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COMMUNITY VERSUS NETWORK ON THE COMMODIFICATION OF COWS IN THE MANDE MOUNTAINS (MALI - GUINEA)¹

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Introduction

This article describes new manifestations of communal labour in the mountainous Sobara region, 80 kilometers southwest of Mali's capital Bamako, as a management strategy to cope with – and to take advantage of – rapid agricultural transformation and monetarisation of the economy² I will describe how the format of the *sansene* was traditionally a period of three or four days of communal labour and is nowadays used in this area as an organisational format to deal with new economic opportunities

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² Research in the period 1999-2002 has been financed by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences KNAW I would like to thank for discussion Wilfried van Damme, Peter Geschiere, and Stephen Wooten Fieldwork has been conducted in and around the village of Farabako (400 inhabitants) in the periods July 1999 November 1999, and March 2000 My host was Namagang Kante (born in 1964), the « compound manager » (*lu nyemogo*) In the period 1988 1997 about two years of fieldwork has been conducted in the region between the Mande hills and the river Niger (the area with the administrative centers Kangaba, Narena, and Siby)

Calculations about time and money are crucial in this process of appropriating a culturally specific interpretation of the *sansènè*: this form of communal labour demonstrates how people cope with conceptions of « real » time and wage labour in a context where aspects of the market economy are encroaching into the region. I will argue that the chosen strategy aims to exclude money and the idea of wage labour, although « rational » economic calculations seem to be made constantly. Hence, the issue of the commodification process requires particular attention. My case study will problematise – but not refute – « classic » views – expressed for instance by Marx and Simmel and discussed by Maurice Bloch and Jane Guyer – on the presumed destruction of kinship ties and the increasing individualisation produced by the introduction of money. Moreover, it seeks to discuss the cultural dimensions of currencies, not so much by emphasising the symbolic representations of currencies, but rather by describing actual ways of dealing with currencies in the practice of everyday life.

Although this article contains a description of only one case, a few more or less similar *sansènè* events were observed. The observed tendencies to cope with time and money certainly are valid in the field of alleged « ritual labour » in large parts of West Africa. I will argue that commodification does not lead immediately to monetarisation; it seems that people actually make a lot of effort to exclude the idea of money from many events. Thus, this case study illustrates the idea that « Plutôt que d'opposer "leur" ethos économique au "nôtre", il serait plus juste d'explorer les articulations possibles et souvent originales de structures locales avec l'économie marchande moderne » (Geschiere, 1994: 89).

I will relate my description of the *sansènè* to more general developments occurring within the organisation of communal labour in a region located in the South of Bamako. I will suggest the idea that cows tend to be replaced by money when the social configurations of the rituals' participants change: cows have a functional role in a « community configuration » while money is appropriate in a context where networking is crucial. Moreover, given the fact that monetary transactions can easily be increased in

terms of speed – in contrast to transactions in cows – there seems to be a prerequisite for meeting the increased demands of gifts in present-day Mande ritual

The Sobara region: geography, settlement principles and economic activities

The Sobara sub-region is on the western limits of a region called Monts Manding. Although there is only a distance of 100 kilometers to Mali's capital, Bamako, the region is very isolated and has a poor transportation infrastructure. In recent years trucks have sometimes entered the area during the rainy season (July–August), but often they are trapped for several days in the maze of small rivers and brooks that transform, after heavy rains, the Sobara into a region dominated by wild waterways (there are no bridges in the entire region). Before World War II, population density in the Sobara region and the Mande hills in general was about 2 per square kilometer (Zobel 1996). Nowadays, I estimate it – on the basis of written documents and interviews with school teachers – to be between 10 and 15 persons per square kilometer.

During the rainy season two thirds of the population of the village of Farabako – where I conducted fieldwork (see note 2) – spent the majority of their time in the « hameau de culture » (*buguda*) of Kalifabugu in the neighbouring region of Bintanya. During the 1920s and 1930s Bintanya's population declined significantly because of a « mysterious » disease (Zobel 1996), and it is still not densely populated. People live in Kalifabugu until there is no more water in the brooks, which is said to be in February. In the Bintanya area lands have been cleared by several Sobara villages since the 1980s.

Harvests are often good (though life is not luxurious compared to elsewhere), but I expect problems when the fields become exhausted because of future population and economic pressure – after having been cultivated for five to seven years, land must lay fallow for ten to twenty years. In 1999, I observed that the Kalifabugu people actively cleared parts of the bush around the settlement. When such fields are cleared, they provide firewood for

the next year(s). Only the shea « karité » trees are not cut, because they supply essential products (medicine, butter, oil).

