

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PJW-11

The women of Koundougou

Bobo-Dioulasso

Burkina-Faso

6 October 1984

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

The women of Koundougou are working together to improve their lives. They have formed a women's cooperative group to work on a variety of activities that affect their lives -- notably agriculture and health.

Through the women's group, I and my research assistant, Awa Ouattara, have been meeting with village women to talk to them about their uses of trees and their daily diets. This approach has enabled us to reach a large number of women quickly, and to become accepted rapidly by the villagers.

The village of Koundougou is located 70-75 kilometers (45 miles) north of Bobo-Dioulasso, on the paved road that is the main route to Mali. According to the 1975 census, Koundougou had 2722 inhabitants: recent estimates put the population closer to 4000. The village is one of the larger ones in the area. The weekly Thursday market is a good-sized one, attended by residents of nearby villages and merchants from Bobo-Dioulasso. A regional storehouse for the Rural Development Organization (ORD) is located in Koundougou. The village also has a police post and a primary school.

Although Koundougou was originally a Bobo village, members of other ethnic groups -- Mossi, Samo, and Peul (Fulani) -- have moved to the village over the years. Many of these immigrants have lived in Koundougou for ten to twenty years. The Mossi inhabitants now outnumber the Bobos. The majority of the villagers -- 60-80 percent -- are Muslim.

The Koundougou villagers are organized into a variety of social groups. The village has a traditional village chief and other male elders. There is also a Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), composed of young men. Two men and one woman live and work in the village as rural extension (ORD) agents. The two men work with the men's cooperative group: the woman, Marguerite Kabore, works with the women's cooperative group.

Paula J. Williams is a Forest and Society Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, studying human uses of forest resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

Marguerite has been at her post only since May 1984. The women's group had been formed prior to her arrival, by the village women themselves, to focus on helping with women's agricultural activities. The women's group, with 427 members, is organized into 12 sub-groups. The group's president, Dicho Kalangibo, explained to me that the group has really started to function well since Marguerite arrived and they have begun to participate in projects. It is quite clear that the largest factor in the success of the group's efforts has been the eagerness of the women to work together.

One of the group's first activities since Marguerite's arrival was to plant three collective fields: 1.5 hectares (3.7 acres) of millet, 0.5 hectares (1.2 acres) of sorghum, and 0.25 hectares (0.6 acres) of black-eyed peas. The fields are not very large, but an important start. The son of the village chief has loaned the women the land. The women work in the fields once or twice a week when there is work to be done. All 427 members will not show up simultaneously, but perhaps 100 to 160 will work together at a time. The harvest will be sold and the members will jointly decide how to spend their revenues.



Harvesting black-eyed peas from the collective field

Since the village has no pharmacy and is located quite a distance from Bobo-Dioulasso, one problem is obtaining medicines when they are needed. To address this issue, the women's group has decided to spend some of their funds to obtain some basic medicines, such as aspirin and chloroquine (the latter used for malaria suppression and treatment). Their objective is not to make any money -- since the medicines will be resold to villagers roughly at cost -- but to provide a service to villagers. The rural development office in Bobo-Dioulasso is arranging the initial order of approximately \$50 worth of medicine from a government pharmacy, at lower prices than commercially available.

Marguerite is also working with the group members, providing advice on topics of concern to women. She discusses agricultural issues and demonstrates agricultural techniques. She also presents information on a variety of health issues. One day when we were visiting, for example, Marguerite met with one of the sub-groups to discuss malaria -- its causes, prevention, and treatment.

*

*

*

The first meeting that we had with the women's group to discuss their uses of trees and shrubs for food was attended by 60 to 70 women, as was the second meeting. With this many women present, it was difficult to get much participation: most of the women listened, while perhaps half a dozen provided answers to my questions. The women who talked were primarily the older women in the group, the group president and the presidents of some of the sub-groups. This typically seems to occur, with the older women having the rights to speak for the group, and the young married women, with their small children in tow, listening.

Toward the end of the first discussion, I asked whether any of the women obtained resources from the Forêt Classée de Tere (Classified National Forest of Tere), which is located about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the village. A couple of the younger women discussed their trips to the forest, saying that they occasionally go there in the dry season. In the wet season, they explained, the grass is too tall and it is difficult to find the paths to enter into the forest. In the forest they find certain types of edible species that are difficult to find elsewhere. They will search for firewood at the same time as they are looking for edible leaves and fruits. They consider the forest to be quite distant from the village. To make a trip there, find leaves, fruit, and wood, and walk back to the village may take them from 5:30 in the morning until 6 at night. Probably the younger women volunteered information on this subject since it is they, rather than the older women, who make the trips.

