

**WAYS OF KNOWING *DONSOYA*:**  
**ENVIRONMENT, EMBODIMENT AND PERCEPTION**  
**AMONG THE HUNTERS OF BURKINA FASO**

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## **Contents**

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>DECLARATION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>COPYRIGHT STATEMENT</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>NOTE ON LANGUAGE</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>RESEARCH FOCUS AND OUTLINE OF THE WORK</b>	<b>12</b>
Concepts of knowledge	15
Outline of the work	20
<b>THE MANDE</b>	<b>24</b>
A history of exchanges	26
Fluid ethnicity and society	30
<b>PART ONE - APPROACHING DONSOYA</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 - THE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DONSOYA</b>	<b>38</b>
<i>Donsoya</i> and its cosmology	42
The constitution of modern hunting associations	54

<b>CHAPTER 2 - ACCESSING THE FIELD, ACCESSING DONSOYA</b>	<b>61</b>
The initiation	66
The <i>Dankun</i> network	70
Exploring Adama's network	77
Between individualism and connectivity	83
<b><u>PART 2 - THE HUNTER AND HIS ENVIRONMENT</u></b>	<b><u>89</u></b>
<b>CHAPTER 3 - THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF THE BUSH</b>	<b>90</b>
Cotton and cows	91
Hunting and illegality	95
<i>Donsoya</i> facing environmental change	103
<b>CHAPTER 4 - CONCEPTIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>112</b>
The village and the bush	113
Blurring the boundaries	121
Enacting an environment	125
<b><u>PART 3 - RESEARCHING SENSORY EXPERIENCE</u></b>	<b><u>133</u></b>
<b>CHAPTER 5 - THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BUSH</b>	<b>134</b>
Learning to hunt	136
Anthropology and perception	140
An Ecological approach to perception	144
Noise and sound	149
Frustrated visions	153
Perceiving in the darkness	156
Researching experience	159

<b>CHAPTER 6 - REPRESENTING THE APPRENTICESHIP</b>	<b>164</b>
Representing the sensory aspects of hunting	167
Collaboration and enactment	174
Enactive poetics	179
<b><u>PART 4 - FROM EMBODIMENT TO ECOLOGY</u></b>	<b><u>184</u></b>
<b>CHAPTER 7 - THE EMBODIMENT OF <i>DONSOYA</i></b>	<b>185</b>
Embodied knowledge	187
Embodying <i>donsoya</i>	193
Kinds of knowledge	200
<b>CHAPTER 8 - CONNECTING KNOWLEDGE, BODY AND ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>207</b>
The materiality of knowledge	207
Fetishes	213
Beyond the semiotic	217
A <i>donso</i> and his fetish, a <i>donso</i> as a fetish	221
The ecological embodiment of knowledge	226
<b><u>REFERENCES</u></b>	<b><u>231</u></b>

## **Abstract**

Ways of Knowing Donsoya: Environment, Embodiment and Perception among the Hunters of Burkina Faso.

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This thesis is centred on a group of initiated *donso* hunters in Burkina Faso. It proposes an ecological approach to their knowledge to make sense of the presence of *donso* hunters across a diversity of languages, ethnic groups and ecological transformations. I suggest that the knowledge of *donso* hunters is made of a set of specific relationships with their environment, which differentiate them from other villagers and from uninitiated hunters.

Central to my approach is the assumption that knowledge is not just a set of notions but is enacted in an ecological system that encompasses a non-dualistic individual and his environment - in its human and non-human aspects. This way *donsoya* encompasses procedural and propositional knowledge, materiality and meaning, enskilment and initiatory knowledge. I have looked at all these dimensions through the lens of apprenticeship, as a focal interest and as a methodological device, through my own initiation and practice of hunting.

The film *Kalanda - The Knowledge of the Bush*, which accompanies and constitutes part of this thesis, is an audiovisual counterpart to the dissertation. It narrates the apprenticeship providing an overview of the multifaceted knowledge of *donsoya*, in a collaborative work that involved the filmmaker in the role of student and the hunters in the roles of teachers. I recommend watching the film before approaching the written text.

## **Declaration**

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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## Note on Language

In the course of this thesis I transcribe from two African languages, Jula and Seenku, respectively the trade language of the area where I worked and the language of the Sambla, the people among which I lived throughout the research. At the moment there is no standardised transcription convention for these two languages. In Burkina Faso for example a variety of spellings are used for toponyms, and one can read different versions of the same name on signs, maps or official documents.

Where a use is established I preserved the common spelling, often influenced by French - for example for the town Bobo Dioulasso. In other cases, if an alternative spelling has become common in the literature I have privileged that form - as in Jula. I left the names of the persons I mention in this work as they appear on their IDs, even though incoherences abound also in this case.

I transcribed Jula and Seenku terms using a simplified convention, so *è* and *ò* appear instead of the phonetic *ɛ* and *ɔ*, *ng* and *ny* appear instead of *ŋ* and *ɲ* and *c* instead of *tʃ*. I use double letters to indicate long vowels and do not mark tones (Jula has two, Seenku has three). Jula determines the use of the plural form - the suffix written *-w* and pronounced *u* - depending on such factors as opposition to singular, definite versus indefinite or reference to a countable quantity (Dumestre 2003: 137–138; Hellweg 2011: xi). For clarity, in this work I simply use the marker *-w* to indicate that a noun refers to a plural quantity (as for example in McNaughton 1988a). Terms in italics are in Jula, unless differently specified.

# INTRODUCTION

## Research Focus and Outline of the Work

The present work is centred on a group of West African initiated hunters called *donsow* (a plural, sing. *donso*), and on the forms of knowledge and practices - *donsoya* - that separate them from the rest of local, uninitiated hunters. *Donsow* are in fact a subset of hunters, which are normally referred to as generic "killers of animals." This implies that the hunting activity *per se* cannot guarantee the status of *donso*. Becoming a *donso* requires entering an initiatory society and acquiring practical, ritual and esoteric knowledge. *Donsow* can in fact be healers specialised in herbal medicine, diviners, amulet-makers, and ritual specialists.

Among the farming populations of Mande influence, over the territories of Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso, the term *donso* is used with minimal spelling variants, and *donsoya* is a markedly interethnic phenomenon. I conducted my research in Burkina Faso, west of the town of Bobo Dioulasso, mostly in and around the villages of Karankasso Sambla, Banzon, Samogogwan and Samogohiri, dealing mainly with hunters of Sambla, Tusia, Samogo, Bobo, Dafing, Jula and Senufo origin. Over these territories *donsoya* is conceived as a unitary entity. It is constituted of local and transnational connections that are revealed by the circulation of *donsow* across borders, by the presence of international gatherings and shared myths and rituals. If compared to the diversity of languages, peoples, religions, traditions and histories of the large area where *donsow* can be found, *donsoya* is striking for its consistency.

The most basic question that gave origin to this thesis emerges from this apparent unity of *donsoya*. I was brought to ask myself a simple question that could not find an answer in the existing literature on *donsoya*: what makes a *donso*? In other words, on the one hand, what differentiates a *donso* from an

uninitiated hunter, and on the other, what unites *donsow* who do not speak the same language and live hundreds of kilometres apart? I want to suggest that it is a matter of *knowledge*, and that *donsoya* is ultimately a search for knowledge and for the power and mastery associated with it. In the field, I encountered a decided emphasis on *donsoya* as a way to knowledge, one that used a vocabulary common to that of education, with terms like *karamogo*, teacher, *donsoden*, student hunter, *kalanda*, group of students, *lonni*, knowledge, *hakiliya*, intelligence, and others. This emphasis revealed a body of initiatory knowledge that sets *donsow* apart from hunters who had not received initiation. But I will also make the point that it is very crucial to account for forms of knowledge that have been overlooked by previous studies, forms that are integral to an answer to the original question of what makes a *donso*.

Looking at the existing literature on *donsoya*, one group of studies has concentrated on the reconstruction of a cosmology or worldview, often starting from texts gathered among the bards of the *donsow*, who have a vast repertoire of epic songs (I refer for example to Bird 1972a; Cashion 1984; Cissé 1964; 1994; Traoré 2000). It is worth remembering that much of the scholarship on the area where *donsow* are found, written in French, focuses on an analogous task by gathering the texts of privileged key informants. The group of scholars associated with Marcel Griaule and his school (on this topic see Clifford 1988: chapter 2) sought access to esoteric knowledge as a privileged way to reconstruct complex cosmological systems and worldviews (examples in Cissé 1985a; Cissé and Kamissoko 1988; Dieterlen 1951; Griaule 1948a). The drawback of this approach has been a neglect of the diachronic transformations of *donsoya* and its involvements in broader political processes.

Aware of these shortcomings, another cluster of studies tried to obviate the issues of an approach based on *texts* by underlining the relevance of the ways *donsow* were adapting to a changing *context*: during the last twenty years scholars studied *donsow* as park guards, security agents, irregular troops and members of modern associations (for example Ferme and Hoffman 2004; Hagberg 2004; Hellweg 2011; Leach 2000).

In this work I want to make the point that both clusters of studies are leaving out of the frame an important component of the knowledge that

constitutes *donsoya*. This I might call *knowledge of the bush*, starting from the realisation that most previous studies neglected the setting with which the *donso*, as hunters, are most associated. It is in fact quite difficult to read about what *donso* hunters do in the bush, how they procure the meat and the plants they use for their rituals and medicines. But more importantly, what role is the embodied experience of the bush, with its hardships and difficulties, playing for the sense of identity of this group? Is a novice *donso* only learning esoteric knowledge, or are his body and perception also undergoing transformations and enskilment (Ingold 2000a)? Are these embodied forms of experience also ways of knowing?

My answers to these questions will be based on an ecological approach to the knowledge of *donsoya*, one that considers the hunter in his environment. This latter term has a precise connotation and is borrowed from psychologist James J. Gibson's ecological approach to visual perception (1979). Environment is characterized by Gibson as a relative term, as opposed to absolute geometrical space: in other words, it depends on the perceiver who interacts with it. It is a processual phenomenon, continuously reshaping in its relationship with the perceiving organism, from which it is indivisible. The way I use it, the term environment is not synonymous with nature, implying an opposition with culture and excluding the human species (Cooper and Palmer 1992; Croll and Parkin 1992; Descola and Pálsson 1996; McCay and Acheson 1987), but includes and depends on man's presence. For Gibson perception is active, explorative experience of a body interacting with a visual world - not just peering over a field of view. But, even more crucially, what is perceived is inseparable from the meaning and possibilities it holds for the perceiver - its affordances (Gibson 1979: 127-129).

The anthropologist who has applied Gibson's ideas most thoroughly is Tim Ingold, who put social relations inside the broader frame of ecological relations (2000a). Information is, for him, not constructed as an intellectual operation but resides in any interaction with the environment. My claim is that a *donso* is characterised by a specific engagement with his environment, in the frame of a bush that is undergoing significant transformations. The area where I conducted research is becoming increasingly domesticated, as an anthropogenic landscape that carries the sign of an increasing human

presence. This undermines the traditional idea of the *donso* as a figure with an exclusive access to the bush. Yet *donsow* seem to retain a set of particular perceptual capacities, not just because of the training of hearing and sight connected to the hunting activity, but also thanks to their medicines, which enable them to see normally invisible entities and reveal shape shifters. Thus, the environment of a *donso* is something specific to his possibilities for interaction with it, and differs from that of an uninitiated hunter.

### Concepts of knowledge

Thus, when I speak of an ecological approach to the knowledge of *donsoya* I cannot simply identify it with a form of so-called traditional ecological knowledge - commonly shortened in TEK. This term is used in development and management discourses to refer to the knowledge of the land held by aboriginal populations, which should supplement or "integrate" scientific knowledge. Even if we bracket problematic terms such as traditional, aboriginal and native, this definition and the agenda behind the attention to TEK come with significant issues. Paul Nadasdy, for example, has underlined the power differential between the two kinds of knowledge that are supposed to be joined (1999). Inside the very acronym TEK, environment and ecological are normally interpreted by development specialists as synonymous with the non-human part of the world, or in other words are in conflict with the more holistic conceptions of native peoples who see themselves as part of the environment. In this sense, for many aboriginal peoples "the very idea of separating 'ecological' from 'non-ecological' knowledge becomes nonsensical" (*idem*: 4). But it is also crucial to underline how the definition of knowledge implied by the current use of TEK is influenced by Western scientific conventions of what knowledge might be, as a discrete intellectual product that exists separately from a network of relations (see Goldman 2007; Moore 2009 for African case studies).

By adopting Gibson's acceptation of the word ecological, I make clear that I am not simply looking at knowledge *about* the environment, meant as

something to which man is external and can look upon from a detached perspective. So my project is different from an ethnoscientific approach because it does not simply aim at documenting local systems of knowledge (Conklin 1955; Durbin 1966; Goodenough 1970; Sturtevant 1964). Nor does it speak to human ecology or to the environmental determinism of cultural materialism, which treat cultural meanings as "epiphenomenal" and secondary to material constraints (see a critique in Basso 1984: 48–49). Rather, I use an *ecological approach* to locate knowledge as emerging in a system that includes man in *his* environment - using the possessive pronoun instead of the definite article to underline how environment is relative and does not exist separately from an organism embedded in it. This is not just a reference to Gibson, but to those thinkers who sought to extend mind and cognition beyond the boundaries of the individual body (such as Merleau-Ponty 1945; 1964; Maturana and Varela 1987; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). I am particularly indebted to Gregory Bateson and his conception of ecological mind, immanent in organism-environment systems that do not necessarily include a human element (1972; 1979).

As such, knowledge is also not exclusively contained in the mind, but is retraceable in forms of body use and interaction, because even what we consider "higher cognitive operations" are grounded in bodies in the environment (Johnson 1999: 81). The most recent approaches to an anthropology of knowledge have followed the latest developments in cognitive sciences, passing from a cognitivist approach that equated knowledge with encoded information modelled on language (review in Crick 1982: 288–293) to a "grounded cognition" emergent from domains of practical activity, bodily engagements and environmental situations (see Cohen 2010: 194–196). Anthropologists include more and more in a definition of knowledge perceptual and tool-use skills (Gibson and Ingold 1993; Grasseni 2007; Ingold 2000a), comparing knowledge to apprenticeship: "an achievement of work, experience and time" (Harris 2007a: 1). In other words an ecological approach builds on these contributions to try to resolve an opposition between procedural and propositional knowledge - Ryle's famous "knowing how" and "knowing that" (1949) - underlining how information is to be found in both modalities, which are forms of action in the world. A



cognitivist approach, on the contrary, underlines universal brain structures and relative categories and concepts, opposing objective knowledge to subjective experience (Harris 2007a: 20–21).

A definition of knowledge confined to the intellectual dimension cannot account for the beliefs and practices of *donsoya* I experienced in the field. It would neglect the perceptual and practical skills that are indispensable to hunting, as did the literature that focused on the textual knowledge of *donsoya*. But it would also fail to explain practices that represent a "contamination" between the procedural and the propositional. *Donsow*, for example, make use of medicinal recipes - something that is taught verbally, as a series of propositions - that have the effect of enhancing the perceptual skills of the hunter - which pertain to the domain of the procedural. Furthermore, in this region written text is sometimes used not as a carrier of meaning, but as vehicle for divine power inside amulets and talismans based on excerpts of the Qur'an.

I felt the need to account for the way *donsoya* changes permanently the body and personality of an apprentice, something previous studies of Mande hunters did not mention. From this point of view the knowledge of *donsoya* is *embodied* knowledge. The way I interpret the term embodiment goes beyond the simple inscription of meaning on the body - a sort of bridging that does not deny the dualism (Ingold 2000a: 193). Rather, I refer to Michael Jackson's call for a rediscovery of "the original sense of the word culture as denoting modes of practical activity in the man-made environment" and his critique of "intellectualistic tendencies to assimilate bodily experience to conceptual and verbal formulations and to regard practices as 'symbolic' of something outside themselves" (1983: 327). Jackson's point, which is derived from Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu's ideas, has been taken up again by Ingold (2000a) and by Csordas, with his concept of cultural phenomenology as the study of being in the world, opposed to a more traditional focus on representations (1994a). For example, the paradigm of embodiment allows for a consideration of the power of the fetishes and amulets used by the *donsow* as derived from their role as material connectors with the spirits of the bush, rather than being signifiers or symbols of social relationships.

I am interested in the dynamic aspects of embodiment as a process that can reveal the nature of embodied knowledge as it is taken up - an approximation of what Ingold calls "enskilment" (2000a: 416). Hence my interest in learning by doing as the moment in which aesthetic sensibilities and skills are transformed or developed. In this sense embodiment is not just a process that affects a body, but rather transforms the environment in a systemic way, because it influences the possibilities for interaction of an organism.

Part of this interest in perception, enskilment and embodiment entails a reframing of aspects of the initiatory knowledge of *donsoya* that have previously been read through a mainly symbolist lens. In other words, I have sought to underline the embodied and material aspects of forms of knowledge that are normally mediated through language but act on or through the body of the *donso* - medicines, amulets and fetishes. Dealing with such initiatory knowledge was necessary, on the one hand, because in the field I encountered a repeated stress on the importance of this knowledge for *donsoya*. On the other hand initiatory knowledge is what separates a *donso* from a non-initiated hunter, even when they hunt side-by-side and move through the same space. Previous studies of *donsoya* have mostly taken for granted that the only hunters in the Mande territory are initiated *donsow*, but my experience in Burkina has showed me a different situation and the problem of the difference between the initiated and uninitiated hunters had to be addressed.

To sum it up in the shortest possible way, in this work I am going to look at the social aesthetics of the *donsow*. With this term, where aesthetics refers through its etymological root to sensory experience, I refer precisely to the way the different layers of knowledge I mentioned above are connected with each other and enact an environment, or in other words to the way embodied experience interacts with the institutions, initiatory knowledge and rituals of *donsoya*. Among the studies that have worked in this manner are Steven Feld's *Sound and Sentiment* (1982), which looked at the way the experience of natural sounds among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea reverberated in their songs, and Michael Jackson's *Knowledge of the Body* (1983), which examined the way gender roles are inscribed in the body by an

initiation ritual. David MacDougall, among the few who actually used the term social aesthetics, wrote of the opposite process, namely the way in which an institution such as a boarding school in India imposes a sensory regimen in order to implement its education style (1999). But unlike MacDougall, who compares social aesthetics to *landscapes* for the way they bring together the cultural and the natural (*idem*: 3), by looking at the *environment* of a *donso* I underline the way the two components of the expression - the sensory and the social - are mutually constitutive and do not exist separately.

My focus on embodied experience, enskilment and initiatory knowledge made the case for a participant approach to fieldwork. This translated into a year of apprenticeship in *donsoya*, which involved for me experiencing most of the layers of the knowledge I write about. This participant methodology permeates the whole work, from my initiation to *donsoya*, passing through my apprenticeship in hunting, to get to the practice of *donso* medicine and ritual. My use of audiovisual media aims at representing the sensuous dimension of my apprenticeship, and at the same time the multiple components of the knowledge of *donsoya* through a narrative structure in the first person. The ethnographic film that constitutes part of this dissertation, *Kalanda - The Knowledge of the Bush*, has been both a way to represent and to research *donsoya*, thanks to the involvement of hunters in the editing and to my use of the camera as a catalyst to stimulate the production of further knowledge.

Finally, it is important to remember that in this part of Africa knowledge is often unevenly distributed and is connected to power and social stratification (Bellman 1981; Brenner 2000; Ferme 2001; Little 1965; 1966; McNaughton 1988a; Piot 1993). My deep involvement with *donsoya* meant negotiating the overlap of the figures of apprentice and researcher, joined in my own person (Lave 1977; Marchand 2009). While initiation granted me a remarkable access to this restricted knowledge, it also meant that I accepted to exclude from the dissertation - including its filmic component - certain teachings that were not meant to be shared with non-initiates - regardless of their relevance for my research. This is why I have not included a proper analysis of the texts of incantations or of the components of medicines. In other words, to use Foucault's (1976) terminology, I have agreed not to reveal the *connaissance* of *donsoya* - the subject matter of its initiatory knowledge -

and have limited myself to report its *savoir* - in an upper level discourse *about donsoya*.

### Outline of the work

This introduction has the double aim of setting the ground and context for my research and, at the same time, of starting to highlight certain problems emerging from the ethnographic literature on the whole area where the *donsow* are found. First and foremost, *donsoya* is a Mande phenomenon, a term that refers to a family of peoples loosely united by linguistic, cultural and historical traits. Like in Needham's notion of polythetic classifications, there is no single trait that is essential to membership, but the members are related to each other in a sort of "chain complex" (Needham 1975: 350). Similarly, *donsoya* cannot be described through the frame of a circumscribed, or worse static, ethnic group or area context. Only by placing it in fluid histories and spaces of exchange can one approach its chameleonic appearance. While this is true in general of the Mande area, the part of Burkina Faso where I worked is characterised even more by permeable political, social and ethnic boundaries, having been, in the past, at the intersection of trade routes and borders of ancient empires. It is not a surprise then to find *donsoya* characterised differently as soon as one passes from village to village, yet to find so many hunters connected to each other in a wide network and able to share a common idiom - not just a linguistic one, but rather a communicative common ground. This introduction lays the ground for an account of the *donsow*'s social milieu in the next part, which necessarily has to start with a review of the knowledge *on donsoya*.

Chapter 1 is constituted, then, of a review of the scholarship on *donsoya* that reconstructs a cosmology through the gathering of texts. These scholars have often worked with *donso* musicians, a choice that, I argue, has brought them away from the sensuous dimensions of the hunts in the bush. Still, the focus of this cluster of studies is a good opportunity to present *donsoya*'s myths of origin, main rituals, sacred places and institutions. I underline that

these scholars have often neglected to put their findings in a diachronic perspective, and have ended up reconstructing ideal types that often cannot be retraced in actual practice, and which sometimes have a prescriptive character. The other main group of publications I have singled out tries to compensate for these limits with an attention to ecology, wars and politics. I present some of the main themes especially to depict the transformations undergone by modern hunting associations, since their constitution, in Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. The organisational shape of *donsoya* was in full transformation when I entered the field, and the differences in the initiation procedure were decisive in shaping the course of my research.

An account of my access to *donsoya* constitutes the core of Chapter 2, providing an example of the functioning of the network of hunters. The complications and dynamics of this process are critically and reflexively considered to show how in Burkina *donsoya* is evolving toward an increasingly networked configuration, in parallel with a transformation of its cults and structures.

Chapter 3 deals with the political ecology behind the changes of the bush in Western Burkina Faso. The different interests of farmers, hunting associations, state agencies and foreign donors intersect and collide giving rise to conflict. In the case of hunters, this often means evading the regulations on fauna management and the officers appointed for their implementation. I enquire into the different conceptions and ways of relating to the environment that emerge from the practices and discourses of these different actors, underlining how the current environmental policies in Burkina Faso, inspired by such slogans as "collaboration" and "participation," hide a struggle over the nature of the knowledge of the environment. Part of the literature on Mande hunters and the environmentalist discourses of foreign donor agencies come together in assigning to the *donsow* the role of mediators between the farmers and the bush, artificially removing them from their communities and their roles of cultivators.

I go deeper into the local conceptions of the environment in Chapter 4, confronting an idea commonly established in the scholarship on the Mande area, namely that there is a strong cosmological opposition between the domesticated space of the village and the wild bush areas, reflecting a

contrast between nature and culture. I argue against a clear-cut opposition, drawing on my ethnographic experience that showed how the progressive domestication of the bush has brought to a near collapse of this separation in the everyday practices of villagers. I move on to looking at rituals that reaffirm a relationship of mutual dependency between the bush and the village, agriculture and hunting. Although this frame seems to reject an attempt to describe a univocal conception of the environment, I argue that the key lies in privileging forms of engagement with the bush that enact an environment, rather than representing a body of knowledge about it.

The actual practice of hunting, in its lived immediacy, is the subject of Chapter 5, which draws significantly on my hunting experiences. As underlined by Ingold, perception and embodied knowledge play a fundamental role in hunting, and I take the opportunity to connect the main studies on the topic of the senses and perception in anthropology to the methodological issue of studying embodied experience. This raises wider questions about anthropology being limited to the study of representations, and how it can approach dimensions of culture that do without meaning and text. I advocate for a method in the first person and the heuristic use of the ethnographer's embodied experience, as a way to connect with the hunters' experience through channels that prescind from the verbal.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the problem of how to represent the process of learning such multifaceted knowledge. Among the questions I ask are: how to represent sensory perception with images and sounds, and what relationship is there between Gibson's ecological perception and a technologically mediated perception? I address these problems in a reflection on the film that is presented as an integral part of this dissertation, where I tried to marry an approach in the first person with collaborative methodologies. The result is the documentary *Kalanda - The Knowledge of the Bush*, an overview of the different layers of knowledge that constitute *donsoya*, from the perspective of an apprentice.

Chapters 7 and 8 try to connect all the components touched on so far: the environment, knowledge, and embodiment. In Chapter 7 I start by looking at ideas of personhood as they emerge through the description of the long-lasting effects of *donso* medicines. The body appears permeable and connected

to a man's personality, so that herbal preparations can influence character, perception and even gender. Even the male monopoly on *donsoya* seems not to be clear-cut, and cases of ambiguities and exceptions exist. *Donsoya* shows its aspect of embodied knowledge, for the way it brings together procedural and propositional knowledge.

The embodiment of *donsoya* is especially evident in the use of power objects or fetishes, a topic that has seen many contributions in the Africanist anthropological literature and constitutes the core of Chapter 8. My take on the subject examines the relationship between the owner and the object. Even though the fetish has often been seen as a symbol of kinship or social relationships, what can we gain from considering it in its materiality? I highlight the way *donso* power objects become the embodiment of the connection between a man and a spirit, the tool to enact a pact where a *donso* gains power in exchange for sacrificial rewards. Once again, the medium and the subject of this relationship becomes the body of the hunter, which shares substances with the fetish and, through it, the spirit. Ultimately, the fetish is the connection between the hunter and the bush, one of the tools that allow him to master its power.

## The Mande

The word *donso*, spelled alternatively *donzo* or *dozo*, can be found in many of the languages that share affinities with Jula constituting the cluster Bamana-Maninka/Mandinka-Jula (shortened to BMJ) and in the larger Mande linguistic family. In a paper for the Mande Studies Association, Russian linguist Valentin Vydrine highlighted the confusion and lack of international standards concerning ethnonyms and linguonyms about this area (1995; see also Bird 1982). I should therefore make clear that I shall be linking *donsoya* to a Mande cultural entity, using a term that is a creation of European scholars, specifically first by Sigismund Koelle (1854) and later by Maurice Delafosse (1955). I therefore use the term Mande to distinguish *donsoya* from the beliefs, rituals and initiations associated with hunting by many African peoples, referring in this way to a very problematic and fluid mosaic of peoples, exchanges and territories (see also Charry 2000: xxii). Despite being a colonial creation, the idea of a Mande inter-ethnic and supra-national shared past is also present in local imaginaries - and the diffusion and history of *donsoya* play a role in supporting them. As I will show later on, in this area identity and ethnogenetic processes have in many instances been a ground for such interplay of local and colonial knowledge.

Patrick McNaughton, introducing his ethnography on the Mande blacksmiths, attributes to the term a narrow and a broad indigenous sense (1988a: xvii–xxi). The former refers to a geographical area, often also spelled Manden, considered the homeland of the Mande diaspora, centre of origin of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Mali Empire. Although very roughly defined, this region can be delimited by the towns of Bamako and Ouelessebougou in Mali, Kouroussa in Guinea and the River Bafing. There is also another, broader sense, including areas where speakers of Mande languages are settled. This



vast region extends from the Atlantic Ocean, with Senegal and the Gambia, as east as Burkina Faso; to the north it borders the Sahara and to the south the Guinea Gulf. This is in fact the most unambiguous meaning of the term, referring to a branch of the Niger-Congo linguistic family, as in Greenberg's classification (1966). Languages belonging to this group include Bambara/Bamana, Dioula/Jula, Bissa, Samo/Siamou, Samogo and Soninké.

But the meaning I am going to adopt includes and surpasses a linguistic classification, traditionally a very important criterion during the colonial period (for example Delafosse 1912a: 111). In fact, I refer to a more fluid Mande region, relying on Jean-Loup Amselle's idea of *anthropologie topologique* (1985), specifically based on his work in West Africa. Dissatisfied with the classic notion of ethnic group, derived from the French tradition of administrators-ethnologists, Amselle rejected the idea that ethnic groups are static, reified entities - "monades repliées sur elles-mêmes" (*idem*: 23) - classified according to the language spoken. Many population movements, political and military events have pushed people to adopt a different language, a different clan name or a different ethnic label. Looking at the historical fluidity of the Sahelian region, Amselle proposed to draw spaces of exchange, taking into account reciprocal dependencies, commerce and *linguae francae*, state, political and military spaces, linguistic and cultural spaces. In other words Amselle underlined how studying a phenomenon in the Mande area means accounting for its connections ("branchements" - Amselle 2005) in an ecosystem of neighbouring peoples, and cannot be confined to a circumscribed community. I am going to look at these spaces and histories of exchange, underlining connections and possibilities for change, trying to put an emphasis on the potential for blurring categories and working around hierarchies. The aim is to frame *donsoya*, in Chapters 1 and 2, as one of these possibilities.

## A history of exchanges

A quick look at the history of the Mande area can show how deep are the roots of this fluidity. In particular, the border area between Mali, Burkina and Ivory Coast has a long history of permeable boundaries and processes of ethnogenesis and ethnic switching. Amselle's expression *spaces of exchange* seems very fitting here (1985: 24–26). Historically, an important role was played by the medieval states that made possible long-distance communication and trade. Information on these early multinational formations mainly derive from oral traditions and the manuscripts of Arab travellers (Houdas and Delafosse 1913; Levtzion and Spaulding 2003), and tend to start from the Soninké Ghana/Wagadu state, roughly enclosed in the territories of today's Mali and Mauritania, with Koumbi Saleh as a capital. From the ninth century to roughly the eleventh it ruled over trans-Saharan routes connecting the Sahel and North Africa, flourishing thanks to the trade of salt, gold and slaves. Following repeated Almoravid invasions the state disintegrated into smaller entities, while its elites converted to Islam (Fage and Oliver 1978: 666, 673; Levtzion 1973: 16–28). Oral traditions speak of severe droughts and the inhabitants of Wagadu had to migrate south, toward the river Niger, which seems to account for the advance of the desert more or less in the same historical period.

Around the end of the twelfth century Koumbi Saleh was taken by the troops of a blacksmith king of the Kanté family from Sosso (Herbert 1993: 131–163). One generation later his son Sumaworo Kanté was responsible for the conquest of the small Malinké kingdoms around the upper Niger and Bafing rivers. According to oral traditions he slaughtered eleven of the heirs to the throne of the Mali kingdom, but was later fought against by the twelfth, Sunjata Keita, who placed himself at the head of a coalition of Malinké states. During the battle of Krina in 1235, Sumaworo was defeated and Sunjata was able to become the leader of a multinational state that lasted for at least two centuries (for oral traditions, see Cissé and Kamissoko 1988; Jansen 2001; Johnson 1986; Niane 1960; for history derived from Arab sources Levtzion 1973: 53–89; Fage and Oliver 1977: 376–379). Sunjata and his successors

managed to create a state structure, often called Mali Empire, which integrated different clans and previous political formations. One ruler of Mali, Mansa Musa, made the name of his country known in Europe and the Middle East thanks to the huge quantities of gold he brought with him to his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. The multinational Mali Empire is still very important in the imaginary and political discourse of countries like Mali, Guinea and to a smaller extent Burkina Faso. *Donsoya* is part of this imaginary because oral traditions describe the core of Sunjata's army as constituted of initiated hunters, like the Mansa himself and his closest collaborators.

While in the sixteenth century the first European trade forts were established on the African coasts, the Mali Empire was losing grip on the different states that constituted it, the main blow being represented by the secession of the Songhai who created an independent entity in its northeastern part. A Moroccan invasion happened in 1590-91 and the Songhai state fragmented and lost hold on many peripheral entities. Two of these, the Bambara kingdoms of Kaarta and Segou, not converted to Islam, ruled over the area at the borders between what are today Mali and Burkina Faso, roughly from the half of the seventeenth century to the first half of the nineteenth.

The French sent expeditions with the aim of taking control of the gold mines at the source of the Senegal starting from the early eighteenth century, initially with changing fortunes. With a series of military victories and more or less forced treaties, Faidherbe first and later Archinard, Gallieni and Frey took control by 1898 of what was then called French Sudan. At the time of the arrival of the French, the area between present-day southeastern Mali and western Burkina Faso was in quite a complicated political situation. To the east, the ethnic group of the Mossi had consolidated into two main entities, the Ouagadougou and Yatenga, fighting directly with their Songhai neighbours. They resisted islamisation and occupied the eastern half of today's Burkina Faso. In the west, the Bambara kingdom of Segou had been victim of the armed jihad of El-Haji Oumar Tall, a Toucouleur leader of the Tijaniya Sufi order. He died in 1864 but the French kept fighting his successors until 1890. Further south, from the half of the eighteenth century, two groups of Jula warriors from Kong expanded in the area around the town

of Sikasso in today's Mali, establishing the kingdom known as Kenedougou - the Traoré - and in the area around what is today known as Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso's second town - the Wattara. Because of their influence on the area where I conducted my research, it is worth giving a little more detail on these groups of Jula.<sup>1</sup>

The appeal of the region around the town called today Bobo Dioulasso - at the time a settlement called Sya - was its strategic position of connection between the regions to the south, rich in gold, kola nuts, slaves and other trade goods, to the big trade cities in today's Mali, like Segou or Djenne. The presence of Jula traders, on the other hand, is considered very important for the spreading of Islam in the region, which integrated with local cults and beliefs.

According to Royer, the incursions of the Wattara in the region had the effect of placing certain lineages of formerly enslaved locals at the head of small clusters of villages, a practice that would have given origin to what is considered today ethnic fragmentation. In other words, in this region lineage, ethnicity and social class seem to have overlapped in a process of ethnogenesis that predates the colonial period (Royer 1996: 32–34). This also created a shift between *faamaya*, the power that is established and maintained through the use of force, and *mansaya*, the ritual power that derives from a long-dating connection with the territory, often exerted by sacred rulers like the Sambla *mangan* (*idem*: Chapter 3). The rule of the Wattara over the region was far from stable, and historians generally do not speak of a unitary kingdom but rather of a perennial state of revolt and military repression. All the more so, as the Wattara often clashed with their neighbours Traoré who had settled in Sikasso and used to be strategic allies until the first half of the nineteenth century.

With many characteristics in common with the Wattara, the Traoré of Kenedougou were a military and trade power organised around a main *faama*

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<sup>1</sup> More detail is provided by Royer in his PhD dissertation on the religious revival among the Sambla (1996), where he mainly refers to three dissertations (Green 1984; Kodjo 2006; Quimby 1972). Royer's analysis also points out how the wars between the two groups of Jula were instrumental in creating the ethnic denominations that make today the area between Sikasso and Bobo Dioulasso one of the most complex in the whole African continent (1996: 26–27).

and warlords in kinship relations with him. The clashes with the Wattara, which brought pillaging and slavery in the region, lasted until the arrival of the French at the end of the nineteenth century. In the area under their control, mostly populated by Senufo and Samogo people, they put in place a system whereby subjugated populations were turned either into warriors or slaves, and ruling families were replaced with new lineages (Holmes 1977; Quiquandon 1891).

In a situation of diffused warfare not unlike that of Western Burkina Faso, a Jula warlord by the name of Samori Touré had established his power in the highlands of Guinea taking control of important trade centres such as Kankan and Bissandougou and organising a large army with modern firearms that he had imported from the British colony of Sierra Leone. In part exploiting the void left by the death of El-Haji Oumar Tall, he expanded over the territories of today's Mali, Ivory Coast and Guinea, calling his domain from his region of origin, the Wassolon. He was on good terms with the British and the Peul of Futa Jalon, but clashed with the French who wanted to link their territories in Mali and Ivory Coast. Fighting started around 1882 and continued until 1898, when Samori was made prisoner. In the meantime, he had managed to bring his army to 30000 soldiers but had suffered the British decision of stopping the firearms supply (Person 1968). Both the Wattara and the Traoré were worried about Samori's expansionism, and the former allied with the French to fight him and their neighbours from Kenedougou.

At this point the French had under their control a large portion of West Africa, while Ouagadougou and the Mossi country had been occupied in 1896. They created the colony of *Haut Sénégal et Niger* in 1904 from the territories of present-day Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Haut Volta was separated in 1919 to 1932, to reappear in 1947 after a parenthesis in which it had been sub-divided and administrated by neighbouring territories. French administration established a complex centralised administrative system of *cercles*, *arrondissements* and *cantons*, headed by civil servants. They had serious problems in maintaining control over these territories, and often taxes were not exacted or were appropriated by the Wattara chiefs they backed. Furthermore, during World War I many

revolts swept the French colonies, ignited by the increasing demands of the colonialists to support their military effort in Europe. Even with various punitive expeditions by the French, many populations in Western Burkina Faso refused to pay taxes and to be subjected to forced labour. Many families went looking for work in Ivory Coast in this period and well after World War II.<sup>2</sup>

### **Fluid ethnicity and society**

The drawing of state and ethnic borders defined by the French went hand in hand with a parallel work on the plan of the anthropological knowledge on the area. Ethnic groups, religious systems and even "castes" that had historically been much more fluid entities were taken out of a diachronic perspective and described as timeless institutions. A few figures of colonial administrators/ethnologists were instrumental in starting this process, in a cycle of knowledge and authority mutually reinforcing each other. Maria Grosz-Ngaté has explored this relationship between power and knowledge in the writings of Charles Monteil and Maurice Delafosse, showing how they hid the political relations behind the processes whereby their knowledge was generated. In this way they obtained an impression of scientific validity but created atemporal portraits of norms and rules, rather than of daily life (1988). The classification of natives in ethnic groups followed a similar process of rationalisation, often hiding a more complex and unstable situation.

To take the example of language, traditionally a very important criterion for ethnic classification in colonial times, there is often a striking degree of heterogeneity inside a unity labelled as ethnic group. Therefore, the presence of trade languages transcending ethnic labels is an important factor, especially as it often derives from large pre-colonial states or networks of long distance commercial exchanges (Amselle 1985: 31–32). Furthermore, sometimes the

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Rouch documented similar processes for Nigerien migrants in Ghana and Ivory Coast (respectively 1956; and 1957).

language spoken and the ethnonym do not agree. Such is the case with the Peul of the Wassolon region in Southern Mali, who speak a variety of Bambara-Malinké, but claim to be descendants of the agro-pastoralist people known as Fulani in English literature, coming from the Futa Jalon region during the fifteenth century. Amselle reconstructed how a Konaté clan, of Soninké origin, took a Peul identity and changed their clan name in Jakité, to integrate with a dominant group of the region (Amselle et al. 1979). Changing a family's name following political events seems to be a fairly common practice in the whole region. Among the Sambla of Burkina Faso, for example, the authoritarian rule of Si-Boro Traoré, a *chef de canton* imposed by the French at the end of the nineteenth century, brought many families to change their name to Traoré, a reason for its current diffusion (Strand 2009: 66–67). Sometimes an ethnic label is attributed according to the profession, as for the itinerant traders called Jula regardless of their origin (Amselle 1977). In other words, ethnonyms seem to have a performative and mobile character, one that cannot be detached by its social uses (Amselle 1985: 37).

Another striking example concerns the multiple uses of the term Bambara. The Senufo people living in the border area of Burkina Faso, Mali and Ivory Coast are part of the Mande even if they speak a Gur language, and their hunting association is mainly the same as that of neighbouring Mande-speaking groups. Similar is the case of the Minianka, who speak a Gur language related to Senufo but designate it as Bambara (Traoré 2000: 33), using a term commonly associated with the Mande, even if its meaning is so flexible and generic to be by now almost meaningless. According to those who pronounce it, "Bambara" acquires different qualitative meanings, ranging for example from heathen animist to sedentary farmer, and works as an umbrella under which up to 50 ethnic groups are gathered.

As an ethnic group, the Bambara can be described as an invention of the French colonial administrator Maurice Delafosse, linguist and ethnologist at the beginning of the twentieth century (Bazin 1985). Therefore, when Germaine Dieterlen wrote her *Essai sur la Religion Bambara* (1951), she limited herself to introducing this people giving geographical coordinates and referring to the works of Monteil (1924) and Tauxier (1927). Ironically Marcel Griaule's remark in the introduction, that the Bambara were entering history

with Dieterlen's book, seems almost to reflect this reifying process (Griaule in Dieterlen 1951: viii). The involvement of colonial administrations in creating ethnic groups is particularly evident in the case of the Ivorian Bete people, a term meaning "peace" or "forgiveness," and adopted during a repressive military campaign of the French colonial army (Dozon 1985: 45). Similar dynamics of ethnogenesis resulting from the direct influence of colonialism have also been documented elsewhere in Africa (see for example Watson 1958).

In reviewing these cases and critiques of the concept of ethnic group I am not suggesting that all the processes of ethnic constitution or denomination have taken place during the colonial era, nor that no collective identities superior to the kinship group existed in African pre-colonial societies. I am instead pointing out how some ethnic labels were picked up by colonial administrators and used for their need of creating a usable knowledge that could fit on maps and reports. Local uses of such terms were rather different, their meaning being not fixed but "floating" and "performative" (Amselle 1985: 37), as seen in the previous examples.

From the anthropological literature and from my experience of this area, dealing with the Mande requires embracing this fluidity and dynamism. It entails embracing rather than renouncing the many ambiguities that an ethnographer inevitably encounters, recognising how they are adopted locally precisely because of the multiple possibilities they afford. In the frame of these possibilities for blurring categories and working around hierarchies, *donsoya* seems less of an exception. In the past most descriptions of Mande societies have emphasised rigid classifications, be they ethnic, linguistic or social, whereas the cultural repertoire of the Mande offers plenty of ways to blur boundaries.

For example, there are many social institutions that have historically favoured inter-ethnic relationships. One of the most relevant - *senankuya* - represents an analogy with joking relationships transposed from the inter-clan to the inter-ethnic level. Joking relationships are well-known to Africanist anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1929; Fortes 1945; Mauss 1928), but also to be found in North America and Oceania. Radcliffe-Brown, in a classic article, defined this kind of relation as "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). In West Africa this relation is known to exist between ethnic groups. Marcel Griaule<sup>3</sup> described one of the best known examples, involving the Dogon and the Bozo of Mali (Griaule 1948b). These two neighbouring populations address each other with heavily obscene insults, and tell disrespectful jokes about each other. In parallel, they have mutual obligations – hospitality and ritual services – and prohibitions – violence and sexual intercourse. Often, commercial exchanges or a military alliance are also part of the relation.

The relevance of a concept like that of *senankuya* in the analysis of the Mande region lies in the way it shows the performative character of ethnicity. In Radcliffe-Brown's words, a joking relationship involves "both attachment and separation" (1940: 197). As for kinship, once a relation is established between two groups, strategies come into play that prevent the excess of contact, leading to merging, and the excess of avoidance, leading to conflict. Apart from the clearly functionalist interpretation of Radcliffe-Brown, I am interested in the idea that a boundary is kept functioning through a performance. This principle of maintaining difference through relations in a sense resonates with Barth's view that ethnic boundaries are spaces of exchange that are continually and actively validated (1969).

There are additionally other ways of creating bonds between ethnic groups, such as initiation in a cult or association. Once two individuals are initiated together they have reciprocal obligations, such as solidarity and sharing, attending each other's funeral or marriage, and even creating kinship relations. Such inter-ethnic initiatory connections are attested to in many African regions, such as Cameroon (Rupp 2003) or RDC (Turnbull 1968; 1976; Allovio 1999). In the Mande area, initiatory societies can perform a similar role, as in the case of the *Komo* (Dieterlen 1951; McNaughton 1988a; Zahan 1960), or the *Poro* (Bellman 1984; Little 1965; Ouattara 2008).

Can we expect a similar fluidity and possibility for renegotiation also at the level of social structure? Mande societies have traditionally been

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<sup>3</sup> Griaule refused to draw explicit connections between joking kinship (*parenté a plaisanterie*) and what he called cathartic alliance (*alliance cathartique*) between ethnic groups.

portrayed as divided into three groups,<sup>4</sup> roughly defined as farmers, craftsmen and slaves (Hopkins 1971; Labouret 1934; McNaughton 1988a: 1–21; Monteil 1924; N’Diaye 1970; Paques 1954). It is important to underline, though, that this tripartite system has undergone many transformations, in part because of the phenomenon of clan switching described by Amselle (1998: 52–54). The impact of colonialism further complicated the frame, effectively abolishing slavery from the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, the traditional endogamy of certain groups is not necessarily respected in the way it was not long ago.

Families led by free men who had their main source of subsistence in agriculture would be called *hòròn*. Still, many of them have been involved in commerce and when not absorbed by agriculture could engage in other occupations. In the past, these families mostly provided warriors and rulers.

Slaves were called *jòn* or *woloso*. The former name referred to people entering the condition of slavery as war prisoners, to repay debts or as a punishment for crimes. The latter category refers to the offspring of slaves, who remained in a relationship of reciprocal obligation with the family of their masters. If it was relatively easy to become a slave in a period of political instability, the opposite movement was also possible, although much more difficult: we have seen above how in some cases the French put slave lineages at the head of certain areas. What survives today of slavery are just the mutual obligations between certain families of *hòròn* and *woloso* (Mann 2006: 32) and marriage preferences.<sup>5</sup>

The last group, probably the most interesting for the possible connections with hunters, is that of the *nyamakalaw* or, broadly defined, artisans. They are divided into four<sup>6</sup> endogamous categories: blacksmiths (*numuw*), bards (*jeliw*, widely known as *griot*), Quranic praisers and genealogists (*finew*) and leather workers (*garankew*). While members of these families could take up any profession, they were the only individuals allowed

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<sup>4</sup> Most of the francophone literature on the Mande uses the term *caste*.

<sup>5</sup> For some literature on slavery in Africa societies see Meillassoux (1992) and Myers and Kopytoff (1977).

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars list more than four categories (Zahan 1963: 127–129; Paques 1954: 63; N’Diaye 1970: 79–83).

to practice their ancestral specialization. Their status in Mande society is somehow ambivalent, for the *nyamakalaw* tend to be surrounded by admiration, interdictions, fear and suspicion. Their occupations are considered to involve not only practical skills, but also knowledge of occult powers. As such, they have sometimes been described in the literature as highly respected, and sometimes as outcasts (Monteil 1915: 340; N'Diaye 1970: 14). In local discourse they are sometimes accused of being polluting, a detail which has encouraged the drawing of otherwise unlikely connections with the Indian caste system (McNaughton 1988a: 9).

The three traditional groups used to be strictly endogamous. In contemporary urban settings these three categories have almost no relevance anymore in marriage choices, but strict endogamy can be still observed in rural villages, as it was the case among the Sambla where I spent most of my research.

In most of these patrilineal and patrilocal societies one very important criterion for authority is seniority. A son owes respect and obedience to his father, and a younger brother must equally obey a senior brother. The oldest male relative is normally the head of a family group. Women are normally in a subordinated position, but elderly women can enjoy a certain respect and authority. There are then forms of horizontal classification that cut across the seemingly vertical stratification of the three social groups, such as age sets, and the terminology to refer to age differences is quite developed (see for the Malinké Cashion 1984: 127–128, note 34). Anywhere initiation and circumcision are still in place, the individuals initiated at the same time belong to a same age set, often with an interval of seven years, with separate ceremonies and cycles for boys and girls. Nowadays, though, most circumcisions take place during the first months of life of an infant and do not mark the entrance into adulthood anymore, so that by the same token many initiation ceremonies have been abandoned. But members of a same age set used to be bound by mutual obligations and solidarity, regardless of their class status.

Ethnicity, social class, seniority: *donsoya* is another remarkable social institution that defies rigid boundaries between these divisions and provides tools to renegotiate a man's position inside them. I am now going to look at

the scholarly knowledge *on donsoya*, to show how some of it missed or misconstrued its dynamism and potential for change - not unlike the literature criticised above, which created too static a portrait of the Mande.

**PART ONE - APPROACHING  
DONSOYA**

## **Chapter 1 - The Knowledge about *Donsoya***

This chapter has the double aim of reviewing the main contributions on *donsoya* and of presenting its institutions, cults and historical transformations, in order to build the basis for the following chapters.

For the presentation of the cosmology and structures of *donsoya* that follows I will rely heavily on the work of Malian scholar Youssouf Tata Cissé (Cissé 1964; 1994; Cissé and Kamissoko 1988; 1991), which provides many details and a body of knowledge that are unique if compared to other contributors on the same topic. There are important problems, though, with the methodology he used and with his very approach to the study of Mande culture. Some of these issues transcend Cissé's work and can be found in a big part of the literature on *donsoya*, so I should start by putting these approaches into perspective.

Malian-born scholar Youssouf Tata Cissé was for a long time a collaborator of Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, and under the latter's supervision defended a doctoral thesis at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in 1973. Some of the critiques I will make of his work are in fact applicable to the whole tradition of West African studies headed by Griaule (Apter 2005; Austen 1990; Clifford 1988: Chapter 2; Herbert 1993; Jansen 2000; Van Beek 1991).

