Based on fieldwork undertaken in Burkina Faso in the mid-1990s, this study investigates the functioning of the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farmers with the overall aim of interrogating female agency. The thesis attempts to answer the following interrelated research questions: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship?

Permeating the analysis is the insight that domestic economies of many West African farming societies consist of separate but interconnected economic domains, the “common” economy of the farming unit and the “individual” economies of its male and female members. It demonstrates that women have vested interest in both the common economy and in their individual and that women’s individual undertakings, to a large extent, are motivated by their gendered responsibilities towards their domestic group. The study argues for an agency concept which captures the different modes in which women exercise agency, both as individuals and as parts of social bodies.

As much as the context of Burkinabe cotton farming has undergone changes since the mid-1990s, this thesis has relevance beyond its historic contribution to ethnographic studies of West African cotton farming. Focusing as it does on the internal organization of the domestic economies of farmers, with special attention to gendered and other intersecting power relations, it provides essential background knowledge, empirical as well as theoretical, for understanding the livelihoods of contemporary cotton farmers.
Cotton and Cabaret
Domestic Economy and Female Agency in Burkina Faso
Sigrun Helmfrid

Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Anthropology at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Thursday 5 March 2020 at 10.00 in Nordenskiöldsalen, Geovetenskapens hus, Svante Arrhenius väg 12.

Abstract
This study investigates the functioning of the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farmers with the overall aim of interrogating female agency, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Burkina Faso in the mid-1990s. The thesis addresses the following interrelated research questions: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship? Permeating the analysis is the insight that domestic economies of many West African farming societies consist of separate but interconnected economic domains, the “common” economy of the farming unit and the “individual” economies of its male and female members. It demonstrates that women have vested interests in both the common economy and their individual ones, since women’s individual undertakings, to a large extent, are motivated by their gendered responsibilities towards the domestic group. The study argues for an agency concept that captures the different modes in which women exercise agency, both as individuals and as members of social bodies.

Keywords: household economy, agency, gender, women, gendered livelihoods, farming, cotton, edible plants, shea, beer brewing, Bobo, Burkina Faso, West Africa.

Stockholm 2020
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:diva-177876

ISSN 0347-0830

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COTTON AND CABARET
Sigrun Helmfrid
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Domestic Economy and Female Agency in Burkina Faso
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To those who contributed to this project but passed away before its finalization.

In memory of my father and his unconditional support.
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Acknowledgements

This thesis project has been going on since the mid-1990s. Thinking of the many people who over the years have contributed time, effort and attention to it, I am now relieved that I finally managed to complete it. Your efforts were not for nothing!

First and foremost, I am thinking of my informants and friends in Bala and how grateful I am for their patience and for the fun we had together! I am particularly indebted to my landlord Jérôme Ouattara (†) and his family for lodging me and my entourage and for caring for us throughout our stay. I am also grateful to the community of civil servants in Bala for providing me with information and for treating me as one of them, including me in their social gatherings. The forester Lazare Bougouma and his wife Alice merit special mention. It was thanks to him, a former colleague of mine from the project for improved stoves in which I had been working a few years earlier, that I had chosen Bala as my fieldwork location. Throughout my stay, their courtyard was a haven for relaxation and distraction.

Thanks also to my former colleague Mariam Ouattara who, despite family obligations in town, had the courage to live with me in Bala for more than a year as my research assistant. As I have been looking through our notes again, I realize what an important contribution Mariam made to this study! Thanks also to Evelyne Sanou who lived with us to take care of Mariam’s baby and our household chores.

Other persons who have assisted with tasks such as translations, surveys and checking up on facts have been Augustin Ouattara and Madjaharata Millogo from Bala, and Marie Jeanne Sanou (†), Denis Batienon and Lassina Millogo from Bobo-Dioulasso. Denis was also my Jula teacher and Lassina did a great job translating/transcribing my taped interviews.

In Bobo-Dioulasso I was fortunate to have a base in Esther Schelleken’s and Martin Leake’s villa. Hardly knowing me Esther offered me a room for my visits in town. After some time, another field working researcher, Leslie Gray, joined us. Together we formed an international and fluid living commune. While three of us were constantly arriving and departing, Esther was our fixed point and helped us out with all kinds of practicalities. We had a great time together!
On my second field trip to Burkina Faso I was again fortunate. Thanks to a former colleague, Vincent Kaboré, I could use his house in Bobo-Dioulasso as my town base.

Thinking of my contacts in Bobo-Dioulasso I must mention the outstanding librarian at the CESAO (Centre d'Etudes Economiques et Sociales de l'Afrique de l'Ouest). After my first visits he knew what kind of documents would interest me, and he always suggested relevant material before I had even asked for it! Many thanks also to the helpful staff I met in offices such as the research programme Programme Coton at INERA (Institut d’Etudes et de Recherches Agricoles), the centre for agro-pastoral promotion CRPA (Centre Régional de Promotion Agro-Pastorale), the cotton company Sofitex (Société Burkinabè des Fibres Textile) and the participatory land management programme PNGT (Programme Nationale de Gestion Terroirs). They were generous with their time and helped me access documents which otherwise would have been difficult to get.

I am also grateful to the staff of the antenna of the French research institute Orstom (Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer) in Bobo-Dioulasso for their moral, practical and economic support! I am especially indebted to George Serpantie, for including me in the research programme about fallows, Programme Jachère, which he coordinated and to Ann Fournier, Saïbou Nignan and Djimadoum Madibaye, who identified and gave me the scientific names for the plant specimens which I brought back from Bala.

In Burkina Faso I was affiliated to the Department of Sociology at the University of Ouagadougou. Even though I never managed to give the promised seminar, I benefitted from the mentorship of my old friend, sociologist Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo. At the University of Ouagadougou, I also got in touch with linguist Jean François Dafrasi Sanou who introduced me to Bobo spelling and helped me by transcribing some Bobo plant names from tape recordings.

In Sweden, at the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University, I am grateful to all my supervisors, Gudrun Dahl who taught me how to write a project application, Britt-Marie Thurén who supervised me at a distance during fieldwork, Gudrun Dahl (again) who coached me through my application for continued funding, and Don Kulick who lead me through most of the arduous writing process and who continued to supervise me long after he had left Stockholm University. Last, but not least, kudos to my last supervisors Mark Graham and Paula Uimonen for finally pushing me over the last hurdles of the writing process!

In the beginning of my PhD studies, while I was preparing my research project, I benefitted from a temporary employment as a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala. I learned much from the cross-disciplinary and intellectually stimulating environment. Thank you Eva Evers Rosander, who brought me there!
At my home department, I profited from discussions and comments on drafts by the group of PhD students under Don Kulick’s supervision: Jónína Einarsdottír, Fanny Ambjörnsson, Anna Gavanas, Lena Gemzöe, Thaïs Machado Borges, Ann Frisell Ellburg, Örjan Bartholdsson and Åse Ottosson. Thank’s for your friendship and encouragement!

Thanks also to the members of the seminar series at our department, the Gender Theoretical Seminar, the UTVID-seminar (Development as Ideology and Folk Model) and the Anthropology of the Market Seminar for reading tips and inspiring discussions.

In 1999 I was fortunate to participate in the ESTER seminar (The European Graduate School for Training in Economic and Social Historical Research) in Uppsala, having “Gender, property, and economic development” as its theme. Thanks to Maria Ågren for organizing the seminar and to the participants for valuable comments on an early paper.

In 2007 I participated in the conference “Beer in Africa” which took place in Leuven, Belgium. Thanks to Steven Van Wolputte and Mattia Fumanti for organizing it and thereafter editing the book with the same name in which I had the privilege to contribute a chapter.

Throughout the years I have benefitted from exchanging with researchers from different disciplines and universities: Mahir Şaul, Leslie Gray and Michael Kevane in the US, Dorte Thorsen and Michael Warner (†) in GB, Eva Evers Rosander and Sten Hagberg in Uppsala, and Roujman Shahbazian in Stockholm. I have also had fruitful exchanges with friends who have long experience of working as consultants on gender in Burkina Faso, Inge Schou and Géke Appeldoorn.

A few persons have read the entire manuscript. Eva Połuha did a thoroughgoing work going through the entire manuscript at an early stage. Lena Gemzöe was a brilliant opposer at my final seminar and proposed a few structural changes which made my argument come out more clearly. Finally, Gunilla Bjerén did the final reading before the thesis could be admitted for defence. Thanks also to Abigail Humphries Robertson who, with short notice, has proof-read the manuscript and corrected my English.

My friend Tove Gustafsson Sätter has contributed by making the lovely front cover illustration.

Even though all the above-mentioned persons have contributed to this project, any shortcomings are my own responsibility!

I am grateful to the Department of Social Anthropology and its entire staff for support during different stages of this undertaking.

Thanks also to my present employer, the Department for Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender studies at Stockholm University, where I work as a course administrator, for employing me and then allowing me to take repeated leaves to finalize my thesis. Thanks to my colleagues for their understanding!
My thoughts also go to my late uncle Hajo Tameling who, made it possible for me to take the necessary leaves!

My close family has lived with this project for three decades now. It has become part and parcel of our life together, affected holidays and family gatherings. Its elusive finalization has been postponed so often that it became unreal. To my life companion Håkan Hannebo, my sisters Gudrun and Hillevi Helmfrid and my parents Antje and Staffan Helmfrid (†), thanks for your patience and support!

This research project has received its main funding from Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). Additional grants have been accorded by the Nordic Africa Institute, the Programme Jachère at Orstom (Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer, later renamed IRD), Svenska Sällskapet för Antropologi och Geografi (SSAG) and Helge Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse.
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A note on language and spelling

When I have written words in the local languages Bɔbɔ (commonly written Bobo) and Jula (Dioula in French and Dyula in English) I have tried to follow the spelling standards agreed upon by the National Sub-Commissions for these languages in Burkina Faso.\footnote{Their names are \textit{Sous-Commission Nationale de la Langue Bobo} and \textit{Sous-Commission de la langue Jula de la Commission Nationale des Langues.}} While Jula has a history of being taught in alphabetization classes, this is not the case for Bɔbɔ. For Bɔbɔ there existed at the time of my fieldwork an alphabet agreed upon, but very little learning material, except for a dictionary following an older spelling standard (Le Bris and Prost 1981). Moreover, the convention for Bɔbɔ spelling stipulated that the dialect spoken in and around the town Bobo-Dioulasso, Syada, should be the standard. In this thesis I have, however, tried to spell words as the autochthonous of Bala pronounced them. Their dialect is classified as Soxokire (Sogokire) (Le Moal 1980:81) even though people in Bala did not identify themselves with this label meaning “villages in the bush”.

In some cases, I have deviated from the national spelling conventions, for example when I quote concepts from the ethnographic literature (e.g. from Le Moal 1980). I have also employed French spelling for names of people. The Bɔbɔ and Jula alphabets build on the Latin and draw on the phonetic alphabet for certain letters. Both are tonal languages, but a simplified version without tonality markers has been taught in Jula alphabetization classes. I have aligned myself to this simplified practice without tonality markers.

The seven vowels can be nasalized through the addition of n, hence \textit{an}, \textit{en}, \textit{ɛn}, \textit{in}, \textit{on}, \textit{ɔn}, \textit{un}. The doubling of consonant after a short vowel is not practiced. Instead vowels are doubled to indicate length, as in the Jula word \textit{baara} (work).

The Bɔbɔ alphabet uses the same letters as above, but has added a few specific ones, of which I only use kp (counting as one letter), as in \textit{kpin} (beer).
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<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>As in “have”</td>
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<td>b</td>
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<td>c</td>
<td>ʧ</td>
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1. Introduction

“If a woman has worked on the farm during the entire season…. If she has not undertaken any other activity, wouldn’t it be normal that she’d be given something?” “Please, ask tubabu muso (white woman)!”, insisted the young woman to my male translator, who seemed embarrassed.

We had come to this woman’s cabaret (beer-sale) for an interview about her brewing business, when she posed this question in a loud voice. The men who were drinking in her courtyard now looked curiously at me. I do not remember what I answered, but I felt like I was becoming a pawn in an intra-household argument about the distribution of farm incomes. During my stay in Bala I learnt that this was a common topic for disputes during the post-harvest period.

Farmers in West Africa have been growing cotton for the world market since the early 1900s and despite some ups and downs, production has increased steadily. Occasionally, these cotton farmers make headlines in international media. Such was the case in 2003 when Burkina Faso, together with other cotton exporting West African countries, unsuccessfully lobbied for the US to stop subsidising its own cotton farmers, thereby dumping the world market price. Another occasion was in 2016 when the main actors of Burkina Faso’s cotton sector decided to stop collaborating with the agrochemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation Monsanto, which had provided transgenic cotton for the Burkinabe farmers to grow. At first, the new cotton had seemed promising because it required less insecticide spraying, thus saving labour and reducing health and environmental hazards. But when it turned out that transgenic cotton produced less in quantity and that its fibres were of lower quality, resulting in lower payment on the world market, the partnership came to an end (Dowd-Uribe and Schnurr 2016).

When looking at global commodity production from a macro perspective, it is tempting to jump to simple conclusions about who are the underdogs and how injustices can be corrected. However, invisible from the macro perspective are relations of power and inequality that operate at each level of the commodity chain. Hence, to understand how global capitalism affects people, one also must look closely at what happens at the micro level.

This thesis interrogates domestic economies of cotton farmers in Burkina Faso from a gender perspective. It draws on fieldwork undertaken in the cotton growing village of Bala in Burkina Faso in the mid-1990s. This was shortly after the 50 per cent devaluation of the West African CFA franc,
which made West African cotton attractive on the world market and boosted its production, but before the neo-liberal restructuring of the cotton sector, which in the long run disadvantaged smaller producers and amplified economic stratification. Over time, the expansion of cotton farming has resulted in environmental degradation and a shortage of arable land, which has further disadvantaged poorer farmers (Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013, Gray, Dowd-Uribe and Kaminski 2018). Even so, cotton continues to be Burkina Faso’s main agricultural export product, the second largest export product after gold. Since 2003 Burkina Faso has, almost every year, ranked as the number one cotton exporting country in Africa (Simoes and Hidalgo 2011).

As much as the context of Burkinabe cotton farming has undergone changes since the mid-1990s when the empirical material of this study was collected, this thesis has relevance beyond its historic contribution to ethnographic studies of West African cotton farming. Focusing as it does on the internal organization of the domestic economies of farmers, with special attention to gendered and other intersecting power relations, it provides essential background knowledge, empirical as well as theoretical, for understanding the livelihoods of contemporary cotton farmers.

Even though farmers in the West African cotton zone have been exposed to the same broad political and economic processes, each village has its own micro-history, its specific cultural heritage and power structures shaping men’s and women’s modes of reacting to those macro processes. In that respect, this study offers a micro-level analysis of farming economies in the village of Bala, as they were played out in the mid-1990s, with a bias towards the Bobo (Bɔbɔ, plur. Bɔbɔi), the village’s autochthonous majority population.

Aim and relevance of the study

The overall aim of this study has been to interrogate female agency in the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farming. More specifically, the thesis attempts to answer the following interrelated research questions: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship?

In addition to its theoretical contribution to economic anthropology, this dissertation offers results of high relevance to development economists, not least since ongoing efforts to develop Africa’s agricultural potential requires a more thorough understanding of the domestic economies of farmers. Building on key debates in feminist anthropology, the elaboration of women’s
agency is also relevant for scholars and practitioners in global development, especially now that women’s empowerment is high on the agenda.

By combining economic and feminist anthropology, the present study contributes to recent initiatives to reintroduce gender into the study of global commodity chains, as it was originally conceived within the world-systems perspective, and to bring the study of households back on to the research agenda (Dunaway 2013, 2014). As this dissertation will show, ethnographic studies of local economies are essential to an understanding of the micro effects of global processes - and their impact on gender and power.

Feminist anthropology, economics and the household

Anthropological studies from West Africa have influenced theoretical discussions about how to conceptualize the household, in anthropology as well as economics, since the late 1970s. Hence, the present study inscribes itself in a tradition which has been important in the theoretical development of anthropology (Moore 1988:42ff). Even though the anthropological interest in households has faded, and mainstream economics has moved to large-scale manipulation of decontextualized numerical data (cf. Hart 1995, 1997), there are signs of a renewed interest among development economists for the kind of empirical knowledge that anthropologists can provide (Duflo and Udry 2004:33, Basu 2006:577-578).

The anthropological interest in households, their social structure, the ways production and reproduction were organized, domestic power relations and their interaction with capitalist power relations, coincided in the late 1970s with a Marxist trend in anthropology and with the emergence of feminist anthropology as a sub-discipline. Two books were particularly influential and both relied on empirical material from African farming societies: Marxist anthropologist Claude Meillassoux’s Maiden, Meal and Money (Meillassoux 1981) and agricultural economist Ester Boserup’s Woman’s Role in Economic Development (Boserup 1970).

