'Caught in a vice': traditional authorities trapped between a warring state, radical armed groups and clashing communities in Central Mali

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Abstract

In the past five years, Central Mali has witnessed increasing violence perpetrated by radical armed groups and communal militias. This article analyses the role of traditional authorities in the Central Malian conflict situation. It discusses how traditional authorities have become the object of killings, co-optation attempts and marginalisation by radical armed groups, and how they have mobilised and mediated between communities in response to insecurity and conflict. These traditional authorities appear to be caught between a warring state and radical armed groups, both constituting serious physical threats and causing the institutional decay of traditional governance, while also surrounded by intensifying communal conflict.

Keywords: Central Mali; traditional authority; customary leaders; village chiefs; communal conflict; radical armed groups; violent extremism; mediation.

Introduction

This article analyses the roles of local traditional authorities within the Central Malian conflict landscape, mainly covering the years from 2015 onwards, when both communal and extremist conflict had become prevalent in the region (Sandor, 2017, p. 12; Diallo, 2017, p. 302). The findings presented in this article sketch a picture of a complex entrapment of traditional authorities in Central Mali that, while attempting to fulfil their historical roles as mediators in the traditional governance system that they embody, have seemingly increasingly come under various mounting external pressures. This process already seemed to have started with the early imposition of state authority and now seems to have reached a high point during the intensified conflict in the region. This traditional governance crisis seems to be characterised by traditional authorities being surrounded by government and radical armed parties in conflict, all threatening both their physical security and institutional capacity, as well as by escalating communal conflict that they fail to mitigate effectively, possibly also as a consequence of these debilitating pressures. By analysing these external pressures weighing down on traditional authorities, the article also indicates the apparent fragility of the traditional governance system on which the region still relies.

International attention to conflict in Mali surged in 2012 when an insurgency led by a pragmatic coalition of jihadist groups and Tuareg rebels took control of the vast northern region of the country, provoking a French military response (Operation Serval) and an international intervention in the form of the ongoing UN mission MINUSMA (Chauzal and van Damme, 2015, pp. 10–11; Bencherif and Campana, 2017). By 2015, however, increasing violence and destabilisation had descended into the Central Malian regions of Ségou and Mopti (Tobie, 2017b, p. 1). Communal violence seemed to climax in 2019 when village massacres perpetrated by various militias resulted in the deaths of hundreds of individuals in central Mali, including 150 inhabitants of the village Ogossagou in the region of Mopti on 23 March 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Surrounded by increasingly violent attacks and fighting between the state, radical armed groups and clashing communal militias, local traditional authorities are caught in the middle of this complex conflict situation.

While traditional governance and the presence of violent conflict have both been characteristic of the African continent and studied frequently in academia, the relation between these two phenomena has remained under-researched, with some reports by researchers from the Clingendael Institute on the subject as notable exceptions (Molenaar et al., 2019; Ursu, 2018b). While analysing the roles of traditional authorities in the Central Malian conflict situation, the research question could be more concretely put as: in what ways have traditional authorities been affected by conflict in Central Mali and how do they themselves affect it? Regarding structure, the article first outlines the Central Malian conflict situation by describing the main conflict dynamics observed. Secondly, the article concisely presents the concept of traditional authority and discusses its background and relevance in Central Mali. The ensuing methodological section mainly discusses the primary source material integrated in the article, and its limitations. Following this, the main part of the article analyses the various identified interactions between traditional authorities and Central Malian conflict dynamics, as found in primary and secondary sources. This section is structured using two categories: one concerning how traditional authorities have been affected by conflict and armed actors, and one concerning how they themselves have affected and responded to conflict. The multi-faceted entrapment that was found to characterise the difficult position of traditional authorities, simultaneously surrounded by the state, radical armed actors and violent communal militias in the Central Malian conflict landscape, also comes forward in this section. The article finishes with a conclusion that recapitulates the main research findings, makes some suggestions for further research and introduces a brief policy note.

Conflict Dynamics in Central Mali

The rise of radical armed movements

Radical armed groups have become progressively active and entrenched in Central Mali (Tobie, 2017b, p. 6). They have increasingly shifted their efforts towards the fragile regions of Mopti and Ségou and use a mix of social services provision, coercion and ideological preaching to gain influence and control among the local population and undermine cooperation with the Malian state and external interveners (Sandor, 2017, pp. 13–18; International Crisis Group, 2016, pp. 10, 15). Katiba Macina, also known as the Macina Liberation Front, is a radical armed group that has risen to prominence in Central Mali. It exerts a strong influence in the rural areas of the Ségou and Mopti regions (Diallo, 2017, p. 303). The group's alleged leader has been the infamous radicalised preacher Amadou Koufa (Tobie, 2017b, p. 6). The first main conflict dynamic in Central Mali, emphasised by observers, seems to be the rise of radical armed groups in the region. Radical armed groups or actors are broadly defined in this paper as armed groups that are affiliated to an extremist religious ideology, often referred to as "jihadists", "Islamists" and "terrorists" in the Malian context, in lieu of which the term "radical armed groups" are chosen as a less politically and emotionally charged alternative.

Observers emphasise that the centre of radical armed activity has clearly shifted from Northern to Central Mali. In December 2017, the UN Secretary General stated in a report that the situation in Central and Northern Mali is extremely worrying and 'especially in the regions of Mopti and Ségou, where there have been more terrorist or terrorist-related acts than in the five northern regions combined' (*Africa News*, 2018). The available data on radical armed attacks in Mali supports this claim. The statistics of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) demonstrate that the regions of Mopti and Ségou experienced the largest share of attacks on civilians, Malian soldiers and peacekeepers by radical armed groups in every single month at least from November 2017 to February 2018 (ACLED, 2018). Amnesty International also confirmed in 2017 that the largest number of attacks was taking place in Mopti and Ségou (Amnesty International, 2017). Compared

to the years before March 2017, casualties from violent attacks in the region of Mopti increased 18-fold in the six months immediately afterwards. In this relatively small six-month period, the region witnessed more attacks than in all the fifty preceding months combined (Caselli-Mechael, 2017). Malian soldiers, state officials, UN peacekeepers, and even defenceless civilians and schools have been regular targets for radical armed groups in Central Mali (Tobie, 2017b, p. 1).

Radical armed groups in Central Mali, such as Katiba Macina, have used the frustrations and grievances of certain communities, especially the nomads among the Fulani, related to state governance, corruption and nepotism to mobilise and recruit among the local population (Diallo, 2017, pp. 299, 302). The increase in attacks and assassinations in recent years attributed to them seems to indicate that the power of radical armed groups has been on the rise (Campana, 2018, p. 25). Radical armed movements in Mali have locally inserted themselves in order to increase recruitment (Campana, 2018, p. 24). Operation Serval forced them to embed themselves in the remote rural areas of Northern and Central Mali, where they try to promote an alternative socio-political order through force and seduction (Campana, 2018, p. 24). The article goes on to shed light on the interactions between the radical armed groups and traditional authorities, including violence, coercion and marginalisation, which have emerged from the increased insertion of radical armed groups in local Central Malian communities.

