REVUE INTERNATIONALE
DES ÉTUDES DU DÉVELOPPEMENT

N° 255
2024-2

Paysanneries et conflits violents

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ÉDITIONS DE LA SORBONNE

Fertile Soil?

Rural Young Men's Navigation of Changing Environments and the Potential Expansion of Jihadi Actors in Sikasso, Mali

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ABSTRACT

Poor, unemployed rural young men are often presumed to be inevitable victims for jihadi recruitment in the Sahel. However, from the perspective of rural populations, jihadi violence's social reconfiguration is only the latest episode in a long series of transformations of the social environment. Youth have developed various tactics to move their lives in advantageous directions and joining jihadis is only one potential pathway. Zooming in on Mali's southern Sikasso region, this article proposes the framework of social navigation to make sense of the diverse trajectories of rural male youth. Based on 6 months of fieldwork and interviews with stakeholders in Bamako and Sikasso, it provides a framework that unites social transformation, youth's agency and jihadi expansion.

KEYWORDS

social navigation, rural youth, jihad, Sikasso

Un terrain fertile ? Navigation sociale des jeunes hommes ruraux dans des environnements changeants et expansion potentielle du djihadisme à Sikasso, au Mali

RÉSUMÉ

Les jeunes hommes pauvres des zones rurales sont souvent considérés comme les candidats privilégiés pour le recrutement des groupes djihadistes au Sahel. Or, du point de vue des populations, les reconfigurations violentes actuelles ne sont que le dernier épisode d'une série de transformations sociales plus longues. En effet, les jeunes ont développé diverses stratégies afin d'obtenir un statut social plus avantageux, parmi lesquelles le djihad n'est qu'une voie potentielle. En se concentrant sur la région de Sikasso, au sud du Mali, cet article propose de comprendre les trajectoires des jeunes hommes ruraux et leur navigation sociale (Vigh, 2006). Fruit d'une enquête de terrain de six mois se basant notamment sur des entretiens avec les acteurs concernés à Bamako et à Sikasso, l'article explore les transformations sociales, les parcours de ces jeunes et l'expansion du djihad.

MOTS-CLÉS

navigation sociale, jeunesse rurale, djihadisme, Sikasso

¿Un terreno fértil? La orientación de los jóvenes rurales en contextos mutantes y potencial expansión de los actores del yihad en Sikasso, Mali

RESUMEN

Los jóvenes pobres de zonas rurales son considerados, a menudo, como los candidatos privilegiados para el alistamiento de los grupos yihadistas del Sahel. Sin embargo, desde el punto de vista de las poblaciones, las reconfiguraciones violentas actuales son el último episodio de una serie de transformaciones sociales más duraderas. En efecto, los jóvenes han desarrollado diversas estrategias para obtener un mejor estatus social, entre las cuales el yihad es solo una posible vía. Focalizándonos en la región de Sikasso, en el sur de Mali, este artículo propone entender las trayectorias de los jóvenes de zonas rurales y su navegación social. A través de una encuesta de terreno de seis meses basada, particularmente, en entrevistas con los actores concernidos en Bamako y Sikasso, el artículo explora las transformaciones sociales, las trayectorias de estos jóvenes y la expansión del yihad.

PALABRAS CLAVE

navegación social, juventud rural, yihadismo, Sikasso

Introduction

Too often, the expansion of jihadi actors in the so-called Sahel (Amselle, 2022) is likened to an "oil stain", spreading across rural zones that are deemed "fertile soil". Rather than waiting for supposed "seeding" to take place, analyses would benefit from a focus on processes that potentially "fertilize". This study seeks to reposition analysis to the agency of rural populations instead of taking jihadi ambitions as a departure point. To do so, it employs a bottom-up localized perspective to investigate how rural populations navigate their changing environment and in that process may decide to join jihadi groups. The paper introduces the case of Sikasso (Mali) and proposes the theoretical perspective of social navigation (Vigh, 2006) to provide insights into the various tactics youth employ to survive and thrive.

The starting point for this article is the navigation of rural young men in Mali's southern Sikasso region.[1] The case of Sikasso[2] is important because, as the least conflict-affected region in Mali, it allows a closer look at the gradual emergence of change and jihadi violence. Almost all research on the decade long conflict in the Sahel is centered on Northern and Central Mali where jihadi groups already exert varying levels of control over large swathes of territory.[3] Existing studies provide few tools to make sense of a southward expansion to geographically, economically, socially, and politically distinctive regions such as Sikasso. These studies have left out of focus the rapidly transforming rural social environment that pre-dates violent conflict's social reconfigurations, and youth's navigation thereof.

The article applies the concept of social navigation as developed by Vigh (2006). This approach situates the navigation of rural youth in their everyday environment. More than a simple praxis of survival, navigation assesses how people take stock of their transforming environment and find

1. Youth means here 15-35 years old, following the African Union's definition. Sikasso's population is overwhelmingly young (74%), of whom 78% are rural (Assemblée régionale-Sikasso, 2011).
2. Following the pre-decentralization borders of Sikasso region, not including the embryonal elevation of Koutiala and Bougouni to the status of region.
3. Two main jihadi groups operate in the Sahel. The Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) and JNIM, an al-Qaida affiliate umbrella group. Jihadi fighters in Sikasso are loyal to JNIM through the Katiba Macina.

ways to increase their social possibilities and strive for more auspicious futures (Vigh, 2006) or achieve a sense of "forward motion" (Chappatte, 2022).