First of all, Cissé gives some very problematic definitions of the sources of his knowledge, often quoting within inverted commas but without the indication of an individual speaker. In *La confrérie des chasseurs Malinké et Bambara*, for example, myths are often condensed in quotation marks, as if reported from informants no better defined than "*les maîtres chasseurs malinké*," and under the title of "*Aperçu historique d'après la tradition*" (Cissé 1994: 17). There is therefore a problem with context, whereby the conditions of the

exchange between ethnographer and informant are not provided (see also Traoré 2000: 87), and a strictly connected issue with translation, for the complex social dynamics in which meanings are always produced are not accounted for (Hoffman 1998).

As remarked by Jan Jansen (2000: 104–105), the Griaule school tended to translate in very accurate detail a small amount of concepts, giving them special importance. In addition, their translation of original utterances is often far from literal, if compared to the original, using deeply philosophical interpretations of terms that have a very concrete dimension (examples in Jansen 2000: 105–108). Cissé in particular does not take into account the Mande tendency to lightly create new etymologies (Johnson 1976) or tends to play with tones and nasalisation to create unreliable etymologies. All these procedures are aimed at extracting a complex cosmological architecture that is very difficult to access, but can be found deeply buried in esoteric knowledge and secret meanings, in a process that fails seriously in taking the context into account, as well as in reflecting on the ethnographer's own ideology and field dynamics with his informants. In the case of the *donsow*, I was struck by Cissé's description of *donsoya* as an egalitarian *brotherhood*, and by his use of the words *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité* in the same sentence, as if *donsoya* was given birth during the French revolution (compare below and Cissé 1994: 25). The stress on egalitarianism and fraternity becomes even more suspect if we consider that Cissé proposes *fraternité* as a translation of *koroya ni dogoya*, literally "seniority and juniority" (Cissé 1964: 186). In BMJ languages there is no possibility of translating a concept of fraternity that is egalitarian, given the traditional gerontocracy that permeates many aspects of social life, so you cannot address a person simply as "brother" but always as "elder brother" or "younger brother." This romantic infatuation for a *revolutionnaire donsoya* seems to make Cissé overlook its hierarchical aspects. This is even more surprising considering his Afrocentric<sup>7</sup> positions that pushed him to publish, for example, very questionable lists of toponyms from West Africa and ancient Egypt, in the hope of establishing a connection (see Cissé 1994: 359–366).

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<sup>7</sup> There is a definite bond here with Cheik Anta Diop's thought (1989).

Of course, the problem is also with how these pieces of writing are used after their publication, especially because the ethnic origin<sup>8</sup> of their author seems to confer even more authority on them. Jansen mentions Cissé's work being used as a true portrayal of the philosophical system of the Bambara in a psychology course (2000: 105), and I have witnessed his work on the *donsow* (especially Cissé 1994) becoming the official portrayal of *donsoya* in the promotional materials produced by hunting associations, for example in Mali during the 2001 meeting *La Rencontre des Chasseurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* that took place in Bamako (Ministère de la Culture du Mali 2001; see also Traoré 2004). The effects the penetration into the wider public domain of such an approximate portrayal is yet to be evaluated, especially if we consider that Cissé's work has also been used, with extensive literal quotes, for the voice-over of a documentary on hunters in Burkina (Kersalé 2006) and in an article on the French edition of the magazine *Geo* (Mandel and Bordas 2001).

Cissé used privileged interlocutors for gaining what he considered to be a deeper access to the initiatory knowledge, the worldview and the cosmology of *donsoya*. This is quite a limited perspective that was adopted not only by Cissé, but even by scholars with different methodologies that nonetheless worked toward the reconstruction of a system of rituals and beliefs starting from oral traditions. Such is the case of the work of Gerald Cashion, author of an important PhD dissertation at Indiana University (1984). A scholar in folklore and student of Charles Bird, Cashion conducted fieldwork mostly in the region of Yanfolila, Mali, between 1976 and 1978, with subsequent visits to adjacent areas.

In the preface to his thesis, Cashion writes that "the study of selected aspects of folklore within the ecologically complex whole of any culture and society can assist the researcher in setting forth a world view of people who are regular participants in it" (1984: paragraph 1). Later, he mentions a concern with "the hunters' ethos - their worldview" (*ibidem*: 20) and declares

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<sup>8</sup> I should perhaps write "race" instead, because Cissé is from San, not far from the Burkinabe North-Western border. Nonetheless, he studied mostly the heart of the Manden, the region of Mali near the border with Guinea. He can only very loosely be defined a native anthropologist, and linguistic differences should be taken into account when evaluating his translations (Jansen 2000: 107).



his research to be focused on "hunters and hunting through the expression of their folklore. The goal is to abstract his [sic] ideology, or worldview, from the system" (*ibidem*: 57) where "the system" refers to the intersection of this worldview with a set of elements such as physical space, material components, social relationships, and supernatural entities (*idem*). Much could be said about such an approach, but I am mostly concerned here with the danger that the focus on the reconstruction of a cosmology, system of thought or worldview might lead the scholar to overlook the role of power relationships, local politics and global dynamics at work even in the most remote corner of the West African bush. I have to point out that most of the older works on *donso* hunters that are based on the analysis of oral traditions succumb to this decontextualizing tendency, and Cashion's dissertation is no exception, even with the quality and detail of his fieldwork and his attention to the ecological setting.<sup>9</sup>

Many of these publications, while they are very valuable records of a variety of forms of oral poetry through time, also have another very fundamental limit, that makes them problematic as contributions to an anthropological study of *donsoya*. Namely, there is sometimes a very significant shift between the world depicted in the songs of the musicians or in the words of the master hunters, and the actual practices that *donso* put into action. The most apparent difference concerns the rapidity of change, for while *donsoya* is adapting very dynamically to the requirements of

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<sup>9</sup> There is a substantial body of work on the epic songs of the Mande hunters, mostly published in French. In addition to Cissé and Cashion, whom I already mentioned, Charles Bird is known for his work with the *donso* musician Seydou Camara (Bird 1974) and on heroism in Mande epics (Bird 1972b; Bird 1976; Bird and Kendall 1980). Annik Thoyer has first privately published an epic by Ndugacé Samaké (1978), then four epics by Mamadu Jara (1995). Dosseh Joseph Coulibaly worked with Bala Jinba Jakité to publish a version of *Kanbili* (Coulibaly 1985), while Gordon Innes gathered the songs of Bakari Kamara (Innes 1990). There are more works that are unpublished dissertations (such as Conrad 1981; Dembele 1974; Sy and Traoré 1981) or published in the African continent (Derive 1978; Fofana 1978). Jean Derive and Gérard Dumestre have edited a collection of epic songs from different areas, with a few introductory notes on *donsoya* (1999). Karim Traoré's *Le Jeu et le Sérieux* (2000) is an attempt to produce an "*anthropologie littéraire*" on the basis of the texts of *donso* musicians, put in the frame of the broader world of the oral word in the Mande area. Another work with a very anthropological approach is represented by Theodore Konkouris' doctoral dissertation (2013).

contemporary politics and environmental change, by looking mostly at epic songs one could conclude that *donsoya* is indeed the last stronghold of authentic Mande traditions, as Cissé in fact does.

Not sharing Cissé's view on the existence of a brotherhood, with its egalitarian implications, I decided to use the term *donsoya* to name my subject of study. I also acknowledged how in Burkina "*donsotòn*" was given a restricted use, referring to modern hunting associations and opposed to the practices and knowledge of the *donso* before the diffusion of associations (Hellweg 2011: 243 n.14). There remained only *donsoya* as the most all-embracing term to refer to the practices and knowledge of a *donso*.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Donsoya and its cosmology***

The very word *donso* has debated etymologies. Probably the most plausible refers to the act of returning from a hunting expedition. In BMJ languages *don* or *dun* means entering and *so*, with a high tone, generally refers to home (Hellweg 2011: 53; Cissé 1964: 188; Ouattara 2008: 98). I also personally lean toward this interpretation, after hearing the *donso* musician Diakalia Traoré from Samogogwan singing the line "*na so ni donso ti kelen ye*" - coming home and entering home (*don so*) is not the same thing - playing on the proximity of meaning between the verbs *na* and *don* to underline the difference between a simple hunter and a knowledgeable *donso*. As often happens in this area, daring etymologies are sometimes offered by informants in the field, on the basis of apparent homophones, giving rise to different meanings that can be exploited to support the speaker's ideas (Johnson 1976). Syna Ouattara reports for example the case of a member of the Dosso family from Ferké, Ivory Coast, appropriating the origin of the term *donso* on the basis of an episode of his family history (Ouattara 2008: 98 note 1). Something similar can happen for the root *don* that refers to knowledge in Bamana/Bambara (Jula *lon*), so Cissé proposes the alternative etymology of

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<sup>10</sup> Literally the condition of being a *donso*, the suffix *-ya* attached to a noun denoting a quality or condition (Dumestre 2003: 77).

"horse of knowledge," that he interprets as owner of rapid and certain knowledge (Cissé 1964: 188 note 1), relying on the resemblance between *so* - home, high tone - and *so* - horse, low tone. I consider these proposed etymologies much less plausible, on the basis of my fieldwork observations.

Cissé places the origins of the *donsow* in a population of nomadic hunters called Kagoro/Kakolo (Cissé 1983; Monteil 1953; Pageard 1959), whose connection with the actual population by the same name, in the Republic of Mali, is unclear. At war with the Soninké who founded the Ghana/Wagadu state, they moved south and mixed with the populations of what is today Southern Mali, mostly what Cissé calls Malinké. According to Cissé, it is in the frame of a movement of resistance to the Soninké that the Kagoro founded, on the basis of pre-existing hunting initiation rituals, "*une confrérie de type maçonnique prêchant la liberté pour chacun, l'égalité, la fraternité et l'entente entre tous les hommes, et ceci quelles que soient leur race, leur origine sociale, leur croyances, ou la fonction qu'ils exercent*" (Cissé 1994: 25).

Given the chronology of the Wagadu state, this process could have happened at some point in the ninth century. At the time of the foundation of the multinational state of Mali, in 1235, *donso* hunters had sustained the part of elite troops in the war against the king of Soso. The most important figures of the new state were initiated hunters, including, like his father Fara Koro Maghan Konaté, Sunjata himself, and his military strategists Fakoli Doumbia and Tiramaghan Traoré (Cashion 1984: 11). Cissé attributes the temporary abolition of slavery under this king to the influence of the equalitarian ideology of *donsoya* (Cissé 1994: 28; Cissé and Kamissoko 1991: 39–41). The geographical extension of this state would more or less follow the present-day distribution of *donso* hunters (Ki-Zerbo and Niane 1997: 50–76). Apparently, as long as the Mali state lasted – until the sixteenth century - the *donsow* were taking care of border security, while after the Moroccan invasion that disaggregated Mali as a unitary entity they went back to their role of meat providers (Ouattara 2008: 96–97). It was during the wars headed by Samori Touré in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, that the *donsow* reappeared in the role of soldiers.

Cissé describes the cult of two mythic figures, Sanene and Kontron, as specific and founding for the *donso* brotherhood. He relates a version of the

myth of their origin, which started *donsoya* at large, following Wâ Kamissoko (Cissé 1994: 39–49; a similar version can be found in Cissé 1973). In the Wagadu area, during a huge drought, two hunters and their dogs were crossing an area in ruins, devoid of any water source. After three days without any water, they came across a woman carrying an infant on her back, and a gourd filled with water on her head. At that point extremely thirsty, the two asked the woman for some water, which she refused. The hunters then took the gourd from her with force, drank as much as they wanted and poured the remaining water for their dogs. The woman was desperate and outraged, and started to insult and curse the two, who in response killed her infant, giving the corpse to their dogs. While fighting for the remains, one of the dogs killed the other. This brought the hunters to a fight, and one killed the other, committing suicide right after.

God, says Cissé, was trying to revenge the mother for the injustice she had suffered, but the woman kept mutilating and cursing the dead bodies. He sent the archangel Gabriel to tell her to stop, which she refused. God then revived the two hunters and their dogs, for only God has the right to make justice. The two hunters decided, from then onwards, to seal a pact of eternal alliance, based on their experience of coming back from death.

The words "*saa nènè ni kòtòròn*," then, would have been pronounced on the place where two hunters killed each other and were revived by God. Literally meaning "tasting death and coming back," these words are the name given, from then onwards, to the place where the hunters made a pact with each other, a termite nest placed on the *dankun*. This latter term, which literally means "border," refers in this case to the split of three paths that intersect in a triangular figure. Annual sacrifices<sup>11</sup> are celebrated on these altars, which became since then the sacred place of the *donso* hunters.

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<sup>11</sup> The word sacrifice translates two different Jula words. *Saraka*, from the Arabic word *sadakat*, alms (Bazin 1906: 513; Delafosse 1955: 627), refers to a distribution, frequently of food but not exclusively, to entities that are most of the time persons external to the family. This does not refer necessarily to human persons, so that a *saraka* could also consist of abandoning a kola nut over a termite nest. This is distinct from *sòn*, a ritual killing of some animal with the purpose of offering it to some entity. Often this kind of sacrifice is made with the purpose of obtaining omens, for example evaluating the way a chicken dies (Tauxier 1927: 463–466). There are no comparable prescriptions for sharing the meat of a *sòn*, rather there might be limits as for who is entitled to the meat, as in the case of *donso* sacrifices at the *dankun* when

Also relying on a previous contribution by Moussa Travélé (1928), Cissé underlines how most *donsow* actually treat Sanene and Kontron as ancestors or prototypical hunters ("*version populaire du mythe*" 1994: 38). In other words, the myth narrated by Kamissoko would be a version for high initiates, while most hunters personify the ancestral pair (see also Traoré 2000: 79). It is unclear if they are humans or spirits, and their respective gender is sometimes swapped: for Travélé, Sanene would be Kontron's husband, while Cissé's sources describe Kontron as a son, Sanene as a mother. The two are not associated with any area or ethnic group, just with the bush, conceived as wherever wild animals live. Both figures are characterised by purity (*sanuuya*, literally the quality of gold) and chastity, or sexual abstinence, and even Sanene as a motherly figure is said never to have had any sexual intercourse. Still, she gave birth to Kontron who equally never had any relationship. Chastity, in some cases, is observed by hunters before a hunt to emulate the mythical couple (Cashion 1984: 105).

Mamby Sidibé, in a posthumous book that gathers oral traditions from Mali as stories for children, provides another myth of origin (1982: 19–43). It was a *n'goteni*, a dwarf from the bush by the name of Dôso, to teach men how to hunt. The creature moved permanently to a human village and married a woman, generating a son and a daughter, respectively Kontron and Sanene, both exceptionally skilled hunters. Somewhat surprisingly, if we consider that nowadays basically all hunters are male, the sister was more capable than Kontron. Eventually though, the two brothers married and pregnancy prevented Sanene from surpassing Kontron. That a new technique, a power object, a musical instrument or knowledge first arrives from the bush through the mediation of a genie is a recurrent theme in Mande myths (Dacher 1985: 84–97; Jackson 1982). Also remarkable is that the *donsow* would descend from

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the meat, although shared among the *donsow*, cannot be carried back to the village or given to women. Compare the proverb cited by Dumestre in his Bambara dictionary, where a religious characterisation is given to each typology: "*Sònni ni saraka te kelen ye*, the [pagan] sacrifice and the [Muslim] offer are not the same thing" (Dumestre 2011: 878). Another symptom of such a difference can be located in the verbal forms that respectively accompany each term: it is said *saraka bò*, literally to offer a sacrifice (Bailleul 1996: 46), and *sònni ke*, make a sacrifice. I attribute Dieterlen's interpretation of *saraka* and *sonni* as two kinds of power objects to a misunderstanding (1951: 93).

an incestuous couple, quite opposed to the ideal chastity of Sanene and Kontron in Kamissoko's version.

Karim Traoré (2000: 63–64) gathered a third myth of origin from *donso* bard Bala Djinba Diakité. Here Sanene is the daughter of the hero who kills a dwarf taking from him his power objects, including one called Kontron, which gave her power over animals.<sup>12</sup> The personification of Kontron would then be a consequence of the coincidental invocation of both names (Traoré 2000: 64). In my experience, and in Cashion's (1984: 106), many hunters think of these two names mostly as fetishes or power objects, rather than as personalities of a mythical past. Interestingly this version of the myth makes the beginning of *donsoya* coincide with the acquisition of power objects or fetishes (here called *bolitw*), and not with the discovery of the hunting activity itself, which was already practiced. This general script is also present in a version related by Mamby Sidibé (1929), in fact identical to Diakite's version for the whole first part.

Regardless of the multiplicity of traditions about their origins, Sanene and Kontron, in addition to being the subject of a cult, are very often considered the ancestors of all *donsow*, so that a hunter can call his fellow *donso* a brother. Cissé therefore adopts the definition of brotherhood in French, whereas any time he uses Bamana he refers to *donsotòn*, literally *donso* association. Being all "children" of Sanene and Kontron, the *donsow* do not fight each other, are especially forbidden extramarital relationships with the women of their companions, and forget all hierarchies external to that of the brotherhood, including socio-professional classes and seniority (Cissé 1964: 176–181; 1994: 38–49; also in Cashion 1984). This means that even groups that might have a marginal role in society at large, like descendants of slaves or foreigners, can take up important roles in the brotherhood. Cissé brings the analogy between *donsoya* and a loving, harmonious family even further, referring to the concept of *badenya*, which in the Mande polygynous family refers to the harmony between brothers born of the same mother (Cissé 1964: 180). The opposite of *badenya* is *fadenya*, the bitter rivalry that opposes the sons of a man's different co-wives (Bird and Kendall 1980: 16; Cissé 1964: 178;

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<sup>12</sup> Traoré transcribes *Saane* and *Kontorɔn*.

McNaughton 1988a: 14–15, 71–72; Traoré 2000). *Donsow* would then be like brothers born of the same mother, to the point that they address each other with the terms for senior or junior brother, according to seniority of initiation (respectively *n'koro* and *n'doko*, Cissé 1994: 54).

Cissé also underlines how there is no obligation for taking up membership, much unlike other associative forms in the area. One does not enter age groups, farming associations or secret initiatory cults like the *Komo* on the exclusive basis of individual will, but is rather automatically co-opted because of kinship ties and social belonging. A man,<sup>13</sup> once he has made the decision of becoming a *donso*, goes to look for a teacher who can follow him in his apprenticeship and eventually support his candidature in front of the master hunter of the local *donsotòn*.

Before getting to the actual initiation ritual, an apprentice studies with his teacher for several years, until the latter decides that his student is ready for undertaking initiation. During this period the apprentice receives a formation in the practical aspects of hunting, in the occult knowledge connected to it, and in the ideology of the brotherhood. According to Cissé, the teacher provides a complete course in the material aspects of hunting, including shooting lessons and tips on how to recognise animals from their traces, without forgetting orienteering and bush survival skills. It is more difficult for him to define the brotherhood's ideology, but on the basis of the songs of the *donso* singers of epics, Cissé writes of "*internationalisme politique qui rejoint l'universalisme dogmatique des sociétés de chasse*" (1994: 61). In other words, through the epic songs of its musicians, the *donsotòn* would pass on a certain conception of the world, humanity, death and life, freedom and power, up to forming a true political ideology. He concludes that hunters consider themselves "*bons fils, bons pères de famille, amis fidèles, gens respectueux des valeurs ancestrales bien comprises dont l'esprit d'équité, de justice sociale, de bravoure et de dignité*" (Cissé 1994: 64).

Initiations and sacrifices, in other words most rituals in the life of the *donsotòn* with the exception of funerals, take place at the *dankun*. This is a

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<sup>13</sup> *Donsoya* is the monopoly of men, but there are a few exceptions and gender roles are far from established, as I will illustrate later.

place associated with the sacred in Mande culture, so that not only *donsow* have their *dankun* but other ceremonies are held in similar places (see Cissé 1994: 67–74). Cissé is quite strict in defining it as the triangle formed by the intersection of three paths, and not the simple split of a path. The three paths in question would be the one coming from the uncultivated bush (*wula sira*), the one coming from the fields (*kungo sira*) and the path that arrives from the village (*so sira*). The word *dankun* is generally used in BMJ languages in an unmarked sense with the meaning of border or limit, which connects well with the positioning of this altar between the domesticated world of the village and the wild bush domain. Cissé sees in this tripartition a representation of the domains of nature and of culture, with the cultivated fields as a middle term (1994: 73–74). Often, in the case of a *donso dankun*, a mushroom-shaped termite nest - probably of the *Cubitermes* genus - is placed on the area that receives sacrifices. In the past, many rituals used to be performed in a group of trees reserved to the cults of the *donsow*, but the use had already disappeared by the time Cissé was doing his research (1994: 74 - his material was gathered in the 1960s and 1970s).

The cults *donso* hunters profess rest, according to Cissé, on three main pillars: the first is the existence of supernatural beings, including God, whose favour is indispensable in order to hunt successfully. Secondly, the use of what he calls *boliw*, power objects or fetishes that multiply the hunters' power and protect them. The last point is the belief in the existence, after an animal's death, of some kind of vengeful force, called *nyama*, that persecutes the killer (Cissé 1994: 78). I should also add that these beliefs are, with a certain degree of variation, common to most people in the Mande area. I then try here to single out the specific relevance they have for *donso* hunters.

Surprisingly, with reference to the existence of supernatural beings, Cissé affirms that *donsow* only invoke Sanene and Kontron during their rituals. Now, although this might be true of the *donsow* Cissé knew, I can at least quote Joseph Hellweg, (2004; 2009; 2011) who, relying on his work in Ivory Coast, mentions sacrifices in the name of Manimory, another figure of mythical, semi-divinised ancestor of the *donso* hunters. I have personally witnessed at the *dankun* in Karankasso Sambla, Burkina Faso, sacrificial speeches made by the head of the *donsow* being addressed to the genies



protecting the village - in Seenku *bwen* ( see Royer 1996: 7). It would appear that *donsoya* intersects with the beliefs of the populations among which it is present, and that of genies - *jinanw* - is widespread in the whole Mande area (Henry 1910: 29–30, 90–95; Jackson 1977: 34–37; McNaughton 1982a: 18).

The literature on *donsow* and their epics is filled with references to the genies. The hunter negotiates the acquisition of special powers from a genie, he fights an animal that is in reality a genie, yet another genie hides the animals from him or grants him a spectacular catch (Derive and Dumestre 1999; Cashion 1984; Cissé 1994; Traoré 2000). Briefly, genies are still very important in the system of beliefs of a *donso*. In addition, at least in Karankasso Sambla and in many neighbouring villages where I was present, during *dankun* sacrifices the deceased hunters are mentioned (*donsow su koro*, long deceased *donsow*).

While the use of fetishes or power objects is a feature of many Mande religious practices, the *donsow* have their own specific fetishes and amulets (Cissé 1985b; 1994: 89–108; Cashion 1984: 180–195). Their origin is often attributed to the dwarves, as in the myth reported above. I will provide more details on *donso* fetishes in a subsequent chapter, also drawing on my own research. I have heard many *donsow* refer to the use of fetishes as a necessity for protection, for after killing many animals they found themselves persecuted by the *nyama* of their victims.

The concept of *nyama* is perhaps one of the most difficult to define in the religious universe of Mande people, yet it is of fundamental importance for *donsoya*. In Mande cosmology all matter, organic and inorganic, is inhabited by a force called *nyama*, which stands behind any action or change (Delafosse 1912b; Dieterlen 1951; Griaule 1963). Supernatural beings produce powerful *nyama*, but it can also be generated by certain categories of people or social relationships. Any important transformative act requires energy and releases *nyama*, therefore the *nyamakalaw*, who for their occupations transform some material (iron ore, leather or words) into a product, are surrounded by great quantities of this force. To be able to control *nyama* is an access to power, which connects the *nyamakalaw* to sorcery and explains why they are feared and respected. One of the etymologies proposed for *nyamakala*, that by Zahan (1963: 127), is in fact “those who handle (*kala*) the power (*nyama*)” (see also

Bird, Kendall, and Tera 1995). Hunters deal with the killing of wild animals, and therefore transform animate matter into meat. Now, this transformation can be interpreted in a moral way, and become an act of injustice, so that the *nyama* released by the killed animal is seen as a vengeful force. Cissé seems to concentrate on this specific interpretation (1964: 84–88; 1994: 192–216), which is not shared in the same terms by McNaughton (1988a: 15–19). According to Delafosse's linguistic work (1955: 545), *nyama* seems to belong to the same lexical domain of *nin*, translated with soul but referred to any living thing, including animals and plants. But *nyama* transcends the boundaries of the body it resides in, and it can be emitted by the soul with the finality of completing some task after the death of the body itself (Cissé 1964: 192–193).

In more practical terms, according to the hunters a dead animal can harm its killer by causing accidents, illnesses or mishaps, unless the proper ritual is performed. Not all beings can produce *nyama*, and not all beings emit an equally dangerous *nyama*.<sup>14</sup> Small creatures can be killed with impunity, with a few exceptions. Bigger animals are in general more dangerous, but the criterion to determine the hierarchy is more complicated than just that of direct proportion to size. If an animal played some role in a cosmogonic myth, or if it seems animated by a force that is reluctant to disappear even after its death, then its *nyama* is considered more dangerous (Cissé 1985b; 1994: 87). Even if properly exorcised with procedures<sup>15</sup> that range from washing the hunter with herbal preparations to putting the same preparations on the dead animal's orifices and wounds, or by using protective amulets, *nyama* can affect a hunter's life. His children can be born with malformations or sterility can strike him, especially after a long career in killing big animals. The death of a master hunter is a particularly troublesome event, in that it is believed that his agony is made particularly painful by the *nyama* of the animals he killed during his life. But such a powerful man also emits a strong and potentially dangerous *nyama* in dying, so the death chamber is sealed and a big part of

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<sup>14</sup> It is striking to find the same word used with a very similar meaning in Malawi (Morris 1995: 311).

<sup>15</sup> Cashion also mentions periodical rituals aimed at chasing the *nyama* of groups of animals, involving also shotgun shots and the sound of the *donso* whistle (1984: 253). It would appear that the acoustic dimension has particular relevance here, as part of the actions performed to chase this malevolent energy.

the funerary rituals are aimed at storing and neutralising the energy released by the deceased (Cissé 1964: 209–214; cfr. Hellweg 2011: 90–102). Another important point to make is that *nyama* seems to be very relevant to discern a simple hunter from a *donso*. I often heard claims made that anyone can become skilled in killing animals, but when it is a matter of something different than a hare or some birds, the self-taught hunter will incur all the problems that the *nyama* of a big animal can cause. If he undertakes initiation and gets access to the knowledge of a teacher, on the other hand, he can learn methods to neutralise the *nyama* of his prey or can have his teacher do it for him.

Apart from the positions of teacher and student, there are other ways of defining hierarchies internal to *donsoya*. An experienced hunter can become a *donsoba* (in BMJ languages, *-ba* as a suffix is added to words to mean "great" or "big") when his skills and career are widely recognised, especially if young hunters start to visit him to ask advice and receive his teachings. He will probably establish a *dankun* of his own, and will be able to initiate hunters and give his services to visitors, including magic, herbal medicine and divination. There is no formal sanction of this status, except perhaps for the praises of a *donso* musician. One single *donsoba* can be recognised as the leader of a group of hunters in a given village, being called *donsokuntigi*. As I will mention later with regards to the situation in Karankasso, the constitution of formal hunting associations has complicated the criteria for the choice of such a figure, in the past simply a matter of seniority of initiation. This would precisely be the only criterion that determines a hierarchy in the *donsotòn*, for Cissé, so that all external social distinctions would be forgotten inside the "brotherhood" (Cashion 1984: 101–102; Cissé 1964: 186). It is important to underline how striking this claim is in highly gerontocratic societies such as the Mande ones.

I have already mentioned how the figure of the singer of epics, called sometimes *sora*, *sèrè*, *donsofolikela* or *donsojeli*, has an important role in the origin of Cissé's knowledge of *donsoya*. The denomination *donsojeli*, common in Mali, should not give rise to confusion with the *nyamakala* group of the singers of praise. A *donso* musician resembles a *jeli* only for his activity, but does not necessarily belong to any socio-professional group. In other words,

some *donsow* simply specialise in the music-making activity,<sup>16</sup> sometimes giving up hunting. Any *donso* can become a musician, and this does not entail any obligation for endogamy. While many studies have been dedicated to the figure of the Mande *jeli*, this does not mean that such a figure has the monopoly on oral literature and music-making activities. Rather, similar roles exist for certain specialised genres such as the songs of initiatory societies (Traoré 2000: 154). A *jeli* and a *donso* musician have differences and common characteristics: both for example are in a relationship of dependence with one or more *jatigiw* or sponsors. The bard praises publicly these persons and acts as their spokesperson, receiving in exchange protection, support and money. This is the *ngara-ngana* relationship, whereby the first term identifies the bard, the second his sponsor. Typically, in Mande oral literature, the latter is moved to heroic action by the words of the former (Charry 2000: 54–61; Diabaté 1986: 15; Traoré 2000: 156–157).

But the main difference remains that one is born a *jeli*, while a *donso* musician takes up the *donson'goni* voluntarily at some point in his life. As a result, a *jeli* is generally taught his/her trade inside his own extended family, while a *donsofolikela* becomes the apprentice of an experienced musician who is, most of the times, external to his family. As for all musicians in the area, learning is a matter of imitating and listening, making the most of public performances in the absence of formalised training sessions.

The music of the *donsofolikela* accompanies all the ritual occasions in the life of a *donso*: mostly initiations, periodic sacrifices and funerals. But a *donso* can also require this music for his wedding, the baptism / first haircut of his son, or the funeral of his father, as if some of the prerogatives of *donsoya* extended on a member's family. Additionally, *donso* music is popular with Mande people in general, so *donso* musicians are often hired to play at public events or have their music recorded and sold locally. The iconic instrument of the hunters' musician is the calabash harp, known in two variants: the Maninka *sinbi*, with seven strings tuned to a heptatonic scale, common in Mali and Guinea, and the *donson'goni* diffused in Burkina and the Wassolon region

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<sup>16</sup> I am aware of two exceptions from the literature, in which there is no specialised musician in a group of *donsow*: the Jula of Kong (Derive and Dumestre 1999: 36) and the Dan people (Zemp 1971: 219), both in Ivory Coast.

of Mali, with six strings tuned to a pentatonic scale (Charry 1994; Charry 2000: Chapter 2; Konkouris 2013).

As I mentioned earlier, the musician is a key figure in the public sanction of the internal hierarchy among *donso* hunters. On the one hand, his praises make public the exploits of a hunter in the presence of his fellow *donsow*. He can receive money in exchange, often dropped in the sound hole of his instrument. Theoretically though, as I heard many times in Burkina, he should praise the hunter after receiving a share of the meat of the killed animal (traditionally the shoulder, see also Hellweg 2011: 82). The bond between a hunter and his musician would not then be mediated by money, which resonates with the critiques I often heard voiced against musicians who insistently praised wealthy hunters - not necessarily the most skilled. The idea here is not that praising should not be rewarded, but rather that rewards can be of different kinds than money: a powerful *donsoba* can reveal medicinal recipes, give an amulet, tell an incantation, share an Arabic script endowed with power or promise meat.

The *donsofolikela* is also, as in *donso* epics, the promoter of heroic action (Traoré 2000: 213–214). Joseph Hellweg has given an excellent description of the provocative role of the musician, calling his performances social dramas (2011: Chapter 8). From his observations at a funeral in Koumbédougou, Ivory Coast, in 1995, he describes the way *donso* singer Dramane Coulibaly provoked a hunter to promise to kill an elephant. In the process, the musician provided a sort of commentary on the relationship between *donsow* and non-*donsow*, on the moral function of a meat provider for the community, between the lines of a request for meat. In my experience in Burkina though, in an area where big game is to be found only in distant areas, I witnessed mostly requests for money or knowledge.

Having given an overview of the cosmology, ritual and structures of *donsoya* - keeping in mind the precautions expressed at the beginning of the chapter in approaching a body of literature based primarily on textuality and worldviews - I move now to another stream of literature that is much more aware of the influence of ecological, political and military issues in the Mande area, one that rose more recently and is mostly written in English. Importantly, these authors portray a *donsoya* that is much more morally

ambiguous than the account that emerges from the work of Cissé and others. Their concern for ecology, though, does not imply references to Bateson or Gibson but is meant to account for the transformations of the non-human part of the environment under man's influence. As such, this literature can only work as a starting point when trying to study the *donsow* in their environment. On the other hand, the ecological approach I plan to adopt - especially in chapters 3 and 4 - will look at the way people's conceptions of their environment both respond to and influence the changes of the bush. In this sense the changes of the bush are not just something to which villagers - and *donsoya* - respond, but are also the outcome of their actions and of a wider political ecology.

These more recent works also focused on another key aspect in close relationship with ecological change, the diffusion of modern hunting associations. I move now to a review of these processes, which are indispensable to understanding the situation of *donsoya* at my arrival in Burkina Faso, as I present it in Chapter 2.

### **The constitution of modern hunting associations**

The past twenty years have seen a trend in the grouping of *donsow* into formalised associations. The cases of Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso are strictly linked to each other and prepare the ground for the setting that I encountered at the moment of my own arrival in my field site.

Joseph Hellweg has published a book that derives from his research in Ivory Coast in the 1990s and 2000s, *Hunting the Ethical State* (2011). Hunting associations, he writes, became a hot topic in Ivorian politics following the death of the country's first president at the end of 1993 and the subsequent retreat of state presence from many parts of the country.

It would appear from Hellweg's sources that *donso* hunters were first constituted into legally recognised associations in Mali, in the 1980s. Cashion briefly mentions a national association with an office in Bamako: membership was acquired after the payment of 1500 francs CFA and a card was issued.

Such urban figures, often civil servants, even if they had important roles in representing *donsow* with the institutions, rarely practised hunting themselves and their authority with village *donsow* was limited (Cashion 1984: 101–103). Where they had a powerful function was in their role of mediators with the institutions, enabling illiterate farmers who would rarely travel to town and were not prepared to deal with the Malian bureaucracy, to have a voice on legal matters. The reason why such a role was needed at the time seems to be, from Cashion's account, the very restrictive regulations on firearms possession and hunting permits implemented by the Malian state at the end of the 1970s. In 1978, in particular, hunting was completely banned within the whole national territory and owners of shotguns were authorised to buy only three shells per year (Cashion 1984: 115–116). Hunters started to be prosecuted by the Waters and Forests police, a corps that exists under the same name - *Eaux et Forêts* - in Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. The new association, called *Association Nationale des Chasseurs du Mali* or Benkadi,<sup>17</sup> set itself the aim of negotiating with the state permits for *donsow* to carry a shotgun and reductions on gun taxes and hunting permits, in exchange for collaboration in environmental management policies (Hellweg 2011: 129–130).

In Ivory Coast post-independence laws were similarly restrictive, with "traditional" hunting being permitted only in a hunter's area of residence, with locally made shotguns and only allowing the killing of non-protected species. Hellweg points out how in specially protected forests - *forêts classées* - even the exploitation of medicinal plants was forbidden (2011: 130). In this situation where the state was in fact fighting *donsow* as outlaws through the Waters and Forests police, a structure such as Benkadi could have put them back in the position of citizens with a role in state policies. Thanks to transnational relationships between hunters, Benkadi crossed the border some time in 1990, to arrive in an Ivory Coast that had serious crime problems, with bandits stopping buses at night and robbing the passengers, plus widespread theft and insecurity (Hellweg 2011: 45–51). Additionally, the police were highly corrupt and biased against Mande ethnic groups.

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<sup>17</sup> Benkadi is a compound of *bèn* - agreement - *ka* - the copula - and *di* - good - a name that can be given to all sorts of associations in contexts where BMJ languages are spoken.

In such a context, Benkadi stressed much more the role of hunters as local security agents than was the case in Mali. The association started to spread to the northern part of the country exploiting the existing networks of *donsoya*. Hunters would ask permission from village authorities and speak to the men, before performing a *tònsigi* - association establishment - ritual. A local referent would be nominated and the *donsow* organised into patrols. Sometimes they established curfews, and they would arrest and interrogate anyone who was found outside at night, especially on a road. Once a person was arrested, and for example confessed a theft, the *donsow* would administer punishment by themselves, through fines, public humiliation, or physical violence. This took place, Hellweg underlines, in a period when the police were in fact applying an arbitrary use of authority to exert bribes and violating human rights. For many citizens, going to the police in case of theft had become a last resource, whereas Benkadi patrols were effectively managing a system of fines and refunds. But they also addressed public health and moral issues, entering in some cases very deeply into people's everyday lives (Hellweg 2011: 134–140).

Up to this point though, Benkadi lacked national representatives or recognition, in other words did not have those bureaucratic structures and dialogue with the state that it had in Mali. The first person to set up an organisation that could perform a role of communication between state structures and Benkadi was a civil servant hailing from the north of the country, but living in Abidjan. He had the Ministry of Interior recognise an organization by the name of *Afrique Environnementale* (AE), with the aim of fighting desertification and protecting flora and fauna, as well as educating the local population about environmental consciousness. Hellweg underlines how AE played with the language of environmentalism, in order to lure state support and attract international funds by promising that it would turn the *donsow* into environmentalists. The *donsow* on the other hand played along, because in return the newborn representative body was negotiating for them less restrictive regulations. The choice of the environmentalist idiom was crucial in gaining the state's attentions as opposed to the real reasons behind Benkadi's diffusion, namely a need for security that the state was responsible for and could not admit to be forced to contract to external agents.



Nonetheless, security problems were in AE's unwritten agenda from the beginning (Hellweg 2011: 140–147).

A few years later, a second association was born that spoke a similar language to AE, the *Association Nationale des Chasseurs de Côte d'Ivoire*. By the mid-1990s, then, two organisations were contending for the role of spokesperson for the *donsow*, organising conferences and gatherings in the north of the country. By this time, the role of *donsow* as security guards had become a serious political issue, because after the death of the president Houphouët-Boigny in 1993,<sup>18</sup> Ivory Coast had serious public order problems and his successor Bédié was starting to discriminate against citizens from the north in his rivalry with Alassane Ouattara.<sup>19</sup> At that point *donsow* were seen as a threat by a state that had lost the capacity to unite its citizens under a nationalist policy, and was starting to become more and more divided. Both associations began to be taken into political games that gradually took away from them the support of the basis of Benkadi's rural *donsow*, who continued their policing activities often carried out through violence, excesses and abuses. In 1998 the government had banned Benkadi from the southern half of the country, and required that all modern firearms be handed in (Bassett 2003). The following year there was a military coup and Ivory Coast became less and less democratic, the new government favouring certain ethnic groups over others. As explained by Thomas Bassett (2004), the then president Bédié feared that the increasing popularity gained by the hunters in restoring security, in the absence of adequate presence of the police, would help Alassane Ouattara in the run for presidential elections in 2000. This is a key moment, for hunting associations began to be characterized at the political level as ethnically Mande, and therefore incompatible with the politics of *ivoirité*, in an attempt to undermine their legitimacy as a force that could operate on a national scale. This is even more relevant in the light of the traditional transnationality of *donsoya*, which made it even more of a

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<sup>18</sup> Houphouët-Boigny ruled the country from its independence in 1960 to his death, more than 30 years later.

<sup>19</sup> Alassane Dramane Ouattara was born in Ivory Coast but his father's family is from Burkina Faso, belonging to a group of *Jula*. He worked at the IMF and was Ivorian Prime Minister under the presidency of Félix Houphouët-Boigny in the early 1990s. His Burkinabe origins were used as an excuse to prevent him from running for President in 1995 and 2000.

challenge to the state. These policies of exclusion and ethnoterritorialization later resulted in two civil wars, in 2002 and 2011. Hunters took part in both conflicts, and in the latter crisis they supported Ouattara, declared winner of the presidential elections by the international community, in a fight to depose former president Gbagbo. On April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 press agencies circulated photographs of Gbagbo arrested in his hotel room, showing one of the captor hunters standing to his left. Ouattara's militias, in good part constituted by *donsow*, have been accused of mass-murders of Gbagbo supporters in the west of the country and in Abidjan.

Burkina Faso has had migratory fluxes and commercial exchanges with Ivory Coast well before both countries gained independence in 1960. France was in fact interested in attracting Burkinabe immigrants to the plantations of Ivory Coast, and the Governor Latrille opened facilities to host migrants moving from Bobo Dioulasso to Abidjan (Hellweg 2011: 32–33). Labour from Burkina Faso supported the boom of Ivory Coast's productivity after World War II, and many families moved altogether to a new country. Such was the case of President Ouattara, and an impressive number of the persons whom I met in Burkina Faso were born or had relatives in Ivory Coast. The border area between Mali, Ivory Coast and Burkina has historically been very permeable, and it is no surprise if goods, people and ideas circulated quite freely.

It was then in 1996 that a master hunter by the name of Tiefing Coulibaly organised a provincial-level gathering of *donsow* to found the first Burkinabe branch of Benkadi. Tiefing, who died in 2002, was from Dakoro, a village in the Leraba province of Burkina Faso that is very close to the border with Ivory Coast, where he took the idea and the name of the association. Sten Hagberg accounts for how the newly constituted association followed the advice of the Waters and Forests police to participate in a World Bank-funded project to conduct an arms census (1998). Within two years, the association had had massive success, requiring just the payment of a 1000 francs CFA fee and initiation into *donsoya* (Hagberg 2004: 56). The reasons why local farmers felt such an institution was necessary was the conflict with Peul herders and Mossi farmers, who were perceived as foreign invaders and often characterised as thieves. Many cases of excessive and arbitrary use of violence

were recorded (Hagberg 1998; 2006). Therefore in Burkina Benkadi became an ethnically marked movement, based on the recruitment of young Senufo farmers with little or no knowledge of hunting as an initiatory knowledge, which in turn led to the critiques of some of the older *donsow*. Tiefing Coulibaly himself would remark on the difference between Benkadi and *donsoya*, but used his network of master hunters to spread the association in Western Burkina (Hagberg 2004: 59). His delegate Bema Ouattara would travel to initiate new hunters in a simplified manner and issue association cards.

Since Benkadi's establishment the politics of hunting associations in Burkina Faso have been far from clear, with multiple rivalries over the leadership and the succession to Tiefing's role of leader of the *donsow*. His funeral in 2002, for example, was used politically by the president of the National Assembly, right before the elections. Furthermore in 2000 another association, named Benkelema and based in Bobo Dioulasso, obtained the official recognition by the state Benkadi had never obtained, and proposed itself as the main interlocutor for the state (Hagberg 2004: 62).

When I arrived in the field, in August 2011, Benkelema and Benkadi had left their place to another organisation, the *Fédération des Chasseurs Traditionnels Dozos de l'Ouest du Burkina*, headed by André Sanou. He explained to me that the Federation had replaced previous associations by merging them in a single body, covering the five provinces of western Burkina: Houet, Tuy, Kenedougou, Comoé, Leraba.<sup>20</sup> Sanou, a former sculptor from the Bobo ethnic group, is a well-known ally of Burkina's President Compaoré and, although he is now in fact the leader of the *donsow* in Burkina, has taken up *donsoya* only relatively late in his life.

In the period I was in Burkina another association was emerging with the explicit aim of becoming a rival of the Federation, following discontent with Sanou's unclear management of the financial resources allocated by the state. The *Union Nationale des Dozos Tradi-praticiens de la Santé du Burkina* has its headquarters in Ouagadougou, somehow closer to political power but even more remote from rural *donsow*. Its leaders have been very aggressive in

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<sup>20</sup> *Donsow* are normally not present in the rest of the country.

promoting events in Bobo Dioulasso and campaigning for membership in the western provinces, in what looks very much like an operation of lobbying in preparation for a political candidature.

Other associations have emerged in Burkina during the period I have briefly reviewed (Hagberg 2006), but I believe I have explained enough to underline a few points concerning the situation of modern hunters' associations. In the first place, there are by now well-established forms of recruitment that are different from those described, for example, by Cissé. While in the past, before being initiated, a hunter had to be an apprentice to his teacher for up to seven years (Hagberg 2006: 782), the new procedures put in place by Dakoro Tiefing Coulibaly just required the payment of a fee and the sacrifice of two chickens, plus the toss of a kola nut. This is in its substance not dissimilar from the ritual described in previous literature, but the dimension of apprenticeship relating to magic and hunting techniques is absent, including the moral evaluation of the candidate. This also means that a newly initiated *donso* does not have an umbilical relationship with his teacher but can have in fact no teacher at all - yet he receives a card and the right to carry a gun.

Another very important new element is the increasing ethnification of *donso* associations, more and more characterised as an exclusively Mande monopoly, *pace* Cissé's universalism. It has been so in the Ivoirian civil war, and it appears to have become so in the small-scale conflicts between Burkinabe farmers and agro-pastoralists. Hagberg reports that Tiefing Coulibaly refused initiation to Peul people and that Benkadi was seen as an anti-Peul movement dominated by the Senufo (2004: 63).

The actual hunting, in all this, recedes more and more into the background, as the possibility for prey also shrinks in a more and more man-made landscape. The politics of hunting associations are more and more intertwined with state politics, and more and more decisions take place in towns. This was the situation that I had to confront when I arrived in Burkina Faso with the idea of studying *donsoya*.

## Chapter 2 - Accessing the Field, Accessing *Donsoya*

I arrived in Burkina Faso with the advantage of knowing who I had to look for in order to start my study of *donsoya*. Thanks to a friend, a Burkinabe musician who lives in my hometown in Italy, I was able to make important contacts before starting fieldwork. Abdoulay Traoré has been my music teacher since we met in Milano, Italy, in 2001 (Ferrarini 2006; 2011a: 20–26). He is from Bobo Dioulasso, and from 2002 moved permanently to Italy where he makes a living as a musician and music teacher. His family originates from a region not far from the town of Bobo Dioulasso; his mother lives in Karankasso Sambla, the village where I spent most of my fieldwork. Karankasso is the Jula name, referring probably to the wall that surrounded the historical nucleus, or *kankan*, which with *so* - home, house - creates a common Mande toponym. In Seenku, the language of the Sambla, Karankasso is called Timi (Royer 1996: 34). This village, roughly 5000 in population, is the administrative centre of the *département* by the same name, which gathers 25,000 people over 13 villages.<sup>21</sup> I had agreed with Abdoulay that I would stay at his mother's house and approach *donsoya* through a relative of his, who was an initiated hunter.

I will not hide that my first impression of a rural village in Burkina Faso was quite strong. I realised I was going to live in a mud brick house, although a very nice looking one thanks to the green hedge that surrounded it and the careful finish of the outside walls. Inside the quadrangular court I could see two circular granaries, left of the entrance, and on the opposite side a small henhouse and the walls surrounding the shower/toilet. The house itself, single storey, occupied the side in front of the entrance, and showed three

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<sup>21</sup> According to the 2006 Census (MEF and INSD 2008: 47)

doors that led to three separate rooms. Only one small window could be seen to the far right of the building. Sa-Yacouba, my host and husband of Abdoullay's mother Kadija, built the house. He arrived from his field to receive me, and I remember being struck by the state of his ragged and discoloured clothes. I did not know that he only wore those clothes while working and his regular outfits were much better looking. But it all contributed to the impression of material poverty that the village had on me. If I had come to look for a radically different way of life I had surely found one, and I was wondering if it would not reveal itself being too much for me to cope with over a whole year.

Reading my notes from that day I am reminded of how I found people using much more elaborate and ceremonious salutations than in town. I also had the impression that everything was about agriculture and nothing else, but with hindsight I now attribute this to the specific time of the year, September, when the rains are starting to diminish and the village is almost empty during the day, abandoned by its inhabitants who run to attend to the needs of the fields that will feed them for the rest of the year.

My hosts were extremely kind and welcoming, even considering our limited communication possibilities. Abdoullay's mother, Kadija, spoke good Jula but no French, and her husband Sa-Yacouba only a few words. I could appreciate for the first time the markedly tonal qualities of Seenku, the language of the Sambla. I was taken on an institutional visit to the *dugutigi*, the village chief, where I was introduced as a student and received benedictions and recommendations not to let mosquitos bite me. I remember noticing the politics of sitting, being often offered the best chair as a privileged guest. I was shown the ruins of the wall that encircled the historical nucleus of the village, the *kankan* from which it took its Jula name. I was not aware at the time, but both my hosts came from important families: Kadija's father had been village chief and Sa-Yacouba's father had been the *mangan*.<sup>22</sup>

Abdoullay's relative arrived from the nearby mosque after the sunset prayer, and we sat together in the courtyard with my hosts. His name was

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<sup>22</sup> The *dugutigi* is a role introduced by the colonial power, whereas the *mangan* is a form of ritual ruler common to many other populations in the Mande area, sometimes called earth-chief in the literature (Royer 1996: Chapter 3).

Lasseni Traoré, commonly shortened in Lasso. I could explain my project and my aims to this man who could speak French, and he declared himself available to help me and to introduce me to the head of the hunters of the village. Later, as I slipped under the mosquito net to lie on my matting, I thought that I had not been able to discern Lasso's face in the darkness of the courtyard and did not want to point the torch in his eyes, but I found the sound of his voice reassuring.

