



Existential Transformations

Life in the West African savannah since the 1970s: An outlook

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Existential Transformations

Life in the West African savannah since the 1970s: An outlook

Within a lifetime, Africans have witnessed a tremendous change of their lifeworld. Rarely in history has Africa passed through a period of such profound and sometimes overwhelming existential transformations – transformations, that affect all spheres of life. Changes of the natural environment, of the social order, culture and politics have attained a dimension that would have been beyond the imagination of most people fifty or sixty years ago – Africans, foreigners, policy makers and scholars alike. This change has many faces and facets, of which the experiential dimension is arguably the most fascinating for an anthropologist. A changing lifeworld leaves no sphere of life untouched, and the longer anthropologists take part in the lives of the people, the more they will become aware of how different life had been when they started to conduct their field research. Of course, that is a truism. However, after more than 40 years of fieldwork, one may ask oneself whether one has the right tools to trace the experience of profound change over such a long time. Hence the question raised in this paper: How do the people and ethnographers experience, live, remember and conceive the existential transformations that they have to face? How can an anthropologist evoke the experience of such existential change without reproducing preconceived patterns from the Global North?

This paper does not answer these questions in a plain and straightforward way. It rather experiments with different media, styles and genres. It aims at capturing *la longue durée* of my fieldwork among the Senufo in northern Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, by reproducing the messiness and often inconsistency of ethnographic experience. Ethnography is never the bare recording of what anthropologists have seen and heard. Right from the beginning, it is an experiential engagement of the anthropologist with the many fragments that the other lifeworld has for her or him (Bhimull et al. 2011). They can and often do fracture, disintegrate, and question the anthropologist's ethnographic imagination – long before it is cast into a narrative that may evoke the coherent image of a society or a societal milieu. Such fragmented depictions of ethnographic experience may be closer to social realities than the convincing, fixed ethnographic accounts that find a large audience in the academy or the Global Ecumene more generally.

In this paper, my ethnographic account of life in the West African savannah builds on two pillars: photography and oral conversations. Neither are they consistent as separate and self-referential »sources« nor are they simply two sides of the same coin. They are rather residues of my fragmented life-worldly experience over four decades.¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, when I began to conduct research among the Senufo,

1 I conducted fieldwork in northern Côte d'Ivoire since 1979. With the exception of the years 2003 through 2005, I worked among the Kafibele Senufo every year, in particular in the village of Nafoun, where most of the conversations reproduced in this issue had taken place (e.g. Förster 1997, 2019). I also dealt with methodological questions repeatedly over the years (e.g. Förster 2001, 2014, forthcoming, Förster et al. 2011).

I perceived the two media somewhat naively as two ways of recording my encounters with the people and their habitat. I assumed that the two media complemented each other, but that they provided different insights into my experience as an anthropologist: The photos were, I thought, like neutral recordings of what I had seen, while the conversations were somehow situated between my interlocutors and me, reflecting the situation in which we interacted as well as our knowledge of each other. When I used the photos and the conversations for my scholarly work, I increasingly became aware that they are two sides of the same coin, that is, a way of remembering that lingered between the experience of my friends and research partners and mine.

The photos were sometimes closer to their views, and then again closer to how I had seen, at the time, the lifeworld that we shared. What I saw through the viewfinder of my camera depended, among other things, on where my friends and research partners had taken me during the day. When they left for their field, I followed them – even when I must have been a sort of hindrance in their daily routines. I was slower than they were, and most often, I was not of much help when we finally reached the fields. But these walks brought me to places that I would not have seen otherwise. They often pointed at something that I should look at, sometimes a particular plant, then the shape of a field, and then signs that I would not have noticed myself. Some of them were traces of wild animals, others were related to agriculture and more generally, to human activities which had affected the vegetation and eventually the entire landscape. Very rarely did my partners ask me to take a photo. Notable exceptions were fields that they found remarkable because of the work that they bore witness to.

Sometimes, people were wondering about why I took photos of other subjects, in particular pictures of wider landscapes that they found boring. A photo was either depicting a person, a group of persons or what human beings had created or done. The fields – but also houses and yards – were examples of the latter genre. New bicycles and later motorcycles that they had worked for so long were other motifs, in particular when they were decorated. My friends would stop and pose in front of such vehicles and, where possible, in front of a car – even when they did not know the owner. They then asked me ‘to snap’ them there ‘so that everybody can see’. They very rarely told me who that ‘everybody’ would be.

The other medium, the conversations were mainly conducted in the yard where I lived. Neighbours, often of my age, met in front of my house. We were sitting on stools and narrow benches and spent the evenings chatting and ‘lying’, as the literal translation from Senari wants it. Narrative strands emerged and moved between oral genres. Some of them were fictitious as the fables of animals and other beings that were living deep in the wilderness, others were gossip about the latest stories of the neighbourhood or from

distant places where one or the other relative lived. Still other strands addressed village politics, and last but not least, they were about daily life and how it had sedimented in individual and collective memories. When somebody began to talk about an event in the past, he or she was sometimes corrected by those who were sitting on the other benches, listening and talking at the same time. By engaging in such village talk, the versions of how something had happened, of how the lifeworld had been at that time were constantly adapted to and by the interactions of the participants. The version that one would hear one evening could differ from that of the next evening.

The speakers sometime addressed all people sitting around them, but from time to time turned towards me as I was seen as a new resident of the village who needed additional background information. In the following pages, I have highlighted these passages from my field diary by aligning them to the right of the page. These passages were mainly addressed to me as many of my research partners knew that I was often asking for more background information. Those who had lived in town their entire lives would not have needed such additional explanations.

The excerpts do not reflect a sort of lived, now distant reality – neither mine nor theirs. I often tried to jot a few words down during the conversations – keywords that would help me to remember what had been said. But more often, I was not able to take notes as we mostly met in the evening when it was already dark. Electric streetlights were not mounted until the late 1980s, and most houses did not have power until much later. So, most of the notes were written after the conversations, some of them the same evening in the dim light of my kerosine lamp and others the next morning. When I scribbled into my diary, the words that I had heard, the sentences with their loose ends and the additions from those who were sitting around the speaker, were already woven into short narrative threads. I had already composed these threads in my mind whilst listening to remember better the flow of the often fragmented utterances and how they related to each other. Of course, they were already narrative strands when I heard them, but the form they adopted in my diary was informed by how I had remembered them.

Remembering is a discursive practice. We never remember alone. We remember “better” when we recall our memories to tell others about the past. We may also want to discuss with friends, colleagues and others whether our memories meet theirs. Sometimes, I asked a friend of mine to listen to these daily or rather vespertine conversations together with me and to come back the next day so that we could discuss again what we had heard and how I had jotted it down in my diary. We tend to forget about our past experience when nobody has an interest in it. Siriki Camara, who shared an interest in such subjects with me, was both a friend and a close research partner of mine until his premature death in 2012. His presence made me feel part of a small team.





