Ruralization in urbanization in the Peasant Territories of Southern Mali: everyday life in Ségoukoura, Ségou

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Inhabiting a territory in Southern Mali is a continuum of movement to the rhythm of the world's transformations. In Ségoukoura, in Ségou, Mali (West Africa), this gesture relates to processes of ruralization and urbanization. The peasant perspective allows a counter and decolonial orientation to grasp these specific modes of living. The space of the city is investigated from the practices of everyday life that manifest themselves in artifacts, symbols of a subsistence relationship to the land. The work of life reproduction adapts to the possibilities of the contemporary city by bringing together the perspectives of the rural and the urban and of the global and the local in an open-ended relationship. Ségoukoura thus becomes a tale to interpret the relationship to the world and its transformations through the gesture of living.

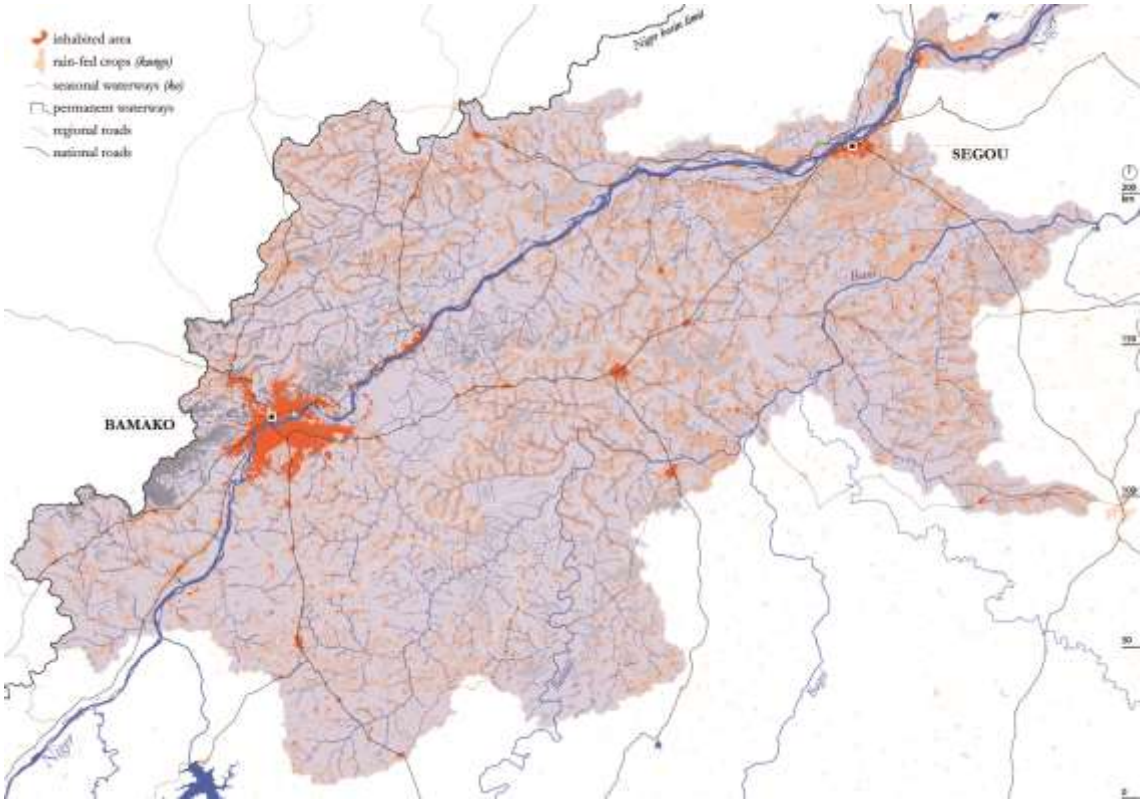
Peasant perspectives on inhabiting a territory: a counter/decolonial narrative

For over a century, the inevitable decline of the peasant world has been announced. Yet, beyond the fortress of the old continent, family farming remains the most widespread form of agriculture, producing 80% of the world's food (FAO 2014).

In Mali, West Africa, to speak of peasantry is to refer to culture. This culture defines a way of inhabiting the territory that eludes the laws of the neo-liberal market, especially in its relationship with the land. It is linked to a family economy of subsistence and community, open to commercial production, but whose essential purpose is the reproduction of life and dwelling. Reproduction is understood as the direct and fundamental satisfaction of human needs beyond the mere production of goods (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999), based on peculiar interactions between capital, land, labour and knowledge (Van Der Ploeg 2018). Similar to the peasant economy model that the Russian agronomist Chayanof theorized in the 1930s (Chayanof 1966), in Mali, private and individual land ownership struggles to transcend the cities' zones of influence (Bertrand 2021) and the work of the land, which employs the majority of the population, is not waged[1].