I could see what Lasso looked like only the next morning, when he came to pick me up around 6am. A bit shorter than me, with broad shoulders and a toothless smile, he first took me to visit his parents, Togo-Fako and Fen-Fila. The Sambla use name prefixes according to the order of birth for the children of a same mother: for example, Lasso is Sa-Lasseni, a second son, while his father is a fifth son and his mother a fourth daughter (Strand 2009: 72). Lasso was born in 1967, and has two wives and nine children. I visited his compound, right behind his parents': around a tall mango tree, some circular granaries, standing raised from the ground on a few red rocks, his first wife's kitchen and room, a main building with Lasso's room and his second wife's kitchen and room formed the three sides of a rectangle. They were built out of mud bricks, as were most of the houses in Karankasso, but here I found corrugated tin roofs. I was offered some food, then Lasso showed me into his room where he kept his very tattered hunting shirt, his 12-gauge artisanal shotgun, as well as some photographs. He pointed to his teacher Adama Sogo Traoré in one of them, wearing an undyed *donso* outfit, and to Adama's son Diakalia, a *donso* musician. Lasso told me how he started hunting first with a hoe and an axe, as a kid, looking for *toto*, the Gambian pouched rat (*Cricetomys gambianus*), or the occasional *kungo kami*, a non-domesticated variety of guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*) that could still be found around Karankasso at the time. He then asked his father to buy him a shotgun, expressing the will to become a *donso*. His father encouraged him, and bought him a muzzle loaded percussion cap shotgun, a kind of firearm that is locally made and that takes a gunpowder that can be prepared by the hunter himself (Cashion 1984: 165–171). Lasso then went to see the head of the local hunters, and arranged the initiation. It was only a few years later that he looked for a teacher, undergoing a second ritual to become the apprentice of Adama Sogo

Traoré, a Samogo *donsoba* from Samogogwan. A few days after that ritual he killed the gazelle - bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*) - whose skull I saw hanging above his doorstep. Later he underwent a similar ritual with a second teacher, Brahima Traoré from Samogohiri, but he could visit the Senufo hunter less often because of the distance.

I had many more questions, but we also had to make a few courtesy visits that day. I was introduced to a number of persons and was soon lost in a variety of faces, names and roles. I retain memories of the long scars on the cheeks of the elders, three lines starting from each corner of their mouth, and of the way people chewed tobacco and spat through their teeth.

The following day was market day, somehow the equivalent of a Sunday in the Sambla five-days week. It started slowly, with rain falling from the early morning. It was not until 10am that women started cleaning the spaces under the thatched roofing that characterised the area assigned to the market, right in front of my house. The head of the hunters was not yet there, as he lived in a compound some 5 kilometres in the bush and the rain and mud had slowed down everyone's movement. Lasso took me to meet a few of the *donsow* who had gathered in a neighbour's courtyard to drink the millet beer - *dolo* - prepared by his wife. I was introduced to the men, mostly over forty years old, sitting under a tree with gourds of murky drinks. I explained my purposes, saying in French that I had come from England to learn what keeps together *donsow* from many different areas and ethnic groups. Lasso translated into Seenku, and I was greeted with "*I ni ko, i dan sogo!*" to which I replied "*Donsow, aw ni nyanin!*"<sup>23</sup> causing laughter and approval. I could talk to the secretary, Si-Lamoussa Traoré, who spoke good French and welcomed me saying that they were all pleased to see that I ate the same food as they did.

He also told me some history of the village hunting association. Here as elsewhere, the main reason for creating a constituted association was the need to negotiate hunting permits at a reduced price with the Waters and Forests police. At the moment I joined it, the association was still struggling for official recognition by the state, helped in this complicated bureaucratic

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<sup>23</sup> All salutations typical of the *donsow*.



process by the local Waters and Forests police. The current head of the hunters had replaced the first *donsokuntigi* Go-Do Ouattara after his death, because he was his deputy. As a matter of fact, another hunter, Go-Fatogoma Traoré, was reputed to be more experienced than him and was initiated before, but the role of president of the association had somehow conflated with that of head of the hunters, so everybody respected Go-Fo Traoré as leader of the hunters of Karankasso (compare Cashion 1984: 103).

I also learned that the president of the association, whom everybody simply called *donsoba*, could now be found in the marketplace at the welder's, his bike needed repairing. We met Go-Fo Traoré, a huge man with grey hair, where Si-Lamoussa had told us. Lasso spoke to him in Seenku, while I could not go beyond the greetings. He translated for me that the *donsoba* was going to call a meeting of the hunters' association for the next market day, to explain to everybody what I was planning to do. We would go to a place in the bush, and I would need a hen, a cock and some kola nuts. My mind was spinning at this point, was it initiation he was talking about? Was such an important event to be decided like this, on the very first day he met me? It was just as I had read in books, the same procedure, with the difference that I had never expected to be able to be initiated so soon in my stay.

On the following day I cycled on a borrowed bike, following Lasso to the compound where the *donsoba* lived with his wife and many children. On the way there, Lasso stopped where the path we were following joined another, a fork I had not even noticed. I could just see an unassuming split in the red gravel path, with grass and shrubs all around. "This is our *dankun*," he simply said. I was surprised, I had expected something more conspicuous, like a termite nest with sacrificial remains on it. We pushed on until the *donsoba*'s compound, surrounded by lush fields of millet and corn. He was sitting under a tree, picking peanuts from the plants he had recently uprooted, his wife and a daughter-in-law helping nearby. The *donsoba* recommended that I bring to the initiation a red hen and a red cock, ten red kola nuts, plus I come dressed in a *donso* shirt. The association fee was 1000 francs CFA (1.30 GBP in 2011). One of the ten kola nuts would be split in halves and thrown to determine my acceptance, hence the Jula name of the ceremony - *woroci*, from *woro*, kola, and the verb *ci*, to split. By becoming a

*donso*, he added, I would agree to respect my teachers and their families, not to steal or lie and especially stay away from my fellow *donsow*'s wives. By following these rules I would be sure to be "inside" *donsoya* and never get into accidents. On the contrary I would have plenty of meat. In turn, I gave him assurance that the association would be able to negotiate with me the use of the images I would take of them, especially to prohibit or limit the disclosure of ritual moments. I gave my word I would not divulge any part of the esoteric teachings of *donsoya*, and would ask him in case of doubt. The *donsoba* surprised me by saying I could bring my camera on the day of the *woroci* and film everything, even at the *dankun*. He anticipated any request I might have made. He believed it was a good thing if in my country someone was interested in *donsoya*, and besides, he had no right to say what is wrong. As I cycled back following Lasso, trying to make it home before the rain, I was still dumbfounded by the openness of these people who were so welcoming and open-minded.

### **The initiation**

On the day of my initiation things again seemed to start very slowly. Lasso insisted that his father pronounce benedictions on us and on the kola nuts, saying it is always good to have one's parents' benedictions before going to the *dankun*. These benedictions are kinds of formulaic wishes (*dubawu / dugawu*, from Arabic *du'a*), usually in the form "Ala ka..."(may God...). They are very important in the Mande world, because of their role of speech acts that make public someone's consent and authorisation of the receiver's action. They are a way to make explicit harmonious social relations. In an area influenced by North African Islam such as the Mande, benedictions also transfer *barika* - or power, originally divine, from the Arabic *baraka*. The benedictions of pious men or of one's parents are generally considered the most powerful (Mommersteeg 2012: 58–65, Chapter 8). That morning I received many benedictions from people I knew, especially from Kadija who for me had taken up the role of mother.

As post-graduate students, during preparation for fieldwork we often hear that what awaits us is akin to an initiation ritual. I was not expecting to go through an actual ritual, though, one that would see me returning from the bush as a *donso*. Just as it may happen in many very crucial moments in a person's life, I only have confused memories of what happened on that day. Looking back at the film footage I recorded I am reminded of the sense of disconnection I experienced, being unable to understand anything that was going on around me. I was concentrated on the filming, pouring sweat onto the LCD screen. I estranged myself from what was going on, facilitated by the fact that my presence only, and not my participation, was necessary. I had some sort of access to what was being said only the following day, when with Lasso we went through the footage and he translated for me from Seenku. In a sense, my ritually liminal phase was characterised by a self-imposed ritual social death, in the form of a technologically mediated autism. Mindful of that initial experience, for the rest of my work with the *donsow* I tried to use the camera as a point of contact and interaction, rather than of separation.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, there were also moments of non-verbal communication, as when the hunters were amused at seeing my relief after the sacrificial hen died on its back, recognising I already knew what the positive outcome should have been. I remember my anxiety as the kola nut was mid-air above the *dankun*, and looking at the convulsions of the hen. Then it was just salutations, "*I ni ko, i dan sogo!*" and the sound of the hunters' whistles. I danced and fired a shot in the air - the first of my life. I had become a *donso*.

I managed to simmer down as some hunters started to prepare the hen and cock, which were distributed and consumed entirely at the *dankun*. Sacrificial meat cannot get back to the village, I was told. Sharing meat enhanced my new sense of being part of a community, the ideal counterbalance for the isolation and loneliness many ethnographers initially experience in the field. Back in the village it was more dances, with the music of Bakari Ouattara who had come from Banzon. I had taken care of the small expenses required to organise the ceremony: *dolo* beer for everybody, and the

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<sup>24</sup> A reference to a quote by Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas: "The camera is an excuse to be someplace you otherwise don't belong. It gives me both a point of connection and a point of separation."

musicians' fee. Money was managed very publicly, being shown to everybody and receiving benedictions. Neither the *donsoba* nor anyone else ever suggested how much should I give, putting me in the awkward situation of not knowing who to ask to in order to have an idea of the amount needed.

All this showed the explicit aim of avoiding conflict and complaints, including suspects of misappropriation of funds. Some collateral conversations with Lasso expanded this frame. Before meeting at the *dankun* all *donsow* should ask their wives or mothers for benedictions, and try to resolve any conflict they might have with them. The *donsoba* did the same, with a small *saraka* of kola nuts and water. Agreement - *bèn* - is fundamental for a proper outcome of the ritual, but is also a precondition for a successful hunt. A *donso* who enters the bush leaving at home conflicts between his wives, for example, is sure to find very little prey and, in some cases, may bring about accidents. My initiation in Karankasso was planned to minimise disagreements and conflict.

The unexpected initiation gave my fieldwork a direction that, although initially unintended, I later pursued on my own initiative, adopting a participant perspective on a number of levels. Studying *donsoya* through initiation gave me a privileged and partial perspective at the same time. As I will detail in the following sections, the stages of my apprenticeship revealed many important dynamics about the organisation of hunting associations, the relationship between a teacher and his students and inside a group of students. Many of these relationships were revealed by my moves inside these emergent structures - in other words, some processes became visible only through provocation.<sup>25</sup> I had remarkable access to initiatory knowledge, but my position of apprentice also entailed limitations on what to reveal of the restricted knowledge I was receiving. In fact a whole level of detail on herbal medicines or incantations that is present in the publications of other scholars is absent from my work, even though at times it would have been relevant for my analysis. The same position that granted me access to that knowledge involves serious restrictions in its revelation, and from this point

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<sup>25</sup> I have reflected in more detail on such an approach to fieldwork applied to a previous research on Egyptian migrants in Italy (Ferrarini 2008).

of view a more external perspective would no doubt have translated into fewer limitations.

After the initial disconnected experience of the initiation in Karankasso, I tried to develop an approach to my use of audiovisual media that could represent this overlap of the roles of researcher and apprentice. In Chapter 6 I will detail how I used an approach "in the first person" to make the camera replicate the catalysing role that my presence had on the network of the hunters. I also worked with specific recording techniques to evoke the sensory experience of hunting in the bush.

The actual practice of hunting, which occupied a big portion of my year of fieldwork, constitutes the backbone of Chapter 5. Taking up the shotgun and following the hunters in the bush gave me a perspective on some of the processes of acquisition of skills and training of perception that end up constituting part of the knowledge of *donsoya*. This was an attempt to bypass the level of representations - especially those mediated by language - and establish with the hunters a dialogue based on shared practical activity and embodied experience. I ground this approach to knowledge in the claim that practical mimesis "should be treated as a central feature of fieldwork enculturation" and "understanding through participation is of a different order [...] to that achieved by means of intellectual cerebration and verbal exposition" (Dilley 1999: 33).

Although my control on all these levels has always been partial and in part subject to events beyond my will, my positioning in the field derived from conscious choices and from that same ecological approach outlined in the introduction. The use I made of my body as a research tool is a way to enquire into a knowledge beyond text. Like hunters, it is an attempt to engage with the environment through perceptually guided interactions. Similarly, my positioning as apprentice is not only an instance of learning by doing, but also acknowledges the way the knowledge of *donsoya* does not exist as a corpus "out there," similar to a text, but presents itself in different forms according to the perspective of the scholar - not unlike the environment in Gibson's conception.

From a certain point of view learning by doing, an attention to embodiment and sensory experience, or a participant approach to fieldwork

are not innovations but classic elements of the ethnographic fieldwork.<sup>26</sup> In my research, though, I have sought to emphasise them and make them an explicit and fundamental component of my methodology. Stating this, I am also aware that the euphoria caused by my apparently unconditioned acceptance may have brought me to overlook the complex dynamics that the arrival of a European researcher might trigger in a context such as rural Burkina Faso. If the *woroci* in Karankasso had been the demonstration of the importance of harmonious relations between *donsow* and their social milieu, a successive ritual I underwent showed me what can happen when these relations are far from harmonious, and how often this can happen.

### The *Dankun* network

I soon realised how being initiated was only the beginning. I met the secretary Si-Lamoussa the day after the ritual, and he prepared an association card for me. My face on a passport photo stood out as the latest and palest of the entries on the association register. I knew I had been able to enter *donsoya* thanks to the transformations started in Burkina by Tiefing Coulibaly. Rather than testing the applicant with a long apprenticeship, now the *donsow* preferred to place him under the wing of the association and subject his actions to the moral judgement of the *dankun* and its initiates. But how was my process of learning going to progress, who would I learn from? Lasso came up with an answer, one he had already planned for me since the beginning. He proposed to take me to meet his teacher, Adama Sogo Traoré. Lasso had already told me about him, that he was one of the greatest hunters in the region, from a family of *donsow* in Samogogwan, and that he had killed big animals like elephants and hippos. Of course I said yes.

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<sup>26</sup> Nor do I wish to claim that my initiation to *donsoya* is a unique event. A number of researchers have similarly been accepted inside *donsoya*, among which both native (Cissé 1994; Ouattara 2008; Traoré 2000) and foreign scholars (Hellweg 2011; Konkouris 2013; Strawn 2011).

I remember leaving from Karankasso on a scooter we borrowed from a friend of Lasso's, taking the red dirt road that cuts through the village in the direction of Banzon. I was sitting behind Lasso, who tried to avoid the many holes that cluttered the road in that late rainy season. To my surprise we first made a stop in a small Sambla settlement called, in Jula, Numuso, denoting a blacksmiths' village, not far from Karankasso. Lasso introduced me to a man about his age, named Madou Barou, whom I thought was just a friend of his. But it was explained to me that Madou was also the first in Karankasso to become a student of Adama, and it was thanks to him that Lasso had met his teacher. Because of the seniority of his initiation and his role of *sababu* - literally the cause or origin but here in the sense of intermediary (see Hellweg 2011: 83) - Madou was owed respect from Lasso even though he was younger in years. They spoke for a while, I received what I interpreted as sceptical looks, and we left. The whole visit felt to me like a required procedure.

After following a bush path that borders the river, on the opposite side to Banzon, we arrived at Adama's compound, in an area called Nyawali. I was impressed by the self-confidence of this old man, by the authoritative tone in his voice speaking a Jula I could not yet understand, and by the passers-by who kneeled down in front of him to respectfully greet him. He was a thin man, but of solid appearance, as if made of wood.

His place was an isolated compound made of a few mud-brick houses with corrugated tin roof, plus a large, circular kitchen with thatched roof and a few granaries. He lived there with three of his four wives and his younger sons, plus some grandsons. While one of his wives brought us the ritual welcoming water, he greeted us with the many formulaic salutations I was only starting to master and had the women bring us food.

It was then his turn to ask the reason of our visit, which he knew already, but was part of his prerogatives as host to ask. Lasso explained I was going to devote a year to study *donsoya*, and summarised all my steps so far, from my arrival to the initiation. I note here that to introduce me as willing to "study *donsoya*" was not necessarily understood by locals in the sense of conducting research *on donsoya*. Rather, when I said in my very basic Jula "*donsoya kalan*", the expression was framed as a will to become a *donso* apprentice, not unlike studying anthropology is identified primarily as

enrolling in an anthropology degree, rather than conducting a study on the practices and discourses of the academic community of the scholars who call themselves anthropologists. The ambiguity between studying from the outside and studying from the inside, so to say studying *donsoya* and studying *in donsoya*, characterised the way my research developed. What at the beginning I could have called a linguistic misunderstanding, later became the trademark of my field methodology.

Adama was indeed a fascinating personality. I was particularly haunted by the tone of his voice, and by the way his words would impress themselves in my mind even before I could understand their meaning. Adama talked a lot on that day, saying how we all had to be careful, for he had already learned of my presence in Karankasso. Someone was already speaking ill of Lasso, saying that he wanted to keep all the advantages deriving from my presence for himself. Adama's reported speech was somehow implying that this person believed himself to have some priority over Lasso and for the very fact that he had complained to Adama he probably belonged to the same court of students. I made a mental note to ask Lasso if he had any idea about the identity of this person, once back in Karankasso.

Adama then moved to praise the *donsoba* of Karankasso, underlining how he was his friend and associate. I was not aware that the *donsow* in Karankasso and Samogogwan had a very close relationship,<sup>27</sup> because the first head of the hunters' association among the Sambla, Go-Do Ouattara, had been a student of Lonsana Traoré called Wulen (the Red), one of Adama's teachers. It was Lonsana who had established the *dankun* where I had my initiation. But Adama added that in Karankasso there were many *tòn donsow*, hunters without a teacher who were not learning anything. They did not know how to find big animals and how to exorcise its *nyama* in case they killed one. Now, he continued, it was up to me to look around and find a good teacher. There were many master hunters in Burkina and he could not say who was the best. As for him, *donsoya* was a family affair. He never *became* a *donso*, he was *born into donsoya*. His grandfather Bema had come from the Wassolon, in Mali, and

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<sup>27</sup> I must also remark that some Sambla claim that they descend from the Samogo (in fact "Sambla" is an ethnonym attributed by the Jula, while the Sambla call themselves Sènmogo) and the two languages are considered affine (Royer 1996: 14–15).



was called to fight alongside the people of Samogogwan. In return, the village chief offered him a wife and a place to build his home. They were real Traoré who had come from Mali, unlike the local families by the same name.<sup>28</sup> His father Massa had been a great hunter, and the whole family would not farm the land but live off the commerce of meat.<sup>29</sup> Adama himself had studied with the great hunters of Samogogwan and with Dakoro Tiefing Coulibaly.

Were I to choose him, he would inform all his students in the neighbouring villages that they had a new companion, and would organise a ritual, called *borodon*,<sup>30</sup> to sanction my affiliation with him. Then we would start the apprenticeship and use his network of contacts to visit hunters for my research.

I had a brief exchange with Lasso to try to understand if it would have been premature to communicate my decision so early, for I had already made up my mind. Adama had immediately inspired confidence in me, and I wanted to be able to join the same group of students Lasso belonged to, connecting to a wider environment than Karankasso. I mentally prepared as simple a sentence in Jula as I could manage and, with Lasso's help, asked Adama if I could become his student. He was happy to say yes and I gave him a knife sharpening stone as a present. He reciprocated with a smoked francolin. I asked if I could take his photograph, and he went to put on his beautiful *donso* shirt with vegetal mud-dyed motifs. He posed next to his trophies, a buffalo and a hippo skull, his carbine in hand.

Adama then moved to a list of the things I had to procure for the affiliation ritual: rice for all the students who would take part, kola nuts, two hens and two cocks and a bit of *foni* - the cereal called fonio (*Digitaria exilis*).

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<sup>28</sup> It would be very interesting to go deeper into Adama's family history, for I suspect that his grandfather became a Samogo after he settled in Samogogwan. At the same time, many local Samogo families were adopting the Traoré name. This happens in the Kenedougou of the turn of the twentieth century, so I am led to suspect that Bema could have been a Jula warrior, even though this is just speculation. Adama also underlined that his family totem was the leopard, like for the Traoré of the Manden, whereas other Traoré families in Samogogwan held the red monkey as their totem.

<sup>29</sup> That one's ancestors would not farm the land but only practice a profession is quite a bold statement in Burkina Faso, but I have heard it similarly formulated by other categories such as the endogamous family of musicians or the blacksmiths in Karankasso. This makes me suspect that it might be a customary way of attributing importance to one's origins.

<sup>30</sup> *Borodon*, literally to put the hand in, is often used to refer to initiation rituals *tout court*.

The latter, he explained, has been part of *donso* rituals since times immemorial. He would take care of notifying all his students, but before, we should consult our companions in Karankasso to decide a date. I learned that Adama had four students in my village of residence. Madou Barou was the first, followed by a hunter I had never met, Togo-Siaka Traoré, then came Lasso and after him Go-Lamine Traoré, whom I knew was living in a hamlet away from the village. I was to be the fifth.

The following period, preceding the actual ritual, was very instructive in terms of discovering the many steps a novice has to make in order to complete any official step in his path. I realised how impressive was their respect for the hierarchy, a methodical check of all the required green lights before a step is taken. My discovery of this principle started the very night after meeting Adama, when I asked Lasso who, in his opinion, might have been speaking ill of him. To my surprise, he was already sure of the answer, and named his fellow student Togo-Siaka. He was in disagreement with Lasso on the way I was undertaking research, and had tried to convince him to leave me in the village and use my money to travel around, bringing me only the information they wanted to give me. Lasso refused. I read in Togo-Siaka's proposal a will to acquire the mediating role a local hunter could assume for me, by preventing me from having a first-hand experience of things. There might have been too a concern for the secrecy of the knowledge of *donsoya* and for losing control on the circulation of information once I left the country. Perhaps he also did not trust my commitment to this study.

According to Lasso, Togo-Siaka was a greedy person and believed they had first of all to take advantage of me. I am sure there was long-held resentment between Togo-Siaka and Lasso behind all this, and in the course of my year of research Lasso often told me how Togo-Siaka tried to put a spanner in the works on a few occasions.

The main such situation was the process of deciding a date for my *borodon* ritual. I can still feel my irritation when thinking that in Europe I could have solved the problem with a few phone calls, whereas in this case I found myself driving around bush paths to visit people in order to arrange a date. The way Togo-Siaka tried to sabotage my ritual was precisely exploiting this need for respecting the hierarchy and hearing everybody's opinion,

namely by absenting himself from all the meetings where his contribution was necessary to make a decision. Adama was very well aware of this game, and played along as the refined strategist that he was. Instead of imposing a day with his authority, he delegated the decision to his students, so that Togo-Siaka had to show his hand in front of his companions.

A day was finally decided, and when it arrived it started at 6am, so that I could do all the preparations. I had been in Bobo Dioulasso and bought a motorbike to be able to move independently, plus all the things required by Adama. The small, Chinese-made 125cc was way overloaded when we left Karankasso: I was driving and Lasso sat behind, with two shotguns, 25 kilograms of rice, about a kilo of fonio, my camera and sound equipment and five chickens hanging on top of everything. We passed by Madou's house to continue with him on a narrow bush path, and met with Togo-Siaka and the *donsoba* in Banzon. All these stops took much time, and we arrived at Adama's only when the sun was already high.

Adama was waiting for us under a huge mango tree, just out of his compound. Next to him was his junior brother Lacole, who spoke excellent French, and a dozen of his students. Go-Lamine had arrived cycling, having travelled ten kilometres from his fields, others had come from Samogogwan, Sadina, Nyale, Kariya. Adama's eldest son Diakalia, an accomplished *donso* musician, was also present, recently back from Ivory Coast where some of his brothers lived. Lasso showed my chickens to Madou Koné, Adama's first student among those present, and he brought them to Lacole who finally showed them to his brother for his benedictions, in a hierarchical order.

It was for Lacole to act as a master of ceremonies, Karankasso's *donsoba* was at his side. Adama stayed in the court, while we walked to his *dankun* just a couple hundred metres from the houses. The *donsoba* spoke first, reminding everybody how I had started my path in Karankasso and then had come to Adama to improve my studies. The sacrifice in Karankasso had been devoid of any problem, and so should have been this one if agreement was between us all. Lacole then cut the throat of my two hens. They were so exhausted by the hours spent in the sun, hanging from the motorbike, that they barely moved, and died on their left side. I knew this was a very bad sign, and silently cursed my companions for having wasted so much time on our way

there. Lacole then killed one of my cocks, with the same outcome. I started to receive worried looks from everybody. Lacole wisely moved to the chickens of other hunters, for many had brought one to get auspices on the incoming hunting season. The sun was very high, and I was pouring with sweat. Many of the *donsow*'s hens and cocks died giving bad outcomes, I counted about ten of them. It was then the turn of my final cock, which died just like its predecessors.

At this point Adama was called, and a child brought another hen. Lacole called me aside and made me reflect on my relationship with my parents, were they aware of what I was doing, did they give me permission to do it? He also asked about the honesty of my purposes, and if I had started similar relationships with other *donsow*. My state of mind was deeply agitated, my legs were shaking and my voice trembling. I started to doubt everything. Maybe I only cared about my career, about making a successful film and thesis. Maybe this cannot be part of *donsoya*. Maybe I was just being selfish and my intentions were not true and pure in any way, rather I was using these people for my PhD and career. Dust, sun, sweat, blood spilled on the shotguns' stocks. Suffocated cries and feathers, birds' bodies bouncing around. What was I doing there, with all the hunters looking at me with a worried expression?

I repeated that my interest in *donsoya* was true, but I was also going to make a research on it and perhaps a film, and I could not be sure whether this was allowed. Adama took the hen and said that it should show if there was something wrong with me or with the hosting party. He went to the *dankun* with his brother and left me in the shadow of a nearby tree with Madou Koné, who seemed to want to comfort me without being able to communicate. They slit the hen's throat and again it died the wrong way, on its left side, but this time turned its back to Adama and his brother. The two brothers started to talk closely among each other, and finally Adama called for another hen. A child arrived with little more than a chick. Adama killed it on the *dankun* and threw it to the ground.

I was still sitting under the tree thinking about the direction my research would take, unable to accept that a chicken could influence my destiny at this point. I would have had to look for a teacher from scratch, maybe the rumour

of my failed ritual would have spread causing me problems. Then somebody called me from the circle of men at the *dankun*; I got up to see Adama smiling and the little hen flapping its wings while laying on its back, as if an invisible hand had been keeping it down. It was explained to me that Adama and Lacole had understood from the previous hen that the problem concerned them and determined its origin in a recent disagreement about the sale of some cows.

As for me, I confess, I had been thinking that the ritual would have been just a formality, and I was given a big lesson. Only by being myself involved could I understand what these sacrifices are about. They have a strong emotional impact, especially if they are to decide your immediate future. At first I was just unnerved and wanted to get rid of it, then I was shaken, insecure and my voice was trembling, finally I felt so relieved and hugged all the hunters as my brothers. *How to Do Things with Stones*, a chapter in Michael Jackson's *Paths Towards a Clearing* (1989), immediately came to my mind. In this essay Jackson approaches Kuranko divination as a husband worried for his wife's pregnancy. This leads him to reflect on the existential problem of the aleatory from the point of view of a participatory methodology.

Secondarily, talking to hunters I once more realised how these sacrifices are thought to reveal relationships between the people present, for the *dankun* is believed capable of showing disagreement, dishonesty or treachery. Lasso confirmed that many of the students' hens had shown bad omens because of the divisiveness of Adama's group. He and Lacole were continuously in conflict over all sorts of things, as I was going to discover later. Additionally, the shadow of Togo-Siaka's plots was hanging over the group.

### **Exploring Adama's network**

After I became his student, Adama encouraged me to visit him often, saying that it makes no sense to register your son for school if you do not send him to classes. As my apprenticeship to Adama progressed I came to realise the importance *donsow* attribute to the relationships they entertain with

each other, what I call *the dankun network*. The *donsow's* altar is the centre and the indicator of the health of these relationships, inasmuch as they influence the outcome of the sacrifices performed on it. My *woroci* in Karankasso had been a model of the search for agreement - *bèn* - whereas the *borodon* ritual at Adama's, with its troubled preparation, had shown me some of the effects of divisiveness. It would appear from a comparison with some of the literature on *donsoya* that such a stress on a *donso's* network of relationships is a relatively recent development in the history of the Mande hunters. The rest of my apprenticeship to Adama showed me some of the forms these relationships could take, well beyond the manifestations I had known through my initiation rituals.

Perhaps the most fundamental relationship connects the student and his teacher, being often equated to a parent-son bond. This also meant that the student is, up to a point, caught in the blood kinship network of the teacher, and vice-versa. Adama took me on a few occasions to Samogogwan to meet his first wife, sister and elderly mother who lived in the family compound where Adama's grandfather, Bema, had settled around the turn of the century. In turn, Adama was regularly visiting his students' parents, but it was impossible for him to do it with me. I could see his desire to connect with my kin when he referred to my father as his true brother or when he gave me, as a present for him, his own *donso* shirt. Like a son for his father, I would try to perform duties for him, bringing presents from time to time, trying to give him a share of the meat I hunted and occasionally working for him in his fields or building rooms in his compound - at least as long as the tender skin of my hands allowed. Small groups of his students would in turns go to work in his fields when the rainy season started.

The teacher in turn would give the students bits of knowledge, mostly in the form of recipes for vegetal based medicines, but also in a more indirect way, hidden in the many stories he would tell us as we sat around the teapot, constantly boiling with green tea. Adama was especially conservative in revealing his knowledge, which means that often he would let you guess how much he knew but would not reveal this or that recipe. I heard many times Lasso or Madou complaining that the day he would die he would take with him so many of the secrets he never wanted to reveal.

But Adama was also very careful in respecting the hierarchy among his students, for he had had some with him for more than 20 years. On some occasion, when Lasso and I expressed curiosity about a certain medicine, he refused to give us the details because Madou - our senior for initiation - had not yet been made part of it. If the students are like brothers of a same mother, then, they are never equal in the always-gerontocratic Mande societies. Adama also used medicines to maintain our relation of dependence on him. We often complained that he never revealed the recipe of the white powder we used to chase the *nyama* of the animals we killed. The same powder can be smeared on one's face and forearms before going to the bush at night, or used in one's washing water to chase evil genies. It was in other words a very basic preparation that we were often short of and had to get from him.

But I realised that this way he had us tied to him, he could be sure we had to visit him with a certain frequency. If he complained about something it was that his students did not visit him often enough. The difference between giving a student a medicine or its recipe is clearly that the former can only be consumed, while the latter can be input in the network and traded for new knowledge, acquiring a completely different value. The analogy between *donsoya* and kinship could be extended even further if I consider how often I had to visit fellow hunters on occasion of funerary ceremonies. Adama was always clear in saying that it was our *duty* to go, just like it is a duty to be present at relatives' funerals. A group of students implied solidarity: for example, when Go-Lamine had to organise an onerous funerary ceremony we all went hunting for a few days, in order to stock him with meat to feed his many guests. Looking at the way meat is shared in case of an important kill, for example, it is again possible to see the proximity of figures from the domain of kinship and the domain of hunting (see Hellweg 2011: 80–82).

Adama's network included many important hunters and we started to visit a few of them, starting from Nafali Koné, head of the hunters of the Kenedougou province and his personal friend.<sup>31</sup> Later I was to meet his deputy Kunumba Traoré from Samogohiri. My teacher singled out some key

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<sup>31</sup> A Senufo from the area of Ouolonkoto, Nafali Koné appears in Kersalé's 2006 documentary *Les Maîtres du Nyama*.

figures and made official my apprenticeship, so that nobody could accuse him of trying to create an exclusive relationship with me, just as Lasso had first taken me to meet Madou Barou first. And thanks to me, his international network was also extending to Europe, beyond Burkina, Mali and Ivory Coast. He often mentioned how they had the duty to inform me of the death of a fellow *donso* or of one of his relatives, even if I had already left Burkina. From Europe, I could require that sacrifices be performed, and be informed of the outcome.

This brings me to the striking importance of mobile phones in this network of relationships: *donsow* use them very much to maintain their contacts, especially considering the relatively high cost of phone calls in Burkina. Adama himself, who being illiterate usually has a son operate his phone for him, has about a hundred contacts in his address book. Having spent so much time with him I know how often he makes and receives calls. But one of the most striking examples was to see the walls of a house in Brahim Traoré's compound, in Samogohiri, completely covered in phone numbers. "See how many contacts he has", Lasso told me, "it tells you how important he is." The extension of the network of this *donso*, also renowned diviner and healer, was made visibly public in his compound.

Furthermore, a *donso* is highly mobile inside the geography of this network: a motorbike revealed itself an invaluable research tool, and I found myself covering an average 1000 kilometres per month.<sup>32</sup> A *donso* who could afford a motorbike could see his network expand dramatically, being able to visit more teachers more often and in a wider area.

The *borodon* ritual had allowed me to have a glimpse of the dark sides of the *dankun* network. As my acquaintance with the hunters of the Kenedougou and Houet provinces became deeper, I realised that many of these relationships consisted of rivalry, jealousy and hatred. *Donsow* were very often in conflict, and Adama could count as many allies as he could list

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<sup>32</sup> In Burkina Faso this is quite a high figure, if we consider I seldom travelled on paved roads and mostly used bush paths where the average speed was between 20 and 30 kilometres per hour. I often found myself thinking I was spending more time on a saddle than hunting. As a matter of fact, the motorbike allowed a compression of space and time that speeded up my apprenticeship. It is interesting to compare this with Jansen's observations about the use of the car in shaping the field expeditions of the Griaule team (Jansen 2000: 100–101).



enemies. Leadership in a group was very often the reason for conflict. The most representative example that I heard about was the feud that opposed two groups of Senufo hunters in the region of Ouolonkoto, namely the followers of Nafali Koné and Kadjana Dembélé. The two master hunters had been trying to kill each other for years, I was told. Also on occasional trips to Samogogwan with Adama I could understand that he had many enemies in his village of origin, and he claimed to have received many attacks in the form of magic. The main idea, it was explained over and over again to me, was that the more one becomes well known through hunting or healing exploits, the more one also becomes visible and exposed, attracting jealousy. Making one's name - *ka togo soro* - is one of the aims that attract people to *donsoya*, but also a risk.

One of the favourite stories Adama would tell over and over again is an account of how he killed a hippo in Banzon, in 2007. At a master hunter's funeral it was decided that a hippo should be killed, to honour the dead and provide meat for the guests at the *saraka* from the seventh day from the decease. All the master hunters from Kenedougou were present, and Nafali Koné, as their leader, proposed that Adama be designated to do the job. In this way, he acknowledged the skill of his colleague and friend, but exposed him to the jealousy of all the master hunters present. Adama accepted and chose a solitary male in the flooded area around Banzon. Now, most hunters will say that a hippo is a relatively easy kill - a single headshot is usually all it takes. Yet old bulls and mothers can be extremely aggressive and unpredictable, and during my stay a male hippo killed at least three persons around Banzon cutting them literally open with its massive, sharp teeth. But the most challenging part lies in the beast's *nyama*, which is particularly evil in the case of the hippo. Stories abound of unprepared hunters with good rifles who lost a hand in an accident or died suddenly, after killing one of these animals. Adama knew well what to do and had the right equipment, yet he spent a whole night soaked in the water without being able to shoot the hippo. Early in the morning he received a call from his brother in Samogogwan, who said a *donso* had talked to their mother telling her that there was no way Adama could ever kill that hippo. Adama explained to me that his *fadenw* - meaning here descendants of a co-wife of his grandfather, or

distant relatives - had made *dabali* on him. This word refers in general to an evil spell, a curse (Chappatte 2013: 166; Mommersteeg 2012: Chapter 7; McNaughton 1982b: 490–491). Adama did not give in and asked one of his students for a needle and a new-born chick. He descended into the water and performed some kind of magic. One hour later the colossal hippo was dead. Adama made a sensational entrance at the celebrations for the deceased master hunter, followed by a truck loaded with meat. "Here is your meat," he said to the hunters present, "but if those who tried to prevent me from killing this hippo eat its meat, they will be pregnant until their death, without ever being able to give birth."<sup>33</sup> Many did not touch any food, that night. I loved hearing this story the way Adama told it, with his sense for suspense and dramatic statements. It was also very meaningful in showing that his pride was not so much in the conquest of the prey itself, but in the way he had been able to overcome a plot against him thanks to his knowledge of magic.

Protective medicines, aimed at deflecting magical attacks constituted a relevant part of my apprenticeship in magic with Adama, and once in a single day he taught me as many as four such recipes. Some were directed at shielding from aggressions to my person, others would frustrate curses aimed at spoiling my chances of killing prey. I definitely got the sense that for the *donsow* the defences were as developed as the means for aggression.

Perhaps the most exemplary figure of this double aspect of the *dankun* network is the *donso* musician. Indeed he is a nodal figure in the circulation of knowledge, for as I mentioned above he can redefine the hunters' internal hierarchy and receive knowledge in exchange for praises. A popular *donso* musician becomes then a nodal point in a network of master hunters, receiving knowledge from a multitude of sources in a shorter time than it would take for an apprentice to travel around and gain the trust of some teachers. Musicians invest a big part of their knowledge in gaining magical means that help them to be more popular and liked - *dawulafla*, a medicine for gaining charm. The flipside of this exposure is the possibility of arousing jealousy and sorcery attacks, especially from colleagues. A musician's shirt, then, is a striking exhibition of knowledge in the way it is cluttered with

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<sup>33</sup> Compare Brett-Smith's description of poisoning procedures among the Bamana (1983: 51)

amulets, demonstrating its owner's prestige not unlike the phone numbers on the walls of Brahima's house. But it is also a formidable protection against magical attacks, with its many mirrors that should ward off *koroti* - magical poisoning. The two aspects of gaining charm and protection from attacks are so intertwined that I was not surprised when Adama's son Diakalia, a powerful musician and sorcerer, gave me an amulet with Arabic script in it, wrapped with coloured cotton thread and filled with herbs, saying that it would make me more popular and at the same time protect me from poisoned food.

### **Between individualism and connectivity**

The more I reflected on these networked aspects of *donsoya* as I experienced it during fieldwork, the more I was struck by the contrast with *donsow* as they were portrayed in part of the literature. Patrick McNaughton, for example, in comparing Mande blacksmiths and hunters, remarks how "[Hunters] are not opposed to seriously disrupting social harmony and cohesion to achieve their ends, and they are perceived frequently as threats to social stability" (1988a: 71). Because of the energy they deal with and their sorcery skills, they are feared as much as they are respected (1988b: 156). Furthermore, they embody the archetype of *fadenya*, the individualistic competition between half-brothers that represents "the will to put oneself before the group, to act in defiance of it and to disrupt it if need be, in order to accomplish some personal goal" (1982a: 55). McNaughton relied heavily on the work of Charles Bird, who first wrote about the Mande hero in oral traditions - most of the times a *donso* - identifying him with the topos of *fadenya* (Bird and Kendall 1980: 14–16).

I could not recognise my fellow hunters in this portrait, as "rugged individualists who seek to bend society to their own wills" (McNaughton 1982a: 56). Rather, they were entangled in networks of relations, from their own court to the extended family, to the relationships created through apprenticeship and associations. Perturbations of this network influenced

their lives and hunting exploits. Even more, there was a lot of micro-politics guiding the decisions of the master hunters or their speeches on the *dankun*, even for those like Adama, who often deprecated the *donsoya* practised in town and its connections with institutions and politicians. I needed a moment of realisation that could allow me to put these different views in a diachronic perspective, one that arrived thanks to Adama's network of relationships.

I used to go to Bobo Dioulasso about once a month, to buy the few things I needed and send reports by email. On one of these visits a friend told me that he knew an old *donsoba*, who used to live in his neighbourhood, Bolomakoté. He was a great hunter, he told me, and I should visit him in his compound near Kouakouale. He was a Bobo and everybody called him Bakari Taximan. We went to visit him one morning; my friend was a Samo - a *senanku* of the Bobo - and Bakari immediately started to tease him. He was an old man, 75 years old, with a piercing voice and a sharp sense of humour. He could drink astonishing quantities of spirits, and when drunk he was even less restrained. When I greeted him as a *donso*, "*Karamogo, a ni ko*," he started to mock me as well. He just could not reply seriously to my questions, until I mentioned that my teacher was Adama Sogo Traoré.

"Sogosi?!" he shouted. "From Samogogwan? He is my friend! My best friend! He is a real hunter! That man was cruel, and could he shoot!"

He calmed down a bit and continued: "We used to hunt together when I was in Samogogwan with the army, in 1974. We used to disappear in the bush for days together, then the captain would put me in jail. But not for long, because he needed me."

Bakari "Taximan" Sanou had been a driver for most of his life, and he had the same role in the army. Now that he discovered that Adama was my teacher, he was much more open with me. But when I mentioned that I had had my initiation at Karankasso's *dankun*, he barked: "*Dankun, dankun*, everybody is following this new trend. In my days there was no *dankun*, and I will never have one."

I was astonished, and asked him to explain himself better.

"Can you hear me well? It is what I said. It was Tiefing who started to go around selling this *dankun* to everybody. And now they think that you cannot become a *donso* without one. Then how did I become one?"

Was he talking about Tiefing Coulibaly? From Dakoro?

"Yes, he was a Tagwa,<sup>34</sup> I remember him very well," and he continued by addressing Tiefing with a terminology I'd better not use here. Basically, he said that the *dankun* was just a big fraud, one that granted Tiefing a lot of money.

"Do you know what I use? I have no *dankun*, you know?" He was really quite drunk by then, a bottle of spirit sat beside him half empty. "Go open that door."

I stood up and went to open the corrugated tin door he had pointed out to me. What I saw inside was so complex that I was left with the feeling that my eyes could not embrace it all. In a small, poorly lit room, almost a closet, a big clay pot stood on a tripod, almost entirely covered in a mountain of coagulated blood and feathers. On the floor were a dozen egg-shaped objects, dark from the blood they were smeared with, a tuft of hair protruding from one extremity. More objects of strange shapes were hanging from the walls and in the corners of the room, which was a real example of the aesthetics of obscurity and murkiness McNaughton linked to the idea of *dibi*, the darkness of death (1982a: 91). Bakari had allowed me a glimpse into his *cebon* - literally man's room - where he kept all his fetishes - or power objects, *jow* in the local Jula.

Later chats with Adama allowed me to understand that I had made the mistake of considering the *dankun* as a timeless institution present since the origin of *donsoya*. Perhaps influenced by Cissé's lack of contextualisation, I had been surprised to learn from the accounts of more and more hunters that the *dankun* really started to spread in the west of Burkina Faso from the 1990s. But now that I was aware of this it made perfect sense that the man responsible for its diffusion was the same man credited with the introduction of modern hunting associations in the country. The change started by Dakoro Tiefing Coulibaly had involved the cults as much as the institutions of *donsoya*, creating a different model that saw in the *dankun* its perfect symbol, the fork of paths that stood for the expanding network of relations the hunters were establishing. As the *donsobaw* were establishing their first *dankun*, the

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<sup>34</sup> One of the subdivisions of the Senufo people.

modalities with which young apprentices were recruited also changed, and the fee and card system spread. I had the perception that *donsoya* during the year of my stay was going through the final part of a process of transformation from individual practice to network of relationships.

Talking to the hunters of the generation of Bakari or my teacher Adama, or old Fie-Cèenku Traoré from Bwende, elders in their seventies, I could imagine the apprenticeship in *donsoya* in the pre-*dankun* era as very much based on the relationship between teacher and student. A *donsokaramogo* would then never have thirty students, like Adama had, but only a few and these would absolutely depend on him as the only figure able to sanction their status, in the absence of an institution able to do the same with a card. All those aspects that today characterise the urban manifestations of *donsoya* were absent, from gatherings to parades to politics.

Bird's and McNaughton's views of the *donsow* now can be put in the perspective of a different time and place - in Mali, in the 1970s. Yet one should not fall into the trap of picturing two simplified ideal types, the individualistic *donso* being replaced by a networked type. The extent to which *donsow* had broader relationships with different ethnic groups and villages was already noted by Cashion during his fieldwork in Mali only shortly after Bird (Cashion 1984: 109). In particular he draws an analogy with the case of Igala hunters of south-western Nigeria described by Boston (1964), who already evidenced the existence of a network made of esoteric knowledge and skills. In other words, I prefer to highlight some tendencies rather than positing a point of departure and a point of arrival. A *donso* is constantly in between these two opposing forces, especially because *donsoya* is ultimately a way to acquire knowledge and, thanks to it, a power that can only be maintained and recognised through relations with others (Saul 2006b). After all even Bakari, who proclaimed to hate associations and the *dankun*, who refused to have a mobile phone and who often sent away people looking for him saying they were at the wrong address, had put a sign on the main road to indicate where visitors should turn to find him, with an arrow and his initials on it: SBT.

Furthermore, I could draw parallels from the point of view of the cults of *donsoya*. Bakari told me he only used fetishes, and Adama confirmed that before the *dankun* "arrived" - most likely before Tiefing there were some but

they were not as ubiquitous as nowadays - *donsow* were relying mostly on power objects for their sacrifices. I say more about these objects in a later chapter, but what interests me at this stage is to remark on the difference in their use. A *donsojo* is a highly personal object, and only its owner can operate it. If it is used for somebody else, then the owner is anyway the mediator of the request. Any *donso*, on the other hand, can go to the *dankun* and ask it for good luck and for help with some endeavour or good health for a relative. A *donsojo* is either destroyed at the death of the owner, or is passed to a disciple, whereas the *dankun* generally belongs to an area and to its local hunting association. In this sense, hunting fetishes are to individualistic *donsoya* what the *dankun* is to hunting associations.

But even here, again, ambiguities abound. As I learned more not only about *donsoya* but also about the area where I was doing research, it became clear to me that the fetish is a very important category in local cults. So much so, that even the *dankun* sometimes seemed to be conceived through this category. For old Bakari there were no doubts, the *dankun* was just another *jo* diffused by Dakoro Tiefing, just like anything else that receives sacrificial blood. Adama on the other hand was very clear-cut in stating the opposite, underlining that he had abandoned all his hunting fetishes for his *dankun*. This was often the reason for a long distance argument between Bakari and him in which I acted as a messenger, coming and going between the two friends. Bakari often stated that Adama was lying when he said that he had no fetishes, because there can be no *donso* without fetishes. Adama insisted he had discarded them all because of their demanding taboos, whereas the *dankun* was easier to operate. Yet I noticed that he had *his dankun*, a personal one like many other *donsoba*, sustaining *his* network of students.

But as I acquired more details on the way the *dankun* propagated through Tiefing's action, I realised that it was treated just like other cults of the area. If we compare for example the accounts of the diffusion of anti-witchcraft cults such as Sogo or Do gathered by Patrick Royer (1996: 131–140), we can see how a fetish would reproduce by gemmation, like a plant which produces a smaller version of itself. In other words, in order to acquire the altar of a cult - its power objects, or fetishes - a village would go and buy them from its owner in a neighbouring village, and establish it with a ceremony

(Colleyn 1985: 234). The very same thing happened with the *dankun*, with the payment of a fee and the establishment ceremony. It is striking how similar a process was involved in the diffusion of Benkadi, in Ivory Coast first and in Burkina later. By reading the accounts gathered by Hellweg (2011: 133–134) about the former country, I recognise the same process: the inhabitants of a village heard of the advantages brought by the association in a neighbouring village and asked them to perform an establishment ceremony. It is uncommon that someone just copied the idea and established a local version in an independent manner.<sup>35</sup> Benkadi then spread just like a cult, and somehow everything seemed in sync when Adama revealed to me that Dakoro Tiefing Coulibaly also owned a fetish by the name of Benkadi.

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<sup>35</sup> Something similar happens with associations being traded in Nigeria (Röschenthaler 2009).



## **PART 2 - THE HUNTER AND HIS ENVIRONMENT**

### **Chapter 3 - The Political Ecology of the Bush**

One of the foci of the previous two chapters has been the most important evolution in the structures of *donsoya* in the past 20 years, the emergence of modern hunting associations. I have underlined how at the origin of this phenomenon are, on the one hand, a series of gradual transformations of the ecology of the bush, with their roots in pre-colonial times and accelerated by local and global economic processes. On the other hand many West-African post-colonial states<sup>36</sup> have continued the same environmental policies inherited from their former colonists, establishing reservations and policing the use of natural resources. The need for subjects among the hunters that could be suitable interlocutors for the state has been answered by hunting associations that had their backbone in a class of urban civil servants. I am going to argue that what these associations were unable to bridge in their role of mediators are two different conceptions of what an environment is. Firstly, the conception of the state and its agencies, inspired by global conservationist discourses on the depletion of natural resources, and secondly that of local communities of farmers - of which most *donso* hunters are part. Through this layer of analysis I start my ecological approach to knowledge from the most general sense of a conception of the environment.