Paying attention to rural youth's agency dispels the popular imaginary of "inevitable victims" (Hobsbawm, 1994). Officials, (international) policy makers and researchers often depict a vulnerable rural population, driven by poverty and disenfranchisement into the arms of jihadi recruiters (e.g. the radicalization narrative of Preventing Violent Extremism). A Malian official lamented during an interview, "the youth might disagree [with jihadi ideals] but in the end, they will do anything for money". However, research shows jihadi fighters have complex and multiple motivations (Théroux-Bénoni *et al*., 2016). Inverting the common retrospective retracing of (ex-)fighter's motivations, I demonstrate that joining jihadi groups is but one of an array of tactics. "Tactics" denotes the praxis of navigating a set of rules and an environment in motion.[4] The focus is on rural male youth, between 15 and 35, who are oftentimes assumed to be either a "risk" or "at risk". While senior community leaders and women are also targets for recruitment, young men make up the rank-and-file and therefore deserve specific attention.[5]

The research was hindered by methodological challenges; the fluctuating security situation, coup d'états and institutional constraints, among others, which limited access to rural areas and sensitive topics.[6] Despite these constraints, the findings are based on observations and semi-structured interviews, conducted by the author in French in Bamako and Sikasso-Ville during intermittent research stays totaling 6 months. Respondents range from rural youth leaders, civil society, land activists and experts, to local and regional state-officials, diplomats, expatriates, and so on. This article

4. "Tactics" acknowledges agency, though less than "strategy" which presupposes the actor's capacity to define the rules of the game. Whereas strategy implies control over the environment, tactics is about adapting and surviving *within* the environment (Vigh, 2006).
5. Just like Vigh and most work on youth in conflict (Debos, 2013; Lombard, 2016; Richards, 1998), this paper has a gender bias. We cannot underestimate the role of women in jihadi projects (Abatan & Sangaré, 2021; Rupesinghe & Diall, 2019).
6. Respondents were unwilling to be associated with jihadi actors, especially towards an outsider-researcher. Distance was created through discourse, e.g. "our youth only cooperates under threat".

is a testament to the fact that "field" research (Eggeling, 2022) in contexts facing jihadi violence remains possible and necessary.[7]

The following section expands on the concept of social navigation, its advantages and how it can be applied in the Sahel. Subsequently, the context of Sikasso region will be elucidated. I then identify four common tactics employed by youth to navigate their environment: acquiescence, increasing control over agricultural production, adventure, and mining. Only then can we consider how the presence of jihadi actors expands youth's navigational capacity and opens up potential new tactics: joining jihadi groups, banditry, or counter-mobilization.

1. Conceptual Framework

The objective of this article is to contribute to the growing body of literature on jihad and conflict in the Sahel in two ways: introducing the case of Sikasso with new empirical data; and secondly, providing a single framework to study youth, conflict, and change.

Authors have become increasingly cognizant of the need to center rural populations' role in conflict in the Sahel. The conflicts' origins were first traced to -among other things- Tuareg discontent (Lecocq & Klute, 2013), and unclear connections to a "global" jihadi project (Dowd & Raleigh, 2013; Guidère, 2014). When jihadi actors moved into Central Mali around 2015, attention shifted to herder-farmer tensions (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). As jihadis "go rural" (Jezequel & Foucher, 2017), avoiding urban areas they cannot control, the underlying assumption remained of a passive fertile soil. Poudiougou (2022) already criticized this presumed passiveness for Central Mali, asking whether it is the "ruralisation of jihad" or rather "jihadisation of the agrarian question" (see also Bouju, 2020). Still, the need to move beyond the herder-farmer dichotomy becomes more urgent with jihadis' southward expansion (Nsaibia & Duhamel, 2021; Simoncelli & Lemmi, 2022) into areas where the distinction is less explicit.

7. In an upcoming article, I reflect on the impact of danger on fieldwork through a discussion of the socially constructed nature of danger and my positionality as a white female researcher.

The lens of social navigation allows us to situate rural youth in their changing environment. Its main advantages are a dialectical view on structure and agency, as well as a holistic approach that connects rural youth's action to change, including but not limited to conflict-induced social reconfigurations. The praxis of social navigation is a "project of social becoming" (Vigh, 2006), which may or may not lead to "fertilization" for the expansion of jihadi groups.

Vigh's primary advantage is the way he sees the agent not as an unconditional, autonomous object, but places agency in relation to social forces. An individual's capacity to navigate their environment does not belie the structuring effect of that environment (2006). He calls our attention to the "motion within motion"; as we move, we are equally being moved. Rural young men are agents acting in unstable—i.e. changing—social fields (Vigh, 2009), experiencing the push and pull of social factors.

To use Vigh in a Sahelian context, we must acknowledge the extensive influence of the social "collective" on the individual. Vigh does place agents in their social reality. Nevertheless, he presupposes an individual actor whose family relations are merely "resources" in an "economy of affection and obligation" (Vigh, 2006). In Sikasso, the individual is strongly embedded in communal structures, such as the household and extended lineages and tribes (Grosz-Ngaté, 2000). These relations are more than a resource, as I will demonstrate below.

