

**Speak no more of cousinage?
Neoliberalism, conflict and the decline of joking
relationships**

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Occasional Paper No. 1

28th of May 2008

Africa Peace and Conflict Network

<http://www.africaworkinggroup.org/>

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A key to establishing institutions of governance that successfully manage conflict is to recognize and incorporate existing institutions on the ground.

-- Amos Sawyer, former president of Liberia
(personal conversation, April 2005)

Ils sont en general communs à l'ensemble des peuples du Sahel et de la savane de l'Ouest africain. Il ne s'agit donc pas du bizzarreries exotiques propres à un peuple spécifique, mais de règles de vie, complexes certes, mais indispensables à une survie collective dans un milieu aussi défavorable que le Sahel étant donne les moyens techniques rudimentaires traditionnels.

-- Christian Girier

The Problem: Conflict and its management

In the domain of conflict and conflict management Amos Sawyer knows of what he speaks. The demise of his government marked the beginning of the collapse of the Mano River sub-region into what would come to be called “the worse place on earth.” His words speak to the view that conflicts, all sorts of conflicts, from the quotidian affairs of normal political life, to the massive “conflict systems” such as the Mano River Basin can and do merit consideration from a governance perspective. Such a perspective conceives of politics as essentially about social, political and economic conflict and that the business of managing it (i.e., resolving it, channeling it, avoiding it) relates to the constitution of rules about how these affairs are to be organized and how actors are to relate to each other *vis-à-vis* the matters over which they tend to conflict and in the normal course of their engagement within the polity (Hyden 1994; E. Ostrom 1990; Zartman 1997). Such a perspective best begins with an appreciation of the self organizing potential of local societies (V. Ostrom 1997). For Sawyer this means connecting mechanisms of resolution and post-conflict peacekeeping to deeper contextual factors associated with the conflicts and the sociocultural contexts in which they are imbedded and which generate institutions of their own.

These institutions, in turn, must be a part of the constitution of any lasting formal structure of governance tasked with, among other things, the maintenance of peace (Sawyer 2004). Central to this governance-as-conflict-management perspective is, thus, the appreciation of how local societies seek, in the words of professor Girier, to create “life rules” indispensable to collective survival in inhospitable milieus.

Taking these insights seriously, this paper explores the very sort of indigenous social structure identified by scholars engaged with the constitution of institutions of self governance, but is one that has not, in fact, been specifically addressed in their literature.¹ This institution is referred to variously in European languages as the joking relationship, *cousinage* or *parenté à plaisanteries*. I seek here to consider the implications of changing societal conditions for these indigenous structures, which I deem quintessential indigenous governance institutions. I do so in the substantive context of herder-farmer conflict. This substantive focus stems from my work with a growing body of researchers concerned with the increasing significance of what is, by some accounts, as old a form of conflict as one is likely to find.² Some of this work focuses on the apparently worsening tensions related to resource aspects of these conflicts while others connect them to a general decline in the relationship between herders and farmers – the “failure of symbiosis” hypothesis (Breusers et al 1998). Whatever the trends may be there is a growing awareness that these conflicts can escalate, when left unmanaged, to the very worst conflicts imaginable.³

¹ I reference here, in particular, the work of the Workshop on Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University. See, for example, McGinnis 1999a, 1999b, Ostrom 1990).

² See forthcoming special issue of *The Canadian Journal of African Studies* (40:1, 2006).

³ The conflict between Senegal and Mauritania in 1989, for example, was sparked by a “final straw” incident that involved a cross-border, herder-farmer clash. There are also non-incident aspects to the Rwandan genocide of a herder-farmer kind. Today, the genocide in Darfur stems directly from the dynamics of herder-farmer conflict. Says one observer, “La principale source de la crise du Darfour, à l’image de plusieurs zones agropastorales notamment semi désertique, est la compétition croissante pour le contrôle de la terre et l’eau entre populations nomades et sédentaires veulent avoir des terres agricoles qu’ils labourent à chaque saison de pluie au detriment des nomads, d’où les querelles entre les bergers et les agriculteurs.” (Diawara 2005, 35).

My analysis is informed by data collected in rural Senegal during the years 1999-2000, and in subsequent trips in 2003, 2004, and 2005. I suggest that the restructuring of center-local relations, and significant economic change in rural Senegal, which has been combined with, and is partly a function of, a host of neoliberal reforms implemented over the past two decades, have redefined the “political topography” (Boone 2003) on which local contests for increasingly scarce resources are waged (O’Bannon 2006). In doing so, these transformations have created new kinds of governance problems for local actors. And as governance is now recognized for its essential conflict management dimension⁴ there is a dark irony to the failures associated with the good governance reforms that have so dominated Senegalese politics for the period under review.

Though it is far from, and in no danger of becoming, a “collapsed state”, conditions in rural Senegal, particularly on its most peripheral edges, share similarities to the corollaries of state collapse. These are the conditions of state in which the emerging regime appears “no better at generating resources, stabilizing allocations, and channeling the opposition groups than was its predecessor...” (Zartman 1997: 8). As a result of this failure, most local authorities in rural Senegal express a powerlessness to assist local actors in implementing conflict management strategies they have formulated. Because of these failures local farmers and herders attest to more frequent conflicts among them and to greater difficulties in resolving them at the lowest levels through conventional (“traditional”) methods. Interviews with rural extensions agents (*chefs des Centres d'Expansion Rural Polyvalent* (CERP), gendarmes, sub prefects and prefects reveal that these historic conflicts are now more frequent and tend more frequently to escalate to higher levels, and thus more often involve formal intervention of state authorities. All this now seems to inform a generalized state of greater mutual distrust than can be remembered in an even quite recent past (O’Bannon 2004).

What this paper seeks to do, then, is to further develop part of the explanation for why these quite ancient conflicts now seem to require greater and more frequent involvement of state

⁴ See for example, Deng et al. 1996; Zartman 1997; Deng and Lyons 1998.

officials who, it seems, are institutionally so poorly endowed to assist meaningfully in their management. More fully, the question posed here is how might growing economic stress that I, and my interviewees, connect to these worsening conflicts have created a condition in which standard modes of conflict management do not suffice? That is, what might be the relationship between the efficacy of indigenous “conflict medicine” (Wilson-Fall 2000) and the socio-economic conditions in which it is to be applied? Alternatively, what might be the relationship between, in Gerier’s words, the “rules of life”, and the conditions of life which inform them and, indeed, make them so important?