Meillassoux theorized West African farming societies and argued that because labour was a crucial means of production, male gerontocracy based itself on the control over marriageable women. When farmers turned to cash-cropping for the world market, colonial and post-colonial capitalism came to rely on local pre-capitalist power structures to access cheap labour for cheap products. The essence of his argument was that women’s subordination in pre-capitalist societies served the interest of colonial and post-colonial capitalism. Even though the core of this argument resonates well with more recent feminist concerns about the exploitation of women’s unpaid work under global capitalism (e.g. Dunaway 2013), Meillassoux was at that time criticized by feminist anthropologists for disregarding women’s roles in production (Moore 1988:49-54).
By contrast, Boserup’s *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (1970) was positively received by feminists across social and economic disciplines. She highlighted African women’s heavy involvement in farm work and showed that they could even be farmers in their own right, cultivating their own field and taking all decisions regarding choice of crop, the allocation of labour and utilization of the harvest. Boserup claimed that African women (in comparison with Asian women) were powerful due to their control over productive resources. Capitalist modernization threatened to undermine their position, Boserup argued. Anthropologists nuanced Boserup’s rather stereotypical description of African farming and pointed to the many variants of gendered farming systems and to the changes which these had undergone since the early days of colonialism (Whitehead 1990, Guyer 1991, Bryceson 1995). They showed that not everywhere were women farming on their own account and that in some societies women did not farm at all. In societies where farming engaged both men and women, the gender division of labour was either according to work tasks, as commonly in the coarse grain belt of inland West Africa, or according to crops, a situation which was more common in coastal West Africa. The introduction of new crops, production for the market and labour migration had, since the early days of colonialism, produced changes in African farming systems and the implications for women were quite different in different contexts.

Throughout the 1980s feminist anthropologists engaged in lively cross-disciplinary exchanges about the household concept and its use within social and economic disciplines (Young, Wolkowitz and McCullagh 1981, Moolck 1986, Guyer and Peters 1987, Dwyer and Bruce 1988). These debates involved anthropologists, sociologists, economists and farming systems researchers. Their shared undertaking was to explore how intra-household processes interacted with economic and political processes on the macro level and to understand their impact on women.

Women’s own-account farming in some parts of Africa was one of the parameters which was difficult to accommodate within the conventional definition of a ‘peasant household’ as a unit for joint production and consumption and cohabitation. The separateness of a woman’s budgets from that of her husband’s extended beyond farming different plots, that is women who engaged in petty commodity production and trade also managed these incomes separately and outside their husbands’ control. As anthropologist Jack Goody (1976) demonstrated, it was rare in African societies that spouses held common property. Various studies have described African domestic economies as being subdivided into semi-autonomous male and female “accounting units”\(^2\) with separate income and expense streams (Abu 1983,

\(^2\) The expression, commonly employed by feminist economists, has been described as: “Separate accounting units means that the wife and husband may draw separate personal incomes
Economic relations between spouses were thus characterized by the exchange of goods and services and by bargaining, rather than by altruistic pooling, as presumed by economic theory. The concept of “intra-household bargaining” became pivotal in the development of household economic theories.

Spouses could more easily be imagined as having separate and conflicting interests in the African setting where they had separate budgets, compared to the European/American context where spouses were expected to have a joint economy. But, as anthropologist Ann Whitehead (1984 [1981]) demonstrated comparing a Ghanaian case with British cases, the same kind of processes were at stake, only that different forms of “conjugal contracts” entailed different conflicts of interest between husbands and wives. Whitehead’s term “conjugal contract”, a shorthand for “the terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes, and services, including labour, within the household” (Whitehead 1984 [1981]:93) became part of the terminology in which intra-household relations were discussed.

The separateness of spouses’ budgets was not the only aspect which made it difficult to apply the conventional household concept to African domestic units. Even in societies where the units of production, consumption, accumulation and cohabitation neatly coincided, the domestic units rarely corresponded to a western type of monogamous conjugal household, but were more often three generational clusters of conjugal units, monogynous as well as polygynous (Guyer 1981, Whitehead 1984 [1981]).

Many definitions of the household include the aspect of headship (Locoh 1997:16, Niehof 2011). A household is thus defined as a group of persons who recognise a common “head”. The idea that a household cannot exist without a “head”, a person representing the household, and that this person normally is male, is a reminiscent of early European census-taking. As Olivia Harris pointed out, the authority of the household head is often taken for granted, yet “both the source, the content and the effectivity of that authority must be investigated” (Harris 1981:147-148). Moreover, including the parameter of headship in definitions of “household” does not solve the problem of how to delimit the household when domestic units are nested, that is larger groupings encompassing smaller, each unit recognizing a person as its “head”. Ekejiuba (1995) launched the concept of “hearth-hold” to stand for the group of persons a woman is in charge of feeding. Hearth-holds are headed by women and men are consuming members in their wives’ hearth-holds. However, even the concept of “hearth-hold” is not self-evident and its relation to other domestic units should be investigated empirically.

from agriculture and associated activities to meet separate financial obligations” (Palmer 1991:21). Separate accounting units are particularly prevalent in West Africa.
For feminist anthropologists, questioning the household concept and the implicit assumptions underlying it was as much directed to mainstream anthropology as it was a critique of economic theory. A core assumption within both disciplines was that relations within households were based on an altruistic pooling of resources, and thus inherently different from relations outside the household, assumed to be based on self-interested exchange. Feminist economist Nancy Folbre, in a much quoted passage, comments that “it is somewhat inconsistent to suggest that individuals who are entirely selfish in the market (…) are entirely ‘selfless’ within the family” and she points to the paradoxical juxtaposition within economics of “naked self-interest that presumably motivates efficient allocation of market resources and a perfect altruism that presumably motivates equitable allocation of family resources.” (Folbre 1986:247). The cross-disciplinary feminist critique of the household resulted in a “rapprochement between feminist theorizing and mainstream anthropology and economics”, manifested in a “view of the household which sees it as a locus of competing interests, rights, obligations and resources, where household members are often involved in bargaining, negotiation and even conflict” (Moore 1994:87).

During the 1980s, some economists had turned to game theory to develop various politicized concepts of the household, under the label “bargaining models,” further subdivided into “cooperative” and “non-cooperative”. These models drew on insights from cross-disciplinary feminist discussions about power relations in households and were developed specifically in reaction to Gary Becker’s New Household Economic Theory (Becker 1991). Bargaining models abandoned Becker’s idea of the household head’s “benevolent dictatorship” and imagined instead decisions to result from intra-household bargaining. The “cooperative” models assumed that bargaining would lead to the best possible solution for the parties involved and for the household as a whole, while the “non-cooperative” models were based on the understanding that family life was characterized by “asymmetric information, enforcement problems and inefficiency” (Katz 1997:34).

The cross-disciplinary discussions on intra-household bargaining peaked in the mid-1990s, at the time of my fieldwork. The field of discussion was broadened to include issues such as spouses’ perceptions of each other’s needs and contributions (Sen 1990, see also Haddad, Hoddinott and Alderman 1997b:5), gendered interest coalitions inside and outside the

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3 Olivia Harris (1981) traces the origins of this dualist thinking to Chayanov, the Russian agrarian economist of the early twentieth century, but Nancy Folbre (1986:249) suggests its origins to be with Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century founding father of liberal economics.


5 Becker published articles on this topic already in the 1970, but his major work “A Treatise on the Family” was published in 1981, with a second expanded edition in 1991.
household (Folbre 1997), the influence of extra-household conditions on women’s intra-household bargaining power (Agarwal 1997, Kevane 2000), how local and supra-local discourses were drawn upon as resources in intra-household bargaining (Moore 1994), and how inequalities in voice and exit options were created and maintained (Katz 1997). Unsolved problems that crystallized from the critique of Becker’s “unitary household model” and in response to the various “bargaining models” were: (i) how to capture complex household organizations, (ii) how to account for differences in household members preferences and bargaining powers, and (iii) how to deal with the fact that household members have joint as well as competing interests.

The increasing complexity of household models provoked a counter reaction among neo-classical economists. Returning to “methodological individualism” they claimed that household behaviour was the aggregate of individual preferences. Their approach, which goes under the label “collective model” is a priori agnostic about relations within households and presumes that such information can be extracted from large-scale survey data focusing on individuals (cf. Hart 1995, 1997, Xu 2007). The collective turn made Gillian Hart conclude that household economic theory had reached “the limits of economism”. She suggested that attention should instead be paid to issues of power and subjectivity (Hart 1997).

While some anthropologists have continued to investigate household economics, the field is dominated by economists, since anthropological interest in these matters faded in the early 1990s, as a consequence of the postmodernist turn and the decline of the Marxist paradigm. Those who continued to care for these issues, such as Ann Whitehead (1990, 1998, 2001), Jane Guyer (1997), Bridget O’Laughlin (2007) and Henrietta Moore (1992), came to play the role of critical voices on a stage set and dominated by economists.

However, many of the insights from the early debates are still relevant, particularly regarding the variability of household and family forms and the conventions structuring members’ rights and responsibilities towards each other and towards the domestic unit. These insights deserve to be re-actualized and to be enriched by a contemporary understanding of agency.

Female agency, male authority and domestic units

A dilemma for feminist social science has been how to talk about women’s willingness and ability to act without at the same time minimizing the power relations that constrain them (Fraser 1992, Dahl 2009). Studies of women and gender in Sub-Saharan Africa have oscillated between depicting women either as oppressed beasts of burden or as assertive and self-reliant heroines, and gender relations as either being oppressive or complementary (Imam 1997, Sow 1997, Cornwall 2005). For instance, scholars have described African cultural models of gender as corporate and dual-sex/complementary,
emphasizing how gender roles are determined by membership in corporate
groups, such as family and lineage, while relations between men and women
are complementary, even if not symmetrical (Mikell 1997). Gender should
also be appreciated in relation to shifting identity locations, intersecting with
lineage, seniority and motherhood (Nzegwu 2006). Since my empirical data
captures multi-conjugal and multi-generational households in Burkina Faso,
the complementary relationality and dynamic intersectionality of gender
makes it particularly challenging to pinpoint female agency in this study.

In economics and much of the social sciences the concept of “agency”
carries a connotation of autonomous individuals standing up to the con-
straints of society, as phrased in the Dictionary of the Social Sciences:
“agency refers to the ability of actors to operate independently of the deter-
mining constraints of social structure” (Calhoun 2002:7-8). From an anthro-
pological perspective, the idea of autonomous individuals existing outside
and in opposition to social structure is not tenable. Even more problematic is
the theory of “rational choice” on which much of the economics and social
science theorizing on agency draws.

Moreover, as pointed out by anthropologist Gudrun Dahl (2009), the
agency concept has taken on moral connotations, implying that activity is
superior to passivity, resistance superior to endurance and victimhood a trait
of character rather than the outcome of forces outside a person’s control (see
also Burkitt 2016:329). Dahl observes that authors differ on whether they
read agency as intentional acts or as the outcome of these acts. “We [the
researchers] must make clear distinctions between agency in the sense of ef-
cient impact and in the sense of willingness-to-act, not to reread the ef-
fects of constraints as individual shortcomings of character” (Dahl
2009:405).

To avoid assumptions about individualism, rationality and the moral su-
periority of action, which underlie economic models of households, I take
the anthropological definition proposed by Laura Ahearn as a point of depar-
ture: “Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn
2001:112). The definition is left broad intentionally, and Ahearn is more
explicit in specifying how agency should not be understood, than on pinning
down what it is: agency should not be treated as “free will” or “resistance”
(p. 130). Moreover, all humans have agency, not in different quantities but in
different, culturally constructed ways. She invites anthropologists to investi-
gate different modes of agency, while at the same time recognizing that mul-
tiple types can be exercised within any given action.

For anthropologist Sherry Ortner, a practice theorist, it is important to dif-
ferentiate agency from routine practices, and she conceives of agency as
having two interconnected fields of meaning. In one field “agency is about
intentionality and the pursuit of (culturally defined) projects. In the other
field of meaning agency is about acting within relations of social inequality,
asymmetry and force.” (Ortner 2006:139). The two fields are interrelated in
the sense that actors often employ domination or resistance in the pursuit of their “projects”. Inspired by Bourdieu’s conceptualization of strategies, Ortn-ner specifies that intentions need not always be consciously reflected upon. Even un-reflected habitual acts can be purposeful and count as agency. Un-like Ahearn, Ortnner conceives of agency as something some persons can have more of than others, due to unequal power relations (Ortnner 2006:151). She is less clear about how she conceives of projects. The parenthesis in her expression “(culturally defined) projects” suggests that anything which is considered as worth striving for in the local society counts as a project. Ortner’s distinction between “agency of (culturally defined) projects” and “agency of power” is useful for reflecting on why some acts make a greater impact than others.

In development cooperation women’s agency has ranked high on the agenda since the publication of the World Bank’s World Development Report 2012, Gender Equality and Development, and the Bank has made commendable efforts to refine concepts and methods to make them applicable for the empowerment of women worldwide (e.g. Boudet et al. 2013, Klugman et al. 2014, Donald et al. 2017). This corpus of literature draws on works by development economists Amartya Sen and Naila Kabeer to define agency as “the ability to define one’s goals and act on them” (Boudet et al. 2013:22, Klugman et al. 2014:3). The definition resembles Ortnner’s: agency is something which a person can have much or little of, it is important to differentiate agency from routine behaviour, and the projects that people strive for are culturally defined. However, the World Bank literature goes to great lengths to pinpoint what kind of agency counts and what doesn’t, with regard to women’s empowerment and their ability to make strategic life decisions (Boudet et al. 2013:72). The aim is to identify measurable indicators that can be compared worldwide. There is a risk that such approaches miss much of what women actually do, particularly their more “hidden practices”, and what sense their actions make to them in the local context. From an anthropological point of view, it is also problematic that agency is conceived as a project for autonomous individuals, especially when applied in cultural contexts where personhood is embedded in relations of kin, family and house-hold. In fact, the concepts autonomy and empowerment are often employed interchangeably. In short, an agency concept which takes autonomous individuals as the ideal and does not consider women’s unpaid activities as manifestations of agency is likely to miss both what women strive for and how they are actually doing it.

I have, therefore, chosen not to follow that path, but instead taken hold of Ahearn’s idea that agency can exist in different modes. One such mode is “encompassed agency” introduced by Holly Wardlow to capture “actions that produce effects, but effects whose ends are beyond the individual’s actions and for a wider purpose” (Wardlow 2006:13). A wider purpose can for example be the benefit of the household or lineage corporation. The idea of
"encompassed agency" resolves the dilemma of how to conceive of female agency within family and kinship structures under male authority, since it recognizes women’s willingness and ability to act without minimizing or disregarding structures of inequality and power. A similar concept is Rosalind Shaw’s “subsumed agency”. In her study from the Temne in Sierra Leone she suggests that the most powerful acts are those performed indirectly and often invisibly (Shaw 2000).

As I will show, the related notions of “encompassed” (Wardlow 2006) or “subsumed” (Shaw 2000) agency are applicable to the agency that women in Bala exercised as members of household and farming units. The organizational structure and material situation of their farming unit set the conditions for women’s ability to act. They may feel joy and satisfaction in the performance of work-tasks which benefit others than themselves, but they also have expectations of being cared for to some extent. Even though women are in a subordinate position, their actions have effects which contribute to enhance or to undermine the social and economic success of their farming unit and its male head. For women, being “encompassed” by a farming unit, entails constraints as well as options, subordination as well as power, the possibility of being exploited as well as the entitlement to material and immaterial benefits. In addition, women act as individuals in order to realize personal projects. To do so they draw on their dyadic relations with other persons within or outside their domestic unit, that is they exercise what I call “relational agency”. The concept “relational agency” exists in social theory and refers to the idea that actors produce social structure through interaction (Burkitt 2016). In that sense all agency is inherently relational. However, I use the concept in a narrower sense, as a mode of agency among others. Women (and men) can expand their scope for action, enhance their capacity to realise their own projects through the skilful management of relations. In that sense relations become instrumental to agency. It is through membership in kinship groups and domestic units that women have access to relations which they can nurture for relational agency.

These modes of agency, “encompassed”/“subsumed” and “relational”, are interconnected and conditioned by membership in a domestic unit. If one wants to understand women’s agency in economic matters one should, therefore, begin with understanding the organization and functioning of the domestic economy.

Fieldwork and methodology

The empirical material for this study was collected during a period from 1995 to 1998. The main fieldwork was conducted in 1995-96, during a total timespan of 1 ½ years, of which I spent roughly half the time in the village Bala and the rest in the town Bobo-Dioulasso. I came back for a complemen-
tary three months sojourn in 1998. In 2003 and 2005, an assignment to write and present a gender profile for Burkina Faso (Helmfrid 2004), gave me the opportunity to visit Bala again, and I had some of my earlier observations confirmed. The visits were, however, too short for new investigations; hence, this study refers mainly to material collected from 1995 to 1998.

The background for my research interest and choice of fieldwork location was that in the late 1980s I had spent four years living and working in Bobo-Dioulasso, from where I coordinated a development project for the dissemination of fuel-saving cooking stoves. The project’s main target group had been women and I had become interested in their economic activities, their know-how and the seeming autonomy with which women managed their productive activities. Touring in the villages, I had also become fascinated by the expansive cotton sector and the relative richness encountered in cotton farming villages. By a lucky coincidence, the Swedish International Development Authority\(^6\) (Sida) offered research funds for gender research in developing countries, and this is how my research project was conceived.