The territories between the capital Bamako and the city of Ségou in southern Mali are historically, and still today, among the most densely populated in the region. Here, major transformation processes are underway: the population growth, the quickened development of Bamako, as well as the increase in motorization, match the widespread availability of mobile communication networks and solar energy. Despite these signs of apparent homologation, it is not possible to compare the emerging settlement forms with the 'megacities region under construction' that one can find in the nearby Gulf of Guinea (Choplin and Hertzog 2020). In the area between Bamako and Ségou, as well as in the rest of the Sahelian hinterland, the expansion of a few large cities inserts itself into a pattern of territorial settlements linked to the peasant villages that stud the flatlands [fig.1].

[1] In 2017, 29.9% of the 'urban' working population were employed, compared to 5.1% of the 'rural' working population. In 2017, Mali had 18.786.996 inhabitants of which 74.8% are considered to belong to the rural *milieu* (INSTAT, 2017).



[fig.1] Map of agricultural land use, hydrography, roads and settlements in the main waterways' basins between Bamako and Ségou. Source: elaborated by the author.

Along the national road that links the cities of Bamako and Ségou, peasant villages (*dougou*) alternate with pluvial cultivations, grazing, hunting and harvesting areas (*kungo*) and slight depressions of the ground where rainwater is collected (*kɔ*). The village (*dougou*) keeps a certain level of autonomy, particularly in terms of food production, and it represents the economic and social unit that weaves the net of local geographies together along the paths of the seasonal impluvium waterways (*kɔ*). There, the water table is closer to ground level and the waterways' shores are suitable for cereal cultivation (Benjaminsen 2002).

In West Africa (as in other parts of the African continent), to name peasant culture means first of all to recognize its existence and the way it defines specific 'territorial figures'[2], images of the spatial-ecological frames in which living is immersed. On a more general level, taking a peasant perspective means looking at ongoing transformation processes holistically, without sectorising the different aspects of living. As Maria Mies explains, commenting on her work 'The Subsistence Perspective' (1999) from which this article is directly inspired: "We aren't speaking of a subsistence economy, but of a subsistence perspective. That is to say, it's not an economic model, but rather, a new orientation, a new way of looking at the economy. That means something entirely different. It doesn't just apply to the economy, but also to society, culture, history, and all other possible areas" (2005).

In the second two decades of the 21st century, assuming a peasant perspective means referring to social movements such as 'La Via Campesina' defined by some authors as 'new ontological politics', "la cui posta in gioco classica, quella relativa alla questione della produzione e della distribuzione della ricchezza sociale, si articola con la possibilità di produrre una differente natura storica" (Avallone, 2015, p.23). This also echoes 'critical agrarian studies' which are "simultaneously a tradition of research, thought and political action, an institutionalized academic field, and an informal network" (Edelman, Wolford, 2017, p.962). Like LVC (La Via Campesina), they position themselves as "politically engaged, pluralist and internationalist" (Borras, 2023, p.476).

[2] By territorial figures we mean the conceptual representations that interpret the conditions of the existing in relation to the structuring elements of the territory with reference to Paola Viganò reflection on the tools of the project as a "forma specifica di interrogazione della realtà" (Viganò 2010).

