

Andreas Dafinger
**THE
Economics
OF Ethnic
Conflict**
THE CASE OF BURKINA FASO

WESTERN AFRICA SERIES

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OF Ethnic
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Acronyms

AVV	Aménagements des Vallées des Voltas (Volta Valley Improvement Scheme) Resettlement Programme in the 1970s
DANIDA	Danish development organization. Major financier of PDR and PIHVES
IGB	Institut Géographique du Burkina
IMF	The International Monetary Fund
MEE	Ministère de l'environnement et de l'eau
MVVN	Programme de mise en valeur de la vallée de Nouhao (Pastoral Zone). Development organization
PDR	Projet du développement rural. Development organization
PIHVES	Projet Hydraulique. Built 800 wells in the province over the past 10 years. Development organization
RAF	Réorganisation Agraire et Foncière. (Land reforms of 1984, 1991 and 1994 allowing private owner- ship in land)

Vernacular Expressions (in Bisa)

<i>bagotodo</i>	Diviner
<i>djatigi</i> (Dyoula)	Non-Fulbe host, often in town
<i>kiri</i>	Village chief
<i>kje</i>	An individual's hut within a compound
<i>naba</i>	King or chief. Head of a cluster of villages
<i>parza</i>	Household head
<i>tarabale</i>	(annual) sacrifice to the earth, carried out by the earthpriest, <i>taraza</i>
<i>taraza</i>	Earthpriest, descendant of the firstcomers
<i>zirobalen</i>	Sacrifice to the ancestors

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Dedication

To Aysher

1



Introduction

In the two decades since the end of the cold war the world has seen a profound change in the way conflicts are perceived. Conflicts appear smaller in scale, larger in number, and more local in scope. Having lost the support of a clear-cut world order, public perception and the media have had to find ways of explaining and categorizing these new conflicts, which were often no longer wars between nation states or national alliances. Conflicts are often perceived as directed against the state and most violence as insurgencies against the state's monopoly of warfare, power and jurisdiction. Wars are led by groups that are often, despite more appropriate terms, considered 'ethnic', and the new category, 'ethnic conflicts', has become a catch-all term to include most clashes on sub-national levels.

This book presents a series of case studies from Burkina Faso to show that this is not merely a process of global (re-)classification, but that the change of rhetoric has begun to reshape social relations on the ground, impact upon political strategies and affect local production patterns. As national and developmental organizations refute ethnic criteria, 'non-ethnicity' has become a key factor in defining civic entitlements and political participation. Ethnic groups, ethnically defined tensions and resource competition stand as synonyms for the pre-modern, under-developed and unruly and offer legitimate frames for political and judicial intervention. At the same time, local groups, elites and individuals appropriate the discourse over ethnicity when dealing with the state (and with development and other NGOs) in order to secure scarce resources under pressure from population growth and climate change.

The increased focus on ethnic conflicts, or rather, 'ethnicized' conflicts, is also indicative of wider interest in local systems of

political and economic production. Ethnicity is often seen as an impermeable barrier between open global networks and local relations (Chapters 2 and 4). The neoliberal turn in world economics since the 1980s has emphasized direct access of global economic networks to local resources, especially through the privatization of essential infrastructure, such as health, education and communication. States now increasingly draw their *raison d'être* from being agents of a global economic community, safeguarding principles of free trade and enterprise. Paradoxically, while the state is expected to withdraw from the public sector and give up its economic stakes in the former first and second world, it is, in most African countries, only now making its appearance on the local level as a political and legal authority, replacing local political systems.

It was only after the implementation of the new liberal agenda that many African states effectively pursued land privatization (Chapter 2) and conflict prevention (Chapter 5), and in the process they have, eventually, become significant actors at local level. None of the conflicts and local economic and social relations with which this book engages can be seen independently of the 'arriving state' and the process of global economic integration. Although defined by local practice and specific historical conditions, the processes described are the result of both national and international developments. A large number of the institutions which regenerate ethnic boundaries are the outcome of colonial and post-colonial politics and economics. World market prices affect local production and have an immediate effect on how conflicts are negotiated: damage involving cash crops, for example, is less likely to be tolerated than damage in the millet fields. The same is true for many other contested resources, such as education, health or political recognition, which had only been created or supplied by state and development organizations. In supplying these resources, organizations define legitimate user groups and modes of appropriation and also control any conflicts over these assets.

