INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PJW-10
"La periode de soudure"

Bobo-Dioulasso
Burkina-Faso
10 September 1984

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
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Dear Peter,

"La periode de soudure" is a time of great uncertainty here. It is also a very deceptive season. The countryside is lush green, due to the rains, but there is little to eat.

"Soudure" is the French word that means "soldering" or "welding", as in a soldered joint between two pieces of metal. The phrase "periode de soudure" connotes the period of the year when food supplies are at their lowest -- the last couple of months right before the harvest, when food from the previous year's harvest is almost exhausted. The people, thus, have to deal with a contraction of food supplies -- to bridge the gap (like a soldered bond) -- between the harvests.

The "periode de soudure" in Burkina-Faso is generally synonymous with the single rainy season -- extending from June through August. This time period is when rural farmers, who comprise over 90 percent of the national population, are busiest. Although field preparation may begin in March and April, cereal crops cannot be planted until there has been ample rain, in late May or early June. The crops are harvested towards the end of the rainy season. The uncertainty of the season arises from the uncertainty of the rains. Whether the sorghum and millet will yield much when they are harvested this October and November still depends upon how much rain is yet to come.

For rural villagers here, the question of rain is one of uppermost priority. What James Hoagland wrote over a decade ago still seems to be true:

> More than 85 percent of Africa's 300 million people eke out their lives as peasant farmers, and a failure of the rains to come can be a devastating economic disaster. If the question, "How do Africans live ?" means how do most of them spend the majority of their time, the answer probably is "Thinking about rain". Life tends to be organized around it, in the way that consumer goods are the centerpiece of Western societies.[1]

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For most Burkinabé residents, this preoccupation with rain outweighs other concerns. In talking with rural villagers in recent months, the subject has come up repeatedly. It is much more important than other topics of conversation, such as current revolutionary politics of the government.

Average Burkinabé farmers obtain the bulk of their food from their own efforts -- cultivating food in rainfed fields, procuring food from trees and shrubs, raising livestock, or capturing wild game. As I am interested in the extent to which rural residents obtain food from trees and shrubs, I have been visiting three villages during the past month to talk to village women about their food consumption patterns and uses of various woody species for food. I have been learning a lot about the diverse situations confronting Burkinabé farmers during "la periode de soudure".

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When I began my village fieldwork, I had assumed that it would be relatively easy to ask people to describe their previous day's food consumption. Nutritionists have used this technique in studying dietary patterns, and have found that most people have generally good (although not perfect) recall of what they ate the preceding day. This approach has also been utilized as a measure of the importance of various "wild" leafy plants in the diet, by obtaining counts of the frequency with which various leafy food items are consumed (as compared with the total food consumption sampled).[2] Thus I had hoped I could discover if foods coming from trees and shrubs were significant in local villagers' diets.

The very first day, however, when I asked some older women to describe their previous day's diets to me, I learned how difficult and problematic this question could be.

I had gone to visit the village of Koumi, a traditional Bobo village located on a dirt road about 15 kilometers (10 miles) west of the city of Bobo-Dioulasso. Koumi is a very unusual village, in terms of the degree to which the villagers have retained their traditional life-styles. Although a Catholic seminary was founded next to the village over fifty years ago, most of the villagers still follow their traditional animistic beliefs. Very few have converted to Christianity. The fetishes and altars that form an important part of their religious rituals can be seen throughout the village. Traditional religious Bobo "masks" still appear in the village for certain rituals.[3]

Some rural development agents have told me that they consider Koumi to be an "impermeable" village, very closed to outside influences. The villagers do not appear to be particularly interested in modern agricultural practices. Koumi residents continue to practice agriculture using "dabas" (short-handled

hoes) to dig up and weed their fields. As far as I know, no one in the village uses animal traction and plows. In Koumi the villagers have not yet formed a group cooperative to work with the rural development organization (ORD) staff -- merely a village planning committee exists. (The ORD provides seed, fertilizer, pesticides, and agricultural implements at favorable prices to villagers that organize themselves into group cooperatives.) The ORD extension agents who work and live in the village are a married couple: Madame Coulibaly is an "animatrice" (woman extension agent working with village women), and Monsieur Coulibaly is an "encadreur" (man extension agent working with village men).

