

Camilla Toulmin *Land, Investment, and Migration: Thirty-five Years of Village Life in Mali*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

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Beyond the interplay of land, investment and migration over time in central Mali, this book tells the story of a special attachment to the place and people of one scholar's foundational fieldwork experience, Dlonguebougou (DBG) – which the author visited over 35 years. Its pages intertwine technical topics with personal reasons for writing, aiming to: 1) capture change over time; 2) capture the shift of values, technologies, climate, domestic structure and 'arrangements'; 3) screen the global question 'How to feed the world' through agricultural policies, irrigated / rain fed patterns, social justice and value for money; 4) explore the conditions under which collective solutions could be found to common problems (control of land, water, trees, grazing resources); 5) shed light on connections; 6) pay tribute to a debt towards the villagers. Indeed, one can feel a deep commitment and anger between the lines about land grabbing and political chaos. The narrative mobilises manifold sources (archives, satellite images and rainfall measures, ground-level interviews); patterns drawn from ecology, landscape approach, agrarian studies and anthropology; skills (two foreign researchers settled for two years, three Malian research assistants, an initial team under the direction of Jeremy Swift); as well as institutional and social conditions (grants and institutions, availability of the Malian peasants). Apart from its incredibly rich content organised into eight chapters, including boxes, pictures and figures, the book can also be read as a historical object, produced within a political era that has just ended under our eyes.

The first chapter introduces the village of DBG in central Mali and its people, and outlines the methods and aims of the book. The historical background, back to the kingdoms of Ghana in the late eleventh century and of Segou around 1710, is followed by descriptions over time and personal memories of the author, until the raids of jihadist groups today. While the range of crop–livestock systems were marked by the droughts of 1973–1974 during the author's first stay in 1980–1982, they are now under the attention of food aid agencies and large-scale plans of resettlement.

Chapter 2 traces the environment of DBG back to the large Sahara era, 12,000 years ago, in an ambitious historical overview, connecting domestic arrangements with regional political dynamics. Conquest, control, mobilisation, shift from slavery to forced labour status, colonial recruitment (Office du Niger irrigation scheme, dam of Markala...) and politics of settlement relate waves of migration to rainfall, taxation, military recruitment and forced labour demands. The present global crisis of governance is related to the explosion of conflicts in the northern part, their insurgent nature and the western military adventure in Lybie in 2011. In other words, history matters as much as geography, rainfall and climate do when it comes to understanding the present situation.

The third chapter, 'Farming landscape: soils, rainfall and crops', shows how the farming system of DBG fits within the wider landscape and how rainfall patterns have shifted since 1980. Indeed, from the 1980–82 average until 2016–2018, falls in millet yields and the collapse of millet harvests in village fields disrupted the farming cycle. The set of present constraints on the farming system makes a gloomy picture: increased pressure on grazing land, loss of soil fertility in village fields, large expansion in cultivated areas and the new sugar plantation further south triggered a large inflow of migrant farmers; the bush-field

fallow cycle shortened, announcing a further fall in productivity that a little inorganic fertiliser will not compensate. Climate scientists are not able to predict rainfall trends and patterns for the west African region as a whole. At DBG scale, the villagers cope with rainfall variability through longstanding strategies such as combining crops of different cycle length. What is at stake here is also how rainfall patterns, their variability and eventually their disruption, are dealt with by farmers in first place – and by scientists.

The sentence that serves as epigraph to the fourth chapter ('From abundance to scarcity'), 'The bush is finished', could be heard in many places throughout west Africa. As for DBG, the author answers the question, 'how could this great land abundance turn to scarcity in the space of 25 years ?' (actually over seven decades from 1952 until 2016) by tracking changes in land use around the village and exploring the reasons for the large increase in people coming into this area in search of farmland. The local changes in land-use are traced through a huge documentation combining aerial photographs, satellite images and ground-level interviews, and mobilising diverse backgrounds (key figure 4.9). This comes with a longitudinal picture of household growth and change in DBG (figure 5.3) and the analysis of the wealth holdings per household in 2016 (figure 6.17). Here, a linear discourse from abundance to scarcity is debugged, and legal and technical processes, as well as the consequences of political choices, are explained.

The fifth chapter, on 'People and domestic organization', refers to anthropological classics: avuncular relationships; uncertainty around successful child rearing testified by the names given to children; social positions of women and girls and how they have changed since 1980; jealousy between co-wives passed onto the children – the 'fadenya' – versus the harmonious relationship attributed to sons born of the same mother – 'badenya'. Similarly, the chapter may recall to those readers familiar with French rural works in the 1970s and 1980s, classical surveys on income and expenditure. Households are better equipped today, and no one is spinning cotton or cultivating fonio anymore, even though little has changed regarding responsibilities for cooking and fetching water and the amount of time and money spent in preparation for marriage. The main finding here is that households have no systematic pattern of growth and division: larger households provide better insurance against risks, and more labour, while allowing the combining of personal activities better than a simple household would. Large households with complex structures were maintained between 1980 and 2016, despite alleged progress in individualism and personal agricultural activities.