My argument in this paper remains a tentative one. Nevertheless, describing, as the scholars identified above have done, the degree to which herder-farmer conflicts are more frequent, more difficult to manage at the lowest levels and which have, in fact, escalated to terrible heights, seems now to beg certain questions. Principally that question is why conventional modes of conflict management such as the much touted “*parenté à plaisanterie*”, still recognized as a viable, fully functional part of the milieu in which these conflicts arise, often prove inadequate to current tasks. Thus I ask not about applying traditional “conflict medicine” to *modern* conflicts as was the case in Zartman (2000) but rather why, or under what conditions, traditional cures fail in the treatment of quite *traditional* conflicts, indeed, the very ones for which they were seemingly derived. The exemplar of conflict medicine normally brought to bear on such conflicts is, indeed, the joking relationship. Implicit in the testimonies of my interviewees about worse, more frequent and uncharacteristically violent conflicts all seem to point to a possible failure of that which has long been touted as part of the explanation for Senegalese exceptionalism – that despite the conditions said to explain intractable ethnic/civil conflict elsewhere, Senegal has remained an island of relative stability.

In this paper I compare the degree to which *cousinage* appears operative against the ways it has been expected to function. I derive this expectation from what I term the “classical model” of joking relationships. I construct the classical model from a survey of early and contemporary

key works on the subject with particular attention to its form and function in the Senegambia. Having identified the contours of the model I apply it to contemporary circumstances in rural Senegal. My research suggests that either the model never fit very well in Senegal, or that change might indeed be underway. Given that West African data, and Senegambian data in particular, have been central in the literature, the disjuncture between the model and contemporary circumstances in Senegal informs my conclusion that transformative processes might well be in play. Given that all social structures such as the notions of kinship and ethnicity as I investigate here are themselves perpetually contested terrain, this finding is not counterintuitive. But why these transformations take the particular form they do, or why there appear to be selective cracks in the edifice of Senegalese *cousinage* merits explanation.

The classical model of joking relationships

The classical model of joking relationships was constructed throughout the inter- and post-war years by anthropologists reporting on field work from five continents. Based on ethnographic research from across Africa as well as from North and South America, Australia, the Pacific Rim and Europe, the likes of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 1949), Meyer Fortes (1945, 1949), Denise Paulme (1939), Henri Labouret (1929) Marcel Griaule (1948) and Marcel Mauss (1928) articulated, in terms largely consistent with the emergent structural–functionalist paradigm, what scholars still describe as “a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195).⁵

The classical model consists of four components.

⁵ As an indication of the continuing influence of the classical model, Radcliffe-Brown in both Francophone and Anglophone literatures and to a lesser degree in the Anglophone literature Griaule and Paulme remain *de rigueur* citations throughout the five decades subsequent to their seminal works. The latter two figure prominently in Hocine’s (2003) analysis of these relationships in Burkina Faso. For its part it is hard to match the staying power of Radcliffe-Brown’s hostility hypothesis, which was the basis for “reconsidering” joking relationships in the 1970s (Freedman 1977) and constitutes the point of departure for Gundelach’s recent (2000) examination of Scandinavian national identity.

The first is, of course, **the joke**. *Plaisanteries* consist of playful exchanges among putative kin or allies that range from mere teasing and mockery, to more vulgar swearing and play fighting and even to ritualized theft and kidnapping. Common to all contexts is the sense that these exchanges constitute sanctioned violations of rudimentary social norms, often to such a degree that real hostility would result from almost any of these exchanges were they to take place outside the sanctioned joking relationship – that is, outside the relations of *cousinage*. Insulting a complete stranger by declaring him a fat “rice eater,” would, under normal conditions, likely engender a hostile reaction. But someone with the patronym Diop will elicit from someone with the patronym Ndiaye only a jovial and equally insulting remark about Diop’s parentage when he declares him just such a person. The staying power of these scripts is remarkable. Participants in these exchanges, no matter how many times they have heard it, never seem to tire of the joke.

Second, these exchanges are not merely permissible but **tend toward the obligatory**. As Thompson found, “there is an *organized* type of behavior falling under social sanction, in which license in language and in behavior, of a set and stereotyped form, is obligatory” (1935: 489). Moreau specifically pursued this question and found that “without exception the view is expressed ... that between *watani* rudeness is not merely permitted but is the right and the expected thing.... ‘Surely a boy *that* [three feet] high wouldn’t abuse an old man?’ he would ask. The usual answer was: ‘He must (*lazima*) abuse the old man because he is his *mtani*’” (Moreau 1949: 392). These obligations, of course, fall on both parties. The boy, in this case, must insult the old man, and the old man is equally obliged to appreciate the joke. Obligation is essential, for these exchanges often violate more than mere standard norms of polite conduct, but vital cultural structures such as those related to age, gender and caste. In this way *cousinage* may allow one to trump the most revered of social hierarchies.

Third, these relationships may be **extensive and readily transferable**. That is, cousins may be found in very large numbers and among quite remote and essentially unknown “kin.” Moreau’s work in Tanganyika found that 15 of the 17 ethnic groups he surveyed had established

joking relationships (*utani*), each with an average of 6 external joking relationships. Only three groups had fewer than 3 affiliations and the Mbunga were said to enjoy 14 *utani* while the Ngoni had 18. Furthermore, “in most of the nine tribes having internal *utani* every member of a family is the *mtani* of every member of another with which *utani* exists, irrespective of age and sex” (1949; 390). Today I find good evidence of the extensiveness of these relationships – and the seriousness with which they are taken – in the complaints I sometimes hear from those who must recognize them. Among the Soninke, for example, visits from distant cousins to the compound of one known for his relative wealth, are common. Young men looking for work are especially common. They usually arrive without notice, are received without fanfare, but welcomed to a place to sleep and to share in the meals. Once when asked about a guest who seemed to stay longer than usual, the norm seemingly a few days to a week or two, I was told “well, here we have obligations to our relatives. It’s not always good. They come because they know we must help them. These aren’t *really* our relatives, but we must treat them as if they are.” Surely complaints about the obligations of cousinage attest to their significance.