People's attitude towards agriculture has changed a lot. The habit of saving surpluses has been abandoned; present-day « compound managers » (*lu-nyèmògòw*) sell all their surplus. « Our generation likes money a lot (*wari ka di an ye*) », said Nfaly Kante (*ca.* 1957-2001), the eldest brother of my host in Farabako, Namagan Kante. Nfaly said this when I discussed his parents' strategies. Surplus is sold to merchants from Bamako. In return people purchase « luxury » goods, such as batteries, sugar and salt. These trading networks have existed since the reforms of agricultural production in the 1980s which gave more opportunities to private entrepreneurs (Diarra, Staatz & Dembélé 2000). The huge population growth of Bamako must also be an important factor in the development of the Sobara economy³.

The pro-capita production is relatively high in the Sobara. Since health conditions have improved a lot in the past decades⁴, there is an important labour force, and very few old people. Old people told me that, in the past, people used to die young. And even these old people work almost daily in the fields close to the village.

Labour groups between exchange and money economy

J.J.: How much does a day's labour by one man cost?

³ The famous « Intensitätsmodel » of Johan Heinrich von Thunen, published in 1826, predicts that agriculture is not determined by soil, but by transportation costs. Therefore close to the market (the metropole) one finds dairy production and horticulture, and further away extensive cattle breeding (for meat production) and extensive agriculture. This is exactly what I witness in the areas of my research in Siby (mangoes), Bancoumana, and Kangaba many people are involved in horticultural projects (mangoes, bananas, vegetables). From these villages products can be transported within a few hours to Bamako. The Sobara region specialised in staple crops, such as millet and maize.

⁴ There is one male nurse in the entire region. Moreover, government controlled vaccination programs take place annually in the villages of the Sobara region.

Reply: Twenty people cost four thousand *dòròmè* (= a unit of 5 F CFA, therefore 4 000 *dòròmè* = 20 000 F CFA = 200 FF = 30 euro).

J.J.: Aha, this means a day's labour by one man costs 200 *dòròmè*.

Reply: No, twenty people cost four thousand.

I had this type of conversation on many occasions during my fieldwork in Sobara. Here, it is interesting to note that a group is paid as a group. Elsewhere, for instance in Narena, Siby or even Bamako, a man's wage for one day was calculated in terms of the individual's labour cost. Thus, the labour wage was the same in Farabako and Bamako: 1 000 F CFA per person per day. In addition to the salary, the Bamako or Siby employer has to feed the employee (a meal for lunch). However in Sobara the employer has to offer a wide range of services (*infra*) in addition to the reward for labour. Therefore when calculated in terms of money, wages in Sobara are higher than in Bamako! This is remarkable, since one would expect higher wages in a area where daily living is much more expensive and where « luxury » goods are less in demand. Moreover, these remunerations are much higher than those mentioned by Zobel for communal labour by a « lineage » in the neighbouring region of Kenieba Congo (Zobel 2000: 50-56).

High wages are evidence of labour scarcity. People may argue that 20 000 F CFA for twenty people is a symbolic remuneration and 1 000 F CFA is an individual salary. I tend to acknowledge them both in terms of labour prices. Since land in Sobara is abundant, agriculture is profitable and labour costs are high – apparently this is particularly the case in August when the demand for labour is high. As Bamako's population is rapidly growing (5% annually, it is said), partly due to immigration, labour is abundant in the metropolis.

The fact that people are not employed as individuals but as a group, is a strategy to manage production conditions that are characterised by labour-extensive agriculture, low population density, no immigrant labour and no land scarcity in a barely monetarised context (cf. Geschiere 1995, for a comparable organisation of labour groups in comparable economic parameters

in East Cameroon). The remuneration earned by a labour group is not divided among its members but used for communal goals, such as the communal eating of a cow on a festive day. The Sobara people explained this to me in the following way: «In the rainy season you work for your family, and in the dry season you are free to go wherever you want, and then you can keep the money you earn»⁵

A « sansènè » performance in Konsori as a temporary labour organisation

The tension between market production and « traditional » labour remuneration is illustrated by a collective labour event in which the Farabako people are involved. The people in Farabako defined a period of collective labour as *sansènè* (*san* = year, rain, *sènè* = agriculture, *sansènè* = collective agriculture during the rainy season or annual agriculture, « culture de l'année », according to Leynaud (1966: 51)). A *sansènè*, I was told, is remunerated by the owner of the field with a cow (*must*). Sometimes a *sansènè* is therefore called a *mustikè* (in this case *kè* = *ci* = agriculture). A *sansènè* begins with the offering of ten kola nuts – a sign of respect – to the person who has to « collect » the labour forces in his own community.

A *sansènè* is undertaken with approximately twenty men over three or four days. In my perspective, people implicitly calculated a daily remuneration of 1 000 FCFA per person. This can be deduced from the price of cows. A cow's price is related to the quantity of meat the cow represents. In the Sobara region, in 1999, a cow costed 70 000 FCFA (about 100 euro). However, a bull (*tura*) in good shape cost between 100 000 and 110 000 FCFA. A young cow cost 50 000 to 55 000 FCFA. Prices of cows are slightly higher in Bamako, but the people of this part of Sobara (in contrast to Nioumala, a village in Southern Sobara where *sansènèw* no longer

⁵ See, for a similar way of reasoning, the title of Stephen Wooten's PhD (1994).

existed) said that they did not sell cows for money; they got their money via maize and millet sales.

