

An Assessment of the Dogon-Fulani Conflict in Central Mali

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Abstract

This article assesses the Dogon-Fulani conflict in central Mali. The aim is to find out the cause(s) historically and the resultant effects of the conflict between and on both peoples. This study employed the historical research method. The study found that, in addition to the effects of climate change and population growth, which have led to a scarcity of natural resources for pastoralists (Fulanis) and farmers (Dogons), the conflict also stems from historical land and ethnic battles. This article recommends that the government adopt a different approach to achieving a lasting solution to the lingering conflict by implementing policies (on afforestation and sustainable agriculture) that, upon implementation, will reduce the effects of global warming and climate change on the environment. It is believed that this will limit the need for migration, whose ripple effects are pushing pastoralists and farmers to move in search of greener pastures.

Keywords: Dogon, Fulani Herders, Bambara, Sahel, MINUSMA, Mopti-Region, Sedentary.

Introduction

Central Mali has been affected by a fierce war since 2016. The territories to the South and East of Mopti town are now the epicentre of the country's unrest. Unlike everywhere in Mali, particularly in the North, this violence disproportionately affects civilians, primarily Fulani and Dogon, and is marked by mass murders, arson, and cattle theft or slaughter. Jihadists and community armed organisations are the perpetrators. On the night of March 23-24, 2019, an armed gang raided the Fulani community of Ogossagou, some 15 kilometres east of Bankass town, killing dozens of people. At least 157 individuals, including women, children, and the elderly, were slain by the mob, which also butchered animals and set fire to at least 220 dwellings and dozens of granaries (MINUSMA, 2019)

On March 23, 2019, gunmen murdered 160 Fulani herders in central Mali in a series of raids. The violence erupted as a result of the Malian government's crackdown on the country's Islamic terror cells. Ogossagou and Welingara, two villages in particular, were hard hit. The slaughter sparked widespread protests in Mali over the government's apparent passivity, prompting Prime Minister Soumeylou BoubèyeMaga and his ruling council to resign (Diallo, 2019).

On April 22, 2019, heavily armed militants of Mali's most prominent Islamist organisation, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam Wal Muslimin (JNIM), stormed an army post in west-central Mali. The insurgents claimed 16 troops were murdered in partial retaliation for the Ogossagou massacre. However, the Malian Defence Ministry estimated the death toll at 11. Another incident in February 2020 claimed the lives of 21 people. Dogon hunters armed with rifles and machetes, according to local Malian officials, carried out the attacks. The assailants claimed the Fulani peasants had links to jihadists and said the attack was in reprisal for an Al-Qaeda raid on a Malian military post the week before, which claimed the lives of 23 Malian troops. Almost every hut in the communities was burned to the ground, according to witnesses. Following the event, President Boubakar Keïta ordered Dan Na Ambassagou, an ethnic Dogon militia believed to be responsible for the attack, to be disbanded. Human Rights Watch has also accused the militia of being to blame, while the militia's leader, Youssoufu Toloba, refuted the charge as baseless (Ahmed, 2019).

However, because Dogons identified essentially as farmers and Fulanis as pastoralists, the violence was also portrayed as the outcome of traditional farmer-herder disputes. Climate change and population growth, which lead to greater scarcity of natural resources, intensify these long-standing tensions, according to media sources. Ogossagou village is divided into two sub-villages: one Fulani and one Dogon (Ogossagou Peul) (Ogossagou Dogon). Fulani military dominated the lowlands from the 19th century forward, chasing the Dogon back to the surrounding escarpment, where the majority of the Dogon people resided. Those who did not want to forsake their fields had to accept being Rimaybe – "slaves" or "servants" of the Rimbe –and assimilating into Fulani society (Fulani of higher status). The Dogon increasingly moved down from the surrounding escarpment to farm on the plains below after the French colonial force acquired control of the area early in the twentieth century, particularly after Mali's independence in 1960. (Petit,1998).

In recent years, jihadist organisations affiliated to Al Qaeda and Islamic State have used ethnic tensions in Mali and its neighbours, Burkina Faso and Niger, to increase recruitment and make broad swaths of territory effectively ungoverned. In 2013, the French military intervened in Mali, a former French colony, to halt a jihadist assault from the desert North. However, the jihadists have since regrouped and expanded their territory into central Mali and neighbouring nations. Around 4,500 French troops are still stationed in the Sahel; the majority of them are in Mali.