Communal conflict

Communal conflict constitutes the second main conflict dynamic emphasised in reports and other observations on the security situation in Central Mali. Conflict within and between communities, often concerning the use of natural resources, such as land, is a deadly and growing threat to peace and stability in the region (Tobie, 2017b, p. 9; Caselli-Mechael, 2017; Sahelien, 2017b). Competition for land, such as agricultural plots or pasture, is significant and unregulated by the Malian state (Sandor, 2017, p. 12). The Bozo (fishermen), Fulani (pastoralists), Dogon and Bambara (farmers) are the main ethnic communities of Central Mali competing for natural resources (Tobie, 2017b, p. 9; Bagayoko et al., 2017). These ethnic groups are often characterised as being mainly fishermen, pastoralists or farmers but in reality, all these and many other sustenance activities are practised within each group. From 2014 onwards, violent conflicts between Fulani herders and Bambara or Dogon farmers began to intensify and became frequent in the region of Mopti (Sandor, 2017, p. 12). Tensions between communities, the creation of self-defence militias and the risk of escalating tit-for-tat retaliatory violence between them has also threatened the north of Ségou (Sandor, 2017, p. 12).

Communal conflicts can be defined as 'violent confrontations between non-state actors where the cleavages largely fall along ethnic or tribal lines' (Wig and Kromrey, 2017, p. 9). Within this type of conflict, we can in turn, distinguish inter-communal conflict between such groups and intra-communal conflict within them (Wig and Kromrey, 2017, p. 9). In Central Mali, conflicts for natural resources, such as between herders and farmers, occur both within and between communities. In the case of inter-communal natural resources conflict, however, locals become opposed and mobilised along ethnic lines, including the Fulani, Dogon and Bambara constituencies. As a result, conflicts become extended beyond the localities from which the disputes originate. Inter-communal conflict for natural resources, such as land, in Central Mali is, therefore, claimed to have the greatest potential for escalation into larger scale violent conflict (Brossier, Jourde and Cissé, 2018, pp. 26–28).

Estimates suggest that violence between communities is responsible for far more deaths in Central Mali than attacks by radical armed groups (Caselli-Mechael, 2017). A survey from 2017 reveals that insecurity between communities is regarded as either an important issue (22%) or a very

important issue (78%) by the inhabitants of Mopti and Ségou (Tobie, 2017a, p. 6). Competition for land in Central Mali has increased significantly because of demographic growth and agricultural intensification, often at the expense of pastoralist grazing areas (Tobie, 2017b, p. 9). Disputes between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers concerning the loss of pasture and the trampling of agricultural fields by livestock have led to violent clashes between the groups, in which dozens of lives have repeatedly been lost (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 3). The resulting communal tensions and land conflicts have led to the formation and armament of local militias that are both responses to and aggravators of insecurity in Mopti and Ségou (Tobie, 2017b, pp. 11–12, 16).

As a consequence, numerous violent inter-communal clashes involving armed militias have taken place in recent years. For example, in May 2016, inter-communal tensions led to clashes between Bambara and Fulani armed groups that killed over 40 people (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. ii). In February 2017, in Ségou, 21 Fulani were killed in their village by a Bambara self-defence militia in retaliation for the murder of a Bambara shopkeeper (Human Rights Watch, 2017b). Again, in August 2017, dozens of Dogon and Fulani lost their lives in Mopti in inter-communal clashes over natural resources that have become increasingly frequent (*Reliefweb*, 2017). In June 2018, a group of Dozos (traditional hunters active in militias, of ethnically mixed composition but most often associated with the Dogon community) attacked the Fulani village of Koumaga in the region of Mopti twice and killed 37 of its inhabitants (*Radio France Internationale*, 2018b). Still, a month later, in July 2018, a group of Dozos attacked the village of Somena in the region of Mopti killing 18 Fulani civilians (Reuters, 2018). In May 2018, a Fulani militia called L'Alliance pour le salut au Sahel was created to protect the Fulani population against threats, such as the primarily Dogon militia Dan na Amassagou mostly comprising Dozos, which also in turn claim that they are merely there to protect their Dogon community (*Radio France Internationale*, 2018a). Attacks between the groups had already started shortly after the creation of the new militia (*Radio France Internationale*, 2018a). The year 2019 saw some of the worst reported cases of communal violence yet, mainly with the attacks on the Fulani villages of Koulogon and Ogossagou in the region of Mopti resulting in the deaths of 37 and 150 inhabitants respectively (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These are merely a few examples of violent attacks between communities in Central Mali that can be found in open sources. An enormous amount of violence, however, remains unreported according to local observers (ag Ismaguel, 2018).

Inter-enabling communal conflict and radical armed movements

Communal conflict is claimed to be a key enabling factor for radical armed groups in Central Mali. It offers such groups entry points to position themselves in the security landscape as allies and providers of assistance, protection and mediation, while for the government it means a loss of legitimacy due to its inability to maintain order and resolve conflict (Sandor, 2017, p. 16; Guéhenno, 2017; Tobie, 2017b, pp. 12–13, 16; International Crisis Group, 2016, pp. 9–10, 24; Diallo, 2017, p. 300). Radical armed elements are thus able to use inter-communal tensions to their benefit, as they offer the opportunity to provide services to locals suffering from insecurity and, thereby, to gain leverage and consolidate their positions (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 20; Diallo, 2017, p. 303; Campana, 2018, p. 27). For example, on 12 March 2018, a group of Dozos that had attacked Fulani villages a few days earlier was intercepted and eliminated by Katiba Macina forces (Menastream, 2018a). Another form of security provision by radical armed actors practised in Central Mali is the mitigation of disputes, including those between individual herders, mediated by the followers of Koufa in the rural zones of the region of Mopti (Sandor, 2017, p. 16).

To a certain extent, this enabling relationship between radical armed actors and communal conflict also seems to work the other way around. The increasing presence of radical armed groups in Central Mali and their recruitment among the local population has further deteriorated tensions

between the Fulani, Bambara and Dogon communities, and stimulated the growth of abusive self-defence militias (Human Rights Watch, 2017b). The Fulani community in Central Mali experiences unjust victimisation from the government and elements from other communities because it is believed to be affiliated with radical armed groups. As victims of 'mistaken affinity' every Fulani is viewed as a '*de facto* jihadist' (Ibrahim and Zapata, 2018, p. 30). In reaction to attacks by radical armed groups, Dogon and Bambara self-defence militias have targeted Fulani civilians (Ibrahim and Zapata, 2018, p. 30). Attacks by radical armed groups and narratives claiming Fulani association to those groups, thus, further inflame inter-communal conflict in Central Mali. Some local armed Fulani self-defence groups in the region of Mopti, which were created in 2012 in response to attacks by Dogon farmers, allegedly joined Islamist armed groups in their conquest of northern Mali (Sandor, 2017, p. 12). The conflict dynamics of rising radical armed movements and communal conflicts thus stimulate and enable each other. The question remains how exactly the traditional authorities of those communities are situated in this conflict landscape surrounding them, but first we need to take a look at the concept, background and roles of traditional authority in the region.

