



STABILITY

Rethinking 'Intercommunity Conflict' in Central Mali

RESEARCH
ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article re-examines the notion of “intercommunity conflict”, commonly used to characterize recent confrontations (from 2015 onwards) between armed men/groups from Fulani and Dogon communities in central Mali, particularly in the Mopti and Bandiagara regions. The violence arising from these tensions easily lends itself to facile oppositions between Dogon victims and Fulani executioners, or vice versa, giving thus the impression that ethnic groups are substantial entities to which common interests can be attributed. Yet there is ample evidence of collaboration between Dogons and “Fulani jihadists”, even though they are supposed to be antagonists, calling into question the misleading intercommunity characterization of the conflict. The transformation of the conflict tends to show that ethnicity actually matters less than the interests that individuals or groups, even supposed opponents, can obtain from each other. The article is based on sixty individual interviews conducted during multiple field missions in Ténenkou, Mopti, and Bandiagara during 2023 and 2024.

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This article re-examines the notion of “intercommunity conflict”, commonly used to characterize recent confrontations (from 2015 onwards) between “ethnic communities” (Breton 1983), notably the Fulani and the Dogon in central Mali (Mopti and Bandiagara regions). It is based on sixty individual interviews conducted during multiple field missions in Ténenkou, Mopti, and Bandiagara during 2023 and 2024.

The term “community” used here refers to membership of an ethnic group. The violence that ensues from these confrontations is generally presented as being underpinned by issues of access to land and resources (Bagayoko and al. 2017; Benjaminsen and Ba 2018; Bouju 2020; FAO 2021). However, such dynamics, have always existed in the region, have involved the same actors, and had been more or less contained, at least until the outbreak of the multidimensional crisis of 2012. Since then, these same conflicts have often been settled with great violence, resulting in many deaths. A link can thus be established between the old conflicts — which were poorly resolved or not resolved at all — and the new violent conflicts. The presence of armed groups and the increased circulation of weapons have given the various actors the opportunity to resolve conflicts that were previously resolved relatively peacefully, in a more violent manner. Such violence lends itself readily to easy oppositions between Dogon victims and their Fulani tormentors, or vice versa. The main *casus belli* justifying the violence in many instance is the accusation by Dogon groups that the Fulani support, or even collaborate with, jihadist groups. Tensions have led to regular confrontations between armed groups from both ethnic groups, and to recurrent armed attacks by the same groups on Fulani and Dogon villages. This is the result of the transformation of the Malian conflict since it broke out in 2012.

January 17, 2012 marked the resurgence of the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali, led by the armed group *Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad* (MNLA). Faced with the remarkable weakness of the Malian armed forces (FAMA), this Tuareg armed group encountered very little resistance, and succeeded in seizing several localities in northern Mali. From the end of March 2012, these developments paved the way for the entry into play of three jihadist groups — Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Ed Dine (Defenders of the Faith). This led to these three groups, plus the MNLA, occupying the entire northern part of the country, which represents 65% of the national territory but holds only 10% of the population. From late 2014, a new hotspot of violence emerged in central Mali, mainly in the Mopti and Bandiagara regions but also in Ségou, with jihadism spreading from the north to the centre. This resulted in the creation, in January 2015, of the Katiba Macina group, portrayed as the southern *katiba* (battalion) of the Ansar Ed Dine jihadist group operating in the north.¹ Katiba Macina was subsequently frequently referred to by the local population as a Fulani movement, due to the fact that it was led by a Fulani preacher, Amadou Kouffa, and also because the majority of its members allegedly consisted of Fulani fighters. In response, ethnic self-defence militias have been set up, particularly within the Dogon community (but also by other ethnic groups), supposedly to protect themselves against external threats. This dynamic has resulted in repeated deadly clashes between different

¹ The jihadist group Ansar Ed Dine has merged into The Group for Support to Islam and Muslims (JNIM), created in 2017, affiliated to Al-Qaeda, and born from the merger with three other groups: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Macina *katiba*, and the Al-Mourabitoune *katiba*.

armed groups, as well as attacks with many fatalities targeting Fulani and Dogon villages such as Ogossagou, Songho, and Sobane Da.

