

## **STEPS TOWARD CONFLICT PREVENTION PROJECT**

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### **Case Study**

#### **The Spirit of Forgiveness**

Tradition, Leadership, and Strategies for  
Social Cohesion in Burkina Faso

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**December 2006**



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

**These documents do not represent a final product of the project.** While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction and Methodology	3
Joking Relationships, or La Parentée à Plaisanterie	6
The ethnic composition of Burkina Faso	6
Overview of joking relationships	7
“On est né trouver”: History and the formation of joking relationships	9
Associations of joking relationships	10
The Education of Children	10
Leadership	11
Public Displays of Leaders’ Propensity for Peace	13
Inter-religious Tolerance and Collaboration	14
Traditional Intra- and Inter-Community Mediation Mechanisms	16
<i>Griots</i>	16
<i>Forgerons</i>	17
Additional community mechanisms	17
The Burgeoning Role of Civil Society	18
The Tricky Role of the Government	18
Awareness of ethnicity as a potentially volatile factor	19
The method of posting civil servants	19
Regular payment of civil servants’ salaries	20
The National Week of Culture	20
The Mediator of Faso	21
Other government institutions	21
Lack of Resources and General Poverty	22
The Ambiguous Role of Women	22
Potential Sparks of Conflict	24
The war next door	24
Regionalization/decentralization of political system	25
The “discreet invasion” of the Mossi	25
Conclusion	27
<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1A: Burkina Faso in West Africa	28
Appendix 1B: Map of Burkina Faso	28
Appendix 1C: Language Map of Burkina Faso	29
Appendix 2: Ethnic Joking Relationships	30

## **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank the many people who contributed to the creation of this case study. The staff at CDA Collaborative Learning Projects provided support and guidance that was inspiring and constant. The other members of the research team demonstrated an enthusiasm for the project that validated its importance and urgency. Appreciation is also due to the representatives of many organizations who shared freely of their time and knowledge, especially the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, which linked the research team to its vast network of liaisons in Burkinabe civil society and governance structures, and Citizens of the World, which organized the 2<sup>nd</sup> Forum of Leaders for Peace. Finally, many thanks to the many citizens of Burkina who participated in this case study, sharing their time, their energy, their perspectives, and their hope.

## Introduction and Methodology

This case study will examine conflict prevention mechanisms in Burkina Faso, a West African nation which – unlike so many of its neighbors – has never experienced civil war or prolonged internal strife. During the last several decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nearly every West African nation witnessed some form of internal armed conflict. These conflicts included civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia; separatist movements in Western Sahara, Senegal, and Nigeria; political revolts in Guinea and Togo; major interethnic clashes in Ghana; and massive rebel uprisings in Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, and Mali. Amidst such turmoil, Burkina has remained an oasis of peace, a country whose arid soil has fortunately not been doused with the blood of its citizens. Although Burkina has undergone numerous *coups d’état* since its independence 1960, these *coups* have remained concentrated in the upper echelons of the political elite, rarely disseminating outward to affect the population at large.

This case study will examine Burkina’s enigmatic internal peace, asking:

- What have the citizens and leaders of Burkina done to maintain internal peace in a volatile sub-region? What strategies and mechanisms have they used?
- What challenges to peace have they faced, and how have they overcome them?
- What challenges will they face in the future, and what are the prospects for conflict prevention?

Before proceeding, we must note that Burkina has not necessarily played innocent bystander to West Africa’s conflicts. The United Nations has accused the country’s president, Blaise Compaoré, of playing a major role in the arms-for-diamonds trade that stoked the flames of violence in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and even Angola. Moreover, Burkina Faso may have sent its soldiers as mercenaries to those countries. Having come to power himself in a *coup d’état*, Compaoré has been accused of aiding and abetting *coup* plotters in Togo, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mauritania in the past decade alone. And rumors abound about the relationship between the rebels who are currently governing northern Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina’s governing elite.

Whether or not political players in Burkina have fuelled warfare in other countries, the country’s internal peace remains remarkable, and the population is rightly proud of it. “We need the other countries of Africa to learn not to equate the current regime with the population of the country,” said one interlocutor in this study, voicing a commonly held sentiment. This case study sought to collect stories from individuals and groups around the country, asking them to explain the underpinnings of Burkina’s peace and their role in maintaining it. An extremely impoverished country which typically hovers at the bottom of socio-economic development indices, Burkina Faso has become accustomed to receiving international attention focused on its failure to develop economically. Those who participated in this study were by and large delighted to be asked about peace in Burkina, welcoming the study for the simple reason that it was the celebration of a success in the country rather than the probing of a weakness. As one of the translators exclaimed early on in the study, “Our ability to co-exist peacefully constitutes one of our strengths. We should share our strategies with others.”

The field research was conducted over two weeks in October 2006. The author worked closely with a translator, Coulibaly Ibrahim, a French teacher who also speaks the country’s two most

widely spoken local languages, Mooré and Dioula. In other instances, Gnegne Momini, who speaks five of the country's local languages as well as French, filled in. Given the tremendous ethnic and linguistic diversity of Burkina, a country which houses over sixty ethnicities, it was not plausible to attempt to speak to representatives of all of the country's ethnic groups. Rather, the author began by speaking to people in the capital city of Ouagadougou, which serves not only as the centre of the country's majority ethnicity – the Mossi – but also as a national hub, a place where people from all parts of the country – and from all social classes and professions – converge.

The research team began the process by interviewing representatives of the Burkina Faso chapter of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding and the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism. These initial contacts provided the names of others, and in “snowball” fashion, the team quickly developed a lengthy roster of individuals with whom to converse. In addition to this roster, which contained primarily representatives of government agencies and NGOs, the research team sought to talk with everyday citizens with whom they were fortunate to cross paths – farmers, market vendors, mechanics, students, and the like. The conversations were not structured but rather began with simple questions such as “What have Burkinabè citizens done to maintain the peace in Burkina Faso?” or, “Why has Burkina remained peaceful while so many other countries in the region have suffered war?” A serious attempt was made to capture the stories people told and their unique voices. Using this open-ended method of enquiry, similar themes emerged across most of the conversations.

After a few days in Ouagadougou, the research team headed to the southwestern part of the country for a number of reasons. First, they sought perspectives on conflict prevention from people from ethnicities structured very differently than ethnicities in the country's central plateau and northeastern region. Second, they sought to ascertain the historical memory of war in Dédougou, the site of a large-scale revolt against the French in the years immediately preceding the creation of Burkina Faso. Third, they sought to gain the perspectives of rebels in northern Côte d'Ivoire – many of whom were born to Burkinabè parents in Côte d'Ivoire – to understand why rebels had taken up arms in that country but not in Burkina. Following the research in the southwestern part of Burkina, the team returned to Ouagadougou, where the author participated in a two-day Forum of Leaders for Peace, subtitled, “Institutions, Strategies, and Mechanisms for Early Warning and Conflict Prevention in Burkina Faso.” Sponsored by the NGO Citizens of the World, the Forum featured traditional, government, and military leaders. Other participants included university students, youth groups, and representatives of numerous civil society groups.

By the end of the two weeks, the research team had engaged with dozens of people, including:

- Representatives of NGOs, especially NGOs engaged in peacebuilding, human rights, women's promotion, and civic engagement;
- Journalists and editors;
- University professors and scholars, especially in the social sciences;
- Middle school, high school, and university students;
- Religious authorities, including imams, priests, and animists;
- Traditional authorities, including village and town chiefs and sub-chiefs;
- Village elders;

- Farmers;
- Herders;
- *Griots*;
- Policemen;
- Women’s associations;
- Market vendors and businessmen;
- Mechanics;
- Representatives of government agencies, especially those with work related to culture, human rights, or mediation;
- Teachers;
- Museum curators; and
- Rebels.

Nearly every person who participated in these conversations was excited to elaborate his or her theory of why Burkina is peaceful today. Almost every interlocutor made recourse to history and to the historical alliances between ethnicities in Burkina; when the topic became history, the research team tried to probe by asking how history makes itself manifest today.

The findings presented in this document come almost entirely from the conversations which took place over the course of the study; these findings have not been checked against the historical record or verified for scholarly authenticity. Rather, they are meant to represent the voices and perspectives of the people who graciously shared their time with the research team.

In general, most interlocutors felt that there was something intrinsically peaceful about the population of the country. As one imam explained to use, “Dialogue and exchange is fundamentally anchored in the Burkinabè spirit.” Although the founding stories of many of Burkina’s ethnic groups do include stories of war and conquest, one interlocutor explained the non-violent nature of the Burkinabè people this way: “It is true that we are warriors. But we don’t need to make war because we know we are strong.” The chief of an ethnic group in the country’s southern region explained things differently: “We are a pacifist people. In the history of cohabitation with other ethnic groups, we have been humble. We don’t need to imagine that we are better than others.”