Struggles in the local arena are also exploited by local elites in their attempts to re-appropriate ethnicity and ethnicized conflicts. Social groups set up ethnic boundaries through local practice, build local economies on the ethnic division of labour and lead conflicts that are defined through the ethnic boundary. In almost all cases, these ethnic conflicts lack the violence that shapes public perception: ethnicity is foremost a means of controlling local political, social and economic relations and conflicts are an essential part of a local agropastoral economy. That is, however, no reason to underrate these conflicts or to romanticize ethnicity as a means of anti-state resistance.

The chapters that follow reveal the injustices inherent in this system and name the winners and the losers – and this book has not been written in defence of local practice. In fact, the ethnic division of labour and political authority – just as that along gender lines or the uneven distribution of authority according to age – is a source of profound injustice. Nor have local resource regimes delivered proof that they might master the imminent demographic and ecological changes.

The state's approach of turning a blind eye and officially disregarding and delegitimizing ethnicity is, however, not a real alternative, as I will argue. The discrimination that is produced in the local ethnicized discourse works its way into state and development organizations. As a result, we see local elites continuing to dominate the process of resource allocation through these institutions: ethnic criteria are concealed by formal parameters. The 'ethnicization of bureaucracy' (Chapter 5) turns out to be a more complex phenomenon than anthropological approaches to ethnicity and ethnic conflicts have previously assumed. Development organizations that draw on principles of civil society and states that pursue explicitly non-ethnic politics do not exclude certain marginal groups as a result of ethnically selective recruitment – the exclusion of marginal groups and positive discrimination of others.

The bureaucratic elites in fact think less along ethnic lines and define themselves more through an ideology of modernism. In their shared view they see themselves as spearheading the transformation process and tend to dissociate themselves from members of their own home communities, which are often constituted along ethnic criteria.

Still, most current models on ethnic politics – or politicized ethnicity – presume an implicit preference for members of the same ethnic group. They do not explain, however, *why* the administrative elites should privilege members of their own ethnic groups. Many of these theories explicitly argue within a constructivist framework; building on the premise that ethnicity is exploited in the struggle over collective goods and infrastructural resources supplied by the state (Cohen, 1974). However, this still risks letting primordialist assumptions in through the back door, when those same models invoke shared language, shared culture, sentiments of common origin, kinship and trust as presumed motives of ethnic nepotism (Geertz, 1963; 1994; Wimmer, 2004).

The reasons why some ethnic groups, such as the Fulbe herders in this book, often are (or perceive themselves to be) disadvantaged by the administration in terms of access to basic infrastructure are found elsewhere, as the following cases suggest. While the administration

does not necessarily perceive itself as representative of any ethnic group and rather tends to dissociate itself from ethnic fellowship, the state and its related agents ignore the fact that ethnic ascriptions are still viable categories in public discourse and local politics, and so allow for their continued, but concealed, persistence. In the local arena, ethnic relations remain strongly defined by criteria that have their roots in colonial practice: ethnic groups are ranked according to their degree of 'civilization', putting sedentary farmers over allegedly 'semi-nomadic' herders, principles of territorial organization over systems of selected resource control. Local perceptions of groups and practices as 'less or more civilized' show how the colonial rhetoric of ethnicity has entered the vernacular. While the administration may have established new ways of defining entitlement in accordance with a new global discourse of economic self-determination, such delineation persists as a means of inclusion and exclusion, of controlling access to economic, social and political resources between local groups.

This book approaches ethnically framed conflicts as occurrences of everyday life. It traces how ethnicity and ethnically framed conflict are at the heart of the local economy and analyses how these local conflicts are perceived and dealt with by national politics and international development practice. While state and development organizations tend to identify these tensions and conflicts as a competition over limited resources between socio-economic user groups, and regard them as obstacles to sustainable development and civil society formation, this book will take a different perspective and argue that the fight is less about the typical resources of an agropastoral economy, such as land and water, nor about modern state-supplied resources as others have argued (Asche, 1994; Cohen, 1981; Olivier de Sardan, 1988; Wimmer, 2004), but rather about political and social authority and control. Berry has already suggested that historically people, not land, were the scarce resource in Africa (Berry, 1993: 181). This book will show that despite the increasing pressure on the land, this claim still holds true in most local, national and global political contexts. At the same time, it becomes apparent that competition happens less between the groups than within the respective communities. The framing of conflicts as ethnic helps to conceal personal inter-ethnic ties, which, however, constitute an important resource. The concept of concealment of these political and economic relations across the ethnic divide is the central model and main argument of this book.