Hundreds of US troops are also stationed in the area (Reuters, 2019). By 2025, however, the French troops had left Mali. It is on this basis that this study is carrying out an Assessment of the Dogon-Fulani Conflict in Central Mali.

Theoretical Framework

To explain the complexity of the Fulani-Dogon conflict, the theory of Primordialism was adopted to understand the social, political, economic, and historical problems that underpin the conflict in central Mali, especially between the Fulani and the native African tribes, particularly the Dogon and Bambara. Primordialism is the idea that nations or ethnic identities are fixed, natural and ancient. Primordialists argue that individuals have a single ethnic identity which is not subject to change and which is exogenous to historical processes (Chandra, 2012).

Primordialism may be traced back to German Romanticism's intellectual ideals, notably in the writings of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Gottfried Herder. For Herder, the word "nation" meant "linguistic group." Language was identical with cognition in Herder's mind, and because each language was learned in a community, each community had to think differently, and the community would maintain a fixed nature across time. Primordialism claims that "ethnic groupings and nations exist because there are traditions of belief and conduct toward primordial.

Objects such as biological elements and, notably, geographical location, in connection with ethnicity (Steven, 1994).

In terms of ethnicity, Primordialism claims that "ethnic groupings and nations exist due to traditions of belief and conduct toward primordial objects such as biological elements and, notably, geographical location. "This argument is based on the idea of kinship, in which members of an ethnic group believe they share similar qualities, origins, or even blood ties. While political scientist Khalil F. Osman acknowledges that "primordialism is admittedly not without its own flaws and problems, much like all conceptual and theoretical traditions in the social sciences". He argues that "primordialism, as an approach that stresses the workings of sub-national loyal ties and solidarities operative in the collective consciousness of communities, is still capable of furnishing an epistemological and conceptual tool informing and opening up a horizon of possibilities." (Khalil, 2015).

The Dogon-Fulani conflict is deeply rooted in primordial and ideational factors. The violence was also described as the result of typical farmer-herder disagreements, with Dogons primarily identifying as farmers and Fulanis as pastoralists. According to media reports, climate change and population growth, which lead to increased scarcity of natural resources, exacerbate these long-standing conflicts. The village of Ogossagou is separated into two sub-villages, one Fulani and the other Dogon (Ogossagou Peul) (Ogossagou Dogon). From the 19th century onward, Fulani troops dominated the lowlands, chasing the Dogon back to the nearby escarpment, where most Dogon lived. Those who did not want to abandon their lands had to accept the position of Rimaybe, Rimbe "slaves" or "servants", and integrate into Fulani culture (Fulani of higher status) (Brandts, 2005).

An overview of the Dogon-Fulani Conflict

To understand the Dogon and Fulani in central Mali, it must be viewed in its broader political-economic and historical context, with a focus on land and natural resource access and control (Peluso & Watts, 2001). While climate change and population growth, as well as religion in the case of jihadist violence, may play a role, the current Sahel conflicts can only be fully understood by incorporating a political ecology framework with a focus on the material politics of land governance in a historical and political economic context (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2021).

The Fulani-Dogon tension is historically rooted in conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and Dogon sedentary farmers over land and other resources. However, the re-emergence of this conflict on a larger scale is directly linked to the Western intervention in Libya in 2011 and the subsequent metastacization of jihadist groups in the Sahel.

Historical Tensions over Land and Resources

The Dogon are thought to have originated from today's Southern Mali, south of Bamako, and relocated to the Bandiagara Escarpment during the Mali Empire in the 13th or 14th centuries, either to avoid being converted to Islam by Fulani or due to external disputes among their own lineages (Petit, 1998; Brandts, 2005). They erected their towns on the steep escarpment, with a view over the Senuo plains, to avoid slave raids by the Fulani, Tuareg, Mossi, and Songhay kingdoms, according to oral history. The Dogon, however, were able to descend to the plains to farm in the 15th and 16th centuries, particularly in the Madougou area, also known as Ourokorohi, meaning "ancient villages". Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, a Fulani expansion starting in the delta drove them back to the escarpment. The Dogon, who refused to leave their fields, were eventually enslaved as Rimaybe (Petit, 1998).