Thompson found that merely a lengthy discussion between strangers can establish “a kinship bond between the two men which may then be extended to all the members of the hordes to which they belong” (1935: 479). A story I have heard on several occasions in Senegal, and that rings familiar to many with whom I share it, refers to the extension of *cousinage* in a car-jacking/hostage taking incident involving separatist rebels in the Casamance region.⁶ In this story, a Dakar delegation to the Casamance region was ambushed on the road from the regional capital Zuiginchor. When the rebels, who are usually of the Diola ethnic group, forced out of the car inhabitants of various ethnicities, it was discovered, because of his national identity card, that the chauffeur was Sereer, who enjoy a well known *cousinage* pact with the Diola. When confronted, the driver affirmed his *cousinage* with the Diola rebels, and then extended the protection this

⁶ The Mouvement des Forces democratiques de Casamance (MFDC) waged a separatist campaign in the southern region beginning in 1982. It is, today, essentially settled.

relationship afforded him to all passengers in the car. The rebels are said to have then released the car and all its passengers unharmed. The rebels are further said to have remarked “You are lucky you chose today a Sereer driver. We cannot see your blood.” Were one to doubt the seriousness of MFDC attacks, the recent death of the sub-prefect Gorgui Mbengue (Wolof) in an attack that also injured his driver and body guard serves as a grim reminder.

Finally, the fourth element is its *raison culturelle*: the joking relationship is fundamentally about **conflict management**. It is a set of rules, enforced with clear and effective sanctioning mechanisms, which structure relationships prone to conflict. It is, thus, an institution of self governance. This claim may be controversial, given its structural functionalist flavor, but there is a good deal of evidence to support my contention. First, there are usually origin stories that recount past conflicts or potential disharmonies and these are said to explain the present relationship. A model case is the alliance between the Bamba and Sanga regions of present day Mali and Burkina Faso. The alliance is said to stem from some past pardon of a group of Sanga boys who had been caught stealing cattle from a Bamba village. Said Paulme, “Les habitants de Bamba que cette faveur gratuite, en les comblant, n’était pas sans humilier quelque peu, ne voulurent pas demeurer les obligés de ceux de Sanga...” (Paulme 1939: 435). In a well known and particularly compelling story, the relationship between the Diallo and Diakité clans (or Kane and Bâ among the Pulaar)⁷ is believed to stem from a singular self sacrifice of one for the other.

“Le premier, voyant son compagnon incapable de poursuivre sa route, se coupa un morceau de chair, le fit cuire et le donna au second, qui fit sauvé et put échapper à la mort. Rentrés dans leurs village les deux hommes réunirent leurs descendants et prêtèrent le serment solennel de ne se faire aucune mal et de s’aider en toute circonstance. Telle serait l’origine de la *senakuya* entre les Diallo et les Diakité (Labouret 1929 : 252).

⁷ These relationships are, interestingly, carried over in the alternative versions of the patronym. For example, the Pulaar names So, Bâ, Kane and Barry are Sidibé, Diakité, Diallo and Sanka, respectively in Soninké. It is particularly significant that *cousinage* is observed among these pairs *across* ethnic lines. That is, Diallo (Soninke) and Bâ (Peuhl) as well as Diakité (Soninke) and Kane (Peuhl) observe the pacts of *cousinage* that bind more generally Peuhl to Peuhl and Soninke to Soninke.

The pervasiveness of conflict origin stories remains an important reason why the Radcliff-Brown hostility thesis has held sway for so long. Exemplary of the apparent ubiquity of past conflict is Moreau's survey in which he asked "how he thought external *utani* had originated [and] without exception he said that his ancestors had fought (*pigana*) with the tribe with whom he now has *utani*" (1944: 388). Griaule, in his exploration of the "cathartic alliance" between the Dogon and Bobo, which was an important early challenge to the Radcliff-Brownian approach, nevertheless found that it rests on a typical origin story that includes the murder of a Bobo man by a mob of Dogon (1948).

The prevalence of these origin stories relates to another aspect of the conflict management function – structurally conflictual interests appear to be the target of these relationships.

In the joking relationship and in some avoidance relationships, such as that between a man and his wife's mother, one basic determinant is that the social structure separates them in such a way as to make many of their interests divergent, so that conflict or hostility might result. (Radcliff-Brown 1940: 209)

In what remains the statement on the functional nature of these relationships Radcliff-Brown asserts, "the joking relationship which constitutes an alliance between clans or tribes, and that between relatives by marriage, are modes of organizing a definite and stable system of social behaviour in which conjunctive and disjunctive components, as I have called them, are maintained and combined" (Ibid., 200).

These functional characteristics no doubt are central to the renewed interest in joking relationships and are the basis for connecting them to the governance-as-conflict-management rubric. In all the forms these relationships may take, one consistency emerges. Again and again, Radcliff-Brown found that, "any serious hostility is prevented by the playful antagonism of teasing, and this in its regular repetition is a constant expression or reminder of that social disjunction which is one of the essential components of the relation, while the social conjunction is maintained by the friendliness that takes no offence at insult" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940: 197-

198). In his less frequently cited work, Radcliff-Brown identified what remains perhaps the most pervasive element in research on joking relationships:

What does ‘friendship’ mean in these contexts....? On the basis of comparative analysis it seems to me that the assertion of ‘friendship’ means an obligation for the two persons not to enter into open quarrel or conflict with each other. It is sufficiently evident that one way of obviating open conflict between two persons is for them to avoid one another or treat each other with very marked respect. I think it is also fairly evident that a relationship in which insults are exchanged and there is an obligation not to take them seriously, is one which, by means of sham conflicts, avoids real ones (1949: 134).