In early September 1999 I was told that the Farabako people were to perform the *ciwara* headdress the following week in Konsori, a small village about 20 kilometers away. The *ciwara* was to be performed after a three day *sansènè* that would consist of weeding Konsori's maize and millet fields. I was told that we were invited by Konsori's village chief Musa Camara who was to reward the Farabako people with a *selitura*, a bull that would be consumed during a feast (*seli*).

Along with Modibo Keita (born 1958) from Farabako, I went to Konsori on a Monday afternoon. At night it appeared that many adolescents and adult men from Farabako as well as their younger sisters or daughters were in Konsori⁶. I stayed in the house of Modibo Keita's parents-in-law. My host Namagan had put me in touch with Modibo because he was the central person in the organization of the *sansènè*: his father-in-law who was not the village chief appeared to be the owner of the fields the Farabako people had to work on. Although over three days Konsori's village chief was the point of reference in frontstage meetings, backstage Modibo's father-in-law was the organiser. For instance, each morning all the Farabako men gathered in his house for a communal breakfast porridge. Thus, by associating me to Modibo, the Farabako delegation took great care of me.

The night of arrival, at 8 p.m., I heard *jenbe* music and horns blowing. It appeared that eight men of approximately 23 (!) years old from Farabako were welcomed by the Konsori population⁷. Children sang a song in which they were praised as *namakèw*

⁶ The fact that men are accompanied by women can be related to notions of being human, according to Leynaud (1966: 61). I have not investigated this aspect.

⁷ I was told the *namakèw* are normally seven people. Leynaud mentions a mask called *Nama Seki* (*seki* = eight) in the village of Kenyèguè (Leynaud 1966: 64) and this is quite confusing to me. Among the men who entered the village, one blew a *namaburu* (*nama* = horn/trumpet), two blew a *burulen* and one had a *daba* (hache) in his hand.

(= male *nama*, plural), the persons who (are said to) work the entire *sansènè* period from dusk to dawn⁸.

The *namaw* received better food than the other workers and each day a small additional sum of money for cigarettes. Leynaud (1966: 63) relates the *nama* to the hyena, one of the animals celebrated during agricultural work and as a representation of the chief of the workers. However, I suggested several times translating *nama* as « hyena » – using my dictionary – but every time this was rejected by my informants, who only recognised *nama* as « hyena » on second thought: for them *surukun* was « hyena ».

On the first day of the *sansènè* the Farabako people went to the fields late because of heavy rains. They also returned quite early, almost exhausted by the heavy labour conditions. At night, again, the *namakèw* were welcomed in the village with the same song (I forgot to check whether they had « pre-returned » to the village in the afternoon).

On the second day, the weather was better and at 7.30 a.m. most of the men had gone to the fields. At 11 a.m. I accompanied the girls who brought meals to the people in the fields⁹. I observed that people were weeding, slowly walking uphill, shoulder to shoulder, in groups of around ten people. Their work was accompanied by music (guitar, *jenbe*, *dundun*) and singing. The group of *namakèw* and some agemates from Konsori worked separately from the rest and ate their meal later. This group was called the *baaranyèmògòw* (= labour chiefs).

⁸ In March 2001, in Paris, I discussed the *sansènè* with a Malian who had spent his youth in the late 1940s and 1950s in Siby, and he said that during a *sansènè* the young men did not return to the village at all, but spent an entire week (sic) in the bush

⁹ People consumed porridge, with sauce and meat, but also kola nuts, tobacco powder, cigarettes, and – hidden from the public – paracetamol and a tablet with ephedrine (a mild slow acting non-addictive drug that may cause insomnia and restlessness) People call all these tablets, even hard drugs such as amphetamines, (*furakise* = medicine) I did not see the consumption of hard drugs during *sansènèw* but these are consumed in large quantities by gold diggers in the mines in the Kouremale area

During the « lunch » break, Modibo collected a pebble stone with every man from Farabako. It appeared that 35 people from Farabako were present, but the entire labour group was composed of approximately 60-70 men, whose age ranged from 15 to 50. Soon after the break it started to rain. We all sought protection under shelters made of reed and bamboo. When the rains subsided people went to work again. At 4 p.m. most of the people had returned to Konsori. At 8 p.m. again the *namakèw* were welcomed with the same music as the nights before.