After our first two meetings with large groups of women, I suggested that perhaps we could meet with sub-groups or individual women, depending upon their availability -- so that we could talk to more women individually. At subsequent meetings with members of various sub-groups, I have been learning a lot about the diversity of village women's lives, values, and perspectives. The sub-groups are divided along ethnic lines, which roughly correspond with residential sections of the village (see Figure 1). We have had separate meetings with Samo, Mossi, Bobo, and Peul women.

Ethnic identity still seems to be a very strong factor in shaping villagers' values and behaviors. In Burkina-Faso, as elsewhere in Africa, many people identify themselves first in terms of ethnicity. Ethnic identity is not synonymous with race or tribe. As John Grazel (1980: vii) notes,

An ethnic group is a somewhat more abstract entity than a tribe. It exists based on a feeling of shared identity on the part of people who possess a common life style, language, religion, or other major cultural institution. One belongs to an ethnic group because both the individual and others "feel" they belong.

The ethnic mixture found in Koundougou is, in some ways, a microcosm of the national situation. Burkina-Faso has a population of over 7 million, who are classified as belonging to over sixty different ethnic groups. According to Jan Claessens (1981), roughly half the national population is Mossi. The next most numerous groups are the Peul (10.4% of the population), the Lobi and Dagari (7%), the Bobo (6.7%), the Sénoufo (5.5%), the Gourounsi (5.3%), the Bissa (4.7%), and the Gourmantche (4.5%). As a map of the eleven largest groups shows (see Figure 2), these ethnic groups were originally concentrated in different regions of the country. In the past two decades, however, there has been a great deal of migration from the northern and central regions of the country into the southern and western areas.

The ethnic groups in Koundougou differ in a number of ways -- language, life styles, types of houses, and physical appearance. The ethnic identity of many individuals in Burkina-Faso is very clearly marked, and visible to the knowledgeable eye. Traditionally many of the people here have received facial scars to mark their initiation into certain age-groups: typically each ethnic group has its own distinctive designs. The Peul women do not have facial scars, but have distinctive hairstyles and dress. They often shave the hair over their foreheads, to push back their hairlines, and typically wear a great deal of jewelry, some of which is often braided into their hair. The Peul wear very brightly-colored dresses, usually with flower motifs, over woven striped skirts. The women of the other ethnic