One of the key mechanisms for obtaining and soliciting these mutual obligations is the leveling aspect of these joking relationships. This was from the outset and remains today a dominant theme in joking relationship analysis. The jokes often turn on a charade that ignores absurdly obvious differences. For example, “The point of the joke [which suggests a young man’s intention to marry the wife of his grandfather] is the pretense at ignoring the difference of age between the grandparent and the grandchild” (Radcliff-Brown 1940: 202). Within immediate families, or – as I will explain below – in Level I relationships, these scripts bring the first ascending and first descending generations onto a level playing field. In wider contexts, or what I will refer to below as *cousinage* levels II and III, these become some of the most celebrated incidents in the accounts of *parenté à plaisanteries*. Richards, for example, was struck by the fact that among the Bemba, “even a commoner may swear at his chief if they are *banungwe*” (1937, cited in Moreau 1944). And for Gravrand, “Il n’y a rien de plus sympathique que d’assister à un toast où des ministres Tukulëër s’adressent familièrement à un auditoire de vieux Sereer en partant de cette tradition, ou d’entendre un modeste paysan Sereer plaisanter d’égal à égal avec son préfet Tukulëër” (1980, 94 cited in Diouf 1998 : 61). Whether among family members of different generations, where gerontocracy norms would prevail, or among clan members where other signifiers of social, political or economic status would rule the day (or at least the interaction), or among members of ethnic groups who may stand in relatively unequal relationships to the state or to each other in light of historical scripts of servitude, the teasing,

mockery and play fighting reduce these “relatives” of unequal stature to co-equal actors in a comical theatre of the absurd.

Finally, the central mechanism of the conflict management apparatus, and the one perhaps most relevant to an examination of increasingly competitive resource based conflict, is the model’s proscriptive content. In most of these relationships there is a clear and well adhered to proscription on injuring and above all spilling the blood of one’s cousin, under pain of grave shame and misfortune. The story from the Casamance discussed above remains instructive in this regard. This is an era in which the most heinous crimes (mutilations, amputations, rape, etc.) often suffice as tactics of war. Thus the tale of a well armed separatist group, known to have a rather serious human rights record (Amnesty International 1998), that releases important hostages in the name of *cousinage* is a powerful reminder of the seriousness with which this proscription has been taken. And this was a key element of the classical model. Labouret : “Toutefois il apparaît nettement que les allies ne peuvent se nuire et en particulier se tirer du sang, quand pareil fait se produit il donne lieu à des cérémonies d’expiation et de rachat, auxquelles on ne saurait se soustraire sans attirer sur soi les plus grands malheurs ”(1929 : 252). Similarly, Paulme found that : « Non seulement les coups sont interdits entre *mangu*, mais, en présence d’individus appartenant à un groupe allié, les disputes raves avec un tiers sont impossibles : le sang ne doit pas couler devant eux. L’allié, en se montrant sur le lieu de la dispute, met fin à la querelle, sa vue suffit ramener l’ordre » (1939 : 435-436).

This, then, is the classical model of *cousinage*. It consists of constructed (imagined) kinships, articulated and confirmed in the form of ritualized and well scripted playful exchanges of various sorts. Participation in these exchanges is mandatory under pain of considerable social sanction. The relationship is often quite extensive and readily transferable across the loosest of affiliations. And the central explanation of the prevalence of joking relationships is its functional capacity to regulate the affairs of a wide range of actors, all of whom, however, have some well recognized structural basis for conflict. It is, then, a wholly indigenous structure of self-

governance. It is what Ostrom means when he refers to the self-organizing potential of local society (1997).

Levels of analysis

The model described here captures relationships of varying degrees of imagination. Insults, pacts and playful exchanges of all sorts are bind cousins at different degrees of separation. There are essentially three levels at which *cousinage* attaches. Says Moreau: “[U]tani can operate between tribes and within a tribe. In the former case, which may conveniently be called ‘external *utani*’, the acknowledgement of *utani* between two tribes means that every member of each tribe is, by birth, and irrespective of age or sex, the *mtani* of every member of the other” (Moreau 1944: 387).⁸ Labouret found among the Mandingues, Bobo and Peuhl that there were, first, « les relations entre cousins; 2^o les droits et devoirs réciproques entre membre de clans allies; 3^o le mêmes obligations entre diverses peuplades” (1929, 245). Paulme also saw distinct categories of relationships : “Cette alliance joue entre représentants de groupes déterminés – familles, village, régions, peuples – porteurs de noms différents” (1939 : 433).

Thus references to familial linkages constitute Level I relationships. In general, all work on joking relationships includes or assumes the existence of level I relationships. Ascending and descending generational links, cross cousins, and kinship by proximate marriage are the best known examples of Level I. Level II consists of *intrapeuple* or intra-ethnic linkages, such as those within clans, between paired patronyms, among villages of the same ethnicity.⁹ The “most imagined” kinships, and, it would seem, the most germane to conflict studies, are Level III relations. Level III refers to *interpeuple*, or inter-ethnic, linkages, which may include regions and their distinct peoples, as discussed above (Gravrand (1980) on the Sereer and Toucouleur and Doneux (1978) on Diola and Sereer, Sereer and Manjak, and Sereer and Balant.)

⁸ *utani* = joking/plaisanterie; *mtani* = “one of a family, a kinsman”

⁹ See for example, Fortes (1945).

This question of conceptual levels, or levels of imagination, matters because, as I discuss below, the process by which, and the explanation for, the transformations of relationships of *cousinage* lies in the renegotiation of identities which comprise these levels. When identities change, so do the relationships they inform. When those with some structural basis for conflict are bound by reciprocal ties of kinship, “sham conflicts help avoid real ones.” But when these parties redefine or reorient their network of kin, the ties that bind are loosened, and so may be the *chiens de guerre*.

The classical model as sketched here, the broad contours of which were largely defined in the 1930s and 1940s, remains the essential lens for analyzing joking relationships through to the present time. In the 1960s, Christensen affirmed the vitality of the classical model in all its components. “Among the Luguru, the *utani* relationship is a jural one that may be defined in terms of rights, privileges and obligations. It permits familiarity between *watani* regardless of age or sex. There is an obligation to assist *watani* in times of crises, participate in their ceremonies, and serve as mediators in disputes. *Utani* exists on an intertribal as well as intratribal level, and serves much the same function of dissipating hostility and maintaining harmony between groups” (1963: 1325). Though in the following decade Freedman discussed, “a reconsideration of joking relationships...” and in particular weighed in on that era’s criticisms of Radcliff-Brown’s contributions, there remained broad adherence to its principles throughout the decade (Freedman 1977). The 1980s (Drucker-Brown 1982, Apter 1983) re-affirmed the privileged place of the model – and Radcliffe-Brown’s contributions to it, as did the 1990s (Heald 1990)¹⁰ and as have the first half of the present decade (Konate n.d.; Gundelach 2000; Hocine 2003).

Our colloquium demonstrated that it remains a vital part of the sociocultural and political landscapes across West Africa. Dennis Galvin sees it in Senegal as a means of community building where no natural “national” community exists within the post colonial state framework.

