Sangare, 2016). The question that arises here is: why would a country like France renege on a deal that is so important for Mali in favor of an armed independence group such as the MNLA? It is true that it is difficult to answer this question, but since the French intervention in 2013, there has been a proliferation of armed groups on the ground and, above all, a shift in the conflict to other regions that had previously been spared. While the particularity of jihadist armed groups lies in their demands, their constitution, and their mode of operation, there is a strong interconnection between them on the ground. This is how a former hostage and a merchant described the jihadist groups:

It is also important to understand that jihadists are divided into several interconnected groups. For example, the regions of Gao, Timbuktu,

Mopti, and Bandiagara are controlled by Yad-agaly's Islamic Support Group (GIS), which is mainly composed of Arabs and Tuaregs. The Macina and Niono areas are controlled by another group called Katiba de Macina d'Amadou Koufa, and the Ségou region by Djamaratoul Al-Islamia. However, both Katiba and Djamaratoul Al-Islam are mainly composed of Fulani."

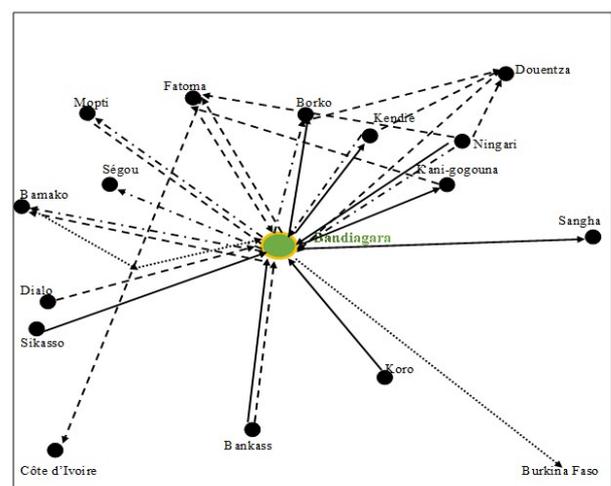
The conflict has therefore gradually spread from its original hotbed to other regions. Today, in addition to the reasons in the north, the Centre regions (Segou and Mopti) have become a dormitory for armed jihadist groups and self-defense groups. On the ground, this shift in the conflict is attributed in part to French intervention. This view is shared by a displaced person from Bandiagara Doundiourou.

"(...) they called on the French to remove the jihadists through their armed forces. o the French army pursued the jihadists to the center of the country, and that is how the people in the center began to feel the full force of the conflict."

Basically, this feeling that the conflict is distant is quite widespread on the ground. However, we go further by attributing the spread of the conflict to these regions to the approach taken by the Malian government and its partners in resolving the conflict. The following account, taken from an interview with a teacher from Bandiagara, is quite illustrative:

"It was the Salafists and Ansar Dine, jihadists excluded from the peace and reconciliation negotiations, who ended up in the center with Iyad Ag Ghaly at the head of the jihadist groups, because afterwards they split into several groups and continue to be a threat to the stability of the Ségou and Mopti regions."

Dogon Country, a strategic area left unguarded: The town of Bandiagara enjoys a strategic position in the Mopti region. It is located in the heart of Dogon Country and thus serves as a link between the main towns of the Mopti region in terms of trade. Bandiagara also provides a link between Mopti and other countries in the sub-region, such as Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, through the supply of livestock and basic necessities. Burkina Faso supplies the Bandiagara market with various items (clothes, soap, shoes, etc.). Livestock is sold at the markets in Fatoma and Douentza, which are the two largest livestock markets in the region, and is destined for Côte d'Ivoire. Bandiagara benefits from a twice-weekly market (Monday and Friday). This specific feature allows the city to play a key role in the distribution of products and also facilitates the movement of people and their goods. In terms of trade (distribution and supply), the Bandiagara market plays a central role, regulating the commercial circuit of the Mopti region's economy, as shown in Figure 2 below:



Authors, 2025

Figure 2. Bandiagara trade circuit

Analysis of this figure reveals that Bandiagara is a strategic hub in terms of the movement of goods and services, but also an important hub for internal and external interconnection in Mali. The Bandiagara circle has a strong presence of armed groups, particularly jihadists.

Effects of the conflict in the Dogon Country: Given that operations (attacks, clashes, kidnappings, etc.) take place in areas of socio-economic activity (villages, fields, weekly markets, etc.), it is important to analyze the effects of the conflict on the dynamics of the economy. The presence of armed groups on the ground is most often manifested by the repetitive use of violence. Behind this violence lie hidden interests and realities that are not always easy to understand. Given the links between security and political dynamics (Brück et al, 2013), understanding the relationship between armed groups and rural populations in a conflict context requires taking into account the specific nature of the realities. This is justified by the complexity of the realities of societies destroyed by conflict. While the armed conflict in Mali was initially confined to the regions of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, it gradually spread to the regions of Mopti and Ségou. Since then, the Bandiagara circle has been marked by the presence of armed groups (jihadists and self-defense militias) and attacks on the population. These recurring attacks characterize the daily life of the people in the Dogon Country. The attacks carried out by armed groups against the population have caused enormous damage: destruction of property, loss of life, kidnapping of people and animals, mass displacement of populations, sexual violence, poverty, food insecurity, lack of access to education due to school closures, economic exploitation, orphans (loss of parents and Koranic school teachers), disease, trauma to children, loss of human dignity, etc.