My experience of everyday hunting in Karankasso showed me a conflict where hunters would try to resist attempts at a bureaucratisation of the bush by the state and its agents. Far from being a wild and untamed space opposed

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<sup>36</sup> "The State" in many African contexts and especially in Burkina Faso is far from a monolithic entity, being often distant from the lives of rural villagers. Therefore I primarily refer here to the state agencies and bureaucracies that put in practice state policies, connecting to a tradition of anthropological studies on the "margins" of the state in Africa and beyond (Bierschenk and De Sardan 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Das and Poole 2004; Scott 1998).

to human communities, as the anthropological literature on the Mande area would hold it, the bush appeared as the setting for multiple man-made influences: processes of ecological change driven by agricultural policies, forms of state power trying to regulate hunting and turn it into an economic resource, and more traditional forms of land management. All these contrasting forces are shaping *donsoya* in its most recent transformations, as reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2.

This chapter deals with the political ecology of the bush (Wolf 1972), and asks what kind of conception of the environment emerges from the practices of hunters, and more widely villagers, in the area where I conducted fieldwork. I underline how the debate over this conception is also a political one, where the state blames the failures of its environmental policies on the wrongly held conceptions of the villagers, and especially of hunters. This is an attempt at what Povinelli called a "sociography" (2011) of the bush, in other words an ethnography that shows the local effects of broader powers at work in a field of forces or social projects.

I start by describing the background to all these issues, the changes in the bush in the area where I did fieldwork, but soon move to look at the ways people interacted with the bush and with the constraints posed by the state, in the form of environmental laws and policies. From an ecological point of view it is fundamental to account not just for changes in agriculture, forestation and fauna, but to look at how human interactions with the bush are transformed - being at the same time agents of this change.

### **Cotton and cows**

The bush around villages like Karankasso Sambla is part of an area of transition between the Sahel, which in fact covers only the northernmost corner of Burkina Faso, and more humid areas to the south. Annual rainfall is normally around 1000-1100 millimetres. People usually distinguish at least three seasons: the dry season, roughly from November to March, a period when the rains cease and a dusty, dry harmattan wind starts to blow from the

north; the hot season, between April and May, when temperatures reach their peaks, and humidity increases significantly; the rainy season, from June to October, with a peak in precipitation in the month of August (compare World Bank 2013). But rains are highly unpredictable in this area, and people depend completely on them in the absence of infrastructures to exploit the rivers and streams that abound in the area. The main dangers for farmers are then a lack of water - namely a rainy season that starts late or has a break after an early start - or an excess of water: the soil absorbs the abundant precipitations very poorly and the months of July and August often see floods that can kill young plants. Erosion makes it difficult for the soil to retain humidity and plant nutrients, as well as making travel very difficult.

Near Karankasso many seasonal or perennial streams cut through the bush to flow into the main watercourse of the region, the Black Volta River or Mouhoun. Some of these perennial streams offer the possibility for dry-season gardening, while in the village of Banzon - about 20 kilometres north-west of Karankasso - a development project has made possible farming all year long thanks to a canalisation of the river Volta. Although dry-season gardening is quite common as a way to supplement the diet with crops like potatoes, onions, aubergines, tomatoes, taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) and okra (Jula: *ghan* - *Abelmoschus esculentus*), most inhabitants rely for their sustenance on the seasonal rains, and the infrastructures in Banzon are an exception in the area. As a result, the period of the growing season - June to September - until the harvest between September and November, can often be one of hardship, when the reserves of food in the granaries are about to run out and the need for manual labour at its maximum.

The most basic crop for subsistence farming is sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), thanks to its resistance to periods of irregular rains. Maize is also common, along with some species of millet, while farming rice is more difficult, resulting in relatively high prices. Almost all families cultivate peanuts, a very important component of their diet throughout the year. Other crops include fonio - a small variety of millet (Jula: *foni* - *Digitaria exilis*) - sesame, and the Bambara groundnut (Jula: *tigenna kuru* - *Vigna subterranea*). Some farmers have small plots of mango, banana or coconut trees, and their fruits are usually sold in local markets. But people also know very well how

to gather a variety of products from the bush to supplement their diet: wild herbs, flowers, seeds and fruits are commonly used by women as ingredients in their recipes - including the Shea tree caterpillar (*Cirina butyrospermii*). The largest fields are normally cultivated by kinship-based groups, but young men and married women will often care for smaller, individual fields.

The area around the villages of Karankasso Sambla, Bwende and Konkolikan, where I did most of my hunting, is in between a relatively flat region to the north and a zone of steep, rocky hills toward the south. Villages and hamlets tend to be found in flat areas, where it is possible to farm the land. Even there, the ground is often dotted with red rocks, which farmers remove and throw to the margins of their fields. The demographics of the area have varied greatly during periods of war and forced labour but today, walking on bush paths in the Sambla country one often comes across small, seasonal agricultural hamlets that are inhabited during the rainy season by groups of people related by kinship. The elders in Karankasso say that fields are being cultivated further and further away from the village, and some families choose to move semi-permanently close to their crops when most work is needed. The alternative would be to march or cycle - only a relatively small percentage of male heads of households own a motorcycle - for a dozen kilometres every day, loaded with tools and sacks of seeds and fertiliser. Many choose to resettle for the farming season, even though some families have their fields in different directions and at different distances, so that they are unable to choose one single location for their rainy season residence and as a result remain in the village. Some hamlets, on the other hand, are inhabited all year long and can be fairly big without having the status of village, as I will detail further in the next chapter. Karankasso Sambla is the biggest village of the Sambla region at about 5000 inhabitants, but most settlements average much less in population.

One of the biggest factors in the transformation of the landscape in this area was the introduction of cotton on a large scale, as a state-managed commercial crop. In all their West African colonies the French had tried to transform the local, small-scale production of cotton by making it a mandatory crop since the 1880s, but the production really took off only starting from 1950. The centralised, forced-labour system of the French cotton

company CFDT was continued after independence, until state controlled companies became the main interlocutors for farmers. The Burkinabe SOFITEX (Société Burkinabé des Fibres Textiles), instructed by the French and the World Bank, worked through a system of credit inputs, first to growers and later to farmers' associations (GVC), to then subtract the amount owned for fertilisers, seeds and herbicides from their earnings. Since then the amount of cotton produced by Burkina Faso has constantly increased, with peaks in the 1980s and 1990s, and mostly in the south-western region. Cotton has been for 20 years now Burkina's largest export (World Bank 2004). Thomas Bassett has documented how in northern Ivory Coast this latter period was characterised by a marked extensification, especially in the sense of an increase of the surface cultivated as cotton, as a strategy to cope with the fibre's falling price (2001: 151–153). The farmers' attempt was to save on the cost per hectare by using less than the prescribed amount of pesticides and fertilizers, at the same time trying to expand their income through cultivating more surface area than they declared - thanks to the relatively cheap cost of labour.

As a result of these policies, peasants dedicate an increasing number of fields to cotton, in the hope of realising a monetary gain, but from the experiences of the persons I knew in Karankasso they often end up working for free or having to sell animals to pay their debts with SOFITEX.<sup>37</sup>

The intensification in the cultivation of cotton, with its elevated use of insecticides, has had on the other hand the effect of reducing the incidence of trypanosomiasis or sleeping sickness, thus facilitating cattle breeding. Also thanks to the increasing availability of veterinary treatments, more and more cattle are being herded. Those villagers who can afford to own more cows than they need to plough their fields use bovines as an investment for the surplus of cash they earn through cotton. Cows are not normally kept in villages, unlike goats, sheep, chickens and pigs, but the owner pays a herder - Peul are widely agreed to be the best - to keep them in the bush, away from cultivated fields. When in need of cash, the owner can sell some cows locally

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<sup>37</sup> There are many dynamics at play in the history African cotton, involving also the role of women, debt, neoliberal policies and colonialism, so I refer to Bassett's work on the region of Korhogo for an analysis that mixes history, geography, economics and ethnography (2001).

or, more likely, send them to a livestock market in Bobo Dioulasso. If everything goes well the cows, whose price is constantly on the rise, can represent a remunerative investment for their owner. In my experience on the hunt around Karankasso, cows were a frequent encounter that disrupted the search for game, and even when they were not present their footsteps, everywhere on the ground, made it impossible to follow the tracks of one's prey.

Cotton and cows, with the local and global economies connected to them, are important agents in the transformation of the bush space around villages like Karankasso Sambla. As a result, a hunter from these villages will often find himself hunting in the forested strips between groups of fields, or even in the fields themselves. Many of the small animals that can be found in the areas where I hunted during fieldwork in fact coexist with humans in a multispecies habitat (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), as for example in the case of *woron*, the double-spurred francolin (*Pternistis bicalcaratus*), which can be shot while it unearths the recently planted seeds from sorghum fields. Such small animals share the bush with humans up to the point that shooting them was sometimes dangerous for the safety of the inhabitants of some hamlets. Lasso and I, like all other hunters in Karankasso, sometimes hunted very close to the farmers at work. The lack of extensive forested areas connected to each other means in practical terms the absence of larger animals like antelopes, gazelles or big cats.

### **Hunting and illegality**

The state is an important actor in this frame not only with organisations like SOFITEX, but also through a police unit assigned the task of enforcing its environmental laws and policies. Like in Mali and Ivory Coast, this corps is called *Eaux et Forêts* - Waters and Forests police. As I started to practice hunting I learned to avoid the Waters and Forests police like my companions did, and to consider them enemies. It was quickly clear to me that the guards and the hunters were not on good terms. And I understood why as soon as I

started to learn about the laws concerning hunting and realised that hunters were constantly transgressing most of them.

They would kill animals outside of the period marked as hunting season, would hunt female animals on the claim that you cannot distinguish the sex of most small animals from a distance, they were sometimes killing protected species and, especially in the case of *donsow*, were hunting at night. After sunset it is forbidden to hunt with the aid of a torch, because of the way the light disorients animals and makes them easy targets. The diffusion of similar regulations goes well beyond Burkina Faso, and seems to derive from the principle of the fair chase, one of the pillars of ethical hunting in Euro-American traditions (Posewitz 1994). But the idea that a shoot might be "too easy" or unfair with regards to the animal is one that is absent from the reasoning of the hunters I spent my time with. While local hunters do on the one hand recognise that hunting at night is easier - because of the fresher temperature and the help of the torch - on the other hand they underline the risks connected with walking through the bush at night. Many dangerous animals are more active at night, it is easier to get lost and one is less likely to find help in the event of an accident. Furthermore, at night the *genies* - in Jula *jinanw* - that hide during the day roam around, and can kill a hunter or make him lose his wits. In my experience of hunting in Karankasso only the *donsow* would be brave enough to get into the bush at night, because they had the right magical protections. It became clear to me that illegal night-time hunting had an important role in setting apart the *donsow* from common hunters and from the rest of the villagers.

For the Waters and Forests Police all hunters were the same. Differences between them would only be made via the presence of a recognised association and the degree of collaboration they would be able to obtain. On 7 June 2012 I had the opportunity to ask Pascal Balima, one of the two officers assigned to Karankasso, about their relationship with local hunters. After a preamble of positive comments (he knew well by then my close relationship with hunters) he started complaining about the lack of collaboration. Even though they were trying to favour hunters with the concession of a cheaper hunting permit, they were aware that rules like the prohibition to sell bushmeat or other territorial restrictions were not respected. The Waters and



Forests police were there to try and enforce a sustainable exploitation of natural resources, but hunters would not collaborate and were stuck in the belief that resources were inexhaustible. He broadened his complaint to villagers in general, mentioning deforestation and bushfires. Villagers were too narrow minded, they simply thought about clearing new grazing land, making some charcoal to sell on the black market or starting a new cotton field. They were thinking about immediate gains, losing sight of the threat that desertification was posing to their whole ecosystem (compare Fairhead and Leach 1996: 29–30).

The guards' attempt to set up forest management groups - *Groupes de Gestion Forestière*, GGF - had failed due to lack of collaboration. The groups should have helped in the task of managing the firewood trade, a sector that in Burkina is very strictly regulated but sees much small scale, illegal traffic. The villagers were supposed to help them control a territory too vast for two agents to monitor, through reporting to them whoever broke the law. I was incredulous that they would expect such a thing. Not only was it against the ethics of a *donso* to report a fellow hunter to the police, but no villager would have done it, at least not without having something to gain in exchange.

The frequency with which the guards used the terms collaboration and participation made me think that it was a label for some precise policy that the state was trying to pursue. On what terms was this collaboration supposed to take place, what were the stakes and returns, and was there even a common language for a dialogue? To know more about this I went directly to the Direction Régionale de l'Environnement et Développement Durable in Bobo Dioulasso, the region's main headquarter of the Waters and Forests Police. I had arranged a meeting with Colonel Sibiri Traoré of the *Corps des Eaux et Forêts*. A thin, short man in his sixties, with grey hair and a hint of moustache, Colonel Traoré had the gentlest appearance but his mere presence would make the otherwise very relaxed young guards jump to attention.

After I introduced myself and broadly explained my interest and research project, he told me he was a Sambla too, from Toronso. He had grown up in Dinderesso where his late father before him worked in the Waters and Forests Academy and local protected forest. I had been directed to

him because he had been for 35 years an expert in fauna management, and had extensive experience in dealing with hunting policies. When I asked about the relationships between the state and the *donsow*, he made a long preamble.

Reservations were created during the colonial period, he acknowledged, without any attempt to consult the local people or gain consensus. This gave rise to a common feeling that protected forests are against the people and foresters are acting as a repressive force. He said that he always worked toward convincing the people of the possible advantages they could get out of the presence of a protected forest in their territory. The Waters and Forests distinguished three categories of actors, namely local populations, the state and the hunters - by this latter term he referred mostly to foreign hunters, specifically tourists. Then they tried to develop measures that could reconcile the interests of all three categories. In concrete terms, what he proposed was that local hunters could be trained as guides for tourists, and that the profits of the hunts - regulated by a system of quotas - would benefit the local communities, both in terms of meat and monetary revenues. There is in fact a public education course to obtain a diploma as a hunting guide, but from the end of the 1980s hunting concessions were handed over to private enterprises, which manage the commercial exploitation of hunting reserves under the control of the state. On the other hand the state established *Zones Villageoises d'Intérêt Cynégétique*, where hunters' associations would manage the revenues from the visits of tourists. This was a first attempt to involve local communities in a move to "participatory management" (see Hagberg 2001: 487–488 for another case from Burkina Faso). The concession of the *Permis de Chasse Villageoise* (or *de Chasse de Subsistence*) was another step in the same direction. Hunters would be able to hunt locally for small game, for non-commercial purposes, with a permit significantly cheaper than the regular *Permis de Chasse Sportive*. This kind of permit is available only to members of an officially recognised hunters' association, and its price would create a fund that is shared between the state and the association itself. While hunting associations are not necessarily the same as associations of *donsow*, the two often overlapped. It becomes clear then that it was not only the *donsow* who had interest in constituting themselves into associations, but also that the state

was looking for suitable interlocutors in matters of environmental policies. But generally the *donsow* did not share most of the conceptions about legality and the environment that the state was taking for granted.

Some *donsow* were involved, for a short period, in helping the Waters and Forests to track down poachers. This experiment was soon abandoned after they realised that the *donsow* had no juridical ground on which they could detain - and sometimes punish - infringers of the *Code Forestier*, the Forest Code that gathers the environmental state laws.<sup>38</sup> Many of the projects to involve local communities in the management of fauna, backed by the state and sometimes by the World Bank, failed because of a lack of continuity in state policies and a lack of engagement of the local villagers.

During my conversation with Colonel Traoré I asked if some Waters and Forests officers were sometimes also initiated *donsow*. He replied affirmatively and his voice shifted to a more confidential tone, as he added that, although some of the highest ranks of the Waters and Forests police were *donsow*, they did not seem to use their double role to open a dialogue with their fellow hunters. The heads of the main national hunting associations were often invited at joint meetings but this did not seem to result in any positive outcome.

What this meant in terms of the everyday experience of the hunters I frequented in Karankasso was very different from the desired collaboration. With reasons ranging from ignorance to the impossibility of compliance, most environmental regulations were not respected and the Waters and Forests officers were seen with mistrust. For example, according to the law every kill should be reported to the local officer, who should note it down and register it on the hunter's permit. This entry, other than providing statistical data on the kills in the area, should add towards a regional quota that eventually would result in a prohibition to hunt that animal until the following hunting season. But why should hunters travel to the Waters and Forests office from the other corner of the Département, covering perhaps several kilometres, just to report the killing of a hare? If we add to this aspect the fact that villagers

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<sup>38</sup> For an overview of the environmental laws of Burkina Faso and other African countries see the volume *Compendium of Environmental Laws of African Countries* (UNEP and UNDP 1998).

generally ignore the details of the lists of protected and partially protected animals, and generally are afraid that the authorities would try to tax or extort some money from them, it is hardly surprising that, at least in Karankasso, nobody ever reports kills. Furthermore, the Waters and Forests officers were the first to doubt that reporting kills would have any utility at all, especially without the network infrastructures required to disseminate this information. They had no computers available nor internet connection - in fact in the whole of Karankasso there was no electricity.

At the time of my fieldwork the two Waters and Forests officers in the Karankasso section had the task of patrolling the whole Department - too vast an area for them to control. Even though I could see that most hunters were on good terms with the guards, most of them were continuously engaged in illegal activities and were trying to avoid the guards in the bush. A very common kind of illegality concerned the hunting permits: according to the law in Burkina Faso all hunters must have a permit, but typologies are drawn. A Burkinabe citizen should pay a substantial fee - 15000 francs CFA in 2011-2012 - but the law allows for hunters' associations that are officially recognised by the state to obtain permits at a significantly reduced price - 3300 francs CFA, the *Permis de Chasse Villageoise* mentioned above by Colonel Traoré. As it happened in Mali and Ivory Coast (see previous chapter) hunters' associations were constituted precisely to enable negotiation with the state of these kinds of policies. The hunters in Karankasso Sambla are grouped in an association that in 2012 did not have an official recognition by the state, yet the two Waters and Forests police officers were collecting the reduced fee and were helping the association in the process of getting official recognition. This effort brought many hunters to actually get a permit, and indeed the association was encouraging them to do so by underlining at meetings that it was compulsory. However the permit fee was clearly conceived by the hunters as a tax for which they had nothing in return.

Where there seemed to be no possibility of complying with the rules was in trying to obtain a shotgun permit. The amount of paperwork and bureaucracy was simply too overwhelming for an illiterate village farmer, and the price of dealing with often dishonest middle-men was prohibitive. The Waters and Forests officers would occasionally remind the hunters that it was

compulsory to get a permit for every firearm, with the discouraged look of one who knows that those who listen have never even seen a real permit. Similarly, there was just no way a hunter would accept the idea that he could not lend his shotgun to a friend, in a place like rural Burkina where they are expensive and sought-after objects. The hunters I talked to were often convinced that the card of the hunters' association would be enough to allow them to carry a shotgun, but this was not the case (compare Bassett 2005 for Ivory Coast). Lasso held such a belief, but from an unfortunate episode it became clear that it was only thanks to a tacit agreement with the village authorities that undocumented shotguns were tolerated. One day we were stopped on our way back from Samogogwan, on a main road, by a patrol of the national police. I was driving and Lasso was sitting behind me. We carried his shotgun and a few shells, to be ready for any shooting opportunities along the way - something energetically recommended by Adama, who would reprimand us if we showed up unarmed. The patrol checked my passport and visa. They then asked for Lasso's identification and permit. Because he did not have one, his shotgun was confiscated and he was called on to report at the central police station in Bobo Dioulasso, where the officers laughed at his hunters' association card and threatened to arrest him. We never saw that shotgun again.

My experiences in Karankasso offered some possible explanations to this lack of engagement by local hunters and villagers in general, which is also highlighted by Sten Hagberg in the case of the Tiogo Forest Reserve. Hagberg makes the point that the centralised way in which the Burkinabe state managed natural resources did not change with the passage to "participatory forest management" policies in the 1980s (2001: 488). Actively sustained by foreign donor agencies, these policies sought to create or deal with existing local associations to set up a collaborative management of natural resources. Colonel Traoré had described attempts made along these lines in the field of fauna management. But, as it has also been argued in the case of Kissidougou - Guinea - by Fairhead and Leach (1996: 258–259), behind the façade these policies fail to attribute the causes of the degradation of the bush to the same economic processes that have generated the policies themselves. Instead, they blame the villager's ignorance or greed and, despite the "participatory" or

"collaborative" slogans, local communities are never assigned any decision-making role or asked their opinion (Fairhead and Leach 2003: 233–238). I want to point out how the issue of knowledge is especially relevant here, because the state is imposing a conception of the environment that frames it as a non-human, external entity, conceived as resources that can be quantified and consumed. Local knowledge is taken into account only in the case it can be extracted from ecological interactions, turned into notions or propositions, "repackaged in terms of foreign science" (*idem*: 235) and made to work for the ends of a state policy (Agrawal 1995; Nadasdy 1999; Thrupp 1989). But in this and in the next chapter I will contend that the villagers, and more specifically the hunters, of the area where I conducted fieldwork do not normally conceive of their environment in terms that bear an equivalence to those used by the Waters and Forests and their policy-makers.

Yet on the other hand the state, represented by the Waters and Forests police, wants collaboration in the form of knowledge it can recognise: they want villagers to tell them how much wood was cut, which animals were killed and who transgressed the law - in other words to become collaborators in an attempt to bureaucratise and quantify the bush. If we consider that on the other hand villagers are kept in the dark regarding the aims and the outcomes of these efforts at regulation, one understands how this imbalance of knowledge sometimes generates transgression as a strategy of everyday resistance (Fairhead and Leach 1996: 259).

Despite these centralising policies, and the state's desire for knowledge and control, the Waters and Forests were severely understaffed for the tasks they were assigned. This is why they looked - with little success - for the collaboration of local populations. Colonel Traoré and the Waters and Forests agents in Karankasso complained about the lack of collaboration by the villagers, but they did not offer any positive reason for this collaboration to take place. Furthermore, often the authorities would not interact with more local forms of land management, like Earth Chiefs/Masters of the Earth. These figures, found among many peoples of the area, decide through a privileged relationship with the earth to assign a patch of land for farming to a villager. This is what happens for one such figure, the Sambla *mangan* (about which I give more detail in the next chapter. Compare Hagberg 2001;

on the Sambla see Royer 1996). In Karankasso there was no "collaboration" between the two Waters and Forests agents and the *mangan*<sup>39</sup> or other figures, like the head of the *donsow*, who should have been important interlocutors. As a result the authorities were seen as repressors or competitors for the resources, and rather than collaboration I was witness to a low-intensity conflict, often in the form of a hide-and-seek game. The "collaboration" sought by the Waters and Forests police was not synonymous with participation, then, but rather with subordination to authority and with providing information about accomplices. It becomes clear why the Waters and Forests tried so hard to involve the hunters in their policies. They were after the knowledge *about* the land held by the hunters, who could have compensated for the guards' incapacity to control the territory.

### ***Donsoya* facing environmental change**

I cannot stress enough how important the transformations that affected the Sahelian ecosystem have been for their impact on *donsoya*. The progressive disappearance of big game and the general reduction of habitat for wildlife is a process with a long history that started to intensify from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with the introduction of firearms in the Mande area. Samori Touré himself, who was pivotal in the diffusion of the British rifles he needed in order to resist the French colonial troops, almost completely exterminated elephants from certain areas in order to procure ivory that he could exchange for the firearms he was receiving from Sierra Leone (Legassick 1966; Person 1968).

The large animals that populate the heroic tales of *donso* singers are now in many regions completely extinct or protected by law, so that only old master hunters can pride themselves with having killed such prestigious prey. Hunters therefore nowadays generally limit themselves to monkeys,

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<sup>39</sup> Hagberg reminds how "the lack of continuity between earth chief and state authority has been reported from elsewhere in Burkina" and in the Sahel, providing a few references (2001: 490, note 2).

small antelopes, hares and birds. This means that, in terms of the contribution they can provide to the diet of the local population, *donsow* are less and less important. Furthermore, West African state governments are increasingly applying policies that limit hunting on their territories, as bushmeat commerce is seen more and more as environmentally unsustainable (Bassett 2005; Pailler et al. 2009; UNEP and UNDP 1998).

The reduction in the quantity and quality of the fauna of the Mande area also started other mechanisms that ended up in a transformation of the role of the *donsow*. In some contexts, Mande hunters have been given the role of custodians of nature by some scholars and by development agencies. In Guinea for example, *donsow* have been employed as National Park guards, where they are called on to use their knowledge of the bush to protect the local fauna from poachers. Melissa Leach, writing about the Upper Niger National Park in Guinea, underlines how European donors privileged traditional hunters instead of trained guards, relying on ideas such as participatory sustainable development, respect for local traditions and a mythologized past where hunters were respectful managers of the land, before colonization broke the equilibrium (Fairhead and Leach 2003; Leach 2000). She warns about the context of these representations and draws analogies with indirect colonial rule in the way a foreign power looked for a native organisational structure, often framed as timeless and as working optimally, to put its policies into practice (Leach 2000: 578; Leach and Fairhead 2000). Leach also underlines how such idealisation of the past is based on heavily gendered perspectives that often simplify the complexity of female roles in the socio-ecological relationships at work in that context.

Furthermore, funding agencies and local associations in receipt of funding have glossed over a certain ambiguity in the figure of the hunter that emerges from Leach's own work and from McNaughton's (Leach 1994; McNaughton 1988a). Namely, the *donsow*'s moral ambiguity and use of violence have been ignored creating the image of an idyllic relationship between the bush and village world (Leach 2000: 581–582; 2004). Here environmentalist discourses and the ideas of international agencies about sustainable and participatory development have intersected with the self-idealisation of the past brought forward by an Afrocentric discourse that



seeks native devices in order to deal with the requirements of the Western world.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the classic literature on Mande hunters does in fact provide support for such a depiction of the *donsow*. Patrick McNaughton, relying on Charles Bird's and his own work in Mali, characterises *donso* hunters as liminal individuals, coming and going with ease between the normally separate domains of the bush and the village (McNaughton 1982a; 1988a: 17). A similar portrait is also present in Cissé (1964; 1994), and seems to come from the many oral traditions that assign to a *donso* the role of cultural hero or of first settler. I am going to revisit the bush-village opposition in the next chapter, but for the moment I will limit myself to remarking on how such an image of initiated hunters as ideal links between the bush and the village has often had the effect of shadowing the membership of all hunters in communities of *farmers*. In a context such as Western Burkina Faso, subsistence agriculture is the first and main preoccupation of a man, and in certain periods the hunting activity is completely stopped to attend to the needs of the crops. In the villages I visited professionals - blacksmiths, shopkeepers, millers, mechanics, even the mayor - leave their occupations for part of the day during some crucial months, to cultivate their fields. And, in my experience, if some *donsow* meet during this period they mostly chat about that year's rainfall, the best moment to sow or harvest, or the price of fertilisers. It is during the dry season, when most people are not busy in the fields, that hunters can spend much more time seeking after game. The question at issue here is, how to enlist the hunters to help protect the bush from the aggressions of farmers, if hunters *are* farmers? The interests of an individual in the roles of hunter or farmer obviously coincide, and many *donsow* I spoke to in fact started hunting to protect their fields from predation by monkeys or other animals.

Another case where the connection between the roles of hunters and farmers was evident is that of bush fires, again forbidden by the law but widely practised. During the dry season, November to May, bush herbs get

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<sup>40</sup> Something similar has happened with the re-invention of *senankuya* as a conflict prevention device (as in Niang 2006; see also Canut and Smith 2006 for a review ranging from public events to newspapers to pop music).

dry and hunters start to light fires to reduce hiding places for animals, or sometimes to hunt them out of the patches of tall grass. For farmers bush fires are also a way to keep the bush under control, domesticating it so that it can be ready to be farmed when the time to prepare the soil arrives. Another point here is that the land that is burned annually cannot grow anything larger than shrubs, and the ashes contribute to the fertilisation of the soil. In a similar way, if somebody wants to clear a patch of trees to farm that land, he cuts the trees and leaves them to dry, until they can be burned on site. As a result, if a hunter burns a field in the dry season the local farmer will only be happy. In other parts of Africa bushfires are part of territorial cults and it is ritual specialists who start the annual cycle of fires (Schoffeleers 1971). Now, it is the dominant view in ecological science that these fires, in conjunction with farming, promote the recession of forested areas because they favour the growth of savanna grasses over fallow land (Fairhead and Leach 1996: Chapter one). During the dry season the grass can be burned and this prevents the formation of bushes - and thereafter forest. But farmers in Karankasso, just like those in Kissidougou that Fairhead and Leach write about, see farming differently, as a way to reduce the spread of tall grasses and savanna vegetation, and land use as a way to control fires (*idem*: 194-196).

As partial confirmation of my point, I can relate one of the episodes in which I witnessed hunters and guards coming the closest to a dialogue. It happened when Balima's colleague in Karankasso, Salifou Coulibaly, made appeal to the hunters *as farmers*. On 16 December 2011 I took part in a meeting between him and the association of the hunters of Karankasso. Many topics were discussed that day in the courtyard of the compound of the head of the hunters. Coulibaly did most of the talking, in Jula. The conversation ranged from shotgun permits to prohibited forms of hunting such as with poison, from vehicles and at night. Unlike his colleague who only used French, he was speaking a language all hunters could understand, and even though he looked authoritative in his camouflage uniform and at this stage did not leave much space for dialogue, he was using a much friendlier register than Balima often did. The rationale behind these prohibitions, he explained, is to avoid indiscriminate, non-selective killings that could involve young or pregnant

animals. He tried to sensitise the hunters so as to gain their help in protecting the bush, saying that it was "running out" - *kungo bi baana*.

"Just like oil is running out" he added, and "white men are now building electric cars, we have to take action." He then mentioned explicitly that if the bush would run out they would have nothing to farm. The hunters were listening very attentively and nodded in agreement at this latter point. Coulibaly had managed to strike a chord with his reference to agriculture. Yet in the following months I did not see any change in the behaviour of the hunters I spent my time with. They kept hunting at night or out of the hunting season, and killed all sort of animals they had the opportunity to shoot.

From my experience in Karankasso I doubt that the Waters and Forests were not aware of these dynamics and romanticised the figure of the *donsow* like aid agencies did - quite the opposite. If they kept trying to involve hunters in the application of their policies, it is because they aimed at their knowledge of the land, because it would help them in their effort to quantify and bureaucratised the bush. But the fundamental problem was the way Balima and Coulibaly were appealing to the hunters' environmental sensibility, something that did not exist in the terms of the conservationist paradigm implicit in the approach of the Waters and Forests Police. For example, the system of quotas and the prohibition of indiscriminate killing of animals in the mating season derive from notions such as population viability and the very idea that in a depleted ecosystem if animals fall under a given threshold they might face extinction. But did villagers share such conceptions derived from conservation biology, even as simply phrased by Coulibaly with his analogy with oil?

I tried to construct for myself an idea of what the hunters' attitude could be regarding the possibility that animals would disappear and the bush would become a barren desert. Whenever I asked if there could possibly be a reason to spare an animal, I had negative replies. The judgement on whether to shoot an animal or not seemed to be a purely economic one, a comparison between the amount of meat the animal could bring and the cost of a shotgun shell. We should take into consideration here that in Jula the general category

to refer to animals is the same as the word meat - *sogo*<sup>41</sup> (Bailleul 1996: 426; Dumestre 2011: 920). I remember asking Lasso if some animals were not called *sogo*, and he replied negatively, "because in fact you can eat all animals." This is not of course strictly true, because even though people consume a remarkable variety of animals compared to Western Europe or North America, they do not eat just anything. Animals that are not eaten tend to be classified as "things" - *fɛnw* - like some inedible insects. Apart from the epics of the *donso* musicians there is no other trace of the attribution of personality to animals in the everyday practice of the villagers of the area where I worked, which shows again how an excessive reliance on textual sources and representations can create a portrait of *donsoya* detached from everyday ecological interactions. So if, among Mande peoples, animals are given traits of personality and beliefs exist whereby humans can take the shape of animals and vice-versa, I would not force the analogy with animistic thought too far (as argued in Kedzierska-Manzon Forthcoming).

The idea of *nyama*, as we saw in the first chapter, complicates this frame, as one might decide not to kill an animal for fear of not being able to exorcise its power. The right preparation, though, if applied to the shotgun, to the body of the hunter or to the dead animal itself, can overcome this problem. The procedure can be performed for another person just as well, so that the teacher can do it for the student. Adama always told us to shoot anything we saw, and that he was there with his knowledge precisely to solve these problems. So whereas most *donsow* would agree that shooting pregnant or mating animals is especially dangerous, this is nothing a knowledgeable master hunter cannot solve and does not form the basis, as in Cashion's romantic interpretation, of a "conservationist non-written code" (1984: 114; Cissé 1994). Common hunters or villagers can have recourse to the initiatory knowledge of a *donso*, and I witnessed Lasso perform the *nyamagwè* ritual - literally chasing the *nyama* - on a friend who had killed a *bakoroni kuru* - African Civet (*Civettictis civetta*) - and was scared of the consequences.

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<sup>41</sup> I did not encounter the word *bagan* to refer to cattle, as reported by Kedzierska-Manzon (Forthcoming)

To assume that such beliefs are there to limit kills to a sustainable level would be a form of teleological ethnocentrism that tries to project onto other peoples the environmentalist anxieties of the West. It would presume a principle whereby humans have a responsibility to protect the environment, or have the capacity to do such a thing. As showed by Mangiameli in the case of the sacred groves of the Kasena of North-Eastern Ghana, interpreting these earth shrines as traditional biodiversity sanctuaries goes precisely against local ideas about man's role in his environment (Mangiameli 2013). The Kasena instead believe that humans have limited possibilities to influence the decline or development of non-human species, and are not custodians of nature, similarly to the findings of my own research.

For example, in May 2012 four *mangalaniv* - Duiker Antelope (*Sylvicapra grimmia*) - were spotted around Karankasso by farmers at work in their fields. Many hunters prepared their shotguns and torches, and set out looking for what was likely to be the best catch of the year for that area, each animal being an average of 20 kilos in weight. Soon two were killed, and I have to say I shot the third. On the same night a hunting companion shot at, but missed, the last animal. Since we all knew that those were the only antelopes in the area the following day I asked Lasso, how could we expect to be able to hunt more if we were killing the last two couples? Were we not causing a local extinction with our indiscriminate hunting? Lasso replied that animals can always arrive from another area, and God creates them continuously. If a place is good for *mangalani*, you will keep finding them over the years. Adama, after a similar question, expressed himself in similar terms. He also added that if you decide not to shoot an animal you are just giving somebody else the possibility to do it. Adama's pragmatic stance resounds with a certain rhetoric commonly found in *donso* discourses and songs, whereby the hunter is described as merciless and cruel (McNaughton 1988b; Traoré 2000).

What I have written above does not mean that the *donsow* I hunted with are not aware of the ecological changes around them. On the contrary, they are perfectly able to connect what we would call social and ecological aspects, highlighting their interrelatedness. In many conversations with my teacher Adama he explicitly linked the recent transformations of *donsoya* with the disappearance of big game and its habitat: "*kungo bèè senena*," - all the bush has

become fields. This process for him was characterised by a parallel loss of the knowledge of *donsoya*, so that in places like Karankasso most hunters were what he called *dankun donsow* or *tòn donsow*, hunters without a teacher who had little or no esoteric knowledge.

I was also struck by the number of references to ecological change I heard during speeches at the *dankun*. It is common during ceremonies, once the main ritual actions have taken place, that some of the most representative hunters improvise a speech, often stimulated by the praises of the musicians. At the annual *dankun sòn* - sacrifice - in Karankasso, on 6 February 2012, for example, the head of the local hunters Go-Fo Traoré introduced the ritual by talking about the importance of the survival of the bush for village life. Let the ancestors not end the path we are on with this generation, he added, or nobody will be able to perform more sacrifices in the years to come. He spoke in Seenku, and then Lacole Traoré, brother of my teacher Adama and honoured guest at the ceremony, continued along similar lines in Jula. Animals are less and less, he said, and harmony between the hunters is required in order to let sacrifices like that day's improve the situation. On that day and others it was possible to hear musicians like Diakalia Traoré or Brahima Konaté sing the lines "*sogo ma baan, sogo be flaburu jukoro*" - animals have not disappeared, animals are [hiding] under the leaves - which points at the skills - both perceptual and magical - a real *donso* should have, but also speaks to an anxiety for the reduction of game. The way to help the situation was for the *donsow* not to abstain from hunting, as the Waters and Forests would require them to, but to perform ritual action to ensure the harmony of the connected domains of the humans and the bush.

So while hunters are aware of change around them, they do not seem to think in terms of an exhaustion or extinction of the bush. When associations such as *Afrique Environnementale* in Ivory Coast (Hellweg 2011: 140–147 and Chapter 1 here) took for themselves the role of representatives of the hunters and started a dialogue with the state using the language of environmentalism, they offered the collaboration of *donsoya* to a conservationist project whose premises the *donsow* themselves did not share. It is thus very important to clarify that the emergence of modern hunting associations in Mande Africa is not just an evolution or transformation of *donsoya*, but a contingent answer to

specific political conditions and idioms, such as the increasing bureaucratisation of hunting and of the bush. As shown by Hellweg and Hagberg, the aims of Ivoirian and Burkinabe *donsow* were very different from those of these environmentalist agendas, having more to do with the possibility of continuing the hunting activity and providing security for the villagers.

On the other hand, looking at the situation in Karankasso one has to recognise how we are not really faced here with a clash of monolithic conceptions on how to conceive the environment, but rather with processes of gradual adjustment in which the hunters' relationship with the bush is shaped by new political and ecological forces - in addition to more traditional ones such as the relationship with a teacher or beliefs such as *nyama*. The state adapts too, of course, taking on board new priorities as donors impose them - such as in the case of "participatory development." The bush appears then as a field for the struggle of different powers, of different scale and provenance.

## Chapter 4 - Conceptions of the Environment

It is now time to look at the specificity of the local conceptions of the environment, following from my description of their political relevance in the previous chapter. As I have mentioned, my fieldwork made me appreciate how hunters spend most of their time as farmers. Part of my disagreement with the literature that frames *donso* hunters as liminal individuals has to do with the way this separates them from their communities - which on the contrary play a very important role for *donsoya*. To counterbalance this separation, this chapter will consider hunters as members of wider communities than *donsoya*, dealing mostly with shared conceptions and how they emerge from the practices of the Sambla, the population among which I spent most of my research time.

I went to my fieldwork site with an expectation of finding a tangible divide, in people's ideas and practices, between the space of the village, inhabited by humans, and the rest - the wild, untamed bush where all except the *donsow* were not at ease and feared to go. This is a classic idea present in most of the literature on the Mande area. Michael Jackson, who started working among the Kuranko of Sierra Leone at the turn of the 1970s, has portrayed their conception of space as based on an opposition between inner and outer (1977: 31–53). In a subsequent work on Kuranko narratives, the space outside of the village and away from cleared paths is an ambivalent area. On the one hand it provides food, for the fields are located away from the village and hunters find their prey where humans do not usually go. On the other hand the bush is home to aggressive animals and mischievous supernatural forces (Jackson 1982). Figures encountered in the grey area between town and the bush embody a contrast between antisocial, individualistic forces and collective efforts that is present also in the men's



initiation ritual. The boys are segregated in a hut in the bush, and their return to the village ratifies their transformation into moral adults (*idem*: 10). Patrick McNaughton also affirms of the Bamana that "most people shun the bush" because of the dangerous genies that live there (1988a: 18; see also 1982a: 55–56). The Dogon of Mali also see a sharp contrast between bush and village in their cosmology, and the former is a zone of fluidity from where all vital forces derive (Van Beek and Banga 1992). Cissé roots this same opposition in Bambara and Malinke cosmology (1994: 69–70; see also Arnoldi 1995: 23; Cartry 1982; Le Moal 1975: 84, note 2) and this review could go on and beyond Mande Africa.

### **The village and the bush**

The strength of this structural opposition between bush and village immediately recalls the most classic of anthropology's dualisms, that between nature and culture, fitting the frame of a sedentary farming society (Croll and Parkin 1992; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Fairhead and Leach 1996; Richards 1985). Sedentarisation and the passage from nomadic hunting and gathering to agriculture mark a very important change in people's conceptions of the environment. The general consensus among scholars seems to be well expressed by Serpell, who sees farmers inevitably in opposition to nature, because they have to clear and weed their fields and tame livestock, protecting both from wild animals (Serpell 1986). The domestication of animals is a key moment, part of a series of transformations connected to farming and the reduction in mobility. Ingold has argued that the history of domestication is "part of a more encompassing story about how humans have risen above, and have sought to bring under control, a world of nature that includes their *own* animality" (2000a: 61): in other words, the beginning of the separation between man and nature (1980) or a "subjugation of nature" (Serpell 1986: 175). This also reflects on the social dimension, with an increase in complexity and stratification: more hierarchies and fixed gender roles appear and this extends to the conception of self and universe, so that "the

human-nonhuman dichotomy becomes more fixed and exclusive" (Kent 1989: 11).

Another crucial difference concerns the type of relationship with the environment. While hunter-gatherers position themselves in a "giving environment" (Bird-David 1990) that provides for their needs, sedentary farmers perceive their environment as a resource from which nourishment has to be extracted. A classic example of the differences between these conceptions are Colin Turnbull's ethnographies of the Mbuti Pygmies and their relationship with the neighbouring Bantu populations (1968; 1976). The semi-nomadic, egalitarian Mbuti hunter-gatherers are portrayed as in perfect tune with their environment, the forest, which they see as benevolent. The Pygmies' neighbours, on the other hand, see the forest with fear and mistrust, and as a space to exploit for farming, cutting trees, or killing animals for meat. The difference in the relationship with the forest seems to be a consequence of the more or less mobile lifestyle and economic mode of subsistence. The Pygmies are also said to be the original inhabitants of the forest, whereas the Bantu populations are relative newcomers.

What happens to the conception of hunting, animals and meat among peoples of sedentary horticulturalists? Susan Kent (1989) has examined the cross-cultural value attributed to hunting and meat, which goes well beyond its nutritional value compared to other sources of food, like plants and fish. There are social and symbolic associations, she writes, that derive from the status of domesticated animals versus wild ones. Many societies that live in the presence of a domestic and a wild variety of the same animal do not put them in the same category (Kent 1989: 132). The opposition between wild and domesticated areas is also at the root of modern hunting practices in South-Western Europe, where wild animals were historically seen as a threat for human communities and cultivated land. Here hunting is conceived as a form of "gathering" without concern for or management of game, maintaining a wide separation between the wild and the domestic (Hell 1996: 207–208).

These "oppositional" conceptions contrast with the portrait anthropologists provided of hunting and gathering peoples, who conceive of their actions as part of the environment, rather than being imposed upon it, and of animals as non-human persons: hunting, for example, is framed as an

initially non-violent way of establishing a relationship with the animal, before the actual killing (Ingold 2000a: 69; Nadasdy 2007; Sharp 1981: 226; Willerslev 2007). For scholars like Ingold these societies, being highly mobile and based on egalitarianism, sharing and immediate return economies (Lee and DeVore 1969), do not split their living environment into social and ecological relations. On the contrary, for them social relations are a subset of ecological relations (Ingold 2000a: 60). Most hunter-gatherers attribute to what we normally classify as natural elements relational capacities like emotions, language or interaction, which draw them into a shared environment with humans. In other words, they relate to non-human persons, as in the example of hunting I mentioned above, or claim common ancestry with animals. Often animals are understood as creating societies that are very similar to human ones (Viveiros De Castro 1998). A further consequence of this interconnectedness is that humans, being part of the environment, get their nutrition from it through a relationship of respect and reciprocity. So the hunter has to take care of the regeneration of life, after he has given death, and must use meat in a respectful and rational way, without wastage. This stance is akin to a "conscious policy of conservation" (Ingold 2000a: 67), but one much unlike the "scientific" one that aims at preserving a "wilderness" as it would be without the intervention of man. It is also thanks to the diffusion of the anthropological literature on hunter-gatherers that environmental management policies have treated them as privileged interlocutors, making for example some Pygmies trackers and guides for conservation projects or eco-tourism (Köhler 2005: 416).

By contrast, one can see how the literature on farming societies, with their conception of a naturalised, non-human environment can in a sense provide a supporting argument for the Waters and Forests police when they accuse the local farmers of excessive predation on the resources of the bush. Additionally, the way the more specific literature on Mande conceptions of space has described the opposition between village and bush would seem to align the peoples of the Mande area with the externalisation of man from the environment typical of societies based on agriculture.

But the lived practice and experience of the people around Karankasso, where I spent most of my time, was much more nuanced than the village-

bush opposition would suggest. As I tried to describe in the beginning of Chapter 3, in that region the bush is a highly man-made landscape. My hunting experience helped me to appreciate the point to which in the bush the signs of farming, woodcutting, cattle keeping and human settlement were constantly visible and audible. The bush itself, to my surprise, was called in its entirety *kungo* in Jula (Seenku: *jun*): there was no trace of the Bambara word *wula* used for example by Cissé in his tripartition of village, farmed fields and wild bush (1994: 70). This means that whenever somebody was saying he would go to farm, he would say he was going to the bush - in Jula *n'bi ta kungora*. In Karankasso and in many other large villages of the area the villagers' fields are not necessarily adjacent to the village. Everybody would go to the bush every day, including unaccompanied women and children. As I could gather from everyday practices and in conversation with villagers, nobody is afraid of going to the bush anymore, except perhaps at night. Therefore, how can one possibly say, in this scenario, that the *donsow* have the monopoly over the bush space? This was the hypothesis I wanted to explore in my research proposal, so it became necessary to start from a step back, and to revise the idea that the village can be a bounded, circumscribed entity.

I was also surprised to learn that quite a few Sambla live in the bush, sometimes seasonally, in farming hamlets that are inhabited when the need for work is at its peak, but often permanently: "The residences in most Sambla villages are not contained within a single, defined area that is distinct from the wilderness, or 'bush,' with the exception of Karankaso, which at one time was encircled by a wall for military protection" (Strand 2009: 38). Patrick Royer, author of the main study on the Sambla, has called the modern village "invented" by colonial administrators who, "faced with an unfamiliar human landscape" consolidated the hamlets and assigned to some the status of villages (1996: 115). Until the 1950s, he writes, the basic Sambla settlement was constituted of clusters of houses based on a patrilineage (Seenku: *sa*), sometimes as distanced from each other as two kilometres. Population could rise or decline very quickly according to socio-political events, and settlements disappear without leaving any trace. So what makes a village?

A cluster of dispersed *sa* is considered a village (*gwo*) if specific divinities associated with the land sets the community apart from the bush (*jun*). A Sambla village must have at least two of these divinities, the *Gwo* shrine and a river. The term *Gwo* refers to the shrine associated with the foundation of the village and metonymically to the village and also to the country inhabited by the Sambla (*Seen-gwo*). All villages (*gwo*) were founded near a "sacred" water source, the most important village spiritual entity with the *Gwo*, and symbolically associated with continuity (Royer 1996: 113).

Another factor that distinguishes a village from a bush hamlet is the presence of a sacred ruler called among the Sambla *mangan*. This figure was distinct from that of village chief, which is actually a creation of the colonial administration. The role of the *mangan*, now vacant in Karankasso, is still fundamental in Sambla identity and in their relationship with the territory. Royer writes that the *mangan* has more in common with a power-object or a cult shrine than with a man, and that his power is ritual in nature and opposed to the violent, military power of a *famaa* (a reference to the period of the Jula invasions, see introduction). He adds that the *mangan* "is the ritual manifestation of the right of villagers to exploit the land surrounding the villages while spirit cults are forces coming from a parallel world outside the village-community and established in villages in the form of cult shrines. The overlapping domains of the bush and of the village generate the powers of the *mangan* and of the spirit cults" (Royer 1996: 67). The *mangan*, similar to the *mansa*, the "sacred king" found in the broader Mande context, was ritually killed and secluded from social life when he took office. But more similarly to West African earth-chiefs than to the rulers of Mande states of the past, the *mangan* would arbitrate conflicts, ensure the fertility of the land and base his authority on rituals aimed at dealing with the powers embedded in the territory. A *mangan* would extend his authority over a few of what nowadays are separate villages, and from the ritual point of view this would make them a unit - and unequivocally Sambla territory, in an area where ethnic attributions were unclear (Royer 1996: 69–76).

I also came across a few ambiguous cases in the killing of domestic animals, which sometimes seemed to indicate the trespassing of a permeable barrier between domestication and wildness. Patrick Royer writes of a custom now abandoned among the Sambla, the *konkaa*. Once the death of a *mangan*

was announced, some members of his lineage would kill as many goats and chickens as they could find in the village, with the aid of clubs (1996: 97). Nobody could oppose the killing or ask for compensation, and the meat would be consumed by the whole village in the huge feast that celebrated the death of the sacred ruler. Royer says that, without a *mangan*, the *konkaa* has been abandoned. But still I discovered that, in 2012, those animals that were not tied up had been snatched after the death of an elderly member of the *mangan* lineage. In any case, the *konkaa* really seems to have been a *hunt in the village*.