In recent years, clashes between Dogon hunters, who have a unique traditional culture that dates back generations, and semi-nomadic Fulani herders have become a major flashpoint.

Inter-communal violence erupted between Dogon, Bambara, and Fulani in the Mopti region; between Bambara and Fulani in the Segou Region; and among different Tuareg and Arab communities in the Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal regions, all over disagreements over transhumance (seasonal migration) and cow grazing. Members of the Fulani ethnic group, as well as members of the Bambara and Dogon groups, clashed often as a result of intercommunal violence. Attacks were allegedly carried out by self-defence organisations representing these populations. On the Bandiagara escarpment, high above the western slopes of the Niger bend, the agricultural Dogon reside. In the 15th century, the Dogon arrived in the Bandiagara area. It dispersed into relatively autonomous communities that colonised not only the Bandiagara cliff and plateau, but also the vast plain of Séno-Gondo, a sandy area east of the cliff that provided fertile ground for cereals, abundant water resources, and nutritious wild fruit. The Dogon, who were formerly animist tribe, migrated to this location more than 500 years ago to avoid Muslim Fulani oppression. Would-be attackers were kept at bay by the geography. Between Dogon Country and the rest of Mali, the Bandiagara Escarpment runs 150 kilometres across brush-covered plains, forming a kind of barrier (Krätli, 2021).

In 1818, the Fulani conqueror Seku Amadu founded the Empire of Massina (Diina) and a new capital, Hamdullahi, located southeast of Mopti. The Massina Empire gradually extended from Segou in the south to Timbuktu in the North.

In response, the Dogon constructed beautiful fortress settlements in the Bandiagara Cliff, which was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1989. The Cliff of Bandiagara, also known

as the Land of the Dogons, is a 400,000-hectare cultural landscape with 289 communities distributed over three geographical regions: sandstone plateau, escarpment, and lowlands (more than two-thirds of the listed perimeter is covered by plateau and cliffs). The Dogon make up the majority of the settlements at the site. Despite significant, irreversible socio-economic changes, the Dogon's social and cultural traditions are among the best preserved in Sub-Saharan Africa. The settlements and their residents maintain ancestral values associated with a traditional way of life (Smith, 2001).

The Dogon are mainly farmers who grow millet, sorghum, and rice, as well as onions, tobacco, peanuts, and other crops. Griaule helped the Dogon to grow onions and promoted the construction of a dam near Sangha. Since then, the Sangha region's economy has grown, and its onions are sold as far as Bamako and the markets in the Ivory Coast. Granaries are where grain is kept. Aside from agriculture, the ladies collect wild fruits, tubers, nuts, and honey in the wilderness outside of the settlement. Although some young men hunt small game, wild animals are uncommon near villages. Animal husbandry has minimal economic importance in Dogon communities, where residents maintain chickens or herds of sheep and goats. A modest number of cattle may be owned by high-status individuals (Beek, 1993).

History of the Tuareg Rebellion in Northern Mali

Tuareg rebellions and the steady withdrawal of the Malian military from northern Mali have bred instability at the national and regional levels since the 1960s. In northern border areas, violent conflicts have generated a 'political economy of violence,' centred on arms, human, and drug trafficking, which has fueled criminal and terrorist networks while compromising government players (Jourde, 2011).

The Tuareg uprising of 1962–1964, also known as the *Alfellaga* or the First Tuareg Rebellion, was an insurrection launched by people in what is now northern Mali immediately after the country gained independence from France in 1960. Only the intervention of Morocco and Algeria in the war in 1963, which handed over 35 leaders of the counter-rebellion and imposed military authority over the Tuareg territories, brought the brief insurrection to an end. Tuareg grievances remained largely unaddressed, and a seething resentment persists in many Tuareg communities to this day. The problem of instability in the North had simply been deferred, not resolved (Baz, 2002).

Several rebel groups launched an Azawad campaign against the Malian government on January 16, 2012, calling for independence or greater autonomy for northern Mali. By April 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg-led movement, had gained control of the region (Associated Press, 2012).

As a result, President Amadou Toumani Touré was deposed in a coup d'état a month before a presidential election, due to his handling of the issue. Mali's constitution was suspended when mutinous troops known as the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDR) took power. Mali's three main northern cities—Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu were run by rebels for three consecutive days due to the instability caused by the coup. Following the conquest of Douentza on April 5, 2012, the MNLA said that its objectives had been met and that the attack had been called off. It declared northern Mali's independence from the rest of the country the next day, dubbing it Azawad (Serge, 2012).