My theoretical framework and research methodology evolved over time and I cannot claim that from the beginning there was a clear linkage between the topic, the methods and the methodology, which has become an ideal model for anthropology more recently (Davies 2008:46ff). I started my PhD studies in 1990 with a vague interest in gender, which was one of the profile areas of the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. My interest in material matters, such as production and distribution, however, did not fit in well with the postmodern vogue of the time, but was grounded in the anthropology of the 1970s, which was when I did my basic education. Hence, I started this research with one leg in the anthropology of the 1970s and the other in postmodern self-reflexivity with its attention to epistemological issues. Despite many interesting texts and seminar discussions, this combination did not make me well prepared for fieldwork. My main source of inspiration was instead Gregory and Altman’s (1989) *Observing the Economy*, a down-to-earth book about how anthropologists can study the economy, with an emphasis on counting and measuring. I took to the field with a litre measure, a spring balance and a long measuring tape. However, I found many of the proposed methods quite obtrusive and the book did not offer much guidance on how to prioritize among the various suggestions for measurement, according to time and other practical limitations. In the end I developed my own methods along the way.

This study is neither a village ethnography in the sense of describing a circumscribed or isolated unit nor is it a holistic description of an ethnic group. Instead, the choice of locating the fieldwork in a village is the logical consequence of the research topic (Davies 2008:39ff). My choice fell on a village in Burkina Faso due to my previous experiences, but the study could

\(^6\) Sida changed its name in 1995 to Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.
just as well have been undertaken in any of the neighbouring countries. I
could have extended the study to cover several villages, but that would have
entailed logistical difficulties of transportation and reduced opportunities to
create rapport. I chose Bala because it was far enough from town to present
the characteristics of a rural economy; limited market opportunities, limited
income sources for women and difficulties of transportation due to a bad
road. But the village was also close enough to town to be accessible in half a
day’s travel by bush-taxi. Moreover, the national research council Centre
National pour la Recherche Scientifique et Technique (CNRST) had a guest-
house there, which I thought could be useful. The existence of a drilled well
with clean water and a health care centre, made Bala suitable as a fieldwork
location. Finally, the local forester was an ex-colleague from the stove pro-
ject, hence I knew a person who could introduce me to the villagers.

Upon arrival in Burkina Faso in February 1995, I started with a Jula lan-
guage course in Bobo-Dioulasso and prepared for fieldwork. My network of
friends and ex-colleagues was of significant help. One of the former stove
project’s female extension workers, Mariam Ouattara, accepted an invitation
to move with me to the village as my assistant. Her experience of rural life
proved invaluable. With previous work experience from a cotton farming
village, she was an ideal discussion partner throughout fieldwork. She was
not only my translator; she also conducted interviews and took notes on ob-
servations, and I routinely asked her to read and comment on notes that I
made.

In Bala we rented a house from one of the farmers. It was a stone-house
with iron-sheet roof and a cement floor and thereby above average standard.
With us lived a teenage girl from town, hired to take care of Mariam’s eight-
month-old baby boy and do our household chores. During the hottest months
our house was little more than a storage facility and we lived our lives under
the mango tree in our landlord’s courtyard. At that time, it was still uncom-
mon in Bala that houses were rented,7 and the relationship into which we
entered was unusual both for me and for our landlord and his family. As
guests we were under his tutorship and it was an advantage for us to be in-
cluded in this household’s network. But it was also necessary for us to main-
tain a minimum of autonomy for our movements and encounters in the vil-
lage and I, therefore, found it useful to maintain a clear distinction between
work time and leisure time.

As my interest was in resource flows within domestic units, my plan for
the fieldwork had been to start with collecting detailed expense and income
data from all individuals of a few selected farming units to establish house-
hold budgets (see appendix for a detailed description). For the rest I would
rely on participant observation and improvise methods for a more targeted

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7 This changed shortly thereafter when a secondary school was built close to the village and
its teachers and some of its students rented rooms with families.
collection of data to follow up on specific themes as they emerged during the fieldwork. Improvisation started shortly after arrival. It was the end of April; the period of traditional feasts was drawing towards its close and the farming season was about to start. Soon we found ourselves alone in the village during daytime and nobody had time for interviews. So, our principal activity became to visit the farms of our sample families. Many farms were far from the village, but two mopeds facilitated our movements. On the farm we would have somebody respond to a few questions such as their intentions for this year’s farming, the present situation, and details about the work they were doing. We would, thereafter, lend a hand with the work during a few hours and at midday return home to rest and write down what we had learned. Except for recurrent trips to town for errands and relaxation, this was how we spent most of the farming season, from June to January. In town I also visited the regional offices of public services and development projects, to collect statistics and various other documents. I also explored the rich library at the CESAO (Centre d’Études Économiques et Sociales de l’Afrique de l’Ouest).

It was not until after the harvest, towards the end of my main fieldwork period that people agreed to sit down for lengthy interviews. But this was also the time for socializing, attending feasts, marriages and funeral ceremonies, visiting other villages and drinking beer. The village was thriving with life and did not pause for me to capture it in my notebooks. For me it was a constant dilemma, how to participate in the life and to document it at the same time. Except for interviews, I generally avoided taking notes in public and, therefore, had to find time afterwards to write down my observations as I remembered them. To get as much as possible done during the last months, I instructed Mariam to work independently and let myself be assisted by French-speaking villagers for translations and surveys. With their help, I had all the beer brewing women surveyed and completed the survey with in-depth interviews. I also had the dealers at the Sunday market surveyed.

While in Burkina Faso I became affiliated to a multi-disciplinary research programme about fallows, Programme Jachère, coordinated from the Bobo-Dioulasso office of Orstom, the French institute for overseas research (later renamed IDR). I received a grant from this programme to investigate women’s use of wild plants, which made it possible for me to prolong my stay in Burkina Faso. The information proved relevant for the overall theme of my study and constitutes the core of chapter seven. The practical procedure of identifying plants involved talking with women about what plants they used, writing down the names in Bobo, having somebody to show me the plant in the bush, collecting a specimen, pressing it, taking these specimens to the botanists at Orstom for identification, double-checking all the unclear cases, and finally getting help to harmonize my spelling of Bobo names.

The principal languages through which I communicated with the villagers were French and Jula. Since colonial times, French has been taught in
schools and employed by the administration. Jula is a trader’s language, a *lingua franca* understood throughout western Burkina Faso and in the neighbouring countries. In a multi-language setting such as Bala (like other villages of the region), the *lingua franca* seemed most useful to learn, because I wanted to communicate with all the four language groups in the village (see Gregory and Altman 1989:12). My skills in Jula were only enough for simple conversations and to socialize but not sufficient for more profound exchanges. Therefore, most interviews were conducted through the intermediary of my assistant Mariam, who translated between Jula and French. A few villagers were sufficiently fluent in French so that I could converse directly with them. Most villagers spoke Bobo amongst themselves, a language which neither I nor Mariam understood. It was only towards the end of my sojourn that I came to know a young village woman who could assist me with translations. I also got in touch with a man in town who was able to translate tape recorded interviews from the local Bobo dialect to written French. These contacts made it possible for me to organize my work differently during my follow-up fieldwork in 1998.

When I came back to Bala for a sojourn of three months in 1998, I opted for the minimum of logistics; lodged in the CNRST guesthouse and employed French-speaking villagers, when needed. With assistants from the village, interviews could be undertaken in Bobo. I often conducted group interviews, to save time, and found that these were more likely to develop into a relaxed conversation than when I interviewed individuals. I taped the interviews and the oral translations were kept brief to speed up the conversation. The transcripts from the taped interviews gave me richer material than I could have produced with note taking.

Research ethics that guide ethnographic fieldwork underline that nobody should be the object of a study without being informed about its implications and consenting freely to it (Davies 2008:54). My introduction to the village of Bala was through the local forester. He presented me to the important elders, including the customary village chief and the custodian of the village shrine. I also met with the boards of the Village Association (of male farmers) and of the Women’s Association. They all welcomed me to stay in the village and undertake my study. To make my research topic comprehensible I explained that I wanted to understand their livelihoods and women’s contribution to the domestic economy in particular. There had been researchers in Bala before, but they usually made surveys with male household heads and did not live in the village. The women seemed pleased that I took an interest in their work tasks and even wanted to live in the village. When I had picked out the sample families that would constitute the core of my study, I approached their household heads to ask their permission. I did my best to explain the purpose of the study and what participation would entail for them. The individual members, if they had not been present at the first encounter, received the same explanations at the first interview. I did not
encourage them to refuse participation, but they had the possibility to opt out simply by refusing to be available for interviews. Two persons (from different families) did so. I am aware that I drew on existing power structures to enter into relationships with my interlocutors. However, this was a pragmatic approach, because there was no other way that I, as a European, could slip into village life and start interrogating people.

In anthropology the issue of informed consent is tricky when interlocutors live in a reality so different from ours that they have difficulties grasping the sense and consequences of participating in a study. Moreover, even when this is not the case, it is not possible to explain every aspect of a study, either for the risk of putting people off or because new aspects emerge as the study evolves (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:210-212). Did the villagers understand my explanations and grasp my intentions? Some probably did, others not. Even after more than a year in Bala, I received questions about the purpose of my stay. When I gave the usual explanation, they continued asking “Yes, you told us that, but what is the real purpose of you being here?”

Confidentiality was promised to all persons who were interviewed (Davies 2008:58). I have given them pseudonyms, even though some did not mind having their name in print. In some instances I abstain from biographical detail and use decontextualized anonymous quotes to impede identification. On the other hand, I do not hide the identity of the village, because for anyone familiar with the region, it is of interest to know where the study was undertaken. Moreover, Bala’s proximity to a national forest reserve, including a lake, makes it easily identifiable. Leaving out these details would have implied leaving out information of relevance for understanding the livelihoods of its inhabitants.

My field material falls into several categories. I had a binder for everything that concerned my case families. The material was sorted family wise and contained filled-in forms with basic data such as household composition and agricultural production figures, sketches of annual work schedules, notes from informal conversations and observations from our visits to their farm. In addition, I kept a chronological diary which contained a mixture of reporting the events of the day, capturing my own thoughts and ideas, and observations which did not relate directly to the case families. Moreover, I had survey material: one bunch of filled-in forms from interviews with beer brewing women and a smaller bunch with forms from a survey of market vendors. I also produced an herbarium, a collection of wild useful plants, which after identification I left at Orstom because it was too bulky to bring home. During my second visit I mainly produced taped interviews, and I have both the tapes and the written translations. To find my way through the mass of notes in different formats, I produced a simple index in word-format in which I assigned keywords to paragraphs, by which I then identified common and recurrent themes. Throughout my sojourns I took many photos. Except for social photographing, I documented work processes that I knew I would
write about. I also brought home a considerable amount of documents, such as policy documents, project reports, consultancy reports and student theses.

The purpose of the above description of my fieldwork, its conditions and methods, is to render the research process transparent and to provide a background to a discussion about reliability, validity and generalizability of this research (Davies 2008:95ff). While reliability refers to the likelihood that another researcher can repeat the research and come up with the same data, validity refers to the extent to which the research produces information that is correct. Anthropological studies are generally weak on reliability due to the difficulty of reproducing the same fieldwork. On the other hand, they are strong on validity because they combine methods and cross-check data from various sources. In my case, staying in the village for an extended period allowed me to cross-check interview data with observations and informal talk, to use interviews and informal talk to make sense of observations, to compare and complement my information from Bala with statistics, project reports and other printed sources. Throughout the writing process I constantly referred to other studies from the region to look for differences and similarities in relation to my own data and to help make sense of my data. Concerning generalizability, Davies points out that there are two forms of generalizations: empirical generalizations and theoretical inference. In the former a localized study is taken to say something about a wider region while in the second “the conclusions of ethnographic analysis are seen to be generalizable in the context of a particular theoretical debate” (Davies 2008:203). I would say that my study combines the two in the sense that I contribute to the understanding of the domestic economies of West African smallholder farmers, while my insights about processes and mechanisms are applicable to the wider region, even though empirical details will be different from one locality to the other and certainly undergo changes over time. Thus, I claim that my theoretical argument and empirical data are of interest even though time has passed and life in Bala has changed.

Burkina Faso in the West African cotton zone

Even though this study is based on fieldwork in one village in western Burkina Faso, it is instructive of the regional context of the West African cotton zone, covering western Burkina Faso, southern Mali and northern Côte d’Ivoire (Jonckers 1987, Schwartz 1993, Tersiguel 1995, Bassett 2002a). The region’s environmental conditions are suitable for rain-grown cotton; a thin savannah forest on light soils with an average annual rainfall

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8 Benin is also among the important cotton producing countries in West Africa, but in this thesis, I do not extend my argument to Benin, simply because I have not enough knowledge of the cultural and historical context of cotton farming in Benin.
around 1,000 mm. Even though the population is culturally diverse and consists of many different language groups, they share similarities regarding social and political organization, livelihood and world views. Moreover, the same languages are spoken on both sides of national borders.

Figure 1: Map of Burkina Faso with fieldwork village Bala

Even though cotton had been grown in West Africa since pre-colonial times, for local cloth production and long-distance trade, colonial and post-colonial interventions increased the scope and intensity of its cultivation. The aim of the colonial project to increase cotton production in West Africa was to provide raw material for the cotton mills in France. The French colonial administration employed both force and taxation, which created much resentment, and introduced new cotton varieties which were more labour intensive. The modest increase in cotton production that was achieved under colonialism was absorbed by an increased demand for cloth on local markets and very little was exported. Only from 1951 and onwards, did farmers start to volunteer to grow cotton as a means to earn money and a particular increase in production occurred during the 1970s. Behind this development was the organized extension programme of the French cotton company, the Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres Textiles (CFDT)
(Schwartz 1993, 1995, Bassett 2002a). The strategy of the French cotton company, which later was continued by national cotton companies of the independent countries, was to furnish a complete credit package of agricultural inputs, technology and extension services, together with a guaranteed market and fixed producer prices. Farmers who took the credit had no choice but to sell their harvest to the cotton company. The competing local market for the resale of cotton was thereby eliminated and exports increased. Through this approach, which geographer Thomas Bassett (2002a) has called “vertically integrated”, the national cotton companies of Francophone West Africa established themselves as monopsonies, that is state-owned monopolies. These countries have been able to maintain the vertically integrated character of their cotton sector, despite privatizations imposed by the structural adjustment programmes of the mid-1990s (Bassett 2008:41-42).

Soon after independence, the national economies of Burkina Faso and Mali became extremely dependent on cotton export, a dependence which still characterizes these countries. Even though the Côte d’Ivoire had a more diversified economy, it ranked in most years among the five top cotton producers in Africa (OECD/SWAC 2006:54, Simoes and Hidalgo 2011). Throughout the West African cotton zone the commercialization and mechanization of cotton farming has led to similar changes in the agricultural production process, regarding the division of labour and the social relations of production. In all societies, there has been a transition from farming being undertaken by “houses”, that is corporations with a lineage at its core, to smallholder farming units, often multi-generational and multi-conjugal, headed by the eldest male. Even though there were similarities across the region, there were also local and ethnic differences, particularly in the extent to which women engaged in farm work. In Bala, for example, the ethnic Jula and Marka drew on Islam to explain why women should not do farm work, while the ethnic Bobo and Mossi, even those who were Muslim, took pride in their woman-folk’s ability to work hard on the farm. These differences persisted even though all were engaged in cotton production. Cultural differences between groups living in similar socioeconomic circumstances should be understood against the backdrop of particular historical circumstances, power relations and politics of group belonging (see Amselle 1990), aspects that are outside the scope of the present study.

Generally, the post-colonial transformation of cotton production in Francophone West Africa has been considered a success (Şaul, Ouadba and Bognounou 2003, OECD/SWAC 2006, Somé 2010). Even though the profitability of this crop had its ups and downs, there was a steady increase in production. More and more farmers started to grow it, the areas planted with cotton expanded and export volumes increased. Commonly the success has been attributed to the cotton companies’ organized programme for reaching out to the farmers, but as Bassett has shown in his detailed historical account from Côte d’Ivoire, the farmers themselves played an active role. They adopted cotton farming but adapted it to their local circumstances (Bassett 2002a:155).

Since 1978, in Burkina Faso, Village Associations, Groupement Villageois (GV), had acted as intermediaries between cotton farmers and the credit institutions, such as the agricultural credits bank, Caisse National du Crédit Agricole (CNCA), the regional centre for agro-pastoral promotion, Centre Régional de Promotion Agro-Pastorale (CRPA), and the cotton company Société Burkinabè des Fibres Textile (Sofitex). Through the associations, farmers could get inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides on credit, which was then subtracted from the value of the cotton harvest that Sofitex purchased from the village. The association organized the sale of its members’ cotton to Sofitex, weighing and keeping records of how much each one had delivered. In compensation the Village Association received a percentage of the value of the village’s cotton sale. These overheads were generally invested in public infrastructure such as schools and healthcare centres.