Many research studies identify these dynamics as “intercommunity conflicts” that arise around power relations and access to, and control of, land and natural resources. Such conflicts are often fueled by the prevalence of jihadism (Cissé 2020; Samba 2019; ICG 2020, 2021; Ammour 2020; Berger 2019; Benjaminsen and Ba 2018, 2021; Sangaré 2016, 2019; Brossier et al. 2018; Bagayoko et al. 2017; Lyammouri 2021, 2022). These “intercommunity conflicts” are thus regularly represented in “groupist terms”, understood by Brubaker (2004) as the tendency to treat ethnic groups as substantial entities to which interests and actions can be attributed. Such structural approaches, according to the author, tend to reify these groups as if they were internally homogeneous, externally delimited groups, or even unitary collective actors with common goals. Indeed, most of the time, as soon as ethnicity is mentioned, and even more so when dealing with inter-ethnic conflicts in central Mali, ethnic groups becomes the default category of analysis. The Fulani and the Dogon are presented as the main protagonists — either as executioners or victims — of these conflicts.

The same observation applies to international actors, such as the international NGOs operating in Mali that are implementing their projects on the basis of the Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) nexus approach. Analysis of the HDP nexus in central Mali indicates that the main type of conflict identified in the conflict analysis conducted by these international NGOs, which is an essential prerequisite for the implementation of activities related to the “Peace” pillar, is intercommunity conflict. It therefore stands to reason that the categorization/definition of conflict needs to be as accurate as possible to yield relevant results, an aspect that will be elaborated on later. However, research by Poudiougou and Zanoletti (2020) runs counter to these kinds analyses that generally approach the “Malian crisis” through the prism of “ethnic and communitarian conflicts”. Instead, they argue that the rise of violence in Mali is generated by a series of ruptures and continuities in what they call “rural governmentality” and suggest that violence is better understood as a public policy and an instrument of government, mobilizing ethnic, religious and land-related frameworks.

Indeed, recent research conducted by my team (see Methodology below) in the Mopti and Bandiagara regions indicates that those directly affected by these conflicts do not always attribute an intercommunity dimension to the conflict. There is, in fact, ample evidence of *collaboration* between Dogon and “Fulani jihadists”, which calls into question the over-simplified intercommunity characterization of the conflict. In addition, there are several other cases where Fulani and Dogon populations in the same locality have suffered violence from armed groups that they both find difficult to identify, or where Dogon militias have launched violent attacks against Dogon villages. This is a transformation of the conflict that tends to demonstrate that ethnicity actually matters less than the interests that individuals or groups, even those who are supposedly opponents, can obtain from each other. Moreover, interests can be diverse *within* the community, and defending these interests can lead to a split in the community, while at the same time leading to an alliance between a fringe (of the community) and the presumed enemy. In this respect, it seems a mistake to take groups for granted in the study of ethnic conflict, since from a constructivist perspective groups are constructed, contingent and fluctuating (Brubaker 2004). Beyond simple isolated occurrences, the question of recurrent collaboration between Dogon, particularly in Bandiagara, and “Fulani jihadists” — to attack other Dogon —

represents a little-known dimension of the current conflict, which this article sets out to analyse. This study adopts an approach that runs counter to the behaviourist tradition, which tends to (deliberately) strip conflict of its context in order to analyse its generic characteristics. However, central Mali is strongly characterized by a diversity of contexts, in terms of ethnic composition, the presence of various armed groups, and the different ways that the latter act depending on the context. Thus, my analysis focuses on the conflict dynamics, examining both the processes through which they evolve, and the contextual factors that shape their transformation, whether through mitigation or exacerbation.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this study originates from individual interviews conducted as part of the research project entitled *How can the HDP nexus succeed? NGOs between Humanitarian Aid, Development Assistance, and Peacebuilding (2021–2025)*, covering three national contexts: Iraq, South Sudan, and Mali. The project was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and was implemented by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) in partnership with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Malteser International (MI), and Welthungerhilfe (WHH). It investigated the interactions between the components of the HDP nexus, and local understandings of conflict, peace, and conflict resolution. The overall aim was to assess the opportunities and limitations of integrating “peace” into humanitarian aid and development cooperation. As the lead researcher for the Malian component of the research project, I conducted multiple field missions in Ténenkou, Mopti, and Bandiagara during 2023 and 2024. The present analysis focuses specifically on data collected in the Mopti and Bandiagara regions, drawn from sixty individual interviews with diverse local actors. This approach, which was consistent with that of my colleagues conducting research in Iraq and South Sudan, aimed to analyse the lived experience of conflict as well as local conceptions of it within various communities affected by war in Mali. The study combined individual interviews with direct observation, in order to capture not only discourses but also practices and social dynamics at work in the contexts under investigation. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, organized around predefined themes and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to freely elaborate on their perspectives. The HDP projects studied, implemented by the NGO partners in the research, follow a collaborative approach that links humanitarian aid, long-term development and peacebuilding in order to respond more effectively to the needs of populations affected by crises. This means, for example, coordinating humanitarian action — through the provision of water, a resource to which access can be a source of tension — with development. This could be by promoting training in resilient agricultural techniques or the creation of stable incomes from agricultural production and sales. This links to peacebuilding activities, such as the establishment of a joint community committee responsible for ensuring equitable and concerted management of water resources.