If we look at inhabiting a territory in West Africa from a peasant perspective, we recognize a space made up of interweavings and knots of different nature in which the fundamental dualisms are articulated around "de ce qui est ouvert et de ce qui est fermé, de ce qui est visible et de ce qui est invisible, de la vulnerabilité et de la durabilité" (Mbembe, 2023, p.43)[3]. In this context, discussing rurality and urbanity acquires a relative value. In a pluralist perspective, or rather of pluriverse, "les cultures de notre époque vivent plusieurs temps different mais en subissant les mêmes transformations, les mêmes influences" (Glissant, 1990, p.83). This means questioning the assumption of overcoming the opposition between urban and rural "by the extension of urbanism to the entire territory" (Corboz, 1983, p.15) as a consequence of the disappearance of the peasantry as such (Corboz 1998) and the percolation of market laws into every aspect of life, of the *vivant*.
This article proposes a peasant perspective to reflect on settlement transformation processes in Southern Mali. The neighbourhood of Ségoukoura in the city of Ségou is considered a case study. The space of the city is investigated from the practices of everyday life because these represent the main terrain of social change (Federici 2018). The 'southern urban theory' has expressed on several occasions the need to examine the practices and imaginaries of the everyday with reference to the 'hyper generative dimension of daily life' (Pieterse 2009; Mbembe, Nuttall 2004; Simone 2004). "Daily life, like language, contains manifest forms and deep structures that are implicit in its operations, yet concealed in and through them" (Lefebvre, 2005, p.2). When considered from a peasant perspective, this language is, in the first place, an ecology, where ecology is understood as the place of coexistence made up of many opaque membranes that protect what's different and make relationships work (Glissant 1990). These relationships define "a space of flows, of flux, of translocation, with multiple nexuses of entry and exit points" (Mbembe, Nuttall, 2004, p.351). On the other hand, if we consider the territory as the horizon of reference (Corboz, 1983), these relationships appear as well anchored to the soil towards which they turn a fundamental form of dependency for the purpose of subsistence.

The artifacts of everyday life: symbols, spaces and land
Ségou is a city on the right bank of the Niger River about 200 km north of the capital Bamako. The city has seen its population grow exponentially over the past thirty years. The latest available official population figure is 135.000 (INSTAT, 2009), compared to 90.000 in the late 1980s (INSTAT, 1987).
Ségou is a historical city: it was the capital of the Bambara kingdom of Ségou until 1861, when El Hadji Oumar Tall[4] conquered it. At that time, Ségou was a 'multiple capital' (Sow 2021) made up of four villages, the four Ségou: Ségoukoro (*koro*, old), Ségoubougou (*bougou*, hamlet), Ségoukoura (*koura*, new) and Ségoushikoro (*shi koro*, the old shea tree). When French settlers arrived, a town centre was defined at the village of Ségoushikoro and the settlement lost its historical multipolar feature. Since that time, the city began to expand in a radial manner. Today, Old Ségoushikoro is the commercial centre of the city with its baked brick colonial buildings, the harbour and the light installations of the large weekly market (*sougouba)*.
Ségoukoura contains three settlement fabrics. The oldest is the village of Ségoukoura, which dates back to around 1750. It has maintained its original morphology defined by a density of dwellings shaped by courtyard clusters with a variable, non-orthogonal geometry. In Sègoukoura, as in other city villages, people continue to build above the same wall layouts. Sometimes they use concrete blocks instead of traditional mud bricks, but they preserve the salient heritage features in terms of typology and morphology.
There is only one plot whose walls do not border the others. This is the Bouarè family's house. The Somono, the fishermen, live in the northern part, and the Bambara, originally farmers, in the southern part. There is no clear delimitation, but, even today, there are two *dougoutiki* (village chiefs), one on each side. The Bouaré family is one of the two families, together with the Coulibaly,

[3] In 'La communauté terrestre' (2023) Achille Mbembe refers to the Bambara culture. The Bambara are peasants who speak the language of the same name and inhabit the study territories between Bamako and Ségou. Mbembe considers their culture as one of 'l'Afrique ancienne', forgetting, perhaps, that Bambara peasants still inhabit this world.
[4] El Hadji Oumar Tall from the Fouta Toro region in present-day Sénégal started a jihad towards the Mandinka and Bambara regions around 1850. He went as far as the conquest of the Islamic kingdom of Macina in today's Mopti region in Mali. The Toucouleur Empire he ruled resisted until the French occupation in 1893.

who has access to the social role of Bambara *dougoutiki*. Madou Bouaré from the large Bouaré family (*douba, dou*-family *ba*-big) kindly opened the doors of his home and guided us through the walls, symbols and objects of his daily life.
In the Bouaré courtyard, there are four *gwaw*, housing units consisting of bedrooms in which three of the Bouaré brothers live with their wives and children as well as a widowed sister. They are all built in *banco*, mud bricks, with cement plaster and a sheet metal roof; apart from Madou's house, which has mud plaster and a wooden structure roof covered with straw and earth. There is also an imposing concrete block building. However, the building is uninhabited and its construction is financed by a brother who lives in Bamako. There are also three sheds for a dozen sheep, a pigeon house, a ruined building inhabited by rabbits, and three outdoor toilets. To enter the courtyard, one must pass through a vestibule. Next to the rooms occupied by Madou together with his two wives and children, there is a large vestibule made of concrete blocks. This is the place where the village council meets to discuss issues affecting the community together with the *dougoutiki*. At the corner of the boundary wall stands another one, reserved for women on ceremonial days.
Bricks, wooden planks, scrap metal, and other useful materials are arranged in different corners of the courtyard. Roofless mud buildings are left to become piles of sand, while animals roam around. Everything is subject to possible change, apart from the two vestibules and the new building, a symbol of recent wealth [fig.2].