Apart from these ritual occasions, domestic animals are normally caught by hand, often telling some children to run after them. Once they get caught, a male adult will slit their throat in a practice of Muslim origin, also used by Christians. But Lasso told me that a friend once asked him to shoot some pigs that were spoiling his maize field at night. In villages animals are normally free to walk around, not being kept in enclosures, and it often happens that conflicts arise if the animals go to feed in someone's field. His friend paid for the ammunition and Lasso shot five pigs. The day after, nobody wanted to admit being the owner of the animals - for fear of additionally having to reimburse for the damage to the crops - and the meat was shared - not unlike what happens for wild game. It also happened, while we were hunting in the bush around Karankasso, that Lasso shot a domestic cat. He did not do it by mistake, and when I asked if he did not fear that the owner of the animal could complain or ask him for compensation, he replied that no one could do that. He had shot the cat while it was wandering in the bush, so he had all the right to do it. Had he shot it in a village or in a hamlet, it would have been very different. In this case the same animal, according to the context where it is met, seems to cross the boundary between *dugu sogo* and *kungo sogo* - domestic or bush animal. Implicit in my definition of domestic cat, on the other hand, is the notion that it belongs to a species from its birth and cannot change it.

Other animals are even more liminal in their wild / domestic status. The helmeted guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*) is a domesticated species but is known to be prone to escape and become feral. Lasso and I once spent an afternoon hunting a friend's guineafowls around his bush hamlet, because

they had become too difficult to approach and would lay their eggs deep in the bush. A similar movement from domestic to wild is also possible, albeit in a covert way. Until about ten years ago the wild variety of guineafowl was still common around Karankasso - now they have completely disappeared. I was told that some young hunters used to steal domestic guineafowl and sell them as wild ones (pricier on the bushmeat market) after having removed the head and feet, the only parts that make it possible to tell the two varieties apart.

It is also important to remember that the idea of *nyama* does not set apart wild animals from domestic ones, and even though *donsow* have to deal with bigger quantities of this power they are not the only figures to handle *nyama*. I was reminded that domestic animals also have *nyama* when I saw a *donso* covering the eyes of a sacrificed male goat, at the *dankun*. Later, a visit at the slaughterhouse in Bobo Dioulasso, the Abattoir Frigorifique de Bobo, confirmed that the workers there also take their magical precautions, not unlike *donsow* do. I spoke to one of the men in charge of slitting the throat of animals according to the Muslim procedure, Soungalo Zon, a Samo from Nouna. His family had been doing this for three generations and had transmitted to its members the procedures to avoid mental illnesses and deformed sons, especially in the case of the accidental butchering of pregnant animals. I knew these words from many talks to hunters, who fear the same consequences.

Where the binary opposition between bush and village is in fact clear is in a series of interdictions that the Sambla normally observe. Certain acts, if performed in the bush, entail much more serious consequences than they would if performed in the village. In May 2012 I spoke to another important figure in the Sambla ritual world, Karankasso's *kungotigi* (Seenku: *junsera*). Sa-Sibiri Traoré was a man in his fifties, and that day looked at me in a way that showed he had expected my coming to ask him questions. And rightly so, because his title means bush-master, although a better translation should specify that he deals with the powers of the bush, rather than literally mastering it. Not unlike the *mangan* he is a ritual specialist, in charge of performing sacrifices that are fundamental for the arrival of the seasonal rains. His family, Sa-Sibiri told me, used to live in a bush hamlet, when the

*mangan* of Karankasso asked them to move to the village. The reason for this "courtship" were the powerful objects that Sa-Sibiri's ancestor used in order to control rain. In Royer's interpretation the *mangan* did not want a concurrent power in an alternative site, and tried in this way to integrate the *kungotigi*'s power - and power objects - in the village shrine of *nyama-jun* (1996: 91). But the move was not a simple thing, added Sa-Sibiri, because of the taboos connected to the objects his ancestor was supposed to take to the village. The *kungotigi* moved to Karankasso only after the *mangan*, as the main authority of the village, assured him that he would make the prohibitions be respected.

These interdictions are still in effect today, even though everybody is aware of a growing degree of transgression. Villagers cannot have sexual intercourse in the bush, they cannot steal, and they should not die in the bush (see Royer 1996: 101). Because all of these things happen, a sacrifice to one of the power objects of the *kungotigi* can save the offender from serious consequences - normally death. Now I could understand why Lasso once told me that he had moved all his guineafowls to his fields, far away from the village, for fear that they would be stolen. That move seemed completely counter-intuitive to me, being used to thinking that keeping animals next to one's home is the safest solution. What I initially failed to understand was that Lasso wanted to put the thieves under the threat of the *kungotigi*'s power objects. Clearly it becomes important, in the case of people who live in bush hamlets, to deal with these interdictions:

Hamlets called *fun*, however large they may get, are not differentiated from the bush (*jun*). All the prohibitions associated with the bush apply to hamlets. For example for a married couple to have sexual relationships in a *fun*, a piece of wood (called *pion*) from the ceiling of their house in the village must be placed in the *fun* (Royer 1996: 114).

In my view though, we are not facing here a clear distinction between a hamlet in the bush and the village, but a practice that blurs this opposition creating a sort of village enclave in the bush.



## Blurring the boundaries

The figure of the *kungotigi/junsera* is even more interesting for its role in an annual ritual cycle aimed at assuring the arrival of the seasonal rains, at the same time affirming a dialectical connection or an original interpenetration between bush and village. One morning in February 2012 I was preparing to go hunting, which I did almost every day during that period. Lasso, my usual companion, was away at a family meeting and I had agreed to drive with his elder brother Si-Moussa to his garden near the village of Bwende, in an area called in Seenku Bomwène, where a perennial stream allowed cultivation all year long. But that morning Si-Moussa apologised saying we could not leave the village. Nobody was leaving the village, that day - *bi mogo ti ta kungora*. It is a village tradition, he explained, which actually starts the night before with a *saraka*.<sup>42</sup> The children of the village go from house to house shouting "MMMMHI! MMMMHI!" and receive a small gift of bean flour pancakes. But for the details I would be better off talking to his father, he said.

Togo-Fako Traoré is one of the respected village elders, and I often paid him a visit to ask him about his health. I would also bring him some meat or kola nuts, somehow reinforcing the role of symbolic father he had acquired for me in the field. Whenever I needed benedictions or authorisations to do something important, I would go to him. In Jula, I asked him to tell me about the *saraka* and its origin.

"Once, a long time ago, a hyena used to live in the village, not far from where your house is. She had a hole in a mound, and raised her cubs there, until one day the villagers killed them all [according to another version I gathered they starved to death]. She then left the village, but her cries would be heard all night long. The worried villagers asked a diviner to interpret the cries of the animal.<sup>43</sup> The response was the prescription of a *saraka*, an offer of *tomso* and *faro* - both food prepared with bean flour. This *saraka* is necessary

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<sup>42</sup> Strictly speaking it is the same day because among the Sambla, like for many other West-African peoples of Muslim influence, days start at sunset.

<sup>43</sup> The night offering is called in Seenku *kurusa*, the cry of the hyena.

for the rains to come again and chases away an evil cold wind that in February brings epidemics. The morning after all women sweep well their houses and gather the dirt in a gourd that they will empty at the western edge of the village. It is on this day that nobody goes to the bush."

"The following week [the Sambla week is made of five days] the first *tèèn* takes place. Early in the morning a whistle is blown and the men of a whole ward gather to the margin of the village with shotguns, sticks, dogs, slingshot, anything. The whole male population,<sup>44</sup> from teenagers to elderly men, walks all day through the bush trying to kill any animal they can hunt out. There is a *tèèn* per week for each ward of the village. Without this hunt, the rains will not come. It is the *kungotigi* who goes to a specific place in the bush and performs a sacrifice [Sa-Sibiri had used the Jula word *sòn*] to get permission to start the *tèèn*."

Five days later I was participating in the *tèèn* of *mangandugu* - the central ward of the village, where the families related to the *mangan* live. I carried a camera and a sound recorder on that day, but the following week and on other occasions I was participating as a hunter. These collective hunts are very different from the individual or small group hunting of the *donsow* that I will describe in the next chapter. Having a shotgun is actually not an advantage during a *tèèn*, I realised. Whereas the *donsow* move in the bush trying to be as silent as possible, the human wave of the *tèèn* hunters is definitely loud, with the aim of flushing out small game from its bush hideouts. Once the animal has started to run, the group closes on it and kills it with clubs, often helped by the dogs. The men shout loud and whistle in the bush, to give each other indications of the direction the hares or the birds are taking. In a sense, it is a way of hunting by noise. In a day we would cover some 25 kilometres in six hours, with only a single stop. We traced a long circle around Karankasso, passing by the small village of Sembleni (Seenku: Sombere). We killed or gathered anything edible, including wild honey. I was amazed at the quantity

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<sup>44</sup> The *tèèn* is exclusively men's affair, with no exceptions. Women must not even show up where the men are gathering and must not go to the bush. But there is a similar ritual for women too, involving this time fishing, called *sansege*. The *kungotigi/junsera* also performs a sacrifice to authorise the women to go fishing with baskets in the perennial streams, after the cycle of the *tèèn* is over.

of hares that the group was able to sweep up with this technique, compared to those I would see on an average day in the bush with the *donsow*. Back in the village, I was surprised to learn that people would not share the meat outside their nuclear family, which is instead the normal practice of the *donsow*.

The *tèn* has analogies with similar ritual cycles in the area of Mande influence, which involve collective hunts and in which hunting is considered necessary for the rains to come (Adler 1982; Héritier-Izard 1973; Jacob 2007; Lentz 2013: 43). In a broader sense the *tèn* resonates with African territorial cults that have a communal character, transcend kinship belonging, link the management of society with the management of nature and express an "ecological philosophy" (Schoffeleers 1979: 2–3).<sup>45</sup> Royer's interpretation of the *tèn* is based on his findings whereby only clubs (Jula: *bere*, Seenku: *ngyèè*) are allowed in the hunt: "No sharp weapons, knives, bows and arrows, guns, or even dogs can be used to kill the animals" (1996: 99). Like many other instances in which these hunting techniques are used, he continues, we face the attempt by a few powerful people to impose their control over a territory. Because no sharp objects are used, the *tèn* is also very close to forms of bloodless sacrifice, but diluted in a very mundane activity that has apparently very little solemnity. While blood is very important in the cosmology of Mande sacrifice, bloodless sacrifice is used for living persons, sacred rulers or unreachable gods, frequently where a shrine is not present. In the Sambla case, it is connected to the *mangan*, a sacred ruler whose power is asserted without spilling blood and is antithetical to that of the a military ruler, imposed through force. The *konkaa* and the *tèn* are linked, then, by the interdiction of spilling blood as part of the ritual domain of the *mangan* (Royer 1996: 102–106).

In my view of this fascinating cycle of rituals I would tend to downplay the importance of the killing modalities, at least because today - Royer was in Karankasso almost 20 years before me - the *tèn* is practiced with just about any possible weapon available. Blood is definitely spilled, by dogs and men,

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<sup>45</sup> I do not try here to draw connections with peoples who practice routinely non-ritual forms of communal hunting, which are also subject of some studies (for example Abruzzi 1979; Hayden 1981; Saffirio and Scaglioni 1982)

by bullets and blades: it is common to see people slit the throat of the animals they have just killed, as most Muslim hunters do. But even in case the custom had changed - or degenerated - in the past 20 years, my interpretation has less to do with sacrifice than Royer's. For me it is important to start with the beginning of the cycle, the *kurusa* or the *saraka* to the hyena. The myth I was told, of which Royer was not aware (personal communication), seems to point to a time when the wild, represented by the hyena,<sup>46</sup> was not spatially distinguished by the domesticated village. The rupture of this interpenetration was the killing of all of the hyena's offspring, which put in danger the cycle of renewal of the bush. At that point an action was needed to reestablish the balance and to allow the villagers to keep relying on the bush for their survival. The small ritual offer of pancakes to the hyena-children, if compared to the long cycle of collective hunts could seem unimportant, but seems to me to be what allows the hunts to take place - and ultimately the rains to come. Thanks to this small offering the initial injustice can be repeated and the mass killing be performed.

The acoustic aspect of the *tèn* is also very important. Like many collective rituals characterised by shouting, noise and racket, it is a liminal moment of inversion of an established order (Attali 1985; Bakhtin 1968). All the - male - villagers move to the bush and violate it with no restraint, collecting everything they can. It is not by chance that the other moment when similar collective hunts would take place among the Sambla is with the initiation of men, a classic ritual of passage now abandoned (Royer 1996: 100).<sup>47</sup> The interdictions called in Seenku *gwo-kèè*, those relative to forbidden behaviour in the bush, reinforce the separation between the bush and the village, whereas the *tèn* seems to blur it. Every year the *tèn* blurs the boundaries between bush and village, in a way that is not just symbolic, it is practical, physical, and violent. It does not transmit a message through signifiers, it enacts a series of relationships through bodily practices, teaching

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<sup>46</sup> The hyena often represents the wild in tales and epics (Calame-Griaule and Ligers 1961; Gottlieb 1989: 492; Jackson 1982: 54–56, 100–101).

<sup>47</sup> I was also told, like Royer, that the guinea-fowl is a central animal to the *tèn*, being a liminal animal *par excellence* (Royer 1996: 102). Today, though, it is impossible to catch wild guinea-fowl around Karankasso (see also in Adler 1982).

and letting people experiment with the possibility of mastering the bush. It teaches values to the young, thanks to its cooperative, levelling and collective character. I was witness to how, if someone starts to run after an animal breaking the line of hunters, he opens the way for the animal to escape and is subsequently blamed by his companions. The *tèèn* thus opens the way for the two main forms of interaction with the bush, hunting and farming. That the two are somehow linked is clear with a relationship of necessity, whereby the rain will not come without the performance of the *tèèn*.

I argue that the myth of the cry of the hyena and the practice of the *tèèn* are very telling of the attitude of the Sambla towards their environment. A fundamental duality between the world of men and the bush is ever present, but is blurred much more often and easily than previous ethnographic accounts would tell. The Waters and Forests would complain, perhaps with some reason, that the villagers exploited the custom to hunt outside of the regulations. But putting the *tèèn* in the whole frame of an annual cycle of death and rebirth - without forgetting that the dry season is also the period of the village funerals - shows quite a different picture. There is a moral relationship that is not so much between men - the meat is not even shared - but between men and bush. The withdrawal imposed on the bush is somehow perceived as problematic and can take place only after a reparatory sacrifice has been offered. People then seem to relate to the bush more as a sort of subject rather than a resource, as in the perspective of the Waters and Forests police. Not unlike the Dogon, the Sambla seem to conceive of the bush as the origin of life and vital power (compare Van Beek and Banga 1992), so they normally treat it respectfully. Plainly, they are well aware that they completely depend on it, but they do not think of it in terms of an exhaustible resource like oil.

### **Enacting an environment**

Compared to the starting point of this chapter, the literature's relatively simple oppositional dualism between village and bush, the frame I

encountered in Karankasso Sambla appears much more complex. People do not seem to relate to their environment as hunter-gatherers do, nor do they set themselves completely against it, at least not in the same way Western naturalism does. The *tèèn* and the myth of the hyena somehow summarise the complexity of these multiple relationships with the way they destroy and rebuild barriers between village and bush. They also state in a very persuasive way the interconnectedness of hunting and agriculture, making the former necessary for the latter. The ritual cycle of the collective hunts and the myth of the hyena put villagers in a moral, almost social relationship with the bush, even though this is very often perceived as external and in opposition to humans.

And if we consider the conceptions and practices specific to *donsoya*, it seems even more difficult to provide a portrayal of a univocal conception of the environment. On the one hand, especially if we consider the rituals and beliefs I described in Chapter 1, there are many elements that are reminiscent of the animistic practices of hunters and gatherers. Think of the custom of sharing meat, which is still very important in the ethics of a *donso*, compared to the same practice in immediate return economies like hunter-gatherers. The belief in *nyama* - a vengeful force that strikes the hunter after he has slain an animal - reminds me of a similar need for ritual respect already noticed by Frazer (1998: 679–698) and common among hunter-gatherers who treat animals as non-human persons (Århem 1996: 190; Descola 2009; Ingold 2000b; Scott 1989; Willerslev 2004). If we develop this connection further and examine the epics of the *donso* musicians we often come across a social world of wild animals, parallel and analogous to that of the humans. Yet at the same time, there are just as many elements that are typical of sedentary farming societies, even if we only consider the *donsow*. Speaking to elders like my teacher Adama, I could get the sense of a time in which a *donso* was the defender of the village from the attacks of wild animals. When he told me tales of man-eating leopards and the epic hunts to track them down, I could really picture those days as "man against nature" - and the outcome was much less certain than it is now. The question then was how to situate the contradiction between the respect that seems to emerge from the idea of

*nyama* and the lack of kinship between men and animals<sup>48</sup> - even the insatiable appetite for kills shown by many hunters?

One possibility would be to consider this complex situation as a hybrid of two components, namely approaching *donsoya* as a survival of the most ancient elements of Mande culture, indigenous populations of hunter-gatherers assimilated by a wave of sedentary farmers who brought with them a different conception of the environment. This would resonate with narratives that are sometimes encountered throughout the area, for example in Burkina among the Samo (Héritier-Izard 1973: 123), or among the Bambara in Mali (Cissé 1983). Not only do I believe that this is total speculation, but I find the tendency to retrace a few pure components in a complex historical situation to be particularly ill-suited to the history of the whole Mande area (Amselle 2005). Furthermore, I have tried to show how part of this blurring between bush and village universes is a product of very contemporary conditions, not the remnant of a prehistoric past.

The other approach, the one I want to follow here, has nothing to do with trying to locate peoples in a scale of separation from their environment that goes from hunter-gatherers (no separation) to the Western industrialised world (extreme separation). I find it reasonable to expect to find in any society a co-presence of elements that have been attributed to one pole or the other, unless one tries to sketch ideal-types. Some of Ingold's work<sup>49</sup> seems to me to fall into this mistake, making the hunter-gatherer the prototype of a non-dualistic, anti-Cartesian way of being-in-the-world, characterized by phenomenological ways of perceiving the environment as "infused with human meaning" (2000a: 57), known through sensory apprenticeship (*idem*: 37) and the lack of an opposition between nature and culture. And it is especially in the recurrent oppositions between hunter-gatherers and Western Euro-Americans that these alleged worldviews appear less credible. Justin Kenrick has precisely made the point, with reference to Ingold, that the

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<sup>48</sup> I was sometimes told with a pun "*mogo ni sogo ti kelen ye*" humans and animals are not the same.

<sup>49</sup> In his most recent works Ingold seems to have taken a different stance towards his portrait of hunter-gatherers, and has applied his approach and theoretical premises more widely (2007a; 2011).

construction of dualistic oppositions between the West and hunter-gatherers does not represent correctly the variety of engagements with the environment that are possible inside a given culture (2002: 197–202). Similarly, the Cartesian anthropocentric paradigms are not entirely representative of the variety of Western understandings of the environment. But despite his own warnings (2000a: 42), Ingold creates a monolithic "Western Science" based on Descartes (see also Morris 1995: 303). Everything finishes in the same cauldron: anthropology, Cartesian philosophy, natural science and perspective painting.

I believe creating such a caricature is not very productive and agree rather with Descola and Pálsson:

"Not only does the nature-culture dichotomy appear inadequate when trying to make sense of non-western realities, there is also a growing awareness that this type of dualism does not properly account for the actual practice of modern science. As Latour (1993) argues, the reification of nature and society as antithetical ontological domains results from a process of epistemological purification which disguises the fact that modern science has never been able in practice to meet the standards of the dualist paradigm" (Descola and Pálsson 1996: 8).

But even in more everyday situations the West can show an animistic side, in ways of relating for example to computers (Gell 1998: 18–19) or cars, by personifying animals as pets or animalising humans as in the case of slavery. And on the other hand populations of hunter-gatherers are more and more included in relationships with neighbouring populations of sedentary farmers or are being more or less forcibly made to sedentarise. All these political, social and economic processes make it even less likely to encounter pure types such as those described by Ingold.

Let me get back to the example of the Pygmies that I referred to at the beginning of the chapter. Turnbull's portrait of their perception of the forest and of that of their Bantu neighbours has been criticised for hiding, behind a veil of romanticism, certain historical factors that can reposition the respective roles of the two peoples. Axel Köhler has traced the appropriation of anthropological descriptions by environmentalist discourses, and the creation of two symmetrical "moral tales" where the Pygmies figure as caretakers of the forest, while the Bantu are the invaders (2005). Since their "discovery" by



European travellers, the Pygmies of the African equatorial forests have been described as aboriginal inhabitants of the deep forest, and geneticists and behavioural ecologists have supported this position without ever being able to provide final evidence. Turnbull's work, especially *The Forest People* (1968) popularised the opposing images of Mbuti and Bila as, respectively, children and exploiters of the forest, finding a resonance in the developing environmentalist sensitivity. But it would appear that in pre-colonial times many Bantu lived in mobile settlements and alternated cultivation with hunting and gathering. Their sedentarisation started only later, in the final part of the colonial period (Köhler 2005: 416). Despite the identification of elephants with ancestors and their cosmological relationships with the Pygmies, the latter were involved in the ivory trade since the end of the 19th century, drastically reducing the number of these animals. On the other hand, one should also consider how Bantu farmers seem to have perceptions of the forest that are more similar to those conceived in the pre-environmentalist West, because of their longer history of contact with the state and market economy. When the Western perception of the forest changed - from "green hell" (Vansina 1990: 39 in Köhler 2005: 412) to "green lung" - the Bantu farmers became "the embodiment of our bad conscience within a currently fashionable discourse of conservation and sustainable development. Conversely, Pygmies are seen as the aboriginal population of an environment that is now deemed highly worthy of conservation or preservation" (Köhler 2005: 423). In sum, Köhler warns against crude dichotomies and reminds that, although there may be grounds for them, one needs to consider the historical, social and economic practices that gave them birth.

Some of the scholars who have worked in contexts where people hunt *and* farm have encountered complex situations where the dichotomy of nature versus culture seems less relevant than wild versus domesticated (Strathern 1980). Roy Ellen has criticised the possibility that one culture might be said to have a univocal conception of nature. The Naulu in eastern Indonesia, for example, express at times an opposition between wild and domesticated, but the terms of this opposition are dependent on the context. So the forest shifts between female and male identifications, sometimes a hostile and at times a caring entity (Ellen 1996).

In Africa, and specifically in Malawi, Brian Morris has encountered a similar ambiguity in people's conceptions of the woodland surrounding their villages. The case is even more interesting to me because Morris makes it clear that the bush is "a plant community which has been formed and is maintained by continuous human agency" (1995: 307). Seasonal fires and other human activities like hunting or wood and plant gathering make the woodland something more than just an area home to wild animals. So whereas it could be possible to draw diagrams opposing village to bush, hunting to cultivation, humans to animals, Morris judges them an over-systematisation. What emerges from his experience in Malawi is a kind of upper-level division whereby in the village such oppositions exist and are articulated, whereas in the bush they seem to collapse (*idem*: 308). This is not unlike what I noticed during my fieldwork. People feel both an antagonism towards the woodland, as farmers, and a conscious feeling of dependence from it as a provider of food, medicines, and fertility, because the bush is also the residence of the spirits of the dead, indispensable for the perpetuation of human life. A similar ambivalence is retraceable in the approach towards wild mammals. In certain ritual and hunting contexts mammals that are killed for meat are associated and somehow incorporated into the kin group. Other animals that are useless or hostile are opposed, and sometimes identified with the affinal group (Morris 1995: 311).

It should be clear at this point that the point that I want to make is that a degree of ambivalence is to be expected in all societies, and is not a characteristic of peoples who farm and hunt as hybrids of two distinct ideal-types. So what I am interested in, here, is in seeing humans in the environment as an approach, for what it can tell us about my original question of what makes a *donso*, and not as a characteristic of a certain people, lifestyle or mode of subsistence. In this light what I have written above on the bush and the relationship the Sambla have with it is not just an argument to prove the impossibility of locating those people in degrees of distance/closeness to their environment. Those ethnographic accounts try to give a panorama of the multiple ways a man (I concentrated my fieldwork primarily on the male population) can engage with and conceive of his environment as subsistence or cash-crop farmer, hunter or *donso*, ritual

specialist, experienced healer or simple participant in a ritual like the *tèèn*. According to the various moments and kinds of interactions the relationship of the same person with his environment varies.

I am not trying to define a conception of the environment in the sense of a body of knowledge *about* it, something that can be formulated like a cosmology. Rather than looking at a knowledge *of* the environment, I want to adopt an ecological approach to knowledge, which makes the latter emergent from a relationship between organism and environment. Ingold gets close to a definition as "knowledge not of a formal, authorised kind, transmissible in contexts outside those of its practical application. On the contrary, it is based in feeling, consisting in the skills, sensitivities and orientations that have developed through long experience of conducting one's life in a particular environment" (2000a: 25). This perspective has manifold consequences, but as applied to this uppermost level of knowledge it means to privilege the plurality of engagements individuals can have with their environment over any possible representation they might make of it. It means to recognise that the specificity of these engagements might have a more relevant role than the mode of production or the lifestyle. This and the previous chapter have tried to give a panoramic view of the different ways hunters and villagers adopt different engagements with their environments in a tangle of socioeconomic forces, attempts at regulation by the state, traditional institutions and rituals. This perspective also allows a more dynamic view of the current ecological changes in the Mandé area, allowing us to view them not just as the result of a given conception of the environment and socioeconomic influences, but as part of a system that also sees adaptive transformations in the ways of engaging the environment. In this sense the environment does not exist as a separate reality but is continuously enacted by multiple engagements.

The importance of an ecological approach to knowledge is that it ties together organism and environment, to the point that the former is not given without the other, and vice-versa (Gibson 1979: 8). So conceiving of the bush as space, as I sketched it out at the beginning of Chapter 3, is only of relative interest for me - a background. Most descriptions of the Mandé conceptions of space, based on the opposition between village and bush, also fail to engage with this sense of the word environment. What I am interested in, the point

where I want to arrive, is a sense of the way the bush of a *donso* is different from the bush of a village woman, or of a simple hunter. To use a term borrowed from phenomenological thought, I want to look at an "*intentional environment*" (Descola and Pálsson 1996: 18). Again with Gibson, this depends on the *affordances* an environment offers to a specific organism, which vary according to his skills and his history of engagements and conceptualisations (1979: 127–129). It is now the moment to turn to these skills and engagements, especially in their bodily components, to try to get an idea of how hunters perceive their environment.

# **PART 3 - RESEARCHING SENSORY EXPERIENCE**

## Chapter 5 - The Experience of the Bush

This chapter is concerned with the knowledge of the senses. It is an enquiry into the perceptual skills of hunters and suggests that these form the conditions for the *donsow* to relate in a specific way to their environment, and have a role in their social formation. I start from the assumption that a hunter is a "perceptually skilled agent" (Ingold 2000a: 24), or in other words that hunting requires specially developed sensory skills.

My way of approaching the sensory experience of hunters has been through participation, as first mentioned in Chapter 2. Together with the path of initiation I had started in Karankasso and with Adama, I had almost immediately started to hunt, something that was not in my plans. But for the hunters I wanted to accompany it made no sense to lead me around in the bush when I could have contributed to taking more meat home. And for Adama there was no way a student of *donsoya* could do without hunting. He reassured me about my initial intuition that hunting would still be central for *donsoya*, despite all the recent changes it had undergone. I was planning to accompany the hunters in the bush, and ended up hunting myself. But this development, although unforeseen, was indispensable in disclosing to me a world of sensory knowledge and skilled perception. The amount of time I spent on the hunt is very relevant - in average one in six days across my year of stay - and it constitutes the basis for the reflections of this chapter.

Following Jackson, what I tried to do was about "literally putting oneself in the place of another person: inhabiting their world" (1983: 340). The researcher's own experience becomes both a field of enquiry and method of analysis. Their body becomes a heuristic tool. Jackson, who conducted his first fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone at the turn of the seventies, among the Kuranko, first produced a monograph with a structuralist approach (1977),

but later shifted his interest to a perspective inspired by radical empiricism and phenomenology (1989). In *Knowledge of the Body*, where he presents an analysis of ritual as embodied experience, he also provides one of the first explicit examples of corporeal reflexivity (1983: 340). I also want to stress how this approach is consonant with the ways knowledge is transmitted in this part of Africa. In my experience of apprenticeship in hunting, music-making and manual work, the teacher rarely verbalizes instructions or general statements. Rather, being a pupil is to be allowed, and sometimes encouraged, to imitate. In fact, this is what I did and acquiring skills *for* the research was *part of* the research itself. The aim was never to make my own subjectivity stand in for other people's subjectivities, but rather to use embodied experience to open up new research perspectives, which after all represents one of the core procedures of ethnography. Underlining this approach also meant recognizing how the researching subject is entangled in a field of relationships and can never be a disembodied and neutral observer (Ingold 2000a: 169; Jackson 1989: 4) - in other words this was an extension to method of my ecological approach to knowledge.

This is all the more relevant to the topic of hunting, if we consider that a good number of ethnographic accounts on hunting groups were built on the basis of their author's participation in hunting activities, more or less "behind the scenes." While this aspect is not an explicit methodological trait in authors with diverse theoretical approaches, I suppose it is connected to the peculiarities of hunting as an activity that takes place away from human settlements and requires a large degree of mobility. If the researcher wants to study hunters, then, he must keep up with them and not slow them down or spoil their possibilities of catching prey. For example Georg Henriksen, in his ethnography of the Naskapi Indians of Labrador, reports of exhausting runs after caribou on sleds or on foot, with snowshoes (1973: 21–23). Another such example is Adrian Tanner's book on the Mistassini Cree hunters of Quebec, in which the author even gives a good deal of detail on his personal experience with a family in the bush, the sharing of practical activities, his attunement to the environment and the transformations of his perceptions. But these relevant aspects are relegated to the preface, and assume a kind of anecdotal character, rather than being the basis of his knowledge of Mistassini hunting

(Tanner 1979: xi–xviii). Paul Nadasdy, on the other hand, has reflected on the way a puzzling experience with a snared rabbit brought him to reconsider the Kluane belief that animals give themselves voluntarily to hunters (2007: 35–36).

But rather than with "extraordinary experiences" (Young and Goulet 1994), I am concerned here with more ordinary dimensions of everyday experience, arising from the sharing of hunting as a practice. Thus, I used bodily participation as a primary means to enquire into the perceptual skills and experience of the hunters in their own terms, focussing on what happens in the bush rather than on the way it is represented.

### **Learning to hunt**

One of the crucial days of my fieldwork, about a month after my arrival in Burkina Faso, was my first visit to master hunter Adama Sogo Traoré. As related in Chapter 2, Lasso introduced me to his teacher as soon as he could, after I was initiated as a *donso*. This was a sign of respect for the hierarchy that positioned Adama at the head of a group of about thirty students, from a dozen different villages and some eight different ethnic groups. On the day I asked to become his student, Adama spoke to me starting with a very simple sentence which, unlike the rest of what followed, I could understand clearly. He said: "*Donsoya ye segèn ye,*" *donsoya* is pain, misery, exhaustion. This was his presentation of the subject he knew the best, for somebody who wanted to approach it for the first time.

About twenty days later I got a first taste of what Adama meant. In Bobo Dioulasso I had managed to get a shotgun, a locally made artisanal copy of a French 12-gauge model called Simplex. I had not planned to practice actual hunting, at the research proposal stage, but in retrospect I understand that the possibility of accompanying hunters in the bush without hunting myself was just nonsense to their ears. There were also other practical reasons that became evident when Lasso started to take me with him for brief excursions.



I would drive following his directions on bush paths around Karankasso, then we would drop off the motorbike to continue on foot. The thick bush at the end of the rainy season offered no visual reference points. On the very first outing we walked in the vicinity of a small stream, where the vegetation was especially thick and lush. The muddied stream wound about with continuous bends, and we crossed it a few times. In other words, in a couple of minutes I had no idea of the direction we had left the motorbike, no idea of the cardinal points, and no way to see anything more distant than 10 metres away. My only possibility of not getting lost was to stick to Lasso at a close distance, and keep my eyes on him as often as I could. I would be walking very close to him, which meant I did not have much opportunity to look for animals. Because I was holding a shotgun in my hands for the very first time, Lasso wanted me to practice shooting, but there was no way he would let me waste ammunition on a target. Shotgun shells, which in Burkina are a precious commodity, are imported from Mali and have a cost per unit that equals a good meal on some street vendor's stall. Most hunters in Karankasso rarely can afford to go out with more than 5 or 6 shells, which marks a difference with many European contexts (where hunters can easily carry 20 or more). This difference also reflects on their hunting style, in that local hunters generally do not shoot any flying or running animal, for fear of missing them. One of the first times I was out hunting with him, Lasso amazed me killing four birds with three shots, catching a pair with a single shot.

Many sizes of small birds that are commonly shot in Europe are ignored by the *donsow*, because they are not considered worth a shotgun shell in terms of the meat they can bring. For the same reason, I had to try my first shot at something that I could possibly kill and eat. This also characterises a hunting style that would surprise a European or North-American hunter. In the first place, shotguns are generally single barrelled with manual ejection, which imposes a much slower pace than a semi-automatic shotgun that can fire three shots in less than two seconds. The most common practice is one of stalking the animal to arrive at a close shooting distance before it runs away, rather than trying the shot and at the end of the day calculating the result in terms of statistics of missed versus on-target shots. Flushing animals is not a common

practice, and dogs are not used with the same techniques as in European modern hunting. Many *donsow* in Karankasso still use gunpowder muzzle loaded shotguns, which have a very long and heavy barrel that inhibits swing. Even if you are skilled, their recharge time averages two minutes. This, combined with a very poor aiming system and the irregularities in the shape of home-made tin balls meant that the kind of hunting practiced in the area developed mostly by stalking, approaching animals silently so as to be able to aim accurately.

That first day, then, Lasso wanted to find a bird for me to shoot, most likely one of the two varieties that I would kill most often: a Violet Turaco (*Musophaga violacea*) or a Western Plantain-eater (*Crinifer piscator*). Whilst we did not find any, I had a lot of time to appreciate Adama's warning about the hardships of *donsoya*. I realised firstly the difficulties of the terrain, since the bush was flourishing at that time of the year. I often found myself having to look more often at the ground on which I was placing my feet than at tree branches, because of the red rocks that are everywhere in the bush around Karankasso. They would make walking really difficult and the soles of my boots lasted less than six months. Moreover, very soon I realised why the *donso dileke*, the shirt hunters wear, is woven from such a thick cloth: it proved to be the only piece of clothing that would not be ripped by the many thorny branches we often had to pass through. Some of these thorns, which were hook-shaped, would prick my skin and break, remaining hanging from my forearms. I have mostly unpleasant memories from that first day, including the first contact with what would become a familiar accompaniment to my daytime excursions - little flies called in Jula *woro-woro*. They were one of the markers of the bush, for they were absent from the village. Just as soon as you began to sweat, they would start to swarm around your head, landing around your eyes and ears and entering the nose, looking for salty liquids. Talking about perspiration, I was struck by the way I started to suffer the humidity as soon as I moved from the motorbike to walking. The bush around the stream was so thick that not much air circulated. With backpack and heavy *donso* shirt, I quickly found myself dripping with sweat.

In general then, hunting was far from a pleasant experience, and I could add more here about the heat and the burning sun, or about the fact that we

never brought food for a whole day out and therefore did not eat from morning to sunset. In fact, my hunting companions did not carry any water, for a whole day or more in the bush. They would just drink whatever water they found in pools or streams. The commonly given explanation was that they needed to travel light, without burdens. It might be that this custom derived from longer hunting expeditions than those practiced commonly during my fieldwork, which rarely exceeded two days. This was one of the few instances in which I came across explicit prescriptions that influenced the ways the bush was experienced.

Most of the time hunting was just about walking and walking, without stopping. On one occasion we went to visit Daouda Traoré, a distant relative of Lasso in Gwenion, some 25km south of Karankasso, for a two day hunting expedition. We were looking for a place with more game than the overexploited bush around Karankasso, and in 36 hours we slept just 6, spending most of the remaining time hunting. Those were two incredibly exhausting days, but I made a point of keeping up with the pace of my companions. The fact that I was able to make it somehow reinforced their respect for me, and was an indication of the way certain mechanisms of group building work at the level of bodily sensations. Not only was walking an important way of placemaking that connects the hunters in a network of paths (Ingold 2004; Ingold and Vergunst 2008), but I realised that sharing thirst, hunger and hardship reinforced interpersonal bonds, just like sharing meat.

My first experiences in the bush also taught me about the importance of perception. I quickly understood, without much indication by Lasso, that it was very important to produce as little noise as possible, while being on the lookout for possible targets. It was just a matter of imitation and of observing and listening to Lasso walking in front of me. In fact, most of the things I learnt about the actual hunting were the fruit of imitation and practice. These were added to the very few pieces of explicit verbal advice or tips I received from Lasso or Adama. The only problem with moving silently was that at the time of that first, brief excursion I was barely able to avoid falling every ten steps, so I spent most of my time with my eyes on the ground, in order to choose accurately where to place my feet, to avoid stepping on dry leaves,

breaking dead wood, or hitting rocks. This is not the ideal stance if you hope to spot some animal on the tree branches. It was also very clear to Lasso that walking around as a two persons system, as he dragged around his noisy companion, made us easily noticeable to birds. One of the reasons we did not see any bird on my first day in the bush was because of the very system we adopted for navigating, doubling the possibilities of being spotted. It was my first step toward the understanding that hunting involves not just mastering one's own perception but also dealing with animal perception, developing strategies to perceive but at the same time be as undetectable as possible.

One of the few explicitly formulated suggestions I received arrived from Adama himself, in response to my frustration. He asked rhetorically: "You see why studying *donsoya* is so difficult? Some think that hunting is just a matter of walking and walking until you come across something, but this is only true for night hunting, when you wear a head torch. During the day, a *donso* has to learn to walk slowly and silently, stopping from time to time to pay attention (*korosi*) to possible hiding places. You have to look and listen carefully to spot immobile animals, otherwise you will not see (and hear) any animal, but animals will see (and hear) you. Animals are on the lookout, and so must a *donso*." Adama's words and my initial experiences in the bush confirmed the importance of perception for hunters. But what is crucial here, in contributing towards an answer to my original question of what makes a *donso*, is how we conceive of perception.

### **Anthropology and perception**

I had in mind to study hunters as individuals who experience a specific environment, having privileged access to the bush. This derived, among other things, by an assumption taken from texts about the Mande area, whereby hunters have the characteristic of venturing themselves into the bush, whereas common villagers are generally afraid of it. But the previous two chapters should have given a clear sense of how in today's Burkina Faso the bush is a relatively accessible space. I realised this as soon as I arrived in the

field, and it also became clear to me that this erroneous assumption constituted a flaw in my research proposal. My idea had been to accompany the hunters in the bush to experience the same sensory stimuli and to see what kind of role this sensory experience could play in their constitution as a group. Was it possible to call them an aesthetic community, a term referring to a group sharing sensory perceptual patterns (Cox 2002; Goldstein 1995; Marano 2005; Meyer and Verrips 2008)?

Adama had started his presentation of *donsoya* with suffering. The literature on *donsoya* sometimes conveys a certain self-indulging rhetoric about heroically enduring hardships that I also heard in Adama's tales about hunting in the days of his youth and maturity. Later I heard this kind of talk in informal conversations between hunters and in descriptions of the activity of the *donsow* made by villagers. This kind of rhetoric is also present in *donso* epics, and Karim Traoré has called it an "aesthetics of suffering" (2000: 94, 186–192; see also Kedzierska-Manzon 2006: 50–52). I can say I am concerned with aesthetics too, but not so much in the sense one could use the term in a study about oral literature, such as Traoré's. In other words, I am not so much concerned with local conceptions of beauty and order (as in Coote 1992; or Sharman 2006). Rather, coming back to its etymological meaning, aesthetics is to be understood as referring to sensory perception and, by extension, to embodied experience (Eagleton 1990: 13; in Cox 2002: 74) as in the concept of social aesthetics. But I wanted to propose a different interpretation than the one that conventionally ties aesthetic communities to the appreciation or "valuation" of sensory experience, relying on the work of David MacDougall to underline the importance of culturally patterned sensory experience in the constitution of a group (1999). In other words, my focus here was not so much on discourses about perception and experience or on aesthetic appreciations. I wanted to look at the sensory experience of being in the bush as constitutive of the community of hunters, before it reached the level of discourse or rhetoric.

But once in the field I asked myself what sense would it make to consider the bush as constitutive of the experience of hunters, if all sorts of categories of people had free access to the bush. Had my approach become obsolete because of the changes described in Chapter 4?

I want to argue that the flaw was less in my knowledge of the state of the field setting than in the way I conceived of such notions as perception and environment. Even though hunting meant sometimes being side by side with farmers, children, women, herders and domesticated animals, none of these groups perceived the bush in the same way as the hunters did. My confusion consisted, in other words, in calling the bush an environment but conceiving of it as space, a given setting through which one can move and be exposed to its features. By approaching the environment according to Gibson's definition, instead, it becomes easier to allow, for different groups of persons, different experiences of an environment that depend on their skills, capabilities for and histories of interaction. If the bush had been the same for everybody, so to say, the differentiation of hunters from other villagers would only have had a quantitative basis, instead of a qualitative one. They would simply have been exposed to the features of the bush for more time or more intensely than, say, a herder, who also spends much time away from settlements.

The understanding of perception, and more broadly cognition, implied by the line of reasoning I initially followed is a dominant one in much Western thought, starting at least with Descartes but with its roots in Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.<sup>50</sup> According to this version, reality is given and external to the perceiver, who collects information on it through the mediation of his senses, which are the only way we access the world. So we all perceive the same reality, but the plurality and sometimes incoherence of people's perceptions is driven by anatomical differences and by mental ones - the latter including psychological and cultural differences. It is quite evident how this hardware-and-software analogy, implicit in the anatomical-mental divide, takes this conception of the way we apprehend the world very close to the functioning of a computing machine. In fact, even though its roots are in the much older Cartesian shift between mind and body, the diffusion and even popularisation of the computationalist model of perception is due to the contributions of cognitivist models to cybernetics first and to computer

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<sup>50</sup> Alternative, mechanistic and anti-idealistic models of perception were formulated by Democritus, Epicurus and later by Lucretius (Lucretius Carus 1986; Greenblatt 2012).

science later (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991: Chapter 3; applied to anthropology Bloch 1998; Ingold 2000a: 159–165; Toren 1999).

Anthropology has developed a specific interest in the relevance of sensory perception for human experience since the end of the 1980s. This period has seen the publication of a few important books in what has become known as the "sensory turn" or "revolution" (Howes 2006). Scholars like David Howes, Paul Stoller, Constance Classen, Nadia Seremetakis, Steven Feld, Michael Jackson and others have, in different ways, asked how our experience is shaped by culturally specific patterns of sensory perception. In part as a reaction to the increasing emphasis on textuality derived from the "writing cultures" movement (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and in part building on a growing interest in experience (Turner and Bruner 1986; Turner 1985), they underlined how cultures also had other experiential dimensions that were less easy to transcribe and translate into ethnographic texts (Jackson 1989; Stoller 1997).

Despite the apparent uniformity suggested by labels such as sensory turn, though, most of these scholars are only loosely tied together by an interest in perception. In fact they took very different directions, one of which is commonly labelled anthropology of the senses. Its starting point was a critique of the emphasis put by Western culture on vision as a privileged modality for knowing. Fabian (1983) linked visualism to the power discourse of colonialism. Feld (1982) and Stoller (1984), underlined the relevance sound has for the cultures where they worked. Only slightly later did some visual anthropologists, most notably David MacDougall (1999; 2006), try to explore the potential of audiovisual media to represent different sensory worlds.

The group of the Centre for Sensory Studies at Concordia University in Montreal concentrated on differences and transformations in the sensorium - the range, segmentation and organisation of the senses (see especially Classen 1993; Howes 1991; Howes 2005; Smith 2007). This group adopted a historical and comparative approach, also following the work of historians like Alain Corbin (1986; 1998) and Roy Porter (Bynum and Porter 1993; Porter 2005). Howes looked at the senses' attributions of value and connections with social organisation, class and worldviews (1991). Classen underlined some key historical moments that redefined the hierarchy between the senses (1993).

Tim Ingold has raised a critique of this kind of anthropology of the senses, underlining how studying the configurations of the sensorium reinforces the illusion of a separation between the senses. In particular, he has argued against those who, like Howes and Classen, identify a given sensory modality with a culture - for example visualism as intrinsically Euro-American - and derive from it a dominant way of apprehending the world - in the case of vision, detachment and domination (Ingold 2000c: 281-282). Instead, vision does not entail by itself a given attitude towards the world because it is not in the first place essentially separate from other senses - such as hearing, to which it is often opposed. But the most fundamental problem with the anthropology of the senses is its cultural constructionist approach that explains the diversity of the ways we apprehend the world with the elaboration of a flux of raw data of experience. Vision has then become conceived as a mirror for visualisation, the representationalist paradigm whereby by perceiving we create internal representations of an external reality (*idem*: 282-293). This paradigm rests firmly on the Cartesian dualism between mind and body, even in apparent contradiction with the epistemological principles of the anthropologists of the "sensory turn."

My research has shown that applying an "anthropology of the senses" approach to the specificities of the hunters in my fieldwork would not be very useful in separating out their experience of the bush from that of other villagers. A study of the "cultural shaping" of perceptions among the Sambla, for example, would tell us very little about the experience of hunters because it would overlook the specificity of the active perceptual engagement required by the search for game. This is why I need to look at a theory of perception that speaks of interaction, exploration and synaesthesia, instead of representation and reconstruction.

### **An Ecological approach to perception**

I will start then from James Gibson's conception of ecological perception (1979), because it is in my opinion best suited to underlining the specificities



of the hunters' engagement with the bush. Gibson studied, during World War II, the visual perception of military pilots - especially the perception of depth and the problems entailed by the use of training films. Starting from that experience he developed a radical critique of cognitivism.

Instead of considering the eye as a receptor and the brain as an information processor, he wrote of a complex, synaesthetic system, as described in his *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966). It is in fact remarkable how, even though he worked all of his life on vision, his approach can be applied across all sensory modalities. Gibson introduced the notion of *visual world*, defined as a spherical extent surrounding the perceiver. Unlike the field of view, the visual world does not transform itself according to the perceiver's movements (Gibson 1950: chapter 3). A visual world is instead the experience of a body in time and space: Gibson considers vision as a form of interaction with the *environment*, constituted of movements in space and active exploration by the perceiver (1979: 1-2). The environment plays for Gibson a much more important role than it did for classical optics, so much so that at the beginning of the book he underlines how an animal and its environment share a relation of mutual dependence, and one would not exist without the other. But, most importantly, in the visual world the shapes of the objects are inseparable from the meanings and functions they have for the perceiver.

One of the most interesting ideas elaborated by Gibson is that of *affordances* - or possibilities for - that an organism can find in the environment:

The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill. The verb *to afford* is found in the dictionary, but the noun *affordance* is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment (Gibson 1979: 127).

The remarkable points that make affordances a unique concept are the way they are not measurable in the abstract language of physics or that of culture, because they depend on the perceiver they refer to. Yet they are not simply a form of subjectivity, and Gibson clearly states that an affordance

"cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy" (*idem*: 129).

Gibson then critiqued some of the most established assumptions of the psychology of his times, centred around theories of perception based on the input-computation process. These assumptions start from the fundamental idea that the world offers to our receptors raw stimuli, in themselves inadequate for the extraction of information that is relevant for survival. For these theories cognitive processes have precisely the function of extracting sense from raw inputs provided by an environment in which the perceiver is a stranger who, in order to survive, has to draw useful information from sensory data. Stimuli are thus enriched, through inference, with innate or learned processes (Gibson 1979: 251–252). But given the mutual dependency of organism and environment, for Gibson, the perceiver is not to be considered a *passive receiver*, applying a creative-interpretive process to raw data, but rather an *active perceiver*, whose activity is exploring and picking up information already contained in the events, themselves enough to allow cognition.

Gibson's use of the term information can be misleading, for it apparently overlaps with input. Nonetheless, he wants to underline the way the environment is already filled with information, not just sensations or stimuli, without any need for symbolic computation or representation. In other words, information does exist on its own, before its reconstruction or decoding, but it contains a redundancy for which the perceiver has a specific receptivity. In this way he suggested the existence of a *direct perception*, skipping the intermediate level of representations. In order to gather sufficient information an interaction, an active exploration of the environment is required, to determine structure and invariants, affordances and geometrical properties of an optic array. One can then affirm that cognition resides in the animal-environment system, rather than in the perceiver's head. Movement and the recognition of invariants in the optic array are two basic characteristics of ecologic perception. Nothing like a frame-by-frame detection of light impulses happens through time, but rather perception works in a much more economical way, for Gibson. By perceiving changes in the optic

array, we learn about our own relative position, and start to consider the variants as relevant.

Although Gibson has a few devoted followers in psychology, his thought is definitely not mainstream in his own discipline. In anthropology, Tim Ingold is no doubt the greatest user of his ideas: the American psychologist provided him with a theory that could represent a bridge between the biology of an organism in the environment and culture. He even wrote in 2000 "I cannot think of any other work that has exerted a greater influence on my thinking over the last ten years or so" (Ingold 2000a: 17). Philosopher Edward S. Reed is another of Gibson's disciples, to the point of devoting most of his work to an "ecological philosophy" (Costall 1999). He tried to develop concepts like that of affordance, extending it to entire populations of animals (Reed 1996a), or that of direct perception that he equates to first-hand experience (1996b). Finally, architect Raymond Lucas has applied Gibson's ideas to urban design, with a specific focus on the sensory experience of place (Lucas 2012). He also designed a notation system for the senses inspired by Gibson's approach (Lucas 2009).