Perhaps the most frequent immediate answer to the question, “How has Burkina managed to remain peaceful?” was this: “nous avons l’esprit du pardon,” which translated means, “We have the spirit of forgiveness.” Several of the participants in this study elaborated on this inherent quality of forgiveness, or pardon: “Forgiveness is intrinsic,” said one, adding, “It dates from time immemorial.” One woman explained, “Where forgiveness exists, there cannot be war.” The remainder of this case study will seek to examine the nuances of this spirit of forgiveness, to look more closely at the strategies and mechanisms in place that allow Burkinabè people to peacefully co-exist across divides of ethnicity, geography, family, religion, and political party. A close examination of this seemingly deep-rooted spirit of forgiveness reveals that social cohesion is not merely a historical legacy in Burkina Faso but rather a spirit that the population embraces and reenacts day-to-day.

### **Joking Relationships, or La Parentée à Plaisanterie**

Every single interlocutor contacted during the course of this study mentioned “la parentée à plaisanterie,” or joking relationships, as one of the primary mechanisms through which the Burkinabè people achieve social cohesion. These joking relationships are a complex phenomenon, and while more elaborate scholarly studies describe them in minute detail, their treatment here will focus primarily on their function in building intra- and inter-group peace.<sup>1</sup> Before delving into the intricacies of this phenomenon, some background material about Burkina’s ethnic composition is warranted.

#### The ethnic composition of Burkina Faso

The population of Burkina Faso represents over 60 ethnic groups. (See Appendix 1C) These groups are not neatly contained within the borders of the country, but rather, some groups straddle Burkina’s borders with Mali, Niger, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d’Ivoire. There is a majority ethnicity in Burkina – the Mossi ethnic group – who are the primary occupants of an arid laterite plateau in the center of the country upon which is situated the capital city of Ouagadougou. The Mossi comprise between 50 and 60 percent of the population of the country.

Although various ethnicities occupy various geographic regions of Burkina (the Gulimance are in the east; the Bwaba are in the northwest; and so on and so forth), the overwhelming majority of villages in Burkina play home to representatives of at least two ethnicities and often three or more.

In the cacophony of ethnicity that is Burkina Faso, two major categories emerge: there is one group of ethnicities – located primarily in the north and east – which are marked by rigidly structured political hierarchies of chiefs, sub-chiefs, and elder councilman. By contrast, the internal structures of the second category – whose representative ethnic groups are located primarily in the country’s south and west – are quite different. Formerly called “acephalous” ethnic groups (translated literally to mean “headless”), these ethnicities are marked not by rigidly structured political hierarchies seen above but rather by more loosely constructed family lineages. When speaking to participants in this study, the words most frequently associated with ethnic groups in the former category were “rigidity,” “hierarchy,” “protocol,” and “structure” whereas the words most frequently associated with the later group were “kinship,” “lineage,” and “inheritance.” These two categories clearly do not represent opposite ends of a spectrum; ethnicities in both categories have chiefs, complex rules for social interaction, and intricate power succession mechanisms. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that ethnicities of the former category have more rigid political structures than the family-based succession patterns of the latter.

It is important to note that there exists a tremendous amount of interethnic marriage in Burkina. In a society where polygamy is practiced with some regularity, it is not at all surprising to find a man who has wives representing more than one ethnicity. While it is true that there are some taboos for interethnic marriage (e.g., sometimes parents do not want their children marrying someone of a specific other ethnicity), interethnic marriage is far more the norm than it is the exception. Most frequently, interethnic marriages pass without comment. Moreover, it is

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<sup>1</sup> For the only book-length study of joking relationships in Burkina Faso, see Sissao.

important to contextualize marriage as a procedure which not only aligns two people but their respective families and communities. As one woman told us, “When we marry, it is not just the two individuals getting married but both of their communities who are getting married as well.”

Finally, ethnicity is a source of personal *and national* pride in Burkina. As a student said during a focus group discussion, “Each person is proud of his or her own ethnicity without looking jealously at what other ethnicities have.” Another man of a small northern ethnicity explained, “Even though the Mossi are the majority, all ethnicities in Burkina are on equal footing. The Bobo and the Peuhl stand head-to-head with the Mossi.” Finally, one teacher put it this way, “We don’t want a homogenous nation. We appreciate our diversity.” Ethnicity and nationality are not perceived as mutually exclusive in Burkina. When asked whether they perceived themselves primarily as Burkinabè or as members of their ethnic group, respondents in this study frequently answered, “I am of [x] ethnicity, and that ethnicity makes up part of Burkina Faso.”

#### Overview of joking relationships

On any given day in Burkina, and as part of many a typical conversation, a person is likely to hear the following a greeting between two individuals that sounds something like this:

Person 1: You worthless scum. You son of a... How dare you show your face here, slave? [To others present] He’s my slave. Make sure he works hard for you.

Person 2: No, you’re the one who’s my slave. [To others present] Can you believe this idiot slave of mine thinks he can boss me around. Worthless scumbag! I’m going to beat you until you understand what it means to work.

Throughout the conversation, the individuals are laughing, shaking hands, and being generally jovial. This greeting is the typical greeting between two people who are “joking relatives,” or linked by ethnicity, family, and village in a joking relationship. You can hear these insulting greetings in marketplaces, offices, government agencies, courts, restaurants, phone conversations and on the street – nowhere is immune. Women and men participate equally in such exchanges. The various axes of these relationships will be described below.

Joking relationships are couplings - across ethnicity, family, village, neighborhood, or social class – in which the two parties concerned both insult each other immensely while understanding that they are strongly linked and responsible for each other’s wellbeing. The cruelty of the spoken word is belied by the casual atmosphere, and both of the parties in a joking relationship know that they share a special bond that borders on kinship. Publicly calling each other slaves and other names, the two parties are actually linked. “If you are a person’s joking relative, you immediately have a context for dealing with that person, even if you didn’t know him or her before,” said one woman. As one respondent explained, “We can pour our anger into insults against our joking relatives, but with the fun of insulting them comes the responsibility to take care of them.” One frequently heard axiom about joking relationships is that joking relatives play at war so that they don’t make it.

One interlocutor described Burkina’s joking relationships as “one of Burkina’s real particularities.” Although joking relationships exist throughout West Africa and have also been documented in East Africa and even in Native American communities in the United States, these

relationships seem particularly strong in the geographic area that became Burkina Faso (originally Upper Volta) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. “From North to South and from East to West, Burkina has joking relationships. There is not an ethnicity or area of the country that doesn’t have it,” explained one official of the Ministry of Culture.

Ethnicity is perhaps the most well known and practiced axis of joking relationships. Each ethnicity in Burkina is paired with at least one other ethnicity and sometimes up to three or four; members of these ethnicities are “joking relatives,” and when members of coupled ethnicities meet each other – even for the first time – they insult each other in goodwill. (For a complete list of the ethnic groupings of joking relationships, see Appendix 2.) Through the system of joking relationships, no ethnic group is left to “go it alone” at the national level. Several interlocutors explained if ever one ethnicity were singled out for ridicule or punishment by another ethnicity, the victimized ethnicity would immediately benefit from the protection of its joking relative ethnicity. Taken together, the joking relationships form a vast and complex web that covers the country, a web of interethnic solidarity and interdependence. One journalist called the joking relationships “a resource you can use when it is needed.”

Other axes along which joking relationships exist include:

- Families – When a woman marries into a family, her family becomes joking relatives to her husband’s family. There can then be intra-family joking relationships, such as between a sister and her brother-in-law.
- Lineages – People whose last names are Ouattara are joking relatives of people with the last name Coulibaly, for example. These family names exist in several ethnicities, but no matter the ethnicity, Ouattaras and Coulibalys are always joking relatives. Other name-based joking relationships exist as well.
- Villages or neighborhoods – Typically through significant levels of intermarriage, villages or neighborhoods can become joking relatives.
- Professions – *Griots* and *forgerons*, who will be discussed below, are joking relatives to certain ethnicities.

In addition to fostering interdependence, another important social function of the joking relationships is to open channels of communications where they might otherwise be closed. Joking relatives are allowed to speak openly to one another despite other differences in class, age, gender, or social rank that might otherwise prohibit open communication. One young woman described that she was able to tell her boss, who was an ethnic joking relative of hers, when she thought he had not made a good decision. “Normally, because he is my boss, I would not be able to criticize his decisions,” she explained, “but because he is my joking relative, I can tell him whatever I want.” This open channel of communication reaches the national level; one elder man of the Samo ethnicity (the joking relative of the dominant Mossi ethnicity) indicated that because of the joking relationship he was able to contact the country’s president directly to tell him when national policy was negatively affecting the population. Indeed, many interlocutors mentioned that the Samo people served as a significant voice to the president. “People of the Samo ethnicity can tell the president anything they want,” one respondent explained, adding that this ability to speak freely through joking relationships was one check on power in Burkina and comprised an important component of the country’s social cohesion.