Koumi is located next to a stream. The stream is the basic water source -- for drinking and cooking water, bathing and washing clothes. No village fields, however, are irrigated. Although there is a well in the village -- with generally cleaner and safer water -- most of the village women still find it easier to fill their large enamel basins with water in the stream rather than crank the pump for the well. Madame Coulibaly, who believes that use of the well water for drinking and cooking could reduce health problems in the village, finds it a bit exasperating that so few Koumi women are convinced that the benefits of cleaner water are worth the extra work involved.

Koumi is a fairly old and large Bobo village. In the most recent (1975) census, Koumi had 4191 inhabitants. I have been told that virtually all of the residents are members of the Bobo ethnic group. The dialect of the Bobo language spoken in Koumi is unique to this particular village, and incomprehensible to other Bobo speakers. The villagers speak varying amounts of Jula, the common market or trading language in the southwestern region of the country: a small proportion speak some French. Koumi is probably at least a couple hundred of years old, if not older -- no one really seems to know exactly how long the village has existed.

Koumi attracts a certain number of tourists, who come to see the old Bobo architecture. The mud houses are generally rectangular in shape with flat roofs: many have a second story. They vary in design. Some have actual staircases, either inside or outside the house to the top floor: others have a diagonally-sloping log, stretching between a corner of the ground-level room up through a hole in the ceiling, with notches carved as steps, to serve as a ladder.

Another unusual aspect of Koumi is the underground rooms, or "holes", dug in the ground by the stream. These holes are big enough for four to eight women to sit inside. They are accessed by a notched-log ladder and the openings are reinforced with wood. These underground rooms are used by the women during the hot season to weave or braid baskets. As there is more humidity underground, the ronier -- a type of palm tree (Borassus aethiopum) -- leaves remain more pliable for working underground than they would aboveground.

Although I was not interested in conducting research in a village that was visited by tourists, I decided that Koumi would be a good choice as a "traditional" village. It is one of the few villages in this region of the country that has a resident ORD animatrice, who could facilitate my contacts with villagers. In addition, Madame Coulibaly, the animatrice, seemed to be quite enthusiastic about the topic of my study and open to working with me on it.

On our first visit to the village, Madame Coulibaly took my research assistant, Awa Ouattara, and myself on a tour of the village. She pointed out the location of various village facilities -- the open-air market, a bar where "dolo," a locally-brewed sorghum beer, was available, the maternity building and health clinic. We walked through the three different sections of the village, including the one where the families of the blacksmith caste live and work.

As it was mid-morning, the only villagers available to meet us were the older adults. We went to meet the traditional village chief. He is quite a striking figure. He dresses in a long-sleeved, knee-length, embroidered white robe. On his head he wears a striped cotton hat -- a short stocking-type cap that flops over to one side. A large brass-and-leather hoop earring decorates his right ear. On his feet are locally-produced sandals, made of the rubber of an old tire. He is not much more than five feet tall, and carries a long, carved walking stick. The chief's face is etched with fine crinkles and he usually has a broad smile -- he reminds me of a wise, merry old Santa Claus. The chief seems to find me somewhat amusing, in that I understand practically no Jula -- but he keeps talking to me in Jula anyway. I respond in French, and Awa translates back and forth for us. So on the first and subsequent visits, the chief and I have been developing a cordial acquaintance.

We were joined in the chief's house by three older women. Like the rest of the villagers, these women all have very short hair that they trim by shaving their heads. The women were all wearing shirts, a long length of fabric wrapped around their bodies as a skirt, and sandals. All three had ceremonial facial scars, consisting of three lines on each side of the mouth, carved across their faces like giant whiskers. Two women also had small round plugs, perhaps made of bone, inserted in their skin between the lower lip and chin. As I have not seen either facial scars or plugs on younger women in the village, I assume that these ritual markings are no longer used in initiation ceremonies.