It allowed me to say we instead of I. Remembering experience – pleasant as well as unpleasant – may leave traces below the horizon of our consciousness. And they may resurface again when we feel uneasy about what we had experienced. We may discover that our memories are not theirs, and we may question their or our own memories – or both. We always remember as members of society and hence, as actors in a discursive figuration.

What ethnographers keep in mind is relevant to them as anthropologists and mediators between two life-worlds. On the one hand, anthropologists often integrate in the society and lifeworld that they study. They may gradually lose the status of a stranger and turn into ordinary people. During this trajectory, anthropologists acquire the habits and routines of the societal milieu where they live. Intersubjectivity, preliminarily understood as the overlapping of perspectives, emerges where and when anthropologists and their partners share routines – and among them, sensory routines are an important part. For instance, ways of looking mirror shared intentions toward an element of the respective lifeworld. Ways of looking at something the same way thus transform that element into a shared intentional object – an object that could be addressed discursively and that is eventually remembered.

On the other hand, anthropologists are members of a scholarly community where they are regularly urged to communicate and to generalise on their lived experience and to formulate abstract statements about the perspectives of others and separately, on their own. The intentional objects that characterised the intersubjective perspectives of anthropologists and their partners are rarely recognised as one – although shared sensory experience and the intentions that they breed are the existential foundations of ethnography. They may, as Agassi (1969) assumed half a century ago, provide a privileged access to the social. However, anthropologists are expected to disentangle intentional objects and the intersubjective experience on which they build so that the lifeworld that they shared becomes visible as the lifeworld of *others*. Relevance unavoidably has a situational dimension, and there are situations that urge us to remember otherwise.

Evidently, remembering is not an extension of perception (Casey 2000a,b). As actors, anthropologists can and often do transcend previous and current perceptions. They relate them to what they have experienced later or in other places and life-worldly settings – but more so, remembering is subject to how we as social actors situated ourselves within a societal milieu and to the situational relevance of how we remember. Different situational frameworks shape past experiences and may give them another meaning – or, in some cases, radically subvert all meanings that we had thought to mirror former realities. Remembering has an imaginative dimension – even if we were eyewitnesses of what we remember, we may remember it differently than those who

witnessed the same time, place, event or thing – ourselves included. Remembering is neither the mere sedimentation of past experience nor is imagination simply the picture of another possible or fictitious life-worldly reality. Remembering and imagining build on the same human capacity to make sense of one's experience in a possibly different situation.

In the end, the photographs that I took are neither completely mine nor are the narratives from the conversations we had completely theirs. They are both somewhere in-between us, the peasants of Nafoun and me. Therefore, they will hopefully speak to each other – just as we spoke to each other.





The stream
beyond the village

October 1990. Soungmon Yéo, student, c 25 years, in a conversation with two friends and the anthropologist. His narration refers to the late 1960s.

When I was a child, the plain behind the village had been a large stream. It wasn't big during the dry season, but it was huge for us children when it rained. Or so it seemed when we were young. My mother used to cross that stream every morning. She often had to work in her garden on the other side where Pélésongou has his cashew nut plantation. Or she was invited to join her neighbours and relatives when they were working in their gardens nearby. At the time, the gardens at the fringes of the village were only for tobacco and a few spices – the strong, intense tobacco that our fathers used to smoke in their little black pipes ... that you could pay for in Bakary's tiny shop up the hill.

Well, that's what the men had when they were leaving for the fields each and every morning.

That one day, my mother had left the compound rather early. She told me that she wouldn't wait for me, and that she wasn't joking. 'You know me,' she said. 'You know me,' she said.

I was a toddler. I don't know how old I had been that rainy season. You know, we don't count years down here. But I know that my younger brother had not been born yet. When I walked behind my mother, I was always slower than she expected me to be. It wasn't easy for me to keep up with her. She walked fast – very fast for a small child like me! She could walk through a thicket, carry a stick in her hand, pointing at a fruit or something else on the ground, and one word would be enough to give you an order: 'look', she said. That meant that you should hasten to pick up that fruit and take it along to the field or the village when we were heading home the evening.

So, when she left that morning, I was still sipping my mush. I didn't pay attention when she told me again that she wouldn't wait for me. And then, she was gone. I knew that I had to run to catch up with her. I left quickly, not having finished my pap. I knew the way. But when I got to the plain, I knew that she must have passed there already. I saw nobody there. The road that led to Zanga [the neighbouring hamlet] was flooded. And I couldn't see the other end of the road.





That road is easy to walk during the dry season. Yes, there is water left and right – but it doesn't inundate the surface of the road. It's just there at the bottom of these plants that carry red and yellow flowers [Canna indica]. But during the rainy season, that road was completely covered with water. You needed to know where the pathway through the muddy water is – else you would fall right into the ditch where the flowers grew.

There were tiny pathways left and right of that road, and my mother used to take one of them as a shortcut to her garden. I knew that way as well, but again, it was flooded, and I didn't know whether there would be stretches of safe ground in between. I was scared. I wouldn't be able to withstand the running water. I would be carried away by the water, I thought.

And I couldn't swim.

I was standing there and looking at the scenery when a man came and saw me waiting. He knew me, it was Yésongou, our neighbour. At the time, Yésongou was a strong man and healthy – not yet the old man that he is today. He also knew my mother, and so he asked me whether I was waiting for her. I didn't dare to say a word as it had been my mistake. I had been late – not her. So, I simply shook my head, just looking at him. I think, he understood that my mother had crossed that stream already. And eventually, he just took me and carried me across the water. On his hips. I was so scared and happy at the same time. When we got to the other side, he put me on the ground and asked me whether I could walk myself. I nodded and turned around, running to my mother's garden – without greeting him.

You know, that road that you see today didn't exist yet. When it rained, there was simply no road. It had given way to water and mud, and more often than not, it was better to walk the narrow pathways through the tall grass rather than trying to find a hard spot in the brown mud that used to be the road.

Well, since few men were wearing shoes those years, it didn't matter much if their feet were clean or dirty. They would be dirty anyway the evening when they came home from their fields.







August 1996. Siriki Camara, c 32 years, retail dealer, farmer and vice imam of the neighbourhood's mosque, in a conversation with the anthropologist and his neighbour.

That place further up the stream was strange. There were huge trees, and a group of three standing right beside the water frightened everybody in the neighbourhood. When you were getting out at night and walked behind the last houses where the gardens are, you could often see a pale light over there. Everything was completely dark – just as dark as a night can be when the sky is covered with clouds and no moonlight gets through. But over there, you could see the shape of the three trees. And no one knew why. My neighbours were scared and asked me to write a *sebe* for them.² I did, but I don't know whether they always carried it as I had told them to.

Well, at least, they had it and I asked them sometime later whether it had helped. They rolled their eyes but didn't say much.