[fig.2] In the Bouré *douba* courtyard, Ségoukoura village, January 2022. Source: photo by the author.

In the centre of the courtyard is the well where all the *gwaw* (households) draw water. Three concrete bricks, or three laterite stones, symbolize the place where the fire is lit for cooking. Nearby is always a mortar and *calebasse* or recycled plastic bowls.
The house of the Guindo family, meanwhile, is part of the settlement fabric of Ségoukoura résidentiel. This area is called *billiontiki* (one who has billions) by locals because the plots are the most expensive in the city. They are designed according to a late 1970s plots plan that included 1200 m² plots, 12 m wide roads, and 2400 m² public spaces at a distance of 200 m. The plan provided for the cadastral subdivision of the land and connection to the water and electricity network. However, it did not include the installation of sewage infrastructure or paved roads.

Today, the majority of the population consists of families who live as caretakers in empty houses or on not yet built land. The owners hold the land titles for speculative purposes and, apart from the Europeans who left a few years ago, it remains difficult for locals to rent the available houses.
Chaka Guindo immigrated with his wife to Ségou from the *Pays Dogon* about ten years ago. After several moves, he ended up in Ségoukoura and now lives on one of these large plots of land. Together with his wife and three children, he occupies an enclosed space of 12 m² made of concrete blocks and a sheet metal roof. He built a terraced space at the front covered with *karatà*, the straw with long intertwined stems. Spinach, grapevines and a few flowers grow on the branches supporting the terrace roof. Next to it, an enclosure for sheep and rabbits, and around it a few fruit trees and aromatic plants. Under the *karatà* roof, there are wood stove, bowls, a mortar and water jerry cans filled from the well on the other side of the courtyard. In the corner, a television connected to a satellite dish and powered by solar energy.
Chaka learned to farm with his family in a Dogon village. He has a precise knowledge of reproduction and fertility methods. Unlike most Bambara gardeners in Ségou, he does not use any kind of pesticide and prefers his own seeds. Chaka spends most of his time working in the garden of his house. Since he received the money to buy two solar panels and a pump from his previous employer, at least 600 m² of the courtyard are cultivated all year round [fig.3]. The family is self-sufficient in food, except for cereals, such as rice and millet, which are bought with the sale of garden products and with the income from Chaka's occasional work.

[fig.3] In the Guindo family garden during the rainy season, Ségoukoura résidentiel, August 2022. Source: photo by the author.

In front of the front door stands a heap of dry leaves, branches and *gnama*, rubbish that Chaka waters down to make *nogo* (compost). Chaka also collects *nogo* in the public space next to his house. This is where the neighbours often deposit their rubbish and animals come to ruminate and defecate. Chaka prunes the trees in the public space before and after the rainy season and stores the wood for cooking. He uses the soil in the public space in front of his house to grow *shɔ* (beans) or *tiga* (peanuts) during the rainy season.

Sacks of onions grown all year round and potatoes, peanuts, maize and beans grown during the rainy season hang in the terrace. In October 2022, Chaka harvested 50 kg of beans of which he saved the seeds and sold the leaves as fodder, a meagre harvest of maize and potatoes, and 150 kg of peanuts of which he sold 50 kg and saved 20 kg as seed for the following season.

The Guindo family's garden changes throughout the year: plants grow and die, wood piled up dries, is burnt or becomes compost. New light constructions are set up and removed. The family home itself is in obligatory change: it may have to be left free from one day to the next if the owner asks for it. Every form of life in its various stages contributes to the reproduction of living without distinction between the decorative and the utilitarian: instruments of distant manufacture are juxtaposed with those of ancient model forms.

Ségoukoura is crossed by a paved road. South of the road, on the opposite side of the river, Bagadadji was built in the early 1970s. The name is derived from Bagdad. Like the neighbourhoods of Medine, Missira, Hamdallaye, and Dar Salam, it alludes to Arab-Muslim culture. The Bagadadji plotting was planned to relocate the inhabitants of the village of Ségoukoura, whose houses had suffered severe damage following an extraordinary flood that has remained in the collective memory without a precise date. Lots of 625 m^2 surrounded by 12 m wide orthogonal roads and public spaces of 3.600 m^2 were allocated to families. However, the large families (*douba)* remained in the old village: only a few family units (*gwa)* moved and some land was sold. A few years later, part of the plots were assigned to military officers.