¹⁰ Heald confirms but seeks to complement or “go further” than the Radcliffe-Brown model.

Sten Hagberg found in Burkina Faso that it creates a space for safe political engagement in an otherwise contracted civil society. Davidheiser and de Jong both see in these kinships mechanisms for resolving quite serious conflicts. It has, thus, proved a useful way of describing an important phenomenological construct in varied settings across the span of nearly a century. The stories themselves, the scripts which through which kinship is articulated, recount histories of centuries past. Thus it is reasonable to expect that it would apply well in rural Senegal. This is, indeed, one of the very places the study of *parenté à plaisanteries* originated (Labouret 1929; Paulme 1939). But as already alluded to, this appears very much an empirical question, answers to which remain tentative but – given the stakes of contemporary conflicts – worrisome.

I have sought, in several locales in three regions of Senegal (Tambacounda, Linguere, and Dakar) to explore the condition of managing resource-based conflict under conditions of national economic and political transformation. In doing so, it has begun to appear that the classical model breaks down in some important respects. There are, it would seem, cracks in the edifice of *cousinage*.

Testing the classical model

The context: herder-farmer conflict

The conflicts referred to in this paper relate to scarce natural resources and the difficulties associated with their management. For more than a decade, scholars have investigated hypotheses linking scarcities in, or stresses on, natural resources and violent conflict (Bennett 1991; Homer-Dixon 1994; Klare 2001). Typically a resource such as land or pasture is considered increasingly scarce when there is physically less of it (through depletion) and/or demand for it grows. Both of these conditions obtain in rural Senegal. But my research suggests that resources such as farmland, for example, are also increasingly scarce when they become less productive. And farmers in the developing world often face a condition in which the land they farm is less productive as a result of having lost access to affordable yield-enhancing inputs like fertilizers,

herbicides and pesticides. These losses result from the disengagement policies of structural adjustment, which include the state's withdrawal of subsidies and other supports to the agricultural sector. In Senegal, as with nearly all IMF clients in Africa, the "New Agricultural Policy" failed to bring about affordable private substitutions for these inputs. As a result, farmers use lower quality seeds and less, if any, fertilizer, herbicide and pesticide. In economic terms, then, natural resource scarcity is a result of agricultural adjustment policies that remove yield-enhancing subsidies from the sector. In Senegal these stresses were introduced through a series of sector reforms known as the New Agricultural Policy, implemented in an on-again, off-again fashion since 1984.

It is not farmers alone who face this situation. Pastoralists face a similarly worsening context. As with farming, the animal husbandry sector in Senegal has traditionally received, since the colonial era, various sorts of input support and productivity enhancing assistance. Sector support has come in the forms of direct state subsidies for alimentary assistance and veterinary medicines, indirect supports in marketing, education, and state sponsored zootechnical research in genetics for species enhancement (Bâ 1986). As with the farming sector, adjustment policies in the animal husbandry sector potentially reduce herd productivity (i.e., weight loss, reduced milk production, loss of stock through disease).

As a result of these two parallel conditions herders and farmers find themselves in an increasingly competitive struggle for existence. Farmers confront the reality that their plots now produce less; herders face the fact that their animals have nutritional needs that are no longer supplemented through vitamins and medicines, and so look to additional and more fruitful grazing options. The structural conflict between herders and farmers is most commonly manifest when animals stray onto a farmers field, or conversely, when farmers, seeking to resolve the land scarcity problem induced by market liberalization, attempt to expand their holdings into traditional pasture areas. If my analysis is correct, these conditions are actually promoted by sector adjustments in both agriculture and animal husbandry (O'Bannon 2006).

Conflict management in rural Senegal.

Toward the end of the 1990s, the *chef de Centre d'Expansion Rurale Polyvalent* (CERP) of the arrondissement of Sagata-Djoloff, which has authority over the *Communauté rurale de Thiamène* in Louga, was filing on average 12 *constats de divagation* per year. This figure, he asserts, is a considerable increase from prior years. The *constat* relates to the conflict that may result when a farmer discovers animals grazing in his field. The first step in resolving such a conflict is the “frank exchange of views” between the two parties. The consensus among interviewees is that normally these discussions suffice. As many farmers own at least a few small ruminants, often they realize that the next time it could be their own animals that stray onto a neighbor’s crops. If this first step fails to resolve the matter, however, the farmer will approach the *chef de village* to ask for his help (or the herder might go if the farmer has seized some of his animals in recompense). The *chef* convenes the two parties and seeks to reach an agreement. Normally, I am told, this often suffices. If this fails to resolve the dispute, however, the *chef* calls in the President of the relatively new *Conseil Rurale* (PCR), who attempts to achieve what the village chief could not.¹¹ If this does not work, the PCR calls on the sub-prefect or his adjutant or perhaps immediately the chef CERP, who will get the task from the sub-prefect anyway. They then typically convene a five-person commission that consists of the Chef CERP, an agricultural agent, an animal husbandry agent, the PCR and one other (sometimes the sub-prefect, his adjutant, a respected notable, etc.). Along with the two parties, they will survey the damage and estimate its economic value (according to estimated harvest prices for that year published by the Ministry of Agriculture). This survey is formalized in the *constat de divagation* and filed with the chef CERP. If the herder agrees to pay the damage amount, the problem is solved at this local

¹¹ Moritz has argued that a logic of “permanent conflict” gives incentives to local actors such as these to *not* resolve these affairs so as to increase the life of the revenue stream associated with their management (2006).

state level. If not, the sub-prefect alerts the gendarme, and the process moves up to a tribunal, where settlements may range from animal confiscation to jail sentences.