« Real time » matters

The third day, early in the morning, I heard that the Konsori people did not want to give a bull anymore. They argued that the rains had spoiled the work on the fields and that therefore they would give a cow instead of a bull¹⁰. The Farabako men were upset and a meeting was called at 7.45 a.m. Within half an hour it was decided that a bull would still be given if the people worked hard until 3 p.m.¹¹ Then the owners of digital watches decided to listen to Radio France to determine the « Real Time ». After resetting their watches they hurried to the fields.

That morning I heard Namagan complaining to someone from Farabako about the Konsori people. He suggested they go to a marabout (Koranic scholar) in Bamako next time. In Bamako Namagan said marabouts can give you in exchange for

¹⁰ The fields which the Farabako people had been weeding during this three days' *sansènè* were estimated to produce a harvest of 2 millions FCFA. The bull, the additional prestations and food will not exceed 200 000 FCFA. From an economic point of view the *sansènè* was thus an investment representing about 10% of the total revenue.

¹¹ That morning, when I walked to the fields with Namagan and another man, Namagan complained to this person that this discussion was spoiled by the idea that a cow represents 70 000 FCFA. He argued that it was commonly known that the reasonable price was only 50 000 FCFA, and that prices had increased recently. Therefore, the bull's price was also much lower and Farabako's request to maintain the promise of a bull was reasonable. I know for sure that Namagan will never sell one of his own cows for this « reasonable » price...

10 000 FCFA, a written promise that it will not rain during the *sansènè* scheduled. In case of rain the marabout will then re-pay with a cow!

At 2 p.m. some adult men stopped work in order to pray while most continued to work. As 3 p.m. approached people tended to check their watches more and more and when all watches had reached « 15.00 h. », the men shouted and yelled and immediately went home. Some people from Konsori protested with hesitation that those who had prayed should continue for another ten minutes but this protest soon subsided (in Konsori a large part of the population is Muslim compared to Farabako)¹². After we had all washed and dressed the *ciwaraw* were danced. After the dances all groups involved « gave account of themselves » (= *ka dantègè[li kè]*) by addressing the village chief. This custom, which consists of many exchanges of kola nuts, very small amounts of money, small speeches, blessings and recitations of names, is a standardised way to start and to close a formalised procedure in Mande. At dawn the event was over and to my surprise most of the Farabako people returned home the very same evening. Again it seemed that « real time » mattered. When I returned to Farabako in March 2000, people told me that the bull had already been consumed at the end of Ramaddan.

The economics of the *sansènè* – historical dimensions

Only after this event I was informed that this performance in 1999 was the first time the Farabako people had performed the *ciwara*. Men who were born in the 1950s and 1960s said they had never danced the *ciwara* though their « fathers » (*faw*) had done so. I was also told that ideally the *namaw* should consist of members of the same « age group » (*kare*). However, « traditional » age groups

¹² On my way back to Farabako, the next morning, a young man from Farabako complained to me that the Farabako people actually had to work too hard but no one was supposed to say anything about it in public, since this would be shameful for Modibo Keita (whose father-in-law had invited the Farabako people)

have disappeared all over Mande (Jansen 1998; Zobel 2000) and therefore « now we just take young men of the same age, but that is not the same », according to Boubacar Keita, one of the *namaw*. In this section, it will be argued that – more than I conclude from Imperato (1980) and Wooten (2000) – the changes in the social basis of *ciwara* performances in Sobara show the evidence of a break with the past.

First-hand accounts of performances by *ciwara* headdresses are rare (Imperato 1970, 1980; Wooten 2000). Artistic descriptions (Zahan 1960, 1980) do not contain ethnographic data and thus Leynaud's data on the *sansènè* (Leynaud 1966) are unique in Mande ethnography and provide my only point of reference; he demonstrates how many changes occurred in a few decades and how original the Sobara *sansènè* trajectory is. Reading Zobel (2000: Chapter 3) on neighbouring Kenieba Congo, one may even expect that the kind of *sansènè* observed by Leynaud never existed in the Sobara region.

Leynaud did most of his research in the area East of the Monts Manding (Leynaud & Cissé 1978). This is an area on the western side of the left bank of the river Niger and south of Bamako. Leynaud's descriptions of village *tonw* (« Sociétés de Jeunesse et de Travail ») are crucial to the analysis of the *ciwara* performance in Farabako. These *tonw* are, according to Leynaud (1966: 41): « les formes les plus originales de l'entraide et de l'organisation communautaire de travail. [...] elles combinent les activités productives et la formation civique et culturelle. Par ailleurs, dans bien des villages, elles sont, dans une certaine mesure, les prolongements laïques des sociétés d'initiation (*Ntomo*, *Tyiwara*, *Kwore*, *Nama*) ».