I believe, the place was dangerous. It was often submerged by water – much more than today. And someone who had passed there at night while walking back from his distant field told everybody that he had seen flames on the ground. Little flames just coming out of the ground! You know, that place is muddy – how can flames come out of water? That must have been the work of the beings of the wilderness!³ God is great, and a *sebe* should be stronger than such things. But somehow... somehow...

I don't know what was over there. During the day, you didn't see anything. Everything was normal. Well, there were hippos living in the water there. A few of them, three or four. Then, one of them died and began to rot. It was stinking. You couldn't stand it!

You know, hippos had destroyed my rice field several times. The field is close by, only five minutes away. Or a little more, but not much. Hippos aren't like other animals. When they get out of the water, they leave long traces. There is a long band where

- 2 A loanword from Manding, the language of Muslim merchants living in the area; literally 'a writing', that is, a *surah* of the Quran sewn in a small leather bag. Such protective remedies were produced and sold by Siriki as a literate person who was able to read and write Arabic and to teach the Quran.
- 3 These beings may adopt many different forms and are usually called *tugubele*, a generic term in Senari, the language of the Senufo. In colonial parlance, they were called *génies de brousse* (fr.) or *bush spirits* (engl.).





the grass and everything else is just bend left and right. Their hooves leave big holes in the wet soil. When they get to the place where they want to eat, they cut the rice plants at the bottom. Nothing is left. When other animals eat, they eat the spikes and the plant can grow again. The hippos are different. They eat everything, just everything – and the rice is gone.

Fortunately, they are about to disappear. They are still in the lake further up the stream, but no longer down here. There is not enough water anymore, I believe. It's getting dry there when the rainy season is over. It's no longer how it used to be. But that's not bad. And I haven't heard of the flames anymore. Anyway, I never dared to go there at night – and I wouldn't. Not even now.





January 2018. Kartcha Soro, c 34 years, housewife and gardener, in a conversation at the fringes of her vegetable garden with several bystanders, neighbours and the anthropologist.

Don't look at me! I'm just planting my onions and aubergines. Why are you all getting together over there? This has been my place for years – no need to inquire, it's mine.

This place is still fine. A little bit, a little bit.⁴ We had water in the ponds where the river passes during the rainy season until two years ago. You see the small bridge over there? There was water below, even in the hottest moment of the year. Now it's gone. We have to dig for water. There and in each and every garden as well. There is clay below the gardens. The soil is hard, you need a lot of force. If you can't do it yourself, you will need the help of someone who is stronger than you. Perhaps, your son or your brother. I'm still strong. I did it myself, but many here couldn't.

I first had my garden close to the village. Then, I moved it. We had to dig deep for water – deeper and deeper every year. That was too exhausting. Others still cultivate onions over there. But I found that too exhausting. When I came here, there was water in the stream. Now, it starts here as well. It's not as bad as it is already elsewhere. It just begins. But what can you do? You'll have to deal with it. That's all.

4 Kartcha used an onomatopoeic expression of which Senari has many: *cōgo*, *cōgo* means to move forward in small steps, also in a figurative sense.







My people's field

August 1991. Zongama Yéo, farmer, in his early 70s, in a conversation with his son, his son's friend and the anthropologist. His narration refers to the 1950s and 1960s. Died of old age in 1996.

When we were young, things were different – not like you believe they were. Life was hard, harder than it is for you [his son] who is distilling *kutuku*⁵ to make a living. Or ... to make our people sick.

In our time, the good name of a man was his field. Nothing but his field. It displayed your character.⁶ When you were unable to keep it in good shape, it meant that you would hardly be given a wife. Everybody would look at it in disdain. It would become village talk: 'Have you seen Gona's field? It's a mess! There are weeds everywhere. How will he be able to harvest anything when the others are bringing their crops home? Nothing will grow. His granaries will be empty.' You know all that talk too well, it's still the same. But it doesn't have the same impact as in our time

There was a big, big pot in the field. It was made of iron – real iron.⁷ It was so big, solid and heavy that it was not moved. It just stayed where it was, and when the women wanted to cook, they lit a fire below. The three stones were big as well, and the mouth between them was wide enough for logs that were stronger than a man's arm – much stronger! There was no lid. When it rained, it rained into the pot.

The pot was big enough to feed all the young men. When they came together to do the 'friendship hoeing' for the new yams field, the women were cooking there in groups of four, five and more! They were many, many, many... That was the moment when the new yams had been on the racks in the field, but not yet in the village. They prepared *gbosuru*⁸, and when they were pounding the yams, the sound was so fast and heavy that you began to work harder. As a young man, I went to do the friendship hoeing because of my people and also, because I wanted to eat the new yams. It is so tasty!

- 5 A loanword from Manding. *Kutuku* (fr. orthography *koutoukou*) is a hard liquor that contains methanol besides ethanol and causes severe health damage. Most villagers knew that *kutuku* can lead to blindness and addiction. Zongama is primarily talking to his son who runs a distillery in a hidden grove close to the stream behind the village.
- 6 Zongama uses the word *zon/zona*, which is usually translated as 'heart' but also stands for inner attitudes that have become habitual.
- 7 I later asked whether the pot had been made of iron or some other metal, but Zongama insisted that it had been an iron pot – a material that is very rarely used for pots and other kitchen ware.
- 8 Literally 'the big cooking', which meant *foutou d'igname* in French or *yams fufu* in English.





The men were working in a line, close to each other in a line. You had to pay attention – else, you would hit your neighbour who was your brother or a neighbour and a friend. There were friendship hoeings that brought more than 40 men together. Can you imagine? 40 young men working in the same field! They didn't need the day to build the mounds for the year to come – the work was done before the sun set. We were working hard, very hard. There were young girls⁹ standing around the workers to give them water in calabashes when you needed it. And we needed it! Sweat all over the body! When you were faster than the others and working at the forefront, the elders put that 'girl of the worker with the hoe'¹⁰ next to you. You saw it, but you wouldn't show. You just continued working. When the day ended, we were exhausted. Some of us were settling back at the *vogo*¹¹, right on the ground. The best were wearing the hat made of black monkey fur. It was given to you as a recognition of what you had done to the people [who owned the field]. We were so tired, but we saw that the girls admired us. They did! You were trying your luck the next evening or a few days later...

We were proud of what we did. The lines of the mounds were long and straight – just as they ought to be. When you saw such a field, you admired it: 'They have worked well', you said to yourself.

What has happened to the pot? I don't know. I haven't seen it again. It's all over now. Now, everybody has his own field – small, small. You don't need such big pots anymore.

Well, the 'friendship hoeing' is still done. Sometimes. Not every year and not everywhere. Everybody has his own field, and if you feel fine with it, you can do it. But there are only a few workers – by far not as many as on the big fields as they once were. Everything is small, small these days.

9 Zongama used the word *picā*, literally 'little woman'. The term is often used for unmarried young women and hence translated here as 'girl'.