In the early 1990s West African countries were put under pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to restructure and liberalize their economies, including the cotton sector, a process which was in its beginning at the time of my fieldwork. In the mid-1990s, Sofitex and the state authorities pointed to the malfunctioning of the Village Associations as a major obstacle to increased cotton production (Burkina Faso 1996). One set of problems had to do with lack of transparency and the suspicions resulting from it. As most farmers were illiterate, they were not able to control the accounts of credits and cotton sales. Another problem was the principle of the caution solidaire, which meant that the association was entirely responsible for the reimbursement of the credits. The more successful farmers had to compensate for those who failed to pay their debts, and this constituted a disincentive for them to grow cotton and resulted in tensions that paralyzed many Village Associations (Fayolle and Kaigama 1994, Schwartz 1997).

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10 The juridical status of these associations was “pre-cooperative”, they had a more limited status than cooperatives.

11 In 1994 only 11.8 per cent of the rural population in Burkina Faso were literate (18.8 per cent of the men and 5.7 per cent of the women) (INSD 2000a:30).
In the agricultural year 1995/96 Sofitex introduced a system which privileged large cotton growers over smaller ones. Those who farmed more than six hectares of cotton could sign a contract directly with the company. However, Sofitex was not always able to fulfil its part of the contract, angry farmers told me. The smaller cotton producers, that is most of the farming units, continued to sell their cotton through their Village Association (Burkina Faso 1996, Schwartz 1997). This system was replaced in the following year by the creation of smaller producer groups, the *Groupement des Producteurs Coton* (GPC). Consequently, the Village Associations lost their *raison d’être*. The effects of this reorganization are, however, outside the time frame of the present study.

The beginning of my fieldwork in early 1995 was a turbulent time for cotton farmers in Burkina Faso. Many were angry after several years of deteriorating conditions. In 1991-1992 widespread insect attacks had led to harvest losses, leaving many farmers indebted. Sinking world market prices and the implementation of Burkina Faso’s Structural Adjustment Plan for the Agricultural sector (PASA) led in subsequent years to reductions in the cotton purchase price paid to the farmers. The drastic devaluation in early 1994 of the common currency for French speaking West Africa, the *Franc de la Communauté Financière en Afrique* (FCFA), facilitated the sale of Burkina Faso’s cotton on the world market, but increased the costs of imported fertilizers and chemicals necessary for cotton production. The devaluation also resulted in a general augmentation of consumer prices and farmers felt that life was becoming more expensive while the profitability of cotton was diminishing (Labey and Ouattara 1994). Moreover, there was widespread discontent among farmers about the malfunctioning of the cotton sector. In some years, the prices of the agricultural inputs delivered on credit had not been made known until after the harvest. Furthermore, these inputs were often delivered late and in insufficient quantity. After the harvest, Sofitex had classified the cotton in ways that farmers experienced as random, and they were often paid less than expected. Sometimes Sofitex was late in picking up the harvested cotton, which would by then have started to deteriorate. Moreover, farmers would have to wait several months after pick-up before getting paid. All these problems were well known to Sofitex and the government (Burkina Faso 1996). Every year, at the beginning of the agricultural season, new promises were made about improvements.

The organizational problems of the cotton sector had direct consequences for the domestic economies of the farmers. Late delivery of agricultural inputs could spoil the prospects of a good harvest, and the delayed cotton payment put the farmers into debt or made them sell their grains cheaply. Conflicts arose within Village Associations about how to pay for the unpaid debts, and within farming units, irritation grew when the male head explained to his dependants that the expected cotton payment had been entirely consumed by the credits.
In early 1995 farmers in many villages protested against the government’s price policy and threatened to give up on cotton farming. In response, the president, Blaise Compaore, embarked on a country-wide tour to meet with producers, decided to augment the cotton purchase price and to subsidise agricultural input products (L’intrus 1995, Schwartz 1997). These measures seemed to have calmed the farmers as the cotton production figures of the agricultural year 1995/96 indicate (Gray 2008:67).

Women in regional ethnographies

Focusing on the distribution of resources within farming units, with a particular interest in women’s agency, this study fills a gap in the ethnography of the region. Several studies have described how cotton became a major cash crop and how farming became mechanized. The socio-economic transformations resulting from these changes are well documented. It has also been demonstrated how, as a result of new farming practices, women were drawn into farm work to an extent previously unknown (Bassett 1988, McPhail and Polti 1988, Faure 1994c, Tersiguel 1995, Bassett 2002b, 2002a, Traoré and Fourgeau 2006, Somé 2010, Traoré 2010a, 2010b, Luna 2018b, 2018a). These studies also mention tensions within farming units surrounding matters of distribution. However, the mechanisms of resource allocation and consumption have not been sufficiently explored, and they have not been explicitly linked to an understanding of gender and women’s agency.

There are quite a few anthropological studies from western Burkina Faso that focus on gender relations and specifically on women. Closest to my research interests are Mahir Şaul’s writings from a Bobo village close to the town Bobo-Dioulasso. His articles cover a wide range of topics, from the organization of agricultural production to economic relations between spouses, kinship and household organization (Şaul 1989c, 1989a, 1989b, 1991a, 1991b). The village he describes is, however, not typical for the cotton zone. Instead, its economy is strongly affected by its proximity to town, which means that women have more options for personal income earning. The same applies for Claudia Roth’s (1994, 1995) study of urban women’s love strategies. More relevant to my research are the more recent studies by Batamaka Somé (2010, 2013), Saratta Traoré and Catherine Fourgeau (2006) and Saratta Traoré (2010a, 2010b), from the cotton zones of Western Burki-

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12 As it turned out, the devaluation and other measures introduced by the structural adjustment programme came to be beneficial to Burkina Faso’s cotton sector at large and production increased in the years that followed. Burkina Faso more than doubled its cotton production from about 60,000 tons of fibre in 1995/96 to 140,000 tons of fibre in 1997/98 (Gray 2008:67). However, land shortage and degradation as well as increasing socio-economic stratification have been negative effects (Gray 2003, Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013, Gray, Dowd-Uribe and Kaminski 2018).
na Faso. However, even though these studies provide interesting information on gender relations and women’s room for manoeuvre, their analyses are limited to the husband-wife relationship. They have not applied a gender analysis to the domestic economy in its totality, that is the complex system of relations and domains, and thereby miss important aspects of women’s agency on economic matters.

Three of the earlier mentioned studies from this region illustrate the difficulty of conceptualizing women’s agency within male-dominated social structures. Claudia Roth (1994) in her study of urban women’s love strategies, focuses on the power that women have despite the explicitly patriarchal ideology to which both women and men subscribe. Drawing on classical works of feminist anthropology, she argues that even though the social construction of men and women as inherently different implies hierarchy, their separateness, that is the fact that women and men live their social and economic lives in separate spheres, puts a limit on male authority and creates a space for female power. Both men and women engage in income earning, and both men and women own property, but due to the gender division of labour they depend on each other for specific goods and services. Gender roles are thus complementary, and the exchange of goods and services within marriage constitutes an “egalitarian sub-system”, Roth claims. Even though the idea of egalitarianism is appealing, Roth’s argument is not entirely convincing on this point. Focusing as it does on women and their relationship with their male partner, her study reveals little about the material basis for these women’s existence within wider structures of family and kinship.

The rural women studied by Saratta Traoré (in Traoré and Fourgeau 2006), on the other hand, seem almost to lack agency. Traoré takes the local patriarchal ideology at face value and describes women as pitiable victims of both “traditional” male dominance and development. Moreover, women are presumed to lack insight about their own best interests, and the author, therefore, concludes with a list of normative recommendations to the women. Batamaka Somé’s (2010) approach is positioned somewhere between these two extremes. He explicitly argues against Traoré and Fourgeaus’s (2006) description of women as oppressed. Unlike Roth, Somé claims that it is the need for collaboration in farming, not separateness, which creates a power balance between the male head of the household and its dependent members. However, without a theoretical approach to gender or to social structure in general the resulting picture is contradictory. Somé (2010:243) dismisses the idea that “structuring structures” frame the collaboration between household members, even though his empirical account contains plenty of examples indicating that women’s scope and mode of income earning is indeed structured by gendered power structures.

The narrow focus on the husband-wife relationship has been a common bias in many gender studies of African households as well as in development approaches. Within the three generational multi-nuclear polygynous farming
units of rural West Africa there are multiple female and male social positions, all of them relational, structured in intersection with other relational concepts such as age (elder-younger), generation (parent-child), kinship (agnates-affines), anteriority (order or arrival). In other words, gender is not only about men and women, but also about men’s relations with brothers, sons or fathers and women’s relation with sisters, daughters, mothers, and co-wives. Moreover, gender intersects with the structuring principles of the domestic economy consisting of a male-headed common domain and the individual domains of women and junior men.

Interconnected domains of the domestic economy

As I have pointed out, one of the shortcomings of conventional household economic models is that they presume a two-person bargaining game which fits badly with the complexity of West African farming units. The alternative model which I suggest for a better understanding draws on ethnographic evidence from various West African farming societies showing that domestic economies are subdivided into semi-autonomous economic domains, organized according to the twin concepts of “the common” and “the individual” (Le Moal 1980:46, McMillan 1986, Venema 1986, Jonkers 1987, Bassett 1988, Carney and Watts 1991, Whitehead 1998, Whitehead and Kabeer 2001, Somé 2010). Except for the two texts by Whitehead, few attempts have been made to bring this ethnographic evidence into the critical discussion on household economic models. An interesting exception is Kazianga and Wahhaj’s initiative to develop a household economic model for the analysis of family farms in Burkina Faso, which takes account of farms being subdivided into common and individual plots (Kazianga and Wahhaj 2013). My approach differs from Kazianga and Wahhaj’s not least because it is an anthropological study and theirs is a study in economics.

I argue that the dual concept of “the common” and “the individual” should not only be applied to different kinds of farmed land, but to the entire domestic economy, agricultural as well as non-agricultural, and to production as well as consumption. As described by ethnologist Guy Le Moal (1980:46), the twin concepts foroba (“the common”) and zakane (“the individual”)\(^\text{13}\) are central in Bobo thought about “ownership” and of the way they organize their society; strongly valuing communality while at the same time allowing for individuality. Literally, the concepts refer to different kinds of fields: foroba was formerly the common farm of the wie, (“house”), that is the large localized corporate group with a lineage at its core, which constituted the principal farming unit. Zakane were the individual plots that sub-

\(^{13}\) Spelling following Le Moal (1980). In Jonckers’ study of the Minyanka the same twin concepts are written foroba/djonkani (Jonckers 1987).
units or individuals (men and women) were allowed to cultivate in addition to the obligatory work on the common field. In a more figurative sense the two concepts could also be applied for any kind of possession, including persons, magical knowledge or organizational forms (Le Moal 1980:46).

Despite overwhelming ethnographic evidence, I did not realize the full implications of the “common” and the “individual” as structuring principles for the domestic economy until after my fieldwork, when I tried to systematize my household economic data. My readings of the gender and development literature had predisposed me to look mainly for economic relations between spouses and I was frustrated when it became impossible to compile my empirical material accordingly. It was revealing to discover what had been right in front of me all the time.

Central to my argument is the idea that the domestic economy of these smallholder farmers should be understood as a system of interconnected but semi-autonomous domains. On the one hand, the common economy of the farming unit, jointly produced and jointly consumed, but managed by the eldest male, and on the other hand, the economic domains of male and female members, individually produced, individually managed and to some extent individually consumed. Conventions about rights and responsibilities structure the relationship between sub-units and the common economy of the farming unit. These conventions are shaped by norms and practices relating to gender, age, kinship and marriage. The domestic economy functions as a system in that changes in one domain lead to changes in other domains. For example, when the collective enterprise of farming requires more labour, the leeway for individual members to pursue their own projects diminishes.

Even though domestic economies in many West African farming societies are organized according to the twin principles of “the common” and “the individual”, each local setting presents a different mix of “common” and “individual” rights and responsibilities, and they differ in how much of the domestic economy is localized in the common and how much in the individual “accounting units”. In the literature about intra-household relations, Whitehead’s concept “conjugal contract” is frequently used to talk about the conventions that define spouses’ rights and duties in household economic matters (1984 [1981]). I prefer, however, Naila Kabeer’s expression “implicit household contracts” “which spell out the claims and obligations of different members to each other and which are backed by the norms and rules of the wider society” (Kabeer 2000:25). Kabeer’s emphasis on “implicit” is apt, because it should not be assumed that people think about these conventions as “contracts” or that they are even able to describe them in such terms. Furthermore, I prefer to avoid the word conjugal, because implicit “contracts” bind together all members of a domestic unit, not only husband and wife. Hence, a focus on the conjugal couple leads to a misplaced bipolar reading of the household economy and is bound to miss important aspects of what goes on inside West African farm households, as pointed out by Warner et
I have deliberately chosen not to speak about women’s economic domains as “hearth-holds” (Ekejiuba 1995) or “matri-centric units” (Amadiume 2005 [1992]), nor do I find it appropriate to speak about male and female economies in terms of “separate spheres”. The main reason is that these concepts convey a notion of female autonomy, which fits badly with how the domestic economies of farmers in Bala are organized. Instead of being autonomous, the woman-managed economies are intertwined with, and encompassed by, farming units under male headship, and by the norms and practices about who shall pay what within the domestic economy. Therefore, it is more appropriate to think of woman-managed economies in terms of female “gender regimes” within a male dominated “gender order” (Connell 1987).

Thesis structure and chapter outline

The figure below depicts my conception of the domestic economy in Bala. It shows a fictive and relatively small farming unit, with its common and individual domains and the principal transactions between them. This particular farming unit consists of a middle-aged couple, their married eldest son and his two wives. For reason of simplicity the figure shows only the adult members’ individual economies, not those of the children. The most important flows of value: labour, material resources (i.e. cash, grains, housing, healthcare) and cooked meals, are represented by different kinds of arrows. The breadth of the arrows illustrates that most of the value flows in and out of the common domain, while flows between individuals, such as those between spouses, are relatively small. Included in the figure are also the personal incomes which most adult persons draw from own-account activities, and which feed into their personal purses. The purpose of presenting the male head’s personal economy and the common fund as partially overlapping is to highlight that these two are not always clearly separated in practice, something which I will discuss in more detail in chapter five.

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14 It is equally misleading to classify households as either monogamous or polygamous, as in Traoré’s study from Western Burkina Faso (Traoré and Fourgeau 2006, Traoré 2010a). Most commonly West African farming units are clusters of conjugal units, constituted around a core of patrilinearly related men. Some of these conjugal units are monogamous, others are polygynous, some being of the same generation, others being of different generations. Classifying conjugal households only per one of these parameters would imply disregarding other important relations within the domestic group.
This figure serves as a structuring framework for the thesis in the sense that chapters are dedicated to specific aspects of it. The first part (Part I) deals with “the common” domain of the domestic economy, how it is organized, what the members contribute to it and what they get out of it. In the second part of the thesis (Part II), the perspective switches from “the common” to “the individual” domains, focusing on women’s economic strategies, their accounting units and the question of women’s agency in male-headed households.

The empirical chapters elaborate on this figure with ethnographic detail, drawing on surveys, interviews and observations carried out during fieldwork. The theoretical discussions outlined in this introductory chapter are revisited in subsequent chapters, their explanatory value evaluated against empirical data. For the sake of readability, more specific discussions on some ethnographic details are written in the footnotes, while each chapter concludes with a summary of the main topics covered.

The thesis consists of nine chapters, of which the present introductory chapter counts as Chapter one. This chapter has clarified the aims and relevance of this study, elaborated its theoretical framework and described the research methods used, while clarifying its central argument.
Chapter two provides an overview of the social organization of Bala in a regional and historical context. It outlines how processes of change, such as the transition to mechanized and commercial farming and religious conversion, have led to the re-organization of the domestic group, thus providing a background to the empirical chapters that follow.

PART I:
Chapter three describes the organization of farming, that is the crops, the technology, the tasks and division of labour. It describes how different farming units manage production factors differently and demonstrates that women’s room for manoeuvre is framed both by the specific conditions of her farming unit, and by her position within it.

Chapter four takes the annual production figures of a few selected farming units as a starting point to discuss processes of stratification. The aim is to show how livelihood strategies differ depending on the general economic situation of the farming unit.

Chapter five develops an approach for how to analyse these farming units’ consumption patterns to assess different members’ access to joint resources. It also suggests a way to compare women’s material well-being across farming units. Finally, mechanisms that produce inequalities within farming units are identified.

PART II:
Chapter six picks up the theoretical discussion initiated in chapter one about how to understand women’s economic agency in the context of male dominated domestic organizations. I elaborate on a few women’s economic strategies and demonstrate how their individual agency is conditioned by circumstances in their farming unit. In addition, I point to some key notions by which the authority of the male head is justified as well as contested.

Chapter seven takes a close look at the complex work-processes by which women produce daily meals. I investigate the strategies that women employ in response to shortage of time and money and demonstrate how these are framed by general conditions in her farming unit and her position within it.

Chapter eight describes how women make use of the dry season to earn a personal income through brewing. Unlike other female trades, the sale of alcoholic drinks has a predominantly male clientele. Through beer trade, at the cost of considerable effort, women get access to some of the cotton incomes in the hands of male household heads. I explore why some women are better positioned to earn money through brewing than others.