The *ton* combines the idea of a contract (*dye*)¹³ with the idea of a community of initiated persons (*dyo*) (1966: 45). As an example of a practice by a *ton* Leynaud mentions the *sansènè*, but

¹³ For me it is unclear which concept Leynaud refers to: the dictionaries give *jè* as coming together, which is not the same as a contract. See *jekabaara* (*infra*).

this is said to be done by two age groups together (1966: 45-46) According to Leynaud, a *sansènè ton* is a « société de culture de l'année » (1966: 51) Collective work on the fields often consisted of three days of labour (1966: 59-61); the associations were remunerated with money (!), tobacco and kola nuts (1966: 60). He points out that

[] également qu'au cours de cette période l'accent est mis sans cesse sur la valeur sacrée du travail (*tyi*) et que les travaux se déroulent dans une ambiance d'exaltation systématique Il s'agit d'être ou « héros » du travail, ou « fauve » du travail (*tyiwarà*) sans que le lien entre activité du *tō* et ancienne société d'initiation soit toujours appréhendé avec précision

Leynaud does not mention a *ciwara* performance in combination with a *sansènè* which is not held on communal fields Leynaud conducted his research around 1960, just after Mali's independence when Modibo Keita's US-RDA introduced a kolkhoz-like model for society. Here the village was the central unit of production in which the youth were actively mobilised in associations that had to represent the egalitarian characteristics of a group of men circumcised together Thus, age groups and work groups were organised as formal youth groups (Davis 2000: 301).

This *ton* model marked a break from the system in which production was based on kinship (terms) or age groups yet always supervised by old men. The « Sociétés de Jeunesse et de Travail » were modeled on the basis of solidarity in initiatory or religious associations (Leynaud 1966: 44). For the Haut-Niger area, Leynaud estimated that there were 9 000 *ton* members for a population of 75 000 inhabitants (1966: 51-52). Thus the organisational basis varied greatly: some *tonw* were based on kinship but the *Mali tonw* mainly organised the village youth After Mali's independence in 1960 the *Mali ton* quickly became dominant in the organisation of village life and in some villages it incorporated the other *tonw* (1966.58, note 1). However in the Monts Manding this kind of *tonw* seems never to have existed (Zobel 2000: Chapter 2). The *tonw* continued older practices Leynaud writes (1966: 56) . « En outre, les sociétés de jeunes, lorsqu'elles sont la projection laïque de confréries religieuses (*Nama*, *Kworè*), possèdent des masques, des

instruments et des emblèmes symboliques qui appartenaient en propre à ces *dyo* alors qu'ils ont souvent disparu sous l'influence de l'islam ».

The US-RDA policy, in combination with macro-economic changes and reorganisations that have since affected the Malian economy has led in most parts of Mande (lowlands as well as hills) to a form of agricultural production operated by increasingly smaller production units (for instance a few brothers of the same mother hire labour a few times a year). Leynaud has been criticised for over-emphasising the *ton*'s economic function in agricultural production in the 1960s (Imperato 1980), but his data offer a framework to interpret and understand the Sobara *sansènè*.

The *sansènè* as it is practiced in the Sobara is different from the one described by Leynaud; in Konsori the Farabako men had to weed an enormous hill-side « owned » by an individual and Leynaud pictures the *sansènè* on the village's communally cultivated fields. For Leynaud (1966: 67) the *sansènè* was « un puissant levier pour la modernisation rurale dans le terroir du vieil empire du Mali » and in a paradoxical way he was right: the *sansènè* accomplished rural modernisation which has resulted in the *sansènè* being replaced by more individualised forms of labour remuneration as well as by new interpretations of old rituals such as the 1999 *sansènè* by the people from Farabako.

Leynaud seemed to be unaware of *sansènè*'s cultural and regional dynamics. A crucial difference between Leynaud's *sansènè* and the one I observed in Konsori was the absence of money in the latter case. Moreover the additional gifts to the visiting labour group seemed to have been absent in Leynaud's times in his area. Thus Leynaud, working in the 1960s, does not mention situations in which a *sansènè* format was preferred over other formats for cultivating large fields – in his definition the *sansènè* is a blueprint of existing social relations in a patriarchal society. However, the Sobara example demonstrates that the *sansènè* is an actively negotiated cultural institution.

I seek to explain the logics of the *sansènè* through the absence of both cash and wage labour in combination with labour shortage

in the context of promising economic opportunities and with the means of extensive agriculture. For me the services of the collective labour can be compared to wage labour under similar circumstances in a highly monetarised and flourishing economy. Geschiere discusses whether « wage labour in disguise » is an appropriate term (1995: 505) for such a form of collective labour. Indeed, my detailed description of the discussion on the size of the bull/cow and the quarrels about time justify this point of view¹⁴. Following Geschiere, I think the term « festive labour » for a phenomenon like the *sansene* described in this paper is inappropriate. Yet I admit that the importance attached to « giving account of » is evidence that the *sansene* is « more than merely an economic institution » (1995: 514). Moreover it is significant that I have never heard the term *jekabaara* (réunir-et-travailler) though it is noted in the dictionary as meaning « collective labour » but which according to Davis (2000: 297) also refers to « collective labour for private individuals in other villages ».