As we sat on wooden stools, we all exchanged greetings. Then I explained the purpose of my research -- that I wished to visit the village repeatedly, to talk to villagers about their uses of trees and shrubs for food. The chief agreed that

this topic was an important one to the villagers. Madame Coulibaly then asked me if I had a notebook and was "ready to work". I assured her that I did and took it out of my bag. (I had been unsure whether or not note-taking would make people uncomfortable. I was relieved, thus, to learn that she considered it to be a legitimate part of my role as a researcher. I don't know if the others shared her perception, but her request made it much easier for me.)

We began to discuss what types of plants the Koumi villagers cultivate, and which trees and shrubs provide foodstuffs. Madame Coulibaly and Awa took turns interpreting my my questions and the responses. The chief made occasional contributions, but most of the information was provided by the three women. They told me about eighteen different species of edible trees.

Three tree species are extremely important and frequently found in the villagers' fields -- néré (Parkia biglobosa), shea-nut (Butyrosperum parkii), and ronîer (Borassus aethiopum). The néré is valued for its seeds, used to make a high-protein condiment called "soumbala". The nuts of the shea-nut tree are made into shea-nut butter, used as the basic cooking fat and also for making soap. The ronîer, in addition to providing leaves that are used in the making of baskets, provides an alcoholic palm wine that is made from the sap and a non-alcoholic beverage made from the fruits.

All three tree species are actively managed by the villagers. When fallow fields are cleared for agriculture, shea-nut and néré trees will be left, along with other "useful" trees. Farmers also plant néré seed. The ronîer trees are started from seed by farmers in small personal nurseries, and are transplanted into the fields at the start of the rainy season. The family who has the rights to the fields also has the right of harvesting the produce from the trees that they have planted or left on their fields: tree rights are hereditary, passed on through the patriline (descent through the male line, with sons inheriting rights from their fathers).

Other trees that the villagers use for food are less abundant, and tend to be found in scattered locations, often in areas beyond the villagers' fields referred to as "the bush". It was difficult for villagers to explain to me what constitutes the bush -- but it seems to be the area beyond the fields, before one arrives at the fields of the neighboring village. The village "limits" encompass a certain area of "bush" -- only the village residents have the rights to use the trees and other resources in their bush. Depending upon the direction, the bush begins between 3 and 6 kilometers (1.8 and 3.6 miles) from the village of Koumi.

Among the tree species used for food are baobab (Adansonia digitata), "prunes" of the bush (Vitex doniana), wild "raisins"

(Lannea microcarpa), wild dates (Balanites aegypitiaca), tamarind (Tamarindus indica), a fig species (Ficus gnaphalocarpa), detar (Detarium sp.), and another wild prune (Sclerocarya birrea). Two different types of lianes (Saba senegalensis and Calotropis procera) provide edible fruits. Two other edible tree species were mentionned, which are called "gouren" and "konyonwgubo" in Jula. (I have not yet been able to find scientific names for these species, either using lexicons of local language tree names or keying out botanical specimens.)

Who collected these foods, I asked. The village chief answered that all the villagers were "authorized" to collect them. The women laughed and explained that -- although all were authorized -- it was generally the women who obtained these tree foods. Often older children, both girls and boys, are sent out to look for them.

Then I asked each woman if she could tell me what she had eaten the previous day. The first explained that the children in her household (perhaps her grandchildren?) had eaten "tao" (a cooked porridge made of cereal grains, such as millet or sorghum) with a sauce of "da" leaves in the morning. ("Da", or sorrel of Guinea, is a cultivated plant related to okra.) The entire household, adults and children alike, had eaten "tao" with a sauce made of caterpillars collected from shea-nut trees in the evening. The sauce was made by frying fresh caterpillars in shea-nut butter with salt and hot peppers. Some dried caterpillars had also been prepared with "soumbala", shea-nut butter, and water, in the form of a soup.

The second woman told me that she had eaten once the previous day -- in the evening, "tao" with cultivated "kikiri" leaves, prepared with "soumbala", salt, and peppers.