Chapter nine sums up conclusions about how domestic economies of West African smallholder farmers are organized, about women’s scope for action within these domestic economies and what we can conclude about women’s agency in this context.
2. Historical context of cotton farming in Bala

Arriving by car on the bumpy dust-road connecting Bala to the rest of the world, I first encountered houses dispersed seemingly at random in the landscape. The settlement became denser, until we arrived at an open space shaded by huge trees, the place for the weekly market. Next to it rose the fortress-like silhouette of the old Bobo village, the centre of Bala, a tight cluster of adobe houses. Entering the old village, I could see that behind the first rows of inhabited houses, there were buildings in varying degrees of decay and that a large part of the village’s interior was an open space where only traces of houses could be seen.

Middle-aged villagers remembered from their childhood that they could walk on roof tops from one end of the village to the other, so dense was the village at the time. Many deplored the deterioration of the old village even if they themselves had settled in the mushrooming new neighbourhoods. As they saw it, there was more unity in the past, and the dispersion of the habitat was a sign that this unity had gone. An often-cited explanation was that “everybody is going after money these days”.

What had happened? Why was the old village falling apart? What did the new settlements represent? How had social relations changed, and in particular, how had gender relations been affected? The physical re-arrangement of the habitat reflected changes in social organization, but as will be argued, these re-arrangements contained elements of continuity as well as change.

The architecture and spatial layout of the new settlements was inherently different from the old Bobo way of living together. In the old village patrilinearly-related men had their houses clustered side by side, doorways facing onto a narrow lane. Inside, women and children occupied the basement while men had their rooms on the roof-top terrace. In this setup there existed no private space for the conjugal household (Capron 1973:xx). In the new neighbourhoods, on the other hand, what, on my first arrival, seemed like randomly placed houses, turned out to be compounds with the houses of individual family members surrounding a courtyard.15 Two years later, some

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15 There are several ethnic groups in West Africa who traditionally live in compound style habitations, for example the Mossi majority of Burkina Faso. The new compounds in Bala are, however, not modelled on the Mossi’s circle of round grass-thatched huts but resemble more semi-urban courtyards.
families had closed off their compounds with adobe brick walls, cutting off pathways to prevent trespassing, thereby creating a private family space.

The architectural transformation of the village reflected a process in which small family units were closing themselves off and distancing themselves from kin and the village community. The economic separation of small family units from the lineage-based corporations, which in the past constituted the smallest unit for production and consumption, had happened during the 1980s. At the time of my fieldwork in the mid-1990s the economic separation was followed by a spatial and architectural reorganization. Was this a sign of what sociologist William J. Goode (1970 [1963]) once predicted, that the conjugal family household was bound to replace all other family forms, due to the spread of capitalism over the globe?16 I suggest that it was not a matter of one family form replacing another, but that changes in domestic organization in Bala were the outcome of multiple and sometimes contradictory forces. The challenge was to understand what had changed and what had not and what these changes (and non-changes) meant to people. Of particular relevance to this study was the question of how these changes (and non-changes) affected women and gender relations.

In this chapter, I describe the social organization of the village of Bala, and the domestic organization of its inhabitants. I situate the social organisation in its historical context and identify the principal factors of change to be farmers’ embracing of commercial and mechanized cotton farming, in combination with religious and modernist discourses about ideal family forms and relations between spouses. At the centre of my description is the Bobo, the dominant ethnic group in this ethnically and religiously diverse village.

Bala – a village of proud cotton farmers

The village of Bala is about 50 km northeast of Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso’s second largest town. At the time of my fieldwork it had a population of around 3,000 inhabitants (INSD 2000b:83), with the autochthonous Bobo being in majority and the Jula, Marka and Mossi as principal ethnic minorities. Unlike other Bobo villages, the inhabitants of Bala had ventured massively into commercial cotton farming in the 1970s (Ouattara 1988:76 bis), during the first West African cotton boom, when the profitability of cotton was high and production increased considerably (Schwartz 1993, 1997).

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16 Goode’s prediction has been proven not to hold. Demographic data from Africa and other parts of the world have shown that the conjugal family has not become the dominant form (Hertrich 1996, Pilon et al. 1997, Therborn 2004). Instead family forms are evolving in different directions under different circumstances. Moreover, historical research has shown that “pre-modern” African domestic organizations and marriage patterns were more varied than previously assumed (Cordell and Piché 1997).
Elderly men in Bala remembered that in the past cotton was grown as a perennial or at least bi-annual shrub, which required little work but also produced very little. Some of this cotton was marketed to the Jula, who produced the blankets and clothes needed by the Bobo, another part was used to pay taxes. The new varieties introduced by the cotton company produced more per hectare but required more work as they had to be replanted each year. They could not be successfully grown without employing fertilizers and pesticides, and seeds had to be bought. Middle-aged men in Bala took pride in the village’s history of having been at the forefront of the transition to modern cotton farming and that the village used to be the top cotton producer in the department. In Bala the school, the health care centre, the maternity centre and the pharmacy had been built from overheads which the cotton company Sofitex had paid to the Village Association for its work to organise the village’s cotton sale.

In comparison with surrounding villages, Bala stood out as a centre due to its size and its infrastructure. There were about ten civil servants residing in the village: teachers, health staff, the forester and the agricultural extension agent. During my stay a secondary school, a Collège d’enseignement général, was inaugurated. A particularity of Bala was its proximity to a lake and a forest that had the status of a protected Unesco Biosphere reserve and attracted tourists as well as researchers.

The reserve affected livelihoods in Bala. The forest was a valuable source of plants used by men and women for food, medicine and other purposes (Taïta 1997). Many men combined farming with commercial fishing in the lake. Moreover, due to the reserve, arable land was scarce, and many families farmed on borrowed land on other villages’ territories. For the same reason Bala had received relatively few settlers from the dryer northern and central parts of Burkina Faso. Otherwise, during the 1980s and 1990s Western Burkina Faso had received large numbers of migrant settlers, and much of the savannah forest had been transformed into farmland. However, Bala had not attracted large-scale commercial farmers, using tractors, heavy capital input and hired labourers, as could be found elsewhere, where farmland was more easily available. Even though there were inequalities between farmers in Bala regarding capital, machinery and incomes, they were all smallholders, relying primarily on household labour. The local economy in Bala was little diversified. Even though the distance to town was not far, Bala was far from urban markets due to the extremely bad dust-road that connected it to the main road. Labour migration to the Côte d’Ivoire was an option for young men in search of income and adventure.

Even though I do not have figures about school enrolment in Bala, it is safe to state that only a minority of the children of primary school age were enrolled. In 1994 primary school enrolment in the rural areas of Burkina

17 Financed by a French non-governmental organisation.
Faso was only 28.4 per cent, 34.3 for boys and 21.8 per cent for girls (INSD 2000a:34). Even though public schools demanded no fees, school materials and clothes had to be paid for. The most important cost for a farming unit was, however, to abstain from the child’s labour, which was also an apprenticeship. As will be described in chapters three and seven, children had age- and gender-specific responsibilities on the farm and in the household, and farming units that lacked children of the relevant age used to borrow somebody else’s child for these tasks. Moreover, as explained by Hagberg (2002), schooling was associated with ideas about modernity and expectations about a different kind of life. Hence parents in Bala who wanted their children to stay in the village and to learn the craft of farming, were reluctant to send their children to school. In the words of a middle-aged head of a farming unit: “It is the school which has spoilt our youth!”.

The social organization of the Bobo

Although the architectural transformation of Bala was evident during my fieldwork, central aspects of Bobo social organization still remained. Its largest subdivision was the ward, wotin in the local Bobo dialect. Members of a ward shared a common identity as originating from the same village and speaking the same dialect, but they could also host and integrate strangers. In Bala there were three wards and their names and location reflected the direction of their arrival: Wurotan (i.e. west), Wurodi (i.e. east) and Lale (settled from Kadomba a village to the north).

Wards were further subdivided into smaller units, wie (plur. wala), literally translated as “house”. In the words of Mahir Şaul, a “house” is “a stable social unit constituted by kinship as well as non-kinship ties but defined by reference to residence and economic and political activity” (Şaul 1998:1). “Houses” are not lineages, strictly speaking, because they can integrate persons without having to invent kinship ties for them, but they have a lineage segment at their core. The Bobo differentiate between the wakuma, people of one “house”, and the tɔnɔma (lit. “father’s children”), the latter corresponding to a patrilineage (Şaul 1991a). The suffix -kuma (as in wakuma) designates a group of people as well as that group’s collective ownership, for example to a part of the village, a tract of land, and specific object/cults of traditional religion.

In the past, as described by Guy le Moal (1980:58) the Bobo wie “house” was formally the smallest unit for agricultural production, consumption and cohabitation. According to the ethnological sources he consulted, the size of

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18 A fourth group, the Tinkire, distinguished themselves through their dialect and customs, but were hosted by the Wurotan and did not constitute a separate ward
such a unit could differ from 20 to 100 persons with an average around 50. However, the distinguishing feature of a “house” was not the number of persons, but its ownership of an ancestral house, wasa (lit. “house mother”) (see also Şaul 1991a). The wasa is a building which is said to have been the habitation of the founder of that “house”, that is its first ancestor. All the “house’s” ancestors have been buried inside ever since. Sacrifices are made on its threshold and the “house’s” important ceremonies and life-cycle rituals are held in it. In Bala there were ten wasa. Located at the centre of the old village they literally constituted its heart.

“Houses” were ranked chronologically according to when their ancestor had first settled in the village and kinship ties they had to each other. The descendants of the first settler will forever be considered “owners of the village”, an ownership which does not imply private property, but being ritually in charge of the land. The oldest man of that “house” holds the office as kirite (lit. “village owner”) or kirisaporo (lit. “village ancestor”), in French talked about as chef de terre. He is the custodian of the village’s kiri shrine, through which the villagers communicate with the spirits of the locality. Through the kirite the different “houses” have once been allocated use rights to specified tracts of land, and these are the rights which still count.

“Houses” were further subdivided into tini (lit. “hearth” or “fireplace”). As the name implies, the tini was constituted around the group of men who in the past used to eat from the same bowl: a father and his adult sons. According to Le Moal (1980), a tini could have some economic independence within the “house”. It could farm a separate field, but it did not have its own ancestral house. For religious matters and the performance of sacrifices to the ancestors they always depended on the larger unit, on its wasaporo (lit. “house ancestor”), that is the oldest man of its core lineage, who served as its priest. It was possible for a section of a lineage to split off and to erect its own ancestral house and thereby become a wie “house”, but, as explained by le Moal (1980:57ff), this was an extremely formalized and delicate procedure, and he was, therefore, not surprised to find that incomplete separations, in which sub-groups of “houses” had been granted partial independence, were quite common.

What held a Bobo village together across its division into wards, “houses” and “hearths”, were the male age-sets, established through the initiation of the male village youth into adult male-hood. At each new initiation the previous cohorts moved up one step on the age-set ladder until reaching the

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Quimby (1979) describes what “eating from the same bowl” meant to her Jula informants: “As each man put food in his mouth with his hand and returned his hand to the pot for another mouthful, he exchanged ‘dirt’, in the form of saliva, with the men of his lineage. This level of intimacy helped bind them together” (p.207).
status of elder. It was the group of male elders that collectively decided about village matters.

The social and political system of a Bobo village thus consisted of two complementary organizing principles: a spatial/genealogical subdivision into “houses” and a transversal subdivision into age sets. Men were at the core of both structures.

Traditionally, the Bobo never had a political structure above village level. Villages sometimes liaised in patron client-relations with Jula and Zara “war-houses”, and they related to other Bobo villages through various ties, such as political alliances, kinship, sharing the same cult, originating from the same village and the repeated exchange of marriageable girls. Marriage exchanges, between patrilineal groups within the village and between villages, resulted in a dense web of relatedness in which kinship and affinal ties sometimes overlapped.

Marriage, exchange of women and elopement

For the Bobo, marriages were ideally based on the exchange of brides between patrilineal corporate groups. A woman’s firstborn daughter was destined to marry into the group from where her mother originated, to “fill the gap” after she married out. The girl belonged to her mother’s brother who gave her away in marriage to a real or classificatory son. In Bala, such a marriage was called ya dima (lit. “on the mother’s genitals”). A woman’s other daughters could be exchanged in katira marriages (lit. “barter”). It was also possible to keep a girl within the patrilineal group and marry her, literal-

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20 For a detailed description of Bobo male initiation and the age-set system see Le Moal (1971, 1980). In Bala I was told that women were also part of this system. Women were not initiated, but in one sequence of the male initiation, the cohort of male neophytes was assigned a corresponding cohort of girls. However, at the time of my fieldwork this sequence had not been performed for about thirty years. Le Moal (1980:351) mentions briefly that in some Bobo villages girls participated in the initiation, but without giving any details.

21 “Among the Bobo one can distinguish two types of religious institution. First, there are cults that are particular to a locality and linked to the cycle of seasons, such as the sogo (vegetation) shrines that ‘govern’ various territories or the do, which in each community provide a basis for age grades and masquerades. Secondly, there are protective cults which have replicable and transportable altars and power objects, and the acquisition of which involves transfers of money” (Şaul 1992:354).

22 There were local differences in Bobo marriage practices. In Şaul’s (1989a), example from a Southern Bobo village marriageable girls were exchanged not between patrilineal but between matrilineal corporate descent groups. In Bala I found no evidence that matrilineal corporate groups had existed and in Le Moal’s (1980) works from Northern Bobo villages no such groups are mentioned. They seem thus to be a particularity of the Southern Bobo. Whether girls are exchanged between patrilineal or matrilineal units, the result is the same as it is the mother’s brother who receives the girl and who has the right to allocate her to a husband.
ly “on the umbilical cord” in a wura pege marriage to a paternal cousin. Arranged marriages had been illegal since colonial times and were again declared illegal in Burkina Faso’s family law (Burkina Faso 1990). However, neither the colonial prohibition nor national legislation had led to its abolishment, at least not in the rural areas where I did my fieldwork.

Bobo girls in Bala knew that their marriage would be arranged, unless they first succeeded to elope with a boyfriend. The elopement of one girl could later be regularized through a katira marriage, in other words, her relatives would accept that she married her boyfriend if they received a marriageable girl in return. The difference between ya dima and katira marriages was that the first was an exchange from one generation to the other, while the second was a simultaneous exchange. Every katira marriage was supposed to be followed by ya dima exchanges in the following generations. In this way, the marriage relationship between the two patrilineal groups was to be eternally perpetuated. Even though the parent and the grandparent generations in Bala did their best to maintain exchange marriage as a practice, young people’s preference for elopement made it increasingly difficult.

Even married women eloped. A woman, who wanted to escape a bad marriage and continue to live in Bala, must find herself another husband. To live as a single divorced woman was economically difficult and socially not acceptable. Staying with relatives was a temporary option but not a permanent solution, unless the woman was elderly. It was the same for widows, living alone was not acceptable, and it was the duty of the deceased man’s brother to take over his wife and children in a levirate marriage. The widow could refuse such a marriage through elopement. Elderly women had the option to refuse a levirate marriage through a mock marriage to a male grandson. She then became a member of that grand-child’s father’s household.

The acceptability of polygyny provided a woman with a broad choice of available men and the possibility to avoid those who had a reputation of being unable to keep a woman in “good health”. On the other hand, women in monogamous marriages, must be prepared that one day a co-wife could move in. As observed by Şaul (1989a:60) in a Southern Bobo village, women who eloped tended to join men who were wealthy and influential. Traoré and Fourgeau (2006:128-235) are thus correct in their observation that polygyny is an effect of individuals’ free choice of partner, rather than of the

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23 The Dogon of Mali talk about the “umbilical” cord as a metaphor for “penis” (Calame-Griaule 1965). Whether the Bobo make the same link, I am unable to tell. It would otherwise be tempting to see metaphorical parallel between genitals and affiliation.

24 In 1939 the law going under the name Décret Mandel, “declared non-valid any matrimonial agreement concluded without the consent of the girl or the woman, and every agreement concerning a girl before puberty” (D. B. Sanou 1994:126-127).

25 Like Thorsen’s observation from Eastern Burkina Faso, “health” is one of the ambiguous notions that can be interpreted both as providing treatment in case of illness and as providing sufficient food, well-being, and a harmonious marriage, and so on” (Thorsen 2002:136).
traditional marriage system. In the traditional system the principle was, at least as an ideal, that wives should be distributed evenly among the male members of the descent group. Therefore, a man could not be given a second wife while there were still male bachelors among his patrilineal relatives. In Bala, it was common that relatively young men (around 30), who were juniors within their father’s farming unit, had two wives, one given and one of their choosing. Even Christians practiced de facto polygyny, but a man could only marry one wife in church.