Joking relationships also facilitate the asking for and the granting of forgiveness. One woman described an extreme example of this function like this: “It is a blood crime *not* to forgive a joking relative who has asked for forgiveness.”

#### “On est né trouver”: History and the formation of joking relationships

When asked where joking relationships came from, most people respond, “on est né trouver,” which roughly translated, “we were born into a world where it already existed.” One respondent called the relationships “a natural phenomenon,” saying that they had not been consciously created but rather had evolved through an organic social process. As will be explained below, there is not a commonly remembered historical consensus about the origins of the relationships, but all of the study respondents agreed that the relationships had deep historical roots. One scholar has aptly termed the relationships “a historical privilege” to be preserved assiduously.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the historical explanations which respondents provided include:

- *Warfare and subsequent intermarriage.* According to this line of thought, the verbal violence of joking relationships represents the physical violence that existed in the past. When ethnicities conquered one another, they intermarried with their newly conquered subjects, and the joking relationships evolved out of the need for conqueror and conquered to co-exist peacefully. As one woman explained, “War permitted us to make alliances. When you give your daughter to someone as a wife, you can no longer make war against that person. The joking relationships took the place of the warfare.”
- *Peaceful relations.* In diametric opposition to the warfare theory, some respondents indicated that the joking relationships were an indicator of how peaceful the people of the area that is now Burkina Faso have been for centuries. As one NGO worker described, “These were not kingdoms that made a lot of war among each other. When the French colonizers came, they found peaceful people.” In this formulation, the joking relationships were a mechanism that chiefs developed so that they could interact peacefully without needing to make war against one another.
- *Assimilation and the nature of the Mossi people.* Several respondents spoke about the assimilatory nature of the Mossi people, Burkina’s dominant ethnicity. Although Mossi foundation stories are steeped in violence, many respondents – Mossi and non-Mossi alike – indicated that the Mossi are a people who seek to learn and to integrate themselves with the people that they come into contact with. “The qualitative nature of the Mossi people is important,” said one professor. “They were originally a minority who became a majority by assimilating others. If you took the lid off of the Mossi people, you would find hundreds of ethnicities inside.” In this line of thinking, the joking relationships evolved as a mechanism to enhance assimilation. The Mossi arrival in Ouagadougou bears mention here. As one of the sub chiefs of the Mogho Naba, the chief of the Mossi people, explained, “The Mogho Naba came to conquer Ouaga with arms.

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<sup>2</sup> Sissao, p. 16.

To his great surprise, the Samo [the original inhabitants] offered him a white rooster, a goat, and peace.” Today, the Mossi and the Samo remain joking relatives.

- *Geography*. Finally, some interlocutors described the joking relationships as a function of Burkina’s geographic position between the Sahara desert to the North and the coast to the South. As “a place where coastal people and desert people came together,” the area that is now Burkina created a natural inclination towards interdependence, such as that represented by the joking relationships.

Regardless of the historical explanation provided, all respondents agreed that the joking relationships represent a living history that will not die out quickly. “Our ancestors left us joking relationships,” said one man eloquently, “and we will leave them to our children.” One elder man suggested that young people not only appreciated the importance of joking relationships but practiced them more robustly than previous generations. “They are better at it than we are,” he said with hope and pride.

#### Associations of joking relatives

A number of joking relatives associations – groups of people from paired ethnicities who come together for social and commercial support – have sprung up across the country. The national government recognizes some of these associations and provides financial support for some of their activities and training in organizational development; however, there is no national organization which brings together all of the regional associations. Some of the activities which these associations undertake include:

- Collecting money to provide each other with support during funerals and baptisms;
- Collective farming on each others’ fields;
- Making radio appearances in which they insult each other on-air;
- Dance competitions; and
- Trade fairs at which each ethnicity sells its specialty items.

These associations serve some political functions as well. Politicians convene the leaders of the joking relatives around election times to garner their support in making sure that interethnic tensions do not flare up around political campaigns. Also, the *Forces Nouvelles* rebels in northern Côte d’Ivoire convened the leaders of some joking relative associations to ask their advice on strengthening joking relationships in that country.

#### **The Education of Children**

Another fundamental strategy which a large number of respondents mentioned concerning Burkina’s social cohesion is the method of child-raising found in Burkina. In fact, nearly every female interlocutor spoke of the raising of children as a central reason that Burkina Faso has maintained peace. It is important to note here that the education referred to is the raising of children in the home and in the community, not formal education at school. Even an Ivoirian rebel leader mentioned the importance of raising children well for maintaining peace. In general, women respondents emphasized that mothers were the primary educators of their children while some male respondents argued differently. One village chief said, “The mother’s role is to bless

her child, to wish it well on its way in the world. The father is the model, the guide, the educator. A father's wisdom leads to clairvoyance." Throughout the course of many conversations, the pertinent elements of education which surfaced repeatedly were:

- *Respect for parents, for elders, and for tradition.* One of the greatest compliments that can be paid to a parent is that his or her child is "respectful," and it is a term that encompasses respect to all of these various entities. A person's willingness to listen to the council of people older than him or herself is often seen as a sign of a good upbringing. One respondent explained it this way: "No matter how high a person rises in education or in his profession, he will still listen to his chief if he has been brought up well."
- *Strictness/discipline.* Several respondents said that Burkinabè parents were strict with their children so that the children would learn to be fruitful contributors to society. One young woman said, "My parents raised me strictly but with love. They wanted me to know how to interact with people, so their strictness was for my own good." One of the translators, a new father himself, said, "It is important to be hard with children so that they can make their way in society."
- *Admitting wrongdoing.* For some, a good education meant admitting culpability and knowing when to ask forgiveness. One respondent explained a good education this way: "My parents taught me to ask forgiveness when I did wrong."
- *Joking relationships.* Understanding joking relationships is something that occurs in the household. The students we spoke with uniformly told us that it was their parents who had taught them to appreciate the joking relationships, and several parents told us that they encouraged their children to play with children who were their joking relatives.

There is serious concern that television and school are diminishing the impact that parents are having on the education of their children. Some interlocutors suggested, for example, that joking relationships be integrated into the school curriculum and into cartoons on television so that children would be open to them.

Finally, it should be noted that the raising of children is perceived to be an undertaking with large-scale ramifications. "Education starts in the family, but its effects reach neighborhoods, districts, and ultimately the country as a whole," one young woman explained.

## **Leadership**

Another amazingly prevalent theme which surfaced in an overwhelming majority of the conversations was the role that leaders in Burkina played in maintaining peace. Leadership is writ large here, and some of the various categories of leaders will be disaggregated in subsequent sections. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that people look to leaders – village chiefs, religious leaders, political leaders, and others – mediate during times of crises and to douse water on the sparks of emerging conflicts. Notably, the quest to become a leader was pointed out to be a source of conflict by many respondents. "People want to be leaders because leaders eat well," said one mechanic as he tinkered with a motorcycle, "so people fight to advance themselves."

Despite the fighting that comes with the quest for power, it seems that leaders are expected to do what they can to maintain social cohesion once they are ensconced in the power establishment.

Traditional and customary leaders – such as chiefs, village elders, and village councilmen – figure large in the story of Burkina’s social cohesion. Citizens of Burkina Faso are generally very receptive to pronouncements by chiefs. The Mogho Naba, the chief of the Mossi people, is widely regarded as one of the most powerful men in the country. “It is amazing to see government ministers remove their shoes and bow before the Mogho Naba,” said one NGO worker. In general, although chiefs exercise tremendous sway, it is important to note that they also hold some democratic ideals. One sub-chief of the Mogho Naba told us, “Our chief is not a dictator. He listens to his people as well.” A public demonstration of the Mogho Naba’s listening capacities will be described in the section on public symbols below. Several other respondents emphasized that chiefs in Burkina are consultative chiefs who take their people’s wishes into account. “We listen to our chiefs,” explained one woman, “but they are not a drug. They also listen to us.” People are willing to submit to authority, but there are checks on power. If a chief’s people collectively abandon him, for example, he will be put to death. Elder councilmen can also punish a chief who is not acting in the public interest, and according to traditional belief systems, ancestors also sanction selfish leaders.

The chiefs of Burkina’s many ethnicities have a history of collaborating rather than of sowing interethnic strife. The first example of this collaboration came in the 1930s: when Burkina (then Upper Volta) was dissolved in 1932 and divided into three separate entities with pieces going to Niger, Mali, and Côte d’Ivoire. The Mossi people were divided among four countries: the three mentioned above as well as Ghana. The Mossi chiefs collaborated with both politicians and chiefs from a number of other ethnicities to petition the French to reconstitute the country. Fifteen years and numerous multi-ethnic petitions later, Burkina Faso was reconstituted as a country. As one researcher explained, “The chiefs of Burkina wanted the country to come together again, so perhaps there is a stronger feeling of nationalism here than in other African countries [which have experienced interethnic war].” One farmer asserted that Burkina was “the only African country to have been divided and put back together.”