Ethnic Tensions in Central Mali

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Ougoussagou Massacre

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The Fulani ranchers have been increasingly at odds with other communities for access to land and water for their livestock. Climate change, land degradation, and population increase have all intensified these disputes. "Even if only a portion of all Fulani actively support such Islamist organisations, this propaganda has succeeded in connecting whole communities with these violent actors, thereby expanding the cycle of violence (BBC News, 2019).

Mali's president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, removed the army chief of staff, General M'Bemba Moussa Keïta, and the head of ground forces, General Abdrahamane Baby, following the incident. On March 26, the United Nations stated that a crime-scene investigation team would be dispatched. President Keta ordered the ethnic Dogon militia Dan Na Ambassagou, which is suspected of being behind the attack, to be disbanded. Human Rights Watch has also accused the militia of being to blame, while the militia's leader has refuted the charge (Ahmed, 2019).

Adama Dieng, the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, warned that the violence is becoming increasingly ethnicised. They said that on March 26, 2019, six Dogon villagers were slain and another 20 were kidnapped in the hamlets of Ouadou and Kere Kere by suspected.

Fulani armed groups. Mali captured five accused assailants on March 30, who had previously been regarded as assault survivors. On April 5, tens of thousands of residents demonstrated against the Malian government's failure to prevent religious and ethnic violence. The administration of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maga disintegrated under the prospect of a no-confidence vote, and President Keta accepted Maga's resignation on April 18. On April 22, heavily armed

militants of Mali's most prominent Islamist organisation, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), stormed an army post in west-central Mali. The insurgents claimed 16 troops were murdered in partial retaliation for the Ogossagou massacre; the Malian Defence Ministry estimated the death toll at 11 (Ross, 2019).

Sobane Da Massacre

The Dogon village of Sobane Da in Mali was assaulted on June 10, 2019. The mayor of Bankass, Moulaye Guindo, blamed a Fulani militia group. The number of those murdered in the incident has been lowered from 95 to 35, with 19 people still missing. The assailants, according to a survivor, were around 50 and rode motorcycles and pickup trucks. The Malian government believed terrorists carried out the attack. Traditional herders and farmers, the Fulanis and Dogon, have had a long-running feud over grazing area and water, which has been aggravated by the growth of jihadism in Mali. The Dogon accuse the Fulani of assisting Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations active in Mali, while the Fulani accuse the state of promoting Dogon attacks. Between January 2018 and May 16, 2019, MINUSMA documented 488 Fulani killings in Dogon assaults and 63 Dogon deaths in Fulani attacks in the Mopti and Segou Regions. The Ogossagou massacre was the deadliest. Fulani revenge had been pledged by the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin and Amadou Koufa (Gulf News, 2019).

Islamists Incursions in Central Mali

Macina is a small town and rural commune in the Cercle of Macina in the Segou Region of southern-central Mali. Macina is the home of the Radical Mopti Imam Amadou Koufa, who is mainly behind the incursions of some of the radical Islamic elements in northern Mali to the centre of Mali. Koufa himself was a popular imam in the Mopti region, close to Segou. Amadou Koufa is the founder of the Macina Liberation Front, an offshoot of Ansar Dine (Long War Journal, 2016).

Amadou Toumani Touré, the President of Mali, was deposed in a coup d'état in March 2012 for his handling of an insurgency in Northern Mali. Mali's three main northern cities, Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, were seized by a mixture of Islamists and Tuareg Nationalists as a result of the subsequent unrest. By July, the Tuareg had been driven out by their erstwhile friends, and the region had been taken over by jihadist organisations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), AnsarDine, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in WestAfrica (MUJAO). Days later, French soldiers drove them out, signalling the commencement of Operation Serval, a French-led military operation. Some fighters, on the other hand, were able to reassemble in mountain or desert hideouts. The group's nucleus comprises ethnic Fulani war veterans. The Fulani make up around 9% of Mali's population. However, they are particularly powerful in the Mopti Region, which once served as the capital of the nineteenth-century Fulani-led Islamic kingdom of Macina (Rossiter, 2012).