The second advantage is the holistic approach to social transformation without separating peace, conflict, and warfare into distinct social processes. Change is a natural part of navigation, and actors make sense of the past through "retrospection", to predict movement in their social environment and set their course. While crisis itself can become chronic (Vigh, 2008), social transformations often long pre-date violent conflict. In the region of Sikasso, land commodification and the monetization of social interactions are important factors of transformation (Lund *et al.*, 2006; Wooten, 2005).

When talking about the changing social environment that is navigated, we must not diminish the role of the physical landscape. Vigh (2006) uses the term social "environment" because it conveys a sense of motion and

continuous transformation. He laments how the spatial turn burdened anthropology with a static view of social space (Vigh, 2009), yet assumes that geographical landscapes are unchanging. However, it is important to consider how socio-economic transformations cannot be seen separate from a changing landscape, as is the case for several rural areas of Mali. Without falling for the simplistic climate-conflict nexus (Raineri, 2020), we cannot underestimate the impact of changing landscapes on youth's navigational tactics.

Although jihadi actors are not the lead actors of this paper, they do play a supporting role and require conceptual defining. We must beware of *Othering* (Mohamedou, 2018) jihadis as outsiders and ignoring their local origins and complex motivations (Théroux-Bénoni *et al.*, 2016). "Jihadism" is a self-denomination for a heterogenous patchwork of groups. So-called "jihadis" (active fighters or sympathizers) are united by the aspiration to create a society in line with a strict, Salafist, interpretation of Islamic faith and the willingness to install and defend that project, through violence if necessary. This ideology (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022; Maher, 2016; Thurston, 2020) is always mixed with an array of locally oriented desires, practices and strategies that—in many cases—take priority over religious goals. Using the "jihadi" adjective references the shared ideological background without prioritizing it over locally oriented strategies. Sometimes ideology and praxis may overlap, e.g. when challenging socio-political power-structures: jihadi groups sometimes position themselves as mediators, resource providers and security actors (Sandor & Campana, 2019) and may establish alternative social contracts (Guichaoua & Bouhlel, 2023). Jihadi actors in Sikasso are mostly small bands of fighters, loosely connected to Katiba Macina with heterogenous motivations. Through their presence, they set in motion social reconfigurations.[8]

8. So far, in Sikasso, there is no large-scale challenge to existing power structures.

2. Rural Male Youth in Sikasso—Experiencing Historical Transformations

In order to grasp navigation in changing environments, we must determine who the actors are, where they operate, and how their environment has changed. Sikasso's rural young men form a "shared community of experience" (Vigh, 2006) through a lack of perspectives, stuck in a phase Honwana (2014) calls "waithood".[9] The current generation, born in the 1990s and 2000s, grew up during perpetual economic crisis, blocked by a greedy gerontocracy. Thanks to technological progress, youth have increasing access to consumer-goods such as phones, yet these only make the contradictions of modernity more visible (Chappatte, 2022; Wooten, 2005). These shared experiences of disenfranchisement lead to the assumption that rural male youth are easy prey for jihadi recruitment, although that is not the sole possibility.

Despite shared experiences, male rural youth are heterogenous. Peasant-, herding-, and fishing communities face distinct challenges, structured according to class, ethnicity, social capital, etc. Diverging identities lead to the selection of distinct navigational tactics. We should also beware of persistent dichotomies used to describe youth, such as urban vs. rural. Rural youth live highly mobile lives, connected to "modernity" and urbanity through modern forms of communication and transport. The crude separation between herders and farmers is also often assumed. In Sikasso, multiple symbiotic and fluid relationships between herders and farmers exist.[10]

Youths' agency in Sikasso is subject to the collective constraints of family hierarchies. Families work collectively under the leadership of the senior male relative, who controls the labor and lives of his extended—often polygamous—family (Becker, 2001). As a young farmer explained "all the

9. Both social navigation and waithood are concepts developed in urban contexts, yet the similarities hold. The importance of marriage as a pathway to social adulthood is less pertinent in a polygamous society where nuclear families remain under the auspices of the gerontocratic structure. Waithood is also similar to the term "*cadet social*" in French anthropology (Beuvier, 2020).

10. See Poudiougou and Zanoletti (2020), Benjaminsen *et al*. (2019), and Amselle (2022) for a critical assessment of the herder-farmer dichotomy in Central Mali. Collaboration occurs over labor, food, fodder, etc. Conflict, drought, and cattle-rustling push herders southward while Sikassois also increasingly invest in livestock, putting pressure on these relations.

harvest, everything we earn, it goes in the pocket of the *chef de famille*. For us, there is no discussion." Youth's obedience is premised on a social contract that elders care for juniors' future (Chappatte, 2022), and vice versa children look after aging parents. Despite his declining authority, the *chef de famille* maintains decision-making power over youth[11]: "With the break-up of the large family, it doesn't mean we are not together anymore. There are still things [...] that still are arranged together as a family." We might speak of *individuation*, youth achieving a sense of individuality, rather than fully-fledged individualism (GIZ, 2021).