The chiefs also established in 1957 the Superior Council of Traditional and Customary Chiefs of Burkina Faso, which still exists today and is headed by the Mogho Naba. At its outset, this Superior Council included very little representation from ethnicities in the country’s southern and western regions, where the different social structure translated into weaker hierarchies and less political control for traditional chiefs. With time, however, the French colonialists transplanted the more hierarchical structure of political chieftaincies of the north and the east to Burkina’s southern and western zones for administrative reasons, and today, the involvement in the Superior Council is more fully representative of the country’s ethnic composition.

Although the traditional or customary chiefs are quick to point out that they are a moral and not a political authority, there is also a long history of collaboration between traditional chiefs and political leaders, especially in resolving national crises. In a number of mediation efforts, which will be described below, traditional leaders were full and important participants, working alongside government officials and representatives of civil society. Indeed, many of the

interlocutors noted that a political administration's capacity to lead the country rested on its ability to court traditional leaders from throughout the country. Former presidents such as Thomas Sankara and Maurice Yaméogo attempted sidestep or undermine the traditional leaders, and most Burkinabè people believe that such attempts were fatal flaws in the strategic designs of their presidencies. The current president, who has reigned for 19 years, is regarded as both clever and prudent for having brought traditional leaders back into the governing fold. One NGO worker explained, "Blaise Compaoré stretched out his hand to welcome the traditional chiefs back into the fold. These chiefs said, in effect, 'we will support this administration because it is restored us to our proper place.'"

Finally, religious leaders play an important mediating role in Burkina, and their efforts will be described in detail in the next section. More than anything, however, it is the collaboration of these three kinds of leaders – traditional leaders, political leaders, and religious leaders – which Burkinabè people see as contributing to the country's ability to avert crises. "When there is a national crisis," explained one peace worker, the political leaders consult the Mogho Naba, the Grand Imam, and other authorities. No matter how grave the crisis, it will finish once all these leaders enter the dance."

### **Public Displays of Leaders' Propensity for Peace**

At least two public ceremonies in Burkina highlight the importance that both traditional and political leaders place on social cohesion.

*The Ceremony of the False Departure of the Mogho Naba.* Every Friday morning, the Mogho Naba, the chief of the Mossi people, reenacts a ceremony with his five principal sub chiefs in a large public square at the center of Ouagadougou. During the course of this ceremony, the Mogho Naba, who begins the ceremony dressed in red, informs the public that he has prepared to enter into battle. His sub chiefs, who have consulted the people and know that they do not want to go to war, plead with him one by one, telling him that his people do not wish to go to war. The Mogho Naba leaves, and everyone fears that he has left to launch the battle. However, he soon reappears, wearing any color other than red (typically, he wears white), symbolizing that he has chosen to listen to his people and to his sub chiefs and not to send the Mossi into war.

This weekly ceremony is laden with symbolism. Especially notable is the Mogho Naba's willingness to listen to his sub chiefs and through his sub chiefs to his population. The ceremony also emphasizes the relatively pacifist nature of the Mossi people.

*The National Day of Forgiveness.* In 1998, a political crisis erupted in Burkina when a prominent investigative journalist named Norbert Zongo was assassinated by men closely associated with the brother of the president of the country. As the crisis reached closer and closer to the president himself, his ability to remain president became endangered. Compaoré put together a Council of Wise People, composed of traditional, religious, and political leaders. For over a year, this Council considered possible avenues through which the president and his administration could defuse the tension that had built up around the administration's unsavory activities.

Eventually, the Council recommended that the government ask forgiveness from all people against whom it had committed wrongdoing; in cases where a person had been murdered by the government, the administration would ask forgiveness from that person's family.

On March 31, 2002, the government asked forgiveness from anybody against whom it had committed wrongdoing. This apology was offered broadly rather than specifically: rather than entering into the details of the wrongdoing, the government asked for blanket forgiveness for any wrongdoings it had committed since 1960, the year that Burkina became independent. In fact, the government was even asking for forgiveness for wrongdoings committed by other regimes, even the regime which it had unseated. Skeptics called the proceedings, which unfolded in the national stadium and were televised throughout the country, a political ruse and sidestep around the issue of government human rights violations. Nevertheless, many victims of the government's violence and their families accepted the president's apology, which most people believe was accompanied by a relatively substantial sum of money.

There were victims of government violence who refused to accept the president's apology on the national day of forgiveness. However, the 2002 event continues to be broadcast every March 31 on the nation's only television station, and a number of respondents in this study mentioned it as a symbol of political leaders' willingness to partake of Burkina's spirit of forgiveness.

### **Inter-Religious Tolerance and Collaboration**

In addition to the joking relationships, another axis of peace in Burkina is religion. As Muslim-Christian relations become increasingly strained around the world, Burkina stands as a beacon of inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. A number of strategies of dialogue and mutual appreciation underlie this ecumenism, but before describing those, it would be prudent to describe the religious atmosphere in Burkina more fully.

One commonly heard joke in Burkina runs like this: "Burkina is 40 percent Muslim, 20 percent Christian, and 100 percent animist." Indeed, animism – or traditional religions – continues to run strong in Burkina, and many avowed Christians and Muslims practice ritual sacrifices and ancestor worship. Animism runs so strong in Burkina that one respondent declared, "Burkina is an animist nation." Islam has existed in Burkina for centuries, having arrived with Arab traders who had crossed the Sahara in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but as one imam explained, Islam did not arrive in Burkina with an evangelical strain but rather an accommodating one. "Islam did not come to Burkina in its purest form," he said. "Rather, it was adapted to fit the needs of the community. Imams who arrived long ago entered into dialogue with the traditional priests, and they understood each other." Christianity arrived later with colonizers and missionaries, first Catholicism and in recent years various denominations of Protestantism. Again, the rule of the day remained dialogue and co-existence rather than zealous conversion. Although they are a minority, Christians do not feel threatened. As one civil society leader noted, "Christians balance their minority status with the fact that they compose a majority of the intelligentsia."

In any given family, one can easily find individuals who practice animism, Christianity, Islam, and some people who practice a combination of two or more of these. A single person can have several first names, one for each religion. Moreover, although most traditional chiefs remain animist, ethnicities are not strongly aligned with religions. There is no state religion in Burkina,

and although religious leaders often assist the government to mediate national crises, religious leaders see a mandatory division between church and state. One imam said bluntly, “Religion is moral. Politics is immoral.” Religious leaders are able to speak openly to political leaders, alerting them to crises and becoming outspoken in cases of grave government violations of human rights.

In addition to the general atmosphere of inter-religious tolerance, interlocutors mentioned several specific factors about religion in Burkina that contributed to the country’s peace:

- *Faith and prayer.* Innumerable respondents mentioned the simple fact that, regardless of religion, Burkinabè are a faithful people as one of the reasons that war had not broken out in Burkina. One mechanic said eloquently, “Animists and Christians and Muslims – we all pray so that war does not come. We even sacrifice chickens to prevent war.” Prayer was seen as a factor distinguishing Burkina from Côte d’Ivoire. “Ivoirians lost their faith in God,” said one woman selling pottery. “That is why they can have a war there.”
- *The “moderate” nature of Burkina’s Islam.* Burkinabè frequently refer to the Islam practiced there as a “moderate Islam,” referring to the fact that it is tempered with animist practices. Moreover, most mosques in Burkina pride themselves on being open to people of all classes, ethnicities, and nationalities. Several religious leaders, including imams, favorably compared Burkina’s Islam with more extremist forms practiced in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Europe. Nevertheless, when religious strife has broken out in Burkina, it has been within the Muslim faith: ethnic divisions occurred in the northwestern town of Dédougou, where until recently Muslims of different ethnicities refused to pray in the same mosque, and fights between Wahabbians and Muslims of other branches led to violent clashes in both Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso. Ouaga’s Grand Mosque was closed for nearly 10 years because of this disagreement.
- *The positive example of religious leaders.* Many people noted that Burkina’s religious leaders preach tolerance and solidarity rather than division. On Ramadan, for example, the imam of the Grand Mosque of Ouagadougou used his time on national television to remind people that Islam was a peaceful and welcoming religion, inviting Christians and animists to partake in the festivities. In another example, in Dédougou the Catholic Monseignor attended the opening of a new mosque. One imam said, “We support peace because it gives us time to pray.”
- *Mutual recognition of each other’s holidays.* Many respondents noted that the simple fact of wishing people a happy holiday – again, regardless of religion – was a sign of religious solidarity. One Christian teacher said, “On Ramadan, I go wish my Muslim friends happy Ramadan and celebrate with them. And they come to my house on Christmas.” Many respondents described similar activities. The Burkinabè government recognizes the holidays of both Christianity and Islam as official holidays.