The third woman said she had had nothing to eat the previous day. It was true, she insisted, and the others agreed. She explained that she was a widow and her married sons did not live in the village. Her stock of millet from the previous harvest was gone, and she had no family to give her grain. Other people gave her food from time to time, and she made a little bit of money selling straw baskets she weaves.

The three women and the chief discussed how this is a "famine" year -- the "soudure" was hard this year. Last summer's rains had been poor, so the millet and sorgho harvests had been poor. Consequently, now the older people were usually eating once a day in the evening, the younger adults who do more heavy physical labor eating once or twice a day, and the young children eating two or three times a day.

I asked if there were certain tree foods that are used only in periods of famine. There was only one that they could think of, and they said it was rare and difficult to find. Other tree foods, that they normally use in their diets, are also scarce

this year. When the rains are poor, nothing produces very much. In addition, some tree produce runs in cycles. Last year the shea-nut trees had produced a lot of fruit: this year production was much lower. (Usually, it seems, a year with a good crop of shea-nut fruit is followed by a few years of low yields before another good year.) Consequently, all vegetable food, whether cultivated or collected from semi-cultivated or "wild" plants, is difficult to come by this year.

This topic of famine came up again in subsequent visits to Koumi. On a later visit, I again asked similar questions on the previous day's food consumption of another group of four older women. The preceding day had been market day in Koumi, so a wider variety of foods had been eaten. (Koumi has a small open-air market every fifth day: most of the foods sold there are locally-produced.) Among the foods eaten were "tao", rice, beans, bean fritters, shea-nut caterpillars, wild prunes (fruits of the Vitex doniana tree, called "koto" in Jula), "dolo"(millet beer), and palm wine. Condiments used in the preparation of these foods included "soumbala", shea-nut butter, salt, peppers, and onions.

One woman told me there was "nothing to eat": however, she had eaten some wild prunes and caterpillars the previous day. She then asked me to tell her if we ate the same kinds of foods in my home country, the United States. I told her that we had some of the same foods -- rice, beans(legumes), peppers, onions, and salt. But because the climate is cooler, we don't grow millet nor do we have the same edible trees -- shea-nut, néré, or "koto". I also explained that I didn't know anyone who ate caterpillars in the States. Madame Coulibaly told me that the Koumi villagers don't eat just any kind of caterpillars -- only the particular type found on the shea-nut trees, which are only available in the later part of the rainy season (August). In lieu of "tao", I explained, Americans tended to eat wheat, noodles, rice, and potatoes as their starches.

The older Bobo woman replied that she ate rice occasionally, but she would really prefer to eat "tao" everyday. Then she asked why didn't my country send food to her country, as there is a famine this year. I told her that, in fact, the United States had sent some food to Burkina-Faso, but I wasn't sure how it was being distributed. Madame Coulibaly mentionned that the food was being distributed by Cathwell, a program of the Catholic Relief Services. The older woman said that she knew about this program, but as it only distributes food to families with children, she was not qualified to receive any food.

The four women then discussed how, if the poor rains continue, next year will be the "true famine". There was not much rain the beginning of the summer -- in June and July -- so the beans and

maize have not yielded much. The rains were better in August, though still low. Consequently, in Koumi people are generally pessimistic about the prospects for the sorghum and millet harvests in late September, October, and November.

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In reflecting upon the several visits I have made to Koumi, I realize how difficult it is to interpret what I have been told and what I have seen there. From visual appearance, the village seems to be quite poor in comparison to other villages I have visited. In our first walk around the village, Madame Coulibaly had pointed out two young children that were quite ill -- feverish, with blank expressions on their faces. She told Awa and I that she thought the children would probably die from malnutrition. She was very discouraged by this -- in both cases, she said, each mother had already lost two children. The shortage of food was certainly a factor, but the women were also continuing to have children spaced too closely together, for whom there is inadequate food. (One of the ill children had been recently weaned, as his mother had a new baby at her breast.) I also wondered if the village's low agricultural yields could be at all improved by other agricultural techniques, rather than solely depending upon the rains. I don't know if the village is really suffering from famine -- according to "objective" measurements -- or if this is just what I was told (and the villagers themselves may perceive).