The Concept of Traditional Authority and its Central Malian Context

Previous work by the Clingendael Conflict Research Unit has made important contributions to analysing the ways in which traditional authority interacts with conflict in Mali and, in particular, its conflict mitigation functions. Their pivotal 2017 study concludes that customary justice systems operated by local dispute-mitigating traditional authorities are still prominently present in Mali, including the Mopti region, and analyses how they function (Goff, Diallo and Ursu, 2017). The more recent 2019 Clingendael study on traditional authorities and conflict in Northern Mali, Libya and Niger dives deeper into the policy implications that these traditional governance and mediation systems entail in the context of the region's current instability (Molenaar et al., 2019). This article further supplements the valuable work of the Clingendael researchers by focusing on the experiences, fragility and pressures weighing down on the traditional authorities in the specific context of the Central Malian conflict.

Traditional authorities are highly important governance actors (Risse, 2012, pp. 8–9). The concept of traditional authority has been quite thoroughly discussed in academia. Traditional domination, or power based on the submission to and acceptance of traditional norms and customs, was already categorised by Max Weber as one of the three main types of domination (Médard, 2014, pp. 78–79; Cheka, 2008, p. 72). Traditional authorities, however, cannot be easily characterised. Leading expert Janine Ubink defines traditional authority as 'leadership whose *legitimacy* is rooted in history – either real or invented – and culture, often combined with religious, divine or sacred references' (2016, p. 9). The traditional governance functions that Ubink mentions include dispute settlement, natural resources management and local development (Ubink, 2016, p. 7). Cameroonian researcher Cosmas Cheka defines traditional authority as 'an institution or power that is received and handed down or over from generation to generation' (Cheka, 2008, p. 72). In Central Mali, the position of traditional authorities, at least in the case of customary chiefs, is indeed derived from lineage. Those male seniors, who descend from the founders (the first comers) of the local community, or most effectively claim to do so, have the customary right to a chief's position. Thereby, they own the responsibility for the management and distribution of essential local natural resources, such as the land in and surrounding the village (Moorehead, 1997, p. 278; Nijenhuis, 2013, pp. 44–47).

One of the main ways emphasised by observers in which traditional authorities remain relevant to conflict, stability and related policies is their historical responsibility for the mitigation of local disputes through the provision of what is often referred to as "customary justice". Those who are looked to for the provision of customary justice in the Malian context, including Mopti, tend to be

customary leaders, such as village chiefs, imams, marabouts, qadis, griots or even just respected elders (Goff, Diallo and Ursu, 2017, p. 12). In response to disputes, often about land, inheritance or family issues (but not in the case of serious crimes, which do require formal justice), these traditional authorities will be asked to arbitrate and provide a fair result or to mediate and help the conflicting parties communicate and figure out a solution. This traditional system is generally free, accessible, seen as relatively efficient compared to formal justice, and many believe it has pre-colonial origins. When asked to intervene, a traditional authority will first speak to both parties separately and consult witnesses, after which he lets each side confront one another with their views on the matter. His subsequent decision, designed to restore harmony rather than to proclaim a winner, is normally announced publicly but not written down, and can be influenced by the suggestions or vote of an advisory council, a religious document or local traditions. These decisions are not legally binding but instead socially enforced by the perceived moral authority of the traditional authority (Goff, Diallo and Ursu, 2017, p. 12).

Despite the informal character of some of these governance services provided by traditional authorities in Mali, they certainly cannot be described as purely informal or non-state authorities, as they have been the object of historical state co-optation and modern legal integration. While traditional institutions are often rooted in pre-colonial African history, they have been both reshaped and integrated by colonial and post-colonial states (Wig and Kromrey, 2017, p. 6). Rather than being an outright invention of colonialism or, on the other extreme, constituting static primordial entities, traditional authorities in Mali represent governance structures with pre-colonial origins that, throughout various regimes and state-building processes, continue to persevere and remain relevant in different and reinvented forms (Molenaar et al., 2019, pp. 2, 16, 25, 148). In addition to providing governance services, traditional chiefs are now also legally integrated into the administrative structure of the Malian state (Cotula and Cissé, 2006, p. 14; Berteau, 2007, p. 20; Ursu, 2018, p. 6). While long having acted effectively as the intermediaries between state and society, the post-colonial formalisation of their role only began more recently with the decentralisation process in the 1990s, although the designation of traditional authorities has remained according to local custom (Molenaar et al., 2019, pp. 79–80). When Malians present their land disputes directly before legal justice magistrates, they are told to consult a traditional authority first and come back only if they are not satisfied with his decision (Ursu, 2018, p. 6). In addition to dispute resolution, their public responsibilities on the local level also include tax collection and monitoring the local security situation (Molenaar et al., 2019, pp. 79–80). Land legislation in recent years has furthermore clarified the public tasks of traditional authorities concerning the management of natural resources and has enabled the formalisation of their decisions (Ursu, 2018, p. 6). At the same time, state relations with certain traditional authorities, including Tuareg chieftaincies in northern Mali, have historically been notoriously difficult (Bencherif, 2019).

This kind of Malian government arrangement in which traditional authorities represent or supplement the central state at the local rural level could be typified as what Ken Menkhaus names the 'mediated state', in which African low-capacity states necessarily partner up with local non-state actors to bring governance and security to the country's peripheries (2008, pp. 29–31). A second aspect that can be added to the hybrid nature of governance in Mali is governance by armed groups, which has also affected traditional authorities. Due to the volatile security situation, lack of enforcement power and the negative impact of armed governance on the legitimacy of traditional authorities, those attempting to continue exercising their traditional governance functions as before the crisis often find themselves greatly restricted, sidelined and even threatened (Molenaar et al., 2019, p. 81). Further, the Malian crisis has variously led to traditional authorities siding with political and armed actors as a response to threats and insecurity, which in turn has harmed the neutrality on which their legitimacy and governance capacity relies, effectively sacrificing long-term stability for direct security needs (Molenaar et al., 2019, pp. 151–152). This article proceeds to identify and

analyse further the difficulties that armed groups and armed governance have posed for traditional authorities and traditional governance in the region of Central Mali.

Some researchers suggest that in the process of colonial state-building, the legitimacy of local traditional authorities and the original governance, conflict-mitigation and natural resources management systems that they historically implemented have been harmed and partly eroded (Cotula and Cissé, 2006, pp. 19, 23–24; Moorehead, 1997, pp. 197, 203). Colonial rulers selectively co-opted traditional authority structures (Molenaar et al., 2019, p. 37). Through the *commandement indigène*, local chiefs in the region became the auxiliaries of the colonial administration and were utilised for forced labour recruitment, military conscription and the collection of taxes. Following their association in the eyes of locals with the most unpopular sides of French colonial rule, traditional authorities became discredited and their traditional management systems were undermined as a direct result of colonial state policy (Moorehead, 1997, pp. 200, 209, 212). In the post-colonial period, traditional authorities in Central Mali again became integrated as the auxiliaries of a disliked state system, likewise often perceived as exploitative of the region and its inhabitants. It also installed new parallel government institutions that further undermined the traditional governance system (Moorehead, 1997, pp. 212, 214–215, 221–225, 242, 247). It will become evident throughout the article that such processes of traditional governance erosion by external powers variously co-opting and sidelining or replacing traditional authorities, now also including armed groups in addition to the state, seem to have intensified during the recent crisis.