Scarce resources and scarcity as a resource

‘...les colonisateurs se sont transformés en assistants techniques;
 en fait, nous devrions dire qu’ils se sont transformés
 en assassins techniques’
*Thomas Sankara*¹

The small province of Boulgou, which is at the heart of this book, faces a chronic scarcity of resources. For its rural population, water and land are the most important concerns; during the dry season people in some remote settlements need to walk for hours to fetch water and the agricultural production constantly falls short of people’s demands: in dire years, the land barely yields half of what is considered a minimum. In response, Boulgou has seen an increasing number of national and international development projects over the past decades, attempting to improve access to existing resources and to provide new ones. This, needless to say, has strongly affected local resource use patterns and resource control regimes. The new agents have established themselves as major actors with vested political and economic interests.

Consequently, anthropology also finds itself operating in a field that is shaped by the interaction of local groups with state and development organizations and their respective ecological, economic and political trajectories. The fight over modern resources, as supplied by these new agents, is just as fierce as the struggle over natural resources. The cases reported in this book reveal that skills in dealing with administration and bureaucracy are as vital as knowledge about agricultural or pastoral production.

One line of anthropological reasoning argues that modern conflicts are largely about competition over these new pools of collective goods as supplied by the state. While this cannot be denied, approaches that focus on modern resources as causes for conflict largely tend to overlook the agency of local actors and local social institutions. Local populations are not simply users of natural resources and recipients of modern infrastructural resources; they constitute a source of political legitimacy and economic power. Even critical models in development anthropology often disregard the fact that the state and the development machine are competitors over social and political resources and

¹ ‘The colonizers have turned into technical assistants; actually, we should say that they have turned into technical assassins.’ At the 25th meeting of the Organization of African Unity, Addis Ababa, July 1987.

at the same time equitable actors in the local arena. The field we are looking at is equally defined by local elites, marginalized groups and members of the administrative and development complex alike.

Scarcity is Boulgou's Achilles' heel in more ways than one. On the one hand, it is an obvious source of constant hardship and insecurity, yet it is also the gateway for the array of interventionist projects and organizations on which the precarious local economy depends (Bierschenk and Elwert, 1988; Olivier de Sardan, 1988; Kremling, 2004: 224–79). Most organizations have focused on resource scarcity in the fight against poverty, or '*la lutte contre la pauvreté*' (UNDP, 2009), which they often see as the result of limited natural resources in combination with increasing population, inefficient resource use and inefficient management systems.

At the same time, resource scarcity has been identified as a principal cause of conflict. Most state-run programmes, development organizations and modernization projects operate on these or similar neo-Malthusian assumptions: that resources are objectively scarce and that they are becoming continuously sparser as populations increase. It is indeed hard to deny this argument's logic: when I arrived in Boulgou for the first time in fall 1994, the province had 350,000 people; as I write these lines, Boulgou is home to twice as many. Everybody I talk to readily confirms that access to land was so much easier 'then' and bush fields used to be 'so much closer'. There is always some lamenting when people reminisce about the past, but this one holds a grain of truth: people are running out of the land and the resources on which they depend.

Scarcity, however, is not merely a recent phenomenon, and not only an 'objective' problem, the consequence of a growing population running short of arable land. Scarcity is also politically induced and a prerequisite of political control: those who control access to land and other resources derive their power from precisely the fact that these resources are not abundant: controlling scarcity is a source of political and economic power. Interventionist 'relief' programmes which bring in (and consequently control) resources such as safe water, wells or educational, hygienic and health provisions, also 'restructure' local production systems in order to increase agricultural or pastoral output and to integrate local systems into a national and international framework. Privatization and economic restructuring invariably rank in the top five of international cure-all remedies (*ibid.*).

Are NGOs, in other words, Trojan horses (or technological assassins, in Sankara's more revolutionary terms, above)? Over-emphasizing the vested interests of development organizations in such a way may sound objectionable in the light of the factual shortage of and demand for

water and food – and neither would it do justice to the agency of the people. Moreover, as this book also shows, there is no reason to believe that current resource use patterns could have kept up with the imminent demographic and economic changes. Local practice may have been able to deal with resource distribution and provide social order over the past hundred years or more. It might well do so for a number of years to come. But there is no indication that the current arrangements will be able to tackle the challenges of the next generations. Land is running out, based on current population growth and present cultivation techniques. Moreover, the state and international development organizations have made their appearance, and the impact of global market forces on the local economy cannot be simply wished away. The question is how this imminent change is negotiated between the various stakeholders.