It is worth noting that once a *constat de divagation* is filed, parties to the conflict well understand that the power of the state is now invoked. Seeking this solution is tantamount to an admission that the problem cannot be managed without state intervention. This is significant for many reasons. First, all parties attest to a preference for managing the conflict at the first levels (e.g., among themselves, with the chief, PCR, etc.). This is true for many reasons, but, in particular, farmers often suspect the gendarmes are easily bribed with a young goat, and thus fear the state typically sides with herders in these matters. Interestingly, and as I later discuss further, these complaints are most often recounted in ethnically descriptive terms. That is, one does not often hear from farmers that *herders* are the beneficiaries of these illicit transactions, but rather Wolof farmers in Sagatta-Djoloff or Dahra-Djoloff tell me that “*the Peuhl* can bribe the gendarme.” In the Soninké region of the Bakel area one hears a familiar refrain that, not herders, but “*Peuhl* control the state.” In that region also, this alleged control over state agents is presumably achieved through bribery. One respondent offered to take me by the residence of a local gendarme to see a young goat that had been recently tethered at his property. “Where else would he get one?” he asked rhetorically. While my research cannot confirm these claims, Agrawal’s (1999) analysis of the politics of bribery associated with pastoralism lends theoretical support to local wisdom. Nevertheless, herders with whom I spent time often feel incapable of engaging the state on an equal footing with their – more sedentary – “cousins”. They feel their transhumant existence prevents them from fully participating in the important arenas of politics where the real power games are played (e.g., voting, campaigning, lobbying).

Second, failure to manage these problems at the first levels indicates that traditional authorities responsible for them are failing in the areas long attributed to their portfolios (Moritz et al 2002). When these authorities are deemed irrelevant in the affairs that matter most to their constituents more and more incidents are brought before the state. Conflicts are inevitable as

herders and farmers are condemned to live together. But when too many of these conflicts require state intervention, political inflation takes place. With too much inflation, the state cannot fulfill its many other functions. (Zartman 1997). Perhaps most significantly, when the state begins to fail in this way extrajudicial means of conflict resolution may become attractive. This, in no small measure, may explain the rise in banditry decried by many villagers in the Upper Senegal River Valley. Who is presumed responsible for this banditry, as discussed below, is a complex matter of identity transformation that confronts standard conflict management processes, and the application of the classical model, with myriad challenges.

Third, when conflicts such as these are not managed at the first levels, the likelihood of violence escalates. This is especially likely when a farmer has captured and refuses to release animals caught *in flagrante delicto*. And when violence erupts between farmers and herders normally bound by the strictures of *cousinage*, (e.g., Soninke and Peuhl, or between Serer and Toucouleur, or between certain Wolof and Peuhl) that singular taboo associated with joking relationships has been violated. The traditional conflict “medicine” has failed (Wilson-Fall 2000). And this gets to our central question.

The classical model has long held sway in Senegal – for it was partly forged here. It is still quite common for strangers, upon introduction, to immediately begin swapping insults, once the family names are identified. Bâ and Diallo in the Soninke region around Bakel, and Diop and Ndiaye in the Djoloff area, are classic examples of putative (Level II) cousins who expect to swap inflammatory tales of, for example, the others’ heritage or untidy eating habits. And while a quite extensive Level III relationship (*dendiraagal*) is said to exist between the Peuhl and Serer (Bâ 1986) there are myriad *dendiraaku*: “between Diallo (a Fulbe [*Peuhl*] patronym), and Serer, Camara (a Mandingue patronym), Koulibaly (a Bambara patronym), Gueye (a Wolof patronym), and Seck (a patronym belonging to both the Serer and the Wolof)” (Wilson Fall 2000, 60). This complexity supports Makhtar Diouf’s position that *parenté à plaisanteries* does not simply hold for the Serer and Toucouleur or the families most noted for their classic exchanges (e.g., Diop

and Ndiaye). He finds these rules for interaction to be present in relations among and across practically all the ethnic groups in Senegal (Diouf 1998).

Changing interpretations of herder-farmer relations: Cracks in the system of *cousinage*?

Since the adoption of structural adjustment reforms in the 1980s, the number and intensity of herder – farmer conflicts have grown. These trends have not only manifested themselves in more frequent filings of *constats de divagation* but in larger scale engagements such as village-wide conflicts between Mouride settlements and Peuhl herders in the central zone of the sylvo-pastoral that have escalated to the exchanges of gun fire. The most notable clash, and the most revealing of the stakes involved, occurred in the spring of 1989 when a number of farmers were killed in a clash with Mauritanian herders. This incident sparked the international dispute that spiraled into massive rioting and looting in both countries' capitals.

It appears that, in response to these events, the flexibility of the kinship system or *cousinage* runs in both directions. That is, the tendency that the classical model describes toward extension of imagined relations may be countered by a worrisome tendency towards contraction or differentiation. In the remote village of Kujani, located in the upper River Valley, discussions often turn to the problem of growing animal theft and banditry. I regularly asked who was responsible. This, from one interview, was a most informative response.

“Well, we are all Peuhl, but, if *they* don't stop stealing our animals....”

The respondent here is referring to a well documented rise in banditry – animal theft, in particular, but also carjacking and robbery – that is the source of so much consternation among local residents and that has occupied a growing amount of attention by the gendarme – including international cooperation with Malian and Mauritanian officials.¹² Interviews on background confirm that these are serious trends, but also that there has been success in countering them with

¹² From the last unpublished newsletter of the *Federation des Paysans Organisés du Département de Bakel* in the records of the Adrian Adams-Sow collection, Khounghani, Bakel.

the use of cross-border pursuit. The remark is interesting because the speaker reveals an appreciation for the larger linguistic grouping (hal pulaar) of which the *Peuhl*, Toucouleur and Laube are believed to be members. This view is wholly consistent with standard conceptions of *cousinage*. But the attribution here is that the *Peuhl* are essentially representative of a clearly heterogeneous linguistic family. He did not, after all, say “we are all halpulaar” – that “we all speak the same language.” They are all, in his view, however, cousins (“*Nous sommes tous les parents*”). At the same time, the unfinished expression clearly conveys a sentiment of differentiation that has implications for being freed from the constraints of *dendiraagal*. The obvious unstated conclusion is that if they don’t stop stealing our animals, there will be trouble. What is particularly noteworthy here is that though his patronym is *Peuhl* the respondent would not self-identify on a national census as *Peuhl*, (nor Toucouleur nor Laube). He is head of a storied Soninké family that established itself in roughly its present location in the Upper River Valley during the first part of the 18th Century (Adams So and So 1996).