Figure 1

GENERALIZED LAYOUT OF KOUNDOUGOU

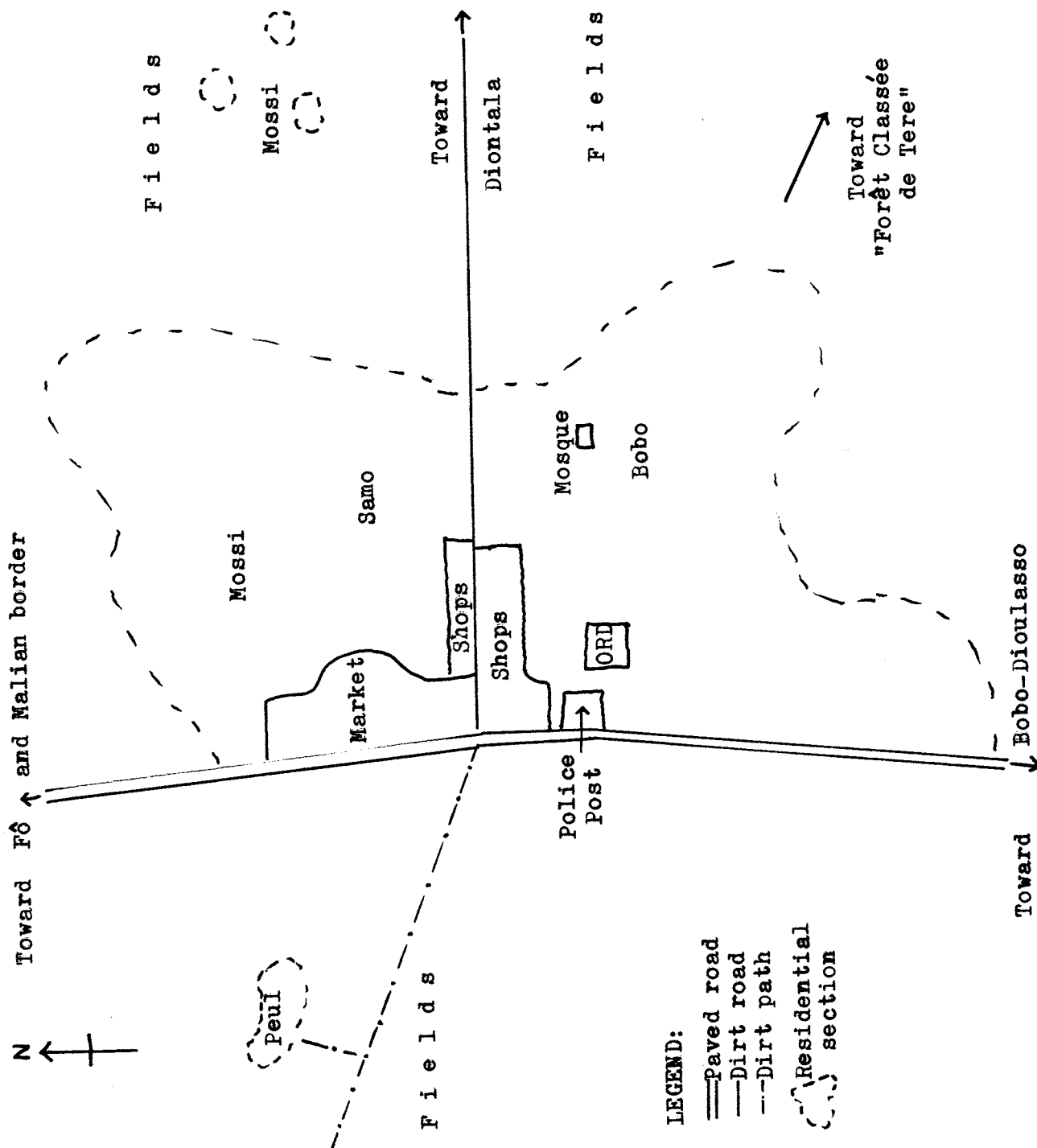
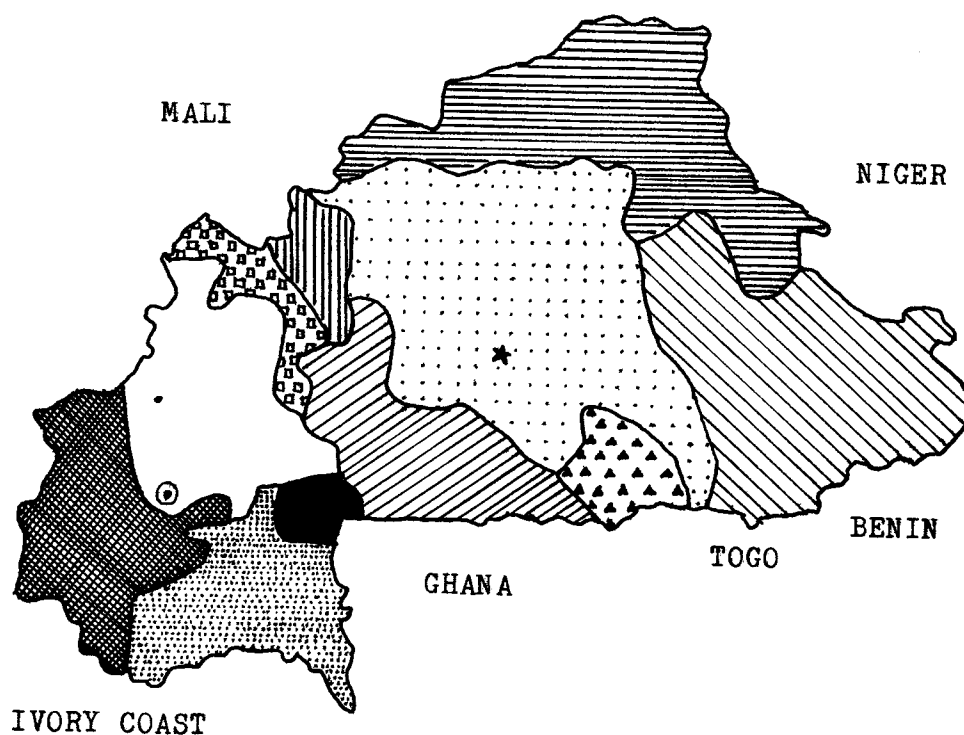