Descriptions of female elopement are found in the regional ethnography from various periods and socio-cultural settings: for urban Zara women in Bobo-Dioulasso (Roth 1994, 1995), for the Lobi of the borderlands between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire (Hagaman 1977, Schneider 1990) and for the Mossi (Rookhuizen 1986) and Bisa (Thorsen 2005) of central and eastern Burkina Faso. In the literature, the marital mobility of Bwa women (Bobo’s neighbors to the east) stands out as more frequent and probably more tolerated than among other ethnic groups (Tauxier 1912, Capron 1973, Retel-Laurentin 1979, Tibiri 1989, Coulibaly 1990, Traoré and Fourgeau 2006). Even though Bwa and Bobo are similar in their socio-cultural organization, it is difficult to know to what extent these descriptions are valid for Bala and for the region at large. In Bala, people talked about the Bwa as being more tolerant about female elopement, and as one man told me: “it even happens that at a Bwa woman’s funeral all her ex-husbands participate”, something which he found very peculiar.

The richest ethnographic account of female elopements is still Retel-Laurentin’s (1979) study from the Bwa, which not only contains a large amount of quantitative data (all the 2500 adults of nine villages), but also presents a rich material of women’s own narratives. The author classified women’s motives into three broad categories: one related to problems with traditional marriage arrangements and the non-fulfillment of obligations, the second related to conflicts between spouses or with the in-laws, and finally causes outside the spouse’s control such as sterility, illness, migration or widowhood. Conflicts between spouses, or between a woman and her in-laws, were often triggered by disagreements about the performance of work tasks and the distribution of resources, that is issues that relate to the fulfillment or terms of “implicit household contracts” about women’s rights and duties in the household. The few accounts I have from Bala fit with this picture.

In Bala it was not uncommon to encounter women who had a history of having changed husband at least once. Some had run off from an arranged marriage, others from a love marriage. A common theme in their accounts was that they had run off because of bad material conditions. “If you are married and you receive nothing to eat, and if what you provide disappears, several times. In the end, you accept no more!” Even if one should not exclude that romantic love could motivate a woman to leave her husband, I did
not hear any woman talk about her own elopement in such terms. Passionate love relations were generally regarded with skepticism and easily attributed to somebody’s use of magic, rather than to sound emotions. Therefore, a woman who wanted to be respected after her elopement must convince the public about her abandoned husband’s (or his kin’s) failure to keep her “in good health”. If she succeeded, the blame for breaking up the marriage would fall on the husband (or his kin). If the woman’s accusations were well founded, even the husband’s close kin could defend her elopement. Such was the case of Abdoul, who talked about his brother’s wife’s elopement as: “Of course she eloped. My brother is lazy! The wife didn’t even have enough to eat.” Like a few other cases I came to know about, this woman’s elopement had been preceded by a split of the farming unit. Her situation became unbearable only after the brothers had decided to farm separately and she found herself alone with a lazy husband.

To sum up, even though arranged marriages were common, women in Bala had the possibility to make choices about which family to become a member of. This said, elopement was not an option for all women to the same extent. First, not all women and girls were wanted. A person who deviated too much from the norms of female behaviour, would have difficulties finding a man to receive her. The same logic applied to men: A man who deviated from norms would have problems attracting a wife and making her stay, and this was one reason why some men argued for the necessity of arranged marriages: “You know, some men don’t even know how to approach a woman. They would have to stay without. Others would have several…” The second constraint that some women faced more than others, was connected to their role as mothers. Some women endured in a marriage because they did not want to be separated from their children, who in this patrilineal context belonged to their father’s kin group. Third, others endured out of loyalty to their kin, those married in a ya dima marriage out of loyalty to their close maternal relatives, those married in a katira marriage out of loyalty to their brother, who’s’ marriage was connected to theirs through the exchange. Fourth, with age it became increasingly difficult for a woman to change husband. Not only were men of her age more interested in younger women, but also the status she had acquired in her husband’s household would be lost, and she would have to start from a lower position as a newcomer in another man’s house.

Matrifocality within a patrilineal society

Even though patrilineality was the organizing principle of the corporate groups that made up a Bobo village’s socio-political structure, matrilineal kinship ties were important, especially from the point of view of the individuals. On a personal level, people maintained emotionally close relations both
with their mother’s and their father’s kin, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The closest ties were, however, between a mother and her children and between siblings born by the same woman. From a gender perspective the mother-son relationship was special because it seemingly reversed the gender hierarchy. A son owed his mother a great deal of respect, he could not command her as he commanded his wives, and was obliged to listen to her advice. This meant that some aged women could become influential in village matters through their adult sons.

Children grew up with a large number of persons whom they called sisters and brothers, the children of their mother’s co-wives as well as the children of their father’s brothers, yet they accorded a particular relationship to siblings of the “same mother”. In adult age this meant that a woman who was mistreated by her husband or his family could count on the support of her brothers, particularly if the brothers were from the same womb. This close relationship between siblings continued in the next generation, so that a man’s sister had a special relationship to his children. Similarly, a woman’s brother had a close relationship to his sisters’ children. In practice a man who came into conflict with his father or his brother could seek refuge with his mother’s brother. The role of a mother’s brother was to be a caring figure, in contrast to the father and the father’s brothers who were more of authority figures. The relationship between a man and his sister’s son was even institutionalized as a joking relationship, which allowed for the latter to take his uncle’s belongings without being punished for it. For girls, the relationship to the maternal uncle was less relaxed because he was also her potential father-in-law.

Matrifocality and the reverence of motherhood are common features of African societies, and elements of matrifocality have been reported also from patrilineal societies (James 1978, Bisilliat 1983). Ifi Amadiume (2005 [1992]) even argued that matrifocality was a sign of primordial African matrarchy, a position which has been criticized (Nzegwu 1998). Without going into that debate, I suggest that matrifocality and the reverence of motherhood are perfectly compatible with a patrilineal logic, according to which a woman achieves social status in her husband’s patrilineal group through the birth and mothering of future group members. Even if matrifocality does not negate male power structures in Bobo society, it is a source of female power on which some women can draw more than others, and which makes them less vulnerable to bad living conditions in their husband’s household.

Ethnic and religious diversity in Bala

My description of the social and domestic organization so far is valid for the Bobo, but there are other ethnic communities living in Bala. Depending on the circumstances of their arrival they were differently integrated in the vil-
lage. The core families of the Jula group descended from a war leader from Kong,26 who settled in Bala in the aftermath of the anti-colonial war which shook the region in 1915-16.27 He later sent for an imam, an ethnic Marka, to take care of the religious duties. Part of the Marka population in Bala descended from this imam. The habitations of the first Jula and the first Marka were physically integrated in the old village structure, and socially they were affiliated to one of the Bobo “houses”. I was told that in the past their sons had even participated with the Bobo in the male initiation ceremony, but that they had ceased to do so. The Mossi, who had arrived as settlers from the central parts of Burkina Faso in the 1970s, were not that much integrated. Their settlement was on the village’s periphery. For the Jula and Marka, being Muslim was part of their identity. This was so to a lesser extent for the Mossi. Many of them were said to have converted at arrival in Bala because the first Mossi living there was a Muslim. The Bobo are known to have long resisted Islam,28 with the exception of the Bobo speaking Zara.29 In Bala there are, however, Bobo who are Muslim but who do not identify as Zara. This category included some influential figures such as the chef de terre, the chef de village, and the president of the Village Association. Generally, the Bobo have been more attracted by Catholicism, or maintained their “traditional” religion.

The beginning of Catholic missionary activity in Western Burkina Faso goes back to 1931 when the lay order known as the White Fathers established themselves in Bobo-Dioulasso. The White Fathers and their female counterpart, the White Sisters, received their popular apppellations due to

26 Kong is a town in Northern Côte d’Ivoire which in the middle of the eighteenth century emerged as a regional centre of power. Kong is often called a “Jula kingdom”, but, as Şaul (1998) has pointed out, it did not correspond to the European notion of a kingdom. It did not control a territory nor had it political subjects. It was more like a network of war leaders who with their families and followers had settled here and there over a vast area, covering what is now Northern Côte d’Ivoire, Southern Mali and Western Burkina Faso.

27 This war was the strongest resistance encountered by the French in their colonial enterprise. The French eventually won the war, and the repression that followed was devastating for the local population in large parts of what is now Western Burkina Faso and Southern Mali (Şaul and Royer 2001).

28 Şaul (1997) even argues that the Bobo constructed their “traditional” religion in resistance to Muslim influence, and that this process had begun in a distant past.

29 According to Le Moal (1980), the Bobo speaking Zara are of Mande origin like the Bobo, but represent a later wave of migration. They arrived in what is now Western Burkina Faso during the 17th and the 18th centuries. Some of these newcomers assimilated to the Bobo, while those who were Muslim identified as a distinct group, the Zara. The word Zara means “a person who moves around” (Le Moal 1980:14). Many Zara were ambulant traders, and they are, therefore, also known under the label Bobo-Jula (jula meaning “trader”). In the nineteenth century the Zara of Bobo-Dioulasso established themselves as a power centre, similar to the Jula “war houses”. Even though the cultural similarities between Bobo and Zara are so many that they could be considered as one ethnic group, the Bobo in Bala insisted on their differences.
their white gowns, but their official names are *la Société des Missionnaires d’Afrique* and *Congrégation des Sœurs Missionnaires de Notre-Dame d’Afrique*. The first encounters which the population of Bala had with Catholicism were negative and it was not until the late 1950s that there was a significant wave of conversion, starting with a group of young men. The church in Bala was inaugurated in 1962 and festivities at this occasion attracted new members.\(^{30}\) At about the same time (1960), protestant missionaries established themselves in Bala.

At the time of my fieldwork the Catholic congregation in Bala had around 500 members and the Protestant 45 members. No exact figures for the Muslims were available, but with the assistance of a Muslim elder I counted the farming units of which the head was a Muslim and how many members these had. In that way I estimated the number of Muslims to be around 800. The ethnic minorities made up a large part of the Muslim community, and in those families, usually all members shared the same faith. In Bobo families on the other hand there was often a mix of religions. Many Bobo stuck to their traditional faith, but the pure traditionalists were diminishing in numbers as the old died and the young converted to Islam or Christianity. To some extent traditional Bobo religious practice continued to be important even for those who had converted. They managed to continue these practices because they defined Bobo religious practice as custom and not religion. Strictest on rejecting Bobo customs were the Protestants, who, for example did not participate in the male initiation ceremony.

The ethnic communities in Bala very much lived their social lives separately from each other. This was particularly so for the women, and that was a reason why I did not come to know many non-Bobo women. Except for the wives of civil servants there was only one non-Bobo member in the Women’s Association (*Groupement Villageois Féminin*).\(^{31}\) Many of the Mossi women hardly spoke the *lingua franca* Jula. Men had more contacts across ethnic differences. They met in public places to drink and chat, and they cooperated in the Village Association, of which they all had to be members if they wanted to grow cotton. Islam brought together members of the different ethnic communities, but women were less concerned as they did not participate in the social life around the mosque.

While intermarriage across religious difference was common, at least within the Bobo community, intermarriage across ethnic difference was rare. One reason was that the marriage systems were not readily compatible. To give away a daughter in marriage the Mossi wanted bride-wealth payment,

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\(^{30}\) Personal information from the first village catechist.

\(^{31}\) *Groupement villageois feminins* (GVF) were associations formally recognized by the government authorities and served to mobilise women for local development activities and as a counterpart for reach-out activities. At the time of my fieldwork the authorities only recognized one GVF per village, which often resulted in a *de facto* dominance by one ethnic group.
while the Bobo claimed a girl in exchange. Furthermore, the Marka and Jula did not want their daughters to marry a non-Muslim, but there are a few cases of their intermarriage with Muslim Bobo. Bobo men were not keen on marrying Jula and Marka women, because these were not sufficiently habituated to hard farm work, the Bobo thought.

Religious discourses on marriage

With conversion to Islam and Christianity the inhabitants of Bala were exposed to new discourses about family values and ideal spousal relations. Even though these ideals had been embraced only partially and not to the same degree by all inhabitants, religious and other supra-local discourses provided arguments on which differently positioned persons could draw, when negotiating rights and duties within the household.

Since their arrival Catholic missionaries had worked on transforming the Bobo family and marriage system with the aim of establishing Christian conjugal families, disconnected from the corporate authority of their lineages (Marie-André du Sacré Cœur (Sœur) 1939, de Montjoye 1981, D. B. Sanou 1994). These new families were to become the foundation on which to build a new Christian society. The missionaries were particularly active in combatting what they called “forced marriage”. They recruited their converts primarily among young men and women, many of whom had run away from the prospect of being married against their will.

In both Islam and Christianity, the conjugal family is the ideal building block for the ideal society, but even though Islam considers marriage a religious duty, it is not a religious sacrament, as it is for the Catholics (Therborn 2004:133-135). In other words, a Muslim marriage is a contract between persons, not an act transmitting God’s grace. The spouses are not supposed to “become one” as in the Christian marriage. Generally, Islam has been more compatible with local family systems than Christianity, perhaps because of centuries of co-existence and mutual adaptation. Islam has been differently interpreted in different parts of West Africa and its practical implications for women have varied (Callaway and Creevey 1994).

In Bala in the mid-1990s, Muslims as well as Christians continued to arrange marriages for their children even though both religions stipulated that a person should not be married against her will. Polygyny is a pre-Islamic practice, but Islam has limited the number of wives to four and demands their equal treatment. In contrast, it is normal according to local customs that wives are treated differently depending on when and how they entered the marriage. In Bala even some Catholics have more than one wife, and this was a problem in the eyes of the Church. The Muslim view of the complementary but hierarchical relationship between spouses seems to have fit well with pre-Muslim values. But the Christian ideal of intimacy and companion-
ship, the idea of spouses “becoming one” was more alien and proved difficult to apply in practice. In the case of divorce, it was through Islam that Bobo men got the right to divorce a wife. A non-Muslim Bobo could in the past only rid himself of a wife if he treated her so badly that she left by own initiative (Roth 1994:44). By contrast, Catholics were against divorce altogether. The colonial missionaries were scandalized when Christian women who had been married in church later eloped to move in with another man (de Montjoye and de Montclos 1952-55:40).

Several studies from Burkina Faso describe Muslim wives to have considerable bargaining power, because of the clear linkages of rights and responsibilities in their “conjugal contracts” (Roth 1994, Roost Vischer 1997, Puget 1999). While the Quran (4:38) stipulates that a wife has the duty to obey her husband because he is her provider, the urban Zara women in Roth’s study made use of this rule as an argument in bargaining, because few men were able to provide for all the needs of their wives (Roth 1994:12). Roth also showed that the Muslim gender separateness creates female spaces of action outside the husband’s authority and she, therefore, argued that gender segregation is a condition for female power within a patriarchal society. No comparable studies of Christian couples in this region are available, but possibly a woman’s scope for bargaining is more limited when divergent interests and unequal power relations are glossed over by an ideology of intimacy and “being one”.

The ideal that marriage is an exchange relation where the husband’s duty is to provide, and the wife’s duty is to obey, fits well with how my informants of different age, sex and religion talked about relations in marriage. However, the ethnic groups in Bala differed in their understanding of what it meant to be a male provider. The ideal for the Jula and the Marka, was that women should not do farm work, while a Bobo or a Mossi man was considered a provider even if the wives had participated in producing the crops on the farm. What counted was his success as a farm manager, that is if the farm produced enough to satisfy its members’ needs. Christians in Bala, most of them ethnic Bobo, were aware of the ideal of spouses “becoming one”, and some even stated that they adhered to it. However, as far as I could observe Christian couples did not live their lives much differently from the Muslim or traditionalist couples.

How the “house” farm fell apart

The dissolution of the Bobo “house” as the basic unit for agricultural production was a gradual process and did not happen at the same time everywhere. Ethnographic accounts (cited below), tell of young men who were dissatisfied with having the fruits of their labour controlled by the elders, and who, therefore, set up their own farms, first to grow cash-crop and later also
to grow food crops for themselves and their conjugal household. Gradually, over a period of about 30 years, the “house” ceased to exist as a unit for joint production, but it maintained its political and ritual functions in the village society. This process, which Savonnet (1986) described as “the revolt of the young”, started earlier and probably more radically among Bobo’s neighbours to the east, the Bwa, who were the first to venture massively into commercial cotton farming (see also Capron 1973). Similar processes have been described for the Bobo (Le Moal 1980), for the Minyanka of Mali (Jonckers 1987) and for the Senufo and Jula of the Côte d’Ivoire (Bassett 2002a).

As outlined in Savonnet’s (1986) account, changes started after the Second World War, when war veterans returned to the villages with small pensions. These veterans refused to let their money become common “house” property and contested the elders’ authority by building themselves privately owned houses, and establishing personal farms. Other young men were inspired by their example. They wanted to earn personal money and cotton was the cash-crop at hand. Cotton was already grown on the common farm of the “house”, but this income was in the firm grip of the elders. In 1965, all the young household heads in the area studied by Savonnet had acquired the elders’ permission to maintain personal fields, but they had to present their harvest to the elders, who then kept a considerable share. They still had to work on the “house’s” common farm during five days of the week, but they could work on their personal fields on Mondays and Fridays, the two holy days on which work on the “house’s” farm was taboo. They were, however, not allowed to grow red sorghum and millet which were sacred crops. In the area studied by Savonnet, household farms were accorded complete independence, including the permission to grow the sacred crops, as late as the early 1980s. Only then had the “house” ceased to exist as a production unit.