Near the public space, where the daily market attended by the whole of Ségoukoura is located, sits the home of the Djire family. The Djire family living there consists of five *gwaw*, all members of the same Somono family from the village of Ségoukoura. In the village by the river, there is still the court of the *douba*, where Bagadadji's Djires go for celebrations or other purposes. Vieux Djire today works as a tailor and his workshop is located in one of the buildings in the plot. Together with his younger brother, he runs the business with seven electric sewing machines. In front of the entrance, there is a covered and enclosed terrace where customers wait their turn. Near the door, a jar is filled with water for passers-by.

Between 2019 and 2022, the years in which the surveys were conducted, the courtyard changed considerably. New lemon and guava trees were planted and the old papaya tree was replaced by new ones. The wood stacked in a corner was used to build a roof with *karatà*. Where there used to be a sheepfold, a concrete block warehouse has been built. The sheep are still there and when they are not left to graze in the street, they rest in front of the pigeon house [fig.4]. The five *gwaw* use a common outdoor toilet. A well is located in front of the shared kitchen-storeroom, where other building materials, including many mud bricks, are gathered. The fodder for the sheep is stored on top of the warehouse roofs. The Djires retrieve it from relatives in the old village, who are still fishermen and use pirogues to cross the river and collect straw on the opposite bank.

[fig.4] In the Djire family courtyard, Bagadadji, December 2021. Source: photo by the author.

In Bagadadji's house, there are no *daba*, the tools for hoeing, nor stocks of beans or peanuts. One does not cook with wood as the Bourés and Guindos do but with coal bought in the neighbourhood. There are no vestibules. Access to the courtyard is between mud-brick rooms with cement plaster and a sheet metal roof. The gestures of drinking and fetching water from the well, eating from a shared plate while sitting on a low stand, cooking with the back bent over a *daga* (pot) at the fire of a low cooker, filling the plastic teapot to go to the outdoor toilet: all this is linked to a way of living defined by movements shaped under new influences, yet reliant on an ecology defined by the balances between the land, the source of all that is living, space, where "le vivent se compose sur la base d'un potentiel de variabilité, d'élasticité et de plasticité chaque fois changeant" (Mbembe, 2023, p.42), and artifacts which, like symbols, are "ustensiles de la vie..leur role [est] d'aider les humain à établir un pont entre leur propre 'réfection' et la réfection du monde" (Mbembe, 2023, p.23), in other words, to inhabit.

Peasants without barns or a city of women

Along the road that separates Bagadadji from the village of Ségoukoura and Ségoukoura Residentiel, a wide range of activities take place. In the transect corresponding to the residential area, the road has an average width of 35 m. The two paved traffic lanes are approximately 6 m wide, bordered in several places by slight depressions in the ground where rainwater collects. Household waste (organic waste mixed with plastic bags) is deposited here, animals graze the grasses and shrubs that grow, and what remains is collected as brushwood to light the cooking fire.

Along the road, a large public space of about 30.000 m² separates the residential area and the village. This space is occupied by a *grabal*, a livestock market where wood, coal and fodder are also sold, and a station for *katakatani*, two-wheeled public transport vehicles with trailers. The population density in the village is higher than in the residential area. The width of the road reduces to about 20 m and the numerous activities leave no space for buffer zones.

Craft and commercial activities are the same, but their frequency is different. There are activities carried out in segments of courtyard dwellings with extensions on the street by means of sheet metal or *karatà* shelters. These include handicraft activities such as welders, mechanics, carpenters, tailors, cobblers and barbers; commercial activities such as hardware shops, stationers, electronics

shops, second-hand clothes shops, plastic tool shops and grocery shops with basic consumer goods. There are also two bakeries and a pharmacy.
The remaining activities are carried out on public ground using sheet metal kiosks, *karatà* or sheet metal canopies, or a simple stall. These activities follow a variable timetable to meet neighbourhood needs. They mostly sell fresh vegetables that come from the gardens along the Niger River cultivated by village families. At break times, these are supplemented with products bought at the market, products that may come from the villages surrounding Ségou or from Europe. This is the case with onions and potatoes, which for a considerable part of the year are imported from Holland by multinational companies like Dacomex. The other stalls sell daily rations of basic necessities such as powdered milk, sugar, loose cigarettes, bags of Lipton or Chinese green tea, single-dose packets of Nestlé Nescafé, Maggi cubes, single-dose bags of soap powder, soap bars or loose nappies. Along the way, bulk gasoline is sold in recycled glass bottles [fig.5].