Methodology

For the main part of the article, open-source material including reports and news articles was supplemented by interview data, as outlined below, which was compared and analysed for the identification of any interactions between Central Malian traditional authorities and the discussed conflict dynamics. While assisting research at the Conflict Research Unit of The Clingendael Institute, the author gained authorised access to original interview data collected by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu for use in this paper. Ms Ursu spent three weeks doing fieldwork in Mali during April and May 2018. She and a local research assistant conducted around 50 short semi-structured interviews and 14 focus groups with traditional authorities and other stakeholders from the region of Mopti. This project let to the publication of Ms Ursu's Clingendael policy report titled *Under the gun* (Ursu, 2018b), which can be consulted for further information on the original data gathering process and for the conclusions that Ms Ursu derived from the data. Relevant information in the form of original notes from over 25 interviews, most with local traditional authorities, were selected to be integrated in this article. Due to the vulnerability of the respondents and the sensitivity of the information in the interviews, extreme diligence had to be shown to safeguard their anonymity. No personal names, place names and virtually no direct quotes are, therefore, mentioned when referring to the interview data, as a prerequisite for its use.

Regarding the limitations of the interview data, one must first consider the various levels of interpretation involved. Respondents, including interviewed traditional authorities, often referred to the situation in their region and of their peers as they interpreted it rather than basing it on their own direct personal experiences. To a large extent, thus, the interview data consists of their interpretations of the Central Malian context and of the situation of other traditional authorities. Another layer of interpretation is added by the people conducting the interviews and taking notes, and in turn by the author's interpretation and analysis based on these data.

Secondly, one must consider the diversity of the interview data or rather the lack thereof. Seeing as the primary data integrated in this paper is collected mainly from traditional authorities in the

region, the narrative of the article is consequently very much influenced by their expressed view on the situation. Despite the lack of many other local perspectives, however, the specific insider perspective integrated in this article, namely that of traditional authorities discussing their situation in the region, does seem to be a useful addition to the available reports observing conflict and governance in Central Mali. The partial and fragmented nature of the interview data resulting from these two limitations must nonetheless be taken into account when assessing the methodological limits of the paper and its findings. Throughout the article, the reader is, therefore, repeatedly reminded of the partial perspectives that the findings are based on whenever claims are made and patterns are identified.

Links between Traditional Authorities and Conflict

How conflict has affected traditional authorities and how armed actors have approached them

Killings, attacks and targeting by armed actors

Since 2015, the security situation of traditional authorities in Central Mali has often become life-threatening due to the local presence and interference of radical armed groups in the region. Traditional authorities, including village chiefs, imams and other religious figures, have been frequent targets of attacks by radical armed groups, especially by Koufa's Katiba Macina (Tobie, 2017b, pp. 5, 7; Diallo, 2017, p. 302). An interviewed chief from the region of Mopti stated that fear reigns everywhere and that chiefs are attacked by jihadists.[1] A Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration implementer expressed that chiefs in the region had all been attacked in one way or another.[2] It is remarkable that when one searches online for attacks on village chiefs, imams and other traditional authorities in Africa in recent years, almost all cases that come up have taken place in either the Mopti region (most frequently) or the region of Ségou. A local journalist claims that traditional and religious authorities have been targeted more frequently by Amadou Koufa's followers than formal state authorities, such as mayors (*Mali7*, 2017). The open sources discussed below often indicate that the traditional authority in question was killed because he refused to collaborate with, work for or support members of a radical armed group. Other provided claims concerning motivations behind attacks by armed radicals included perceived collaboration with the enemy government and military, or as a warning towards the wider community not to do so. Here follows a chronological overview of events, documented in news articles and reports, which involve lethal attacks by radical armed groups against traditional authorities in Central Mali, including context and claims concerning the alleged motivations behind the attack whenever provided.

On 14 August 2015, Aladji Sekou, the imam of Barkerou, a village in the region of Ségou, was assassinated. According to a local official, the act was committed by men of Amadou Koufa, who had tried unsuccessfully to get the imam to back their cause in the months prior to the assassination. He had refused repeated attempts to be recruited by the radical armed group and was, therefore, targeted as an enemy (*Jakarta Post*, 2015). The imam was moderate and preached for peace, unity and fraternity. He became the adversary of the extremist group because he did not accept that they would indoctrinate the local population (*Radio France Internationale*, 2015a). In April 2015, Amadou Issa Dicko, the village chief of Dogo located in the region of Mopti, was assassinated. The perpetrators were unidentified but suspected to be Koufa's men (*Radio France Internationale*, 2015b). According to sources within the village, members of Koufa's group had visited the chief and ordered him to join them and apply Sharia law. The chief refused, after which Koufa's men harassed him and his relatives with various threats. The chief reported them to the Malian government forces

and the radical followers were arrested but released again after two weeks for unknown reasons. They subsequently assassinated him, according to a relative, both for refusing to collaborate with them and for denouncing them to the authorities (*MaliJet*, 2015).

In 2016, Fulani extremists, assumed to be Koufa's men, assassinated the imam of the village Nampalari in the region of Ségou, who had also refused to support their cause (Sandor, 2017, p. 17; Hagberg et al., 2017, p. 30). In mid-September 2016, a marabout (Islamic teacher) from the Sofara village in the region of Mopti was killed for his alleged relationship with the Malian armed forces. Witnesses state that on multiple occasions he had welcomed patrolling soldiers into his house, while Islamists had been active in the zone as well (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). On 7 November 2016, an alleged Islamist group executed Kola Kane Diallo, the village chief of Diaba in the region of Mopti. He was shot in front of his family. A villager believed that he had been killed as a warning to the rest of the community not to collaborate with the Malian army. Malian military forces had become more active in the area shortly before. A witness also stated that the assassinated chief had been threatened multiple times by the men but that he nevertheless refused to leave his village (Human Rights Watch, 2017c).