The reorganization of the agricultural production system did not happen without friction. It was sacrilege to set up an individual farm if the permission of ancestors and the divine powers had not been granted; death under mysterious circumstances could be the result (Savonnet 1986:274). Many who succeeded in their individual undertakings feared that jealous fellow villagers would use magic against them and, therefore, spent considerable sums on protection. Already from the 1930s onwards, new protective and

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32 Geographer Georges Savonnet started to do research in western Upper Volta in the late 1950s and had thus witnessed the transformations he described.

33 Le Moal (1980) in his Bobo ethnography situates the beginning of this transformation even earlier, before the second World War, and points to changes in colonial taxation as a cause. As long as the colonial tax was fixed as a global sum for each village, the elders paid the tax from what the “houses” produced collectively, but when a head-tax was introduced, the elders let individuals farm cash-crops to pay their own taxes.

34 Şaul (1992) also describes the transforming effects of returning war veterans on the local economy and power structure.
anti-witchcraft cults had spread throughout the region (Şaul 1991b, 1992). Savonnet (1986) suggests that the elders accorded young men limited autonomy because they hoped thereby to prevent a total dissolution of the large production units. Young men had started to emigrate to work in the plantations of Côte d’Ivoire, and the elders complied with young men’s claims for personal farming to incite them to stay in the village. The state authorities also encouraged young entrepreneurial farmers, which they hoped would increase the production of exportable crops.

What about women’s crops?

In Savonnet’s (1986) description of how the large farming units dissolved, there is no mention of women having farmed individual plots. But Le Moal (1980:47) describes two kinds of fields that could be farmed on the two days when work on the foroba (“large field”) was taboo: the zakane-foroba, which belonged to a sub-group within the “house”, or the yere ma zakane, a field that belonged to an individual person, man or woman. The latter could only be worked after work on the zakane-foroba had been accomplished. As women had obligations both on the foroba and on the zakane-foroba there could not have been much time left for them to work on a personal plot.

In Bala some elderly women told me that in the past they had farmed personal plots on which they grew groundnuts for sale. One woman explained how this money enabled her to buy herself the large cooking pots needed to start commercial beer brewing. An elderly man explained that in the past there existed no individual plots, but that women and junior men had been allowed to farm for themselves on the borders of the foroba.

If Savonnet’s description is complemented with the accounts of some elderly women in Bala, it seems that there was a time when women and junior men could be autonomous producers, although only on the two days of the week when work on the communal farm was taboo. This was when the “house” still functioned as the principal unit for agricultural production. Later women’s and junior men’s individual labour was increasingly absorbed by the emerging household farms under the authority of its male head. Such a trend was confirmed by Şaul (1992) writing about changes in a Southern Bobo village. He argued that the loosening of corporate authority during the early phase of this transformation, made it possible for individual women and men to realize personal projects in farming or commerce. The tendency in a later phase was that wives of successful entrepreneurs had fewer possibilities to earn a personal income, because they invested so much work time in their husband’s enterprise. These women lost autonomy but gained a higher living standard than wives of poorer farmers (Şaul 1989c).

Agricultural extension services contributed to marginalizing women’s individual farming and to centralizing their labour to the communal field of the
farming unit. After the failed collective approach during the early colonial years, when each village was obliged to jointly farm a field of cotton as a tax to the colonial authorities, extension programmes for cotton targeted farmers as individuals (Bassett 2002a:165). It was imagined that the prospect of individual earnings would incite a farmer to produce more than he would as a member of a collective. Implicitly only men counted as individuals and women were not given access to the means for cotton production. An interesting example from the Côte d’Ivoire shows how in the second half of the 1980s many women nevertheless managed to grow cotton on personal plots, but that these efforts were curtailed by men who wanted women to be available for cotton-labour on the household farm under their headship (Bassett 2002a:213-217, 2002b). The example highlights the extent to which access to family labour became a key issue in commercial cotton farming.

A more recent case from Burkina Faso also illustrates the difficulty in promoting women as independent producers in a cultural context where men are expected to be the principal providers. In 2004 a Swiss non-governmental organization, started to promote women as producers of organic and fair cotton in some provinces of Burkina Faso. Somé (2010) describes how many men co-opted their wife’s cotton farm and used their wife as a proxy to become part of the project as soon as they realized that the “women’s cotton” was better paid than theirs.

The changes in the agricultural production system, which I have summarized only briefly, were often talked about as “individualization”, in the local context as well as in academic texts (e.g. Platteau 1996, Somé 2010). I suggest instead that it was a double process of decentralization and centralization: decision-making authority was decentralized from a few “house”-elders to a larger number of middle-aged heads of farming units. Simultaneously there was a centralization of labour from individual plots to the farming unit’s common farm, as heads of farming units drew on the labour of their wives and children to succeed with their “individual” farming enterprise. If indeed farming had become “individualized”, then one would have expected most of the agricultural production to take place on men’s and women’s individual plots, but this was not the case. At the time of my fieldwork it was difficult for women and junior men in Bala even to get their head’s permission to farm a personal plot, because their labour was needed on their common farm.

The re-emergence of large farming units

While the commercialization of farming led to the dissolution of the large “house” and the emergence of small household farms, the mechanization during the following decades not only halted this process but led to farming units becoming larger (McPhail and Polti 1988, Faure 1994c, Tersiguel
A large labour force was a prerequisite for early mechanization, that is the transition from hoe-farming to ox-plough farming, and this created a pattern of inequality which persisted thereafter. The more members a farming unit had when commercial farming started, the more it was able to accumulate capital. With this capital they mechanized their farm, and mechanization made further accumulation possible. Relatively wealthy farmers invested in farming equipment, cattle, modern houses, motorcycles and consumer goods. A few even invested in non-agricultural businesses, such as a milling-machine, a village shop or a car for commercial transport (Tersiguel 1995).

Faure’s and Tersiguel’s respective studies demonstrate that the availability of family labour was a prerequisite for successful mechanization. Faure argues that the transition from ox-plough farming to tractor farming became possible only with a very strict management by the male head of the farming unit’s labour and finances. To maintain and increase the family workforce, male heads arranged for early marriages of their sons, and thereafter tried to maintain them and their wives and children within their farming unit (Faure 1994c). The earlier World Bank study from the cotton zones of Burkina Faso, Togo and Côte d’Ivoire demonstrates that it was in fact economically beneficial to be part of a large farming unit conducting mechanized cotton farming, because the productivity of labour was considerably higher than for manual farming. However, the management of the incomes was in the firm hands of the eldest male, and not transparent. The study noted that particularly in Burkina Faso household members had expressed dissatisfaction about income distribution. Young men’s continued work migration to the coastal countries, in spite of rising incomes at home, was interpreted as an effect of this unfair distribution within farming units (McPhail and Polti 1988).

Even though the previous tendency towards smaller farming units was reversed, this should not be understood as the resurrection of the “house” as a production unit, as Faure seems to suggest (Faure 1994c:4). First, the large farming units were still smaller than “houses”, defined by their possession of an ancestral house, a wasa. Second, they lacked some of the ritual checks and balances on the head’s power which operated in the “house” when it functioned as an economic unit. There had for example been restrictions on how cereals could be taken from the common granary and a taboo against cereal sales (Capron 1973:327ff, Le Moal 1980:50). Third, the context of production and consumption had changed and it was, therefore, not possible for the “house” to be resurrected in its old form.
Where are the households?

Even though the large farming units of the mid 1990s were not resurrected “houses”, their internal organization bears resemblances to how the “house” was organized in the past when they still functioned as units for joint production, assuring communality while allowing for individual agency.

Large farming units were at the time of my fieldwork three- or four-generational clusters of conjugal units, monogamous as well as polygynous. In these units production, consumption and ownership continued to be structured according to the twin principles of the “common” foroba and the “individual” zakane, which means that even though they all drew their basic livelihood from their common undertaking of farming, there was scope for individual members to have personal incomes and property. The conjugal household (i.e. a man, his wives and their children) was “individual” in relation to the farming unit and “common” in relation to its individual members. Conjugal households that were part of a larger farming unit did not have any productive activities in common. Similar to how consumption was organized in the “houses” of the past, they functioned as “house-holding units” during the dry season when each woman cooked for her husband and children with grains allocated from the common stock of the farming unit.

There were, at the time of my fieldwork, 303 farming units in Bala, with an average size of 10.3 persons per unit. The smallest consisted of a divorced man living alone, while the largest consisted of seven brothers with their wives, children and aged parents. Both represented exceptional cases. There was also a bewildering diversity of living, production and consumption arrangements. People who shared a compound did not always farm together. In other cases, people who farmed together lived in separate parts of the village, depending on where they had found a space and had been granted permission to build their houses. I was even told about a family which had split their farm, but continued to pool resources for eating. Even spouses sometimes lived at some distance from each other in the village.

To make sense of this diversity in living, production and consumption arrangements, it is useful to think in terms of “developmental cycles of domestic groups”, a concept introduced to anthropology by Meyer Fortes (1969 [1958]). Fortes suggested that all domestic groups pass through the three phases: “expansion”, which starts when a couple has its first child, “fission”, when the first son moves out with his spouse and sets up an independent domestic unit, and finally “replacement”, when the last remaining son with

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35 The average is based on the total number of farming units, obtained from the agricultural extension agent in Bala, and the total population figure for Bala, obtained from the 1996 national census (INSD 2000b).

36 Permission to build a compound was granted by the elders of the “house” that used to farm a specific portion of the land on which the village was now expanding. No costs were involved, and land was not private property.
spouse and children replaces the domestic unit of his father (Fortes 1969 [1958]). Fortes took the conjugal couple as the basic unit and presumed that children moved out when they married. Jack Goody (cited in Robertson 1991:12) expanded the model, to make it applicable to all kinds of domestic organizations. He suggested that households could be vertically extended, that is include more generations, or horizontally expanded, that is include more people of the same generation. As pointed out by Robertson (1991:14), the extended type of domestic organization is advantageous where a large workforce is needed for farming (or similar activities) and where other economic and political institutions are lacking.

In Bala, the differences in size between farming units indicate that they were in different phases of their developmental cycle. Large farming units were both extended and expanded in Goody’s sense. Ideally, married sons with their wives and children continued to be part of their father’s farming unit, which sometimes also included other persons, such as foster children. Small farming units consisted either of young couples who recently had started to farm for themselves, or middle-aged and elderly couples who for some reason did not have children farming with them. According to a frequently stated ideal in Bala, brothers should continue to farm together even after the death of their father, but few were able to do so in the long run. Often, they entered into disagreement about the joint economy and, therefore, decided to split. The diversity of living, production and consumption arrangements reveals that the fission of domestic groups is a gradual process, which does not necessarily translate into a simultaneous separation of living, production and consumption arrangements.

The separate living arrangements of spouses reflected different phenomena. In some cases, the woman was a widow, married in a levirate marriage to a brother of her deceased husband, who continued to live with her children in her deceased husband’s house. Other non-cohabiting couples were young and had not yet established their own compound but occupied houses in the old village centre which had been left behind by out-moving relatives. Here a man and his wives did not necessarily live in adjacent houses.

Summary: Understanding change in farming units

As detailed in this chapter, much of the old Bobo social organization was still functional at the time of my fieldwork, although adjusted to new realities. Girls were still exchanged in marriage, except for those who eloped with a boyfriend. Boys were still undergoing initiation, but not everybody participated, and the period of their training had been shortened to allow

school-attendants to participate. Men continued to move up the age-ladder each time a new cohort of boys was initiated, and eventually ended up as elders. The elders continued to make important decisions about ritual matters, but they no longer controlled production and consumption. The collective rights of “houses” to land were still recognized, even though use-rights had become individualized to heads of farming units. The village’s subdivision into wards and “houses” and their relative ranking, was still the self-evident system for organizing collective matters for the villagers, for example when fertilizers for cotton were to be distributed or to mobilize labour for loading the harvested cotton into Sofitex’s container lorries.

In short, “houses” wala and “hearts” tini had not ceased to exist, they had simply ceased to be units for joint production, consumption and cohabitation. “Houses” continued to have social, political and ritual functions, and to be a person’s marker of identity. Members of a “hearth” neither farmed nor took their meals together but continued to cooperate about family matters such as the arrangement of marriages, care for ill members, and the organization of funerals. My point is that these farming units did not emerge from nowhere, but in accordance with the principle that sub-groups of a “house” could have some independence in economic matters. It is even probable that this organizational flexibility made it possible for the Bobo to conserve the “house” as a unit with ritual and political functions, even after it had ceased to be a unit for production, consumption and cohabitation.

Many domestic groups in Bala did not fit the conventional definition of a household as a unit for production, consumption and cohabitation. I, therefore, prefer to utilize a more precise terminology when speaking about domestic groups: I employ the word “house” (with citation marks) to refer to the specific unit wie (plur. wala), which in the past constituted a unit for production, consumption and cohabitation, which still had collective rights to a specific section of the old village and to a specific tract of farmland. The “house’s” main distinguishing feature was its wasa, the sanctuary of its ancestor’s, and its wasaporo, the elder who serves as its priest. I use the expressions “agricultural production unit” or “farming unit” to talk about the group of people who farmed together. This is a translation of the term unité d’exploitation agricole, commonly used in Francophone writings about smallholder farming, a term which is also employed by the agricultural authorities in Burkina Faso. When I talk about a “house-holding unit” I refer to a conjugal household functioning as a sub-group for consumption within a farming unit. The Anglophone literature on intra-household processes does

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38 While the English literature on West Africa labels any large cluster of conjugal units who live and consume together a “household”, the French equivalent ménage generally refers to the conjugal unit, that is a man, his wives and their children. Composite domestic units living and/or farming together are in French texts called l’exploitation agricole, l’exploitation familiale, or simply la famille.
not distinguish between conjugal households and composite farming units and, therefore, I follow the convention of that corpus of literature and employ the word “intra-household” even when I mean “intra-farming unit” (for example in well-established expressions such as “intra-household bargaining”). Occasionally I employ the generic term “domestic unit” when it is not necessary to differentiate between conjugal households and farming units.

Anthropologists have made the analytical distinction between “the family”, as an aggregate of persons connected through kinship and marriage, and “the household” as an aggregate of people residing and consuming together (Holy 1996). In the economic literature this distinction is not always made, which results in naturalizing assumptions about what households are and about relations within them (Harris 1981). I find it useful to maintain the distinction between family and household, to emphasise that changes in domestic organization in Bala does not mean that households have replaced lineages, or that families have become nuclear, but rather that there have been shifts in how people relate to each other, like the extent to which kinship or marriage relations translates into joint or separate production, consumption or cohabitation. For example, brothers do not cease to be family when they split their farming unit, but their relationship changes.

In summary, deep-going social and economic changes had taken place in Bala, and in other villages of the cotton zone, but these should not be understood as if one social form has replaced another. Instead, changes were more like shifts in practice and represented a gradual adjustment of pre-existing organizational forms to new circumstances. Throughout these changes the twin principles of the “common” and the “individual” continued to structure domestic organizations and their economies. What had changed was its content, that is what counted as “common” and “individual”.

The introduction of new religions and of new economic opportunities led to power struggles between generations. Young men picked up the new ideas, challenged the power of the elders, and thereby transformed the social context as such. Unfortunately, in the written accounts, little is said about women as agents, and it can only be assumed that women of different ages also took part in these power struggles. What is clearly shown in accounts from the second half of the twentieth century is that it was the young men who gained power and the male elders who lost some of theirs. These young men had at the time of my fieldwork become middle-aged heads of farming unit and were the most influential power holders on economic matters.

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39 There is considerable inconsistency in how the terms “household” and “family” have been used in academia, in addition to the different meanings they have in the local societies under study (see Pilon et al. 1997).
Part I
3. The common undertaking of farming

One night in late May a heavy rain had made the soil moist enough to allow for a plough to turn it over. This was the moment everybody had waited for since the dance of the *kele* masks, which closed the dry season cycle of ritual feasts. By the following morning, the relaxed pace of dry season village life had changed into febrile activity. What mattered now was to get seeds into the soil as soon as possible. The earlier the field was planted, the earlier the crops could be harvested.

There was no time to lose. Women and girls hurried to finish their cooking. They loaded large enamel basins with the day’s provisions, together with their hoes and tiny sowing baskets, lifted them on to their heads and started walking to the fields. Many women carried small children in a *pagne* on their back. Some had more than an hour’s walk ahead of them. Men hurriedly crisscrossed the village on their bicycles for last minute errands or social calls. Hoes, ploughs, sowing-machines - everything had been mended weeks ago. Those who possessed oxcarts used them for transport to the field, while others loaded the equipment on their bicycle. Between eight and nine in the morning the village gradually became deserted. Not until shortly before sunset at seven did the inhabitants return, their untrained bodies aching after several months of idleness. During the next ten months their days would be filled with hard physical work, from morning to evening.

Despite the prospect of hard labour ahead, I sensed a kind of euphoria. In the evenings, the village reverberated with merry greetings, *sige!* (“you have strived well!”), shouted from neighbour to neighbour, too much in a hurry home to stop for a conversation. People were happy to start working again. As one male friend repeatedly said, “now we are bored with just drinking and doing nothing”. After all, the people of Bala were farmers, and they were proud of it. Although men as well as women often complained about the hardship of work, they also emphasized their own ability to endure arduous work and to produce well.