Money was excluded in the Sobara *sansene*. The « idea » of wage labour was also « not welcome » within the village (cf. Geschiere 1995: 504), yet an object to be consumed collectively on one location during a festive day was accepted. However on the spot it appeared that this object's price was arguable. Hence, the *sansene* has been « commodified » in a non monetarised context.

Landowners in the Sobara are creative in employing labour groups¹⁵. My host Namagan Kante announced me early October 1999 a *ballonci* which may be translated as « soccer agriculture ». He described it as an institutionalised form of agriculture but one may doubt whether this is the case. Namagan said that the youth

¹⁴ Leynaud describes the people involved in a *sansene* as « exalted ». In the Konsori case exaltation was absent: the people were aware of the fact that they were invited to work and that they were supposed to work hard. Afterwards I heard some complaints that they had to work too hard.

¹⁵ The *sansene* format was also used for labour payment within the village. For instance, three brothers invited from Farabako invited eighteen persons for two days of labour in both 1998 and 1999, the cow was consumed in 1998.

from a neighbouring village would come to work communally in order to gain shirts for their soccer team. This may show the origin of the *ballonci* but since any village nowadays has shirts for its soccer team the labour should be remunerated differently. In practice Namagan offered the young labourers and their female company good food and batteries (to have a party) plus 500 FCFA (0.84 euro) for each young man. Although still slightly higher this labour price reflects the one mentioned by Zobel for the « modernised » neighbouring region of Kenieba Congo (Zobel 2000: Chapter 3). This low price may be explained by the fact that the labour took place in the « quiet » period between weeding and harvesting when the clearing of new lands was undertaken. However this low price also underlines how expensive a *sansènè* is.

From community to network; on speed and time at large

On a regional level, the *sansènè* « nouveau style » is a disappearing or marginal phenomenon. Young men in Nioumala, a relatively rich and Islamised Sobara village, told me that they had abandoned the *sansènè* for two reasons. The most important one was that it was too expensive for the organiser to provide everyone with food and drinks. Thus, the « festive » part « on the spot » puts too much pressure on the organiser's budget and labour seems to be « rationalised ». Things must have changed dramatically since Leynaud calculated that the *sansènè* was a cheap form of labour (1966: 60). It is interesting to note that according to both Leynaud (1966: 62) and Zobel (2000: 56) the money earned during collective labour was used to pay festivities, while the Sobara people prefer a cow, to be consumed communally. From a « pure » economic perspective, one wonders if the prices for cattle have increased relative to the price for wages. A totally different reason for the *sansènè*'s disappearance was the young men's fear of performing a *namaw* since on one occasion a man had given them black coffee with hard drugs to improve the labour output.

People work a lot on each others' fields but not so much on community fields (*fòròbaw*) – it is generally known that the amount

of « village » fields has decreased substantially in the 20th century. For Farabako, the Keita and the Kante each had a *foroba*, but the harvests of these fields were sufficient to feed the people only until February-April – which is half of the agricultural annual cycle. Thus the people from Farabako seem to be as many others in the Sobara and beyond, in a highly dynamic and regionally variable transitory process from collectivity to individual entrepreneurship. Others however (Wooten, Zobel) suggest the decreasing importance of the communal fields is a deliberate strategy of variation in the production processes.

Such observations on the « re-organisation » of agricultural production, I would argue, add a level of sociological observation to Mande society and ritual at large. This leads to the hypothesis that Mande notions of community and the annual calendar are gradually being replaced by notions of personal network and wage labour.

In colonial times administrators complained that the people in the Mande hills used cows to arrange marriages rather than for « economic exploitation ». However people do (and did) exploit cows, but in a culturally specific way. Cows are used to remunerate communal labour groups which in turn increase agricultural production. As objects of transaction within arranged marriages, they tended to be replaced by money. The dynamics of these processes can be explained by observing closely the transformation of cattle into a currency. Klamer and Van Dalen (2000) argue that a society can use anything as a currency « Money is the stuff that makes up one side of each trade [.]. Anything can serve as such stuff, at least as if it satisfies certain conditions. Cows have been used, but also stones, salt and gold, of course » This is a mistake based on a static perception of currencies. Where metal does not change physically, cattle do – when a cow reaches a certain age, or a bull reaches a certain weight, one must consume it. A cow however is worth a lot in (marriage) transactions at a relatively young age. Thus as a currency cattle have their own logics which require cattle-connected economic strategies. Since beef cannot be preserved a cow has to be consumed at once and in one locality.

Thus remuneration using cattle implies that the people who worked for it must be on the same location when the cow is consumed. Hence remuneration with cattle produces community festivities. Money, however, has different potentials; it can travel and it can be divided. Therefore money is to be used in contexts where the labour force quickly splits up after the work has been done. Moreover money can be re-used (for investments) after it has been divided. Purely « economical » money is thus a more productive currency than cattle.