10 *tefālāpicā*, literally 'the girl of the worker with the hoe', is a wooden pole with a female anthropomorphic figure at the upper end, which the elders who were surveilling the hoeing contest pushed into the ground where the fastest and most powerful man was working.

11 A small hangar with a thatched roof on very low wooden pillars and without walls.





September 1996. Karkoulougnon Ouattara, c. 26 years, former high school student, onion grower since his return to the village. Died of AIDS in 2001.

I did that when I had been a little boy. A little boy. A little boy only. ...

**I mean, I surveyed the field of my uncle...
[literally 'the old (man) of the people', i.e. mother's brother]**

My uncle came to our compound the evening before we would leave for the field and tell us that he expected us to be there early in the morning. He could also pass by the morning and tell us that we were already late – although we had no idea that he wanted us to work. We were children. Working meant that they, the men, were taking their hoes and machetes and drove their bicycles to the fields. Some were really far away. *Fɔrɔgɔ lɛɛli* was my uncle's field. I can tell you, my uncle's field was really far – as the name already tells.¹² My mother used to walk for a long, long hour, perhaps a little more. But I was small. I had to run, and after some time, I could no longer catch up with her. I could see her walking the narrow pathway in front of me, through the streams and the mud left and right, always with her enamel bowl on her head. The handle of the women's hoe was hanging out. She had to walk around the lower branches of the trees – else, the things in her bowl would have fallen out.

When we had left the last compounds of the village behind us, she began to walk faster. I tried to keep up with her, and I ran wherever the soil was flat and smooth. I saw her from behind, but when the ground was uneven and full of rocks, or when we crossed a stream, I dropped behind. I lost contact, and sooner or later, I didn't see her anymore. I was a little boy.

When I finally reached the field, she used to laugh at me, telling me that I would surely walk faster when I would grow up. My elder sisters also teased me. The first few weeks – or was it a year? – she [my mother] didn't tell me anything. I just sat at the ridge where they had their vogo and a rack for the new yams and rice. At that time of the year, the rack was almost empty. Everything had been brought to the granaries in the village, and the new harvest hadn't started yet.

12 The suffix *lɛɛli* means 'far', *fɔrɔgɔ* is a place name.

It was a granary like the big one that we have in our compound, while some fed their own granaries only. You know the difference.

The big ones were for the people [i.e. the members of the matrilineage], and they had doors. When I was young, you had to fill these ones before filling your own. Your own granary was smaller. Like the ones you see here today. Being a farmer meant that you thought of your people first before thinking of yourself. But when you had given what needed to be given, you fed your own granary up to the rim. There were people who were so proud of their granary! Only the old man of the people [i.e. the doyen of the matrilineage] didn't have one. He was in charge of the big one.

But on the field, you had to labour. Well, as a small child, I was hanging out there, and I strolled around with other children. But that ended soon. My uncle gave me a stick and an empty can. I should walk around the field and chase away wild animals if there were any.

I had to beat the empty can, together with two friends who also had such cans.

I did so, but soon hit the harder work. I had to weed, to sow, to weed again, to weed again, and to weed again. And then, he said, that I should stay with the other children there. Over night. And pay attention that the animals did not trample down the new plants. I did not know what that meant. Anyway, I didn't have a choice. So, I stayed. The first nights were scary. I heard sounds out there, which I had never heard before. The calling of animals, sure, but I didn't know them. The older children who were there with us were smirking, and some were frowning. We were all sitting in the vogo. It was dark. Very dark. 'Go and look for them!' said Nioro [his half-brother]. I don't know whether he meant it or not. At least, he didn't go, and I wouldn't either. Never.

I got used to the sounds. But one night, there was another noise. We were all children, but many were older than me. They stopped to talk and listened carefully. Nobody was talking. I knew, something wrong was happening, although it wasn't very loud. And then, I heard





a cow mooing. All of a sudden, everybody jumped up, and those who had a torch hastened toward the direction where the noise had come from. In the dark, they discovered the slowly moving bodies of the cows at the other end of the field. The other boys lit up the place, and there were at least ten cows. Or more, I don't remember. Porona began to shout at the cows. He was taller than the others and healthy.

The cows did not hasten to leave the field. Two of us began to search behind the cows if they could find the herdsman whom we expected to see behind the cattle. The older boys were searching in the shrubs while I was watching from where I was. 'They do this on purpose', said Nioro.

'They' were the Fulani herders. At the time, there was a *campement* in the bush between Nafoun and Bolondo. They had more than one herd. We knew the elders of the camp, but the real herders, their sons, we did not see because they were often somewhere in the wilderness, following their cattle. They are real *broussards*.¹³

That was the beginning. We couldn't capture the herder, and when our elders came back the next day, they inquired why we hadn't kept the Fulani back. They were angry. I wanted to leave, I wanted to go home. But it was your people's field. You can't argue. It's your own, and since everybody else is working there, you'll do that as well. The elders didn't ask. They would say that you're also eating 'in their granary'.¹⁴

I had to spend days and days out there without coming back to the village. And when I had grown up a little, we spent months in the wilderness. The second half of the rainy season didn't see us in the village. I was out in the field, deep in the wilderness. It was horrendous. At night, the others slept on a sort of bench made of boards. Nothing else. But I had to sleep on the ground. I was given a thin plank and a

13 Karkoulougnon used the two French terms when he addressed me. *Campement* is a small non-permanent settlement, usually made of short-lived materials. *Broussard* is deduced from *la brousse*, 'the wilderness' and a pejorative term that is used in Côte d'Ivoire for people who have no knowledge of urban life and are therefore perceived as backward and ignorant.

14 The speaker means that everybody is profiting from the same stocks after the harvest.





mat. That was all. There were bugs all around – and mosquitoes, of course. Since the racks with corn were right next to the vogo, you heard mice and rats roaming around. When someone switched on his torch, you saw their yellow eyes in the darkness. And sometimes, there were snakes! You wouldn't hear them, but in the morning, we found them in the warm sand where we had been sitting the evening before. They were also climbing up the poles and into the rafters.

We had little black stones. Some said that they would help when you're bitten by a snake. You must put it on the skin immediately after the bite. If you wait, you'll die. Nyakélé was one of them, as you all know. But that was much later. I did all that too much. I was happy when I was sent to school – finally.







August 1998. Lourgo Soro, c. 28 years, farmer, in a conversation with his brother and the anthropologist, moved to the subprefecture of Dianra and never returned to his village of origin.

Yes, I did that as well. Every year, we spent weeks and weeks out there. We were eating the new yams, and their taste is very good. But we would have loved to be in the village. You're out there in the wilderness. You may be two or three, but you won't see the others. Yes, my uncle came almost every day, and oftentimes, he spent the night out there with us. But it's not the same. You're looking at those who are allowed to return to the village, and you envy them. You will want to go home.