But my initial visits to Koumi did shatter some of my preconceptions. First was the idea that it would be easy to ask people about their food consumption. If people do not have much food -- whether it is due to normal "periode de soudure" conditions or poor harvest -- then food consumption may be a difficult issue to discuss. There is also the problem of how one asks this question to a group of individuals. I have no idea whether there is any shame involved in admitting in front of others -- fellow villagers or strangers -- that one has had no food, or very little food, to eat because of poor harvests or one's family situation. Not only may the question be difficult to answer, but I also found it difficult to ask. I had not been expecting to find that the villagers had so little to eat. Being confronted with the poverty and hunger of the Koumi villagers on my first visit there was emotionally overwhelming for me. I can deal with the situation intellectually, but on an emotional level I feel rather helpless. What can I, or any outsiders, do to help improve the lives of these people?

I had thought that I might be able to ask these food consumption questions to individuals alone. But I have discovered that this is difficult in two respects. When I, as a foreigner, arrive with my research assistant and the animatrice, it is already an event that attracts a lot of attention in the village. Lots of children gather around to watch and listen, and women who are free come to join the group. In addition, it seems to

be common for the Koumi women to talk and work together in small groups. After the first visit, in three subsequent visits, when I have talked to women they have always had some work to do at the same time -- making strips of ronier leaves and weaving them into baskets, stripping "kikiri" leaves from their stalks so that the leaves could be dried and preserved, or hoeing their millet field. Then women have been quite willing to talk to me, particularly if I pitch in and help them with their work, but I am unable to assess how the questioning in a group setting may affect the responses I receive.

The second preconception shattered was that if food is scarce, perhaps people can obtain more food from trees and shrubs. This idea of people using certain woody species as "famine foods" is quite popular in the forestry literature. If the rains are poor, then all food may be scarce. Of course, scarcity is a relative concept, particularly when measured in terms of subjective perceptions. In regions where food is extremely difficult to come by, people may be forced to eat species they would not normally consume. This situation may not yet have arrived in Koumi, where people just find the species they normally use in less abundant supply. When the Koumi villagers talk of "famine", they may be implying that they are going through a period of hunger but not actually one of starvation. (They did make a distinction between this year's "famine" and the possibility of next year's "true famine".)

But I have learned that tree foods are frequently employed in the diets of Koumi villagers. The "periode de soudure" is made a bit less hard by the fact that women can gather caterpillars from the shea-nut trees in large quantities to eat, and also wild prunes. Some villagers, at least, seem to regard these foods as seasonal delicacies. Although there have not been a lot of karite fruits this year, women use the few good fruits they can find as nourishment for their young children. The "soumbala" and shea-nut butter are important daily condiments for seasoning whatever foods are available at this time. The shea-nut butter is particularly important, as these villagers could not afford to purchase alternative cooking oil.

The shea-nut caterpillars and wild prunes are now, in mid-September, virtually finished. The rains have not yet stopped. "La periode de soudure" is drawing to a close. Soon the uncertainty of the harvest will be settled, and the Koumi villagers, like those elsewhere in Burkina-Faso, will know what the year ahead will bring.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

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Forest and Society
Fellow

NOTES:

1. James Hoagland, "Africa: fragments in the mind," Washington Post (18 February 1973), p. B1, quoted in Andrew M. Kamarck, The tropics and economic development: a provocative inquiry into the poverty of nations (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, for the World Bank, 1976), p. 16.

2. Anne Fleuret, "The role of wild foliage plants in the diet: a case study from Lushoto, Tanzania," Ecology of Food and Nutrition 8 (1979),pp. 87-93; and Anne Fleuret, "Methods for the evaluation of the role of fruits and wild greens in Shambaa diet: a case study," Medical Anthropology 3 (1980),pp. 249-269.

3. More information on Bobo masks and Bobo culture can be found in Guy Le Moal, Les Bobo: Nature et Fonction des Masques, Travaux et Documents de l'ORSTOM No. 121 (Paris: ORSTOM, 1980). Tree leaves, plant fibers, wood, and other materials from woody vegetation are used to make these religious masks.

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