Given that they are implemented by NGOs and that the selected areas posed security-related access constraints, the research was conducted in cooperation with three international NGOs (IRC, MI, and WHH). Their involvement was limited to logistical support, including the provision of security information and facilitation of access to the research sites. None of these organizations participated in the selection of locations or respondents, thereby ensuring the independence of the study. Finally,

to safeguard the confidentiality and security of participants, all collected data was anonymized and not shared with operational partners, the funding agency, or any other external entity outside the research team.

After a description of the study area and its context, essential to understanding the dynamics analysed, this article briefly explains what led to the widespread framing of the intercommunity nature of the conflict. The second part analyses the data gathered during the field research, conducted between 2023 and 2024 in the cities of Mopti and Bandiagara.

CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT DYNAMICS

In the literature on conflict dynamics, the regions of Mopti and Bandiagara are most often referred to as “central Mali”. These regions — but also beyond — are generally subject to identical problems, characterized by, among others: strong activity on the part of jihadist groups; a flourishing of community-based armed self-defense groups; and the resurgence of old conflicts linked to access to resources, in new forms. But the expression of these conflict dynamics, examined here, differs profoundly from one locality to another, making it sometimes very difficult, if not impossible, to draw any generalizable conclusions from them, hence the choice of a localized (micro) approach to conflict analysis. The analysis below of the collaboration between certain Bandiagara Dogon and the Katiba Macina jihadists, despite the antagonism that would be presumed to characterize their relationship, is a good illustration of these very localized dynamics.

In Mopti, the research took place in two Internally-Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in the *communes* of Sokoura and Médina Coura. These camps were chosen because Mopti town has become the main destination for conflict-affected IDPs from all over the region, regardless of ethnicity. Bandiagara was formerly one of the eight *cercles* (second-tier administrative units that are subdivisions of regions) of the Mopti region. However, in 2023 Mali’s new territorial division made it a region in its own right, comprising 9 *cercles* divided into 32 *arrondissements* and 53 *communes*. The region’s administrative capital, Bandiagara city, is where the fieldwork took place. Bandiagara region’s geographical and demographic characteristics are essential to understanding the phenomenon under study. It is part of the dry zone – in French a *zone exondée* – to the east of Mopti. This dry area is “Dogon country”, and contrasts with the flooded zone of the inland Niger delta where the Fulani predominate.

Indeed, there is a notable distinction between the Delta’s flooded and dry regions in terms of the expression of the jihadist phenomenon. In the former, with its mainly Fulani population, the jihadists of the Katiba Macina are firmly established, although the movement also attracts sympathizers from the dry zone, particularly among Fulani nomads ([ICG 2020](#)). For example, around Ténenkou or Djenné the group exerts a strong influence overall over the local population. As an armed group, the Katiba Macina seems to have an almost exclusive presence there, due to the near-absence of armed opposition groups, such as community militias, which do operate in Bandiagara. The Fulani are numerically the majority group in the Delta and, as the saying goes, the Inner Delta is the “navel of the Fulani” ([Coulibaly and Dorier 2017](#)). However, they co-exist with other communities, notably farmers and fishermen.