Because of their perceived neutrality and their ability to bring people together, religious leaders often serve as mediators. At the end of the country’s four-year revolution in the mid-80s, for

example, the Archbishop of Ouaga negotiated the mainstreaming of the former revolutionaries into the newly formed government. The revolutionaries had sought refuge in the Cathedral and refused to leave unless the Archbishop could guarantee that the new government would not kill them upon their exit. In a village example, a so-called “ecumenical committee” including both religious and traditional leaders was formed to serve as a resource in case of community conflict. This mediating role even has an international dimension: when Catholic priests in Côte d’Ivoire were using inflammatory language during a flare-up of the civil war there, priests who were members of the Episcopal Justice and Peace Commission were persuaded to travel to Côte d’Ivoire to convince those incendiary priests to temper their language in the interest of peace. In the end, these leaders see themselves as mediators: “we avoid being judges,” said one priest. “We should be diplomats.”

### **Traditional Intra- and Inter-Community Mediation Mechanisms**

At the village level – both within a village and between villages – there is a host of mediation mechanisms that Burkinabè people use to settle conflicts before they escalate.

The examples collected for this study represent techniques that are fundamentally confrontational; the mediators who shared their stories did not speak about finding common ground or establishing similarities between people. Instead, they spoke about the need to emphasize the fighting parties’ differences. Indeed, respect for others’ worldviews was presented by one *griot* as a touchstone for peace: “trying to convince other people of your way of thinking can create conflict,” he said. When one very elderly chief was asked what words he used to mediate a conflict, he explained, “You remind the parties in conflict that they are different and that they have different worldviews. You tell the opponents that they are not the same and should not try to understand things from the same point of view.” Mediators who participated in this study also described a similar series of steps they followed:

- 1) Get each person’s side of the story;
- 2) Speak to each side about the other’s story to see if they are willing to concede any points of dissension; and
- 3) Bring together both sides to let the truth come out.

At the village level conflicts pass through several stages of mediation, each stage being taken care of by a distinct “caste,” or a group of people defined by their profession. These are not castes in the Indian sense of the word but rather profession-based identities that give their members very specific roles in the communities. The three “castes” which intervene as conflict mediators, according to the respondents in this study, are: 1) *griots*; 2) *forgerons*; and 3) a third group of interveners whom interlocutors could not publicly discuss. Typical village conflicts include marital problems; problems over land ownership; problems of inheritance; and other social disturbances.

#### *Griots*

*Griots* are village musicians, historians, speechmakers, and diplomats. They typically record village lore in music, which they sing at celebrations. Being a *griot* is hereditary, and villages have *griot* families which fulfill the roles mentioned above. When a conflict erupts in a village, it is the *griots* who are the first responders.

One village chief told us, “When a fight erupts, *griots* come to tell the stories of the village. This makes people reflect on the history that the other has lived.” A farmer explained the *griots* mediating role this way: “A *griot* knows how to manipulate words and speak to both parties to a conflict so that neither side is hurt. *Griots* are masters of speech.” In speaking about the past, *griots* make reference to ancestors, a powerful reference in most parts of Burkina. *Griots* also offer sacred rituals to the ancestors.

In general, the role of *griot* is gendered. When conflicts arise between women, female *griots* intervene and likewise for men. When a rupture involving both men and women is felt, both male and female *griots* intervene, though the men are the leaders. One *griot* summarized his role poignantly: “It is our job to make peace. There must be peace in the village for us to play our music, and music is our source of joy.”

### Forgerons

If the interventions of the *griots* fail to resolve a given conflict, then the *forgerons*, or metalworkers, represent the next level of mediation.<sup>3</sup> Described as “masters of fire and iron,” *forgerons* construct both weapons and farming tools such as hoes for all the members of a village. Because of their crucial role in the community, and because of their mastery of fire, *forgerons* typically command respect and fear in a village. The *forgerons* also possess a connection to the ancestors through their forge, which is a sacred site.

Through their connection to the ancestors via the forge, *forgerons* are able to exercise tremendous amounts of influence on people who are in conflict. They can transmit the wishes of the ancestors that the opponents end the fight. “When you speak on behalf of the ancestors,” said one teacher, “people are paralyzed. It unleashes a certain emotion.” *Forgerons* can ask the parties to the conflict to forgive each other. One woman explained the extent to which the *forgeron*’s words hold sway: “If a *forgeron* asks you to forgive someone, you have to do so, even if that person has killed your child.”

If the interventions of the *griots* and the *forgerons* are both unsuccessful, there are other stages led by people called different names by different interlocutors, but all respondents agreed that they could not speak publicly about these stages.

### Additional community mechanisms

If the *griots*, *forgerons*, and all other traditional mediators are unable to resolve a conflict, the entire community will become engaged, putting pressure on the person who will not admit he has done wrong until he accepts to ask for forgiveness. In cases of an inter-community fight, it is the *griot* and *forgeron* representatives of both communities who will make contact and collaborate to ensure the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

One form of village-level conflict occurs when herders’ cows destroy farmers’ crops. Although some scholars warn that this is an impending source of conflict in Burkina, many interlocutors for this study described such events as “episodic” and “sporadic.” In such cases, it is the chiefs

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<sup>3</sup> One interlocutor indicated that *forgerons* represented the first step of mediation and *griots* the second.

of the respective groups – the land chief of the farmers and the chief of the herders – who will determine whether or not the cows have indeed destroyed the crops, and if so, what restitution the herder should make. Increasingly, these conflicts are being mediated in courts of law rather than by traditional chiefs since the courts are linked to the government, which can ensure enforcement of the sentence. For example, one herder whose cows roam in northern Côte d’Ivoire explained that farmers there bring their cases to rebel leaders, who work with the chief of the herders to ensure the proper resolution of the conflict.

Village-level mediation efforts are a rich source of conflict prevention in Burkina Faso and one that some urban residents believe the government should study in order to learn how better to resolve conflicts. “We in the city have a lot to learn from the traditional mediation mechanisms,” said one doctor in Ouagadougou. It is a resource we should tap since we are losing this way of thinking in the city.”

### **The Burgeoning Role of Civil Society**

Since the 1990s, Burkina Faso’s civil society organizations – including groups working for human rights, women’s promotion, peacebuilding, youth promotion, environmental protection, and others – have grown tremendously in size, number, and influence. Today, it is fair to say that civil society organizations comprise a major component of governance in Burkina. From a technical standpoint, traditional leaders are included in the government’s formulation of “civil society,” and traditional chiefs typically attend conferences for civil society; however, from the point of view of the average Burkinabè person, traditional chiefs perform a very different social function and garner far more respect than representatives of civil society organizations. For the purposes of this case study, then, traditional leaders are not included in the discussion of civil society.

Civil society organizations perform at least two crucial functions that contribute to peace in Burkina. The first is direct mediation. When the government has reached a stalemate with some segment of the population, civil society representatives – much like religious leaders as indicated above, and sometimes working together – are called to mediate. Recent examples include a 1997 national health care strike, in which health care workers refused to work until their salaries had been augmented; a democracy research institute served as the mediator between the government and the health care workers’ union. Civil society representatives also mediated a recent clash between students and the administration at the country’s one large university.

A second function which civil society performs is participation in elections through monitoring elections and through chairing the National Independent Electoral Commission. The head of that Commission is by law a representative of civil society. Several highly educated respondents mentioned that the chairmanship of this Electoral Commission was an important factor lending credibility to elections and minimizing politically motivated violence around election time.

### **The Tricky Role of the Government**

To speak of the role that the government of Burkina plays in maintaining interethnic and social cohesion in the country is a difficult task. To be fair, the government has put in place myriad agencies, strategies, and ad hoc means of maintaining peace in the country. At the same time, however, the relationship between the population of the country and the ruling elite is weak and

strained. As one teacher concisely noted, “We all know that the way in which the politicians run the country is unacceptable, but our only concern as citizens is getting our daily bread, not worrying about how politicians are screwing up the country.” While people speak well of leaders and authorities in general, there is nonetheless widespread distaste for politicians and political affairs. Partnered with the country’s history of numerous *coups d’état*, leaders’ widespread unwanted interference in neighboring countries’ domestic affairs, and the lack of a viable opposition movement, this mistrust of politicians can paint a political portrait in which the prospects for maintaining peace are grim.

Setting such misgivings aside, this section will focus on the positive contributions that the government of Burkina has made toward social cohesion there, both the strategies that have proven successful and fledgling efforts to promote social cohesion through policy. As one student mentioned during a group discussion, “The government lives and works as a community, so they are a good example to us.” This section will be disaggregated into smaller factors, agencies, and simple facts which speak to the government’s strengths as a peace-maintaining entity.

