

# Bäjafanga. Power to all!

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## **Mali: Searching for good citizenship in Africa, in five steps.**

by Charlotte Wiedemann

### **I. The capital: Bamako blues**

Standing in front of this iron door flap wasn't planned, not at all.

The iron flap keeps opening and closing. The flap is part of an iron door, and the door leads to the central prison. Five detained journalists are in custody here, editors and directors of Malian newspapers. But this was not planned, not in this story that was supposed to cover democracy in Mali, one of the few democracies in Africa.

Every time the iron flap opens, a crowd of women waiting in the street try to get to the hatch. They are trying hard to shove dishes through it, plastic or tin bowls, carefully covered with cloths. The meals are for their detained relatives; seemingly there are no meals in prison. Mali is a poor country.

There is such a contrast between the banality of the iron prison flap and the dramatic tone of the Malian newspapers prior to when they fell silent in angry protest. Consisting of only a few pages and written in French, newspapers are for the educated elites in a country where only every fourth can read. Now they are all on strike, leaving a phalanx of disgusted headlines against the "dagger stabbed in the back of freedom."

The pathos and bitterness, as well as the accusation of having betrayed the country are aimed at one person, a person who was once considered the hero of Malian democracy: President Amadou Toumani Touré, usually called ATT. The five detained journalists are charged with having offended the head of state.

16 years ago ATT had eased the birth of the "new" Mali: He was the honest man leading a coup d'état, the commanding officer of the presidential guard who then changed sides and supported the democratic insurgence, the one who liberated the country from dictatorship – and ultimately handed over power to a civil government. Throughout Africa this caused surprise. Malians still call ATT "the man of March 26." That had been the day when the army of the old government gunned down political demonstrations, when students died bleeding in the streets; ATT finally changed tack.

The "new" Mali: this is how it began, in 1991, 1992. ATT, the hero in uniform, abandoned politics; only two terms of office later he came back, now as president, elected by the people. And the Malian newspapers, too, are branches of the same tree, offshoots of the new beginning, children of democracy. But now journalists are detained behind that iron flap.

The background seems bizarre and absolutely hollow. A high school teacher had assigned his class an essay on a self-written, fictional parable. It's the story of a young mistress being pregnant by an unnamed president; by creating a scandal she finally urges him to marry her. The story undoubtedly broke some taboos – but it didn't name any names or any particular country.

Unnecessarily the public prosecutor saw an offence to the Malian president and arbitrarily arraigned journalists who reported about the case.

Within days, the five journalists are given suspended prison sentences –in comparison to the things that can happen to journalists in other African countries, this is very minor. But this is Mali, and Mali is in a different league. Is the country, as an association for Human Rights has asked, slipping towards dictatorship?!

In the streets of the capital of Bamako the air is sticky, a hot cube of blue fumes. Everyone is waiting for rain, but it won't arrive and the political turbulences even enhance the stickiness. The journalists' strike is followed by a general strike: because life is too expensive. At the end of this depressing week the country wearily faces parliamentary elections; the latter are funded by Japan.

Mali features everything that formally would constitute a democracy: elections, political parties, and a parliament. Not least because of this – and not only because Mali is poor – the country receives a lot of foreign development aid. However, most of the 14 million Malians feel like playing only a minor role in this democracy. Many citizens are wearing t-shirts with a party slogan on it; others are dressed in garments sewn from printed cloth displaying political messages. Such textiles are dumped on the market on many occasions. But talking to someone about such a piece of clothing will result in astonishment: Oh, really, there's written something!

Every evening the national television news show features Malians sitting as eager students in workshops and at seminar tables, while the commentary repeatedly talks of "participation", "education", "information", and "women" – it is a continuous loop of courtesy addressed to foreign sponsors. Occasionally, a white face appears, it's the ambassador of X, or the minister-counsellor of Y, promising more aid for participation, information, and women. Still more aid? It sounds like a threat.