In the latter (dry) region, the jihadists have not fully achieved full domination, as they face fierce opposition from the Dogon militias, who act as resistance groups, and act

as a barrier to jihadist penetration. This situation is the opposite of that in the inland Delta, where there has been no real opposition of this nature. This configuration means that violence by jihadist armed groups, particularly against civilians, is more regular and intense in dry zones (yet to be conquered) than in flooded zones (already conquered). This observation is consistent with the rule of allegiance versus protection that the jihadists seem to have established. This rule suggests that once the locals agree to comply with the jihadists' desires, no further violence is likely to be directed against them.

Dogon people from Bandiagara providing support to jihadists

As outlined above, the research project that brought us to Mopti and Bandiagara intended to analyse how the components of the HDP nexus influence, and are influenced by, local concepts of conflict, conflict resolution and peace. As it happened, the dynamics analysed in this article emerged incidentally. My interest was sparked when chatting to a driver, a Dogon from Bandiagara, who was taking me to Bandiagara ville. He disclosed that he no longer informed anyone of his comings and goings, not even his family members. The reason he advanced was that "today, we no longer know who's who in Bandiagara". Indeed, the area around Bandiagara is infested with jihadists from the Katiba Macina. Every stretch of road leading to the town is a hotbed of jihadist activity, illustrating the high level of violence in the dry "exondée" zone. This violence involves both the Macina katiba, presented by locals as the Fulani jihadist group, and Dan Na Ambassagou,² a militia made up mainly of Dogon, which embodies the armed resistance against the jihadist groups. Several villages in the region have been destroyed in armed attacks, "solely on the basis of their Fulani or Dogon ethnicity" (ICG 2020).

The interviews with members of Bandiagara's Dogon community showed that if the "Fulani jihadists" are so successful in their actions, it is partly thanks to the collaboration of at least some Dogons. "They're not here, but they know everything that goes on here. They know who's going out (of town), who's coming in, and when... how do you think they know?" The question was thus returned to me by one interviewee, as if to point out that internal complicity was evident. Over the course of the interviews, a multitude of examples were shared with me by interviewees, for whom there was no doubt about jihadist infiltration. They related how precise information had been given to the jihadists, enabling them to target one vehicle in a transport convoy and extract a specific individual. There had been the transmission of movement plans for groups belonging to the Dogon Dan Na Ambassagou militia, in preparation for an attack against them. It seems that there are few Dogon villages around Bandiagara in which the Katiba Macina jihadists have not succeeded in establishing a solid information network including Dogon individuals.

During my fieldwork in Bandiagara, the interlocutors I met — diverse in age, gender, and social position — were unanimous in their conviction that members of their own community were collaborating with the enemy. This perception, they explained, had produced a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust, almost a collective paranoia, in which people came to view one another with suspicion, fearing that anyone might

² Dan Na Ambassagou is made up of traditional hunters (the dozogs), the majority of whom are Dogon, although it also recruits from several ethnic minority groups not associated with the efforts of the Fulani or the Katiba Macina. The heart of the movement is located on the escarpment, or cliff, of Bandiagara, but is also active in the *cercles* of Bankass, Koro, and in the Douentza region (Lyammouri 2021).

be an informant or collaborator of the so-called “Fulani jihadists.” As I listened to these accounts, I sought to understand how and why some Dogon individuals might come to align, even temporarily or pragmatically, with the jihadists against their own community. The most common reasons provided were as follows. Firstly, personal financial reasons: the jihadists are said to have succeeded in setting up a network of informers in many Dogon localities, to whom they pay a lot of money. Secondly, collaboration with the jihadists is said to be a way for the Dogon to settle old conflicts between themselves. The following quote, from one of interviews conducted with a resident in Bandiagara, illustrates this point well:

“(…) Rare are the places in and around Bandiagara not already infiltrated by jihadists. When they want to infiltrate a village, they identify a few members of the village and hand out lots of money to win their loyalty. Very few people can refuse their offer... and once the deal is done, they're privy to everything that's going on in the village – absolutely everything! ...”