[fig.5] Flows and living around the *goudron* in Ségoukoura Source: elaborated by the author.

The *goudron*, the street of Ségoukoura, appears as the variegated and fluid space of what Abdoumaliq Simone calls 'popular economies' (2019). "'Popular economies' refers to the variegated, promiscuous forms of organising the production of things, their repair, distribution, use, as well as the provision of social reproduction services that simultaneous fall inside and outside the ambit of formal capitalist production" (Simone, 2009, p.618). The logics and the time that define them are baroque, mottled (Gago 2018), and in their action ground "the 'neoliberal reason' (a supposed norm of pure mercantile calculus) is appropriated, ruined, transformed and relaunched by those who are supposed to be only its victims" (Gago, 2018, p.31).
Plastic packaging waste at the roadside emphasizes "the integration of households into new networks of capitalist production" (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991, p.73). Everyday approaches to global market rules reveal how trade and craft are defined by the sharing of needs on a neighbourhood scale, the needs of oneself and one's *sighignogow* (neighbours, literally those who sit together). Where the sharing of practices and spaces is no longer possible as extensively as in spread-out villages, interactions accelerate and the dimension of the everyday acquires a reference value.
The satisfaction of the neighbourhood's needs interacts with the flows of the street. This intersection displays "the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces,

persons, and practices" and how "these conjunctions become an infrastructure - a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city" (Simone, 2004, pp.407-408). At Ségoukoura, it is not only these conjunctions that are involved in the process of reproduction, the foundation of daily life. This process comprehends the set of activities that reproduce life and the ability to work day after day. For the most part, it is performed by women (Federici 2018). "Le femministe hanno dimostrato che la vita quotidiana non è un complesso generico di eventi, atteggiamenti ed esperienze in cerca di un ordine. È una realtà strutturata, organizzata attorno a un processo specifico di produzione, la produzione di essere umani, e il suo epicentro il lavoro domestico e i rapporti di genere" (Federici, 2018, p.159).

The rhythms and necessity of the reproduction of everyday life shape the space and time of the city. Beyond the flexibility and unpredictability of exchange opportunities, women's work anchors the city to the soil, the movements of the sun, and the flow of the seasons. It is guided by a peasant language. The act of eating, for example, is not fixed by conventional timetables, but rather by the cooking rhythms of unprocessed and unpackaged ingredients available in open-air shops at certain times of the day. In Ségou, a town of more than 150.000 inhabitants, there are no supermarkets: shared temporal and spatial references guarantee the sustenance of the *gwaw* (households) with the least possible energy expenditure.

Women in Ségoukoura cook in the *daga*, the recycled aluminium pots with convex bottom, as their sisters do in the villages. They lower their backs in the same way so as not to burn their eyes with the smoke from the fire. They shake the *calebasse* with firm movements to leap out rice or bean peels. They spin a small *calebasse* inside a larger one to wash the rice. As Achille Mbembe notes, writing about traditional Bambara culture, "savoir-faire et objets étaient considérés comme des gages de vie", within the manner of "faire monde en se mouvant et en résonance avec les forces du vivant" (Mbembe, 2023, p.45). In the concreteness of these gestures, which are by no means trivial, present and daily needs intersect with a peasant temporality traceable in the signs of its territorial spatiality.

Reliance on everyday life implies a necessary relationship between the space of reproductive work and sociality. The domestic space where women cook for several hours is separated from the street, but not isolated from hearing and sight. To buy fresh or dried ingredients, each morning the women of Ségoukoura go to the market in Bagadadji and spend their *prix de condiments* there. In the morning they wash their clothes at the river or with tap water and often leave them to dry on the ground: the midday sun will soon dry them [fig.6]. They go to the neighbourhood mill to grind millet or maize and can look for some products in the grocery shop no more than 100 m away; or, they can buy from the street vendors who stop in their yard. They often engage in punctual trading activities, such as selling food at certain times of the day prepared in roadside stalls near their homes.

[fig.6] Morning laundry and gardens along the Niger in Sébougou, Ségou, December 2021. Source: photo by the author.