The general auditor of Mali produces his annual report: More than 100 billion of West African CFA francs – that is about 150 million of euros – have been embezzled, misused or detoured by the state. This equals 70 percent of all public salaries, as the daily *Les Échos* notes, angrily calling it "a vampirism against the people". Corruption inside the Department of Education effectively took away one book from every student. On a single day, the Department of Energy registered an acquisition of sugared tea amounting to almost €17,000. It happened – what a shame!

– on a Sunday, as Malian journalists found out. Tea bags simply are called "Lipton" in Mali; now Lipton is a code word for corruption. Approximately one third of the foreign aid disappears in the murky channels of Lipton.

It is election Sunday, but voters appear only sparsely. Some polling stations are so quiet that poll workers at their desks fall asleep in the afternoon heat. There are 94 political parties on record in Mali, 94! Most of them are just one-man shows; new members receive their party document together with some cash. In the National Assembly, the deputies have to talk French; consequently most Malians are excluded – and some deputies as well. They haven't learned to read, and certainly not French. Therefore the deputies' young sons are accompanying their fathers as translators; school kids tell the members of parliament what newly submitted legislative proposals are about.

Formally, the elections are running correctly. The Japanese have spent much money, and the Germans have provided their expertise. Correctly marked ballot papers fall into correctly sealed ballot boxes made of transparent plastic. But the consciousness of some voters isn't equally correct. Some sell their vote; they sell it cheap, without any sense for what it's worth. In front of the polling station, candidates arrange a table with some food on it; they distribute some pale red crumpled bank notes, worth less than two Euros. In return they receive the vote. For a

moment the citizens didn't play only a minor role; they participated, in a sense.

That's the blues of democracy: the Bamako blues. In the vernacular language Bambara, the word for democracy is *bɔ̀ɔ̀fanga*: power to all. Dying bleeding in the streets, the students had dreamt of it 16 years ago. They now have a martyr memorial on the bridge leading over the Niger River.

Hamidou Diarra is called the "Dragon", because he knows no fear and spits fire every morning, on air for Radio Klédu. Normally, he starts his programme yelling obsessively in a breathless rhythm: "Good morning, corrupt politicians! Hello, looters of public funds! Good morning, work dodgers!" The journalist has presented his programme for six years now, he's a legend; street traders and pedlars are selling tapes with pirate recordings of his radio show on the markets.

Radio Klédu is a private station. There are about 150 similar free radio stations in the country, more than anywhere else in Africa. The radio marks the threshold to the great world of ordinary people; it opens the door to another Mali.

Diarra (45) is an autodidact, a restless smoker, a serious, almost sombre moralist. He developed his style from traditional Malian songs, ballads that either praise or blame. "They are clear," Diarra says, "black or white, that's how it should be. I hate lies and cheating, I want to be clear, direct." His radio show, he characterises its principle, is aimed at recalling the infamous racketeering egotists, in order to "hold them to account towards society."

In most cases, Diarra hasn't had to name names, his audience understands who he is referring to.

On that morning, too, the audience understood when Diarra bashed the expenses of the First Lady. Immediately after his show, Diarra was kidnapped, transported to the outskirts of town, beaten until he lost consciousness, and finally left in the shrubs. Later, Diarra's fans came together in front of the hospital; and when he returned on air, he reasoned with his listeners in a live show about the crime. The perpetrators, presumably police wearing plainclothes, got away unchallenged. Diarra compiled evidence himself, but no court was willing to pursue his case.

"You cannot expect the state to protect the freedom of the press," Diarra says. He drives away in a car: It's a present from an affluent fan that he received after the attack, in order to be better protected in the future. The kidnappers had pulled him off his moped.

## **II. The small change of participation**

It happened a year ago on a scorching hot day. Mali never had experienced anything like it: A mayor gives an account of his work while being on camera; he publicly explains what he has done with the money of his fellow citizens. Issa Doumbia is sitting in front of the microphone, a little stooping; he is an exceptionally tall person, sweat is streaming down his well-shaven head as he battles his way through his municipal budget. In front of the mayor several hundred citizens are sitting on chairs and pads, some attack Doumbia, showing the attentive suspicion all Malians feel for everything related to the state. Eventually Doumbia might have stolen something, no?