From the ideal of security to economic windfall: The following passage, shared with us by a restaurant owner in Ogossagou, Bankass district, reveals a security vacuum: "It was after the attack that the army came to the scene to assess the situation... (Bankass, October 2021)." Faced with this security vacuum, self-defense initiatives are often multiplying on the ground. It is in this spirit that many self-defense militias have proliferated in response to attacks by jihadist groups and unidentified armed men. As a producer from Degumberé, in the Bandiagara district, explains:

"When the population realized the seriousness of the situation, groups of Dogon hunters, known as dozos, rose up to fight these jihadists who were attacking people during their travels, but who were also imposing their principles that women should wear veils."

Self-defense militias owe their existence to the aspirations of the people for defense and security, which have become an imaginary "ideal" for many localities and their populations. However, these militias are not immune to the desire for economic gain and consequently extort money from the population under the guise of "war effort" or "security effort." Several sources confirm this practice by self-defense groups in Sévaré.

"With the militias, there is a tax on livestock, for example 2,000 CFA francs per large ruminant. Failure to pay this tax exposes the farmer to the confiscation of all his animals. Access to farmland is also conditional on the farmer paying a tax to radical armed groups (Sévaré, December 2021)."

Weakening of local economies: One link between conflicts and the destruction of the local economy is their negative impact on human capital formation. Endogenous growth theory concludes that human capital is the determining factor in growth. Moreover, the importance of human capital has been highlighted since the 18th century by Adam Smith (1776). Education and training are therefore the foundation of development through the formation of human capital. However, armed conflicts deal a fatal blow to education. With regard to schools, almost all schools within a five-kilometer radius of the city of Bandiagara are closed. With the conflicts, the people of the Dogon Country face enormous difficulties in ensuring their survival. They make a living from activities such as agriculture, small trade, livestock farming, and crafts. These activities are directly impacted by armed conflicts. Insecurity forces them to flee their fields, their livestock, etc., to find themselves in extreme situations. In the best-case scenarios, they become a burden on others, and in other cases, they lack shelter, healthcare, food, etc. Economically speaking, these populations, which were previously active, have become inactive. With clashes,

attacks, kidnappings of people and livestock, the abandonment of plots of land, following the ban on agricultural activities, and the destruction of weekly markets, armed conflicts weaken the commercial circuit and undermine the internal and external dynamics of the Dogon Country's economy.

Breakdown of interpersonal trust and deterioration of peace: This account from two restaurant owners in Bandiagara and Ogossagou, in the Bankass district, shows us that the armed conflicts in the Dogon Country have broken interpersonal trust and damaged peace and cohesion. "We are very affected by the conflicts and, in my opinion, social ties have deteriorated, as have peace and social cohesion. Before these conflicts, I was well known in Bankass for my restaurant business and had very good relationships with my suppliers and customers... These actions were very symbolic and strengthened our ties. But with the arrival of the jihadists, there is no longer any solidarity in the community."

"(...) Socially, people no longer collaborate as they did before; they no longer trust each other. People still do the same things, but everyone suspects everyone else of being an accomplice of the jihadists, a member of the Dana Ambassagou group, or part of the Fulani clan. The level of suspicion is so high that everyone avoids talking about the conflicts so as not to create problems for themselves."

The common thread running through these two narratives is the deterioration of peace and social cohesion and the breakdown of interpersonal trust between communities due to the proliferation of armed groups in the area and the violence to which communities are subjected on a daily basis.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to study the relationship between rural populations and armed groups under conflict in the Dogon Country, highlighting the contexts in which armed conflicts occur and the economic relations between the peasantry and armed groups. The armed conflict that Mali has been experiencing since 2012 has gradually shifted towards the Mopti region. As a result, the daily lives of the local populations of the Dogon Country are marked by violence and the forced abandonment of socio-economic activities in the field. Recurring attacks have forced people to abandon various markets and move to other towns and countries, leading to a deterioration of the commercial circuit. Rural populations perceive the conflict as the expression of shattered hopes, the destruction of the socio-economic activities necessary for their survival, and the risk of being killed at any moment. The armed conflict has disrupted the dynamics of the local economy in the Dogon Country through attacks on the population, the burning of entire villages, the burning of weekly markets, the burning of fields and crops, and the prohibition of agricultural activities. However, the relationship between armed groups and rural populations is in a state of constant negotiation, evolving from normative sharing to economic and social exploitation. As a result, economic structures have been disrupted, leading to a kind of unspoken redistribution of social and economic roles and statuses.

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