In Farabako it was considered as problematic in the long run that in marriage arrangements fewer and fewer cows and more and more cash were being « used ». However my plan to go to Bamako to sell a cow to solve this problem was dismissed as impossible. Cows seem to be used to mobilise social relations (marriage, labour) whilst surplus harvest is used for cash. This economic chain should not be shortened by selling the cows directly – probably people « knew » that the cows were an investment in the local economy and thus increasing the harvest was the most profitable, socially as well as economically.

A similar « logic » can be applied to the use of money. While a cow is rather immobile and can be consumed by a group, money has different characteristics – it is more mobile than cattle and easy to divide. Thus the speed of monetary transactions is a parameter to measure the economy as well as the complexity of social relations and transactions. My hypothesis is that money necessarily replaces cows in situations where social and economic relations have passed a point of no return. This point is reached when business and personal network relations have become more important than kinship and community relations.

The growing importance of personal network and business relations is illustrated by the exploration of new time frames. Every man has a field for which he is responsible. Often he is joined by his siblings or half-siblings. During the rainy season everyone has to arrange a group to work on his field. This is a complex strategy for the head of each household since you are allowed to be replaced by a young man in your household (a younger biological brother, or

classificatory « brother » or « son »). These young men often have their own agendas and obligations which can lead to serious discussions about time management. This again shows the high demand for labour in the Sobara region – everyone tries to cultivate as much as possible and explains the high remunerations for labour.

The discussion on remuneration is connected to a discussion on the unity of labour: time. The discussions related to the *sansènè* in Konsori are not simply a local response to new economic opportunities; there is more at stake. I would argue it is perhaps a process of « disciplinisation » in which new conceptions of time are imposed or voluntarily introduced (cf. Elias 1996, for Mali; Arnoldi 1995: Chapter 4).

The discussions about the amount of work necessary for the prestation of the bull in exchange is an example of many changes in the time frame the Sobara people had to cope with in the 20th century. For instance in August 1999, circumcision was done communally in Kalifabugu. I knew from ethnographic literature that such a ritual « should » take place in the dry season (Leynaud & Cisse 1978; Arnoldi 1995: 106-113). However the school teachers had announced that they would exclude from classes the children who did not attend school for a prolonged period during to the dry season¹⁶. Thus the circumcision was transposed to the wet holiday months – a phenomenon that is also observed elsewhere in West Africa (De Jong 2001: 72). This transposition to the wet season has had major effects on the ritual. First, the threat of infections has increased dramatically because of the humidity. Secondly, people are in the fields and thus circumcision cannot be celebrated within the village, hence creating an age group that will work communally in the future¹⁷. In the case of Farabako in 1999

¹⁶ In many Sobara villages there have been local initiatives to construct schools. The school teachers are paid by the community. These school teachers can be very coercing in determining the organisation of education; there is a shortage of school teachers in Mali.

¹⁷ Young men are now circumcised at a younger age and the period of exclusion has decreased also. These factors have had a major impact on the disappearance of performances of age groups in West Africa. Moreover

the circumcision took place in Kalifabugu the boys from Farabako were circumcised together with sons of other temporary residents of Kalifabugu from neighbouring villages. In the future this group of boys will never be able to act as age groups once did. For example when doing collective prestations during the dry season (undertaking restoration of houses and roads) because they will not be on the same location during the dry season¹⁸. Thus, the schooling system is partially responsible for the disappearance of collective labour/age groups¹⁹.

Another time frame with which the « traditional calendar » has to cope is the Islamic calendar. The great Islamic feasts (end of Ramaddan and Tabaski) have priority over other ceremonies, which are then postponed, sometimes for a year, sometimes for a week (see Jansen 1998: 260-262 for discussions of the calendar of the famous septennial Kamabolon ceremony in Kangaba). It is clear that different notions of time are being negotiated, and this is often a highly politicised affair in which complex solutions must be created: people are really coping, even struggling with time.

Conclusion – cows as currencies and commodities

This paper described the collective labour called *sansene* in the Sobara region, an area in the Mande hills close the Guinean

circumcision is done more often, but for smaller groups (De Jong 2001 Chapter III).

¹⁸ Note that the *sansene* was still organised with the village of Farabako as a base, although most inhabitants of Farabako were in Kalifabugu at the time.