And what's worse: When the harvest is done and you're finally sent home – it is not for you! It all goes into the granary of your uncle. You'll get nothing. You may eat in the fields, but you won't take anything home. If you're lucky and you've also been on the field of your father, he may give you a little. But not your uncle. That will be yours one day, but as long as the old man is there, you can't expect him to give [you anything]. He feeds you. That's it!

But it'll soon be over. Why should I exhaust myself on his field? I'm a healthy man. I'll go one day. I'll have my own field. Down there [i.e. in the subprefecture of Dianra], the soil is dark, and you can plant a lot of cotton. There is yam as well. And maize. And onions.

What else will you want? You're working for yourself!

It's better to go. You'll be on your own, but that's just fine.



August 1993. Tyosongui Soro, farmer, c. 25 years.
Returned from a small hamlet in the subprefecture of
Dianra.

You know, I had to come. I had a big field down in Dianra *sous-préfecture*. But Wanyon [his younger brother] had to leave because of that story with the Fulani herder.¹³ Wanyon is no longer here, so I had to come and stay at my father's side. He is already old and can no longer work as he used to. He surveys the field, and there are enough workers. But there are days when he needs someone nearby. I'm doing him that favour. He is not my people's elder [mother brother], but that is fine with me. I work his field, but also that of my uncle. I have no field of my own. I depend on them.

I know, some people here laugh at me. Most of them have their own fields these days.

13 Wanyon had hit a herder with his machete when he caught him red-handed with his cows in the family's field. The Fulani had called the police and Wanyon was summoned, arrested and brought to Korhogo where he spent about a week in custody before he was released on the assumption that he was still a minor. It turned out that he had given the policemen a false age. So, when he returned to the village, he left again to settle somewhere in the wilderness of Dianra subprefecture where nobody knew him and where the police would not search for him.









My father's house

February 1986. Segba Tuo, c. 30 years, insurance salesman in training and later partisan of the main opposition party, in a conversation with me while walking through the neighbourhood of his parents.

You know, my father had such a house [a house with a flat roof and spurs on all sides]. We called it *brif*. I don't know where that word comes from. I believe, it's not Senari [the language of the Senufo]. Probably a Manding word. Prestigious people used to have such a house. Some of them even had two floors, and there was a ladder inside – or rather a trunk with notches on it – to get to the second floor. But they had almost no windows, and some didn't even have one. It was completely dark inside.

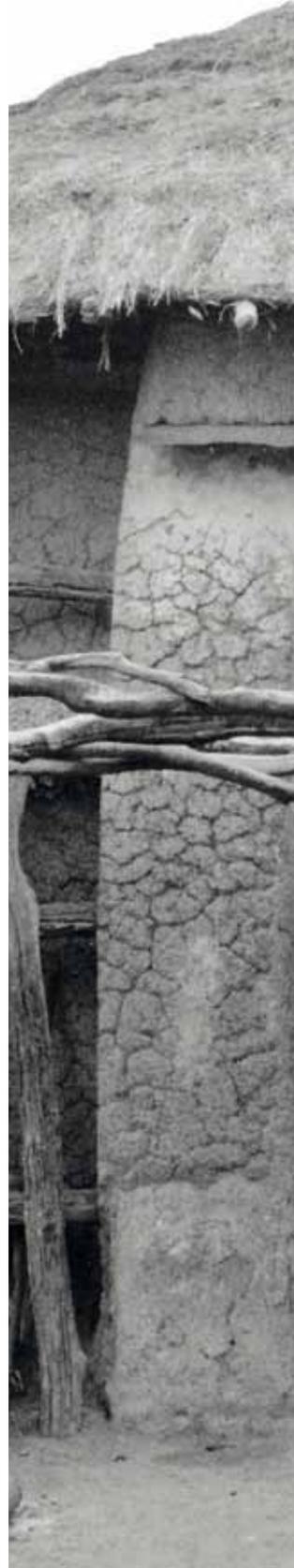
My father had a small shrine behind the entrance door in the dark. That was where he did the sacrifices to his father's side.¹⁶ I had no idea that there were two wooden statues behind the door. I discovered them only when I had already turned twelve or so. By accident. I was searching for a sack of maize and thought, that I would find it there. Instead, I found the two statues, and I was very surprised.

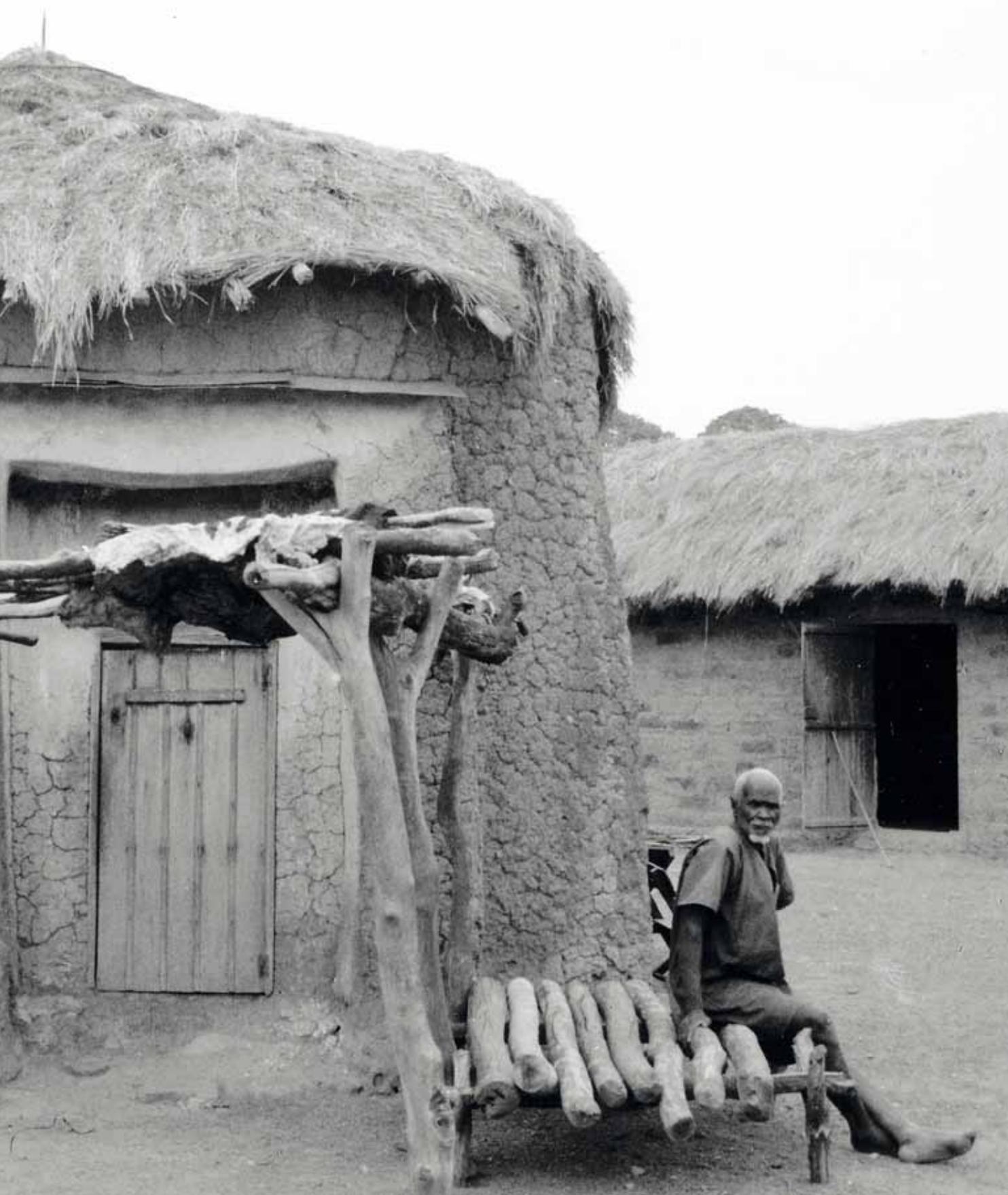
...