Using Gibson's approach to conceive of perception helped me make sense of the experience of hunting, to understand the relevance of sensory experience in shaping hunters as a community and setting them apart from other villagers in the bush. In the examples that I relate in the rest of the chapter I will show how, even though I was often tempted to draw distinctions between prevalent sensory modalities in night or day hunting, I realised that one hunts synaesthetically, with all of one's body. I will also connect another of Gibson's important insights, the importance of proprioception as an often-neglected sensory modality inseparable from perception (1979: 65–66, 86, 106–113), and describe my realisation that the mastery of one's body and the sounds it could produce were as fundamental to hunting as the ability to spot animals. Finally, I will show how it became evident to me that basing perception on the simple capture of inputs model could not explain the superior perceptual skills local hunters would demonstrate in the bush, and which starkly contrasted their hunting efficacy with my own.

According to Edward Reed, who tried to apply Gibson's ideas to social contexts, "not only can social agents directly perceive their mutual affordances for one another, but they are also able to share their perception of other constituents of the environment. Attuned through prior training and experience to attending to similar invariants, and moving in the same environment in the pursuit of joint activities, they will pick up the same information" (Reed in Ingold 2000a: 168). As Ingold continues, this is an attempt to ground sociality in shared sensory experience, rather than in conceptualisations constructed *on the basis* of perception.

Both Gibson's ideas and the intensive practice of hunting helped me to realise the inadequacy of my approach to hunters as an aesthetic community on the basis of their frequenting the same space and being subject to similar sensory stimuli. The realisation that the boundaries of a traditional partition between bush and village were collapsing went hand in hand with the opening of new perspectives by my own practice of hunting.

In parallel, I started to shift my attention from looking at hunters being exposed to the same sensory stimuli, to hunters using their senses to engage with their environment through practical activity. In other words, my own repositioning in the field became the basis for conceiving aesthetic communities through perceptual activity rather than receptive passivity. I realised that the bush of the hunters was indeed different from that of herders or farmers, because their "intentional environment" (Descola and Pálsson 1996: 18) and their affordances were different. I found much resemblance to Eden and Bear's analysis of northern England's anglers as environmentally engaged in a relationship of mutual coproduction, which changes the angler "in terms of skills, technology and perceptions" as much as "the fish, the river and the riverbank" (2011: 299). This ecological engagement is a knowledge-practice, one that requires a synaesthetic intelligence located not so much in the head but in the whole body-mind system, something which has also been highlighted in studies on walking (Michael 2000; Ingold 2004; Waitt, Gill, and Head 2009; Wylie 2005). What would set apart a hunter was precisely that, presented with the same space as a non-hunter, he would find himself in a different environment: he would be able to move through thick areas that

others could not cross, hear or see animals from the distance, find their traces and understand how recent they were, recognise plants and know their uses.

There is another body of well established literature here, with its roots in the intersections between ethnography, cognitive science and historical psychology, that has situated cognition in the interfaces of apprenticeship, communities of practice and interaction with tools (Lave 1977; 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991; Suchman 1987). These interfaces form "environmental systems, including both material and relational structures, underlying the recursive, co-constitutive and co-evolving dynamics that organise them" (Grasseni 2007: 6). It clearly became crucial for me to look at the processes of acquisition of these skills, what Ingold called *enskilment*, or "Understanding in practice, [...] in which learning is inseparable from doing, and in which both are embedded in the context of a practical engagement in the world" (2000a: 416). I get back to the bush, then, to show how from the intersection between my hunting experiences and an ecological approach to perception hunters become characterised by a series of specific perceptual interactions with their environment.

### Noise and sound

Hunting, in the area of my fieldwork, is not necessarily a solitary activity, but it always involves a degree of isolation. Hunting in a group means setting a distance between each other so as not to disturb each other's perception, and not to intensify the sounds produced by the hunters' movements.<sup>51</sup>

During my first period as a trainee hunter I was too noisy. I just could not help producing so many sounds with my feet and whole body, and this emerged even more by contrast with Lasso's skill. I was reminded of some passages in Turnbull's *The Forest People*, where he describes how silent were the steps of Pygmy hunters in the forest, compared to his heavy, noisy steps

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<sup>51</sup> A remarkable exception are collective ritual hunts such as the *Sambla tèn*, which on the other hand is based on completely different techniques (see previous chapter).

(1968: 73). Moving silently is an art I learned very gradually, so much so that I have never been aware of this process of enskilment. I only had sudden moments of realisation, as when a friend came to visit me in the field from Italy. He spent most of his time in Bobo Dioulasso, but also joined me in Karankasso for a couple of days. On one occasion he insisted on joining Lasso and me on a hunt, just to see what it was like. I was against this idea, unable to see what interest he could have in accompanying hunters without hunting. I had already forgotten my research proposal and initial naivety at my arrival in the field. He insisted, so we took him along to a perennial stream neighbouring the village of Bwende - an area called in Seenku Bomwène. Because after several months I knew quite well the area we reached that evening, I could separate from Lasso in a way I could not do at the beginning of my stay. Lasso was smart enough to go alone and left me with my friend who, a bit like I did on my first day, started to follow me closely. As I was starting to concentrate on the bush, I was struck by how much noise he produced behind me, with his steps. At the same time, I became aware of how little noise I was producing while walking, as if by contrast. We did not see any animal during those hours, except for a group of francolins that took off while we were still very distant.

The fact that I was never given instructions on how to walk silently does not mean that hunters are unaware of this aspect, quite the opposite. Very early on I was made to notice that the trekking soles of my shoes were too noisy, unlike the almost smooth surface of the heat-molded plastic shoes that most hunters wore. Some, like Si-Lamoussa, the secretary of the hunters' association of Karankasso, told me they only hunt barefoot, considering it the ultimate way to produce as little noise as possible. When I asked about the peculiar design of a *donso's* trousers, characterised by the use of buttons to slim down the part of the leg below the knee, I was told this avoids the noise produced by the fabric of the two legs rubbing against each other.

Noise, in Jula *mankan*, is a very broad concept, applied to a variety of contexts. Trying to learn more about the perception of the transformative process the bush environment was going through in the area around Karankasso, I was told several times that noise is one of the main factors responsible for the progressive disappearance of wild animals. One particular

noise in this respect was tree cutting. Rather than destroying the habitat for animals to live, reproduce and feed, the sound of the axe chopping wood scared and chased them away acoustically. Cows were a constant presence in the bush, there was no way a day could pass without meeting some of them. Traces of their hooves were just about everywhere, often preventing us from seeing the traces of our prey. The inhabitants of Karankasso were aware of the increase of cows in the past thirty years, and most told me that they scared away wild animals with their loud lowing sounds, along with the calls of the Peul herders that accompanied them. In the bush, when I would hear the screams and whistles of herders, or of some children looking after goats, I would just move to a different area, for I was sure I would not find any game until I got out of the acoustic range of their calls.

As mentioned above, I learned to walk more silently. This went hand in hand with learning to move with more ease in the thick bush, managing to keep my eyes less on the ground and more on the vegetation around and above me. But at the same time I learned to identify many more sounds than I could during my first walk with Lasso. First, while I was just following him closely, I did not care to know what was making him head in the directions he followed. When I finally asked, he told me he was following the call of some bird. I could not single out what he was listening for, and if he pointed towards some distant bird silhouette, I was still unable to understand where exactly he wanted me to look. One of the first things I learned to recognise, then, was the call of the birds we would hunt.

There are areas where the bush is especially soundful with the voices of birds, for example when one follows the bed of a stream. This is a kind of hunt I practiced very often, because it allowed me to walk alone, with no guidance, just following the stream in one direction and then return back to the starting point. Along a stream vegetation is denser and different in nature, as one can come across trees from more humid climates like palms and vines. Birds tend to concentrate here regardless of the season because of the thicker foliage and the abundance of insects. Again, one is necessarily short-sighted here, and relies on hearing. Most of the sounds I learned to hear were of small birds, chirping or digging through dry leaves in search of insects. The process was so gradual I cannot recall any moment of sudden realisation, but after

around six months of hunts I was able to distinguish not only the calls of edible birds, but also the sounds different species made when taking off, and even different steps on dry leaves, including the sound of a francolin searching for insects. I especially recall the characteristic sound of the latter bird taking off, associating it with the frustration of having missed yet another one. The sound is so peculiar that hunters sometimes used to refer to it as an onomatopoeia instead of the Jula or Seenku name, so as to help me understand: "RRRRRRRRR..."

I was surprised at discovering this listening ability in myself, and at not being able to account for the process of acquiring it. When I told Lasso, he just smiled, as if to imply that I was on the right track. All I can think of are the countless times I failed to individuate and recognise an animal, and my determination in wanting to bring meat home and not being just the one who bought the ammunition. For example, I killed my first francolin only after 4 months of attempts and countless failures to take by surprise this very suspicious, tasty little animal. A mixture of frustration, determination and practice built very slowly into what Gibson would call an "education of attention" (Gibson 1979: 274) that translated into a new acoustic sensibility.

This double sensibility - to the sounds one produces and to the sounds around the self - seem to point at the existence of an aesthetic community of hunters based on control and discernment of sound. Hunters would at times comment disparagingly on the noisy clumsiness of the other villagers in the bush, demonstrating an appreciation of the ability to move silently as a way of being at ease in the environment. Steven Feld similarly underlined an important nexus between sound and perception of space, where the acoustic becomes the medium for a connection of the body with the surroundings (1996: 97; Forthcoming). In parallel, the hunters' sensibility to sound as perception and proprioception highlighted their connection to the bush as an acoustic environment where one's capacity for suppressing sound is in direct connection with one's capacity for perceiving sound.



## Frustrated visions

It is very difficult to disentangle, in my perceptual experience of hunting, exclusively acoustic elements from visual aspects. Gibson has underlined how the senses always work in synergy, and are never independent from each other (see also Feld 1996: 92–94). Hunting made me appreciate this interplay and that between perception and proprioception, when an increased mastery of my body allowed me to expand my sensibility to the bush around me. But if, for analytical purposes, I had to concentrate now on the visual aspects, I would say that, in the area, daytime hunting was surprisingly less about seeing than I would have expected.

As noticed on my first day, the bush can be visually very limiting and at the same time often so rich in details that it becomes confusing and disorienting. First, my desire to have a clear view of the area around me was frustrated by the thickness of the vegetation. Then the same thickness, the same layers densely overlapped, would create such a complex scenario that details would get lost in an ocean of leaves, branches, rocks, shadows, wooden logs, pebbles, sand, earth, water pools, and so on. Too much fine detail made it impossible to focus and recognise shapes, to detach figure from ground, especially from a continuously wandering point of view. During the dry season it is a common strategy to hunt during the hottest hours of the day, when the sun is high and bright, generating strong contrasts between shadow and light. At over 40 degrees, small animals often lie under the branches of low bushes, to rest and regulate their body temperature. One of the things I found the most difficult was to spot them, immobile in the shadows. Given the brightness of the overall scenario, those shady corners were pitch black for me, and I could not distinguish any detail, perhaps with my prescription lenses playing their part. As a result of my enskilment in silent walking, quite a few times I happened to almost step onto a sleeping hare or francolin, that would quickly run away or take off at full speed, before I could aim and shoot. On the other hand, it was very easy for me to see anything moving, as small as it might be, though on most occasions when I saw an animal moving it was already running away.

I was struck to see my hunting companions spot and shoot animals lying this way, while I was unable to see them from a more favourable position. On one such occasion, for example, I was walking with other hunters on an abandoned field - a relatively clear terrain - when I saw Madou Barou aiming at something on the ground, roughly towards me, from a distance of about 25 metres. I was not able to see what he was aiming at, so I could not know whether, to get out of the line of fire, I should have quietly moved a few steps to the left or to the right. The ground was clear, with a few dry herbs and irregular brown-red clods. In a moment Madou shot, and I heard the balls whizz past, about a metre from me. The small cloud of dust that quickly dissipated revealed a francolin, very well camouflaged, which had been lying in the hope that we would pass by without noticing. On this and other occasions where I had time to observe very well the hunter aim in some direction, I was extremely puzzled by my inability to discern the animal until it was shot, even if its location was by then clear. The comment I heard from other hunters was that I was not yet "used" to looking at the bush. Once again, there were no tricks to be learned, no suggestions and no instructions. Rather, it was a matter of perceptual attunement, of developing a "skilled vision" (Grasseni 2007). Rather than distinguishing fine detail in an extremely complicated scenario, spotting animals seemed rather a matter of knowing where to look, recognising the right shapes and isolating them from a background that would otherwise overwhelm the perceiver. As mentioned before, in terms of Gibson's ecological perception, movement and the recognition of invariants in the optic array are the basis of an efficient perception. Performing this recognition in an unfamiliar environment requires *attunement*, which is precisely what was lacking in me according to the hunters. Moreover, in an ecological perspective seeing is an action performed by a whole perceptual system, so that I had to learn a new modality more similar to what Gibson called "looking around" (1979: 203; quoted in Downey 2007: 238 note 1), a way of seeing that is especially aware of the surroundings.

Gibson was not concerned with features of the environment that could perceive the perceiver, and seemed to mostly draw on examples about the perception of inanimate objects. But in the case of hunting, I was rather

presented with a perceptual relationship between hunter and prey, in which the challenge was to recognise before being recognised - that is, not necessarily being perceived in the form of a stimulus, but as a menace. The difference is relevant here, because in most cases I would shoot animals already aware of my presence but not yet scared by it. So part of the skill, for a hunter, consisted in approaching the animal close enough to have a clean shot without alarming it. It is no surprise then that the *donsow* speak of fetishes being able to amplify this skill to the point of allowing the hunter to approach his prey as one would approach a domestic animal.

In the previous part I referred to the seasonal fires that farmers and hunters light during the dry season, and their relevance for agriculture and the domestication of the bush. But this clearing of the bush is also a way to make animals visible and did not involve agriculture. Such was the case when Lasso and I lit fires in November, just as soon as herbs turned golden. The sense of our actions was to restore visibility creating a suitable environment for the hunt. For even given the importance of skilled hearing, I learned that a hunter only shoots something visible. Once, for example, I was hunting near Adama's compound with his grandson Boubacar. We had crossed one of the branches of the Black Volta River that runs not too distant from my teacher's house. A series of depressions are flooded there during the rainy season, but at that time of the year are dry and full of thorny bushes. Some of these can host the *kò nyinan*, or Greater Cane Rat (*Thryonomys swinderianus*), a large rodent that is well known for the excellent taste of its meat. It is also one of the largest animals you can find in the area, and we were silently walking around the bushes hoping to find one. At some point Boubacar made me a sign to stop, and pointed his shotgun somewhere in the middle of the bush that stood between him and me. I noticed some subdued rustling from the area he was aiming at, and I could understand that something, apparently not very small, was moving slowly underneath the thorny cover. It was so close to me I believed I could easily shoot it, yet I waited for a sign from Boubacar. We waited until the noise moved to an area we could not reach, and we eventually moved along. I forgot the episode, but later I found myself again in the situation of locating some sort of animal very precisely, only by its noise, for example behind a foliage curtain. While reflecting on the role of sound as

opposed to sight, I thought I would ask Lasso if he ever shot something locating it exclusively on the basis of the sounds it produced. His reply somehow surprised me: "It is a *law* of hunting that you only shoot what you see clearly. Both my father and Adama [our teacher] told me this many times, it is a matter of safety. You could shoot a person or even a companion." What surprised me was not his very sensible explication, but his use of the term *law* (in French, actually), applied to a domain that did not have many explicit rules. In other words, there may be hunting situations where the aural dimension is dominant, but the last word, so to say, is always to sight.

### Perceiving in the darkness

Burning herbs also opens the path for a completely different kind of hunting, which takes place at night. It is during new moon periods or before it rises, when the bush is completely dark except for the stars and a remote glow in the direction of Bobo Dioulasso. It was clear from the first night I went hunting with Lasso, in late October, that what we were about to do was different from the usual daytime hunting. As soon as the sun went down, after Lasso was back from the mosque, we met in the courtyard of the house where I lived. He asked for some embers, which he put in a fragment of clay pot, laying on them some crushed, dried vegetal preparation. We let the smoke run through the barrels of our shotguns, and along their outside surfaces. He also brought a white powder I had never seen before, and gave me a pinch. We mixed the powder with some *karité* butter (shea butter, from the *Butyrospermum parkii* tree) and passed the mixture on our faces, hands and forearms. It was my first contact with Adama's *nyamafla* (see Chapter 2), and it was explained to me that its smell keeps the *jinanw* away. One can also blow a pinch downwind, or put it on embers and immerse oneself in the smoke. As Adama explained once, there are things in the bush that get out mostly at night. Apart from snakes and predators, he was referring to the *jinanw* - genies - that populate the bush in the Mande area.

Only after these preparations did we take the motorbike and drive for about half an hour following a bush path, stopping on the edge of a large clearing. There we lit our head torches and started to walk, separated from one another by some 100 to 200 metres. Lasso told me to just walk "straight," and I would have the reference of his cold LED light flashing to my side, when he would turn his head toward me. Sometimes I would not be able to see him, perhaps because of vegetation, so I would stop and shut down my torch, remaining in complete darkness under breath-taking stars, until I would discern a tiny distant glow. I would also use Lasso's light as a reference to set my walking pace.

It was a peculiar landscape we walked in, as made visible by the light of the torches. I find it difficult to describe the strange, focused vision made possible by the cone light of the torch, revealing all things in a shadowless, colourless glare. The peripheral light around the central beam would be quite broad and diffused, but revealing even fewer colours. The ground was covered in the ashes and the half-burned stems of herbs, and at the light of the torch it would look like a sort of winter, frozen landscape, an impression enhanced by the 'crunching' sound of my steps as if on frozen snow. The clearings were scattered with the usual stones, which would punctuate from time to time the rustling sound of my steps with a lower note, as I hit one with the tip of my boots. Then at some point I would get to a wall of trees, cross it and in a few metres find myself into another clearing.

After walking for about fifteen minutes I heard Lasso shooting, on my left. He called with his whistle, and I reached him. He had shot *sonsani*, an African Savannah Hare (*Lepus microtis*). I asked him how he did it, how does it work, what should I look for. He replied that I had to look for the reflection of the torch in an animal's eyes, and shoot while it is puzzled by the strange apparition. A layer of tissue behind the retina of many animals, called *tapetum lucidum*, reflects light improving low-light vision. But it also provokes a very visible eyeshine if a strong light source hits it, at the same time obfuscating the animal's view. Later Lasso added that he loves night hunting because he can get so much closer to animals, thanks to the surprise effect.<sup>52</sup> I kept

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<sup>52</sup> For the same reason, hunting at night is illegal in Burkina Faso as in many other countries.

walking straight, until Lasso called me and gave us a new direction. That night I saw two hares, but was unable to shoot them because of the torch. As soon as I raised my shotgun to aim, the light bounced on the rear sight and my eyes were blinded. The background disappeared behind the glow as my eyes tried to adjust, giving time for the hares to run away. Unlike daytime, this form of hunting was a visually stripped experience, given the way the torch desaturated the colours and reduced contrast. We also tended to look for more open spaces, where we could exploit the power of seeing distant things without being recognised as threats.

The head torch completely redefined the rules of the perceptual relationship between hunter and prey. Here our task was not any longer that of going unseen and unheard, but one of spotting and killing quickly, before the animal could realise what was going on. Thanks to this eminently visual advantage, we were able to afford producing more noise than during daytime. Not *any* amount of noise, though. As Lasso reminded me many times, one should try to be as silent as possible even at night.

If hunting with a head torch at night somehow requires the hunter to rebalance and readapt his perceptual engagement, from this point of view one of the strangest experiences that I had was ambushing *bala*, the Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix cristata*) on a rocky hill near Bwende. This is a kind of hunt that you also do at night, yet it is completely different. One ambushes the animal hiding near its hole, without moving, often for hours in complete darkness. Lasso, myself, and our host in Bwende Sa-Doto Traoré did not see any porcupine that night. It was not until a visit to Adama, when the teacher asked if we had checked the direction of the wind, that I remembered distinctly a breeze climbing the hill behind my shoulders, toward the holes of the porcupines. Although hunters are generally aware of the relevance of the olfactory dimension, the direction of the wind is often an overlooked detail, in my experience. I attribute the reason to the disappearance of big game, and the contemporary loss of a hunting style based on long periods of stalking. It is not surprising then that tracking is not commonly practiced, and that hunting is mostly based on casual encounters with the small animals that are still common in the area. Tracks are indeed looked for, but only as a marker of the presence of animals, and not followed.

## Researching experience

In the accounts above, what emerges is how the position of the apprentice - where I had in part found and in part put myself - was crucial in granting insights into the skilled perception of the hunters. The ethnographic style of these accounts derives from another product of the "sensory turn," an approach that I find more fertile and compatible with a study of hunting and with Gibson's conception of perception.

Michael Herzfeld, in the chapter dedicated to the senses in his book entitled *Anthropology*, has argued that the discipline should not make of the sensorium another sub-field of studies - yet another "anthropology-of" (2001: 252). Rather, the senses should become a method and a perspective to apply across the discipline. Some scholars have indeed tried to develop an anthropology *through* the senses, or a sensate anthropology or a sensory ethnography. In other words, they have reflected on the role of the embodied, sensuous experience of the ethnographer as a way to access local sensory cultures. It is important to remember that this happened in a period that saw, in anthropology, the strictly connected rise in an interest in the body and embodiment, with perspectives inspired by phenomenology (Csordas 1990; Csordas 1994b; Jackson 1996a; Kirmayer 1992; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).<sup>53</sup> I was especially inspired by Paul Stoller's call for a "sensuous scholarship" (1997) and his experiences of apprenticeship to a Songhai sorcerer (Stoller and Olkes 1987; Stoller 1989). He experimented on his own skin the rivalries between sorcerers when he was the victim of a magical attack that left him temporarily paralysed. Other scholars have chosen to study craftsmanship by taking up the role of apprentice, most notably in Africa, see Lave (1977) and Marchand (2009).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> But compare the pioneering conception of *ciné-transe* in the work of Jean Rouch (1973; Henley 2009: Chapter 12).

<sup>54</sup> I could give many more examples from the fields of the anthropology of emotions (Desjarlais 1992; Hage 2009; Newmahr 2008; Rosaldo 1984), every-day life (Jackson 1983; Seremetakis 1996; Pink 2004) martial arts and boxing (Bar-On Cohen 2009; Cox 2011; Kohn 2001; Wacquant 1995; 2004), dance (Downey 2011; Taylor 1998; Wulff 1998) and music (Hood 1960; Rice 1994; Roseman 1993).

The experience of the field is here something more than the basis for the ethnographer's authority (Clifford 1988: 35). Such a process marks a difference from the idea of reflexivity as advocated by the literary turn of the 1980s, a self-consciousness of the author's role inside the text and an opening to dialogue with the natives. This latter conception of reflexivity works completely on the level of representations, while Csordas proposes, on the level of *being-in-the-world* and lived experience, a *reflective* effort to include the researcher's experience in an intersubjective negotiation (1999).

If the past experiences of these ethnographers allowed me to think of the possibility of studying the experience of hunters through the sharing of practical activity, they also raised a whole set of new problems. The very elusive field I was determined to study, embodied human experience, poses relevant methodological issues. My research subject has often been beyond the level of verbalized knowledge and even conceptual thought. This translated into the impossibility of relying mainly on transcribed interviews and oral accounts, traditionally a pillar of ethnographic practice (Cox 2002: 74; Harris 2007b: 2, 8–12; Hastrup 1990: 51–54). Jason Throop seems to feel the same urge for "employing methodological strategies that complement the collection of explicitly retrospective assessments" (2003: 235–236).

I would like to stress here that my attempt is one of studying experience, as opposed to representations of experience. One of the best-known books on the topic of experience (Turner and Bruner 1986), in fact deals mostly with such representations, and not by chance. Anthropology has for a long time focused on the public aspects of experience, its subjective dimension being considered inaccessible or not relevant. Therefore for many anthropologists an ethnographer could only access experience through the medium of representations such as systems of symbols, social dramas, narrations or any other form of cultural artefact (Goulet and Granville Miller 2007a: 8–9). Geertz's remarks in the epilogue of *The Anthropology of Experience* are telling of his disregard of more introspective approaches:

We cannot live other people's lives, and it's a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions, they say about their lives. As Victor Turner [...] argued, it is with expressions – representations, objectifications, discourses, performances,



whatever – that we traffic [...]. Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness (Geertz 1986: 373).

Writing about Husserl, Geertz affirms to be interested in the relationship between actor and context, rather than in any internal state of the actor, since we can only access public objectifications of experience as symbols (1973: 110 footnote 134). In his classic work *The Interpretation of Cultures* cultural processes do not take place in minds - *the ghost in the machine*, in Gilbert Ryle's well-known expression - but use public symbols to impose meaning on experience. Without them experience would be an amorphous and unmanageable matter (Geertz 1973: 45–46). Referring to the anthropology of the 1970s and 1980s in general, the emphasis on meaning and the reading of culture tended to exclude experience and the senses from the discipline's field of enquiry. Generally, according to Csordas, anthropologists from the period collapsed the dualism between language and experience, reducing the latter to the former (1999: 146).

This tendency is typical of the seventies, with the interpretive turn, as much as of the eighties, with the literary turn: the textualism underlying the paradigms used for the study of culture is basically unchanged excluding from anthropology a relevant part of the ethnographic experience (Jackson 1989: 184). Coming back for a moment to the ideas of Turner and Geertz, for example, experience is conceived as twofold.<sup>55</sup> From the work of both transpires the belief in a raw, flowing indeterminate component – *mere experience* - that is later interpreted or processed through the imposition of meaning to become *an experience* (the terminology is Turner's, 1986; in Throop 2003). This view, at least in its basic main traits, is the same I was referring to when mentioning the popular version of cognitivism that influenced both the human sciences and common thinking, thanks to the parallel between the mind and computers. In parallel there is, in anthropology, a recognised tendency to consider only processed experience as possible area of enquiry

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<sup>55</sup> I do not want to suggest that Geertz's and Turner's positions on experience, which can be made to correspond on the broad epistemological level (Throop 2003: 222–226), also correspond on the methodological level. See from this point of view Turner's *On the Edge of the Bush. Anthropology as Experience* (1985).

(Jackson 1996b). It is easy to recognise here the same paradigm I described in the first part of the chapter when discussing perception. The conception of experience that emerges from Gibson's ecological approach to perception offers an alternative to this paradigm of Cartesian derivation, and offers the possibility for the ethnographer to consider researching experience in its own terms.

Writing about the perspectivist qualities of Yukaghir animism, Rane Willerslev analyses its practical, embodied character in a reflexive way, as a form of mimetic empathy grounded in learning to follow tracks and kill animals during hunts. It is interesting to look at the way he downplays the role of representation in this passage, and contrast it to Geertz's quote above:

My adoption of the Yukaghir hunter's perspective was not mere representation, but it had a materiality grounded in my bodily experiences of their lifeworld – which, through my mimetic mirroring of their behavior, senses, and sensibilities in day-to-day events and routines, became our shared lifeworld. Mimetic empathy, we might say, then, does not imply simply representation or imagination, but it has a decisively corporeal, physical, and tangible quality from which the former ultimately emerges and from which it derives its “material” (Willerslev 2007: 106).

So the choice of my field methodology was an attempt to deal with the role of embodied experience in a specific group, engaged in a specific way with their environment, through experience itself - what Goulet and Granville Miller have called "experiential ethnography" (Goulet and Granville Miller 2007a: 4).<sup>56</sup>

These observations on my sensory experiences of hunting demonstrate how the method I had envisaged for this research, based on bodily participation, worked on at least two levels. First, I could start to experience

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<sup>56</sup> It must be remarked, though, that the phenomenological tradition that inspires Csordas, Jackson, Ingold and even Gibson is not in fact the only possible approach to experience that tries to deal with the mind-body dichotomy. Some scholars have found in the work of Spinoza - and later of Bergson - and in his notion of affect a dimension of experience that is independent from emotion and rationalisation (Clough 2008; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Massumi 2002). But the emphasis on a parallel form of cognition in the bodily affective dimension for thinkers like Massumi has been criticised as another form of dualism of mind and body (Leys 2011). On the other hand, what Gibson's ideas and approach to the perceived environment allow us to do is to overcome the distinction between the two kinds of experience proposing a truly non-representationalist model for perception.

the bush as a hunter's environment, thanks to the enskilment of perception applied to hunting. Second, I had a kind of access to the community of hunters that initiation alone would never have been sufficient to grant me. Ever since I was initiated I started to hunt, and this gave me and other hunters a ground to establish a relationship born of practice. A simple association card or a ritual would never have constituted a comparable bond. That I was not studying hunting by asking countless questions made perfect sense to the hunters, and in the bush I earned their respect, sharing hardships and frustrations. One of the most meaningful moments, showing how I was perceived to have entered *donsoya* in terms of my bodily involvement, was a day toward the end of my stay, when Adama and his son Dramane remarked how I progressively lost weight: "He was not this skinny when he first came here" said Adama "he really took *donsoya* seriously."

## Chapter 6 - Representing the Apprenticeship

It was only after the sixth month of my year of fieldwork in Burkina Faso that I really started to reflect on what form an audiovisual ethnography of *donsoya* could take. In this chapter I am going to try and show how the choices I made in making an audio-visual ethnography can be linked to the theoretical and methodological approach of the previous chapters.

The choice to include myself in the film on *donsoya* I realised derives from the position I had taken in the field, with the degree of participation that characterised my own initiation, my practice of hunting and my apprenticeship in *donsoya*. But *Kalanda - The Knowledge of the Bush* is not a film about me, it is about my interactions and vital encounters with *donsoya* on the path of apprenticeship, which have a great revelatory potential. I connect this positioning with the idea of "deep reflexivity" as formulated by David MacDougall (1998: 87–91). As opposed to "external reflexivity," deep reflexivity does not provide an explicit framing of the methods used for the gathering of ethnographic data. Behind external reflexivity, for MacDougall, lies a positivist ideology that aims at framing the ethnography and correcting its distortions. As a device external to the ethnography, it tends to downplay the involvement of the author in the genesis of the work. Deep reflexivity, on the other hand, is retraceable in the work itself, it is ambiguous and dynamic, leaving space for unprivileged interpretations. It shows how "subject and object define one another through the work, and the 'author' is in fact in many ways an artifact of the work" (*idem*: 89). So in the film I never framed myself as a researcher nor showed myself with the camera in hand - almost a commonplace in many recent ethnographic films. What I did was to sometimes show parts of my body as I prepared or applied herbal medicines, while most of the time I interact from behind the camera. But this interaction

happens only in non-verbal ways, because my voice asking questions would have immediately changed the framing of the teachings into interviews. The viewer is left in the uncertainty of determining whose apprenticeship it is, which also leaves the space, at times, to self-identify with the point of view of the camera.

In this sense I realised the film *in the first person*, an expression that I draw from Rouch's short film *Les Tambours d'Avant: Tourou et Bitti* (1971). Rouch's voiceover, at the very beginning of the film, introduces the setting and presents the film as an "*essai de cinéma ethnographique à la première personne*" (see also Rouch 1973). I can say that my whole film - and this chapter - represent my development of that concept, fleshed out in some of its implications and adapted to the ecological frame that I adopted for the rest of the research.

Since the beginning of my reflection on representational formats I decided to choose the feature-length documentary film. I had initially planned to realise a web-based work that used the new capabilities for storytelling offered by so-called transmedia interactive documentaries.<sup>57</sup> But in the field, because of the sense of progression in Adama's teachings, I felt the need for a more linear narrative and decided to leave the viewer with less space for interaction. I therefore chose to use a medium, ethnographic film, in which the succession of the elements is dictated by the maker and not, as in interactive documentaries, by the viewer. This of course put me in a well trodden path in visual anthropology, where many documentaries on hunters have often resorted to a narrative style or even to a dramatic structure.

Looking at what are perhaps the two most famous examples of ethnographic documentaries on hunting - John Marshall's *The Hunters* (1958) and Jean Rouch's *La Chasse au Lion à l'Arc* (1965) - it is evident that both films are organised towards a culminating point - the killing of an animal. In the case of Marshall the film follows the tracking and final killing of a giraffe,

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<sup>57</sup> Some recent examples of interactive documentaries that deal with environmental issues have been developed at the National Film Board of Canada (Cizek 2013; Dufresne 2013; Guité 2013; Hobbs 2013). Some visual anthropologists have been following the development of these technologies and their potential for ethnographic representation for a long time (for example Dicks and Mason 1998; Matthews and Aston 2012; Pink, Kürti, and Afonso 2004; Pink 2006; Underberg and Zorn 2013)

introducing the viewer along the way to a whole set of !Kung social features - camp life, plant gathering, smaller hunts. Rouch's film has a more complicated structure, the hunt for a lion being framed as a tale through the device of an initial night scene. But although eventually some lions are killed, the main target, a lion called "the American," remains free.

What I wanted to avoid was reproducing this oriented structure, because I wanted the centre of the film to be the apprenticeship. I wanted it to be the story of a quest for knowledge and not necessarily for prey. This is why I chose as a first sequence, before the titles, an event that is chronologically set as the conclusion, precisely with the intention of avoiding the film to be interpreted as a simple preparation for a hunt.

The *donsow* have appeared in a few ethnographic documentaries but very few films have been entirely centred on them. This latter subset in particular has concentrated on the textual knowledge of *donsoya*, as in the case of *Les Maîtres du Nyama* (Kersalé 2006), filmed in the Burkinabe village of Ouolonkoto. In this case, not only are the customs and rituals shown given a very rigidly symbolic explanation, but the voiceover that constitutes the main narrative device of the film relies heavily on Cissé's work, quoting almost verbatim from his *La Confrérie des Chasseurs Malinké et Bambara*. This change of context from Mali, where Cissé's research took place, to Burkina seems to assume that *donsoya* is the same everywhere and sometimes results in a misreading of what happens in front of the camera. The sequences of hunting in the bush similarly rely on the voiceover to explain what happens and what the bush is like. A documentary with a more developed focus on the habitus and the techniques of the body of the hunter, *Oiseau* (Kedzierska 2004), also resorts to voiceover in order to instruct the viewer about the skills and experiences of the *donsow*.

In my own work I have tried to strike a balance between the different forms of knowledge encompassed by *donsoya*, building the chronicle of the apprenticeship as a progression through different kinds of knowledge. But looking at previous attempts at representing the complexity of the knowledge of *donsoya*, I wanted to avoid the trap of representing non-textual knowledge through text, resulting in a flattening of the sensory aspects of hunting. Film, considered as a "co-presentation" of images and sounds in reciprocal

influence (Chion 1994), on the other hand opens up richer possibilities for evocation.

### Representing the sensory aspects of hunting

Part of the approach I referred to as "sensory ethnography" has been developed as an exploration of the potential of audiovisual media to represent the sensory dimensions of culture. This movement often takes the shape of a confrontation with the hegemony of text - interpreted as verbal language - in anthropology, advocating for the recognition of the potential and capability of audiovisual media to communicate and represent sensory dimensions that escape language (Devereaux and Hillman 1995; Grimshaw 2001; MacDougall 2006; Pink 2006; Schneider and Wright 2006; Schneider and Wright 2010).<sup>58</sup> The comparison between film and writing, for example, has been explored by David MacDougall, who argued that in anthropology we do not simply have a prejudice favouring written text over images, but a tendency to read images and sounds as a kind of language (1998: 76). But, he asks, is it possible to transmit through a film also a knowledge that cannot be conceptualised? Adapting images to the interpretive keys of academic writing does not do justice to their potentialities, and to the literality of vision that inheres to being, rather than to meaning (MacDougall 2006: 1–5). This use of images in anthropology is a way to "preserve the value of knowledge as meaning, but [...] miss an opportunity to embrace the knowledge of being" (*idem*: 6). MacDougall's open and phenomenological conception of knowledge inspired my own, and my choice to look at the sensory dimensions of *donsoya* in different ways in writing and film.

MacDougall developed his ideas in a long career in ethnographic documentary, working with a camera presence that is barely perceptible. In works like *Schoolscapes* (MacDougall 2007a) he relies on the features of the

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<sup>58</sup> A very important moment for the development of these themes was the 2007 RAI conference significantly entitled *Beyond Text?* held at the University of Manchester (Cox, Irving, and Wright Forthcoming).

development of the action in front of him to evoke the sensuousness of the filmed scene. In his film works of the 2000s he put into effect a visual research on the representation of social aesthetics, or the way a group's sensory experience is tied to social features and institutions (MacDougall 1999; 2007b).

This kind of revisiting of observational cinema relies on stimulating a form of heightened attention in viewers, making them appreciate the sensory qualities of the image (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; Henley 2004; MacDougall 1998). Others have developed more innovative approaches to these ideas, as for the works developed around the Sensory Ethnography Lab established at Harvard University by Lucien Castaing-Taylor. With the explicit aim of putting in practice ideas that are analogous to MacDougall's, these works used very long takes to let the viewer appreciate the *aesthetic* - again in the etymological sense of perceptual - qualities of the subjects (Castaing-Taylor and Barbash 2009; Paravel and Sniadecki 2010; Cohn and Sniadecki 2012; Spray and Velez 2013). One of the latest works, *Leviathan* by Castaing-Taylor and Paravel (2012), is taking a different direction realising an immersive portrayal of life on fishing ships off the Massachusetts coast through much more experimental editing. In this sense, it follows more closely the highly edited soundtrack realised by Ernst Karel, who gave all of these films a layered and composed acoustic dimension and contributed to the film's immersive qualities. The films from the Sensory Ethnography Lab have in common a refusal of an explicit narrative, letting the sensory and experiential qualities of the situation take the foreground.

Finally, a very significant part of the practice of audiovisual sensory ethnography has involved different media from ethnographic documentary, including web-based multimedia works, photography, sound compositions, installations and performance (Grimshaw 2005; Pink 2006; Pink, Kürti, and Afonso 2004; Schneider and Wright 2010). It is interesting to note how in many cases these theoretical reflections have materialised in collaborations with artists, as a way to enrich the potential for evocation of sensory



ethnography (Cox and Carlyle 2012; Feld and Ryan 2010; Keil et al. 2002; Wynne and Wainwright 2008).<sup>59</sup>

What I wanted to do, building on the development of all these representational experiments and in line with my attention to sensory ethnography, was to develop representational strategies that could put my experience of hunting with the *donsow* in dialogue with the specificities of local hunting styles and conceptions of vision and hearing. The outcome would have to face the considerable challenge of making some points about the sensory experience of hunting in the bush not through verbal description, as I did in the previous chapter, but by evoking an immersive experience in the viewer/listener. At the same time, I was not expecting this evocation to happen simply because of the audiovisual quality of film as opposed to writing. Rather, I needed to find ways to put sounds and images in interaction to suggest more complex synaesthetic experiences (MacDougall 2006: 42–60), and use montage not to develop analytical arguments but to evoke a sensory engagement with the bush (Grimshaw 2013: 237).

Even before I started to think about the problem of how to represent the sensory specificities of hunting, I decided I would devote at least the first six months to the practice of hunting. I left the camera in the backpack, and I concentrated on the perceptual challenges of spotting game without alerting it. Only later, once I had an idea of what it was like in the bush and had reflected on this experience, did I start to reflect on how to represent it. I am convinced that this was a good choice because, due to the difficulty of recording hunting, I think I would have ended up being a bad hunter and with confused images, which did not make any point. In other words, the camera - or microphone - would have been in the way of the enskilment of my perception. This is not to say that being on the lookout for images - as a photographer or as a videographer - is not a specific mode of attention too - after all Rouch compared it to an altered state of mind. I just did not want to overlap it with the mode of attention required by hunting, with which it would have been in competition. Yet in some ways the mode of attention of

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<sup>59</sup> For two analyses of the relevance of the works of video artist for sensory anthropology with audiovisual media, see Marks (2000) and Russell (1999).

the cameraman and that of the hunter were not entirely opposed. A similar kind of consciousness of the entirety of the surroundings - and of the frame - had to coexist with an attention for the detail - the small movement of an animal or the point of focus. I also noticed how much the technique of the body required for walking silently was similar to that required to walk the camera in a stable way, with the same kind of soft steps.

The example of my initiation ceremony in Karankasso that I gave in Chapter 2 was a good lesson from this point of view, because the use of the camera made me feel very disconnected from what I was experiencing. This is also the main reason why that scene in the film appears as a flashback without synchronous sound, already objectified in the film as a recording that the musicians can improvise on. It is the same in my memory; I do not remember much of what happened because I was looking at the monitor of my camera most of the time. This is also the reason why the role of the camera is so different in this scene from the rest of the film, being without a location, an identity or someone addressing it. In a sense, I was determined not to let the same thing happen with my apprenticeship in hunting.

I decided to approach the representation of my visual and aural perception in the bush in ways I would call hyper-realistic (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 469). In other words I emphasised certain aspects that were stressed in my experience and in that of my companions, going beyond a strict adherence to certain temporal and spatial parameters of perception (Feld 1982: 234–236). Here I use the term mimesis of perception, but not in the sense of a mere copy. The concept of mimesis has been diversely used and interpreted (Cox 2002: 106), but I am here interested in using the relationship between perception and its mediatic representation, described in Michael Taussig's analysis of the mimetic faculty that draws on the philosophy of Walter Benjamin (Taussig 1993). Specifically, I am interested in the characterization of mimesis as a form of copying that is only partial identification, one that preserves difference as the basis for its efficacy (Taussig 1993: 51; see also Willerslev 2007: 9–13). The kind of imitation of sensory perception that I would strive to obtain is explicit mimicry, in that it reveals its processuality and artificiality. The second aspect I find to be related is that of the copy as working through sensuous contact (Taussig 1993: 21), specifically the way it

involves embodied cognition and allows to have very tangible and material effects. In parallel, I aimed at engaging the viewer/listener at the level of sensuous feeling with my images and sounds.

When preparing the section of the film entitled *Learning to Hunt*, on the visual side I mostly worked with a focal length equivalent to 24mm, which in terms of 35mm photography gives a much wider angle than that of human binocular vision - that is, excluding peripheral vision. This choice had a few representational and practical purposes: I wanted to emphasise the perspective to suggest three-dimensionality and increase the flow of the ambient optical array (Gibson 1979: 227–229). Moreover, the use of a wide-angle allowed me to decrease the wobble of a hand-held camera. The camera had to necessarily be very moveable and dynamic, just as hunting was being in motion most of the time. But the image could not have been too wobbly because that is not the way we see, and it would have drawn too much attention to the frame.

I also chose to position the point of view of the camera much lower than my eyes, carrying it by the top handle. Again, even though not strictly realistic, this gives the impression of a meticulous search for game under the bushes, matched by a quick-paced editing that suggests repetition. In actual hunting I would find it difficult to, at the same time, keep the pace of Lasso and check carefully all the spots where small game could hide. This quick pace was somehow a style in Karankasso, because with other hunters - for example in Gwenion - we would move much more carefully and slowly. At the same time, the very wide perspective includes so much in the frame that the spectator cannot really stop and observe or focus the attention on anything in particular. These walking sequences are conceived to be perceptually frustrating just like my perception was frustrated in the bush, and evoke the hunting style of that region.

I managed to represent another kind of frustration, namely the difficulty of seeing animals lying immobile in the shadow, thanks to enactment, an important methodological point I discuss in the next paragraph. It would have been extremely difficult for me to film a living animal - actually it would have been paradoxical because the point to make was exactly that I could not see it. What I set up with Lasso's help was to kill a francolin and place it

under some branches, as if lying on some dry leaves. Next I placed the camera on a tripod, with a wide framing of the scene. I chose to have the bird visible, of course, because the whole point was to give the viewer the chance to see it - even though this was unlikely in practice, because of its camouflage and immobility. After about ten seconds, when one has had the time to examine the whole frame and starts to wonder what is to be seen in this scene, a sudden shot wipes the bird off the ground, revealing it. This scene represents a sort of exemplary case of what has happened to me countless times, playing with the limitation of the viewer's technologically mediated perception.

Night hunting is an even more puzzling perceptual experience, for which I worked with more experimental techniques like long photographic exposures and desaturation of the image. The mimesis of the hunter's perception is for technical reasons much more difficult in this case, because of the different ways the eye and the camera sensor react to intense illumination in the light cone of the head torch and obscurity all around it. I chose a strategy that could give a glimpse of the almost lunar appearance of the bush, playing with lights to suggest the danger of getting lost and the presence of strange entities like genies.

The other kind of images I included, which are not really part of the line of reasoning on the evocation of corporeality followed so far, are close-ups of animals as they are being butchered or prepared for consumption. Here I tried to use the shocking effect of images of blood and recently dead bodies, also as a way to reflect on different sensibilities for animal suffering. The frame purposefully crops away the hunters butchering the animals to let the viewer focus on the materiality of the meat.

The importance of sound for a film in general, and specifically for one that aims at evoking a sensory world, cannot be overestimated. I also mentioned how important the acoustic dimension was for hunting. Therefore, the soundtrack of the section on hunting has undergone an especially complex editing. Not having at my disposal equipment comparable to binaural microphones, that are worn on the head, I decided to work with a very different approach, using off-sync sound. I started from stereo recordings, realised with a matched pair of cardioid microphones in ORTF configuration, to obtain a good degree of separation and three-dimensionality

- a sort of analogy to the wide-angle lens. I realised a first set of recordings with the microphones on a tripod, capturing the ambiances of different areas of the bush around Karankasso. These are static recordings, in the absence of the recordist and so aimed at capturing, in a sense, a "pristine" soundscape in the absence of sounds produced by man.<sup>60</sup> In a complementary way, the second set of recordings used the same pair of microphones on a short, hand-held boom pole, picking up sound closely to my walking feet. I captured the sound of different kinds of steps - from quick and careless to silent and careful - on a variety of grounds - from dry leaves to sandy, compact terrains and soft creek beds.

My project with these two types of recordings was to represent at once the enskilment of hearing and that of movement required by an apprenticeship in *donsoya*. The soundtrack of the first part of the section of the film dedicated to hunting has then to be listened to in parallel with the images, but not in a direct relationship. Whereas the video footage has a quick-paced editing with short cut durations, the soundtrack is edited to sound like a continuum - except for the few tripod cutaways that briefly break the continuity of the point of view. At the beginning, the steps of the apprentice are acoustically very present, being loud and covering up most other sounds. Visually, and in parallel, the camera walks very close to Lasso. Gradually the apprentice learns to master the sounds he produces and gains a new sensitivity to the voices of birds and other components of the bush soundscape. Without audible cuts, this transformation of the soundtrack is barely perceptible, but can offer moments of realisation as it often happens in processes of enskilment. In order to calibrate the levels of the two components of this soundtrack, though, I needed an external ear that could advise me on what I sounded like when I was learning my way in the bush.

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<sup>60</sup> The absence of sounds produced directly by man does not mean that the acoustic environment is in any way "pristine," though, and it has been demonstrated that the sounds of insects reveal the extent of deforestation and climate change (Dunn and Crutchfield 2006). Rather, I use a kind of simplification to build a dualism between recordings with and without a strong human acoustic presence.

## Collaboration and enactment

I was lucky enough to conduct my fieldwork during a time when technology, in the form of a fully tapeless digital workflow, allowed me to edit and share rough cuts of my audiovisual work on virtually the same day of the recording. With these tools I could give to my methodology a perspective that draws inspiration from the works of Jean Rouch and Steven Feld. In particular I had in my mind Feld's editing experiences in Papua New Guinea when, with Lasso's help, I started to work at the sound mixing of the hunting soundtrack.

Describing the preparation of the recording *Voices of the Rainforest* (1991) and his struggles to adequately represent the Kaluli aesthetic concept of *dulugu ganalan* or lift-up-over sounding, Feld remembers how he worked in dialogue with his informants. Being limited to a stereo set of tracks at the time, he prepared separate tapes with different recordings from different moments, some aimed at rendering depth and some height. He then asked his main collaborators to act on the levels balance to get to the result they would find most realistic, "so you could say that to large [sic] extent the recording was pre-mixed in the bush" (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 467; compare Feld 1994: 283). This and other techniques form what he called *dialogic editing* (Feld 1987), a form of dialogue that gives the final product its shape and questions the temporal and spatial division between a data-gathering phase and the processing stage.

With the ease of a sound editing software, compared to Feld's tapes that on the other hand had the advantage of turning a simple knob in order to adjust the levels, I asked Lasso to balance an ambience recording and a recording of steps I had selected. At first I asked him to remember when he first took me to the bush, when I was clumsy and stuck at close distance behind his back. I asked him to recreate what he noticed at the time - the intrusiveness of my loud steps - and he gave me indications while I adjusted the levels on my laptop. Next I asked him to find the balance that could sound like a good hunter approaching some prey. We also discussed who among our companions managed to be the most silent. Then Lasso guided me again

until the new balance was found. I saved the multitrack edits as "bad hunter" and "good hunter" and used them as references for the extremes of a delicate transition that represented in part my own apprenticeship, in part two ideal types.

In this case, Lasso's help was fundamental for me to capture a perception I clearly did not have at the beginning, of my being noisy, and also to verify my ideas of what a good hunter should sound like. I want to underline how, when an anthropologist is working on sound, for example, it is a big advantage to be able to establish a dialogue in that same medium, minimising the mediation of language (compare Feld and Brenneis 2004: 468). In other words, in order to break that hegemony of language mentioned above, sensory ethnography can use audiovisual media not only as research outputs, but as research tools that allow informants to take a more decisive role in the shaping of the research itself.