#### Awareness of ethnicity as a potentially volatile factor

Many of the government agents with whom we spoke described an unspoken consciousness of the need to maintain ethnic proportionality in government agencies. “When we form a government agency,” explained one former Minister, “we make sure there is equilibrium. Sometimes someone is named Minister of a certain department, and you ask yourself, ‘Why that person? Where did he or she come from?’ Then you realize that the person represents an ethnicity that has not had a high-ranking political officer in the government for some time, and it makes sense.”

The country’s legislature is a unicameral house with 111 seats which are elected popularly in districts which cover the country. Until now, politicians have largely run their campaigns based on party – and presumably ideology – rather than ethnicity, and the few attempts to “ethnicize” elections have been criticized heavily by opinion leaders. Currently, people do not generally believe that election campaigns contain any dangerously divisive ethnic component.

Moreover, at the local level, there are some signs that ethnic considerations can be trumped by a candidate’s ability to connect with voters. A few respondents in the study mentioned that a person of Gourmantché ethnicity, which typically represents the country’s East, had been elected mayor of Gaoua, a town in the southwest of the country in an area where the Lobi ethnicity are predominant.

#### The method of posting civil servants

Since the beginning of colonialism, civil servants such as teachers, health care workers, policemen, customs agents, and town prefects have been posted to sites throughout the country “randomly,” at least in theory. That is, a policewoman originally from the country’s south might be posted to the northwest, and a nurse from the central plateau might find himself working in a health clinic in a far northern desert village. Every few years, civil servants are reposted to new sites. The general trend is that as civil servants age, they are able to move from more rural areas towards urban centers.

Civil servants who participated in this study were quick to point out the beneficial effects that this system has for national unity. “People get to see other parts of the country,” said one teacher, “and they learn that people in other parts are not that different from themselves.” This system of posting civil servants was also cited as contributing to interethnic marriage as young, single civil servants are likely to find husbands or wives in villages or towns where they are posted at the beginning of their career.

#### Regular payment of civil servants’ salaries

“Whatever people say about the president,” said one cotton grower who said that she has not always liked Blaise Compaoré, “he plays his role well since civil servants are always paid on time.” Indeed, throughout the administration of Compaoré, Burkinabè civil servants have never had to wait to receive their monthly salary as so many of their counterparts in other West African countries have had to do. This regular payment of salaries was cited by a couple of interlocutors as the single most important factor contributing to social cohesion in Burkina today. As one NGO worker said, “If the regime fails to pay civil servants’ salaries, two weeks later, it will fall apart.”

Some respondents interpreted this phenomenon skeptically. “We are a purchased population, 99% corrupted,” said one policeman, as other civil servants participating in the conversation nodded in agreement. “They make sure we have just enough to eat so that we don’t complain about them.” Conversations like this generally turned into longer debates about the current administration’s ability to buy off opposition leaders so that the opposition parties remained weak, disjointed, and full of internal mistrust.

#### The National Week of Culture

For over 25 years, the government has organized the biennial National Week of Culture. This week is the culmination of months’ worth of village-level and regional-level dance, theatre, music, cooking, and visual arts competitions intended to “revalorize the traditional culture destroyed by the French,” as the event director explained. Over the week of the national competition, which also includes a large component of non-competitive events, citizens can see cultural events coming from all over the country, all subsidized by the national government. At just one of the hundreds of events during the week, one might catch performances by a dance troupe from the north, traditional masks from the east, actors from the southwest, singers from the center of the country, and dancers from a neighboring country thrown in for good measure.

The National Week of Culture is perhaps as potent a symbol as any of the governments’ attempt to celebrate ethnic diversity in a national framework. “The government needed a federal system that would respect people’s cultures within the nation,” said the director of the National Culture Week. The process of recruiting and promoting cultural arts from every corner of the country serves several purposes. In addition to celebrating individual ethnicity’s cultures, the event simultaneously exposes members of ethnicities to other cultures. “We hope that by meeting and singing together and watching each other person, people get a sense of the ‘complementarity’ of Burkina’s ethnicities” said one man who helps to organize the event. “That’s really the key: ‘complementarity.’” Finally, the event organizers hope that the event will continue to get young people interested in traditional culture.

### The Mediator of Faso

One relatively new but potentially potent component of the government's contribution to peace is the creation of the government position of the Mediator of Faso, a person who exists outside of the administration's bureaucracy but who has direct access to the President. Created in 1994 with the intention of bolstering good governance, the role of the Mediator is to "defend the interest of all citizens, no matter what age, gender, ethnicity, or social class," explained one of the Mediator's delegates. Put another way, the mission of the Mediator and her delegates is to improve the relationship between the state and its citizens. The Mediator has named delegates who serve throughout the country. These delegates are retired civil servants with sound judgment who fulfill their responsibilities without payment. "Our doors are open," one delegate explained. "We emphasize welcome and accessibility."

The Mediator and her delegates can intervene in a number of instances directly on behalf of citizens; their services are completely free of charge. Examples of the diverse recent cases which one delegate described were:

- *Civil servants' pay raises slow in coming.* The delegate advocated at the Ministry of Human Resources for a more timely processing of the necessary documents;
- *Lack of materials to perform typhoid tests at a town hospital.* The delegate informed the Ministry of Health that the hospital administrators had mismanaged funds to such an extent that typhoid materials were not available during an outbreak;
- *Laws that are adversely affecting people.* The delegate asks the Mediator to speak directly to president so that he can raise the issue with the National Assembly.

Citizens who make use of the Mediators' services often do so because they are afraid that using the court system will take too long. The Mediator serves as a less adversarial, less bureaucratic, and cheaper alternative to dealing with Ministries, police offices, or courts. Although the Mediator cannot call into question a court decision, she and her delegates do enjoy full access to all government documents so that administrative and legal decisions can be made more transparent to the public.

### Other government institutions

Although people did not generally speak about the agencies and ad hoc councils listed below, they bear mention for their sheer quantity. Whether or not these agencies have been effective in preventing conflict, the government has clearly made peace-related activities a national priority:

- *The Commission for National Reconciliation* – the committee which examined crimes committed by the state against citizens between 1960 and 1999;
- *Administration of Funds for the Indemnity for People Victimized by Political Violence* – a committee which administers restitution to victims and families of victims of state-sponsored violence;
- *The National Commission to Combat the Proliferation of Small Arms* – a multi-party commission responsible for ensuring the control of weapons trafficking across borders in West Africa;

- *The Economic and Social Council* – the organization through which the government negotiates with labor unions;
- *The High Council for Communication* – the government agency responsible for overseeing communications, charged among other things with ensuring that commercials, articles, and other communications materials are not inflammatory; and
- *Several agencies devoted to human rights* – including the Ministry for the Promotion of Human Rights, created in 2002; the National Commission for Human Rights, created in 2001; and the Inter-ministerial Committee of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law.

### **Lack of Resources and General Poverty**

Although poverty is not a strategy, many interlocutors mentioned poverty as a condition facilitating peace and social cohesion in Burkina Faso. A country with virtually no natural resources and a flat geography, Burkina does not contain the material riches which have incited or at least exacerbated many conflicts. “We don’t have diamonds, oil, or timber,” said one government representative. “It’s the rich countries in Africa that have war – South Africa, Angola, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire.”

Other interlocutors expressed the link between poverty and peace in other creative ways:

- One mechanic said, “If a rebellion came to Burkina, where would it hide? There is nowhere to hide except the baobab trees. The government could find and kill them easily.”
- A civil servant suggested that, “A poor man’s war cannot go far. He will fight one day and then need to eat.”
- A Mossi proverb cited by a government representative held that “If the raining is beating down on you, you shouldn’t also beat down on yourselves,” the implication being, he said, that poverty has already attacked the Burkinabè people and that attacking themselves would merely add insult to injury.
- Several interlocutors suggested that poverty leads to solidarity. “We need each other to get by in poverty. It is more survival than life,” said a teacher. In a clever analogy to the situation in Côte d’Ivoire, a farmer said, “It’s harder to divide five francs [approximately one cent] than it is to divide ten francs [approximately two cents]. In Côte d’Ivoire, they had ten francs, and they just divided them into two five franc coins [e.g., the rebel-held north and the government-held south]. But in Burkina, we only have five francs. How do you divide that? You can’t. You have to share it.”

The confluence of poverty and peace might seem jarring to peace researchers who commonly believe that peace and development go hand-in-hand. The role that poverty and the lack of resources plays in maintaining Burkina’s social cohesion begs the question: in what ways can Burkina undertake development efforts – especially economic development efforts – while safeguarding the social cohesion resulting from the shared experience of poverty?