The sixth chapter, 'Investment and prosperity', elaborates on the strategies and innovations developed by farmers. Of current relevance for agricultural policies, are i) the sharp increase in goods in DBG in 35 years, the changes in scale and investment patterns of households and individuals and their distribution (p. 136), deconstructing prejudices about peasant stagnation that often justify their expropriation or political marginalisation; and ii) the lack of adapted and reliable data and methods, leading official statistics on poverty and GDP to substantially underestimate the performance of peasant agriculture. Detailed factual descriptions contrast with an assumption that has not convinced me, that 'fadenya' – see above – might contribute to investment booms and to wealth, through individualist behaviours and competition. I believe that this assumption mistakenly reduces the economy to individual stories of virtue and/or rivalry.

The seventh chapter, ‘Leaving the village on migration’ positions the migrants from DBG within the regional migrations networks and trajectories in West Africa. Recalling regional dynamics (figure 7.3), anchoring migration roads in history (from Ivory Coast to China, and the revival of cross-saharan trade routes) and comparing patterns of migration from 1980, 1997 and 2016 (table 7.1.) has a political relevance today. Interviews and a proposal for a comparative pattern of migrations contribute to the specialised research that has updated scientific fronts in studying how the migrants take part in family strategies, and contribute to the family multilocalised economy by going back and forth between places, with accumulation taking place in flexible ways across generations involving migrants¹.

The concluding chapter, ‘Facing an uncertain future’, states five major factors shaping the options for people in DBG: conflict and insecurity; demographic growth; disruption to rainfall and climate patterns; economic growth and investment; growing pressure on land and grazing. The cost and constraints of control strategies are compared to adaptive strategies which could be supported through diversification by strengthened decentralised institutions (ensuring law enforcement and protection against dispossession and land fragmentation). An intermediate option might be found between irrigated agriculture and dryland farming, such as small-scale irrigation systems under farmer control, with the purpose of ‘regreening of farmland and landscape’. According to the author, external interventions show effectiveness when combining technical and financial support to smallholder farmers to maintain their farming systems, operating at a landscape level and strengthening local learning approaches.

What is original in the book?

The feeling of attachment and accountability of the authoress towards DBG, and her will to pay justice to the many aspects of local life led her to make the best of all sources. The boxes provide a sensitive image of change over time in people’s clothing, nutrition, work and episodes of colonial conquest – miserable (Mungo Park) or violent (Morize) – and set the villagers on stage (the return of Babo Dembele from the Second World War). They embrace the reality in a way often missing in specialised works. The different focus in time, space, politics and intimacy is suggestive, providing figures of households’ budget and the resumption of classic agrarian and anthropological models alongside individual stories. The mix of stories, views and concepts makes the whole accessible to a large audience including specialists. The chapters on ‘History’ (2), ‘From abundance to scarcity’ (4), and ‘Facing an uncertain future’ (8) are my favourites, for their inspiration in combining historical sources, technical notions and data with personal insights.

Due to the geographic and historical roots and fields of human sciences, some questions raised in the book may look familiar to a French audience. More original is the multi-focal

¹ On migration studies, youth, accumulation and family strategies, see Mercandalli, S. 2015. Migrations et recompositions des stratégies socioéconomiques des familles rurales au Mozambique : une lecture institutionnelle des circulations contemporaines. Mondes en Développement Vol.43-2015/4-n°172; Pappagallo, L. (2022). “Partir Pour Rester?”: To Leave in Order to Stay? The Role of Absence and Institutions in Accumulation by Pastoralists in Southern Tunisia [Doctoral Thesis]. Sussex University

synthesis where the farming systems interplay with transgenerational arrangements, policies of land and labour.²

One of the purposes of this book is to call the attention of decision makers and the community of knowledge, on evidenced points that can be found throughout the narrative, for instance: the potential benefits of the decentralisation; adaptive strategies to variability; the pivotal role of domestic institutions in managing risks. On the latter, taking into account local institutions seems fundamental when it comes to designing policies, provided that: i) institutions are not perceived as merely fixed infrastructures for channelling aid, ignoring both the characteristics and modes of operation and their transformations; ii) the burden of public action is not entirely left on local populations' shoulders; iii) the current destabilisation due to the global crisis of governance that fragments society is taken into account.

Closing a historical period

Notwithstanding the detailed descriptions of local and national dynamics, the book describes a recent context in which aid projects took the place of public action and where the number of expatriates is referred to as an economic indicator. This characterises a postcolonial context. Similarly, as sincere and touching as they are, the questions about the impacts of the author's presence on the life of DBG, by co-financing of a maternity clinic, supporting the drafting of a local agreement over the land and natural resources, revert to a bygone era. Indeed, these times were only yesterday but they are over. The book was written simultaneously with the political turmoil in Sahel in the 2010, before the worsening of a global governance crisis. I believe that both the type and the conditions of such observations have become unthinkable now and the parameters of future development have changed. In this sense, this book may be one cairn marking a boundary, a route and a memory.

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² To go further with an historical view on labour policy under colonial administration, see F. Cooper, 'Writing the history of development', *Journal of Modern European History* 8 (1) Modernizing Missions: Approaches to 'Developing' the Non-Western World after 1945 (2010) : 5–23 ; F. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996).