The assembly in the market place lasts from morning till afternoon; some days later the video tape is broadcasted. The inhabitants of the commune of Dioro sit together wherever there is a TV set – and a generator, because there is no other power supply in Dioro. Seeing themselves on TV that evening makes them feel that they have been part of something important.

Dioro is a five-hour drive away from the capital; it's a market town on the Niger River and is one of the 703 rural communes that were set up in Mali in the mid-1990s. The idea was to bring the power back to the country – it was the vision of those fighting against the dictatorial regime. For a very long time, since the years of the French colonial rule, the capital was fed up; it took from the country, rarely giving anything back. Even development aid, German as well as European, nowadays invests in decentralisation. Strengthening the local population against corrupt elites promises more sustainable development than drilling wells.

The idea of winning the confidence of the citizens of Dioro by radical transparency, openness and accountability, goes back to a Malian staff member of a German aid agency. On the local radio the mayor Doumbia started to give accounts of his work; at the end of each month, he now publicly cashes up on Radio Jedugu (i.e. "Radio Common"). Today the experience of Dioro is considered a model: Citizens who trust the local authorities will pay more communal taxes – no longer will they take for granted the privatization of the state that is driven by greedy politicians.

"Too many of the high officials in Mali are thieves," mayor Doumbia says. "Therefore the people only believe what they can see for themselves. They want to witness what's happening."

Decentralisation, he claims, is the only chance for Mali to develop. "On the national level the state is simply corrupted."

Issa Doumbia (47) is a wealthy man himself, successfully trading with rice and running a pharmacy. He isn't in need of politics, he says, and that gives him independence. Wherever he appears, he tops everyone else due to his size, although he comes across a little clumsy. Doumbia is an approachable and unpretentious person, by Malian standards he is quite a normal man. As we arrive in Dioro, the model mayor of German development aid just has married his very young second wife.

According to the local tradition he stays with her for seven days in the enclosure of the "wedding chamber"; today is the seventh day, and for a moment we are allowed to enter. In the dark, seemingly more oppressive than romantic mud-walled "chamber" there is only a tiny window with a vaguely recognisable mosquito net, and a mattress. The couple swathed in white. In the twilight we see the shiny eyes of the bride; she's 18, we are told – others say she's 15. At dawn, Doumbia will be the first to leave the chamber; the rain will be bucketing down, but he will have to go. If a man doesn't leave after the seventh night, it would signify that the wife is dominant.

In Mali polygamy is widely practiced; for the mayor's part, it stands in no contradiction to democracy which he sincerely advocates. After having spent the first night with two wives under the same roof, he innocently enters his living room, dressed in purple coloured pyjamas with the symbols and slogans of the International Women's Day on it.

Ido-ikolola – "Stand upright by your own strength!" – may be an adequate paraphrase for decentralisation in the Bambara language. But where does the strength come from? The Malian government has generously delegated tasks "downward". The communes now have to care about schools, streets, water supply, and waste; only money should be left in Bamako, as long as possible, for power is where the money goes.

The most important resource of Dioro is its market. 4,000 marketers frequent it, travelling many miles. Some years ago the market was messy and it brought nothing for the commune. This has recently changed due to a democratic structure, but wasn't easy to do: it took a whole year to debate the issue with the different traders and groups of marketers. Now the general assembly

of every branch chooses one delegate; subsequently all these delegates elect a committee to manage the market for one year.

On market days communal tax collectors with tiny receipts shove through the crowd; for a donkey cart one has to pay the equivalent of about eight cents (i.e. about 50 CFA francs), for a regular market stall about 17 cents. Don't throw away your receipt! Everyone has heard this on the radio: One has to keep the receipt in order to avoid misuse; otherwise the eight cents could be cashed twice.

Three quarters of the revenue go to the communal budget; the rest is used to maintain the market.