Figure 2
 PRINCIPAL ETHNIC GROUPS
 IN BURKINA-FASO
 (formerly Upper Volta)



LEGEND:

Ethnic groups:

	Bobo
	Mossi
	Gourmantché
	Gourounsi
	Samo
	Peul
	Marka
	Bissa
	Lobi
	Sénoufo
	Dagara

Other symbols:

- ★ Ouagadougou
- ⊙ Bobo-Dioulasso
- Koundougou

Map adapted from:
 "Principaux Groupes
 Ethniques" inset to
Haute-Volta: Carte
Touristique et Routière.
 Institut Géographique
 de Haute-Volta. Printed
 in Paris, 1978. (Scale
 of inset map: not given.)

groups dress in sleeveless or short-sleeved blouses and wrap skirts, or long dresses called "boubous", made of printed cotton fabric or woven striped fabric.

The organization of sub-groups along ethnic lines seems to make sense in terms of the ease with which the women can work together. Those who live in the same part of the village and speak the same maternal language will be most apt to associate in daily life. Although many of the women speak Jula, the regional trading language, and thus can communicate easily with women of other ethnic backgrounds, not all can. Although there is a certain amount of joking and occasional complaining about members of other ethnic groups, generally the village women seem to be able to work together well in their larger group, despite ethnic differences.

In talking to the women about their uses of trees and shrubs for food, the question of ethnicity is brought up by the women themselves. One woman told me, for example, that the Samo, and especially the Mossi, like to use the leaves of the baobab tree (Adansonia digitata) in their sauces. The most baobab trees that I have seen in the village, however, are located in a Bobo residential section. Similarly, one Bobo woman explained that one of the trees that the Bobos value and leave in their fields is the wild raisin (Lannea microcarpa). But, she complained, the Mossis cut these trees down. The Mossi women later told me that they like to eat the fruits of the wild raisin tree and it is among the useful trees they leave in their fields.



A sorghum field with shea-nut trees

Ethnic differences clearly emerge in patterns of daily diet and division of labor. Each ethnic group seems to have certain preferences for food and certain typical recipes. For example, the Mossis seem to flavor their okra sauces with dried fish, whereas the Samos are apt to mix okra with the leaves of cultivated herbaceous plants, such as "da", "sobon", or "kikiri". The Peul women use baobab leaves, shea-nut butter, and "soubala", as do the women of the other ethnic groups, but they typically buy these ingredients in the local market, rather than collecting the ingredients and processing the foods themselves. A major reason for this difference is that the economic activities of the Peul center on raising cattle, rather than agriculture. Peul women sell milk and butter in the village. They are relatively more affluent than other village women, and thus can afford to buy these tree foods. Their diets in general are more varied and include more purchased foods.

The Samo, Peul, Mossi, and Bobo women have all told me that planting trees is done by men, but that women (or girls) will water the trees that have been planted. Among the Samo, Bobo, and Mossi groups, it is generally the men who will dig up and replant young baobab trees. Sometimes the young trees are found around the village, growing from seeds that someone has thrown on the ground while eating the fruit. Other times the baobabs are found in "the bush". Madame Kalangibo, who is Samo, explained that an "old woman" like herself could dig up and replant a young baobab. Among the Peul, however, it is customary for the women to replant baobab trees that the children (probably boys) have found while they were in "the bush" guarding the young cows, and have dug up and brought home. For all four ethnic groups it is only the men who will purchase and plant fruit tree seedlings, such as mango or lemon trees.