Now that we know who rural youth are, we can discuss their changing social and physical environment. Over the last century, the social environment has radically been transformed. When youth "retrospect" to make sense of the past and select tactics today, they have two central desires to "get ahead" and attain social status: access to land and gaining money. Both stem from the French colonial introduction of a monetary economy and land as private property.[12] There was an evolution from people belonging to the land, to the land belonging to people (Lund *et al*., 2006). This led to the early development of two navigational tactics of colonial rural populations: seasonal labor migration to earn cash (Peterson, 2011) or innovating agricultural practices to grow cotton as tax payment (Roberts, 1996).[13] The economic and social relations transformed at a staggering pace from the 1990s onwards due to intense neoliberal reforms (Thiam & Mann, 2020). Land evolved further from private property to a commodity, and money took a central place in social life (Guyer, 1994; Soares, 2005; Wooten, 2005). Monetization and contention over land put pressure on social relations. It is increasingly difficult for elders to provide for the growing material needs of youth, a crucial duty in the household social contract. The consumption of "products of distinction" (Bourdieu, 2018) such as motorcycles, bridewealth or houses is desired and associated with urbanity and modernity, contrary to rural "backwardness".

11. The *chef de famille* controls access through customary systems of land transactions such as loan, gift, metayage (a kind of sharecropping), etc.
12. Land ownership was premised on making land "useful", hence the origin of policies favoring agriculture (Becker, 2001; Benjaminsen & Sjaastad, 2003). See also the literature illustrating colonialism's use in capitalist expansion (Harvey, 2005; Rodney, 1972; Wood, 1999).
13. Since then, cotton has become the primary cash-crop in Sikasso.

Money is not simply an end goal, rather, it is a means for rural young men to achieve social standing and recognition within their community.

The dual push of monetization and land commodification leads to increased competition over the control over natural resources in Sikasso region and puts pressure on social relations. These social transformations are compounded by profound changes in the physical landscape, which Vigh failed to consider. I identify three main factors in Sikasso. First, deforestation due to charcoal production, commercial timber logging, and agricultural expansion (Sidibe, 2022). Secondly, climate-change and anthropocentric practices lead to decreased agricultural yields. Drought and soil degradation fuel existing north-south mobilities in the Sahel, putting pressure on remaining natural resources. Lastly, mining of gold and other minerals such as lithium also reshapes Sikasso's geography. Large-scale licensed and artisanal gold-mines both have abysmal effects on local ecologies (Koné & Adam, 2021). The changing landscape reflects and contributes to the turbulent and changing social environment to which rural young men are forced to constantly adapt.

3. Navigational Tactics in a Changing World

We have determined that the social environment of rural youth in Sikasso has transformed drastically. Now it is time to see what tactics youth employ to "move forward". As one elder said: "Women and youth, they do other things, new things we didn't do before". This section distinguishes four broad patterns of navigation and is followed by a discussion on how the presence of jihadi actors leads to potential new and alternative tactics of social mobility and advancement. Keep in mind that, in their search for social advancement, not all youth have the same opportunities, as their social and financial capital must be factored in. Their position within the household varies, depending on their relation to the *chef de famille*, their education, marital status, and the position of the household in the village.

Adapting to the constant "motion within motion" of the environment, rural youth employ different tactics at different times, or bet on multiple ones simultaneously. Youth might convince relatives to fund an agricultural project while simultaneously working at a mine for supplemental income

during the agricultural off season. Another might migrate with the objective of gaining money and status. Equally likely, a youth is pushed by his household to migrate or go mining, demonstrating the power of the collective. There are myriad ways to combined tactics. Note that I do not include formal employment, as such opportunities are exceedingly rare and rural young men are—just like the general populace—largely illiterate. Formal employment does figure centrally in the desires of rural and urban young and old, yet remains a distant dream for most.

3.1. Acquiescence to Gerontocracy

In a changing social environment and landscape, sometimes the best tactic is to do nothing at all. Rather than venture into the unknown, it can feel safer to stay put within the household despite potential frustration over the gerontocratic hierarchy. At least here, young men can count on their ability to read a familiar environment. One rural young man explained why he, unlike many he knew, didn't migrate further south due to land shortage and soil degradation: "I prefer to stay here and get by. I am known here. People know me, and I know the people". Maintaining the status quo of the existing household institution provides the safety and security of the collective. The decision also depends on the willingness of the household to accommodate youth's needs (the household-level social contract). Depending on the income of the communal plot, the *chef de famille* can gift goods such as motorcycles, mobile phones, bridewealth, etc. If they know the chances of receiving any type of assistance is slim, youth may be pushed to select other tactics. The changing landscape too—such as soil degradation and unreliable rainfall—may force youth to reconsider what tactics to employ.