On 26 March 2017, Adry Ongoïba, the chief of Yirma, a Dogon village in the region of Mopti, was assassinated. Radical armed actors in the region are suspected to be the perpetrators (Human Rights Watch, 2017b; *Nord Sud Journal*, 2017). On 28 May 2017, Hira Diallo, the adviser of the village chief of Mougnoukan in the region of Mopti, was assassinated. The perpetrators were not identified but members of Koufa's Macina Liberation Front were suspected, as they have been known to target anyone who collaborates with the Malian government army or international forces. It is also possible, however, that the assassination simply concerned the settlement of a dispute, as the zone experienced communal tensions (*Maliactu*, 2017a). Armed men assassinated the adviser of the village chief of Fatoma in the region of Mopti in November 2017 (*NetAfrique*, 2017). On 14 February 2018, presumed militants of Koufa's Katiba Macina assassinated an imam in Senegue in the region of Mopti. One of the assailants was wounded in the attack and captured by locals, who subsequently lynched him (Menastream, 2018a). Three months later, on 15 May 2018, another imam in the region of Mopti, this time from the village of Toupéré, was assassinated by armed assailants (Menastream, 2018d). On 22 June 2019, the village chief of Hombori in the region of Mopti was assassinated, allegedly for having refused to accept the ideology of the jihadists following multiple death threats (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

This sequence of over ten reported killings, between 2015 and 2019, of Central Malian traditional authorities, including village chiefs, village chief advisers, marabouts and imams, demonstrates the frequency with which traditional community leaders are targeted by radical armed groups in the region. Whenever explanations as to the probable motivations behind the violence were provided, it appeared that traditional authorities in Central Mali were killed principally for resisting, refusing to collaborate with, be recruited by or support the cause of a radical armed group in the region. Other provided explanations stated that the attack was a retaliation for allegedly collaborating or being affiliated with the state's security forces. Sometimes, the act was interpreted as a warning to the wider community of the targeted traditional authority, for example to prevent them from collaborating with the state's security forces. While these openly accessible accounts demonstrate cases in which contact between traditional authorities and radical armed actors led to the death of the former, they do not provide much insight into other (non-lethal) interactions between the two. The interview data fortunately do provide such perspectives. These local views evoke two intertwined patterns discussed below, namely co-optation attempts and the marginalisation of traditional authorities by radical armed groups.

Co-optation attempts by radical armed groups

The following paraphrased interview statements sketch a pattern common in the interviews, where traditional authorities in Central Mali are presented as forced to co-operate with radical armed actors. From the perspective of the respondents, local chiefs, imams and other traditional authorities are often pressured and threatened into doing the bidding of radical armed actors and acting in correspondence with their will. The respondents repeatedly stated that they and/or their families are killed, abused, abducted, exiled or bereft of their belongings in cases of non-compliance.

One chief from the region of Mopti stated that jihadists approach chiefs such as him and ask them to collaborate, offer them accommodation and furnish them with people as soldiers. Those who refuse are killed. Abductions and subsequent killings of chiefs have become usual according to this respondent.[3] A local mayor in the region of Mopti stated that village chiefs mitigating local conflicts that provide judgements corresponding to the will of the jihadists are allowed to stay in place. Chiefs that allegedly manage their villages badly are threatened and flee.[4] Two Bozo chiefs expressed in an interview that the great majority of chiefs have fled to the south of the country but that those who have stayed are obligated to collaborate with the extremist armed movements so as not to lose their livestock. In order to preserve their lives and those of their families, they had to accept the dictates of the extremist movements.[5] A chief's representative from the region of Mopti stated that the law of the jihadists reigns in all villages where the security forces are absent, and that the traditional authorities are at their mercy.[6] A report from a local reconciliation commission that was obtained through CRU's fieldwork in the region of Mopti stated that chiefs who have been kidnapped or killed were those who refused to adhere to the ideological and anti-state principles of the jihadists, or who refused to fulfil their demands, such as giving up their sons for recruitment. The report also states that collaboration is effectuated by these groups through violence and that the chiefs are restrained in their actions.[7] One village chief stated that his father, who at the time was village chief, resisted the jihadists who came to impose Sharia law. They therefore killed him, took power and dominated the village. He stated that traditional authorities are now at their mercy and are ordered by the jihadists to inform the villagers of their decisions on the regulation, management and coordination of the village.[8] A local mayor also explained during an interview that jihadists tried to assure the adherence of the customary chiefs and threatened them to accept or die. He stated that those who stayed in place had accepted superficially and, as a result, pacts emerged between the chiefs and the jihadists.[9]

Some respondents also mention cases of religious figures being forced to cooperate and comply with the demands of radical armed groups in the region of Mopti. A local Malian researcher stated in an interview that religious leaders protect themselves by adhering to the jihadists, even if the radicals do not seem to have a reasonable understanding of the Koran.[10] One village chief stated that imams and marabouts are targeted by radical armed actors, who want them to preach and implement Sharia law.[11] A local stated that imams and chiefs in Central Mali are obligated to collaborate with the radicals. He explained, however, that this is often merely a superficial form of collaboration that is borne out of the circumstances. He describes it as a façade that they need to keep up, as they must remain quiet in order not to be exiled.[12] A chief's representative from the region of Mopti stated that jihadists also tend to summon the imam by force and dictate their decisions to him so that he, in turn, can inform the populations at the prayers.[13]

The interview perspectives reflect some key aspects of the available reports on the killings of traditional authorities in Central Mali, namely that these figures are threatened and forced to co-operate with radical armed groups, and assassinated, forced to flee or suffer other kinds of abuse when they refuse. These limited perspectives often seem to evoke a sense of attempted co-optation, of radical armed groups trying to manipulate and control the actions of traditional authorities in

their favour, and through them extend their influence over the population, for example in order to further their interests concerning ideology, governance or recruitment.

Marginalisation by radical armed groups

Respondents often expressed that in addition to or instead of trying to take control of traditional authorities, radical armed groups have sought to impose their own order, manage the communities directly and provide local justice themselves with no or minimal interference from the traditional authorities. This part discusses concerns expressed by the respondents on the ways in which, according to their perspective, traditional authorities have been removed entirely or become sidelined, replaced and marginalised under the rule of radical armed actors.

One interviewed chief from the region of Mopti stated that jihadists wanted to chase away customary and formal authorities wherever they wanted to take over power so that they would be able to manage the populations as they pleased. He stated that having a powerful reputation in the village is, therefore, sufficient for being targeted.[14] The two Bozo chiefs expressed in their interview that the extremist groups ended traditional authority when they arrived in the centre of Mali, as they took all their power. They appropriated all power concerning the management of water and fishing and became the only masters.[15] Another local also confirmed that the arrival of Koufa in the region coincided with a transfer of power and justice provision in the villages from the chiefs to the jihadists. Now, it is the latter who settle cases and give judgements instead of the chiefs.[16]

An interviewed communal adviser from the region of Mopti stated that chiefs have lost their authority. Extremist movements have taken total control and the decisions of traditional authorities, as well as those of local formal authorities, do not count anymore. Chiefs have become like any other civilian and suffer abuse and violations as the rest.[17] A chief's representative from the region of Mopti explained that before the arrival of armed movements, traditional authority was respected within the villages and regulated his village. When radical groups came, they took the executive power from the traditional authorities and imposed decisions on them. They taxed harvests and animals and provided justice if there were disputes. On the contrary, the village chief and imam no longer have any power and are treated like any other civilian.[18] A chief's representative from the region of Mopti stated that traditional authorities have become like 'kings without crowns'. With the arrival of the jihadists, they have lost their authority. The jihadists dictate their will directly onto the local population.[19]

The interview data indicate that some respondents felt that traditional authorities have often been reduced to the status of common citizens, losing much or all of any influence and governance capacity they exercised before the arrival of the radical armed groups. Others claim radical armed groups have, at various instances, bypassed and replaced the traditional authorities in providing governance, such as the provision of justice. These local perspectives seem to present concerns regarding a sense of marginalisation and sidelining of traditional authority by an alternative order imposed by radical armed groups.