In general, space is divided into degrees of openness towards the outside or protection towards the inside. From the bedroom, an intimate and inaccessible space, one quickly advances to the living room or terrace, the courtyard, the street in front of the house, and the paved road. Women move between these spaces punctually and conscientiously according to a map of the resources they have access to through pre-established relationships. One example is women's accessibility to medicinal plants, regardless of whether they are planted along the road or in a courtyard. Domestic space does not define a separation since, according to the peasant perspective, every activity intended for reproduction is work: through work, I inhabit the territory and relate to what is life.
Public space, that is, everything that is not part of the domestic space, is called *foroba. Foro* is the cultivated field, *ba* means big. In the peasant territories of southern Mali, *foroba* are the fields of extensive rain-fed cereal cultivation. The *foroba* are collective family fields managed according to the social customs of the village. They are not enclosed: the *douba* families have the right to cultivate in certain areas, but the fields are accessible to different actors depending on the season. The land traditionally belongs to the spirits of the subsoil and not to those who step on it.
Ségoukoura *foroba* is, beyond the goudron line, a permeable soil. There are paved zones, but bare soil is continuity. Most grey water is drained from outside toilets into open ditches on the street. During the rainy season, the passage of vehicles digs up areas where water stagnates, creating traffic problems and the multiplication of mosquitoes. As everywhere in the city, the 12 m wide unpaved roads that cross Ségoukoura do not respond to urban decorum. This is reserved only for a few paved roads. Rather, the dirt streets reveal the intimacy of domestic and neighbourhood reproductive cycles[fig.7]. The city's *foroba* changes over time: in addition to the different activities that punctually occupy it, the transit flow changes course after each rainy season. In less densely populated areas such as Ségoukoura Residentiel, flocks graze and, during the rainy season, *tiga* (peanuts), *shɔ* (beans), *gombo* (okra) or *da* (hibiscus) are cultivated. Preference is given to low plants over cereals grown in village *foroba* because, as Madou Coulibaly explains, in the city it is not recommended: someone could hide among the stems.


[fig.7] Three sisters on the roads of Bagadadji, January 2020. Source: photo by the author.

Ruralization in urbanization in Southern Mali: spaces of possibility

Abdoumaliq Simone devoted much of his thinking to placing African cities in the world. "The 'worlding' is more than simply a state of being 'cast out' into the world as the 'homeless' or the marginal. Granted, there is little autonomy African societies can currently exercise in terms of ensuring a sufficiency of resources and participation in international economic transactions. Yet, African cities continue to be places of experimentation for engagement, the terms of which are not exclusively fixed or determined in advance" (Simone, 2001, p.22). People's effort would be to create a plurality of alliances and opportunities to relate the everyday, local dimension with an 'elsewhere' that retains a sense of 'open-endedness' (Simone 2001). In this gesture, the inside, as opposed to the outside, acquires, according to Simone, a symbolic and spiritual dimension and configures "geographies that are off the 'map'" (2001, p.25), as described by Filip De Boeck in his tales of Kinshasa (2014).

For Achille Mbembe, the encounter between local and global assumes, in turn, the figure of the interweaving: "la conscience de cette imbrication de l'ici et de l'ailleurs, la présence de l'ailleurs dans l'ici et vice versa, cette relativisation des racines et des appartenances primaires et cette manière d'embrasser, en toute connaissance de cause, l'étrange, l'étranger et le lointain.. de domestiquer l'in-familier, de travailler avec ce qui a tout l'air des contraires - c'est cette sensibilité culturelle, historique et esthétique qu'indique bien le terme 'afropolitanisme'" (2010, pp.180-181). For the philosopher, Johannesburg is the most manifest laboratory of *la façon d'être monde* of African cities (2010), and 'afropolitanism' a poetics of the world forged at "l'interface de l'autochtonie et du cosmopolitisme" (2000, p.16). Mbembe is bringing his broader reflection 'À propos des écritures africaines de soi' (2000) into the city's spaces. A tradition of reflection on 'identity' in its double political and cultural dimension that finds its roots in the brutal encounter of slavery and colonialism. 'Identity' is here critically confronted with the idea of 'universal' and then of humanity.