3.2. Fight the Power—Taking Control of Agricultural Production

Land is sought after as a commodity, a source of subsistence, and status, yet is increasingly scarce due to competition over land as well as environmental transformations. Disillusioned by the potential of the household to provide for them, rural young men can challenge the gerontocracy. By and large, they do so without questioning male superiority. Instead, young men vie over authority over access to agricultural means of production from

within existing patrilineal power structures.[14] This challenge need not be overtly confrontational; it can be a refusal to work or dragging one's feet. The scope of this generational conflict became clear to me during a workshop for land conflict solutions in Sikasso-Ville. There, mayors and elders lamented how formally educated youth deceive illiterate elders in intricate titling procedures. Obtaining land titles would allow youth to sell the land.[15] Youth might also put into question long-standing loan, gift or metayage agreements. The primary concern of *chefs de famille* is to maintain the integrity of large communal plots while youth have more short-term goals. Apart from inter-household contention, there are of course also larger scale conflicts between households about boundaries of fields, or even between whole communities over the delimitation of borders and access to communal natural resources.

Widely regarded as legitimate, customary conflict mitigation is being increasingly sidelined in Mali (Coulibaly & Li, 2020; Neimark *et al.*, 2018). Land titling procedures—which provoke social rifts and costly judicial proceedings[16]—are the last resort among a variety of creative ways to achieve some—limited—emancipation. An established rural youth leader from Sikasso illustrated: "Today, they [youth] sell [produce], before there wasn't much cultivated land, but now they want to marry women, buy cars or motorcycles... even trucks!" On their section of communal land, entrepreneuring youth grow more valuable cash-crops, engage in market gardening, breed broiler chickens, invest in livestock, or set up fish farms to name but a few popular ways to earn extra cash. Youth increasingly organize collectively in agricultural cooperatives. As these activities require land and/or seed capital, the chance of success depends on financial and social capital. In a bid to accommodate youth's desire for independence, *chefs de famille* may give youth larger parts of the communal plot or cash loans, again demonstrating

14. Male competition is central in household dynamics while women ensure the survival of their family. Young men desire material goods and status while most women in Sikasso are responsible for *all* household expenses: food preparation, clothing, school fees… Monetization forces women to employ an increasingly wide array of tactics such as charcoal production, market-farming, selling food, or even mining.

15. See Totin *et al.* (2021) for motives to sell land.

16. Rural Malians consider the official judicial system corrupt, expensive, unreliable, and distant. Despite recent attempts to integrate customary conflict mitigation in judicial proceedings, contention persists.

the important role of the collective. Rural young men thus have multiple avenues to increase their hold over agricultural production.

3.3. Tunga—"Adventure" or Escape?

Tunga, a Bambara term often translated as "adventure", connotes leaving one's home in search of betterment, financial or otherwise, and is often associated with migration. Sikassois originally went mainly to Côte d'Ivoire due to its geographic proximity, family connections, and economic opportunities. Stemming from the need to pay colonial taxes, today, it also provides a way to negotiate a new social position: "If you didn't do it [go to Côte d'Ivoire], you weren't brave. You couldn't sit down and talk with the others. Even the girls, they appreciated someone who went." Migration is a sort of "rite of passage" (Bredeloup, 2008). While migration to Côte d'Ivoire plummeted around the Ivorian civil war in the early 2000s, multiple new trajectories exist to achieve status and a sense of masculinity. The primary "adventure", moving to nearby or far-off urban centers, was studied in Chappatte's *In search of Tunga* (2022). While Sikasso is traditionally much less a point of origin for migration to Europe, this trend is shifting. Similar to mining, it is both possible to opt for *tunga* as an "escape" from repressive gerontocracy or to be pushed by the household and wider social expectations in search of material wealth and status. In any case, while the path of *tunga* ideally leads back home, many remain in perpetual flux (OIM, 2014), navigating towards the next urban environment, becoming what Chappatte calls "new nomads".

3.4. Striking gold—Going to Mines in Search for Money

As migration to Côte d'Ivoire decreased, youth found an alternative tactic to earn cash in the mines of Sikasso, Kayes and Koulikoro. Asked why youth from his community would go to hazardous artisanal mining sites, a mayor simply said, "because they have ambitions". There has been a boom in literature looking at the socio-economic impact of this influx of cash (Traoré, 2022), as well as the impact on the mining sites themselves (Berthe, 2021). The main reason for this mobility is "agricultural poverty" (Hilson & Garforth, 2012). As a youth leader explained: "With gold-panning [unlike collective farming or seasonal migration to Côte d'Ivoire] you can make and keep your own money. That's why many of them stay at these sites." Thus,

the tactic of mining is connected to the process of individuation, and the gradual breakdown of the household social contract.

Mobility towards artisanal mining sites might be an individual choice, or a household survival strategy to supplement collective income. When young men leave on their own account, it is often seen as selfish; able bodies who leave the hard agricultural work to women and children. That partly explains why many miners return home during planting season. The goal of artisanal miners is usually to earn enough money to invest in material signs of wealth back home, such as concrete houses, motorcycles, or bridewealth. In the absence of striking gold, miners can spend years in mining sites, too ashamed to return. The health- and environmental risks of mining are an increasing concern for Sikassois, thus illustrating again the impact of the physical environment.

In conclusion, these four tactics demonstrate rural male youth's creativity in escaping "waithood". Through their praxis of social becoming, they look for ways to gain access to or control over land and the means of production, as well as other ways to earn cash in a bid to attain social status. While they have agency, youth are conditioned by the "motion" of their changing environment (commodification, monetization…), the physical landscape's environmental degradation, and the needs of the collective.