Anthropological research needs to acknowledge and scrutinize the fact that the state and its agents have not come to distribute free gifts, but appear on the scene as competitors over political, social, judicial and economic power. On the local level, the new agents hide their agenda of political, economic and social restructuring behind a screen of material relief (while, on a global stage, the political ambitions are openly discussed). With new competitors in the scramble for economic assets and political power, we also witness competition over new definitions of groups and over defining the nature of social relations: a new meta-conflict (Horowitz, 1991: 27). Local elites (landowners, religious and political authorities, land-holding household heads) and new agents (members of state bureaucracy and development administration) draw on different principles of group formation to secure followers, legitimize authority and to contest their rivals' claims, by devaluating other criteria of inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, infrastructural resources respond to the immediate needs of the local population, but on the other they are part and parcel of a redefinition of entitlements, which are no longer controlled by the local elites.

Before turning to questions of how local elites compete with national and international organizations in this field, we need to look at how resources are negotiated between the local elites and how resource conflicts are exploited by dominant local groups pursuing their own vested political and social interests. From the actors' point of view, most of these conflicts are framed in ethnic terms and the production and reproduction of ethnicity is a key element in this process. As this study will reveal, competition happens much less between the respective communities than within these groups. In the following sections, I will ask what issues are at stake and look at

the way rights and obligations are negotiated within each of the groups.

Land rights, resources and ethnic conflict

In answering these questions, this book does not have to venture into uncharted territory. Major scholars have explored land use patterns and described their relation to changing global conditions. Several authors (Bassett and Crummey, 1993; Berry, 1993; 2002; Downs and Reyna, 1988, and Moore, 1998) have elaborated extensively on the complexity of West African land rights and their social implications. They have contributed to what has become canonical knowledge in legal and developmental anthropology: the fact that land is the substance and language of social and political relations in agricultural African societies. Their works have furnished us with an anthropological toolbox, allowing us to show the impact (and often the inadequacy) of state-run 'restructuring programmes' and the resilience of local land regimes. They have also helped to emphasize the agency of individuals in manoeuvring between the spheres of local and national property regimes. The description of land rights in this book will confirm the complexity of local land tenure regimes, and the political ordering of social groups according to their differential degrees of relatedness, and access rights, to land. At the same time, however, the study highlights the fundamental dichotomy of landed and landless groups, which coincides with socio-economic and – most importantly in the present case – ethnic delineations.

This is where we need to go beyond the debate over changing land rights and look at the nexus of land and ethnicity. Ethnicity is not merely seen as a marker of differential access to landed resources; more importantly, ethnicity and ethnically framed conflicts are used to delineate a distinct social and economic sphere that is largely hidden from members of the ethnic group itself and helps to overcome the major restrictions that are part of kinship, i.e. intra-group economy.

A work that focuses on resource competition, conflicts and ethnicity, examining the question of how resource use is negotiated and shared along ethnically defined criteria, will eventually find itself in the company of a broad range of contributions to 'ethnic conflict'. The sheer number of publications on the topic is almost insurmountable as is the scope of conflicts that are more or less systematically labelled as 'ethnic'. Virtually unused in both the academic and non-academic world before the 1960s, the term 'ethnic conflict' has become synony-