Ségoukoura is a very different place from the inner-city Johannesburg portrayed by Simone (2004) or the cosmopolitan capital Mbembe refers to (2010). Ségoukoura in Ségou, on the banks of the Niger River, is the place where "les représentations africaines de soi" (Mbembe, 2000, p.16) are

forged at the interface between the forest lushness on one side and the desert sands on the other. It faces the river that unites and flows to the distant Atlantic Ocean shores. It is a land of the Sahel, in other words, a place where the "pensée de l'enchevêtrement et de la concatenation" (Mbembe, 2010, p.66) is above all an aspiration of the peasant populations that inhabit it. Aware, like any other, that "n'existe pas d'alternative à la modernité", their "travail pour l'universel" (Mbembe, 2010, p.28) consists in materially creating spaces where processes of ruralization meet those of urbanisation. Ruralization can be understood as "the processual, more-than-residual, and geographically-variegated socio-spatial dynamics of contemporary human engagements with rural land, livelihoods, and lifestyles" (Gillen, Bunnell, Rigg, 2022, p.3). This intersects with the construction of the *dugouba* (city, literally large village), "a complex, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory process" (Murray, Meyers, 2006, p.3) in which the diversification of labour and the extension of housing density lead to intensive exchange relationships, as in the paved road of Ségoukoura.

Yet it does not happen as 'hybridization'. Glissant himself distinguished 'hybridization', the calculated outcome of a process, from the 'creole' encounter whose results are always different and unexpected (1990). It does happen in a way that leaves a constant possibility of encounter.

Terry McGee's seminal work in Southeast Asia highlighted how settlement transformation processes in the 'Third World' could follow a different itinerary to the Western model (1971). At the time when the city-territory debate was consolidating in Europe and North America as an actual extension of the urban, McGee framed the term *desakota* (*desa*-village, *kota*-city) to describe the spatial and morphological intertwining of urban and rural in the city development regions of South East Asia (1991). However, McGee's most significant contribution may have been to recognize ruralization as a process and its role in the transformations of living. In his early studies on rural-urban migration, McGee investigates social processes, rather than spatial and morphological patterns, and asks the question "how can this factor of 'ruralization' of the cities be incorporated into the typology of urban model?", since "when a city...has a high number of features which are characteristically rural...this does not mean that the features of an urban style are affected, but it does mean that any static model of urbanism must be changed" (1971, pp.55-56). Fifty years later, while the 'extended metropolis' of Southeast Asia is still being investigated, debate continues on new analytical frameworks to bridge the gap between urban and rural studies (Ghosh 2017; Gururani 2020; Roy 2016).

In the African context, the city-territory debate has contributed to the definition of a new scale of study (Dorier-Apprill, Domingo, 2004). This has been particularly focused on the peri-urban, where the dilution and spread of settlements lead to a blurred distinction between urban and rural in terms of space occupation and land management (Buire 2014; Jaglin, Didier, Dubresson 2018; Sawyer 2014). In particular, the multipolar character of urban expansion has emerged in different parts of the continent (Denis 2015) challenging a simple core-periphery binary (Pieterse 2019). However, a question still remains between the images of an 'Africa's urban revolution' (Pieterse, Parnell 2014) and the problematic nature of translating locally an urban-centred thought on the city.

In 'The Ruralization of the World', Krause proposes an alternative to the "intellectual imperialism of the urban" (2013, p.234). According to Krause, "only when we ruralize the way we think, can we fully disaggregate the different distinctions that have been subsumed under the categories of urban and rural, and think about the different ways they can be put together in forms of social settlement. Only from this perspective can we examine the different ways they are put together again as part of contemporary socio-spatial transformations" (2013, p.234). Studies such as those by Gillen, Bunnell and Rigg echo this position (2022). Inspired by McGee, their work on/from the Global South seeks to form "new dialogues and ways of thinking in human geography" (2022, p.14). They argue that from this placement "ruralization takes the rural-urban binary not as a set of oppositional categories but a relationality" (2022, p.13).

Ségoukoura in Ségou contributes to the discussion by emphasizing that the subsistence of reproductive labour linked to peasant practices is a necessary condition for this relationship, this potentially unfinished encounter, to be possible. These relate to the urban and the rural, as they relate to the local and the global, to what is open and what is closed, to what is visible and what is invisible; as they relate to an idea of identity and humanity: they take different forms shaped by the possibilities of the contemporary world. The four perspectives of the urban and the rural, the global

and the local meet here in a radical and original way, disrupting the analogies between globalisation, depeasantization and capitalism.

Present-day peasant practices hold a clearly structuring role at the scale of southern Malian territories (Pietrobon 2021). Ségoukoura in Ségou suggests that they could fulfil this role at the scale of the city too. The peasant perspective allows us to consider these spaces of possibility and encounter as tools for the construction of a prosperous and decolonial future.

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