4. Jihadis' Impact on Navigation

The previous sections demonstrate that much of the change in rural young men's social environment pre-dates violent conflict. Here, I consider how the presence of jihadi actors and violence leads to social reconfigurations. If previous transformations were like rough waves in the social environment, the last decade can be compared to a full-blown storm at sea. It has become much more difficult for youth to navigate a course towards their desired objectives.

Since roughly 2015, Sikasso's municipalities have witnessed varying degrees of incursions by jihadi actors.[17] 2015-16 saw a short-lived attempt to set up a local jihadi faction: the "Katiba of the South" allied with Katiba Macina; this was quickly rooted out by security forces. Since then, Sikasso served mainly as a *zone de passage* and there are recurring sightings of jihadi actors, mostly in fields, forests, and small villages. They communicate to populations either through preaching at mosques or by approaching those who venture outside the village. A young respondent from a heavily affected area in Yorosso district explains: "They communicate with our herders [...], it's the herders who tell us, [...] they go to the pastureland, and they see each other in the bush." Such sightings mostly pass without incident. Asked how to recognize jihadis, this is a typical answer: "[...] in the first place weapons. We don't carry weapons and neither do the regular Fulani we see. And then there is also the clothing [short-cut pants and beards]". They also stand out because of the—expensive—type of motorcycle they drive.

Today, we are at a turning point. Since 2021 the districts Koutiala, Yorosso, and Sikasso have seen progressive jihadi incursion, with a peak around 2021-22.[18] Jihadi actors cleverly employ porous national borders with Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso to wage attacks and retreat on either side. There are signs of a renewed effort to expand their area of operations: levying Zakat (Islamic tax), preaching, kidnapping (Baché, 2022), and multiple attacks on military targets. A respondent within the JNIM network stated to me in March 2023 that they hope to consolidate a presence in the region despite strong military counter-mobilization.[19] This information is supported by interviewees from the most affected districts (Koutiala, Yorosso and northern Sikasso) in July 2023. However, military counter-mobilization and joint operations with the Burkinabe military attest to the junta's determination to not let Sikasso

17. I spoke with officials and civil society leaders from the most affected municipalities. For their safety, I do not disclose identifiable information.

18. At the time of writing, a limited number of municipalities near the Burkinabe border pay monthly Zakat (reportedly one cow/month/village). There are no reports of the imposition of other types of Islamic governance. In some instances, schools are closed; rather than for religious motivations, jihadis target schools as symbols of the state, causing teachers to flee preventatively.

19. Many (Western) observers prophesized rapid jihadi expansion due to MINUSMA's forced withdrawal. Despite a wave of attacks (Nsaibia, 2023) the situation remains relatively stable in early 2024.

befall a similar fate as newly affected areas such as Segou or Koulikoro. While some observers also point to Sikasso's relative prosperity and closer connection to national politics as factors that might stymie expansion, the list of a recent prisoner-exchange (Nasr, 2021) indicates that some Sikassois have already joined JNIM.

4.1. Exploiting Social Reconfiguration

Whilst we center rural youth's agency, we should not ignore the fact that jihadi actors are also skilled navigators whose goals are much broader than simply attaining wealth and status. They seek to expand and exert control in the southern regions, gain support, and progressively wrestle control from the state. In the process, they cause the further reconfiguration of social relations across the Sahel.

In the first place, the presence of jihadi actors since over a decade has led to a perceived economic malaise among respondents in Sikasso, even though the region remains the country's motor for agricultural production. Respondents worry about the price of consumer goods and food due to inflation and economic sanctions. They reference the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukrainian war's impact on grain and fertilizer prices, and the fact that the military-run transition government invests more and more of the country's GDP in the military. Thus, existing tactics for navigation are affected. Investment in agricultural innovation by youth in Sikasso declines, and inter-household competition over resources and land-access increases, while mining and *tunga* become more attractive for individuals and households.

Financial restraints and the threat of violence by jihadi actors have also led to the retreat of state services, NGOs, and development organizations. The downsizing or closing of development projects halted an important influx of cash and service-provision. Meanwhile, government representatives (mayors, prefects, teachers…) have fled certain municipalities due to direct and indirect threats. Jihadi fighters communicate that they do not target civilians but take issue with "uniform wearers" and all government

employees. Customary leaders still stay put.[20] This retreat of (state-)service provision affects rural youth due to the absence educational opportunities, land conflict mitigation, etc.

Social relations are also affected on a psychological level, through the spread of fear and suspicion. Due to the state's retreat and jihadi mobility, some communities fear that they may be targeted by jihadi fighters when visiting their fields, as happened elsewhere in the country, which affects already strenuous access to land. While community leaders nuance the threat saying "there is [often] more fear than harm", there is a breakdown of social trust in affected areas due to a fear of infiltrations by jihadis: "When we chat, we never know who might be on the other side."[21]

The mistrust also feeds into suspicions of Internally Displaced Persons[22] coming from Northern and Central Mali and Burkina Faso, fearing jihadi infiltration and intensifying competition over resources. While an influx of IDPs may affect opportunities for rural youth, respondents stress the overall welcoming reception. Social relations in Sikasso are not affected to the same level as in Central Mali, where intra-communal relations broke down and Fulani herders are increasingly stigmatized. Despite some association of jihadis with the Fulani, most are quick to criticize the ostracization of herders.