In fact, the whole structure of *Kalanda* is born out of collaborative processes. Even though I made all the key decisions concerning the structure and most of the topics of the film, at various stages I discussed the project with a few key figures and gathered their inputs. It was fundamental, once again, to have the possibility of working at some rough cuts in the field and screening them back to the persons involved. The film's original and most characteristic structural trait is derived precisely from this procedure. It is divided into chapters, playing with the structure of a book or manual. This gives to the film a somehow modular structure, which derives from the way I was first of all working at short films that I would then show to their protagonists. This first screening process created the initial two layers of this work: I showed a rough cut of observational footage to the hunters who appeared in it, and recorded their reactions to it in the form of teachings, further explanations, or tales. This is what happens in the chapter on the shotgun, for example. The footage with a distinct grading was recorded before I even started to hunt, in October 2011. I screened that footage to the head of the hunters of Karankasso, Go-Fo Traoré, in July 2012, as a way to propel a conversation on the medicine he had used to wash my shotgun and on rituals and beliefs connected to firearms. The original footage and that

conversation essentially constitute the chapter on the shotgun. I also included a short sequence of the *donsoba* Go-Fo looking at the footage on my laptop.

In another instance, for the chapter on *donso* medicines, I discussed beforehand with Lacole Traoré what structure we could give to the chapter. He suggested he could tell a story, which we rehearsed first to identify a suitable theme. We chose one that exemplified the connection between the power to kill and the power of plants, at the same time giving a reason for the ritual procedures to gather plants in the presence of genies who act as sources of power. In this case the filming process was opposite, so that the "observational" layer was filmed after the sequences I just described. We agreed to film the gathering of a plant only afterwards, and Lacole followed the procedure to prepare a medicine. It is clear in this instance that what I call observational footage was in fact elicited and decided in agreement with the protagonist, with the aim of completing the chapter. The distinction between a stage where I filmed without intervening and a semi-staged part is then quite fragile and shows the artificiality of the idea of purely observational filmmaking. The degree of collaboration I could establish was of course unequal. With the hunters I would meet the most, such as Lasso or my teacher, it was at its maximum. With them I went through different versions of the film project and various cuts. At the minimum end of the spectrum there were the hunters I saw sporadically or could only reach with great difficulty. With them we only had a single screening session.

It should not seem contradictory that an approach to filmmaking that I called "in the first person" uses such a deep degree of collaboration. The idea of filming in the first person has nothing to do with a solitary or solipsistic enterprise, instead it has deep roots in Rouch's conception of *anthropologie partagée*. From the 1950s onwards, the Frenchman made it a methodological praxis of showing his films to the subjects, a practice he called "*contre-don audiovisuel*" (Rouch 1979: 69). But his "shared anthropology" (Rouch 2003: 44; see also Henley 2009: Chapter 15) went beyond the simple oral feedback, to become a performative dialogue based on collaboration and reciprocal transformation (Rouch 1973: 543). It is a filmmaking style that cannot take place without the confidence and trust one gains through sharing access to the ethnographies being produced.



In my case, the issue of trust was especially sensitive because the knowledge of *donsoya* is of the restricted access kind, being reserved to initiates. It was therefore very important for me to discuss the kind of disclosures I would make in the documentary. The film was perfectly understood as a way to transmit knowledge and as such was in danger of overlapping with the teacher-student relationship. I assured that viewing the finished film would not enable anyone to prepare a medicine, recite an incantation or learn other things that are reserved for the *donsow*. Interestingly, I was not entirely prohibited from sharing knowledge as such, but I was told this should happen only in a teacher-student relationship. In other words, if I had chosen a trustworthy person to become my own student it would have been allowed, but the film was considered too open a medium to be allowed to contain useable knowledge. I had no problems in showing many aspects of the life of *donsoya* that are normally private, such as the ceremony of my initiation at the *dankun* - where women and non-*donsow* cannot take part - after screening a cut of the scene to the leaders of the hunters in Karankasso and obtaining their approval.

I also wanted to acknowledge the inherent intersubjectivity of our being-in-the-world (Jackson 1998), so that my film in the first person also uses the second person. As underlined by linguist Émile Benveniste, subjectivity also finds expression in language through the use of the second person, as a way to recognise a subjectivity in the addressed other, the roles of *I* and *you* being reciprocally exchangeable (1971: 224–225). A strategy that I adopted in the film to make the point of view of the camera more personal was to keep myself behind it, so as to have the eyes of the speaking person straight into the lens and his voice addressing me in the second person.

There is a third and final level of footage, the one that ties the whole film together, and this too is the product of some screening and feedback sessions. In a film of which I conceived as a formative journey through the knowledge of *donsoya*, the figure of the teacher is fundamental. Adama Sogo Traoré, in the film as well as during my apprenticeship, was the point of reference to which I would always return. I conceived for him a role similar to that of a narrator, drawing his position in the film from the dynamics of my process of learning with him. First of all, I discussed with him the global film project, in

part because anything I did that involved *donsoya* had to receive his approval as my teacher. But he also helped me identify the relevant themes and suggested with whom to work.

Toward the end of my stay I visited him in his compound in Nyawali. This was very difficult because of the very heavy rains of early August. I brought my laptop, with the rough cuts of most of the film chapters, not so different from the way they are in their final version, and my camera and sound recording gear. As we had agreed, in the course of two days I screened the chapters to Adama and recorded his reflections and comments on them at the end of each screening. Adama performed brilliantly as the great speaker he is, at times solicited by my questions. Visually I chose a tripod, mostly for practical reasons, being alone and having to use for hours a camera and sound recorder with external microphone. I positioned the point of view about 50cm above the ground, in a position that recalls that of a respectful student sitting on a mat. I also eliminated my questions from the final cut, not to de-personalise the camera but to evoke the way, traditionally, a student does not ask questions directly but waits for the teacher to reveal some knowledge.

From the point of view of the film narrative, these interludes featuring Adama represent the return of the student with some experiences - or some footage. Adama comments and sends him to the next step of the apprenticeship, so that the script had to be agreed in advance and I could not swap chapters around. The reason why Adama performs this static role of upper-level teaching or commentary is his great experience and age, but also the fact that shortly after my affiliation with him, in December, he had a serious accident and broke his right arm. Because of this I could not travel with him but frequently visited him in his compound, where we would mostly talk about *donsoya*. My practical training, on the other hand, was mostly left to others, often chosen by him. It is also a common saying among the *donsow* that you can learn something from anyone, so that we greet another *donso* crouching and taking off our hats in sign of respect, addressing each other as *karamogo* - regardless of our relative experience. Adama's accident and its consequences on my apprenticeship also made the film more static and discursive than I had planned in order to represent the embodied

qualities of learning *donsoya*. In this sense, the film reflects the specificities of my own apprenticeship and the processes of screening and feedback that I had put in place. Even though I concentrated my experiments on the representation of perception in the chapter *Learning to Hunt*, I underline how elements of the embodied specificities of *donsoya* appear throughout the film. I think in particular of the sequence in which the *donsoba* Go-Fo Traoré washes and oils my shotgun, showing a strikingly corporeal intimacy with this tool, and to the sequences where I wash myself with a herbal medicine and show its absorption through my skin.

Adama also gives a sense of progression to the film, signalling some key moments like the initiation, at the beginning, or the need for a big quantity of meat to help a companion with the expenses for a ceremony. This is an event that really happened, and I insisted that it would be included to show the reciprocal solidarity that unites a group of fellow students - a *kalanda*, a term that also means "body of teachings" and gives the film its name. At this point Adama surprised me improvising a detail that adds drama to the plot. Some envious hunters used black magic to prevent the group from killing game, but he is aware and gave his students the right countermeasures. He clearly took inspiration from his own biography for this idea and, being a skilled storyteller, knew that the presence of an antagonistic force increases the appeal of a plot.

### **Enactive poetics**

It should be clear from the previous paragraphs in which I use words like plot, drama or staging, that the way I conceived this documentary includes many enacted sequences. This is in part for practical reasons, related to the difficulties of recording an activity, like hunting, which is played on the thin edge that separates perceiving from being perceived, and even expands the limits of perception. Previous ethnographic films on hunting presumably encountered similar difficulties and had to resort to narrative strategies borrowed from fiction films that could create the illusion of a continuity

missed by the camera, as in Marshall's *The Hunters* (Loizos 1993: 22–23). The timeline of *La Chasse au Lion à l'Arc* was also altered since, although the story is presented as being composed of two hunting expeditions, it was actually filmed over seven (Henley 2009: 202).

The link between collaboration and enactment is already present in another film that deals, at least in part, with hunting - one that was crucial in inspiring Rouch's shared anthropology. *Nanook of the North* by Robert Flaherty (1922) was famously filmed thanks to the collaboration between the filmmaker and the protagonist Allakariallak. Sequences of the life of the Inuit hunter and his family, filmed in the Hudson Bay area in extremely difficult conditions for the technology of the time, were agreed and performed thanks to the screenings that Flaherty organised for his subjects. This form of sharing enabled such a level of collaboration that it became possible to overcome certain technical limitations, for example in the igloo scene where Allakariallak/Nanook built a bigger half dome of ice to allow Flaherty's camera enough light to film (Ruby 2000: 90–91). At the time Rouch was writing to praise Flaherty's "participating camera" (Rouch 1974) few anthropologists had understood the value and ethical awareness of this methodology (compare for example Collier and Collier 1986: 155).

If *Kalanda* includes so many scenes collaboratively agreed and performed, it is also because the line separating teaching to the apprentice and performing for the camera is often blurred. On a few occasions the hunters were performing for the camera as much as they were for me; so much so that the film project and my apprenticeship were intertwined. For example in the second part of the chapter on amulets Go-Fatogoma Traoré explains and demonstrates how to prepare a talisman made of plant leaves. On that day he taught me a few more medicines, but we selected the one I filmed in a single, non-rehearsed take as suitable to become part of the film. In other words the *act of filming* constituted my way of learning that procedure, which in the following days I repeated on my own. This instance clearly resists any classification as "enacted" versus "authentic" because the filming of the documentary and the path of my apprenticeship had consistently overlapped. The best example to illustrate this point is the killing of the antelope that appears in the prologue. I shot that animal on the night of the 15

May 2012, and it represented a major achievement in my year of apprenticeship, at least in terms of results. My teacher Adama had pushed me to try to kill a bigger animal, especially one that requires a ritual to exorcise its *nyama* - and thus belongs to a different, more prestigious category than the small animals I had killed until then. It was also, for him, a matter of demonstrating his value as a teacher through the exploits of his foreign student. But I was also hoping for that kind of prey for its role in the documentary, which I had already planned - so that the night it finally happened I had all the equipment ready. Through that killing I gained the respect and praise of the hunters, and a conclusion for my film. All these ambiguities and overlaps between the apprenticeship of the camera-subject and my year-long apprenticeship in the field constitute what for me is an essential quality of a filmmaking style in the first person, namely that the filmmaker becomes part of the events or influences them in a determining way.

I mentioned above how I borrowed the expression "in the first person" from Rouch's *Tourou et Bitti*. I consider that short film a landmark in visual anthropology not just for this expression, but also for Rouch's role in it. As Feld writes, "he plays the role of both participant and catalyst as he films" (2003: 10). Reflecting on his role in a pioneering article, the Frenchman likened his own *ciné-transe* to the trance of the Songhai mediums he was filming (Rouch 1973: 542–543; see also Henley 2009: Chapter 12). But during the possession ceremony filmed in *Tourou et Bitti*, which until Rouch's arrival was fruitless, it is the man with the movie camera who seems to act as the decisive factor for the trance to start (Rouch 1973: 544; Stoller 1992: 161–173). Rouch was not new to using the camera as a catalyst and to provoking his subjects to action. Classic examples are in *Chronique d'un été* (Rouch and Morin 1960), where his provocations off and on camera literally create certain situations (Henley 2009: Chapter 8). Rouch himself, in an interview, described his approach as "intervening to provoke a certain reality" (Taylor 1991: 99).

My own work for *Kalanda* took inspiration from Rouch's films and his approach to participation, interaction and collaboration. So the scenes I described as enacted are not so much enacted for the film but *enacted by the film*, in a conception that sees filming as a way of acting in and on reality and

not documenting it. The power of enactment and its relevance for anthropology have recently been demonstrated in a striking way by the documentary *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer 2012), where the filmmaker pushes a perpetrator of the 1965-66 killings in Indonesia to re-create for a film project tortures, killings and self-absolatory afterworlds in a process of coping with what he has done. All along, this process provides surreal and paradoxical moments, to the point that the viewer starts to question the "reality" of a country where the executors of a genocide are celebrated as heroes by the media. The re-enacted scenes seem to have a profound effect on the protagonist, who by the end of the film appears to undergo a deep remorse for what he has done. But the "reality" of the "enacted," which is the film's main point, has also extended to the political sphere, because the global success of *The Act of Killing* is putting the Indonesian government under pressure for an official apology.

Elsewhere (Ferrarini 2008; 2011b) I have written of such methodologies based on participation as interaction and participation as collaboration as an example of *enactive poetics*.<sup>61</sup> The term enactive is taken from neurophenomenologist Francisco Varela, who wrote about the enactive paradigm in the cognitive sciences (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). As for Gibson, for Varela the starting point was a critique of all representationalist models of cognition, meaning those theories based on the reconstruction of the given properties of an external reality inside the mind of the subject. Any theory based on this Cartesian split between subject and object, wrote Varela, suits simple and controlled situations and approaches cognition as problem solving.<sup>62</sup> Varela's idea is to consider what is commonly called the subject and object of cognition, or "organism and environment as bound together in reciprocal specification and selection" (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991: 174). This relationship is the enaction of a world through

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<sup>61</sup> I have encountered the application of Varela's ideas to ethnographic film for the first time in the works of Francesco Marano (2007: Chapter 6).

<sup>62</sup> Varela joins phenomenological critiques to computationalist approaches to artificial intelligence, such as that of Dreyfus (1972; 1992).

embodied action, so that perception is not just internal representation but, as it is for Gibson, an action that creates an environment.<sup>63</sup>

Varela's conception of embodied cognition that enacts a world - or an environment, from an ecological perspective - can be applied to the issues I have highlighted in my own film-work, trying to represent sensory experience from an embodied perspective, whilst at the same time interacting with the filmed subjects in a collaborative and dialogic effort to create a reality. This I would call an ecological approach to ethnographic filmmaking, one that tries to go beyond text, entering into the sensory domain of what cannot be expressed by language, and at the same time puts into practice participation as interaction and collaboration, with an interventionist stance that goes beyond documentation. A very important point for me is that sensoriality and participation are united at an epistemological level. Non-representationalist theories of knowledge, like those of Gibson or Varela, tie together what we usually call subject and object to the point of undermining the distinction. The idea of an environment dependent on the organism is opposed to a Cartesian space with given characteristics that have to be reconstructed inside the mind. This means that the way we know the world is by acting upon it, and if applied to ethnography calls for a radically participatory method - which I tried to put in practice during my fieldwork and in the making of my film *Kalanda*.

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<sup>63</sup> Varela also echoes Merleau-Ponty, especially "on pourrait dire aussi que le comportement est la cause première de toutes les stimulations. Ainsi la forme de l'excitant est créée par l'organisme lui-même, par sa manière propre de s'offrir aux actions du dehors. [...] c'est lui [...] qui choisit dans le monde physique les stimuli auxquels il sera sensible" (1942: 11–12). Both Varela and Gibson seem to owe much to the French philosopher, but whereas for Varela the debt is explicitly acknowledged, Gibson never quotes Merleau-Ponty (see Sanders 1993).

# PART 4 - FROM EMBODIMENT TO ECOLOGY



## Chapter 7 - The Embodiment of *Donsoya*

The previous part has dealt with the sensory knowledge that distinguishes hunters from other frequenters of the bush. But it is worth remembering again that not all hunters are *donsow*. So even though I believe perceptual skills form a very important component of the knowledge of *donsoya*, they do not provide a complete answer to the original question of what makes a *donso*.

The initiatory knowledge that is communicated from teacher to student is, for many of the *donsow* I talked to, the decisive factor that makes them different from other hunters. This kind of knowledge has been studied more extensively in the works on *donsoya* I referenced in Chapter 1, and I have been tempted to set it against the sensory knowledge described in Chapter 5. I can say in fact that when I initially I went to the field I did not want to concentrate my research on forms of knowledge that could be conceptualised and expressed through language. I therefore had in my mind to stay away from fields of enquiry such as magic, rituals, myths and epics, to concentrate on what happened in the bush and the embodied knowledge of *donsoya*. But not only was this spatial division between the embodied, procedural knowledge of the bush and the conceptual, propositional knowledge of the village untenable, but the very course of my fieldwork showed me the important role of rituals, magic and other forms of knowledge transmitted through language, as it emerges from the previous chapters. As my apprenticeship in *donsoya* progressed, I realised that the *donsow* themselves often do not apply a clear distinction between procedural and propositional knowledge. Both modalities of knowing, what Ryle famously called "knowing how" and "knowing that" (1949) are categorised as *lonni* - from the verb to know, *ka lon*, in Bambara/Bamana *ka don*. The concept of *lonni* in the area seems to have

distinctly material and embodied aspects, some of which I will analyse in the following two chapters.

My initial reaction to the primarily textual focus of previous approaches to the knowledge of *donsoya* also had a major theoretical flaw, in that I had immediately classified initiatory knowledge as a form of exclusively propositional knowledge, something superorganic that constituted a level added on top of the *enskilment* described in Chapter 5. I had not considered how even forms of knowledge transmitted through language can have important bodily components and ecological relevance, running into a contradiction with the phenomenological approach I adopted so far. I was setting up an essentialist dichotomy between forms of embodied versus conceptual knowledge, and classifying aspects of *donsoya* in either the former or the latter category. The present chapter and the next one are precisely going to look at magic, ritual, incantations, fetishes and amulets as forms of knowledge that blur the division between the bodily and the conceptual dimensions. In other words, I am going to look at the embodied aspects of objects and practices that have mostly been described through symbolic or textual analyses, that is, as forms of intellectual knowledge - in the broadest sense of information that is stored and processed. I will try to demonstrate how they actually form decisive intersections in a network that connects, on different levels, perception and medicines, the bush and the body of the *donso*, students and teachers, political and mystical power.

A further link to the previous chapters is constituted by the methodological approach that brought me to experiment directly with the subject matter of the present chapter and of the next one. Whenever I talk about medicines, amulets or fetishes it is because I was involved with them as part of my apprenticeship in *donsoya*, not unlike how I based part of my observations of hunting on my own practice.

## Embodied knowledge

The initiatory knowledge of *donsoya*, be it conceptualised and expressed through words or not, interacts very much with the body of the hunter. But this aspect has been almost completely overlooked by previous contributions on *donsoya*, both in the scholarship on cosmology and rituals and in that on ecology, politics and violence (compare Chapter 1). As I will show in this chapter, introducing such a perspective in the scholarship on *donsoya* requires a different approach to the body than seeing it as the physical substrate through which the mind knows the world. What is required is a conception of a phenomenal body, not just a physiological entity but as it is experienced, a unitary entity inhabiting the world. To make sense of the conception of knowledge that emerges from an initiation to *donsoya*, and of the body of the *donso* that such a conception presupposes, I need to look at recent contributions on embodiment in anthropology. This is not an attempt at an anthropology of the body because, with Csordas, I believe that "If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience, then studies under the rubric of embodiment are not "about" the body per se. Instead, they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world" (1999: 143). Such is the sense of the term embodiment, a word that denotes a process, "a shift from viewing the body as a nongendered, prediscursive phenomenon that plays a central role in perception, cognition, action, and nature to a *way* of living or inhabiting the world through one's acculturated body" (Weiss and Haber 1999a: xiii).

Such a unitary conception of embodiment contests the Cartesian split between mind and body. While it is undeniable that it is possible to experience the body as an object, or the separation between a mental and a physical domain, these are exceptions that cannot represent the totality of human existence. But given the striking character of these ways of experiencing, their importance is often overemphasised, confirming the Cartesian split. The everyday, unmarked experience of the body is rather that of an absence or disappearance (Leder 1990; see also Csordas 1990: 6). With

Merleau-Ponty, the body is an existential modality, not something one has, but something one is (1945: 175).

What is hard to grasp, the most unmarked form of our *being-in-the-world*, is thus our corporeality. Heidegger's hyphenated expression (1962), unlike many dichotomies inspired by Descartes, unites subject and object of knowledge, mind and world - which should not be thought of as separate domains but structurally coupled, as in Gibson. Thinking of an external world with given properties remains a common and useful praxis in many situations, but has its foundations in an embodied being-in-the-world. Perceiving the world is being part of it, so that the subject-object distinction is secondary to a more fundamental pre-objective state (Merleau-Ponty 1945). Merleau-Ponty rejected the conception of the body as a physical reality that follows the orders coming from the mind, proposing a corporeal intentionality that is non-representational: in other words, the activities of the body are not meant to be expression of some internal state of mind. The meaning is in the action itself, and in its consequences: "Dans le geste de la main qui se lève vers un objet est enfermée une référence à l'objet non pas comme objet représenté, mais comme cette chose très déterminée vers laquelle nous nous projetons, auprès de laquelle nous sommes par anticipation, que nous hantons" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 160–161) .

This is a kind of meaning that is not necessarily located in the mind, but can do without representation through signs and symbols. Knowledge is not just propositional, then, but also procedural, a *praktognosie* or practical knowledge: "La conscience est originairement non pas un « je pense que » mais un « je peux »" (*idem*: 160).

Michael Jackson followed Merleau-Ponty when he critiqued the way the early anthropology of the body has treated "body praxis as secondary to verbal praxis" (Jackson 1983: 328), following trends in the study of bodily communication like those of Birdwhistell (kinesics, 1970) and Hall (proxemics, 1959). Furthermore, structuralist anthropologists like Mary Douglas (1978 in Jackson 1983: 329) treated the body mainly as an image of society, expressing the relation of the individual to the group. This perspective treats, in a very Cartesian way, the body as matter on which mind or society act. The body as subject, that is as basis for human embodied

experience, has been neglected for too long, as anthropologists made of the body either a way to express ideas or a cosmological symbol (Jackson 1983). Once again this tendency echoes a superorganic idea of culture, opposed to a natural substrate that is common to the whole human species.

When Jackson was writing, at the beginning of the 1980s, the main two contributions that explored the body as a subject that enacts and reproduces culture were attributable to Marcel Mauss and to Pierre Bourdieu. Mauss, with his pioneering essay *Techniques of the Body* (1973 [1936]), underlined the cultural specificity of the body's practical uses. Introducing the idea of *habitus*, he appropriated for the social sciences a subject traditionally associated with the natural sciences. Without ever defining the term with precision, he gathered under the label of *habitus* socially shared skills and techniques. Another remarkable point in the work of Mauss was the intuition whereby the body is at the same time the target of the influence of culture and the very means that perpetuates this same influence. This reciprocity between social determinism and individual autonomy is retraceable in Bourdieu's interpretation of *habitus* (1977). In part an objectification of the social structure and in part the way these same structures reproduce themselves - "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (*idem*: 72) - *habitus* is for Bourdieu more than just a collection of bodily techniques. Yet it is unclear how the *embodiment* of *habitus* works and how it can be studied, so that some have seen the concept as "merely the explanatory bridge to resolve theoretical problems, such as the relationship between structure and agency" (Downey 2007: 243).

Even with their differences and contradictions, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Bourdieu's *habitus* are at the roots of the non-dualistic paradigm of embodiment. According to Csordas, this approach does not consider the body as an object of study for anthropology, but as "the existential ground of culture" (1990: 5). Embodiment is then a way of re-thinking perception, the mind and body, intersubjectivity and emotions in a perspective called cultural phenomenology, to bring together "the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed" (Csordas 1999: 143). Csordas proposes to add to the study of representations and symbols an interest for embodied

experience: "semiotics gives us textuality in order to understand representation, phenomenology gives us embodiment in order to understand being-in-the-world" (*idem*: 147). Most notably, the challenges raised by Jackson and Csordas have been taken up by the whole sensory turn, as seen in Chapter 5, and by contributions in medical anthropology (for example Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; Kaufman 1988; Kleinman and Kleinman 1991; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

Is this complementarity between being-in-the-world and representations destined to similarly oppose skills and propositional knowledge? I believe the answer to making sense of an apprenticeship in *donsoya* is to expand the notion of knowledge without limiting it to its propositional version, rather than to oppose it to skill. A rigid opposition would be highly contradictory, and Farnell notes: "Ironically perhaps, the postmodern, phenomenological valorization of the sensuous usually retains the dualistic terms of the Platonic legacy, abandoning what counts as rationality to intellectualists, rather than making a case for the rationality of feeling" (1999: 346). More fertile is the approach of recent contributions, many of which have relied on phenomenology and on the latest developments of cognitive sciences, which have sought to account for an embodied knowledge (Goulet and Granville Miller 2007b; Harris 2007a; Weiss and Haber 1999b). By including practical knowledge, they built upon related contributions on the anthropology of skills (Grasseni 2009; Gibson and Ingold 1993; Ingold 2000a: Part III).

One important principle pointed out by this literature is that most forms of knowledge are situated, that is, they do not take place in an abstract detachment but in the continuity of the experience of an environment. As a consequence, the essentialist distinction between procedural and propositional knowledge is rejected: "in the enactment of what we know, the two kinds are merged and are both activities and convey meaning" (Harris 2007b: 3). At the same time, these works state the necessity of including organic and physiological processes along with the semiotic dimension of symbols and meanings - because they are often inextricable (see Bloch 1998).

Philosopher Mark Johnson has argued how "there could be a connection between structures of our bodily activity and what we think of as our 'higher' cognitive operations" (1999: 81). These operations are grounded in our bodies

and environments so that "reason is embodied" (1987: 100). With Lakoff, Johnson has been a proponent of a theory of language based on embodied metaphors, which form the ground of a connection between propositional knowledge and the environment (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Inspired, among others, by these developments in philosophy, linguistics and cognitive sciences, Trevor Marchand has looked at construction sites in Djenne, Mali, as "environments of situated learning" (which he takes from Lave and Wenger 1991). Recent developments of neurology such as mirror neurons provide a way to account for the unsatisfactory linguistic communication taking place between masons, and Marchand claims that language cannot be the only window on cognition (2007: 184). In a synergy of skill and verbal communication, masons do not use mental schemes but act and react in an environmental context made of abilities, words, materiality and intersubjective relationships.

The single approach that most radically and coherently pursued the implications of conceiving an *embodied mind* is the already mentioned enactive paradigm. Francisco Varela claimed that the mind cannot be separated from "the entire organism" or from an "outside environment" (1999: 73–74). What we usually call the subject and object of knowledge are in fact arising from a process of mutual specification and do not exist separately. Merleau-Ponty's principle whereby the mind is not limited to the body, but is rather immanent in the world - a principle that loosely connects also to Bateson's work (1979) - is taken here to the extreme consequences, and the sense of bounded self as we habitually conceive it is undermined. We have now come full circle but with more radical conclusions: we can think the mind-body-environment system with permeable boundaries, where knowledge is something enacted and performed in such a relational context.

I want to draw two consequences from this short review of approaches to embodied knowledge, to guide the analysis of the knowledge of *donsoya* that follows. First, knowledge is not exclusively an intellectual resource but also involves material components. This helps explain how, when a *donso* looks for initiatory knowledge such as medicinal recipes or amulets, he is also looking for something that transforms his body and his way of being in the environment - with Gibson, his affordances. These material forms of

knowledge influence not just a body as such, but the whole relationship with the bush, character and gender, as I will show in the rest of the chapter. Embodiment then refers to a process whereby these relationships between materiality, environment and initiatory knowledge are enacted.

This is strictly connected to my second point, because it emerges from my apprenticeship in *donsoya* how embodiment is sometimes purposefully driven through certain objects - like amulets and fetishes - and other material substances - like herbal medicines. I want to take up Sheets-Johnstone's call to use embodiment as a perspective on *dynamic* processes, rather than as a simple bridge between mind and body that does not deny the dualism (2011: 119). Some studies in fact use the label of embodiment just to refer to an inscription of meaning on the body, like in a recent article by Hiroko Ikuta that reads a Alaskan dance as the encoding of a relationship with the environment (2011). It is important to stress the reciprocity and interconnectedness of organism and environment also in processes of embodiment as relational transformation. Bodies do not just take up the habitus, but the malleability of the body, including "perceptual, physiological and behavioural change" (Downey 2007: 236), occurs at given times in given situations. A description of the techniques of the body of the *donsow* that uses habitus in a rigid, non-processual way, like Kedzierska's (2006), runs the risk of becoming unrealistically normative and lose track of the real aim of those techniques, killing animals. In other words, from an ecological perspective, embodiment is a transformation of the self as much as a transformation of the environment through modifications of perception and sensibility.

I move now to account for the way *donsoya* provides the means for such an embodied transformation. In addition to the enskilment of the senses already described, the initiatory knowledge of *donsoya* constitutes a powerful resource to influence the character, the physical structure and even the perceptions of the hunter.



## Embodying *donsoya*

One night in December 2011, as I was lying on my mat about to fall asleep, Lasso knocked on my door - quite strange, I thought, because he knew that by that time I was usually under the mosquito net. He said he had received a call from Diakalia, Adama's son, but they could not speak for very long before his phone battery ran out. Diakalia told him that during the day Adama had had a serious accident, he could not understand all the details but it involved a tree and the old man had to be taken to Bobo Dioulasso. Lasso used my phone to call Diakalia back, and managed to speak to Adama himself, who sounded very exhausted. We reconstructed how the accident happened, for while Adama was showing his grandson Seydou the best way to cut a dead tree, the tree fell and crushed his right arm against some rocks. He added very dramatically that some of his bone fragments remained under the tree.

Early the following day I drove to Bobo, to visit Adama at the Sourou Sanou hospital. I found his son Diakalia, his brother Lacole and fourth wife Kaatou sitting outside the radiography wing. Adama was inside, on a stretcher, his arm wrapped from the shoulder to the tip of the fingers in a thick bandage. Pale, his voice weaker than usual, he explained again what had happened, adding that he had lost a lot of blood, but that, "thank God," his head was untouched. Later I will see a radiography of his arm, showing a bad fracture in the middle of the ulna and radius bones. He got out of the hospital in a few days, to move to the house of his son Dramane in Bobo. He already looked very different when I visited him there. He had regained all his energy and his voice was sharp when he complained about the fact that he had undergone a double surgery and had to pay twice. He felt 'ripped off' by the doctors, and was having to go to the hospital every three days to disinfect the wounds on his arm and fingers, which had been stitched after the operation. He was even angrier because he could not go back to Nyawali, to check that his wives and kids would finish shelling the corn from the maize cobs. He did not like having to stay in town and wanted the doctors to give him permission to get back home. I noticed he had a semi-elastic bandage and

not a plaster cast. Dramane showed me a radiography image taken after the surgery, it showed an intramedullary pin in the ulna, sticking out of his elbow, and a plate joining the two parts of the radius. I told Adama I was not a doctor but for sure those fractures would take long to heal. He nodded grimly, saying that the bones of an old man get harder and take more time to repair.

This episode was the beginning of a long period of trouble for Adama, characterised by various visits to the hospital, misunderstandings with the doctors, and failure of the therapies he was administered. His forearm would periodically swell and kept hurting constantly. The intramedullary pin would finally be removed in March, but I would hear Adama say many times that the bone was not healing until, at the end of May, following a banal accident, the remaining plate in his arm bent and the endings of his fracture separated again. When I reached him in Bobo he was furious, complaining about the expenses he had sustained and the fact that after six months he was starting from scratch again with his arm broken. He was now waiting to undergo surgery again, his forearm unnaturally bent in the middle, but was determined not to let the doctors implant any other nail or plate.

The reason, he explained, lay in the *donso* medicines he had been literally brought up with. His father was a *donso*, son of a *donso*, and since his infancy would give him various preparations to protect and reinforce him. Adama did not give me much details on those preparations, except that through drinking them and being washed with them he had acquired an invulnerability to metal objects - mostly blades and bullets. Such medicines - *negefla* in Jula - are considered a specialty of the *donsow*. At that time, he underlined, in Samogogwan there were no doctors and people would heal themselves with *farafinfla* - literally the black man's medicine, or traditional practices. When the first vaccinations campaigns arrived in the area his father would keep his children in the house for fear that they would be forcibly inoculated with a white man's medicine (compare Herbert 1975). Adama's words really told a story of two separate medical worlds, the one brought by the French, which involved piercing and opening the body, and the native one based on impregnation and the permeability of the body. Part of the clash between these two systems had taken place in Adama's own body:

"After my father died, we saw that new diseases were appearing. I realised that the medicines my father had given me would prevent a doctor from performing surgery or even from giving an injection. So I worked to partially invert the effect of those medicines to allow the doctors to perform their therapies. But the substances I was brought up with remain deep in my bones, and this is why during six months metal and bone could not work together." So although Adama was positing a very stark dichotomy between local healing practices and Western biomedicine, he was conscious that the two worlds had come into contact and intermixed, and he found himself having to pay the price of his in-betweenness. But he had not given up the protection of the plants that composed his father's medicines. He was still using them - although in a different format. He told me he was wearing talismans made with those same plants, which had similar effects but with the advantage of being removable, so that he could take them off before he needed to go to the doctor's.

Adama's accident had an important impact on my fieldwork, and made my apprenticeship with him less about the practice and experience of travelling together and much more based on the exchange of spoken words. When I left Burkina Faso, at the end of August 2012, his fracture was still far from healed. He had managed to obtain assurances from the doctors that nothing be implanted in his arm again, and after new surgery had travelled to a Dafing village, famous for its specialists in fracture manipulation. He had his arm treated – a very painful procedure of manual repositioning of the bones - and the plaster he had received from the hospital was replaced with a simple round of cane splints, kept in place by a bandage. He was much more optimistic now that no metal was interfering with his healing process.

I also mention this episode because it shows something striking and seldom underlined in previous literature, namely the way the knowledge of *donsoya* acts in depth on a hunter's body. But it is very important to underline that these changes are not limited to the body as a material entity separate from the mind. Just as Adama could speak of the changes in the way his body responded to the medicines, he could describe the changes in his attitude caused by those same preparations. The preparations of the *donsow*, he explained, as a common effect "harden the soul" of the hunter - in Jula *ka ja*

*gweleya*. What I translated with soul, *ja*, is a word normally presented next to other components in the literature on personhood in the Mande area (Henry 1910: 41–43). Germaine Dieterlen, in a chapter on the notion of person in *Essai sur la Religion Bambara* (1951), translates *ja* - or *dya* - as double, shadow or twin of the opposite sex. It is female for a man, and masculine for a woman, and with *ni* - the vital force - distinguishes animated beings like humans and non-human animals from vegetal life (*idem*: 57-60). But a person is only complete with *tere* - the personality and character - and *wanzo* - the antisocial principle present in uncircumcised children.

Even though Dieterlen presents these principles as separate from the physical body, she points out that it is better to include in a study of the Mande person the connections between these elements, to better understand their status and functions (*idem*: 65). For example a man's *tere* is partly determined by physical features, and while *wanzo* is a trait we would define of character it resides in the foreskin and clitoris, and is removed at the time of the circumcision. Certain other parts of the body are considered the location and vehicle of *ni* and *dya* - most notably blood. Although Dieterlen adopts a mainly symbolic approach to the analysis of these conceptions, it is evident how in them the body is indeed *mindful* (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), and certain techniques influence character, attitude and gender through action directed on the body. One classic example is circumcision, traditionally practiced as part of the rituals of passage into adulthood, and which is considered the procedure that definitively marks the sexual identity of a child by removing his female - or her male - part (see Griaule 1948a; Jackson 1977: 211; McNaughton 1988a: 66–71).

The conception of the body I encountered in the field resonates with the Bambara one, revealing a permeable and malleable body. To my surprise, only a minimal part of the medicines I prepared and consumed during my apprenticeship were to be ingested. I realised most were to be absorbed through the skin, which appeared as a porous interface capable of letting many substances in. The main technique was that of washing the whole body with a preparation: I was told I should let the liquid dry off my skin, and not wash again for at least 24 hours. The evaporation and the successive period are in fact the moments the medicine is absorbed into the body. Another

technique includes mixing a powdered preparation with shea butter and rubbing it on the skin. The technique of fumigating with the smoke of a preparation works in a similar way but its effects are not considered as durable as the washing (Pageard 1967).

I asked Adama what he meant by *ja*, and it emerged that a nuanced distinction between the components of a person, such as Dieterlen's, was not part of his vocabulary. With *ja* he just referred to a man's character, not unlike the word spirit that in English refers both to an immaterial entity and to a mood (compare the definition in Bailleul 1996: 152). He explained that the hardening refers to an increased determination, courage and self-mastery, and it is fascinating to see how the hardening of the body goes hand in hand with that of the character. I stress that this hardening is not exactly metaphorical, because another companion effect of *donso* medicines such as the one I was given the day of my affiliation ritual with Adama was to prevent a *subaga* - a witch - from changing my *ja* into that of an animal and eating it. The *ja* of a *donso* is especially hard to transform, thanks to the medicines he consumes. By the same token, witches are believed to attack children more easily, precisely because their *ja* is less solid (compare Tauxier 1927: 19–25).

The point at which these medicines act on a person is so deep, especially after a lifetime's use, that their effects become hereditary. The son of a *donso* is likely to inherit some of the personality features - *ja* - his father acquired, thanks to the preparations the latter assumed throughout his hunting career. This process of absorption works independently of gender, and the preparations work just as well on a man as on a woman. Their effects can also be transmitted to a daughter, in the absence of male sons.

This detail is particularly interesting if we consider that the hardening of the soul, the increased determination, courage and self-mastery are among the fundamental traits of masculinity - *ceya*. Adama explained to me the meaning of this word, literally the quality of being a man, by pointing at a young boy: "Look at that boy" he told me. "He is a boy - *dence* - but he has no *ceya*." Adama played with the word *ce*, which means in Jula both man and male and is used as a suffix to assign the male gender to a word: for example *saga*, sheep, can be specified as *sagace* - ram. So the boy was no doubt male, but his

masculinity was not developed because he had not entered manhood and lacked certain qualities of adult men.

But what constitutes *ceya*, then? Intrigued by that conversation with Adama I contrasted his point of view with that of other hunters, and observed a certain agreement on masculinity as an essentially *moral* characterisation. Besides bravery and resolution, "knowledge" also makes *ceya* - "*lonni bi ceya ke*." A man becomes more brave and self-assured because of the knowledge he acquires and the means that derive from this. The hunters referred here to occult knowledge, to the power deriving from it and to the capacity of administering this knowledge with caution. Personal and political power are often linked to the acquisition of knowledge in this part of Africa (Saul 2006b). Adama had said of the boy: "*Denmisenw ti se ka fênw kònò mara*" - literally children cannot keep things inside. This is not really an incapacity to keep secrets, because in the Mande area men of knowledge are well aware of the necessity of carefully revealing bits of what they know to increase their prestige (compare Piot 1993). By the same token, the Jula term that is usually translated as secret, *gundo*, would better be rendered as restricted access knowledge (Jansen 2000: 106).

The capacity to be parsimonious with their knowledge is what sets apart fully grown-up men from children and women, and motivates their exclusion from *donsoya*. In a few instances I heard a *donso* admit that a woman could make an excellent hunter, and could learn *donsoya* just as a man. But what women miss are the nerve and the secrecy of men. The relationship between the monopoly of certain knowledge and dominant gender roles has been well documented in the anthropological literature on Amazonian peoples (for example Hugh-Jones 1979; McCallum 1994; Murphy and Murphy 1974) and in Melanesia (for example Feld 1998; Strathern 1990) or comparatively across the two areas (Gregor and Tuzin 2001; Godelier 2007: Chapter 4). For Mande Africa the topic has been less explored (but see Brett-Smith 1994; Herbert 1993; Leach 1994). Treating the issue of the exclusion of women from *donsoya* would require exploring, in addition to the gendered politics of knowledge, women's association with the domestic sphere and the forms of feminine esoteric knowledge in Mande society. I will limit myself to remarking how, from a description of the effects of *donso* medicines, the attribution of

gendered characteristics reveals again a malleable body deeply interconnected with aspects of the personality - as locally conceived through the term *ja*. This implies multiple cases of ambiguity, for example in the case in which a *donso* with no male sons transmits a "hardened" soul to his daughter and perhaps instructs her in the knowledge of *donsoya*, including treating her with herbal medicine. One such woman can have difficulties in the relationship with her husband, because she will be rebellious and will defy or even attack him - not quite conforming to the gender roles of the patriarchal Mande societies.

*Donsoya* is apparently a knowledge monopolised by men, yet it includes situations of gender ambiguity. For example, most people normally state that women cannot become *donsow*, but this is not always true. Adama reported the example of Dakoro Tiefing Coulibaly's daughters, who were initiated and would be present at *dankun* ceremonies, normally strictly prohibited to women. They would not actively participate in the ritual though, and like most of the women who are initiated often are so merely for reasons connected to the politics of associations, female *donsow* are in fact kept outside most decisional roles and do not practice hunting.<sup>64</sup>

What I want to underline about these processes of bodily change is that they show the interconnectedness of the knowledge of the body - the enskilment of perception I described in Chapter 5 - and of the initiatory knowledge made of medicinal recipes and incantations - forms of knowledge that can be translated into linguistic propositions. The more I became familiar with this latter kind of knowledge, the more I realised that *donsow* like my teacher did not conceive of these two domains of knowledge as necessarily separate.

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<sup>64</sup> Women in oral literature (Conrad 1999), and especially in *donso* epics, have a very important role, sometimes even becoming the real hero at the expenses of the male protagonist (examples in Thoyer 1995; Traoré 2000: 214–229). In Chapter 1 I have also mentioned how the myths of origin of *donsoya* give, in some cases, a more important role to the female entity Sanene. But once again what is common in songs and myths is not commonly part of the practice of *donsoya*. The musician of the *donsow* is also at times called "the woman of the hunters" and where I did research can be "married" by a *donsoba* with a massive donation of meat or knowledge. Most likely its role of dependency and of key to the circulation of knowledge (see Chapter 1) contribute to his feminisation (also compare Colleyn 1988a: 154).

## Kinds of knowledge

One day, toward the end of my research, I was asking Adama some questions, sitting on a mat next to his feet. I started by asking very simply, what if a *donso* and a common man<sup>65</sup> enter the bush together, do they see the same things? Adama replied negatively: "When you enter *donsoya*, you become different for all the things you do and see. *Donsoya* is learning [*donsoya, kalan lo*]. Then the *donso* will see more things, because of all the things he knows."

He continued, making clearer what he meant by knowledge: "Look at this herb," and he pointed at a very short grass growing at the edge of his court, the most unassuming variety you can think of "with this you can make a preparation to hunt *tanko* [a massive antelope, the Western Hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus major*)]. Think of the mango tree, or the shea tree, most people see them only as food, but we know how many things you can do with them."

The kind of knowledge Adama referred to was twofold: at the beginning he mentioned the experience one acquires through the practice of hunting, the perceptual skills I mentioned previously. He was referring to experience in the etymological sense of knowledge acquired through repeated attempts, or "going through" (see Turner's remarks in 1986: 35). I can roughly equate this knowledge learned by doing to *enskilment*. And as I showed through my own account, learning to hunt was very much a training of perception. In the field, I started to realise pretty soon that being a hunter was also to have special, or more developed, perceptual skills. Being able to acquire them, at least in part, offered me a unique perspective that no hunter could ever report to me in speech. This is a point that somehow gets through from some literature on other hunting societies around the world. Mariane Ferme, for example, attributes to Mende hunters "powers of dissimulation (the need to make themselves invisible in the surrounding landscape), as well as [...] the ability to identify the traces left behind by prey or enemy and to recognize the

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<sup>65</sup> "Common man" is the translation for the Jula expression *mogo gwansang*, normal or simple person, which is commonly used by *donsow* and has no particularly derogatory meaning.



guises in which they conceal themselves" (2001: 26). Willerslev says of the Yukaghir hunter that he "has lived and worked in the same territory for years and whose powers of perception and action have been fine-tuned to pick up the sights, sounds, and even smells that constitute the specific atmosphere of its various locations" (2007: 167) and that "the experienced hunter gives to the inexperienced one [...] specific contexts of experience through which the novice can develop his own powers of perception and action" (*idem*: 169). Finally, Steven Feld remembers how Kaluli hunters were among his best informants and most useful collaborators in locating bird calls in Bosavi, New Guinea (1982).

This point was somehow confirmed by some comments I heard about the *donsow*, made by common villagers. Here the distinction between a hunter and a *donso* becomes critical, for the former category includes the latter. As the proverb goes "*Marifatigi bèe tè donso ye* - Not every owner of a shotgun is a hunter" (reported in Jansen 2008: 249). So if all skilled hunters become particularly aware of the bush environment and of their own interaction with it, especially in a synaesthetic interplay of sounds and images as described in Chapter 5, people in Burkina hold *donsow* able to perceive even more than this.

Adama had referred to a second meaning of the word knowledge (*lonni*), mentioning a preparation specific to hunting a given animal. One of the recognised prerogatives of the *donsow* is to know the properties of plants, as part of their knowledge of the bush. They are one of the categories of people who prepare medicines in the Mande world, along with many elders, diviners, Muslim scholars, fetish masters and musicians, in other words anyone who holds *lonni* - in this case initiatory knowledge - of some kind. The Jula term *fla* (a contraction of *fula*, often *fura* in the closely related Bambara/Bamanan variety of Mali) in fact refers not only to healing medicines, but to any preparation that is aimed at sorting an effect upon its consumption. The word shifts its meaning according to the compounds it forms, including examples as varied as a protection from bullets or blades (*negefla*), a medicine against a cold (*murafla*), rat poison (*nynanfla*) or an herbicide (*binfla*). If one wants to find specificity to the category of *donsofla*, as I once tried to do with the help of Adama's brother Lacole, it refers to its

destination - an initiated *donso* only - or function - related to hunting, be it protective or revelatory of game.

I am particularly interested in this latter function, for Adama referred directly to it when he said that a *donso* sees more because of what he knows. Lasso had told me since the beginning that Adama was a great hunter because he knew many preparations to kill animals. He knew the plants and the procedures, including the right incantations, to prepare mixtures with which the hunter has to wash his body. He will then go to the hunt with the certainty of succeeding in finding the animal. So Adama was tying together the knowledge of medicines and the capacities to perceive, confirming the interconnectedness of initiatory knowledge and enskilment of perception.

Later chats with Adama made clearer a very important detail: the preparation works in making the animal *visible*. In other words, it gives you the certainty of seeing it, which means that killing is then the hunter's business, and that it will not materialise an animal in an area where there are none. I started to realise that this kind of *donsofla* somehow acts on perception, improving it or removing possible magical obstacles to it. But it does not exempt the hunter from putting to use his skills in approaching and shooting his prey, so that the connection between initiatory knowledge and enskilled perception is again confirmed. It would be limiting to say that such preparations improve a *donso's* perception, simply in the sense of giving him a better eyesight or hearing. These medicines are not quite the equivalent of a pair of binoculars, rather they work to make an encounter happen. As such, I would say they act on that coupling of organism and environment I referred to when describing Gibson's ideas. They are in fact an improvement of perception, but in an ecological sense, as improvements of affordances.

When I started to consider the possibility of researching the special perceptual skills of the hunter, I realised that I had to expand the concept to one of seeing the invisible. This realisation was thanks to small episodes such as when on one market day, in Karankasso, I was in the courtyard of my house, after dinner, immersed in the dark. My host, Kadija, had been drinking a bit and was in the mood for telling stories. "There are days, at the market" she started "when you see lots of people from the distance. Then you get closer and you realise that the market is not crowded at all." I immediately

thought of perspective distortion and angle of view in photography, but she had something else in her mind: "On market day, sometimes *jinanw* come from the bush in the aspect of humans, to sell things at the market. The only ones who can see and recognise them from a close distance are the *donsow*, because they know the right preparations to wash themselves with." I heard this kind of idea on a few more occasions, that *donsow* are able to perceive a multi-layered reality thanks to their knowledge - and use - of preparations.

My argument here is that the fields of enskilment and initiatory knowledge intersect to a degree that they become very difficult to disentangle. Saying, as Adama did, that a *donso* can perceive more in the bush makes me think of the activity of tracking, where a hunter can recognise apparently invisible features of the landscape and refer them to the activity and position of an animal. Historian Carlo Ginzburg seems to point at something when describing "venatic lore" as "the ability to construct from apparently insignificant experimental data a complex reality that could not be experienced directly" (1989: 103; quoted in Ferme 2001).

The processes of enskilment give the hunter the possibility to perceive the invisible, something I experienced many times in the bush, with the difficulties of identifying immobile animals. Footprints, droppings, hair or feathers can be used to make an idea of the path of an animal and specific preparations can trigger the perception of a given animal, sometimes even by calling it. All these are modalities of engaging dynamically with an environment that is not given, but offers different affordances according to the perceiver. The kind of segmenting I used here, and the partition I employed in my own research proposal between enskilment and initiatory knowledge, are not easily discernible in the conception of the people I studied with. In fact, when one of the components was lacking, hunters like my teacher would raise their critiques and say that it was not real *donsoya*. The most common case was that of urban *donsow* who would not hunt but instead work at trading, increasing and displaying their occult knowledge - "that's not *donsoya*, it is *jinamoriya* [magic]" Adama would say.