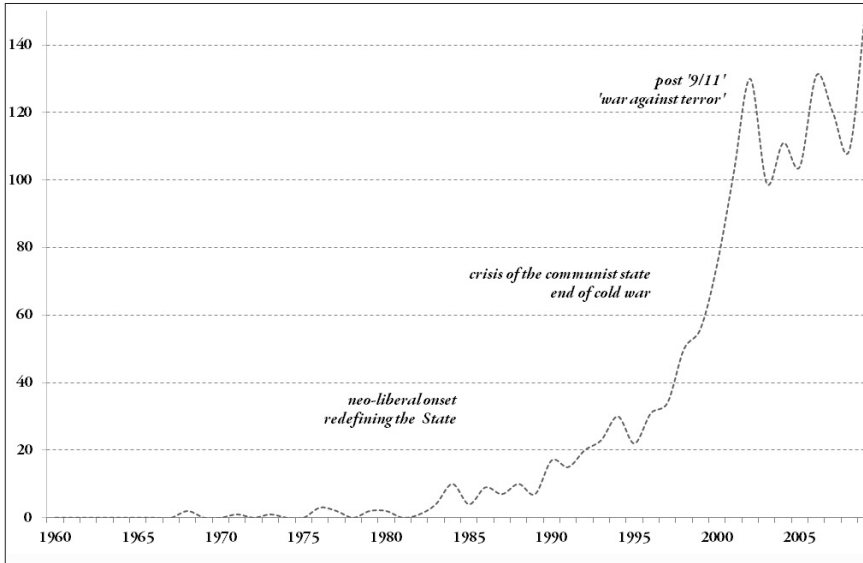


Figure 1 Books published on ethnic conflict by year of publication²

mous with almost any violent or non-violent clash below the nation state level – too broad to be of analytical value.

The Library of Congress Catalogue, the major repository of publications in the Anglophone world, lists fewer than 70 books on ethnic conflicts in the three decades before the end of the cold war, compared to almost 1,600 published in the 20 years after 1989. The social sciences were not alone in the field: in fact, only a small number of the books are scholarly works. Academic analysis of ethnic relations competes with diverging interpretations by public media and policy makers. Any anthropological study thus needs to delineate itself from common sense notions of ethnicity and ethnic conflict, but at the same time needs to incorporate these images into its analysis.

Global, mass-mediated notions of ethnicity, resource competition and conflict shape local relations and open new options for actors on the ground. In its analysis, this book leans on a tradition of critical development studies, reaching from Immanuel Wallerstein's world system model (e.g. Wallerstein; 1974; 2004a and b), James Scott's critical views of the homogenizing state machinery (Scott; 1998), to explicit criticism of development schemes as put forward by Ferguson

² Source: Library of Congress electronic catalogue. The search was carried out using the voyager database (z3950.loc.gov, Sep 06, 2011). Search for 'ethnic' + 'conflict' in book title or abstract. Search returned a total of 1641 titles published between 1900 and 2008. Wimmer (2004) has compiled and published a similar list, drawing on different sources and using a smaller dataset, however showing the same trajectory, with a pronounced increase on publications after the end of the cold war.

and Gupta (Ferguson and Gupta 1992; Gupta 1995). Tim Allen's works on the media's role in shaping a common sense understanding of local politics are a constant reminder that nothing in the periphery can be regarded independently of political processes in the centres of global power (Allen, Hudson and Seaton, 1996; Allen and Seaton, 1999).

I aim to answer to what extent the conflicts between Bisa farmers and Fulbe herders, described in this book, are ethnic conflicts in the sense of the politicized and mediatized image in global discourse. In doing so, I will address two distinct levels: on a local scale, conflicts are an integral part of social, political and economic relations. Relations between ethnic groups are marked by high intensity low-level conflicts, which are generally non-violent. Most of these tensions are an integral part of everyday relations and a number of social and economic institutions are located on the ethnic boundary building on these tensions; local elites often have a vested interest in maintaining a high frequency of these embedded low intensity conflicts.

On a second level, from the point of view of the nation state and international organizations, the 'ethnic' dimension of local relations and conflicts is a major obstacle to tenure security, state rule and the implementation of formal economic principles. Conflict avoidance, accordingly, is a major issue on the agenda of restructuring programmes. At the same time, administration and many development organizations attempt to establish a different reading of local relations and conflicts. Rather than viewing local relations as primarily ethnic, local tensions are seen as outcomes of resource competition. This enables governmental and non-governmental organizations to address the problem through relief programmes, delivering resources and redefining the boundaries of conflict parties as user groups – a process Ferguson (1990; 2006) identified as the 'anti-politics machine' of international development. In the end, all parties, the local elites and the new agents, emissaries of state and post-state led development compete over the nature of the conflict (Horowitz, 1991: 27).

The study of conflict

In current anthropological literature and beyond, 'conflict' is largely synonymous with violent conflict. This view marks a turn from earlier anthropological models of conflict from the 1950s onward that followed a more inclusive understanding (Aronoff, 1976; Gluckman, 1964; Goody, 1957; LeVine, 1961; Sahlins, 1961). Subsequent approaches became increasingly concerned with the causes and dynamics of violence in conflict (Chagnon, 1968; Ferguson and