This observation was reinforced by another interviewee, who explained that the jihadists had succeeded in infiltrating society to such an extent because they were able to offer young people, in particular, the opportunity to make “easy money”. They recounted how Bandiagara, with its UNESCO World Heritage Site (the Cliffs of Bandiagara), offered many young people the opportunity to engage in tourist activities such as serving as tour guides. With the crisis, tourists have deserted the region, leaving young people without employment opportunities. With regard to our research on the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus, this aspect is particularly interesting. HDP actors retain the category of intercommunity conflict as their basis for their design of peace-promoting programs, such as facilitating intercommunity dialogue or other measures to raise awareness of living together. But this would seem inappropriate in this case. Instead, income-generating activities, or other programs that would put an end to idleness among young people by keeping them away from armed groups, would be more relevant.

Although common sense and rhetoric attribute to ethnic groups a discrete existence, boundaries, coherence, identity, interest and power, these attributes are in fact characteristic of *organizations* (Brubaker 2004). For example Katiba Macina defines itself as a Fulani organization, and Dan Na Ambassagou projects itself as a Dogon organization. It thus seems more accurate to argue that it is organizations, and not ethnic groups per se, that are the main protagonists of ethnic conflict and violence, and that the relationship between organizations and the groups they claim to represent is often deeply ambiguous. This is perfectly illustrated with the violent attacks launched by Dan Na Ambassagou against Dogon villages that refuse to endorse the organization's approach in the conflict. The reverse case is also notable: whilst appearing to be the main protagonist, Dan Na Ambassagou depends on a penumbra of auxiliary actions or support from sympathetic non-members. Based on these elements, the simplistic characterization of these conflicts as intercommunal or inter-ethnic may be questioned, as ethnicity or community does not constitute the central element that opposes or unites the protagonists.

Déjà-vu: Historical Antecedents for Dogon alliances with jihadist Fulani groups

At first glance, the dynamics analysed here seem unprecedented, and that is how they are often presented. However, Pierre Bourdieu (1994) argued that, when

examining a social or political phenomenon, researchers must approach it without falling into one of the following two opposing errors: “the illusion of the never seen [l’illusion du jamais vu]”, and “the illusion of the always so [l’illusion du toujours ainsi]”. Accordingly, this sections explores aspects of the region’s history that anticipate the dynamics currently under analysis.

Indeed, the type of “unnatural alliance”, linking Dogon populations to armed Fulani movements operating under the guise of jihad, has a strong resonance in the region’s history, particularly around the nineteenth-century Hamdallāhi caliphate (1818–1862), which was founded by Fulani (or Fulbe) Muslim reformer Ahmad Lobbo (died 1845) ([Bâ and Daget 1984](#); [Robinson 1985](#); [Barry 1993](#); [Bradshaw 2021](#)). This Fulani leader had committed himself to jihad in order to liberate the Fulani of the inland Niger delta from the Arbe, local proxies of the Bambara kingdom of Segu ([Bradshaw 2021](#)). After the conquest of the inner delta and the establishment of Muslim states through jihads, the Fulani rulers of the Macina (Macinanké) enslaved other ethnic groups — including the Dogon and Bobo — based on racial distinctions, notably in terms of “blackness”. Hamdallāhi thus contrasted the identity and legal status of the free Fulbe with the “blackness” and servility of the Dogon ([Bâ and Daget 1984](#)). However, the “Dogon variable” ended up being decisive in the war between the Fulani of the Macina (Macinanké) and those of the Futa (Futanké) from 1861 to 1890.

Indeed, the alliance that the Futanké sealed with the Dogon of Bandiagara — contravening their earlier stance against forming alliances with non-Muslims — enabled the former to defeat the Macinanké, and thus conquer most of the territory previously ruled by the Hamdallāhi caliphate. An important aspect of this history, which resonates with aspects of current dynamics, concerns the interest that the Dogon could derive from such an alliance with the Futanké, whose army was led by Tijānī, nephew of al-ḥājj ‘Umar, founder of the Toucouleur (or Torodbe) empire. Indeed, in order to perpetuate his military success, Tijānī “strategically used gifts to maintain strong alliances, transgressing earlier Macinanké expectations of Dogon servitude by sharing the spoils of war with his Dogon allies and recognizing their leaders before others. For example, the Dogon chief of Bandiagara was the first to receive spoils of war after the Futanké” ([Bradshaw 2021](#)). The Dogon of Bandiagara were constantly courted by the Futanké, who offered them gold (*Ibid.*). This enabled a strong alliance that ensured Bandiagara’s continued victory in all the attacks it faced during three decades of almost uninterrupted warfare. We can see that political expediency, on the one hand, and the interests that the alliance granted, on the other, were stronger than religious/political ideology or ethnic identities.