### **The Ambiguous Role of Women**

Over the course of the study, the “snowball” technique typically led to male leaders. Hearing little about the role of women, the research team sought additional information about the role women played in conflict prevention and social cohesion. Indeed, at the National Forum of

Leaders for Peace, female participants expressed anger that the organizers of the Forum had not included any women in the organization of the event.

To be fair, the current Mediator of Faso is a woman, and women have almost always played central roles in the *ad hoc* civil society mediation teams mentioned above. For example, two women served on the ten-person Council of Wise People after the Norbert Zongo affair. Moreover, when asked about the role of women, many interlocutors mentioned that it was through marriage – described as the giving of a daughter as a wife into a new family – that interethnic peace came about. Nevertheless, compared to the highly visible role that women have played in peacebuilding in, for example, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda, the efforts of women in Burkina are noticeably unnoticeable.

Several factors contribute to the low visibility of women's efforts to promote peace in Burkina. At the community level, for example, most respondents indicated the clearly delineated gender roles prohibited women from participation in decision-making and mediation. A member of a women's pottery-making collective said brusquely, "When chiefs are mediating inter-village fights, we leave it to them. That's a man's affair." A Southern chief took the division one step further, disparaging the intervention of women. "Women are not involved in community decisions," he said matter-of-factly, adding that "when we involve women in the process, the results are not good."

Other respondents indicated that the mediation role that women play is private; however substantial a woman's effort to mediate a crisis may be, it will take place in the home rather than in public. One prominent female representing a civil society organization proffered this take: "Women contribute a lot to mediation efforts, but in hiding. We have to go *under* and *behind*, but we have the same influence as men at the end of it." Indeed, the sub-chief of the Mossi people was quick to point out that the Mossi ethnicity is not misogynistic but rather seeks women's opinions in the domestic sphere: two of the Mogho Naba's most important counselors are his mother – the only person whom he cannot refuse if she asks him to ask forgiveness from someone – and his most prominent wife, the Poulkiemdé, who manages all of his other wives. The Mogho Naba does not dare take a decision without consulting the Poulkiemdé the night before he must take action. One interlocutor suggested that the French colonial system had deprived women of the traditional leadership roles that they played and that pre-colonial leadership structures needed revisiting so that women could be reinstated to their rightful place in society.

Finally, many representatives of civil society – male and female alike – felt that it was women's responsibility to look at the role that they might play in conflict prevention and make known their capacities. "Women do not offer themselves as mediators," said a male employee of a peacebuilding NGO. "We have to go ask them to mediate every time." He suggested that women would need to get organized and "present themselves" if they wanted to be taken seriously as mediators at the national level. In a similar vein, one prominent female who works in both the government and civil society suggested this: "We women should study what women have done in Sierra Leone and Liberia and tell the leaders of Burkina Faso that we can do the same thing."

## Potential Sparks of Conflict

While Burkina is perhaps a West African model of conflict prevention, there are a number of “sparks” which reappeared frequently in conversations.<sup>4</sup> The three troublesome areas identified were: 1) the war in Côte d’Ivoire; 2) political decentralization; and 3) the “discreet invasion” of the Mossi in southern and western territories.

### The war next door

None of the interlocutors really thought that the war in Côte d’Ivoire was likely to manifest itself directly in Burkina; however, most people felt that Burkinabè people were living the experiences of the war directly. A village chief in southern Burkina spoke eloquently about the war in Côte d’Ivoire and the way that Burkinabè people perceived it: “This war affects us all,” he said, continuing in proverb comparing the war to a cadaver: “When you find a vulture eating the cadaver of a person you don’t know, you shouldn’t call that person’s relatives to come chase the vulture away from *their* cadaver. You should call the relatives of the dead person and say to them, ‘Let’s chase this vulture away from *our* cadaver.’”

The population of Burkina is involved directly in the civil war in Côte d’Ivoire through a number of avenues:

- *The Burkinabè “origins” of a large number of the rebels* – A number of the rebels were born and raised in Côte d’Ivoire to Burkinabè parents, never gaining Ivoirian citizenship. Although several million people of Burkinabè origin have worked on the plantations of Côte d’Ivoire and elsewhere in the country, spending their entire lives there, the Ivoirian government has expelled these people forcibly and violently since the late 1990s. These expulsions were seen as a slap in the face to people who had poured their blood, sweat, and tears into Côte d’Ivoire soil, and indeed, many rebels cite xenophobia as one of their primary reasons for fighting. Some respondents recognized the problematic nature of so many Burkinabè people living in Côte d’Ivoire. “The Ivoirians feel invaded by Burkinabè,” said one market woman. Another teacher said, “It’s not good what we’re doing in Côte d’Ivoire. It’s as if we are trying to force them to let us be part of the country.” Nonetheless, there is a widespread notion in Burkina of a shared history between the two countries, a notion whose roots are historical, political, social, and economic.
- *Burkinabè family members still living in Côte d’Ivoire* – Because of a century’s worth of migration of Burkinabè people to the coast, most Burkinabè families have some relatives living in Côte d’Ivoire. “I call my sister in Côte d’Ivoire and tell her not to lose hope that the war will end,” one woman told us. In another large focus group, every single respondent answered yes when asked if she had a relative living in Côte d’Ivoire. Significant amounts of intermarriage between Burkinabè and Ivoirian people also play a role. One farmer asked, “How could I, married to an Ivoirian woman and having raised an Ivoirian girl as my own [an adopted child] – go fight in Côte d’Ivoire?”
- *Historical connections between Burkina and Côte d’Ivoire* – these include over fifteen years in the 1930s and 40s during which large parts of present-day Burkina actually

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<sup>4</sup> For a full study of potential conflict sparks in Burkina, see Sawadogo, “Les principaux germes.”

formed part of Côte d'Ivoire, a period which muddled the geographic division between the two countries and creates some confusion about the national identity of some people.

Even while Burkinabè people are saddened for the fate of their Ivoirian and Burkinabè brothers and sisters suffering during the war, they draw several lessons about how to avoid a similar war in Burkina. First, joking relationships do exist in Côte d'Ivoire as well, but people believe that politicians were able to manipulate these relationships and ultimately poison them. Keeping the joking relationships pure and strong seems tantamount when compared to the experience of Côte d'Ivoire. Second, Burkinabè believe that the Ivoirian people “modernized too quickly,” losing two crucial components in their ability to wage peace: faith in God and the ability to seek and grant forgiveness. Third, Burkinabè people believe that Ivoirians of the south and Ivoirians of the North did not sufficiently intermarry; if they had created some family alliances through marriage, some suggested, the war would have been more easily managed. Finally, Burkinabè people are proud of the comportment of their president throughout the Ivoirian war. They compare Compaoré, whom they see as someone who brings diverse groups together (“un rassembleur”), to Laurent Gbagbo, the president of Côte d'Ivoire and one of the leaders of the movement to expel people of Burkinabè origin – even those who had never set foot in Burkina – from the country. They also were glad to see Compaoré defending the rights of those Burkinabè who were being expelled. Finally, and perhaps most frequently, respondents spoke of Compaoré's ability to keep his calm despite numerous provocations from Gbagbo, including accusations that Compaoré himself was bankrolling the rebellion.

#### Regionalization/decentralization of political system

In contrast to the current model of national government, which does not include a federal component, Burkina is in the process of implementing a decentralization program. Although the goal of this program is to bring governance closer to the people by sending more administrators out of large cities and into more remote areas, many fear that the regional governance structure that decentralization will create will enhance regionalism and ultimately fuel divisive ethnicism throughout the country. The modalities of decentralization are still being negotiated, so it is much too early to suggest that decentralization will lead to conflict. Nonetheless, several interlocutors suggested that decentralization will exacerbate a latent regionalism/ethnicism in Burkina.

#### The “discreet invasion” of the Mossi

Perhaps the most alarming of the three potential sparks of conflict is the one which “does not speak its name,” a phrase which some respondents used to speak of the phenomenon. While demonstrating the assimilatory nature described as a conflict prevention strength above, the Mossi people have over the past several decades moved in great numbers from the central plateau that they have traditionally called their own and resettled in more humid, agriculture-friendly villages in the south and the west of the country. One interlocutor called it the “discreet invasion” of the Mossi. “They come one by one and ask for a bit of land to farm in the village,” he said. “They learn a bit of the language in the new zone, and they might even marry a woman to show that they are integrating. Then the family starts to come from the Mossi plateau – the brothers, the first wives, the children. Then the village back on the plateau hears about how fertile the land is and more Mossi come. And before you know it, you are a minority ethnicity if your own village.” One NGO worker said, “The Mossi are becoming a majority everywhere.”