Caught in the middle: between the state and radical armed groups

Another theme that emerged during the interviews was the pressure and threat that traditional authorities simultaneously experience from two sides, namely from the state and from radical armed actors. One chief from the Mopti region conveyed this situation in an interview when he stated that the chiefs in the region are 'caught in a vice' (*pris en* étau) between the state and the extremist movements, with both parties suspecting them of supporting their enemy.[20] An interviewed local

from the region of Mopti also confirmed that chiefs are sometimes kidnapped or killed by radical armed actors for suspected collaboration with the state.[21] Furthermore, according to one local respondent, due to the retreat of state officials, village chiefs in Central Mali are often simply the only state representatives left for radical armed actors to target.[22] Their historical affiliation with the state, thus, seems to have been a cause of the apparent vulnerability of contemporary Central Malian traditional authorities to targeting by radical armed actors. Malian security forces have also been known to target traditional authorities during their operations against radical armed actors in Central Mali. The Human Rights Watch has documented at least two cases of village chiefs being arbitrarily detained and then killed by government soldiers conducting such operations, one on 19 December 2016 at Issèye in the region of Ségou and one on 21 February 2018 at Sokolo in the region of Mopti (Human Rights Watch, 2017c; Human Rights Watch, 2018). The very same chief from the Issèye village had already been detained and tortured by radical armed forces in 2015 (Human Rights Watch, 2017b). The few available sources, thus, seem to suggest that traditional authorities in Central Mali currently find themselves trapped amidst conflicting armed actors, where suspicions of collaboration or affiliation with any of the parties in conflict have at times resulted in killings and violence.

Another dimension can be added to this entrapment between the conflicting state and armed actors. In the introduction, research findings were outlined which suggest particular colonial and post-colonial practices, where the unpopular state both integrated and substituted traditional institutions, leading to the erosion of the governance capacity and local legitimacy of traditional authorities in Central Mali. In line with these processes, one respondent from the region of Mopti stated that traditional authorities have indeed been losing their legitimacy because of their affiliation with the state and its levying of taxes.[23] Respondents expressed that radical armed actors in Central Mali are currently also both substituting the governance tasks of traditional authorities and obligating them to cooperate with them, resulting in their marginalisation and the erosion of their decision-making power. According to one interviewed village chief from the Mopti region, the practices of radical armed actors in the region have caused some traditional authorities to flee and seek refuge in cities, resulting in a sense of abandonment among their communities and further erosion of their legitimacy.[24] Staying in place and cooperating to the necessary extent with occupying radical armed actors, however, may also result in loss of legitimacy. For example, after the occupation of 2012, the population allegedly mistrusted the cadis (Islamic judges) who had remained in place instead of fleeing, as they were suspected of adhering to the ideology and policies of the extremists.[25] The available sources, thus, suggest that where the state has retreated and radical armed actors have taken control, they seemingly further erode the legitimacy and governance capacity of traditional authorities in the same way that colonial and post-colonial state administrations had already appeared to have done before.

Traditional authorities in Central Mali, thus, seem to have been caught between state and radical armed actors in two major ways. This double entrapment manifests itself in the combination of physical threats (killings, abuse, persecution etc.) and institutional decay (the loss of governance capacity and local legitimacy), both of which seem to have been effectuated from both the state and radical sides. The following section suggests that traditional authorities have variously responded to such armed threats by mobilising their communities, while the apparent erosion of their governance capacity may have contributed to their failure to stop violent conflict between communities effectively.

How traditional authorities have affected and attempted to influence conflict

Intra-communal cohesion building, resistance and self-defence

One way in which traditional authorities have influenced conflict in Central Mali is through their historical capacity to promote in-group cohesion and organise responses to crises threatening their communities. A primary responsibility of traditional authorities in Mali and elsewhere is protecting social cohesion within their community. Malian traditional authorities mitigate disputes between locals through the various customary justice practices that they implement, thereby preserving societal harmony (Goff, Diallo and Ursu, 2017, pp. 12, 36). These are the traditional governance practices that, based on the perspective of the interview respondents, have been manipulated or supplanted by radical armed actors in the occupied areas in Central Mali in various instances. Ana Arjona, however, an expert on rebel governance, writes that legitimate and effective pre-existing local governance institutions, including traditional and religious authorities, greatly increase the likelihood of the emergence of resistance against the occupying non-state armed actors that replace those governance institutions (Arjona, 2014, pp. 8–11). Namely, the pre-existence of such legitimate and effective local governance institutions gives the community a stake in their preservation and their protection against intruders. Secondly, it increases the extent to which community members have shared norms, conflict resolution, collective trust, reciprocity and organisational capacity, all of which are factors that determine the community's ability for collective action and resistance against non-state armed groups (Arjona, 2014, pp. 11–13). Documented events in Kouakourou, a village in the region of Mopti, demonstrate a case in which community members in Central Mali rallied around their traditional authorities to refuse and resist the dictates of radical armed groups that sought to dominate them.

The village of Kouakourou used to be occupied by the radical militants of Amadou Koufa. In September 2017, a group of young villagers defiantly lit firecrackers. They did this in protest of the militants lashing a local old woman for not wearing a veil and other harsh punishments implemented against community members. In response, the radical militants ordered the local village chief to hand over the people who set off the firecrackers. The village chief refused, and he was swiftly supported by the inhabitants, who collectively came out of their homes to confront the armed extremists. The militants withdrew but threatened to abduct the village chief if their demands were not met within one day (Sahelien, 2017a). In the weeks following the incident, the village had become a symbol of resistance in the region, as it became virtually besieged by the jihadists who maintained a threatening presence in its surroundings. The village managed to maintain its resistance through government aid and protection, which was necessary as the inhabitants could not go out to tend to their fields or cattle for fear of being killed. The chief remained inside the village with the terrorised inhabitants. They chose to accept no longer the harassment of the Islamist militants. The local imam provided sermons to offer spiritual support to the community members in these dire circumstances (Magassa, Monjanel and Dine, 2017). This threatening situation continued for two years until becoming gradually pacified by 2019.