¹⁹ Not only the « Western » annual calendar has an impact, but also the Western weekly scheme has become coercing. Dieterlen and Cisse (1972: 255) write that a Komo ceremony should take place during a Wednesday to Thursday night. In Sobara (where Komo is still performed) however, it was a weekend thing. The ceremony took place on a Sunday night – which gives you the possibility to travel the entire weekend to the ceremony's location. Monday morning everyone was supposed to return. Data for the ceremonies appeared to be known in advance, thus facilitating the making of a travel plan for those wishing to attend the Komo ceremonies in the Sobara.

border It appeared that economic calculations in terms of money dominated the *sansènè* in practice, although the labour was remunerated with cattle This economic approach that focused on the negotiations preceding and during communal labour has not been described for the Mande region It appears to be a perspective to be applied to the study of the present-day *ciwara* performance, since the *sansènè* precedes a *ciwara* performance The Sobara way of implementing (and combining) *sansènè* to *ciwara* performance seems to be a culturally unique response to historically unique circumstances (Geschiere 1995) It is an efficient way of bringing into cultivation large areas that can produce grain to be sold in Bamako, a market that has been opened recently to the Sobara people, in a context of low population density and labour shortage However, the Sobara *sansènè* also demonstrates the almost global phenomenon of intrusion of capitalist entrepreneurship into the local market The all-encompassing model to adapt to market production is a western-based time conception.

The demand for high revenues leads to an intensified use of the available labour in the region and – in the short term – an intensification of ritual relationships (a phenomenon observed also elsewhere in Africa [Parkin 1968]) The increased demand for labour coincides with a « new » perception of time, on the one hand people aim to obey « traditional » calendars with « traditional » remunerations (a 3-4 day *sansènè* is remunerated with a cow), but on the other hand they use a « time is money » attitude The price of the investment (a *sansènè*) is high in terms of money – compared to labour costs elsewhere – but apparently profitable This demonstrates on the one hand that the local economy is flourishing, but on the other hand that people think it is useful to use money to invest in social capital on a regional/local level

The *sansènè* as it was observed in Sobara is an expensive form of cultivating fields which will disappear as soon as production circumstances change (increasing labour availability, lower revenues per hectare, economic growth via an increased speed of economic transactions, increasing importance of supra-regional networks). Historically the Sobara *sansènè* is related

to Mali's agricultural politics of the 1960s which stimulated large scale agriculture and seemed to have accelerated or caused the disappearance of the « old style » *ciwara* performance that was related to the *sansènè*. Remarkably, the « new style » *sansènè* is used in a process of transition from a world where production was community centered and remuneration collectively acquired to a world where individuals who produce for a market have to manage their networks and have to pay other individuals for labour. The commodification-without-monetarisation of cattle in daily life, as described in this article, illustrates how currencies are used in daily practice either to express feelings of community or to expand individuals' networks.

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Summary

This article describes new manifestations of communal labour in the mountainous Sobara region, 80 kilometers southwest of Mali's capital Bamako, as a management strategy to cope with – and to take advantage of – rapid agricultural transformation and monetarisation of the economy. Traditionally, the format of the *sansène*, was a period of three or four days of communal labour. Nowadays it is used in this area as an organisational format to deal with new economic opportunities. Although people seem to avoid calculations on labour costs and accept a cow as remuneration for their labour, it is illustrated that in the practice of everyday life both cows and money are currencies which are used with different meanings and intentions, depending on the context. People's interpretation of the *sansène* demonstrates how they cope with conceptions of « real » time and wage labour in a context where aspects of the market economy are encroaching into the region. It is argued that the chosen strategy aims to exclude money and the idea of wage labour, although economic calculations on profit and social capital seem to be made constantly

Key-words: Mali, Guinea, Mande Mountains, *sansène*, communal labour, community, network, currency, money, cows, market economy, economic calculation.

Résumé

Communauté ou réseau. La monétisation des vaches dans les Monts Mandingues (Mali-Guinée)

Cet article analyse les nouvelles modalités du travail collectif dans la région montagneuse de Sobara (à 80 Km au sud-ouest de Bamako, la capitale du Mali) comme relevant de stratégies qui permettent d'affronter (et de rentabiliser) les transformations rapides de l'agriculture et la monétarisation de l'économie. Traditionnellement, le *sansènè* consistait en une période de trois ou quatre jours de travail collectif. De nos jours, il est utilisé dans cette zone comme une forme d'organisation permettant une adaptation à la nouvelle conjoncture économique. Les participants semblent écarter toute évaluation du coût du travail et acceptent une vache comme contrepartie du travail fourni. Pourtant, dans la vie quotidienne, on peut observer que les vaches aussi bien que l'argent sont des monnaies dont les usages contextuels manifestent des intentions et des significations différenciées. Les interprétations locales du *sansènè* montrent comment s'élaborent les conceptions du temps « réel » et de la rémunération du travail dans un contexte régional d'extension de l'économie de marché. Nous montrerons que la stratégie privilégiée vise à exclure l'argent et la notion de rémunération du travail, alors même que s'effectue constamment l'évaluation économique du profit et du capital social mis en jeu.

Mots-clefs : Mali, Guinée, Monts Mandingues, *sansènè*, travail collectif, communauté, réseau, monnaie, argent, bétail, économie de marché, calcul économique.

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