The market committee meets in a shady passage between two storage rooms. The secretary meticulously writes down into a notebook what the accountant of the committee on his part reads to him from another notebook. In Mali, the notebook is a symbol of grassroots democracy: On ruled paper the small change of participation is listed, with an accuracy and commitment as if the elsewhere rampant, heavyweight corruption wouldn't exist.

Issa Sidibé, a 30-year old communal accountant, uses a moped to collect taxes. His clothes, not least the perfectly ironed shirt and shined leather shoes, as he stresses, reflect "the respectability of the office.". Neatly dressed he ridesthrough mud and dust, since the 48,000 inhabitants of Dioro live in about 30 villages. Sidibé has to visit each village twice: although – from a European point of view – the annual tax debt may be low, no one is able to pay it immediately. The tax is eight cents per sheep, 16 cents per donkey, 40 cents for a cow, and three Euros per citizen. A police officer accompanies the accountant in order to keep an eye on the money transport. The commune of Dioro has to request the officer from the superior authority.

In recent times the commune of Dioro awarded prizes – e.g. radio sets or sacks of rice – for the villages where the willingness of people to pay taxes was best. This year the winner is Sama, a friendly fishermen's village by the Niger River: All 1600 inhabitants with three different family names and belonging to the ethnic group of Bozo have paid their taxes.

In Sama, everything is flat, one-storey mud-walled houses where only the mosque rises a little higher. The latter has a warm ochre colouring, the mud has been mixed with good shea butter in praise of God. The villagers built the mosque together; they hold most other things in common too: in the election the fishermen all voted for the same candidate. They didn't vote for Doumbia but for his rival. Nevertheless they now dutifully pay their taxes, thus breaking with clientelism.

The leader of the village brings five notebooks containing Sama's tax records. Five members of the village council have written down all the names ; the notables of the village use Arabic script because they were educated at madrasahs. The amount of every single tax payment is subject to negotiation: "We have to come to an arrangement," tells the village leader. Citizens receive a receipt for every partial payment; it is a little white coupon detached from a tiny perforated notepad – the latter is a discarded receipt book from the 2002 Africa Cup of Nations. But that doesn't curtail its respectability.

One has to know all these details in order to realize that there is another Mali, there's more than the Bamako blues.

We're in a talk on corruption with the "elders" of Dioro, old men who inherited their authority from their fathers and grandfathers. Traditionally Malian notables wouldn't address a broad public without an intermediary; but on the issue of corruption the elders consider it necessary to

speaking themselves: "If it were up to us, we would swat these officials! They live on our blood! The foreign aides should give the money directly to us, not to the government, nor to the administration. Giving it to them is as good as giving nothing. The administration is interested only in furthering its own ends, not those of the country."

### **III. Herdsmen, peasants and grassroots justice**

How green the Sahel can be! The country is as flat as a pancake and the rainy season has covered the landscape with a light-green coat, a meadow, seemingly dense from a distance. Looking at it more closely however, it is only thinly vegetated and full of bald spots. In a few months the scenery will be dead again, the trees will almost die off, the birds will flee. But now – strangely enough – camels are standing in front of a green setting.

Our trip to the outback, "the bush" follows increasingly deteriorating roads: at first, there was still asphalt, which then turns into a red dust dirt road and then an unsurfaced sandy route, winding in smooth turns and marked by the wheels of donkey carts.

Here the donkey cart is the measure of all things. Ten villages with no cars at all, that is the commune of Bellen. From north to south it would take a two days' journey in a donkey cart to pass through it. It takes three days in a donkey cart to reach the next town and it takes one and a half days to reach a hospital. No electricity, no telephone, no police. Here you fall asleep and awake with the hoarse, rusty brays of donkeys.