The story recounted above was repeated numerous times by people in the southern and western zones of the country, who felt invaded. The invasion, as they described it, happened on several levels. First, commercially, people in the south and the west believe that the Mossi have taken over the economy of the country. “Go to the market in Bobo-Dioulasso [Burkina’s second-largest town, located in the southwest],” said one NGO worker. “Most of the vendors there are Mossi.”

From an agricultural standpoint, people from the southwestern parts of the country claimed that their method of cultivating the land was more short-sighted. “They farm cash crops for a few years and deplete the soil and then move on.” Land ownership in Burkina is a particularly problematic domain of conflict since, legally speaking, every bit of land in the country belongs to the government. Despite this technicality, notions of private property and of indigenous rights to cultivate land are becoming more and more pronounced, guided by local decision-making and politics rather than by a coherent national policy. The national law on land rights has been revisited several times, but no significant changes have yet taken place. Land problems – especially those revolving around the right to own land and in what quantity coupled with the notion of indigenous rights – are areas where more conflicts could emerge in coming years.

People of the southern and western parts of the country express the sentiment that the Mossi are ignoring half of the country. “Everything is decided in Ouaga,” many said, noting that the national budget was unduly concentrated there. These sentiments are not new ones, echoing instead a sentiment expressed by a major chief in the south that “our cohabitation with the Mossi is forced.” This chief, who was alive at the time that Burkina was divided and reconstituted, expressed even during the course of the study that the Mossi have never sufficiently considered the role that the people of southern and western Burkina should play in the constructing of the nation. His description of the Mossi was, in fact, rather predatory: “They come, and they pretend to integrate. They learn how to greet in the local language, but that it is all. They marry one of our women for appearances’ sake. And once they have their land and their harvest, they greet you from a distance [e.g., they wave from afar rather than taking the proper time to come shake hands and say hello].” In some cases, people feel hopeless that anything can be done to preserve local identities in the face of the Mossi invasion. “Since the Mossi are so numerous, we have to close our eyes and give the land to those who ask for it,” said one chief.

The relationship between the Mossi and the people of the southwestern part of the country has taken on more political and violent overtones in recent years. Just over ten years ago, one political party suggested divvying Burkina into two countries once more: the northeast and the southwest. One interlocutor suggested that Mossi politicians were in fact resettling Mossi people to these zones in order to be able to secure a majority Mossi vote in areas that were not traditionally Mossi, a process one religious leader called “the hidden ethnicization of politics.” Moreover, in 2002, in a village in the western part of the country, the Mossi immigrants and the indigenous inhabitants, the Bwabwa, took up arms against one another, echoing the Ivoirian war in a Burkinabè town. The two sides became entrenched and proposed drawing a line down the center of the village, creating two villages: the original one and a new Mossi version. Although traditional and religious leaders were finally able to mediate, Burkina had seen a conflict along interethnic lines for the first time in ages.

## Conclusion

*Could such a war as in Côte d'Ivoire happen in Burkina? You never know. But we don't think so. It's when you think something can happen that it will, so we prefer to think that it will not.*

*We keep praying.*

--Traditional chief in southwestern Burkina

Despite these tensions, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt that if war were to come to Burkina, it would need at least a generation to do so. Still, the population seems duly aware that war is a man-made phenomenon and that it could be manufactured in Burkina one day. One commonly heard sentence was, "We are not sheltered [from the potential for war]."<sup>5</sup> For now, the government and its citizens are refreshingly committed to the preservation of domestic peace, and one can reasonably hope that Burkina will continue to remain a model country for social cohesion and the maintenance of peace. As one university professor summed up, "We can hold onto this peace...if we are careful."

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<sup>5</sup> "Nous ne sommes pas à l'abri."

**Appendix 1A: Burkina Faso in West Africa**

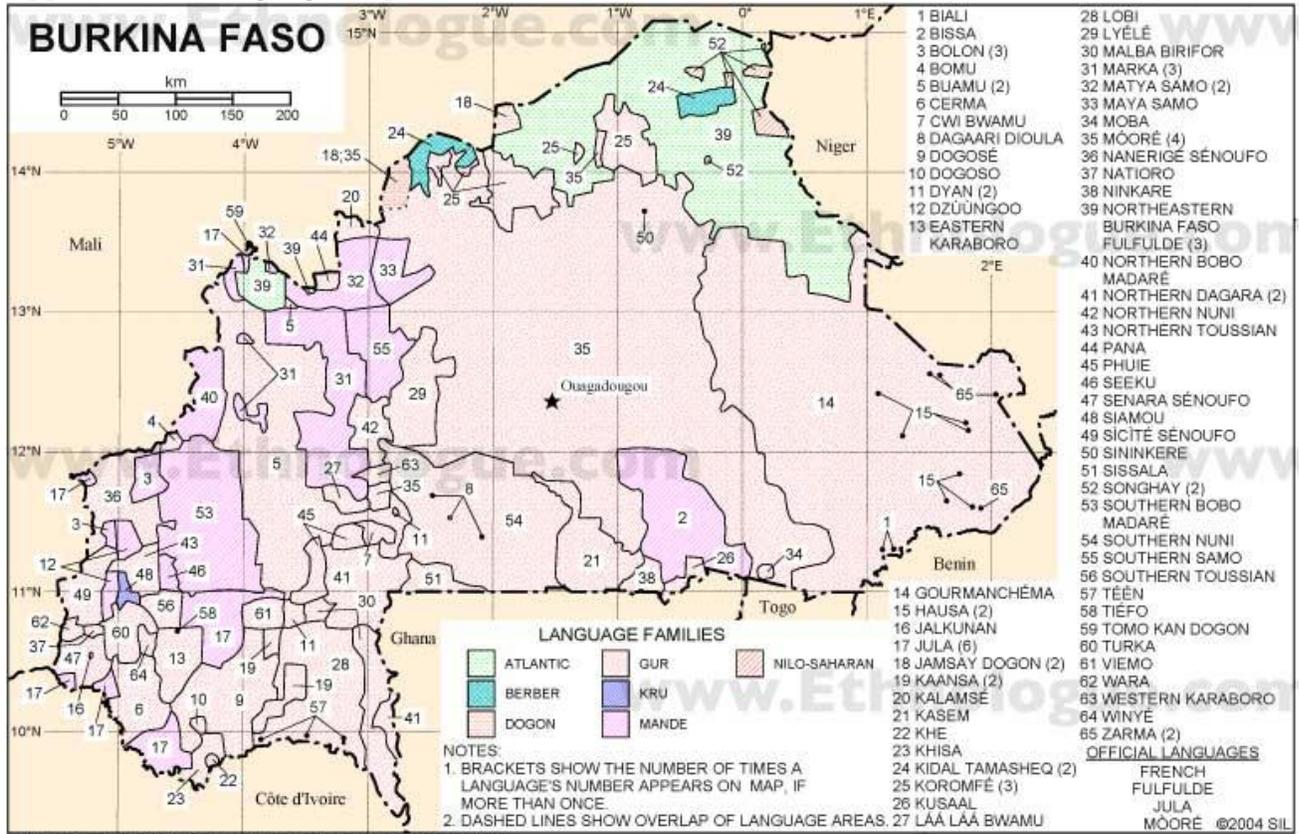


Source: [www.countryreports.org](http://www.countryreports.org)

**Appendix 1B: Map of Burkina**



### Appendix 1C: Language Map of Burkina Faso



Source: [www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org)

**Appendix 2: Ethnic joking relationships (from Sissao, pp. 53 – 54)**

<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Joking relative(s)</u>
Bisa	Gurunsi, Yaadsé, San (Samo)
Birifor	Lobi, Goin, Dafing
Bwaba	Peul, Semble, Dafing
Bobo-Dioula	Peul, Semble, Dafing
Bozo	Dogon
Dafing or Marka	Paul, Bob-Dioula, Bwaba
Dagara	Siamu, Sénoufo, Cerma
Djan	Cerma
Dogon	Bozo
Fulsé	Gurunsi, Gulmance, Bisa
Gurunsi	Bisa, Djerma
Gulmance	Yaadsé, Kotokoli, Djerma, Peul, Dagomba
Cerma	Lobi, Djan, Dagara
Dioula	Lobi
Lobi	Dioula, Cerma, Birifor
Moose (Mossi)	San, Samogho
Peul	Bobo mandarè, Yarse, Bambara, Maranse, Dioussambé, Bwaba, Bobo Dioula, Marka
Puguli	Dagara, Peul, Cerma, Bwaba, Turka, Senufo
San	Moose (Mossi)
Sénoufo	Dagara, Lobi, Djan
Sembla	Toussian, Bobo-Dioula, Bwaba
Siamu	Djan, Lobi, Dagara, Puguli
Toussian	Sembla, Lobi, Dagara
Turka	Dagara, Lobi
Vigué	Peul, Bwaba
Winien (Ko)	Peul, Bisa, Cerma, Lagana, Djerma
Yana	Zaoose (Diabo)