Jihadis use this changing environment to their advantage. In return for services, they reportedly offer material goods (phones, phone credit, motorcycles) and financial compensation. Such products of distinction contribute to being considered an adult, masculine man (Berlingozzi & Raineri, 2023). Providing intelligence on military movements in return can seem innocent enough. These "easy" and practical services can sometimes serve as a way to test loyalty and reliability, before entrusting recruits with more sensitive

20. This is different from Central Mali, indicating that the jihadi implementation of a new socio-political governance project remains limited.
21. This is similar to what Sandor (2017) described in Central and Northern Mali.
22. There are no accurate numbers of IDPs in Sikasso. Many are hosted informally through social networks. Refugees are also highly mobile, often returning home or traveling on. Since early 2023 the Commission nationale chargée des réfugiés (CNCR) is active in Sikasso to assist Burkinabe refugees fleeing jihadi violence. In Sikasso-Ville, there are around 2000 registered IDPs from Central Mali.

tasks, and to "groom" youth into the fold. The funds for this mutually beneficial exchange are sourced locally, for instance in 2021 in Kléla (Sikasso), where jihadis robbed 59 million CFA francs from a bank (Makadji, 2021). They seek to attract rural young men who know both the physical landscape (to serve as guides in navigating backroads whilst evading security services) as well as the social environment (to serve as translators or intermediaries with key figures in local communities), and can serve as informants. As a respondent with ties to JNIM said: "They have youth from the village amongst them, they know what language is spoken in the village."

4.2. New Tactics Emerge

Motivations for youth to respond favorably to jihadi recruitment are complex and multiple. Centering agency does not discount fear and pressure as reasons to provide services or join a group. In this light, Guichaoua and Bouhlel (2023) speak of asymmetric agency. Within their restrained position, youth make difficult choices that fit best with their desired trajectories. I identify three tactics that emerge, of which only joining or assisting jihadi groups is new. Joining the military is an established option for youth but it becomes more salient in the current climate. Banditry has been prevalent in Sikasso since at least the early 2000s but it increases as the conflict persists.[23] Vigh (2006) speaks of "dystopic possibilities", a term that helps make sense of young men who decide to wreak havoc on their own communities.

Youth have many reasons to join or help jihadis. It is a way to rid oneself of restrictive gerontocratic hierarchies and achieve social mobility. Although needless to say, any form of armed mobilization does not automatically result in social advancement, as Debos (2008) demonstrated in the Chadian context. Joining might also simply be a way to "settle scores" and take vengeance on those who have wronged you, oftentimes government employees and security services. Jihadi groups are more than willing to cooperate in a bid to cultivate local support. Although still largely hypothetical in the case of Sikasso, one potential reason to align oneself with jihadis is to gain the

23. For all three tactics, it is near impossible to get access as a (female) outsider-researcher. My attempts to interview military personnel always resulted in a dead-end. And respondents would understandably never admit they knew youth who engaged in banditry or provide services for jihadi groups.

upper hand in resource conflicts, as we saw in Central Mali (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021) where jihadis' claim to legitimacy came in part from the provision of swifter, cheaper and fairer justice, especially over access to pasture lands. With the withdrawal of officials—especially judges—, people engaged in litigation might turn to jihadis.[24] Of course, the patterns of land usage are distinct in Sikasso, but one potent anecdote from my research points in this direction. In June 2023, jihadis in the north of Sikasso approached a local *chef de village* to harass him over his role in settling a land dispute. It is believed that members of the losing party were displeased and approached the jihadis to "intervene" on their behalf. This behavior supports findings from Central Mali, where jihadi groups act as mediators (Sandor & Campana, 2019).

The changing environment and the difficulty to "get ahead" in life does not inevitably lead all rural young men towards jihad but also makes other tactics more attractive. An important one is banditry, mostly through mobile roadblocks.[25] Sikasso is an important passageway for regional trade: "They are mostly focused on people who had a good day selling on the market, or people coming from the artisanal mining zone, they can follow these people and then set up makeshift roadblocks." Banditry is often seasonal, in the dry season both cash and work are scarce.

There is a lot of overlap between the two tactics: jihadi fighters can resort to banditry to fund their operations, or bandits can play on fear of jihadi fighters to avoid persecution. Local communities and observers alike have difficulties distinguishing bandits from jihadis. As one interviewee said: "These bandits, they just have to yell 'Allahu Akbar', and no one will look for them." And another: "Now they do armed robbery in the name of jihad, but it existed already before. Now it's just trendy." The overlap and conflation of the two is so omnipresent, fed by fear and suspicion, that it is difficult to assess the true scope of jihadi's presence in Sikasso.

Another tactic for youth is counter-mobilization. Despite the risks, joining the military is an alluring opportunity for several reasons. There

24. For instance, the three judges of Yorosso district do not reside there and rarely venture there from their homes in Koutiala and Sikasso-Ville.

