

Reply to Peter Oksen's 'Disentanglements'

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Peter Oksen's comments on our paper about farmer–herdsman relations in Burkina Faso raise some interesting issues, notably regarding problems of interpretation of oral and archival sources and regarding the broader relevance of insights gained from an in-depth case study. Before answering straightforwardly to his objections, it is useful to clarify the misunderstanding which appears to exist about the meaning we attribute to 'symbiosis' and 'symbiotic relations'. In our article we restricted the use of these terms to the way in which past relations between farmers and herdsman, depicted as *undifferentiated* groups, are often represented. In discussions about the change of these relations, the emphasis is on progressive deterioration, again without attention paid to the possible existence of intra-group differentiation or of heterogeneity of relations across group boundaries. In this regard, it is remarkable that from colonial documents the interests of farmers and herdsman emerge as equally irreconcilable as they are often considered today, and that, just as at present, competition over scarce natural resources constituted a major factor in inter-group relations. If we therefore reject 'symbiosis' as a correct description of formerly existing inter-group relations, we do not intend to imply that complementary links – such as those we describe for present-day relations between Mossi and Fulbe – did not exist in the past. A major aspect of our argument is that inter-group relations, whether past or present, cannot be subsumed under simplifying labels such as 'symbiosis'. Neither can changes in these relations be understood in terms of uni-directionally processes of deterioration. Hence, present-day 'complementary' links across the ethnic boundary – established by certain, but not all, Mossi and Fulbe actors – are but a manifestation of the continued presence of diversity of relations, not of 'symbiosis'. They point to mutual interests between certain actors belonging to different ethnic groups, not between the groups as such.

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Oksen mentions the questioning of the mainstream interpretation of the evolving farmer–herdsman relations as the main ambition of our paper. However, it would have led to a more fruitful discussion if he had also addressed our other and no less important aim, which is to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the relations between Mossi and Fulbe. The latter is, for that matter, crucial to our criticism of mainstream thinking which fails to account for intra-group diversity and heterogeneity of inter-group relations. Of course, to some extent it is a matter of subjectivity when to decide to qualify certain interpretations as mainstream. We agree with Oksen’s characterisation of mainstream as ‘a “received wisdom” that has been blindly replicated without proper empirical support, so that they are automatically taken for granted’. While it would be misleading to suggest that no studies exist which pay due attention to the history and the diversity of farmer–herdsman relations and to intra-group differentiation (we cite some examples in our paper), it is, in our opinion, nevertheless justified to categorise the explanatory framework that one-sidedly emphasises increasing conflict and breakdown of exchange mechanisms due to increased competition over natural resources and a growing uniformity of production systems, as mainstream in the sense mentioned above. It has obviously succeeded in imposing its perspective on development policies and interventions, notably regarding land use intensification in general and crop–livestock integration in particular. Especially the poor understanding or even denial of the mutual articulation of production systems of farmers and herdsman – not necessarily realised for all individual production entities or through uniform inter-ethnic relations – is supportive of persistent development ‘narratives’ on which widespread and frequently failing policies and interventions aiming at the establishment of mixed farming are based (see Bayer & Waters-Bayer 1995; Hussein 1998; Landais & Lhoste 1990; Sumberg 1998).

Wealth-ranking would indeed probably have revealed that the fact that someone is wealthy is no secret. Also, villagers generally know who among them possesses cattle and who not, and maybe even suspect to which herdsman animals have been entrusted. However, central in the interpretation of the inter-ethnic relations that we present is the principle of ‘acting as if all villagers are equal’, to which the ‘hiding’ of cattle is crucial. In this regard, we would also suggest that cattle as wealth ‘par excellence’ are of a different nature from other ‘indicators’ of wealth such as wives or a rectangular house with a corrugated roof, and possibly more vulnerable to witchcraft attacks. The plausibility of

the latter is supported by findings throughout sub-Saharan Africa showing that, even if it is possible to establish that a farmer or a herdsman owns livestock, it remains a sheer impossibility to know who exactly owns which animals in a herd (Benoit 1977; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Pouillon 1988). We certainly do not pretend that our particular findings are to be simply extrapolated to other local contexts, such as the one studied by Oksen in Tenkodogo. They do, however, underscore the existence of contradictory processes involved in the production of ethnic identity, and point out that tendencies apparent from frontstage discourses may hide counter-tendencies deserving policy makers' attention.

Finally, Oksen rightly argues that our thesis would be more solid if we had been able to support it with data on the frequency of conflicts and entrustment practices. While it would be an arduous task to establish the frequency of conflicts today, this holds even more for past conflicts. First, the records of the Customary Law Tribunals show some gaps, and, second, as we argue in our paper, it can be assumed that only a fraction of farmer–herdsman conflicts ever reached the court. Moreover, oral information is often contradictory and to be understood exactly in relation to the frontstage/backstage distinction we make in our paper. The same goes for information on past entrustment practices. We agree, then, that we have not been able to 'reconstruct' the evolution of farmer–herdsman relations. Nevertheless, quantified data are not needed to confront the mainstream view. Our paper not only offers an alternative explanation of inter-ethnic conflict (that is, not simply caused by increased competition for natural resources and growing uniformity of production systems), but also shows that, beneath public inter-group animosity and concomitantly with processes of intra-group differentiation, a potential exists for the reinforcement and multiplication of friendly relations between farmers and herdsmen, contrary to the mainstream view of progressively deteriorating relations from an initial situation of symbiosis.

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