When the Sahel, the "bank of the desert" turns green, huge herds of up to a thousand cattle each arrive. They come from the area south of the Niger River looking for food, trekking the wide country for months, all the way up to the Mauritanian border. The time of the herds is a time of conflict; there are conflicts between peasants and herdsmen about the green meadows, the land, the fields, and the water. At the border to the desert climate change brings people into confrontation; and things are not made easier by the fact that the herdsmen and the cattle owners belong to the ethnic group of Peulh or are Moors, whereas the peasants are Bambara. Like in an ink drawing the haggard figures of Peulh herdsmen in their typical conical cap, are silhouetted on the wide open country, directing their cattle with long crooks and bizarre, dance-like movements.

It is in the tranquillity of this desert that a new democratic instrument has to prove itself. The commune of Bellen is also a model. Assisted by German development aid ten villages came together in a general assembly and adopt a so-called "local convention": a local law for the protection of natural resources and for the regulation of conflicts. Subject to the law are all those who live in the commune and all those who herd their cattle within the communal territory, as well as those who come and secretly cut firewood – a persistent problem in a country where almost every household uses wood or charcoal for cooking. Now all ten villages have their own committees that organize the protection of the forests, making the wood thieves accountable and adjudicating the conflicts with herdsmen. The commune is also allowed to tax every passing herd of cattle.

We arrive in Toïma, a village of 400 souls. A car! A car from Bamako! The young shout and run beside the car. Of course they have no idea what the capital of their country looks like, but a white car with a white nose inside – they must come from Bamako. Even when the car is parked, our arrival is not accomplished until we have paid the head of the village a courtesy visit. Afterwards someone will sharpen a knife and catch a chicken and a moment later we will see our lunch passing by without its head. It's useless to object. In a Malian village, there are unalterable rules of sociality and conduct. The new democratic instruments won't be able to

work without taking those rules into consideration.

In the jargon of development aid, “resource management”, , assigns a leading role to a quite traditional group: the hunters. This is because hunters are acquainted with the bush. But beyond that, in Mali a hunter is considered to be trustworthy, disciplined and skilful, a keeper of traditional culture and a guardian of spiritual knowledge.

In Toïma, the aged leader of the hunters is deaf, but this handicap doesn't affect his position in the resource management committee; another committee member begins to speak in his place. His name is Morike Konaré, aged as well, a man of delicate stature. With his modest and decent character he is a kind of a local mediator and peace maker. First he shows us the “cattle jail”, a carefully enclosed corral. When passing herds devastate the fields, the wrongdoers are put inside the pen until their owner pays for the damage. Fortunately, at the moment the corral is empty. Everybody is scared of a conflict between herdsmen and peasants; in the worst case such a quarrel may lead to fatalities.

Konaré the mediator talks about the last big case in Toïma: 20 cows had devastated the millet fields; the peasants corralled the cattle in the pen until they found the owner. Then a delegation of the resource committee went to examine the damage on the spot; both the owner of the fields and the owner of the cattle took part in the inspection accompanied by a witness. On the field the parties negotiated until a consensus was found, and they agreed how much the owner of the cattle had to pay for the devastated fields – and for the food in the pen. All added up to the equivalent of about 40 Euros, an enormous sum. The committee members burst out laughing when asked if someone had that amount of money at home. This general amusement only shows what a big deal the agreement on the field had actually been. An equivalent scenario would be if in a German town a Mercedes Benz would have crashed into a china shop and those involved had come to an agreement without calling the police.

Grassroots justice existed in the rural communities in former times as well. Mali is renowned for its culture of dialogue. In the Dogon area (i.e. central Mali), tourists visit ancient assembly buildings only four feet high; the extremely low roof was supposed to prevent the debating men from jumping up with excitement. Today, modern concepts of decentralisation again take up traditions that were discarded under the centralised state of the colonial era. The resource management committee of Toïma congregates beneath the palaver tree, an old khaya, in the leaves of which a nightingale is nestling. By relocating as much jurisdiction as possible to the grassroots level it could be possible to remove the ground from under the feet of Mali's corrupt judicial system. A peasant who has to travel three days with a donkey cart in order to file a lawsuit is an easy prey for corrupt officials.