Traditional authorities exercising their local influence, thus, in some cases may buttress communal resilience and inspire resistance against threatening armed groups in Central Mali. The corresponding increased capacity for collective action, however, may also result in the formation of armed self-defence groups, which has often aggravated the tensions, conflict and polarisation between communities in the region. For example, in the context of the creation of self-defence militias to supplement the weak presence of security forces in Central Mali, multiple Bambara chiefs declared to have taken matters into their own hands because the Malian forces had failed to protect their villages and goods (Human Rights Watch, 2017d). In 2016, the killings and assassination attempt of Bambara village chiefs in the region of Mopti motivated elements in the community to arm

themselves and massacre thirty people in the village of Malémana (Interpeace and IMRAP, 2017, p. 30; *MaliJet*, 2016). In 2012, at the start of the crisis, the Fulani chief of the village of Boulekessi in the region of Mopti joined MUJAO and recruited men in his zone for this radical armed group. He explained that he took up arms not to fight the state but to protect his community against other hostile armed elements in the region (Sangaré, 2016, p. 9). In Macina, an area within the region of Ségou bordering the region of Mopti, Fulani village chiefs had been gathering from 2013 up to at least 2016 to raise funds, mobilise young people and promote the idea among the government in Bamako of creating self-defence groups (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 18). In 2014 and 2015, delegations of village chiefs went to Bamako to support publicly the creation of self-defence brigades. They also held meetings to spread the idea in the centre of the country. Some prominent individuals expressed criticism, as they feared that taking up arms would aggravate local tensions (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 18). One interviewed chief from the region of Mopti also claimed that Fulani chiefs asked their community to arm themselves to protect the region at the start of Mali's crisis.[26] At the same time, it must be emphasised that mentions of traditional authorities forming or supporting self-defence militias in Central Mali are sporadic and very limited. In the interviews, traditional authorities often criticised such practices. One village chief from the region of Mopti expressed, for example, that such self-defence groups could only provide superficial peace because armed populations are very dangerous.[27]

Local leaders in the region of Mopti assume their responsibility towards their communities to find solutions to the insecurity to which they are exposed in light of the limited capacity of the state (Interpeace and IMRAP, 2017, p. 52). They engage in collective initiatives to ensure their own security. These social projects constitute a form of resilience and a unifying force. It depends, however, whether this resilience remains positive and non-violent, or whether it will contribute to violence, steer towards the direction of armament and reinforce cleavages between opposed communities (Interpeace and IMRAP, 2017, p. 52). Such resilience-building and unifying social processes guided by local leaders must, thus, be channelled in order to contribute to an appeased situation instead of leading up to the armament of communities and potential violent confrontations (Interpeace and IMRAP, 2017, p. 52). Traditional leaders in Central Mali, thus, promote intra-communal cohesion and mobilisation in response to conflict and threatening armed groups. In some reported cases, this seems to have variously translated into both collective resistance against radical armed groups and hostile (communal) militias, and the promotion of organised self-defence as a response to insecurity, with the potential negative side-effect of increasing inter-communal tensions.

Inter-communal mediation and dialogue

Another way in which traditional authorities in Central Mali attempt to influence conflicts in the region is through facilitating mediation between conflicting communities. Central Malian authorities usually try to resolve troubles between communities through traditional means.[28] Reports and interviews, however, suggest that the success of such interventions unfortunately seems to be increasingly limited. An interviewed chief from the Mopti region expressed that traditional authorities, such as himself, intervene to preserve peaceful coexistence and to regulate inter-communal disputes.[29] The Mopti reconciliation commission report explained a case in which a village chief convoked all other village chiefs in the area to his house in order to prevent killings among their communities.[30] Another chief from the Mopti region explained that when ethnic violence occurs, all chiefs are assembled to create dialogue among the groups and mitigate their conflicts.[31] More high-profile examples of such inter-communal dialogue initiatives for peaceful conflict mitigation include the peace and reconciliation talks in the city of Ségou that took place among 140 community representatives, mostly of Bambara, Fulani and Dogon traditional authorities, from the regions of Mopti and Ségou on 7, 8 and 9 September 2017 (Dembele, 2017).

A bloody attack by Fulani gunmen on a Dogon community at the village of Sabere Darah in the region of Mopti took place hardly a week after a Fulani-Dogon inter-communal dialogue gathering was held by village chiefs and other authorities in the nearby town of Koro, on 28 February 2018, painfully demonstrating the frequent lack of success of traditional inter-communal mediation efforts in the region (Menastream, 2018b; Menastream, 2018c). Conflicts for natural resources between communities, such as Fulani herders and Dogon farmers, are usually resolved through community dialogues in the presence of local authorities (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 3). As the case above also demonstrates, however, the capacity of local traditional authorities to resolve these conflicts and reach effective settlements has become increasingly limited (International Crisis Group, 2016, p. 3).

Dozens of inter-communal dialogue initiatives have been established by traditional authorities in Central Mali in attempts to stop violence between communities in the region. While these initiatives have sometimes pacified or temporarily de-escalated inter-communal violence, they do not apparently resolve it in the sense that the structural underlying causes of conflict remain, including the intensifying natural resources competition.[32] While chiefs have historically managed conflict between communities in Central Mali, the risk of violence in recent years has risen as the 'traditional reconciliation system erodes in the absence of effective replacement' (Ibrahim and Zapata, 2018, p. 30). A combination of increasing pressure on natural resources on the one hand, and the already discussed erosion of traditional authority on the other, seem to feature among the primary causes for the seeming incapacity of traditional authorities in Central Mali to resolve or even pacify effectively inter-communal conflict. Thus, apart from the interference of and threats from the conflicting state and radical armed parties, the escalating inter-communal conflict that overwhelms the societal harmony preservation functions and mediation capacity of traditional governance seems to constitute yet another threat surrounding traditional authorities in Central Mali. Similar predicaments concerning traditional authorities have been observed in other regions as well. Molenaar et al., for example, write that the combination of communal conflict, the threat of violent extremism and potential government persecution have also put the traditional authorities of the Tillabéri region of Niger in an extremely difficult position (2019, p. 7).

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to analyse the role of traditional authorities in the Central Malian conflict, and discuss how they have been affected by it and how they have responded to conflict in the region. The conflict landscape was found to consist primarily of the rise of radical armed groups and increasing inter-communal conflict. After the French military intervention of 2012, armed groups active in Central Mali had to seek refuge and find recruits in rural areas. There, they sustained and further developed their militant and extremist organisations and found remote populations from which they have tried to recruit followers and impose their alternative socio-political order. Inter-communal conflict manifests itself by the increasing and escalating violence perpetrated among communities in Central Mali. Local Fulani, Bambara and Dogon communities have formed armed self-defence militias in response to the insecurity in the region. In the context, however, of rising natural resources competition, rivalry and suspicions concerning allegiance to radical groups between those communities, these militias have often directed their arms against civilians of each other's respective groups resulting in village massacres. The rise of radical armed movements and communal conflict are inter-enabling as they stimulate each other and appear to constitute the main elements of the conflict situation surrounding traditional authorities in Central Mali.