I believe, his house was the last of its kind here in this neighbourhood. There were more until the construction of the streets. You'll know that anyway. If there was a respected elder in a compound, it was not unlikely to find such a house there as well. It had to be well maintained. You had to monitor the roof carefully and make sure that the water could easily escape during the rainy season. If you didn't do that, the roof would simply crumble and fall on you. It's not like a thatched roof which leaks.

But my father loved it so much. He even built a bank in front of it and for some time, he put mats on the rack in front of the entrance. Now, after the construction of the streets, these houses are gone.

¹⁶ The society of the Senufo builds on matrilineal descent. These sacrifices address the complementary patri-filiation and hence, the recognition of one's father.









September 1990. Lènitá Soro, c. 22 years, prospective high school graduate. In a conversation with another high school student and the anthropologist.

My father had a nice house built in half-hard¹⁷ materials and covered with zinc. It had three rooms and a small porch. When my father turned older, he sat there every day. If you wanted to talk to him, you just went there – you would surely find him in front of his house, sitting there on his canvas chair. He loved that chair. Nobody would have dared to sit on that chair. Only his grandchildren could mess around there. We, the sons who were not yet on our own, were always questioned when we passed by: ‘Why don’t you work? Where is your field? Why don’t you have a *fin du mois*?’ He used that French word – thought he had no idea how difficult it is to get a job in town. He expected us to give him at least a little something. He was always very friendly to the people around him – not so with us two who were in town. He thought that we would bring him money every time we came back to the village to spend our holidays here. We couldn’t – we were A-level students. We had no money.

But that house mainly served as a storehouse. When we came back shortly before Christmas, two of the rooms were filled with cotton – right under the roof. The third, tiny room was locked, and I did not know what was inside. But I know for sure that my father very rarely entered that room. He was sitting in front of the house – but he did not sleep there. It was obvious that he slept in his old house with its thatched roof. I couldn’t believe it. So, I asked him: ‘You have such a nice house. It stands out in our neighbourhood. Why do you sleep in your old house?’ ‘Well’, he asked back, ‘did you ever sleep in such a house?’ Of course, I had done so! I had to rent a small room in town where I attended school, and that room was very much like the rooms in his house. ‘It’s not good’, he told me, ‘it’s very, very hot during the hot season – and it’s very cold during harmattan. My old house is better. But I like it! It shows that we’ve money!’

I was weirded out. I still am.

17 In French *maison construite en semi-dure*, which means that the house is constructed of sun-dried mudbricks, but cement serves as mortar and coating of the walls. Such houses were the first covered with zinc and in the 1970s a sign of wealth and modernity.

August 1991. Yacouba Yéo, c 33 years, postal agent and civil servant at the town hall of the subprefecture, in a conversation with a friend from afar and the anthropologist.

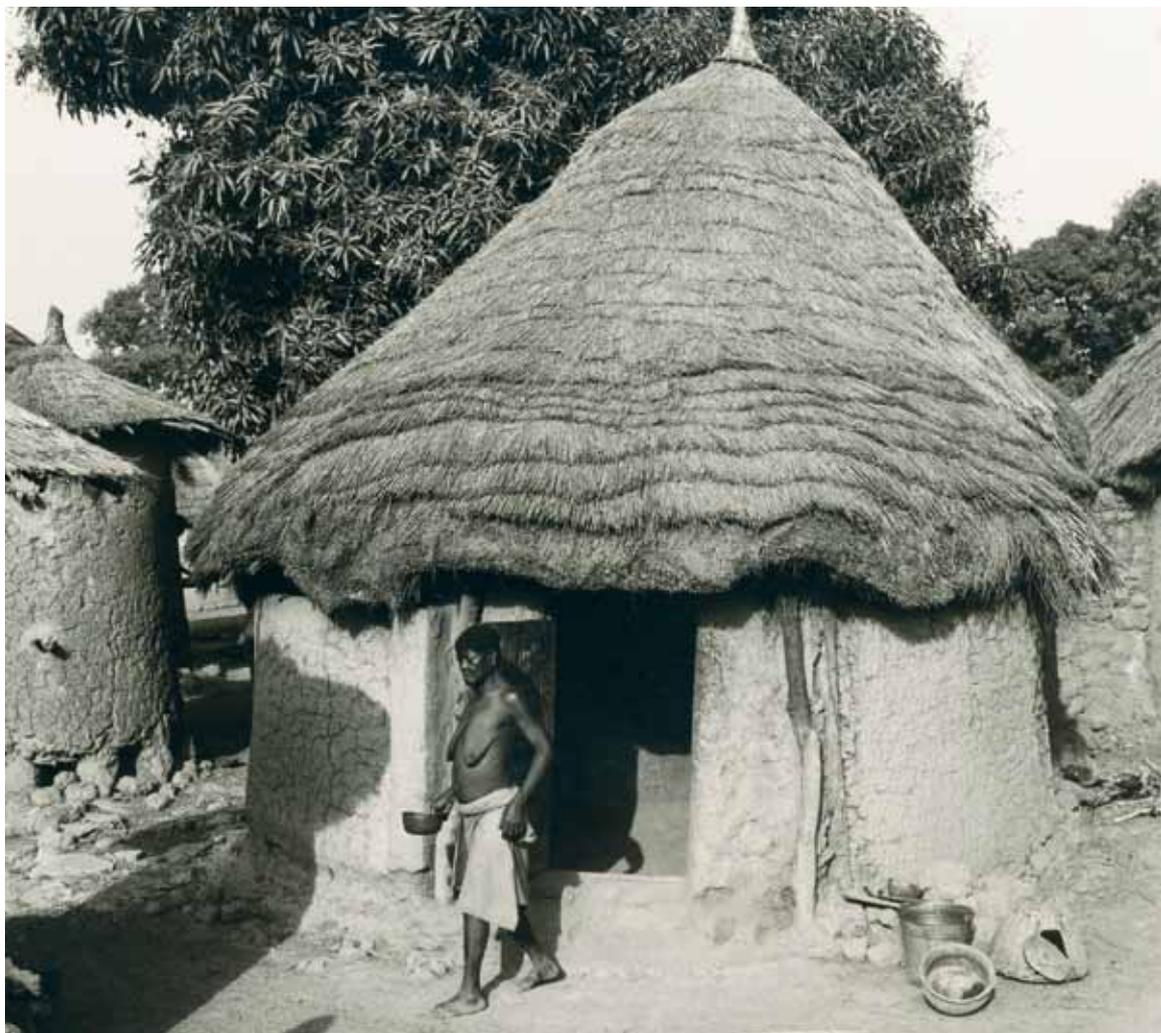
Well, when I was the postal agent of Nafoun, I was staying at my uncle's side. In the long house that he had built in his compound – you know, the house with the three doors. All three rooms opened to the courtyard in the middle of the compound. Our old man was sitting right opposite in his beloved canvas chair and observed all activities in the courtyard. His house was the best and the biggest in town. He always claimed that it was his – but in reality, it was his younger brother – Faïna, the judge – who built it. It would have been by far too expensive for Doulougnanzourou [Yacouba's uncle].