What does this suggest for our understanding of contemporary ethnicity and kinship ties in the region? I hold that what we see here may mark the articulation by locals of an initial process of ethnic *re*-differentiation, a phenomenon conceptually located between ethnogenesis and “full blown” conflict waged across discretely constituted ethnic boundaries. First, there is the extant “linguistic group” *Haal pulaar* of which many of his varied neighbors, but not actually he, are members. (Though his name is Pulaar, and he speaks Pulaar, his first language is Soninke of the Mande grouping.) Recognition of some storied kinship in this larger grouping is important for many reasons but most notably for the impact of *cousinage* and the proscriptions on “spilling the blood” of a cousin. Second, there is the sense that the group most representative of the *Haal pulaar* is the *Peuhl*. This argues for an essential quality, that is, that the essence of the *Haal pulaaren* is not language, but rather the attributes of its most characteristic group, the *Peuhl*. This attribute, of course, is animal husbandry for which the *Peuhl* (or Fulbe/Fulani elsewhere in West Africa) are most noted. The third, however, is the warning that “if *they* don’t stop stealing *our*

animals ...” This reveals a subtle differentiation between “us,” the *real* Peuhl, and “them,” the other members of the larger group (or *vice versa*), which comprises those whose maternal language is Pulaar, but who are otherwise different in important respects.

Indeed, my questions about the ethnic composition of the region almost invariably solicit references not to language, but to *modes de vie*, that is, to some sector of the economy or to modes of production and/or subsistence. Indeed, the tenuous relationship between language and ethnicity in Senegal has been examined by a host of observers (Swigart 1994, Cruise O’Brien 2003) and is familiar to any listener of Sengalese radio. Take for example this exchange between the radio announcer and a caller:

(dj) Asala malekum
 (caller) Maleukum Salaam....
 (dj) Nanga def? (Wolof)
 (caller) Ma Jamu (Soninké)
 (dj) Vous etes Soninke ? (Français)
 (caller) Non, je suis Peuhl, mais ma mere est Soninké. Je viens de region Bakel....
 (Dj) Merci
 (caller) An Toxo ? (Soninké)
 (Dj) responds in Wolof. (7/17/2005 on Radio FM 104)

Thus the descriptions by a Wolof Bakel resident of the various groupings recognize language, but these are hardly the primary attributes of note.

The Toucouleurs, who for the most part live in the north, are sedentary farmers and fishermen. The Peuhl are nomadic herders. They speak with a slightly different accent but use the same words. They sing when they speak. The Serer are mostly sedentary farmers. The Wolof are situated in the old kingdoms, except for the Lebu, who are fishermen. There are the Mandinge in the north east like the Soninké, Bambara and Sossé, where the men don’t work, like the Diola.
 (Anonymous communication, Bakel, 2000)

One problem for interpreting the frustration regarding animal theft is that the signal characteristic of today’s *Peuhl* is not necessarily their mere association with animals, but with their transhumance or semi-nomadic tradition and their *mode de peuplement* (Bâ 1986). The respondent who refers to “they” who steal his animals is a sedentary agro-pastoralist. He is a

farmer with a herd. So our interlocutor is neither quintessential *Peuhl* (i.e., a transhumant, semi-nomad) nor Toucouleur in the residential sense (they hail from the north). Though he does not fish like the many Toucouleur, he does farm. And he is by linguistic association quite clearly Soninké, as are nearly all the co-residents of his village.

So how does a Soninké speaker come at once to self-identify as a *Peuhl*, make distinctions among “true *Peuhl*” and “the other” while he himself would not likely be recognized as either by those more typically identified as *Peuhl*? And what consequences might there be for level II and III relationships informed by such changing self knowledge? Barth’s now classic conception held that all sorts of defining ethnic characteristics could change while the identifications among recognizably distinct groups were maintained. “[M]ost of the cultural matter that at any time is associated with a human population is *not* constrained by this boundary; it can vary, be learnt, and change without any critical relation to the boundary maintenance of the ethnic group” (Barth 1969, 38). But the views of this and other respondents suggest that the boundaries *and* their respective cultural contents are equally negotiable. Cruise O’Brien’s respondent (a self-identified Wolof of Pulaar ancestry) spoke thusly about these fluidities: “What is a Peul (colonial ethnic category) anyway? A man who trails around after his cows. And if he sits down and sells his cows, he becomes a Toucouleur (another colonial census category, again Pulaar-speaking). Then if he uses the money to go off to town and starts to buy and sell cloth, he becomes a Wolof” (2003, 129). In the case of my respondent, we hear from someone whose primary mode of subsistence is farming (though he owns a sizeable herd of animals and pays to have them tended), whose political self identification is primarily that of a member of a peasant farmer organization, and whose linguistic heritage would naturally lead others to identify him as a Soninké member of the Mande grouping, but who nevertheless identifies himself as *Peuhl*, and in some ways more *Peuhl* than those he fears steal from him.

Might this pose a threat to the resiliency of joking relationships predicated on a prior understanding? Might we expect the strains associated with demands of charity placed on cousins

to fray such bonds when the identities become suspect? Isn't this the sort of thing that leads one to confide that these "these aren't *really* our relatives..." but "they come because they know we must help them"?

Farther up river from Kuḡani lies the village of Manael. Here too, there are the problems with animal theft, as well as the persistent problems associated with crop damage. The residents of Manael are particularly sensitive to these problems, for they are but a few kilometers down river from the island of Ndounde Khore, the location of the April 1989 incident that nearly led to war between Senegal and Mauritania and did involve the most egregious violations of the "spilling blood" taboo.¹³ Significantly, when Manael elders referred to "the problem" by speaking of the past, the descriptors were more often "herders" and "farmers." But when they referred to more recent events, including the border conflict, the references were more often to relations among the Soninké and Moors or the Soninké and Peuhl.

This is a subtle transition but is one that seems to correspond with a perceived deterioration in the relationships. "In the past," I hear, "herders and farmers got along." Stories of a more symbiotic relationship, one in which, for example, fields were left open after harvest for goats to graze on the chaff. In exchange, the field was improved with the dung fertilizer left behind. Both herders and farmers often herald this relationship as the kind of relationship between the two modes of subsistence they would like to forge again. Ethnic tales of banditry, theft and violence, however, counter the "histories" of productive symbiosis. Today, the Wolof and the Soninke say that the Peuhl control the state and that they can do nothing about that. Yesterday these were herders, today they are Peuhl. The terrain on which level III relations of *cousinage* have been established appears to be shifting. To use Barth's terms, the changes referred to here seem related neither to the boundary between, nor the content of, these groups (1998). They seem to imply that the *meaning of the boundary* between groups has changed to

¹³ Four Soninke youths were killed, presumably by Toucouleur, in the initial incident that quickly spiraled into the near *causus belli*.

one that carries no obligation of *cousinage*. Such a condition explains, for example, why Kane and Bâ (both Pulaar patronyms) might still resolve their differences through the mechanisms of *cousinage* when the former's animals stray onto the latter's fields, but Diallo (the Soninke form of Kane) and Bâ or Kane and Diakité (the Soninke form of Bâ) no longer can. In terms of the classical model, Level II relations hold, while those at level III do not.