The available sources indicate that traditional authorities in Central Mali have often been severely affected by the interference of armed groups among their communities. The phenomenon that

stands out most at first glance is the frequent targeting and killing of traditional authorities by radical armed groups in the region. Sources reporting the attacks usually claim that threats would materialise into violence when radical armed actors perceived that their coercion was not achieving the desired amount of cooperation and compliance among traditional authorities. Further, the perspective of the interview respondents evokes a sense for a situation in which armed groups in the region seem to have frequently attempted to coerce the cooperation of traditional authorities, employing them as intermediaries to influence, dominate or rule their communities. Like the open sources, interviewees repeatedly claimed that traditional authorities have been killed, kidnapped or otherwise abused when demands were not met, or threats were ignored. Finally, some of the interview sources suggest that contact with radical armed actors has also variously led to the marginalisation of the position of traditional authorities, as the former allegedly bypassed the latter and supplanted the provision of governance, local justice, as well as the decision-making power.

Traditional authorities have variously responded to and intentionally or unintentionally influenced conflict dynamics in Central Mali. Firstly, these traditional authorities engage in intra-communal cohesion-building, including through mitigating disputes between community members. This social cohesion arguably translates into a community's elevated capacity for self-defence and improved resilience and enables resistance against external threats including radical armed groups. In some cases, however, it could also increase tension between groups. In some seemingly rare cases in Central Mali traditional authorities have advocated the formation of self-defence militias as responses to insecurity, which have the potential to threaten relations between communities further. Intra-communal cohesion-building by traditional authorities, thus, may both enable resistance against the control of radical armed groups and heighten tensions between communities. It, therefore, seems to be loosely related to both discussed conflict dynamics in Central Mali. Secondly, traditional authorities also variously attempt to increase social cohesion between communities. Traditional inter-communal mediation manifests itself in Central Mali through all the various inter-communal dialogue initiatives, in which traditional authorities in the region are engaged. Inter-communal mediation by traditional authorities in Central Mali serves to disrupt inter-communal conflict instead of aggravating it. Despite the inter-communal mediation efforts of traditional authorities, inter-communal conflict and violence in Central Mali continues. This partly seems to be related to the apparent eroded governance capacity and legitimacy of traditional authorities in Central Mali recapitulated below.

This article has suggested that, based on the available sources, traditional authority in Central Mali seems to have been caught between two exogenous pressures that have debilitated and eroded this indigenous institution's capacity to provide governance, manage communities and mitigate conflicts. First and foremost, these external pressures historically comprise the state, and secondly and more recently radical armed groups. These pressures seem to have manifested themselves in two main ways. Firstly, both the state and radical armed groups have in various instances posed a physical threat to the survival of traditional authorities, as they have been lethally targeted in the operations and activities of both state forces and radical armed groups in Central Mali. As one chief in the region of Mopti put it in an interview, traditional authorities in central Mali seem to have been 'caught in a vice', with both the state and radicals persecuting chiefs for suspected collaboration with the opposing power. The many observed killings of traditional authorities by radical armed groups and the several reported cases of traditional authorities being eliminated during operations of state security forces seem to attest to this phenomenon.

Secondly, successive colonial and post-colonial state administrations, as well as radical armed groups in Central Mali, both coercive actors with questionable reputations to some extent among the local population, have seemingly partly replaced, substituted and attempted to co-opt traditional authorities and their governance functions into their systems of power. Through these processes,

they seemingly harmed the governance capacity and local legitimacy of traditional authorities. By causing physical insecurity and institutional decay among local traditional authorities, both the state and radical armed sides in the conflict in some ways appear to have threatened the sustaining and effective functioning of the traditional governance system in the region. This may have limited further the ability of traditional authorities to respond effectively to increasing inter-communal tensions, conflict and violence in Central Mali. Incapacity to resolve conflict may also erode their legitimacy. Communal conflict exceeding traditional mediation capacities, thus, added yet another predicament to the state and radical armed pressures weighing down on traditional authorities.

Armed groups exercising governance functions are a common and well-researched phenomenon (Terpstra and Frerks, 2016, p. 2). Future research could focus on how armed governance interacts with and affects the governance capacity and legitimacy of traditional authorities. Another more specific subject that, for lack of sources, has been left out of the scope of this article and that remains obscure, not only in research but also in news and media outlets, is the way in which international interveners including MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane have interacted with traditional authorities in Central Mali and to what end. MINUSMA's approach to conflict and counter-terrorism has been criticised as a 'one size fits all type of a solution to numerous African problems', operated by foreign militaries with a fairly limited understanding of the conflict (Rekawek, 2014). Future research could focus on how and to what extent such international interveners have engaged with traditional authorities in Central Mali, for example as part of key leader engagement activities, and with what outcome.

In light of the severely limited Malian state capacity, traditional authorities have been described by some observers as seemingly the only realistic option available for the provision of local justice and mediation, and therefore appear to remain vital to managing conflict in the region. The risk of traditional governance and conflict mitigation eroding without effective replacement, potentially causing further insecurity and instability, has also been identified by observers as a serious concern. The Clingendael researchers have also stressed the need to support the mediation efforts of traditional authorities in Mali to de-escalate conflict, while simultaneously describing how ties to political and armed actors in the conflict have harmed their neutrality, legitimacy and governance capacity (Molenaar et al., 2019, pp. 151–152). Thus, while traditional authorities in the region cannot be ignored in stabilisation policies, policymakers should be very careful not to weaken their security situation further, as well as their neutrality, legitimacy and related institutional capacity on which local governance and conflict management in Central Mali continues to depend.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See A.E. Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun: resource conflicts and embattled traditional authorities in Central Mali*, CRU Report, Clingendael [Online]. Available at: https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/under-the-gun.pdf (Accessed: 15 September 2020).

2   CRU Interview with a DDR official from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

3   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

4   CRU Interview with a local mayor from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

5   CRU Interview with two Bozo chiefs from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

6   CRU Interview with a chief's representative from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

7   Reconciliation Commission Report. Retrieved in Mali, April or May 2018.

8   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

9   CRU Interview with a local mayor from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

10   CRU Interview with a local researcher from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May, 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

11   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May, 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

12   CRU Interview with a local inhabitant from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May, 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

13   CRU Interview with a chief's representative from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May, 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

14   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

15   CRU Interview with two Bozo chiefs from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

16   CRU Interview with a local inhabitant from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

17   CRU Interview with a communal adviser from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

18   CRU Interview with a chief's representative from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

19   CRU Interview with a chief's representative from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

20   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

21   CRU Interview with a local inhabitant from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

22   Interview with researcher Anca-Elena Ursu at the CRU office in The Hague on 30 May 2018.

23   CRU Interview with a local inhabitant from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

24   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

25   Paraphrased statement made by a credible expert during the HagueTalk on Malian customary justice on 10 April 2018 in The Hague.

26   CRU Interview with a local chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

27   CRU Interview with a local village chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

28   Paraphrased statement made by a credible expert during the conference on Malian customary justice on 10 April 2018 in The Hague.

29   CRU Interview with a neighbourhood chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

30   Reconciliation Commission Report. Retrieved in Mali, April or May 2018.

31   CRU Interview with a chief from the region of Mopti. Conducted by researcher Anca-Elena Ursu in Mali, April or May 2018. See Ursu (2018b) *Under the gun*.

32   Interview with researcher Anca-Elena Ursu at the CRU office in The Hague on 30 May 2018.