But the house where I was staying wasn't of that quality. You know that I was first raised in Béoumi? My mother was Baule, not Senufo. I came to this place rather late in the day. I was already a young man. I couldn't work in the fields, I had attended school – can you ask an educated person to work in the fields? Impossible! But I was constantly urged to do so.

When I came here, the village meant nothing to me. Just one of these forgotten places of which there are so many in this country! Yes, my father was Senufo, and so I am as well. But that's already where it ends! I would have stayed down there if I could. Béoumi and then Bouaké had something. Nafoun is not on par with these cities. When I came here, there were almost no houses with zinc. Only three or four. And they were small compared to what I was used to.

In that long house, my room was a little bigger. But there was no ceiling, and the window had the size of a small towel only. Poorly done. It was unacceptable for a man of a certain level. But what can you do? There wasn't much of an alternative. Believe it or not, I stayed there for years!

You need to be independent – else, you will never live the life that is good for you.



March 2002. Kassoum Dagnogo, c. 63 years, weaver by training but no longer active, in a conversation with his son, the imam of his neighbourhood, and the anthropologist.

Today, I have a nice house and a nice courtyard. It's all constructed in hard [materials]. My son and my nephew in Abidjan did that to me. They are good guys!

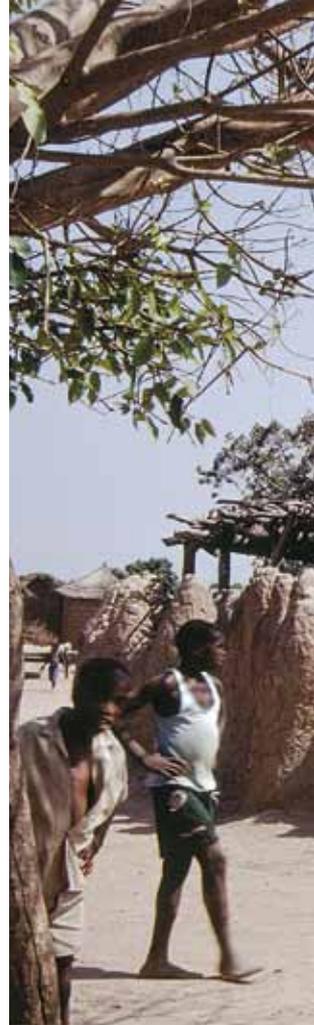
He is a customs officer at the airport – I think, you know him, right? He drives a car.

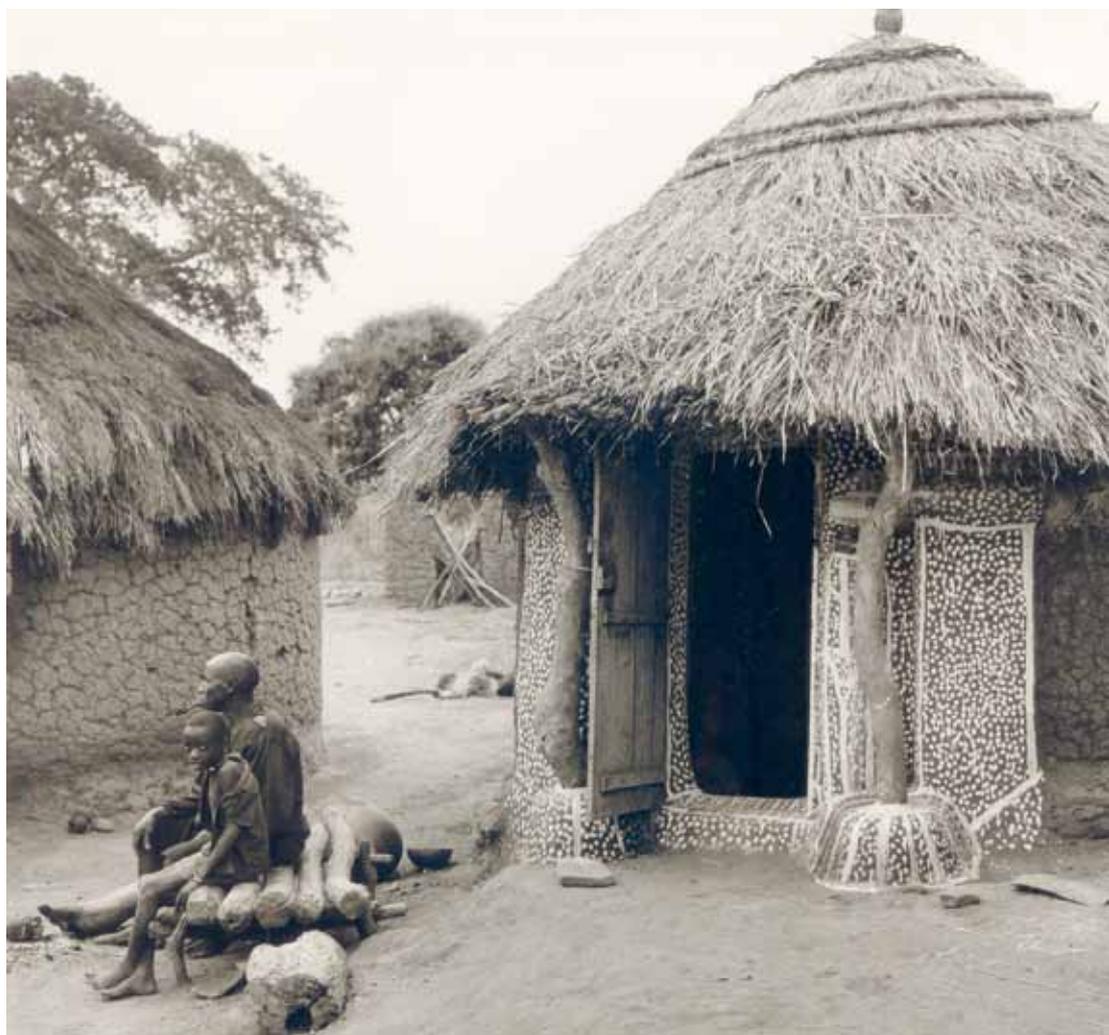
This used to be a dirty place. Now, it is clean. Look at the ground here – it's mainly cement. There will be no mud, not even when it rains. The zinc is new, not taken from an old house. And there is a ceiling! My first wife has a room with an extra entrance. There is a room for visitors, and another for my daughter and her children. My second wife has a small house apart, but it's also covered with zinc. When I was young, I would never have thought that I would live in such a compound one day. There is light everywhere – well, when the invoice is paid. It's nice!