But make no mistake: Malian villages have strict patriarchal social hierarchies. Generally young people aren't asked for their opinion; there are two women sitting on the resource committee in Toïma – they were called only after we asked for them. Nobody considered it necessary to introduce them.

When asked about democracy an old leader of a village in the Sahel answers: “People don't respect each other any more. Only the educated are respected.” He says this in a low, dramatic voice, as if telling us an awful secret. And the old man is right: His generation will be the last whose leaders could claim authority from dignity alone without being able to write their names.

For the younger generation democracy has the slim appearance of a radio antenna, like the one rising above the low trees in the central village of the Sahel commune of Bellen. With the communal radio station – the solar technology of “Radio Bellen” was funded by German

development aid – it is possible to communicate beyond the narrow domain of family, clan or village, at least for a few hours a day. But mainly the radio helps to preserve peace in the Sahel. The radio hosts belong to three different ethnic groups – one of them comes from the peasant population, the other two represent the herdsmen – and so Peulh, Moors and Bambara learn in their own language how to avoid conflicts about pastures and water. It's a kind of multi-cultural radio, used in emergency situations.

As rain clouds gather we meet Cheikhna Dicko the Moor, with his goats. The herdsman moves smoothly like someone who walks great distances. He lives semi-nomadic; the shelter for his family is little more than a sleeping place covered with plastic sheeting, which the wind yanks dangerously. In the rich countries of the northern hemisphere nobody would imagine that he's a radio host: a skinny, barefooted man with bad teeth, his wide, worn out black gown held by an empty, light blue bandolier.

But Dicko's eyes show his pride. He's illiterate, but speaks three languages and enjoys his fame. "If they need me on the microphone, they say so on the radio," he says with a smile. And from then on everyone within a two days' journey in a donkey cart knows that this herdsman is an important person: a man who helps to avoid the conflicts everybody is scared of.

Cheikhna Dicko always carries his radio with him. It's a relatively big device, he carries it in a broken bag. It begins to rain; the silhouette of the skinny man in his wide gown sticks in the mind.

#### **IV. Cotton and a lesson in democracy**

The taxi that ought to take us from the bus terminal to the hotel rolls into a filling station, its motor spluttering. The retailer sells gasoline out of glass bottles, accurately dosed as if the fuel were cognac. The taxi fare, a minimal sum, has to be paid beforehand; only then the cabbie will be able to pay the gas in order to bring us to the hotel. It's an introduction to the economy of scarcity, into an economy without reserves. This is the economy of the cotton area.

Mali is one of Africa's biggest producers of cotton, and if there were any justice in the world, the people in the administrative region of Sikasso, in the fertile and wet southern-most part of the country, would be living in relative prosperity. But the peasants' situation worsens every year. Malian cotton is of high quality, not least because it is picked by hand, but it generates no income for those who are breaking their back as they work the fields. Quite the contrary, Malian peasants are getting poorer by the cotton: every year they get more into debt, since the price on the world market is so low that the revenue from the crops hardly covers the costs for seeds, fertilisers, and (extremely expensive) pesticides.

In the summer of 2007 the summit of the Group of Eight (G8) met in Heiligendamm, Germany. At the same time an all-African counter summit met in Sikasso; it was the summit of the poor, and the assembly took place under a banner stating: "We oppose a world where peasants cannot live from the fruits of their labour."

Now that the rainy season has begun the hardest time is ahead. Malians speaking French call it *soudure*, which would translate literally as "welded joint": the period when the granaries are empty before new crops are reaped. *Soudure*, the word tastes like scarcity and starvation. This is the time of distress: for goats or cattle the price is in the dumps, nevertheless the peasants are forced to sell, and they sell everything they have. They live for the cotton.

We are sitting in a community hall, amidst an assembly of tired and aged family patriarchs. The

men aren't tired by the day's work, but tired by life and its lack of perspective. Behind us, orderly stapled at the wall, the ballot boxes of the last elections are stored, symbols of democracy made of transparent grey plastic, still displaying the seal of German-Malian development cooperation. How ridiculous those boxes seem in this moment, as if they were toys for the children so that they do not annoy while discussing important issues.