25. See Schouten (2022) for a reflection on the economic and political role of roadblocks in central Africa.

are massive financial investments for soldiers' salaries and compensation to next-of-kin for those killed in action, hence why the household might also find this tactic appealing. Under the current regime, the idolization of military men as embodied masculinity also makes it an attractive way to gain social capital. As one interviewee said: "The army is our pride." Thus, motivations to join the military or jihadis are not dissimilar at times. While in Central Mali counter-mobilization also happens through militias of the *dozos*, or hunters (Quidelleur, 2022), this is less common in Sikasso. Several community leaders told me they are explicitly forbidding hunters from taking up arms against jihadis to prevent the same spiraling of communal violence as in the Center. Thus, there seems to be some inter-regional learning, and *dozos* are limited to informing the military of suspicious movements.

Armed mobilization in any form does not necessarily require a full-time, permanent commitment. Recruitment might be circular or temporal, depending on needs of individual youth and their households, or simply on the seasons. We can assume that—just like in Central Mali—the decision to join either side of the fight is sometimes taken at the household level to serve as a form of protection. Additionally, the overlapping and combining of tactics discussed in the previous section also endures. Rather than fully "joining", youth might see themselves collaborating with a group of fighters for a period, providing services to gain wealth or a stronger position within their household in the long run. Jihadi fighters are also rumored to spend time in artisanal mines.

Fascinatingly, according to several interviewees, youth who choose to collaborate with jihadis are not necessarily those with the weakest social and financial positions who do not possess the knowledge jihadis require. On the contrary, in several cases a youth with ties to the *chef de village*, mayor or councilors opted to provide services and information to jihadis. It is youth's social position and potential tactics that indicate why, when, and how they decide to join, not as hapless victims being indoctrinated, but as conscious actors making the most of a difficult situation.

Conclusion

Researchers working in and on the Sahel know how fast and unpredictably things change. Expansion is not necessarily teleological, and military counter-mobilization does appear to be slightly more successful than in Central Mali, and Sikasso remains comparatively less affected. This article consciously only discusses jihadis in the last section, in parallel to the lived experience of rural youth for whom jihadi expansion is only the latest challenge. We cannot understand the potential of expansion solely through a focus on jihadi actors, rather we need to consider what the objectives are of rural youth, and what tactics are at their disposal.

Among rural young men's tactics to navigate the transforming social and physical environment, there are multiple, more "harmless" options such as acquiescence to gerontocracy, taking hold of agricultural production, adventure, or mining. But as we have seen, the presence of jihadi actors and the ensuing conflict which exacerbated transformations make those options less attainable. Poor rural young men might join or help jihadis in exchange for material goods, financial means, social status, and a general masculinization. Aligning themselves with a powerful regional actor can provide a feeling of being in control over one's path, an escape from "waithood" (Honwana, 2014). We should not—only—think of jihadis instrumentalizing marginalized communities, rather consider that rural young men equally utilize jihadis to further their own objectives, in a short or long-term praxis of survival. The "oil stain" expansion of jihadism is, to put it simply, only the next storm rural communities will weather.

Scholars of the Sahel have begun examining how jihadi groups, like armed groups elsewhere, navigate transforming local political economies. During our inquiries, we cannot lose sight of the fact that *all* civilians, young and old, men and women, are navigating those same transformations, and accord rural communities the dignity of agency, rather than perpetual victimhood. Enforced victimhood is often coupled with a stigmatization of rural young men. The "development-conflict nexus" and "Preventing Violent Extremism" discourses are exemplar of a worrying trend where development and security actors only deem certain communities worthy of intervention due to the supposed threat they pose. That perspective does not do justice

to the capacity of rural young men, and rural communities at large, to prevent or slow down jihadi expansion provided that there are sufficient other tactics available to them.

This article shows the value of the social navigation framework and aims to inspire others to pursue innovative ways to study jihad from below without being deterred by challenging research contexts. Many questions on Sikasso remain unanswered: the role of religion, women, urban areas, or national politics are but a few factors that also influence jihadi expansion. In any case, Sikasso offers a rich case for comparative research, providing us with tools to think through possible futures of jihad in the Sahel and the littoral states of West Africa. We can only make sense of the feared expansion by relating it to broader social transformations and acknowledge the pivotal role of rural young men.

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Marte Beldé is currently pursuing her doctoral degree in conflict studies at Ghent University, Belgium. Her research is centered on investigating the expansion of jihadi actors towards Southern Mali, with a specific emphasis on Sikasso region. Employing a grounded methodology, her research endeavors to critically interrogate prevailing epistemological frameworks pertaining to jihadism within the Sahelian context and beyond.

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REVUE INTERNATIONALE DES ÉTUDES DU DÉVELOPPEMENT
N°255
2024-2

Paysanneries et conflits violents

Sous la direction de Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka, Mahamadou Bassirou Tangara, Zakaria Soré et Gillian Mathys

ÉDITIONS DE LA SORBONNE

Couverture : Saly Diaby, *Dimin*

UNIVERSITÉ PARIS 1 PANTHÉON SORBONNE
INSTITUT D'ÉTUDES DU DÉVELOPPEMENT DE LA SORBONNE

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ISBN : 979-10-351-0964-6
ISSN : 2554-3415

9 791035 109646

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