Writing about apprenticeship in hunting, Ingold is critical of the division between social learning and individual learning, stating that "it is not possible, in practice, to separate the sphere of the novice's involvement with

other persons from that of his involvement with the non-human environment" (Ingold 2000: 37). But then would it make sense to perpetuate that same opposition through a distinction between procedural and propositional knowledge, drawing a rigid barrier between the two such as the concept of enskilment suggests? For the *donsow* it would seem such a barrier is especially blurred, because socially learned medicinal practices influence the processes of enskilment and because for them it is possible to have some kind of social interaction with the non-human environment, in a human shape. In the Mande area, in effect, the bush is considered the origin of much secret knowledge and power, in the literal sense whereby the non-human environment can impart social learning to humans, in the form of *jinanw* that reveal secrets to a lucky hunter. The importance of such figures as parts of the bush with which a social interaction is possible is evidenced by two stories related by Lacle Traoré, one of which is part of the film *Kalanda*. Both these stories reveal the role of the genies as custodians of the plants and animals of the bush, but whereas in the first they are hostile to the hunter, in the second they help him.

The first story Lacle told me speaks of a *donso* of old, who once shot a beautiful male bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*). As he approached it, he heard voices, as if of children, whispering: "Look, he shot our ram. Oh, shut up, he is approaching." Worried and sensing something strange, he waited, and could not hear the voices anymore. He finally dared to approach the animal, but found that its tail had already been cut.<sup>66</sup> As happens with large animals, the hunter returned to the village to look for help to transport the meat, but realised during the trip that something had bitten him in the leg. The small prick inflated and caused his death in a week's time. The "owners" of the animal, concluded Lacle, had taken revenge on the hunter.<sup>67</sup>

Solicited by me, Lacle continued with a second story. A relative from Samogogwan told him of how he once shoot an animal in the bush, but when

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<sup>66</sup> Cutting the tail is usually part of the ritual to chase the *nyama* of the animal, so I interpret this detail as an indication that the hunter in this case could not perform it.

<sup>67</sup> Figures of masters of animals, often associated with shamanistic practices and animistic beliefs, are especially attested in the South American context (Århem 1996; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971) and in the North American one (Feit 1986; Tanner 1979).

he approached it to slit its throat the animal suddenly woke up and ran away. This strange dynamic repeated itself three times, until the hunter started to be scared and sensed something strange and dangerous was going on. He thought of using the leaves of a tree to prepare a protection that would chase any evil genies at work, but the tree he was about to cut spoke to him. "Do not cut me, go and cut the leaves of that tree instead" said the voice from the plant. The hunter did as explained, and prepared a medicine in the simplest way a *donso* can do in the bush: he chewed the leaves and spat the paste on the muzzle of his musket and on his hands, which he rubbed on his face. Only then he could shoot the animal and eventually cut its throat.

Lacole then explained that it was a genie speaking from the plant, and that every creature of the bush has a genie as master. I was struck with the realisation of how the first story could explain *nyama* without recourse to some metaphysical energy - or more broadly an energetic theory (Colleyn 2004) - emanating from the animal, but as a revenge by those who herd wild animals just like humans herd domestic ones.<sup>68</sup> The second story originated from a question I posed concerning the variety of incantations and procedures I was taught to perform before gathering medicinal plants. After telling the story, Lacole suggested that if a plant cannot be simply cut and used for a preparation it is because its power depends on a genie that is associated with it. The variety of the incantations and procedures I was taught seemed to be infinite. The incantations were sometimes addressed to the plant, sometimes to the knife, other times were short stories in the third person or declarations of intent in the first person, and in one case they even consisted of insults. Equally varied - and sometimes to my eyes very bizarre - things I would have to do while pronouncing the incantations, from circling myself and the tree with a cotton thread while naked, to gathering leaves at the four cardinal points of a plant, uprooting a shrub in a single pull or picking the leaves with my teeth without touching them with my hands.

There were also strict prescriptions for the preparation, but this attention to the phase of the gathering speaks of a very important principle: the magical

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<sup>68</sup> The genies are often characterised as herders of wild animals in the oral traditions and literature on the area (see for example Cissé 1985a).

qualities of a plant are not intrinsic characteristics comparable to its chemical composition, but depend on the capacity of the *donso* to activate its power with the right actions. It would appear that *donsoya*, from this point of view, is a repertoire of tools and techniques to engage efficaciously with the bush and its powers. The hunter's body is often the medium for this interaction, and this is a common point for both enskilment and magic. Furthermore, an apprenticeship in *donsoya*, for master hunters like Adama, cannot make do without both dimensions of enskilment and esoteric knowledge, and practices like the use of preparations to improve perception represent a point of contact and overlapping. Initiatory knowledge momentarily or permanently changes the body of the hunter, so it cannot be confined to some intellectual dimension. Similar dynamics are at play with another category of tools in the repertoire of a *donso*, in which the connection between the body of the hunter and the bush is evidenced. I move then to examine amulets and fetishes - or power objects - in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 8 - Connecting Knowledge, Body and Environment**

In the early months of my fieldwork the way I would oppose the knowledge of the bush - skilled perception, tracking, animal behaviour - to initiatory knowledge - medicine, magic, incantations - was extremely contrastive. I saw them as opposed and incompatible domains, and this reflected on my approach to research. But certain episodes helped me to rethink this opposition, like a visit to Go-Fatogoma Traoré.

### **The materiality of knowledge**

Go is one of the most knowledgeable *donsow* in Karankasso, and everybody respected him for his extensive occult knowledge and extended network of contacts. In Karankasso, at the time of my stay, he was second in the hierarchy of the hunters association, often taking the leading role during rituals because of his experience. He lived in a hamlet a few kilometres from the Karankasso. We visited him one morning of January 2012, a period when men were not very busy with farming, and we found him at a neighbour's, drinking *dolo*. He finished his gourd and we moved to his compound with his brother in law Go-Kansio, another *donso* who had been present at my initiation. At first he took up refilling shotgun shells with homemade gunpowder, then we took a mat and moved under a tree about a hundred steps from the houses, because "we will talk about *donsoya* and in the courtyard there are women." I was by then used to the form of courtesy whereby people would not initially go straight to the point of your visit,

engaging instead in some other activity before spontaneously switching to the real topic of conversation.

I had not asked anything yet, but he knew very well what I had come for, and was available to answer some questions. I thought of starting from something very generic, but which reflected my naive and schematic subdivision of the knowledge of *donsoya*. Through Lasso's translation I asked what was more important for a beginner like me, to know the habits and the places of animals or to know amulets and medicines? Fatogoma hesitated, smiling as if the answer to my question was beyond him. Then he commented that it was a shame that we had come without a gift of kola nuts.

It is customary to give kola nuts to elders and especially to *donsow*, who love to crunch them and also use them for ritual purposes. But I had come with a present, a head torch, which was very much appreciated by Fatogoma. He seemed very happy with the torch, but he mentioned twice again the kolos. At that point I asked Lasso if it was possible to get some nearby, and he replied that he knew a place. I sent him with a few coins and the motorbike, remaining under the tree with Go-Kansio and Go-Fatogoma. While we waited for Lasso to come back, Fatogoma went to fetch from his room a small bag and his *donso* shirt. He took from the pockets of his shirt three cotton threads, a white, a red and a black one. Helping himself with his big toe, he wrapped three times the three threads, to then break the loop and obtain a bundle about 20 centimetres long, composed of three strands of each of the three colours - nine in total. He asked me to pronounce correctly my name, then he inserted it in an incantation that he murmured softly on the threads. Each time he would cross the threads and say "Tuh! *bissimillahi*," spitting on the cotton, and at the end of the incantation he would tie a simple knot.

This was repeated seven times, that is for seven knots. Lasso returned just in time to give him a red kola nut. Fatogoma washed it in some water, split it and tossed it to the ground. It fell in a position that was the same as had occurred during my initiation, one half facing upwards and one half facing downwards. He said the outcome was positive, and gave me half to chew. He took the rest, chewed it and spat it on the short bundle of threads with the seven knots. Finally with some white cotton thread he tied the whole thing in a small package and gave it to me, saying it would protect me from



all evil, malevolent persons or spirits, snakes or accidents. I should have it sewn in leather and always wear it on me.

He then asked if I would be able to remember some words that would help me kill game. I replied I would write them down, and he taught me an incantation to repeat on the same threads, with the same seven knots, this time to make an amulet for my shotgun, a *tafu*<sup>69</sup> to tie around the grip like a small belt to the shotgun's waist. Fatogoma then picked up two small ram horns from his bag, saying he was meaning to teach me how to prepare an amulet but the horns were broken. He added he would find others and would call me to teach me and I would be able to film the process.<sup>70</sup>

We returned to the courtyard and had rice with cock meat. I felt I was given the best food, and Fatogoma insisted that I finish all the meat because "my fellow *donso* is visiting me." We then went for a walk in the bush next to the compound, between Fatogoma's fields. That day he showed me 5 plants and taught me as many medicines. I followed him and photographed the plants, struggling to keep his pace and at the same time write down the incantations and the instructions for the preparations on my notebook. Once back in the courtyard, Fatogoma prepared two small bags, one for me and one for Lasso, with two different protective medicines. When we finally left I was stunned at Fatogoma's generosity, and with the quantity of knowledge he had dispensed that day. I had been thinking that obtaining this kind of initiatory notions would have been a much more difficult and gradual process. I did not think it was a way of showing off the vastness of his knowledge, but saw it more as an attempt to establish a relationship, putting me in a position of indebtedness, activating a network of initiatory knowledge that works in a very similar way to a gift-based economy (Gregory 1982).

There was another striking aspect I could not help thinking about, as I drove back to Karankasso. Go-Fatogoma had not answered my initial question directly, yet in a sense he had, and very clearly. I had asked if it was

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<sup>69</sup> *Tafu* is referred to any thread with enchanted knots (see Tauxier 1927: 101–102 and 235–236). The practice of blowing or spitting on a knot to perform an enchantment is common throughout the Muslim world and is mentioned in the Qur'an in the surah al-Falaq (Newby 2002: 120).

<sup>70</sup> This constitutes Chapter 5.2 in the film *Kalanda*.

more important to have a knowledge of hunting and animals or a knowledge of amulets and medicines, and his reply had been to make a talisman for me and to teach me a bunch of medicines. Not only had he stated the importance of initiatory knowledge for *donsoya*, he had reminded me of the material aspects of this knowledge by delivering it in the form of an object.

This chapter deals with such material aspects of the knowledge of *donsoya*, the objects that somehow constitute the other side of the medicines mentioned in the previous chapter. Adama had referred to a similar connection when he described how he had transferred the effects of certain plants from his body into removable amulets. Specifically, I want to expand the analysis to talismans, amulets and fetishes as material forms of knowledge. These objects, together with the procedures and incantations used to prepare them, normally appear in the literature in the Mande area with the collective name of *dalilu* (Colley 2004: 65–72; McNaughton 1982b; 1988a: 42–45). I encountered this term only once in a whole year, while more commonly they would fall under the generic label of "knowledge" - *lonni*. But this term was lacking in specificity, for I found the Jula used in my field area was relatively poor lexically and often semantically ambiguous (compare Hoffman 1998: 88). Truly terms like *lonni* - or *fla*, mentioned in the previous chapter - derive their meaning from the context of the utterance. So during talks about the initiatory knowledge of *donsoya*, "*ka lonni soro*" - to obtain knowledge - would definitely include obtaining material objects.

This should not be surprising in an area where even language is used in strikingly material ways. Fatogoma provided one example when he prepared the talisman. I had wondered where the "Tuh! *bissimillahi*" pronounced before almost every incantation was coming from. I knew *bissimillahi* was from the Arabic, meaning in the name of God, but what was the "Tuh!"? It was spit, very simply, an emission of saliva to land on the object of the incantation. In the case of Fatogoma's amulet it literally carried my name inside the incantation and each knot fixed it into the object.

This and other practices seemed to require that the incantation be materialised into saliva in order to affect the amulet, the plant or even the knife that would cut the leaves. In its simplest form, an incantation - in Jula *kilisi* or *haya*, from the Arabic *ayah*, meaning sign or verse - is pronounced -

and spat - on one's palms and then passed on the face, in a gesture that is reminiscent of the Muslim prayer. But in general in sub-Saharan Africa it is common that a benediction is given in the form of both words and spit (Danfulani 2007: 176; Geschiere 1997: 87; Hambly 1930: 174).

Another set of practices emphasises the materiality of writing as a carrier of divine power - *barika* - instead of semiotic meaning. These practices involve the use of Arabic writing and Quranic quotations as transmitted by Islamic religious figures called in Jula *moriw*. The word *mori*, from the Arabic *murâbit*, refers to scholars of Islamic sciences and magico-religious specialists who sell amulets and practice divination. Geert Mommersteeg, who studied this knowledge in its main centre, the town of Djenne, points out how most *moriw* - or *marabouts* in French - divide themselves between the two practices, teaching in Quranic schools and practicing magic (2012). In the Quranic schools of Djenne, when pupils first enrol, their first contact with literacy is not through reading: in order to "open the mind" of the pupil, the teacher writes a formula on the palm of his hand, often a passage from the Qur'an invoking the help of God to properly understand and memorise His words, and has the pupil lick the ink (*idem*: 39). This way the pupil absorbs the force and meaning in the words before he is able to understand any Arabic.

The students of Quranic schools mostly practice reading and writing on wooden tablets, which are then washed clean and used again. The resulting mixture of ink and water is not discarded but kept in jars and used for medicinal purposes (*idem*: 41). A connected practice has developed of creating specific texts that are then copied many times on tablets and washed away. Depending on the text to be written, the resulting liquid will have a given effect on the person who uses it for washing himself or another person or object. This liquid is called *nasi* or *nesi* (Marchand 2009: 201–202), and its use has spread as far as Sierra Leone (Bledsoe and Robey 1986; Ferme 2001: 166–168; Jackson 1977: 33), although they are not exclusive to West Africa (Hamès 2001; 2007; El-Tom 1985; 1987). The part of Burkina where I worked - geographically, historically and culturally very close to Djenne - is a place where specialists able to write correctly *nasi* medicines could be found, and people - including hunters - often resorted to them.

The other comparable kind of use of Arabic writing was of paper sheets with similar texts, which normally are composed of a sort of invocation or instructions for use and a passage from the Qur'an. This use of the Holy Word is considered coeval with the arrival of Islam from the other side of the Sahara, and even to have facilitated its diffusion (Goody 1971). According to some scholars the malleable materiality of writing made it easier to attribute magical powers to it (Doutté 1909; in Mommersteeg 1990: 66).<sup>71</sup> Literacy in Arabic is a prerogative of few in the part of Burkina where I worked, and I found it interesting that these scripts are not used as text - in the sense of the word as used in semiotics, as carriers of meaning. This was partly because most often they end up enclosed in leather amulets or buried in the ground (Marchand 2009: 80–81). The current - limited - availability of photocopies also means that these texts do not necessarily need to be copied by hand by a class of specialists - the *moriw* - but can be reproduced through a simpler technological mediation. So figures like Adama Woni, a *donso* from the Dafing country that I met in Banzon, can amass extensive collections of Arabic writings - locally called *Ala togow*, names of God - without being able to read a single word of Arabic. Their specialism becomes then knowing which writing does what and which ingredients must be added to the paper: plants, minerals, animal parts and more. It is also important to remember that these amulets as forms of knowledge exist as a synthesis of the materials and the procedures needed to realise them, so the simple ownership of the sheet would not enable the fabrication. What is needed is a given procedure, sometimes very complex, and the right words to be pronounced in the act of wrapping up the amulet over a number of times, determined by an extremely complex numerology (compare the account in Mommersteeg 1990: 72–73).

Finally, some of these amulets are worn on the body, on the clothes or beneath them, in close contact with the skin. Being normally wrapped in goat hide, a flexible and permeable material that continues to transform with time, they adapt to the body, change colour, consistency and smell after being worn

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<sup>71</sup> Not only Arabic writing is used in amulets, but also cabalistic diagrams where numbers play an important part, or other signs based on divinatory techniques performed with the sand, apparently based on a XVI century treatise by Sheikh Mohammed Ez Zenati (Kassibo 1992; Monteil 1932: 89–90).

for a long time. As Adama had underlined talking about the externalisation of the medicines of his infancy (previous chapter), the amulets are removable but act in close proximity with the body, transmitting their power by contact. *Donsow* wear many such amulets, making them like other categories of liminal persons, such as mask wearers, children and boys and girls undergoing initiation.<sup>72</sup> But the *donsow* are also specialised users of another important category of objects, distinct from amulets.

## Fetishes

I am going to retrace a similar dialectic between semiotic meaning and power for another category of objects closely related to amulets. In French they are locally referred to as *fétiches*, and in Jula as *jow*, even though it is more common to find them called *boliw* or *basiw* in the literature on Mande peoples. As in other parts of Africa, some objects are held capable of acting in the world if addressed with the right words and rewarded with sacrifices. They can also provide replies to questions through divinatory practices. In other words, these objects allow for a degree of interaction that is akin to that between persons, and would seem to possess agency.

However, this is about as specific as one can get, because the category is very imprecise. Firstly, Mande people themselves tend to apply the term to a variety of entities that scholars would categorise separately. Secondly, the fascination of the scholars for the subject has given origin to so much theoretical elaboration that sometimes seems to hide its object. So many uses of the term have nothing to do with African cult objects, but rather with psychological symbolism, theories of value or aesthetic philosophy.

The very denomination, for example, is the subject of a lengthy debate that springs from the original pejorative use of fetish in a context of colonial contact (Pietz 1985). Other labels were then proposed as "power objects" (McNaughton 1988a), "objets forts" (Colleyn 1988a), "choses-dieux" (Bazin

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<sup>72</sup> For a description of the amulets on a *donso*'s outfit see Cashion (1984: 135–164) and McNaughton (1982a).

1986), "shrines" (Royer 1996) or just "ritual objects" (Brett-Smith 1983). While the original term fetish clearly had derogatory connotation, these latter proposals seem to me just too generic to indicate what I refer to here. I will then use the old label of fetish when making points about the general category, with the precaution of specifying that the term has no derogatory implications in the way I use it here. In my description of local practices I will instead use the local denomination of *jo*. Not that this solution is completely free from trouble, especially since, as related by Colleyn (1985: 229), in the area of Bambara influence the names of the cult associations are often also used for the spirits they represent, for the sacred objects that receive sacrifices and for the society of their initiates. Similarly, the term *jo* that I heard in Burkina is more commonly used in Mali for indicating cult associations, rather than their fetishes. The hunters I worked with would use *jo* to refer to any fetish, even if there was no related cult association.

Furthermore, it was not always very easy to apply the term with certainty to a given object. Tauxier (1927), in his description of what he calls Bambara *gris-gris*, made no distinction between talismans and fetishes, and I sometimes understood his position when, in the field, I had a hard time judging the nature of an object. Many of the tools of a *donso* are endowed with special powers that may be protective or aggressive, and because they tend to be small and portable, enough to be carried along in hunts, sometimes the physical appearance of an amulet or a talisman is not so different from that of a *jo*. The external appearance was not of much help whenever I tried to assign an object to either category. Fetishes are manufactured out of the most diverse materials, from minerals to vegetal to animal components. They can be huge or tiny and have the most diverse appearance. I have seen *jow* in the shape of eggs, horns, rings, spheres, human statues, or others I would not even know how to describe. One aspect most *jow* share, because it is derived from the practice of their use, is the presence on their body of sacrificial remains, primarily blood but often also feathers, that constitute successive layers until they completely cover the object, changing its appearance, its tactile feeling and its smell (compare Colleyn et al. 2009).

Bakari Taximan from Kouakouale had a very clear position on what a fetish is, being himself the owner of many of them. He told me a *jo* is anything

on which you perform blood sacrifices. But this criterion could not account for certain local tensions over the definition of what a *jo* is that were due to the role of Islam. For example, my teacher Adama Sogo Traoré is a devout Muslim and often stated publicly that he had abandoned all his *donsojow* for his *dankun*. This latter term refers to the sacred place of the *donsow*, an altar placed at the fork between two paths, where often a termite nest is placed (Cissé 1994: 67–74). *Donsow* perform their sacrifices there, pouring blood on this altar, yet Adama made it clear many times that the *dankun* is not a *jo*. Bakari asserted the opposite, also on the basis of his knowledge of the materials buried in the ground below the altar, similar to those used for a *jo*.<sup>73</sup>

Another example concerns the clay pot placed by Adama's grandfather at the entrance of their family compound in the village of Samogogwan. From the accounts I gathered, I would not hesitate to define it as a fetish, if not for Adama's and his brother's insistence that it was not. This pot, filled with vegetal matter and water, was a sort of protector of the family and its male members would drink some of its water to heal illnesses and to protect themselves during hunts (compare Dacher 1985: 86–90 for the Goin [Gwen] of the Banfora region). The object, which required annual renovation, had a slave sacrificed to it on the day of its establishment. After the death of Adama's father the clay pot was abandoned during a period of the 1970s, which saw many conversions to Islam and the destruction of many ritual objects (compare Royer 1996; 1999). The pot was then re-established in 2001. Villagers keep coming to make vows on it and sometimes promise an animal in exchange. If their wishes are granted, admitted Adama, they kill the animal *in front* of the object - which would make it in practical terms a fetish. It is clear that a struggle over the definition is at play, whereby the owners of the object did not want to be associated with *bamanaya* - a term that in Mali and Burkina Faso denotes fetishist practices in explicit opposition to Muslim practices (Colleyn and de Clippel 1998; Soares 2005: 130–132).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> The original etymology of fetish in Portuguese is in fact referred to something manufactured - *feitiço*.

<sup>74</sup> Considering, though, that the area has seen Islamic influences for at least 8 centuries and it is often impossible to distinguish the "native" and the "Islamic" (Saul 2006a).

The use of the word fetish in the literature is not necessarily more clear-cut. Albert de Surgy has noted how many categories of objects have been made to fall under the label of fetish, and how often many of these objects seem to belong to more than one category at the same time (1985: 8). As underlined by Pietz, scholars have faced this problem with two basic critiques: a particularist one that denied the existence of a transcultural category that could be called fetish, and a universalist one based on the diffusion of a psychological phallic symbolism or a philosophical error of logical types (Pietz 1985: 6). Yet many analyses do have something in common, which is what concerns me here. As soon as scholars decided to portray fetishist ritual practices as something beyond the blind veneration of objects, or started to borrow the idea of fetish to analyse their own culture, they started to link the fetish as an object with a reality of a different kind. The fetish became then a sign in a semiotic sense, something that stands for something else.

One of the most classic examples of this way of thinking is the concept of sexual fetishism in psychoanalysis, first coined by Binet, whereby an object provokes sexual interest in the place of a person. Freud's analysis is of course highly symbolic and the fetish was identified with a cut-off penis. Marx defined commodity fetishism as the human tendency to mistakenly place value in commodities, thus hiding the role of the social relations of production on which those commodities depend. In common with certain currents of anthropology, primarily structuralism, Marxism saw in the fetish the objectification of social structures. For structuralism the relationship was especially semiotic, and the fetish "nothing but a nonverbal material signifier, sometimes 'animated,' with the pure status of a sign-vehicle for the process of signification" (Pietz 1985: 9). Much of the ethnography on the Mande area suggested a symbolic link between fetishes and other entities: for Dieterlen a Bambara *boli* is a mixture of heterogeneous elements that aim at representing the cosmos (1951: 92–93). For Coquet the subsequent layers of sacrificial skins that envelop the *didiro* of the Bwaba represent the lineage that owns the cult, while the sculpture that constitute the core of the object represents the totemic animal at the origin of the objects (1985). More authors agreed that a fetish could objectify the social relations behind its context of use (Colley 1985;



MacGaffey 1994) or symbolise the overlapping between bush and village (Royer 1996).

It should be clear from this short overview that, for scholars, the transcultural power of the fetish would be in its capacity to point at something beyond itself, being in other words a powerful symbol. But my fieldwork experience did not quite support such a view. My hunting companions and teachers had a very pragmatic attitude towards the objects they call *jozw*, they used them as tools to increase their own power and act in the world (Graeber 2005). I never heard references to metaphysical energies as in Griaule's theory of sacrifice (1940) or had clues that a *jo* represented or symbolised something else.

### **Beyond the semiotic**

I would like now to account for attempts to go beyond anthropological analyses of the fetish as a symbol, because I believe this is the direction pointed at by my fieldwork experiences and the literature on the neighbouring area. Many of these attempts have passed for a re-discovery and re-conceptualisation of materiality, acknowledging that for too long - in part with the complicity of various religious and philosophical traditions - it has been claimed that "materiality represents the merely apparent, behind which lies that which is real" (Pinney 2005: 1). Theorists like Bill Brown have underlined how things - distinguished from objects - thanks to their sensuous or metaphysical presence have agency in constituting human subjects, and influence and relate to them (2001). Things have social histories and biographies (Appadurai 1986). Not only do things carry meaning as symbols, but they are affective (Krmpotich, Fontein, and Harries 2010; Pinney 2005) and are in relation with others as sources of action ("actants" in Latour 2005). A more radical attempt has been made to go beyond materiality as a substrate for social constructions, as implicit in the dualism objects-things, and "take 'things' encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something

else" (Amiria J. M. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 2). Rather than taking meaning as superimposed on materiality, as in a classically superorganic conception of culture, the authors propose to consider meanings as identical to things, remaining in this way more faithful to the conceptions of their informants.

A recent contribution inside this line of thinking deals with fetishes and is based on fieldwork among *donso* hunters in an area not far from where my research took place. Agnès Kedzierska-Manzon, in an article by the title of *Humans and Things: Mande "Fetishes" as Subjects* (2013), aims at restoring subjectivity into objects by avoiding the view of them as carriers of meaning, also as a way to take seriously local ways of thinking.<sup>75</sup> During her fieldwork, she remarks that no object was ever presented to her as incarnating or hosting an invisible entity (*idem*: 1123). She then reports a dialogue with a master hunter and her host in Mali who, while attempting to explain what a *jo* - or *boli* or *basi* - is, claim that any object can become one, if the user interacts with it through a kola nut and sacrifices an animal. In other words, it is the interaction, the relationship that makes the power object (*idem*: 1124-1125).

The content of the dialogue reported by Kedzierska-Manzon immediately sounded familiar to me, to the point that I recognised an argument and even expressions that I heard used during my own research.<sup>76</sup> If I have a critique, it is that, if anything can become a fetish, then in fact not any thing does (Brett-Smith 1983; Colley 1988b; Mommersteeg 1990: 64). Rather, the recipes and the incantations used to prepare one are some of the most exclusive forms of initiatory knowledge in the area. And the fact that really any ingredient can be found inside a Bambara *boli* does not mean that we should conclude that anything can make one, quite the opposite. By looking at actual practices of fetish use these objects emerge as forms of highly specialised knowledge (Royer 1996: 253), by which I refer to both the procedural knowledge of how to operate the fetish and to the sophisticated

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<sup>75</sup> The author wants to position her attempt in a broader series of works that try to redefine materiality and subjectivity (Gell 1998; Amiria J. M Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Ingold 2007b; Pinney 2005; Strathern 1990; 1999)

<sup>76</sup> Curiously echoing Bosman's theory whereby Africans would make a fetish of anything they came across (quoted in Pietz 1985: 7-8).

propositional knowledge of the recipe of their preparation. Mande people in general do not sacrifice to any object, and the words reported by Kedzierska-Manzon "You have to address something. You can choose a tree, a stool, even an old bag. It thus becomes your power object and it acts" (2013: 1124) sound like the product of the hunter's efforts to explain a principle to a person used to reasoning in a different way. I have been told very similar things in response to my own insistent questions, but I realised that people's behaviour with this category of objects was in fact different.

Furthermore, even though the area where Kedzierska-Manzon did research is very close and has so much in common with the area where I conducted mine, my fieldwork experience definitely did put fetishes into a relationship with invisible entities. That Mande people do not address the object but, through it, a genie, is already acknowledged by Henry at the beginning of the twentieth century (1910: 128). The idea that there would be nothing beyond the object, and of the irreducible materiality of the fetish, is even older (de Brosses 1760) and generated a debate with those who tended to link fetishism with animism (first and foremost Tylor 1871). In the field of study of Mande fetishes a similar dualism can be retraced in the debate between Jean Bazin and Jean-Paul Colleyn: the former insisted that analysts should not postulate supernatural beings in the case of the cult of objects that were unique material entities (Bazin 1986). The latter, on the other hand, underlined how the notion of a distant, unique God is always present in Mande thought and the preparation of cult objects tends to follow some standards that divide them into groups connected to a spirit (Colleyn 2004). In my view this debate should be separate from that concerning the symbolic status of the fetish (see also Poppi 2006). To state that a fetish *is connected* to something beyond itself is not necessarily to say that it *represents* this something. Clearly the nature of this connection becomes crucial.

At the core of Kedzierska-Manzon's argument is a critique of the "metaphor model" (see Willerslev 2007) that scholars have used to replace animistic explanations, instead of taking them literally. This metaphor model has a long history, starting at least with Frazer's sympathetic magic (1998 [1890]) and including Taussig's elaborations on mimesis (1993). It consists fundamentally in interpreting actions directed toward a representation as *in*

*reality* directed toward some separate reality, be it the represented person or a power of some kind. The argument with which Kedzierska-Manzon opposes the metaphor model is that fetishes are not representations but are operated literally, not in the place of something else. Kedzierska-Manzon then moves to analyse the subjectivity of Mande fetishes, but her main point remains that this subjectivity, because of its embodied character and the practicality of its engagement with that of the operator, is not metaphorical.

I think the nature of this metaphorical relationship is key here. While I share most of Kedzierska-Manzon's conclusions in her article, I am critical of the way she seems to oppose metaphor to the "authentic" (2013: 1120) and the "serious" (2013: 1126) throughout her analysis. To make a critique of the distance from lived experience of the interpretations provided by some scholars, she accuses them of transforming their informants' words into metaphors, which she presents as something by definition removed from reality. But what is a metaphor, after all? It is a way to express unity. As Jackson states "metaphor reveals, not the 'thisness of that' but rather that 'this is that' " (1989: 142). I would add that it is precisely the lack of a connective nexus that characterises a metaphor in opposition to a simile, so that the former points to an identity, the latter simply to some similarity. Neither is a metaphor ever removed from reality, which provides the specific background to make it "work" (Basso 1984: 50). Rather, metaphoric and literal understanding both participate in the construction of knowledge (Scott 1989). Although I share Willerslev's and Kedzierska-Manzon's concerns for the fate of the words of their informants, charged of meanings attributed by scholarly trained minds, I would not strip local discourses of the possibility to create metaphors or to refer to other than the literal. The risk is that of creating a double standard, a pre-metaphorical mentality, obtaining the opposite effect of the initial aim to have that mentality taken seriously. I would like then to look at the relationship between the *donso*, a fetish and a spirit, to approach metaphor and symbol through the lens of embodiment, proposing to adopt an expanded definition not unlike I did for knowledge. The relationship between the owner and the object has received much less attention than that between the object and a third entity. For this purpose I would like start from my own fieldwork experience and the contacts I had with *donsojow*.

## A donso and his fetish, a donso as a fetish

I should perhaps provide a few more words on the *jow* of the *donsow*, because they are the ones that I know the best from my fieldwork. It should not be surprising at this point that I start by saying that *donsojow* do not seem to constitute a separate, bounded category. *Donsow*, especially if they are aged persons, have acquired esoteric knowledge from sources other than *donsoya*, and can also operate *jow* that are specific to their ethnic group, that they inherited from their kinship group or that belong to an initiatory cult. Furthermore, I later recognised in the literature as not necessarily associated with hunting some *jow* that I had encountered in the field as associated with the *donsow*: for example the *togofebla*, which also Cashion lists as a *donso* fetish (1984: 189–190) appeared in ethnographic descriptions of the colonial era as not related to the *donsow* (Dieterlen 1951: 132; Tauxier 1927: 99). Yet, it is possible, such as I did for *donso* medicines, to sketch some common characteristics. Namely the power of these objects is most often applied to hunting, both for the enhancement of the killing opportunities of their owner, and for his own protection. Some *donsojow* can make an animal blind or the hunter invisible, others can save the owner from enraged beasts or malevolent bush genies. Secondly, these objects tend to be of a small size so that they can be carried in the pockets of the hunter's shirt, during the hunt. In other words, there seems to be a very strict personal relationship between the owner and the object. Very often at the death of an old master hunter all his *jow* are destroyed (Cashion 1984: 224–225). *Donsojow* cannot belong to a village or a lineage but tend to be individual; at most they can be passed from teacher to student (see also Henry 1910: 135–136).

As a matter of fact, *jow* figured quite often in my conversations with my teacher Adama, and it was one such conversation that pushed me to start thinking about the topic, making a few things I had already noticed fall into place. I was sitting on a mat next to him, in the courtyard of his compound. It was my last conversation with my teacher before the end of my fieldwork. I had tried to gather my notes and prepare a series of questions on all matters that were not clear, as if this was to be my very last conversation with him. I

asked him about all sort of things, from herbal medicine to masculinity, and he patiently replied to all my questions. This is not the way a *donsoden* - student - and a *karamogo* - teacher - normally interact, for knowledge is dispensed in a very gradual way and very rarely does a student have the right to ask for it. But Adama was by then used to my questions, which were different from those of the rest of his students. I would not ask for recipes of herbal medicines but about herbal medicine in general, about their effects or about how he had learned what he knew.

At some point I asked if a *donso's* shotgun could be compared to a *jo*. Adama reflected for a moment, then replied: "A shotgun cannot be a *jo* if its owner is not a *jo*. You are a *jo* when you pronounce 'Tuh! *bissimillahi*' or when you gather some plant for a medicine, when you split a kola nut. Somehow, it is persons that are *jow*." Later in the same conversation he referred to me as a *joden*, which could be interpreted as "a part" of a *jo*.

I was dumbfounded but at the same time I felt I understood intuitively what Adama meant, that it resonated with practices I had observed and had been taught to me. Adama had mentioned many of the things he had transmitted to me in the past year: the formula that precedes incantations, the procedures whereby a plant is gathered in the right way and with the right words so that it acquires special properties, and the privileged way of interacting with a *jo* - the toss of the two halves of a kola nut. The way I interpreted my teacher's words seems to point at a relationship between the owner and the object, so close that it gets to the point of reciprocal identification. Could the empowerment of the *donso*, that is the way the force of the object operates through him, make them one thing?

So far I have been using the word *owner*, but I believe it is important to clarify that we are not just talking about property here. The Jula word I translated by owner is *tigi*, which has a semantic field that goes beyond simple ownership. It can refer to the author, the administrator or the person in charge (see Bailleul 1996: 400). So for example a child selling bananas is called in Jula *barandatigi*, without any implication that the fruits could be his - and the same holds true of a taxi driver. In the case of *jow* then, the meaning of *tigi* is more akin to that of manager or operator, and for a fundamental reason. It was clear to all the persons I spoke to that behind every *jo* is a spirit

of some kind, often a bush genie, who is the source of its power. The *jo* itself then seems to be a way for men to communicate with genies and handle their power. It is not a way of controlling them in an absolute way, for a genie can rebel, harming its *tigi*, if its *jo* is not rewarded after it performed a service. I was also told that an object/spirit can act beyond its owner's will, for example protecting him from a danger he was not aware of, or attacking a person he simply hates. In other words, this relationship seems to configure as one between subjects, a *moral pact* (Colley 2004). In many oral traditions it is the genie itself to start the relationship, revealing the secrets for the preparation of the object to a man in the bush - often a hunter. A man that masters the procedure can then decide to reveal it to a disciple or to others, sometimes in exchange for money.

Since anthropologists highlighted how the so called "irreducible materiality" of the fetish (Pietz 1985: 7) was modelled on a contrast with the Christian conception of idols, more and more narratives of how these objects are considered to be the home of some spiritual entity have emerged (for example Lienhardt 1961: 68 about the mathiang gok; or MacGaffey 1994: 125–126 about the nkisi). Furthermore, the very way a *jo* is talked to by its owner, and is considered capable of replying and acting in the world, makes it very close to the Mande category of *mogoya* (compare MacGaffey 1990). Literally the quality of being a person, this word does not so much refer to intrinsic qualities that are to be found in a human being, but rather to a capacity for interaction, a being subject that Jackson calls moral personhood and describes as fundamentally relational. Among the Kuranko, continues Jackson, it is not necessarily applied to human beings but "may include ancestors, fetishes, bush spirits, a divine creator, and totemic animals" (1989: 106). It seems that a similar criterion based on interaction was important for the Azande's poison oracle. Its ontological status is unclear, and the name *benge* refers to the creeper, the actual poison and the oracle procedure. But it seems evident from Evans-Pritchard's account that, as long as the operator interacts with it, then the poison is treated as a sentient being, but when it does nothing but killing or sparing fowls it seems to fall back into mere poison ("stupid poison," 1937: 306).

The exchange with my teacher Adama also highlighted how deeply embodied this relationship is, which might help to make sense of the presence of sexual and food taboos for the operator, the *jotigi*. Because his body is linked to the object and through it to the genie, contamination will mean that it cannot carry out its role. The prohibition does not simply apply, then, to the contact the object itself might have with forbidden substances. This is even more important if we consider that the body of the *jotigi* is often the real medium for the relationship to take place. Once the kola nut is tossed and the object has given a response, the *jo* and the *jotigi* share the two halves. The latter eats his half and then chews and spits the other half on the *jo*. A similar operation can be carried out with beer or water, according to the *modus operandi* transmitted together with the object. Adama told me a few times that the taboos of his many *jow* had made his life very difficult, because he had to respect very complicated rules about what he was eating, where he was sitting, who he was touching. This bond between the *jotigi* and the genies that empower him is often phrased in the explicit terms of a marital or sexual relationship: sometimes a person cannot sleep with his wives on a number of nights because those nights are dedicated to a genie lover (Brett-Smith 1994: 74; Kedzierska-Manzon 2013: 30–31).

These claims about a strict relationship are intended in a very literal way by those who employ them, and according to Colley they go to the point of incorporating parts of the body of a deceased cult chief into the objects of the cult (2004: 72). Furthermore, as Michèle Coquet has remarked, among the Bwaba of Burkina Faso, many individual fetishes are carried on the body and seem to be in a strict relationship with the individual, to the point that certain individuals wear representations of some of these objects in the form of scarifications on their own skin (1985: 114).<sup>77</sup>

The case where this bond that unites spirit and man through an object is most evident is that of possession cults that involve the use of *jow*. I should remark though that most of these cults are collective, so that they can belong

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<sup>77</sup> My teacher Adama, like all his brothers, derives his second name - Sogo - by a pact made by his father with this fetish/spirit - once an important cult in the area (Royer 1996: 126–140) - after he decided to seek its protection from witchcraft, following the death of all his sons in an early age. Thus Adama literally owed his existence to Sogo, and carried its name.



to a lineage or to a whole village. In this case, some individuals are possessed that are usually not the master of the cult. One of the most relevant examples is the cult of Nya among the Minyanka, studied by Jean-Paul Colleyn (1985; 1988a; 1988b; 2004).

For this people, living in the Republic of Mali near the border with Burkina Faso, a supreme God is very distant from the problems of humans. Other powers like Nya are more accessible, especially through its sanctuaries. Nya mainly communicates through the crises of possession of some of its initiates, and some objects have the specific role of mediating between Nya and the possessed. They recruit the adepts and transmit to them the messages of Nya (Colleyn 1985: 238). The possessed persons sometimes begin their career by promising that they will belong to Nya in exchange for something, and the crises are believed to start in some cases thanks to the medicines that are connected to the ritual objects (1988a: 176–179). It is also interesting to note that the possessed person during a crisis calls himself a *yapèrè*, the Minyanka term used normally for the objects of the cult (*idem*: 94).

Another account that is witness to the connection between ritual objects and spirit possession is to be found in Patrick Royer's description of the revival of anti-witchcraft possession cults in the very same area where I conducted my fieldwork (1996). Royer describes how these regional cults (with reference to Werbner 1977), also diffused among different neighbouring populations, after a period of unpopularity in the fifties and sixties, were re-established in the early nineties, when he was doing his fieldwork in Karankasso Sambla. It is important to underline that these cults, just like Nya, tend to be highly syncretic and an interpretation according to the cosmology of a single population would fail to account for the influence of Islam and the partially shared substratum of local beliefs, continually traded and redefined (Royer 1996: 250). In the case described by Royer, the cults that involve possession rituals have a number of common characteristics, namely they derive their power from genies (Seenku *bwendon*) and are established through the fabrication of cult objects that are installed in a shrine. Most of the time some roots are gathered during a ceremony and placed in a clay pot with some water, in a cult house. More objects, more portable and often in the form of the same roots, are carried by the possessed.

Here again, the spirit is addressed through the objects, as if there were no difference:

The root that constitutes the main ritual object of a shrine is not considered analogous to a *bwendon* but it is the power of the *bwendon*. The terms *bwen* [the cult] and *bwendon* [the genie] are in fact used interchangeably. In the same way, the people who are possessed and who are called *gi-nyi* ("*gi* [Seenku equivalent of *jo*]-carry") because they always carry the root of the cult, are often merely called *gi*, in other words they have become the cult. The cult objects and the powers they represent are not differentiated. (*idem*: 251)

At ceremonies, especially in the afternoon after the sacrificial meat has been consumed - here again there seems to be some sharing or commensality that connects to embodiment - some adepts of the cult are possessed by the spirit, and dance and run holding the root of the cult wrapped in an animal skin. The medium then speaks as the spirit, making requests and giving explanations, or warning of threats. The possession episodes end when the root is placed back in the shrine. These possession cults represent in my view an extreme instance because the spirit literally enters the body of the possessed, which does not happen, as far as I know, in the case of *donsojow*.

But the process of embodiment cannot be conceived, I argue, as unidirectional, from the spirit to the human. The fetish acts as the mediator of a relationship, and it also embodies - in a very material sense - the sacrifices its operator performs on it. These take the form of layers of blood that coagulate and thicken with time, making the fetish a quasi-body that absorbs and hardens not unlike the body of the *donso*, as seen in the previous chapter. So the fetishes of an elderly *donsoba*, like Bakari Taximan, are also extremely powerful for their story of bloody rewards received through the years. Similarly, the prestige and fame of a *jotigi* influences the power of his fetishes.

### **The ecological embodiment of knowledge**

My fieldwork experiences seem to confirm that a fetish is not just a symbol in the semiotic sense of a sign with an arbitrary and conventional relationship with a signified, or a carrier of meaning. For me, following

Jackson, one has to be aware of the original meaning of symbol as a sort of tally, of which two persons could keep the halves and through them recognise each other. A symbol was then something that unites, in a very concrete way, two elements. Here the two halves of the kola nut, that the *jo* and the *jotigi* share to seal their pact, come to mind. The pre-eminence of one of the two poles, as in metaphor, was not yet present as it is in symbolic anthropology, where the social meaning precedes the emergence of the symbol (Jackson 1989: 135–136).<sup>78</sup> In this sense Jackson's point echoes the mentioned studies of Lakoff and Johnson on embodied metaphors (1999; see also Farnell 1999: 359).

I see a *jo* in a similar light, something that connects a man and a spirit through embodied interaction, the most noticeable instance being possession cults involving power objects. The capacity to connect is then the main characteristic of the fetish, working on two levels: on the one hand it can *be* a spirit, so that a person can interact with the genie in the form of the object, and on the other it can connect the spirit and the person, the latter embodying the former's power. This has the advantage of avoiding a simple annihilation of the spirit in favour of the object, an excess of literalism that to get rid of a superorganic conception of symbols eliminates the spiritual entity, an instance of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

If the power of the fetish is one of connecting, then, it might not be that different from a metaphor or a symbol, and I would seem to contradict myself. But the key lies in the acceptation these two terms are given, for if they are restored to their concreteness and bodily grounds, using fetishes becomes one universal way "to manipulate external objects and words - as in divinatory, healing, and cursing rites - in the conviction that such actions will have repercussions on themselves or on others. Thus mastery of the external world is linked reciprocally to mastery of self, and people act as if the universe were extensions of themselves and they of it" (Jackson 1989: 155).

These words by Michael Jackson were written about the existential grounds of metaphors and analogical thinking, and seem to adapt very well to ritual practices with fetishes as power objects. This latter term has the

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<sup>78</sup> It is worth mentioning how in symbolic anthropology not all contributors were primarily concerned with the referential aspects of symbols but, especially in Chicago, some like Turner (1967) and Fernandez (1974) pointed the attention towards the social effectiveness of symbols.

undeniable advantage of reminding us what the aim of these practices is, namely to obtain power. In a truly ecological sense, for the *jotigi* this power is a synthesis of the personal level, providing him with new possibilities, of the social level, creating prestige and relationships with "clients," and of the environmental level, resulting from a relationship with the powers of the bush.

This latter aspect deserves particular emphasis for its usefulness to a *donso*. The genies that empower the *jotigi* through the fetishes are creatures of the bush, the area from which, in the conceptions of the Mande, most forms of power are thought to originate. Fetishes are then a handle on these powers, in a very practical sense that is typical, as also remarked by Royer, of an area where religious practices are "often noted for their pragmatic, action-oriented orientations" (1996: 251). In this sense I prefer to refrain from using terms like supernatural to refer to these powers, because it does not apply to local conceptions in which the centrality of the bush does not reflect a natural-supernatural opposition (Olivier de Sardan 1992: 13; in Royer 1996: 252).

Embodiment is the medium through which this relationship happens so that, in a sense, the fetish is the body of the genie. Although people mostly do not believe that genies reside in the objects of their cult, a fetish can be their tangible manifestation for the purposes of interaction with entities that have an elusive materiality. This makes fetishes more than altars, because like bodies they can absorb offers that become part of their being. They also interact replying to interrogations and requests, in other words they act as subjects. But the reciprocity and interconnectedness of an ecological conception of embodiment is also at work in the way the fetish connects to the body of its operator. They share substances and taboos, they empower each other in a circular process: a *donso* can literally control animals through his fetishes, but has to give up a whole series of freedoms - who controls who, then?

What I have written above applies just as well to *donsoya*, and the reason why I have chosen to conclude this work with fetishes is precisely because it demonstrates the way in which in these objects are contained the main themes of my ecological approach to *donsoya*. *Donsoya* is after all an initiatory society, and like others in the Mande area holds its appeal thanks to a capacity to

provide power to its members. This is a power manifest in the capacity to activate a social network, thanks to distributions of knowledge or meat - as seen in Chapters 1 and 2. Power also takes the form of skills in the bush, in other words of a potential for interaction deriving from the embodied knowledge that allows hunters a privileged relationship with their environment, as seen in Chapter 5. Finally, the material aspects of the knowledge of *donsoya* produce a powerful individual, with a transformed body and hardened temperament, as well as providing him with magical tools to put in practice this power - the subject of these final two chapters.

*Donsow* indeed have a special mastery of the bush, and that derived by fetishes is only part of it. If *donsow* have a privileged relationship with the bush as an environment it is also thanks to their perceptual and proprioceptual skills, attuned to the hunting activity. This aspect survives the current ecological transformations and the way the bush has become much more accessible as a space. *Donsow* are also in close relationship with the powers of the bush thanks to their occult knowledge.

This relationship is embodied and reciprocal: not only do they acquire the power to transform their environment - killing animals, attracting disciples and clients, perceiving the invisible - but they are transformed by it in terms of their moral qualities and skills. This dualism between hunter and environment in fact shows its artificiality because of the relationality in the concept of environment itself. For example, for an ecological approach to perceptual skills it is impossible to say where the change happens, if the hunter becomes more perceptive or the bush becomes populated with more opportunities to shoot. The change happens in the relationship, or better in the system that encompasses the hunter and the bush. It is perhaps possible to say that a *donso*, with his developed perceptual skills, herbal knowledge, embodied medicines and amulets and fetishes, is a *highly ecological being*.

I have argued throughout this work how a *donso* is made by knowledge, and that this knowledge is to be conceived in a very broad sense. The basic assumption behind this conception of knowledge is that it is not only to be found in someone's mind, but in an ecological system that encompasses a non-dualistic individual and his environment (in its human and non-human aspects). This way *donsoya* can accommodate procedural and propositional

knowledge, materiality and meaning, enskilment and initiatory knowledge. I have tried to characterise the knowledge of *donsoya* in an increasingly specific way, starting from the relationship with the bush of villagers and farmers, passing by the skills of hunters to get to the very specific esoteric mastery of initiated *donsow*. This implies that some of what I consider knowledge of *donsoya* in fact is shared with other categories of people - villagers who do not hunt and uninitiated hunters. I consider this a necessary reminder of the simple fact that many *donsow* only wear their shirt for a minority of their time, having a multitude of other roles. I also consider it a corrective of studies, like those of Cissé, which tended to present the knowledge of the *donsow* as an initiatory corpus set aside from other kinds of local knowledge. Yet in the path of initiation, like in the path of this thesis and of my own fieldwork, only those who arrive to the last stage can call themselves *donso*. But this is only an illusory end, because *donsow* know well that knowledge has no definitive point of arrival - *lonni ti ke ka baan*.

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