Dogons attacking other Dogons

The Katiba Macina has succeeded in imposing its hold on whole swathes of territory in the Bandiagara region. Contrary to the usual pattern of the “Fulani jihadist” attacking the Dogon village, or the Dogon self-defence group attacking the Fulani villages, there have been situations where Dogon villages — accused of signing agreements with Katiba Macina jihadists — have been attacked by Dogon militias. Indeed, when Katiba Macina decides to punish a given locality for one reason or another, it imposes a blockade by prohibiting all movement to and from the area. In practice, fighters are tasked with patrolling the surroundings and shooting at anyone attempting to cross. Gradually, the locality becomes isolated, cut off from essential goods and facing growing shortages. The intervention of the defense and security forces in such situations is particularly complex, as they face “invisible” enemies who disperse as

soon as they sense the approach of the armed forces and reappear once conditions become favourable again. Confronted with the severe hardship caused by these blockades, and seeking to put an end to their suffering, several communities under siege have ultimately agreed to sign accords with Katiba Macina, committing to comply with the rules imposed by the group. These are the so-called “local peace agreements,” now concluded under duress in many Malian localities.

Considering that this approach, which has been taken individually by the villages concerned, went against the interests of the (Dogon) community it claims to represent, the Dan Na Ambassagou militia unleashed violent reprisals against these Dogon villages. It also appears that this is not the only reason why the militia targets Dogon villages. Dan Na Ambassagou targets its own community also by extorting, kidnapping and killing Dogon villagers in Bandiagara, Koro and Bankass, particularly those who refuse to accede to requests for payment of funds, or to make recruits available to the group (Lyammouri 2021). It's obvious enough here that the “representativeness” of Dan Na Ambassagou as an organization, that is, “the degree to which an organization can justifiably claim to represent the will, express the interests and enjoy the active or passive support of its constituents” is highly variable (Brubaker 2004:173). Therefore, the approach of considering “the community” as a homogeneous whole in conflict analysis misses subtleties such as those described above. One of the lessons to emerge from these analyses is that interests at individual, family or village level are more important aspects of conflict dynamics/analysis than the community as a whole.

Dogon and Fulani facing the same armed threat

The Sokoura IDP camp, where I conducted interviews, differs from Mopti's other IDP camps, in that it accommodates both Dogon and Fulani IDPs on the same site. From the outset, this disrupts the narrative of displaced Dogon civilians having fled the violence of Fulani jihadists; and of Fulani civilians having fled the violence of Dogon militias. In this camp, I encountered numerous cases where Dogon and Fulani living in the same village had been threatened with violence perpetrated by armed actors whom they both found difficult to identify. Indeed, the interviewees claimed to have fled their village because of direct violence (armed attack on the village) or because of the proximity of armed men in the immediate vicinity, targeting the village. Most of the time, they did not have a clear idea of who the actors are, whether they are jihadists or members of self-defense militias. A Fulani IDP from a village in the Bankass district, Bandiagara region, recounted:

“ (...) We had to flee our village because unidentified armed men were about to attack us. Our relatives told us that they were armed men from the Dogon ethnic group, and that they were attacking us simply because we were Fulani. But shortly after our arrival here in the camp, the Dogon, who lived in the same village as us, also joined us here because they too had been threatened by the same armed group. So I'm finally wondering who these armed men are, if they aren't Dogon as I'd been told... “.

(Interview conducted in an IDP camp in Mopti).