In January 2015, the Macina Liberation Front rose to prominence after claiming responsibility for attacks in central and southern Mali. Amadou Koufa, a marabout who led the Islamist insurgents in the Battle of Konna in 2013, was the group's head. Attacks on UN peacekeepers, French troops, and Malian government forces, as well as civilians, have been carried out by the

group. In March 2017, Amadou Kouffa appeared in a video with officials from AQIM's Saharan branch, Al-Mourabitoun, and Ansar Dine, in which they stated that their organisations would be merged into Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin. In November 2018, the French Army is said to have murdered Kouffa.

The Emergence of Local Self-Defence Militias

The Dogon, whom militants have targeted, accuse the Fulani of collaborating with the terrorists. Meanwhile, the Fulani claim that the government has armed Dogon self-defence organisations and that they are committing crimes against them, which the authorities deny. Since 2015, government control in Mopti has eroded, leading to a lack of trust among the population. The authorities' failure to provide adequate security for the people of Mopti and central Mali has led to the formation of these local self-defence groups. This overall sense of unfairness and marginalisation has benefited numerous rebel organisations. Because of the anti-government, anti-elite, and pro-pastoral jihadist ideology, many pastoralists support or have actively joined "jihadist" groups (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019).

Dana Ambassagou: The ethnic Dogon militia, Dan Na Ambassagou, "hunters who believe in God" in the Dogon language, is based in Mali. The militia was formed in 2016 to protect Dogon settlements against assaults, which have resulted in a series of clashes with the Fula people. They accuse the Fula (or Peuhl) of sympathising with Islamist terrorists or harbouring them in their communities. Youssouf Toloba is in charge of the group. In 2018, the organisation was responsible for several assaults. In September 2018, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Dan NaAmbassagou agreed to a unilateral ceasefire "in the context of the war that pits the group against other community armed groups in central Mali". The gang attracted international notice after they were suspected of being the perpetrators of assaults against Fulani herders in March 2019. The group disputed the attack. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta responded by ordering Dan Na Ambassagou to dissolve (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Alliance for the Salvation of the Sahel: According to Human Rights Watch, some Fulani community members created the Alliance for the Salvation of the Sahel (ASS) in reaction to Dogon militia atrocities to protect Fulanis from armed groups in Mali and Burkina Faso.

However, it is unclear whether the ASS has any ties to other Fulani village self-defence groups. The Dogon militia accuses the ASS of being tied to militant Islamist organisations in the area, although the ASS denies this.

Conclusion

Outside observers commonly depict farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel as motivated by ethnicity, resource constraints arising from climate change or population growth, or a combination of these factors. While these factors are significant, as we can see in the instance of Fulani-Dogon violence in Mali, ethnic or short-term narratives often serve to simplify conflict explanations and gloss over the more complicated core reasons, which are tied to historical and existing land relations. As a result, we propose that studying the material is crucial to better understanding violent land battles.

This will lead to explanations that go beyond basic causal chains, with the Sahel seen as a region where diminishing resource scarcity affects livelihoods, driving migration or conflict. Several longer historical and more recent events and processes have led to the current situation in the Fulani-Dogon massacres in central Mali, which have been going on for years. To begin with, the Dogon had to seek refuge on the land-scarce Bandiagara escarpment and the Dogon Plateau to prevent being kidnapped and sold as enslaved people if they descended

to the land-rich savanna below. While the Dogon were able to produce on the plains in the 15th and 16th centuries, Fulani expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries drove them back to the escarpment. Many Fulani herders felt more disempowered and alienated following the Development of a national crisis in Mali in 2012 and the jihadist takeover of the northern and central regions of the country. The problematic situation in central Mali today stems from a long-standing conflict between Fulanis and African tribes in the region, which has worsened since the Malian state nearly collapsed in 2012 due to the Azawad insurrection in the North. As a result of this predicament, local defence groups such as the Dana Ambassagou and the Alliance for Sahel Salvation (ASS) have emerged.

Recommendations

This article therefore recommends that the government adopt a different approach to ensuring a lasting solution to the seemingly unending conflict by developing and implementing policies that will reduce the effects of climate change and global warming on the environment. It is believed that when there is little or no need for migration, whose ripple effects push pastoralists and farmers to move in search of greener pasture, there will be little or no need for land grabbing, thereby eliminating needless confrontation and conflict.

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