The Journal of Modern African Studies, 38, 1 (2000), pp. 121–124
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Disentanglements

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A comment on the article 'Conflict or symbiosis? Disentangling farmer–herdsman relations: the Mossi and Fulbe of the Central Plateau, Burkina Faso', by Mark Breusers, Suzanne Nederlof & Teunis van Rheenen, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, 3, 1998: 357–81.

ABSTRACT

This comment is a reaction to an article dealing with farmer–herder relationships in Burkina Faso. It was argued that the relationship between Mossi and Fulbe is not deteriorating as has often been described in the so-called mainstream literature, and that the apparent open animosity between the two ethnic groups can partly be explained as a frontstage discourse with the aim of concealing personal wealth. The comment questions the use of historical data and the extent of secrecy in relation to personal wealth, and criticises the way in which the authors use terms like orthodoxy and mainstream to portray a broad set of ideas and theories.

The main ambition of the article is to question a so-called mainstream perception of the evolution of the farmer-herder relationship 'which conceives these relations as progressively deteriorating from an initial symbiotic situation' (p. 359). This deterioration is brought about by increased competition over the resources initiated by agricultural expansion, cash-cropping, population growth and a convergence of production systems where Mossi farmers increasingly adopt animal husbandry and Fulbe pastoralists increasingly adopt farming. The authors claim that in the literature 'a sometimes implicit assumption is the former existence of symbiotic relationships' (p. 360), in which each group exploits mutually exclusive ecological niches, with economic complementarity including the entrustment of Mossi owned cattle to Fulbe, and exchange relationships.

In the article the authors try to do this by showing that (1) conflict between Mossi and Fulbe is an old phenomenon; (2) mutual interests and complementary links still exist between these two groups; and (3) the apparent animosity between them as expressed verbally and through conflicts can be explained as a 'frontstage discourse' where the Mossi farmers need to show a common front against the Fulbe in order

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X99003274 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to maintain a pragmatic egalitarianism that conceals their true wealth, with cattle being entrusted in secret to the very same Fulbe with whom they are in open conflict.

With the article the authors not only enter the debate on the complex farmer–herder relationship, but also join the hunt for orthodoxies that has flourished in recent years. There have been numerous publications challenging received wisdom and mainstream thinking and some have led to important new insights in the environment–development debate, the empirical basis and origin of certain myths and narratives, and the vulnerability and cultural biases of much scientific work (see e.g. Behnke *et al*. 1993; Fairhead & Leach 1996; Leach & Mearns 1996; Tiffen *et al*. 1994; Mortimore 1998).

I have no doubt that the findings of the group of researchers is based on sound research and that their case material presented may lead to the conclusions drawn. However, my own Ph.D. thesis research in the Tenkodogo region (Boulgou province) of Burkina Faso gives a somewhat different impression, more along the lines of the so-called mainstream. Though my research is based in another region and concerns the relationship between Fulbe and Bisa rather than Mossi, there are striking similarities, and my objection is also concerned with general aspects of the article and the line of argument employed.

First, the authors show convincingly, with reference to French colonial archives, that there are indications that herder–farmer conflicts are no novelty. However, on this basis they conclude that 'there is *no indication* that "symbiotic" relations ever existed between Mossi and Fulbe' (pp. 367–8, their italics and quotes). This is true, but it does not imply that symbiotic relations did *not* exist. Their argument becomes even more puzzling as they go on to their own present-day analysis, where they show that there are indeed complementary links between the groups even though conflicts are common. These complementary links are the same that make up the contested symbiotic relations. So, the authors use archival material on conflicts to show that the 'mainstream' view of the symbiotic relationships is wrong, while their own research shows that complementary relations coexist with conflicts. This seems not really to support their rejection of so-called mainstream thinking.

Second, the authors stress the importance of taking the historical context into consideration. They do so by using the above-mentioned colonial archives to show that conflicts also existed before. However, they do not in their article show whether the conflicts and the entrustment are becoming more common or rarer, or are simply

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X99003274 Published online by Cambridge University Press

maintained at the existing level. This would be important information if the aim was to confront the mainstream view of deteriorating relationships between Mossi and Fulbe. So the authors do not really consider the evolution of the relationships. They merely argue that the symbiotic relations still exist, but not whether the increased competition over the resources, also present in their cases, has had any consequences. It would be interesting to know whether a change in the Fulbe grazing and settlement pattern has occurred, i.e. whether they have been forced to move out of the agricultural areas; whether the entrusting of Mossi cattle to Fulbe is practised to the same degree and whether the conditions for entrustment are the same, whether conflicts have become more numerous, and whether the magnitude of compensations paid has risen or not. Information of this kind would add to a better understanding of what is actually going on.

Third, the authors offer a compelling explanation as to why the Mossi maintain a hostile public discourse and at the same time entrust their animals to the Fulbe. The authors explain this by the need for the Mossi to hide their wealth which is translated into cattle. Secrecy in relation to wealth is no doubt an important issue and may offer part of the explanation. However, wealth is not always concealed. Other indicators of wealth are quite visible and conspicuously flaunted. The number of wives that a man can afford to marry as well as the quality and size of his houses, are indicators that cannot be and are not kept from display. Furthermore, a simple wealth-ranking with villagers would reveal that people have quite a precise idea of the wealth of all the individuals in a village, though they may not know the exact number of animals owned. Though I find the arguments of the authors interesting, I am not convinced that they explain the open animosity between the Mossi and Fulbe. My experience from a Bisa society where entrusting to Fulbe herders is also performed, does not point to entrustment as being kept secret. The number of animals entrusted may be secret, but there was no problem in getting to know that they did entrust animals, and even to whom the animals had been entrusted.

Fourth, I find the repeated reference to a bulk of literature and research as mainstream to be unjust. Framing something as mainstream has the effect of rendering these results less reliable, as it indicates that they are expressions of a 'received wisdom' that has been blindly replicated without proper empirical support, so that they are automatically taken for granted. There may be good reasons for criticising simplistic perceptions of complex farmer–herder relationships, but nominating a broad set of ideas on these relationships as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X99003274 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mainstream carries with it serious accusations. In the article I do not find evidence which justifies the criticism that the use of a term like mainstream implies. I am not sure when a set of ideas become mainstream, but based on my own research I do not see any reason why the mentioned views should be accused of being merely weakly founded mainstream. I am therefore left with the impression that labelling something as mainstream essentially has the purpose of distancing new findings from older ideas only to make the former appear more interesting.

To sum up, the article raises important questions about the evolution of the Mossi-Fulbe relationship and points to a possible explanation of an apparent paradox in the Mossi attitude towards the Fulbe. The authors are right in arguing that the farmer–herder relationship is very complex and that ethnic relations should be seen as more than a simple dichotomy. However, the authors seem eager to challenge orthodoxies, but do not present data that convincingly confront a set of ideas that can hardly be regarded as forming an orthodoxy.

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