The peasants assembled here only have a vague understanding of the way in which remote forces determine their fate. Each year the U.S. Government grants subsidies that amount to 100,000 dollars for every American cotton farmer. In Malian categories, such a sum is inconceivable: here a producer of cotton would have to work for it about a thousand years. Malian peasants and their families, 800,000 persons, have protested and sent a petition, signed with their thumb print, to the World Trade Organisation. Now the word is that Mali plays a leading role in the struggle for a fair and genuine competition. But how do people struggle with nothing in their hands and the chains of debt around their feet? Actually many peasants are triply encumbered with debts: to the cotton company, to the banks, and to fellow peasants.

One of the aged men brings the debt register of the rural community; it's a booklet, a notebook. The small sums of great dramas are listed on the ruled paper, just as elsewhere the small change of participation. The worst case of indebtedness in the 26 villages of the commune adds up to 500 Euros. An abyss the others look into in horror: How will a family ever be able to overcome this?

Knowing each other's burdens, every family sees how precarious the situation of their neighbours is. Thus life itself stops breathing; no one marries anymore, since there's no chance to marry well.

In the sowing period, one can see the old men standing in the fields, lonesome silhouettes in white boubous, the traditional gowns. Leaned on a long crook, they walk down and examine the furrows with the eyes of patriarchs; here and there they bend over stiffly and bring something in order. It's traditional rigour, but nowadays it's a hollow ritual: even the most accurate furrow only will create new debts.

If then a son or a grandson, after having completed school, wants to go to Europe, the old man gives his blessing to him. What else could he give him? How could he hold him?

### Searching for exits

Nevertheless the peasants benefit from democracy in Mali, too. They aren't mute any more, they have got a voice. There are forms of representation, activists, and union-like associations. And wherever it is possible, the peasants start to organise themselves, at a grassroots level.

The Faraguaran cooperative, a co-op of organic farmers, provides an example. Some dozens of men and women come together on a Sunday morning in the classroom of the village schoolhouse, the iron window shutters noisily slapping in the wind. On the rear wall posters displaying the numbers one through nine are fixed, on the blackboard someone wrote calculations regarding the budget of the cooperative. The women come first; they all sit down on the right side of the room as if they were schoolgirls in a real class. But the way the women lay their over-worked hands on the desks demonstrates how they have never used paper and pen.

The peasant community makes effective use of the little education its members have. The teacher is chairman of the committee that monitors the organic production.

Some years ago Helvetas, a Swiss association for international cooperation, began to promote

the conversion of cotton farms to organic cultivation in this part of Mali; nowadays an independent movement with 33 cooperatives and 4,500 peasants has developed, the so-called Mouvement Biologique Malien (mobiom). Helvetas keeps supporting the movement through consulting and marketing. mobiom is democracy at the grassroots level; every cooperative delegates their representatives to a kind of parliament. Today the producers are allowed to use the labels “bio” and “fair trade”, a combination that helps to improve their income substantially. But first and foremost the farmers have been able to free themselves from debt bondage, particularly because they don't need expansive pesticides any more.

The mood during the classroom assembly isn't free from worry, yet confidence prevails. B??j?fanga, power to all! Perhaps B??j?fanga can only develop in this way: by growing small democracies bit by bit, a bottom-up empowerment step by step.

But empowerment means first and foremost: knowledge. How for instance will Malian farmers be able to decide if they should cultivate genetically modified cotton as it is suggested by a powerful lobby today? The parliament of the region of Sikasso dared an experiment and delegated the issue to a jury of peasants. Never before had such a complex question been taken directly to the grassroots level.

The preparations took eight months, funding and expertise arrived from Switzerland and the U.K. The jury delegates came from local committees in seven cercles, taking into account the size of the farms and paying attention to the gender balance. Then, ways had to be found to explain genetic engineering to illiterate peasants; not least new Bambara words had to be invented.