There are also ethnic differences in the collection of firewood and baobab leaves. For the Mossi, Bobo, and Samo, the women collect firewood for home use, whereas the men may collect firewood to sell. Men will also go out into "the bush" to cut baobab leaves: they fill large sacks with these leaves, to sell in the local market. The women say that they do not obtain large quantities of firewood or baobab leaves to sell because they are "not strong enough". While the men may have a muscular advantage in chopping wood, I find the women's explanation that they are not strong enough to carry sacks of baobab leaves difficult to accept, since the women carry heavy loads of water and firewood on their heads. Upon further questioning, the women have admitted that -- with the other work they have to do on a daily basis to keep their households running -- they don't have large blocks of time to gather wood or baobab leaves to sell. (The women of Koundougou, other than the Peul, sell most other types of produce, both cultivated and "wild".) The women also are less likely than the men to have access to mopeds or carts for transporting these forest products.

Among the Peul, firewood and baobab leaves are never gathered to sell and are only gathered by women. When I asked the Peul women if the men ever collected firewood, they laughed and replied no. But what if a woman was sick or giving birth, I asked, would her husband help her? No, they explained, another woman in the family or a neighbor woman would help out.

*

**

*

All of the women of Koundougou have been very gracious about talking with us and have been very hospitable. At the close of a couple of our meetings, the women have started singing and dancing and clapping. Other times we have been presented with gifts -- peanuts, kola nuts, milk, beans, or Guinea fowl eggs. We have felt quite welcomed in the village and have gotten to know a lot of the women. One woman has even repeatedly suggested that I should move to the village and live there permanently.

A few times when we have been in the village, we have been invited to join their baptism parties -- held when an infant is seven days old (the day when the child is named). These parties have been just for women and their children, to visit the new mother, admire the baby, and leave presents of money or bars of brown soap for the child. The family hosting the baptism, in turn, provides some refreshments, such as coffee and porridge, and also gives the guests kola nuts. It provides a good chance for the women to socialize with one another.

I don't know whether our warm reception is part of the typical hospitality for which the Burkinabe people are renowned or not. I have recently learned that my visits to the village have been blessed with a highly fortuitous coincidence.

When we had first started our meetings with the Koundougou women in late August, I had asked about the rain. The women told me that the rains had been very poor in June and July. It would have to rain until mid-October, they said, if they were to have any success with their sorghum and millet crops. But last year, they said, although they had prayed on Tabaski (a Muslim day of thanksgiving) for rain, it had only rained once after Tabaski. So although Tabaski was coming up the following week and they planned to pray again, they weren't very optimistic.

But this year the rains have turned out to be quite unusual in Koundougou. Instead of tapering off in September, the rains have been their heaviest in September and have continued into October. About ten days ago, I asked Madame Kalangibo, the group president, about the rain. Yes, she said, they had gotten rain since my previous visit -- it had rained a lot the preceding day. Now, she said, even if there was no more rain, the millet would still germinate. Then Madame Kalangibo explained that



Mme. Kalangibo, the women's group president, with one of the Bobo sub-group presidents and the latter's grandchild

it rains every time after I visit the village. The villagers had noticed that although it had not rained much in the beginning of the summer, after I started making my visits to the village, it had been raining a lot. Consequently, she said, the villagers now hold me in high esteem.

Sure enough, when we visited the village four days later, we arrived in the midst of a heavy rainstorm. After sitting in Marguerite's house for an hour and a half, until the rain had subsided, Awa and I walked over to the president's courtyard. When we arrived, it was a small lake. Madame Kalangibo told us that it had also rained a lot the night before -- then thanked us. We agreed that it would be difficult to hold the meeting we had scheduled for that morning with a Mossi subgroup, since there was no dry place to sit -- so we made arrangements for another day. By yesterday, when we returned to the village, all had dried out.

This coincidence of the rain and our visits has certainly been a fortuitous one for my research. It could have just as easily been the reverse. The ease of doing village-level research can, it seems, depend upon such circumstances. I am glad that I have been so fortunate to be received so warmly by the women of Koundougou and have had the chance to share a bit of their lives.

Sincerely,
Paula J. Williams
Paula J. Williams
Forest and Society Fellow

LITERATURE CITED:

Grayzel, John.

1980 "Introduction to Mauritanian social structure," pp. vii - xii, IN Smale, Melinda. Women in Mauritania: The effects of drought and migration on their economic status and implications for development programs. Washington, D.C. : Office of Women in Development, U.S. Agency for International Development.

Claessens, Jan.

1981 Regards sur la Haute-Volta. Poitiers, France: Collectif Tiers-Monde de Poitiers.

Received in Hanover 10/24/84