Oh yes, the old houses were different. My father didn't have one as he wasn't the elder of our people [i.e. the lineage]. But there was one down here [points to the last houses of the neighbourhood], and the little mosque of our neighbourhood was constructed that way as well. Every second or third year, we had to refurbish it. All together. All believers were there, and if one didn't show up, they were talking about him the next day. It was an effort we made as a community – not as a man alone.

Those who didn't come damaged the community, the imam told us. That was a different way – you don't know that anymore! [speaks to his son] You are a trader now, and you don't know that anymore!

You should! It's good to work together.





March 2002. Wosoho Soro, c. 55 years, housewife and gardener, talking to her son who attends secondary school in a town.

You don't want to work together! You could – but you don't want to.
Everybody wants to work for himself only. You don't share.
You'll forget about us!







Coda

Both the narrative excerpts from the vespertine conversations and the pictures bespeak the *longue durée* of a changing lifeworld. In a somewhat superficial reading the narrative snippets as well as the pictures seem to mirror processes that are driven by more general transformations, for instance, the environmental degradation that slowly turns the wet savannah with its yams fields into a much drier area where root tubers do no longer grow. Even long reed for thatched houses is no longer at hand. “We would have to drive far South. Near Bouaké [a four-hour drive], you may still find some – not here” says Losseni Dagnogo, explaining why thatched house have almost disappeared. The peasants are very much aware of the environmental change. It has a direct impact on their lives, and its experiential dimension is also undeniable, as the passage on the stream behind the village shows. However, the discursive formation into which their experience feeds is not driven by perception nor is the notion of the environment its nodal point. Discursively, it is rather rotating around pragmatic takes on their daily work – the work that situates men and women in their lifeworld.

Nonetheless, it is a deep, existential transformation with many dimensions. Nobody in the region where I conducted research would deny that things have changed profoundly. With the notable exception of a few educated young men and still fewer women living far away in one of the urban agglomerations in the South, my interlocutors would not think of the obvious change of their existence as environmental change nor would they frame the disintegration of the lineages as units of production as social change. Most Senufo farmers do see the link between social order, the economy and what we would call environment, but they neither attribute it to some outer influence nor to abstract, anonymous forces such as a particular mode of production. Mid-aged and elderly people are very much aware that their fields have become smaller and less fertile, that amity and reciprocity relate to increasingly smaller social units or simply no longer have the same relevance as a few decades ago, that their houses and settlements have changed tremendously – but most of my friends and partners did and do embed it differently in discursive formations. They would focus on what they (can) no longer do as they once did. Whether that is induced by a changing structural setting, by the natural basis of their lifeworld, or by something abstract such as climate change. In other terms, they rather focus on their agency and how it has changed during their lifetime.

I could write that a few central themes surfaced again and again in our conversations as well as in my photographs: First, the degradation of the natural environment, which has affected their agricultural practices deeply and hence, the very

basis of their existence. Second, the disintegration of larger social groups, in particular the matrilineages as units of production and consumption. Third, the articulation of apparently individual aims in life.¹ Eventually, this existential change could be conceived as the outcome of much larger processes, in particular globalisation, modernisation and their side effects. Individualisation and environmental degradation would appear to be local aspects of such macro processes and the structural violence that they often breed. And eventually, they could be labelled – with some legitimacy – as human rights violations (e.g. Ho 2007).

Such analyses are possible and often useful from an outsider's perspective. However, this is not my aim in this paper. I want to draw attention to the people, their agency and its experiential underpinnings. The hegemony at a macro level is not the only one that is relevant in such contexts. It is not the root of hegemonic tendencies at the local level, nor does it cause the will to autonomy and its many aspects. Taking the two media, the pictures and the narrative strands of the conversations, as a starting point, one may rather conclude that hegemony and autonomy should be studied as individual as well as collective intentions to understand how the people of Nafoun and other villages, towns and cities in Senufoland live up to the enormous and powerful existential change that they have experienced over the past decades.





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Bildlegenden



- 1) Nyamasyon Soro, descendant of the first settlers (March 1997)
- 2) Onion gardens (February 2019)
- 3) Lozeni Dagnogo chatting with the anthropologist (February 2016)



A groundnut field (June 1982)



Baobab and kapok trees at the margins of Nafoun (November 1991)



Thunderstorm and women hastening home the evening (July 1982)



The stream beyond the village (September 1984)



Pristine dry forest (January 2018)



The flooded plain beyond the village (September 1984)



Men walking toward the village (July 1991)



Old trees growing in the swamps besides the stream (December 1983)



The compound of the earth priest before it had to be relocated (March 1986)



The plain beyond the village during the dry season (January 1993)



The plain beyond the village 25 years later (January 2018)



Hoeing contest in my people's field: The sculpture of a bird on a tall pole accompanies the young men because birds will pick up the grains behind them (September 1987)



Teenagers learning to till a field (October 1979)



Young men preparing a yams field (September 1996)



Father and son working on a yams field (May 1991)



Piling a yams mound for the next season (September 1996)



Walking the narrow pathway to a distant field (June 1991)



Walking across the former stream beyond the village (February 2016)



Irrigated gardening at the fringes of the plain beyond the village (February 2019)



Children chasing baya birds with empty cans (May 1985)



Mother and daughter at the vogo, the shelter in the field (May 1991)



Cultivating manioc and vegetables (January 2019)



Working together: planting rice in an irrigated field (May 1985)



A compound under a kapok tree (February 1986)



An old house in the smiths' yard (April 1982)



Department stores along main street (January 2018)



Constructing streets by demolishing all older houses in the way (May 1982)



Department store and filling station with bottles on main street (January 2016)



A thatched round hut with two rooms (February 1986)



The Friday mosque of Mahandiana Sokourani (December 1990)



In the compound of the earth priest (March 1986)



Selling bread in a shop on main street (January 2019)



The house of the earth priest of Mahandiana Sobala (October 1989)



Young men tilling a yams field (October 1987)

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