What accounts for these changes? The key determinants of the changes in identities upon which a redefinition of level III relationships is based can be located in the political and economic transformations local residents invariably call our attention to. Neoliberal transformation, in the form of painful structural adjustments that have hit both the agricultural and animal husbandry sub-sectors does more than induce new economic stresses. It affects the ways in which collectives conceive of themselves and of the spaces they occupy (Hall 1999). For our purposes, it redirects collective affiliations away from the ties of Level III. *Désengagement d'état*, in the forms of decentralization, and economic reforms like structural adjustment and devaluation, localizes the terrain upon which increasingly serious contests for resources are waged. As one local expert suggested, these contests are no longer merely aggrandizing conflicts, but conflicts for one's very survival. But neoliberal transformation also *individualizes*. As a matter of ideological principle, individualism is a central tenet of neoliberal modernity, as is, of course, the methodological approach to social analysis it informs. This reduces one's affiliations toward simply that of the nuclear family unit (and perhaps even more singularly to *homo economicus*). Mine is not the first analysis to suggest these identities are subject to such inward tendencies. Bâ, regarding the changing territorial administration under the colonial regime, discussed the Peuhl's "tendances à l'individualisme familiale" (1986, 75). With such a tendency we might explain the persistence of level I and Level II relationships while we observe the weakening of important level III relations. That is, we can explain the continued appreciation of the jokes between Bâ and Diallo but also the loss of them among herders and farmers, because the ties between these putative cousins are fraying.

In conjunction with these inward tendencies, a globalized neoliberalism means ones affiliations are increasingly transcendent of the local. Peasant farmers' organizations, for example, seek to "tap into" international streams of trade, finance, and, most importantly, aid flows through mechanisms of decentralized cooperation, which connect local actors in transnational networks. Thus we may speak of a *glocalized* identity formation, in which the associations are both inwardly directed (to the household) and externally directed (to beyond the region, and nation-state). Both of these impulses threaten to make irrelevant the associations/affiliations upon which *parenté à plaisanteries* at level III is based. This is why we might expect these structures to be particularly susceptible to exogenous shocks of the sort which neoliberalism offers. The intensifying economic struggle contracts notions of kinship to the less imagined while the search for solutions focuses the gaze to possible relationships only recently conceived. Both tendencies lead away from a focus on regional, interethnic networks, leaving them in a weakened and vulnerable state.

That these relationships would be subject to change is, however, merely to recognize the nature of kinship (Franklin and McKinnon 2001). Criticizing the accepted view that "blood is thicker than water" Schneider's (1984) key work in the field of kinship studies exposed the "sanguine" tautology underpinning classical kinship studies, which had directly influenced the classical model of joking relationships (in particular Fortes 1945, 1949). Not frequently, however, is mention made of whether, how, and under what conditions these relationships are subject to renegotiation/redefinition. The structural functionalism of the earliest (and some contemporary) research was, of course, limited in its capacity to explain system change – maintenance being the approach's central supposition. Nevertheless, my suspicions that these institutions are subject to change-inducing influences are not without their precedents, even within the classical literature. As early as 1944, Moreau said of the joking relationship that "there is no doubt that under modern influences certain of its manifestations are falling into disuse locally" (386). And with specific reference to the classical model's Level I, he noted with regard to the Sambaa and the Bondeii

“Here a transition may be taking place; for in the Zaramu tribe children of both sexes now inherit only their father’s *utani*, whereas it is recalled that in times past they took only their mother’s” (390). And still further, level III effects are felt.

Undoubtedly easier communications are breaking down the observances. As between the Chagga and Pare the forfeit customs are said to be a thing of the past because intercourse is so frequent. Among the Bondei the ‘joking’ is obsolescent. It seems impossible that Zigua living on the main Turiani-Korogwe road could keep open house for the Nyamwezi, the Sukuma, the Kami, the Luguru, the Hehe, the Gogo, and the Zaramu who now pass in such numbers on their way to work on the sisal estates. And it is obvious that a place like Tanga market, with its admixture of tribes, would be in constant uproar if mutual recrimination, ‘April fooling’, and forfeiting went on with pristine vigour. Other Western influences must have a damping effect... (Moreau 1949, 399).

Such an understanding helps explain a quite recent, and perhaps quite suggestive, re-assessment; a well-known retired history teacher was introduced to a journalist who wished to interview him for the national journal *Le Soleil*. When the teacher refused to speak, the journalist invoked the Serer – Toucouleur joking relationship. He responded by saying:

You understand nothing. The Serer is not the cousin of the Toucouleur, he is his father. The Toucouleur was born of a marriage between a Serer and a Peuhl, in an area called Niama Ndira. So do not speak to me of *cousinage*. (Le Soleil 3 May, 2001)

Conclusion

Herder-farmer conflicts are an indicator species of conflict. They are, at once, political, economic, identity and resource based conflicts. When they begin to escalate more frequently and to higher levels of intensity, because their management at lower levels with traditional institutions is hampered, they may indicate worrisome trends in the socio-cultural and politico-economic environment. It has been demonstrated that herder-farmer conflicts are sensitive, as indicator species are, to external shocks to their environment such as the political and economic reforms Senegal has implemented during the last two decades. This paper has sought to theorize the relationship between Senegal’s worsening herder-farmer conflicts and political, social and economic change. More research is needed, but initial analyses indicate that the identities and relationships that constitute *parentés a plaisanteries* are responsive to growing economic stress.

As the more “imagined” kinships contract in response to a more intense struggle for survival, the ties that bind cousins begin to fray. When they break altogether, “life rules” that emerged to ensure collective survival in inhospitable milieus no longer hold. Discourses of autochthony may begin to replace scripts of reciprocity and mutual obligation.

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