Finally, the 45 men and women of the jury debated for five days and listened to experts from different countries. 20 local radio stations reported live on the debates.

The convention was a real event; Alidiata Bamba was one of the participants. Riding an old Yamaha moped she arrives for our meeting; Mme. Bamba is a 57-year old farmer with a self-confident, questioning attitude. Her yellow dress displays the slogan “Liberté, Egalité, Solidarité”, and she leaves no doubt that she knows what this means. The cloth came from the World Social Forum. Bamba is an altermondialiste, an “alter-globalization” grassroots activist. She grows rice and corn, produces mango jam and tamarind syrup; and now she sits prominently in the peasants' jury during the convention, asking a lot of questions. Above all, it is the women in the jury object to genetic engineering. “I'm totally convinced that it will cause harm to us,” Alidiata Bamba states. “If a farmer should start using it, we will burn down his fields.”

It is worth mentioning that global agribusiness, foremost the U.S. multinational Monsanto, didn't follow the invitation to speak to the jury. Agribusiness lobbyists prefer to bribe journalists to publish articles in favour of genetic engineering. But appearing in front of a peasants' jury? Where would that end?! For Alidiata Bamba and the other farmers the absence of the multinational corporations was part of the lesson in democracy.

## **V. Railway and resistance**

There are different ways how people can start to conceive themselves as citizens despite their poverty. Giving rights to them – like it happened in the communes or in the peasants' jury – is a possible way. To deprive them of their rights, is another. The circumstances under which the Malian railroad was privatized are a lesson of the second kind.

The clock at the front side of Bamako Central Station stands still, the gates to the main hall are

locked and the station forecourt is bleak and empty. Only once a day a passenger train arrives; weed grows between the rails. The railway, privatized at the behest of the World Bank, now is the property of a French-Canadian consortium; and the new owner has restructured the service in an extremely simple way: profitability means cargo, not passengers. Most stations alongside the tracks have been closed, 26 towns aren't connected any more. Some of them even lack a road connection.

For a century life alongside the Dakar-Niger Railway developed in time with the trains; nowadays the trains rush by indifferently, leaving trade, markets, and crafts withering. Enraged about this, coci-dirail developed, the "Collectif Citoyen pour la Restitution et le Développement Intégré du Rail Malien" (Citizens' Collective for Restitution and Sustainable Development of the Railways of Mali): a network of groups alongside the railway – among them people suffering from the consequences of privatization, former railway employees and others; again radio stations support the movement.

We meet Dr. Tiécoura Traoré, president of coci-dirail, who sits under a tree near the rails. On his knees he holds a laptop, a gift of solidarity from French railway workers. Following privatization, hundreds of Malian railway workers, many of them unionists, were fired; the engineer Traoré is the most prominent one, an academic who became one of the heads of resistance. He lost his job three years ago, but the other workers continue to call him "the sacked doctor", as if they were still amazed how someone from a higher rank landed on the side of the oppressed.

Elsewhere development aides try hard to convince Malians of civic responsibility for public goods. No one has to explain this to Traoré (53). For him, the privatization of the Malian railway is an act of expropriation, a theft of the people's wealth, and a shame for Mali. "How can a country that calls itself sovereign sell out its national heritage like a sack of peanuts? And the parliament wasn't even asked!"

This summer, audiences at film festivals in Europe will have seen Dr Traoré on screen. In the docudrama Bamako he plays an uncommunicative and depressed unemployed man. The movie was shot in the Malian capital, in a backyard African civil society brings the World Bank to court in a bizarre and dramatic trial. In the movie, the unemployed Traoré studies Hebrew in case Israel ever opens an embassy in Bamako; then he could feel confident to find a job as porter. The real engineer Tiécoura Traoré believes in something that probably for some is just as absurd as learning Hebrew in Mali: a solidarity economy. A social life that isn't dictated by the rules of profit.

B??j?fangá, power to all. At least a railway for all; a railway for the citizens. In the evening light goats are stalking over the rails. No train on the horizon.

Translated by Sara Percino