This testimony clearly shows that it is unhelpful to equate ethnic groups with organizations, which are in a better position to carry out organized actions and thus act as more or less coherent protagonists in an ethnic conflict. Yet, this distinction

also highlights the profound ambiguity that surrounds the identification of actors and motivations in the conflicts of central Mali. What is often perceived, and labelled, as inter-ethnic violence frequently conceals far more complex constellations of actors, alliances, and interests. The blurred lines between categories such as “jihadists,” “self-defense groups,” and “community militias” reveal not only the fluidity of local affiliations but also the limits of analytical frameworks that rest on rigid ethnic distinctions. Recognizing this ambiguity is crucial, as it challenges both academic interpretations and the operational models used by humanitarian and development actors to assess and address conflict. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the implications of this analysis for conflict assessment and peacebuilding strategies in the region.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT ASSESSMENT AND PEACE PROGRAMMING

This article has argued that, in central Mali, ethnicity matters less than the interests, strategies, and interactions through which individuals, organizations, and communities seek security, influence, and survival. Adopting the label of “interethnic” or “intercommunity” conflict often leads to an overestimation of the role of ethnicity and a distorted reading of violence as an inevitable expression of pre-existing antagonisms (Bowen 1996; Brubaker 2004). In reality, organizations such as Katiba Macina or Dan Na Ambassagou are the main protagonists of violence, mobilizing ethnic references as resources of legitimacy rather than as fixed identities.

Violence such as the murderous attacks on Fulani and Dogon villages is often directed at civilian populations. Yet, whilst organizations are generally the protagonists of conflict and violence, they are not always the objects or targets. Moreover, whole categories of the population — or presumed groups — can be the objects of organized action much more easily than they can be the subjects or perpetrators of such action (Brubaker 2004).

This perspective calls for a rethinking of the categories used in both academic and operational analyses. Understanding these dynamics therefore requires localized, process-oriented approaches that take into account the specific configurations of power, interests, and organization in each context. Beyond its theoretical implications, this approach also offers practical guidance for evaluating and designing peacebuilding initiatives in central Mali. In particular, it highlights the need for HDP programs and similar interventions to move beyond the “intercommunity” framework and focus more directly on the organizational and contextual dimensions of conflict.

As the various testimonies and observations demonstrate, the local perspectives that form the basis of our approach often depart from the conventional “intercommunity” or “inter-ethnic” characterization of conflicts in central Mali. This context-based approach, grounded in the lived experiences and personal or collective histories of local populations, reveals that what is commonly framed as an ethnic struggle is, in reality, a complex and evolving web of organizational interests, social relations, and political economies of violence. The evidence gathered throughout our research — corroborated in the preceding analyses — thus supports the view that so-called intercommunity or interethnic conflict, “which might better be called ethnicized or ethnically framed conflict” (Brubaker 2004:166), may in fact mischaracterize the nature of these confrontations and deserves to be critically rethought. By basing

peace education and violence prevention efforts on a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, practitioners can more effectively support local capacities for negotiation and coexistence. Ultimately, only by acknowledging this complexity can both researchers and practitioners hope to produce more accurate diagnoses and to design more contextually appropriate and sustainable pathways toward peace in central Mali.

This has direct implications for both conflict assessment methodologies and the design of peacebuilding interventions. In particular, it invites a reconsideration of the conceptual frameworks underpinning the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus approach. Conflict analyses conducted by international NGOs and development agencies in central Mali often rely on pre-established typologies — such as “intercommunity” conflict — used to identify the root causes of violence and to guide programming priorities. However, as shown above, these typologies tend to obscure the complexity of conflict dynamics and the diversity of actors involved. By privileging ethnic categories as units of analysis, they risk naturalizing divisions and reinforcing the very social boundaries that interventions aim to transcend. A more accurate understanding of conflict requires a shift from ethnic or community categories toward a focus on organizational logics, local micro-dynamics, and the interplay of interests and alliances at individual and village levels.

In practical terms, this means that HDP programmes should integrate finer-grained, context-specific analyses capable of capturing variations in actors’ motivations and forms of organization. Conflict assessment tools should thus be adapted to identify the mechanisms of mobilization, patterns of negotiation, and networks of interdependence that link local populations, armed groups, and external intermediaries. This shift also has methodological implications for peace education and violence prevention activities. Rather than promoting abstract notions of “intercommunity reconciliation,” programmes should support initiatives that cultivate critical awareness of how violence is organized and instrumentalized, and that reinforce existing local capacities for mediation and negotiation. Such an approach does not deny the salience of ethnic identities in the perception of conflict, but seeks to reposition them within broader relational and organizational configurations. It also helps to prevent the reification of ethnic boundaries in intervention strategies, allowing for more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable peacebuilding processes.

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