This chapter describes the agricultural production process and takes a close look at the labour input that differently positioned individuals contributed to the farming units’ common undertaking. The chapter is the first of Part I, which deals with aspects of production and consumption in the common domain of the domestic economy. I recall the sketch visualizing the domestic economy introduced in the first chapter. Below is an excerpt from that sketch which shows only the flows of labour from the individual to the common

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40 *Pagne* is the French word for the rectangular cotton fabric which women habitually wear as wrap-around skirt. *Pagnes* also have various other utilizations, such as carrying babies and packaging things.
domain. The reason why no arrows point in the opposite direction is that the common economy was under no obligation to furnish labour to individuals’ own undertakings. For example, the collective workforce of the farming unit was not mobilized to assist a woman with her commercial beer brewing, nor did a woman have the right to utilize collective equipment, like the family’s oxcart for such transports. Women could draw on family members for assistance, but these were negotiated dyadic relationships between individuals, as will be described in chapters seven and eight.

Figure 3: Flow of labour in the domestic economy

Most farming units in Bala relied on farming as their principal source of income. All members participated in the work, and the incomes from farming constituted their common fund under the management of the male head. Members also engaged in other activities to earn a personal income, but the conditions for these activities were set by the itinerary of the common farming project. As I will show, the labour requirement in farming was not only a consequence of the growth season or the age and gender divisions of labour, but also of crop choice, access to farming technology and the composition of each farming unit. Therefore, there were differences within the categories “men” and “women” with regard to labour obligations on the farm vis-à-vis access to own time. That is the reason why to understand women’s economic strategies one must start with the common economy of the farming unit.
Mechanization and the multiplication of labour

Cash-cropping made possible a relatively high degree of mechanization. In Bala this process started in the 1970s and 1980s when male household heads were granted credits for a plough and draught oxen and were taught how to use them. This credit was then cut from their cotton payment during several years. Later other ox-drawn tools such as “weeders” and “ridgers”, as well as sowing-machines were promoted. Between 1977 and 1992 a French development project even introduced tractors to some of the large farmers (Faure 1994c, 1994b, 1994a). At the time of my fieldwork most farmers in Bala used ox-ploughs. Of the 303 agricultural production units recorded in October 1995 by the agricultural extension agent in Bala, 14 (4.6%) were motorized, 255 (84.2%) used ox-drawn tools and 34 (11.2%) were manual. Compare this to the national average at the same time of only 30 per cent of the farms having a plough, whether ox or tractor drawn (Economist Intelligence Unit 1999–2000). In other words, Bala was far above the national average with regards to agricultural mechanization, and the same goes for the entire cotton zone.

Several studies in Burkina Faso, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire and Togo show that women’s workload increased with the expansion of cotton farming (Bassett 1988, McPhail and Polti 1988, Faure 1994c, Tersiguel 1995, 1998, Bassett 2002a, Somé 2010). It may seem as a paradox that agricultural mechanization augmented the need for human labour. The explanation is that the farmed area was expanded to allow for the cultivation of both cotton and food crops, and even though the plough facilitated the task of soil preparation, there was more work in seeding, weeding and harvesting. Mechanization created new labour bottlenecks and as a result the division of labour by age and sex was modified. Women took on new tasks, such as weeding, which previously was a male task. At the time of my fieldwork a preferred division of labour existed, but when necessary any member of a farming unit could be asked to do any kind of task. Furthermore, the farming season was prolonged compared to before commercial cotton farming. Planting started earlier, and the cotton harvest continued several months after the cereals had been harvested.

Recollections by elderly interlocutors concurred with earlier ethnographic records (Tauxier 1912:52) on the following division of labour in the past. Men cleared the land, worked the soil and weeded. Women put the seeds into the soil. Women also cooked and carried the food to the field. At harvest, men cut the cereal stalks at their base and laid them out in the field for

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41 This is a translation of the French butteur, an ox-drawn tool for making ridges, used to pile up soil against the stalks of crops. The English terminology for agricultural tools is from Şaul (1991b).

42 There were 11 tractors in Bala, but 14 farming units counted as motorized because in some cases two farming units shared one tractor.
the women to cut off the ears. Women thereafter assembled the harvest and carried it to the threshing ground. Men threshed, and women winnowed. Harvesting and threshing were done by the age set of newly initiated young men, who harvested the different “house” farms, one after the other. This collective work was accompanied by songs and drumming. The elders supervised the whole sequence of events after consultation with the divine powers and performed the necessary rituals. This short description confirms Guyer’s (1991:260) characterization of agriculture in the West African savannah as a lineage-based collective activity, with a ritualized sequence of work and a clear division of tasks according to age and gender.

Cash or food in the choice of crops

Farmers in Bala grew a mix of cotton, cereals, pulses and vegetables. Commonly one agricultural production unit cultivated a single field subdivided into plots, where the different crops were rotated from one year to the next. Cotton was followed by maize, which thereby benefitted from the fertilizer that remained in the soil. Maize should then ideally be followed by pulses to improve the soil, but as Tersiguel (1995:97-100) shows in his study from a village in Burkina Faso’s cotton zone, such amounts of pulses were simply not grown. Pulses were not consumed in quantities that matched the size of a cotton-field, and commercially they were less lucrative than cereals. More commonly, the plot was, therefore, planted with sorghum in the third year, and the following year fertilized and used for cotton. Tersiguel’s study found that large cotton farmers had reduced the number of crops to only cotton and maize, which were shifted in a two-year rotational schema. Even in Bala there were farmers who grew nothing but cotton and maize.

In 1988, 28 per cent of the cultivated area on the territory of Bala had been planted with cotton, but both the percentage and the totality of the farmed area are likely to have increased since the time of my fieldwork (Lainé, Berger and Sanou 1990). In the agricultural year of my fieldwork 1995/96 Sofitex predicted a cotton harvest in Bala of more than 810 tons. Estimated figures for cereal production in the same year illustrate the relative importance of the difference crops: maize 1,680 tons, white sorghum 355 tons, millet 324 tons, red sorghum 88 tons, rain fed rice 30 tons and 2 tons of

43 When a farming unit maintained more than one field, the reason was that the first was too small and could not be extended. Additional farmland had, therefore, been borrowed elsewhere.

44 A more recent overview from the cotton zone of Western Burkina Faso mentions farmers who had even abandoned food-crops, and who had specialized on growing cotton on large surfaces, using tractors and paid labour (Şaul, Ouadba and Bognounou 2003).

45 These figures were obtained through an analysis of SPOT satellite images. To my knowing there are no such figures for the years of my fieldwork.
white fonio (*Digitaria exilis*) (Source: Agricultural extension officer in Bala). Red sorghum was grown for brewing while the other cereals were food crops, and among the latter maize was the dominant crop. Maize was both a food and a cash-crop, and much of the maize produced in Bala was exported from the village. Cotton, maize and plough-farming go together (Tersiguel 1995).

Maize was the favourite food crop because it produced the highest yields per hectare.\(^{46}\) Its work itinerary fit well with the itinerary of cotton. For maize to succeed on light soils, such as those in Bala, chemical fertilizers were required. Many farmers grew cotton simply to obtain fertilizers on credit, so that they could utilize some of it on their maize plot. Even when as a result their cotton harvest barely paid for the credits their farming unit achieved a better food security than it otherwise would have had. That is why farmers often claimed that they “gained nothing from cotton, except the maize”.\(^{47}\)

Farmers who did not have access to fertilizers on credit and lacked cash to purchase it, relied instead on white sorghum as their main cereal. Sorghum was commonly inter-cropped with cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata*), whose leaves were a principal vegetable during the rainy season. By the time sorghum plants were large, the cowpea-leaves had already been consumed. White sorghum easily produces a harvest, but a smaller quantity per hectare than maize. Another inconvenience is that sorghum is easily attacked by a parasitic weed (*Striga senegalensis*) and should, therefore, not be grown for several years on the same plot.

The disadvantage of the highly nutritious millet (*Pennisetum sp.*), is that it produces even smaller yields per hectare than sorghum and that it grows slowly and, therefore, needs to be weeded three times, while other cereals need only to be weeded twice. The first weeding was done manually with hoes, but the second could be done with an ox-drawn “weeder”. The extra weeding operation required by millet discouraged people from growing it even though they still loved eating it.\(^{48}\) Due to its low productivity and labour requirement, millet had a higher market price than other cereals.

Rice was an urban food, and in Bala it was the typical dish for celebrations and religious holidays. To encourage national rice production, and diminish the reliance on Asian imports, the agricultural authorities had just introduced a new variety of rain-fed rice and in 1995/96 a few farmers in

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\(^{46}\) Figures from a village of this region show that in the agricultural year 1988/89 the average yields were 2.4 tons per hectare for maize, 639 kg per hectare for sorghum and only 167 kg per hectare for millet (Tersiguel 1995:155).

\(^{47}\) Similar observations have been made by Somé (2010).

\(^{48}\) Both Bassett (1988) and Şaul (1991b) have noted that millet was becoming rarer while white sorghum had become the most common staple. Bassett suggested that this was due to labour bottlenecks created by cotton farming, while Şaul simply wrote “the reasons for this need to be better understood” (p.305).
Bala gave it a try. Fonio on the other hand, had been a major staple in Bala in the past, but was at the time of my fieldwork almost abandoned. Fonio was said to be easy to grow, but its preparation before cooking was extremely time-consuming and women in Bala simply had no time for fonio.

Additional crops on the farm were groundnuts, cowpeas, “bambara groundnuts” (*Vigna subterranea*), sesame and watermelon. Sesame and watermelon were secondary crops which could be sown on plots where early groundnuts or maize have already been harvested.

Women planted vegetables on the borders of the field and around the field house, mostly peppers, okra, “native green eggplant” (*Solanum sp.*) and different hibiscus species. These were considered women’s crops, but this does not mean that women used them for their own ends. Women were obliged to provide the ingredients for the vegetable sauces that accompanied the daily meal of *too*, a stiff porridge made of cereal flour. Most of the vegetables grown by women were, therefore, consumed by the household. Some of the weeds that grow in the field in the beginning of the rainy season were also spared during weeding because they were appreciated sauce ingredients.

In some farming units, women were also allowed to grow crops such as red sorghum, cowpeas, groundnuts or “bambara groundnuts” for themselves, crops which they sold or used at their liking. When a farmer was asked about what crops there were on his farm these plants were rarely mentioned. One had to walk in the field to discover that women had crops, a little here and a little there, even if they did not farm separate plots. Some heads of farming units explained their reluctance to allocate plots to women “because then she would demand time to cultivate it”, which they claimed would disturb their organization of labour on the common farm. “Here in Bala women help their

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49 After the devaluation of the West African currency in 1994, the price of imported Asian rice had risen, there was thus a potential for developing rice production in Burkina Faso.

50 Cowpeas were grown both for their edible leaves and for their seeds.

51 Several kinds of hibiscus species and varieties were grown in Bala, all with edible leaves. As they belong to the same family as cotton, the same insects attack them. Farmers, therefore, planted hibiscus along the cotton field, to let them receive the cotton’s sprayings. *Hibiscus sabdariffa* was cultivated in two varieties. The greenish/whitish fruit-capsule of the one was a sauce ingredient, while the red fruit-capsule of the other was sold on the urban market where it was used to brew a tea or a sweet soft drink. Their seeds were first extracted because a fermented condiment could be made from them. Leaves could be dried and stored away. *Hibiscus squamosus*, spread from one year to the next. It was spared at weeding, because men used its stalks to produce fibres for ropes and the dress of masks. *Hibiscus asper* is a wild species that was saved during weeding for its edible leaves, much appreciated at the beginning of the rainy season, but not much consumed thereafter.

52 These edible weeds were: *yelepre yanna* (Lat. *Amaranthus hybridus*), *yerckuba* (Lat. *Boerhavia diffusa*), *kekara* (Lat. *Cassia tora*), *burzndara* (Lat. *Commelina benghalensis*), *wurokper* (Lat. *Cucumis melo*), *yansεbε* (Lat. *Gynandropsis gynandra*), *magatera* (Lat. *Ipomea eriocarpa*) and *worosaanna* (Lat. *Tribulus terrestris*).
husbands. That is how we have become successful in cotton farming”, explained one head of a farming unit.53 There were some Bobo women who farmed their own plot, but it was not considered a female right as it was in some ethnic groups, such as the Mossi. Mossi women in Bala, even though they were under the same time constraints as the Bobo, had maintained the practice of farming their own plot, and they were accorded time to work on it, as women did in the Mossi homelands in central and eastern Burkina Faso (Ouédraogo and Ouédraogo 1986, Rookhuizen 1986, Kevane and Gray 1999, Thorsen and Reenberg 2000).

Throughout the farming cycle, the male head of the farming unit made a series of small decisions to maximize the harvest while reducing the risk of failure. He decided about the best mix of food and cash-crops and what cereals to plant, and he considered the farm’s soil potential, the previous years’ farming history, and the availability of farming equipment, labour and cash. He also decided how to allocate labour to different tasks.

The farming calendar and its bottlenecks

There are three major sequences in farming, and each has its labour bottlenecks: ploughing/sowing, weeding and harvesting. Farmers employed different strategies to minimize these bottlenecks through their choice of crops, investment in farming technology and management of human labour.

The itinerary for cotton was the most rigid and set the framework for when operations on the other crops could be performed. Cotton must be sown in ploughed soil, preferably starting from the beginning of June. As soon as weeds showed, herbicides must be sprayed, unless the farmer opted for manual weeding. Cotton seeds were sown in pairs, and often both seeds germinated, and the seedlings then must be manually thinned. Thereafter chemical fertilizer was applied. Once the plants had grown to some height, an ox-drawn plough for weeding (a weeder) could be used for the second weeding. Those farming units who did not possess such a tool relied on manual hoeing. Even those who used a weeder between the rows, worked with hoes to weed between plants. A few weeks later an ox-drawn plough for ridging (a ridger) could be used to pile up soil against the stalks of cotton and maize. Others did this work with a hoe. Between August and October, every two weeks, cotton should be sprayed with insecticide. This was done between three and seven times, depending on whether there were signs of insect attacks. The cotton harvest started end of November and could go on

53 Bwa cotton farmers, interviewed by Saratta Traoré, forwarded similar arguments for not letting women farm a personal plot. Many women seem to have farmed personal plots nevertheless (Traoré 2010b:96ff).
until February. The capsules containing the fibres open at different moments and, therefore, each field had to be harvested more than once.

Some cereals were planted before the cotton, others after. How early it was possible to start ploughing depended on the humidity of the soil. Tractor farmers depended less on soil humidity than ox-plough farmers, whose animals were weak after the dry season’s meagre pastures. Farmers preferred to sow some of their maize before starting with cotton. But if rains were late, they might start with sorghum or millet, which could be inserted into the dry soil without previous ploughing. In such cases tilling and weeding were later done in one single hoeing operation. This meant that farmers who planted without ploughing had to handle more laborious weeding. Weeds were scratched loose and left in the sun to dry, but if they were plenty, they were piled in heaps away from the plants. Another advantage of sorghum and millet was that they could ripen even if sown very late in the season. It often happened that farmers had to re-sow a field several times due to short periods of draught which had made their growing crops die.\textsuperscript{54}

Two varieties of groundnuts were cultivated, one early and one late. Early groundnuts could be sown as early as mid-May, before everything else, and be harvested as early as August. Thereafter, that plot could be used to plant a rapid crop like sesame or watermelon. With a plot of early groundnuts, the farmer could ease the difficult months before the main harvest started in October, a period when most households experienced shortage of both food and cash. Late groundnuts on the other hand could be planted as late as July and harvested in September, and thereby the household’s workforce was utilized at a time when there was not much other work on the farm. Maize also existed in two varieties. Early maize, harvested already in August, was for immediate consumption, eaten grilled, ground to flour or sold.

The main cereal harvest started in the beginning of October, to be finished by the end of November. This was a very busy time. All other farming operations had been mechanized to some extent (although not everybody possessed the equipment), but there existed yet no machinery to facilitate the harvest of any of the crops. The ears and cobs of millet, sorghum and maize were all collected manually. The more mechanized the farm, the larger the surfaces and the greater the work to gather in the harvest. The cereals ripened almost at the same time, and the farmers had to prioritize which crop to collect first and which to leave for later, thereby risking their deterioration. At this period of the year labourers for paid work were difficult to find, because they all were busy getting their own cereals in.

Cereals were differently threshed. First, maize-cobs had to be de-husked, a time-consuming manual job. They were thereafter stored in lofty enclosures for drying. For large quantities farmers hired the services of a machine.

\textsuperscript{54} Šaul (1991b) reports an instance when farmers had sown sorghum as late as the end of August because a short drought had made the previously planted crop die.
for shelling which moved around in the village during December and January. After shelling the maize was filled into bags for storage or sale. For ritual reasons millet should be threshed outside the village before the end of November. However, many farmers found it difficult to finish their cereal harvest before that date, and secretly brought un-threshed millet into the village or stored it in their cottage on the farm. Sorghum, on the other hand, cannot be well preserved once it is threshed; it was instead stored on top of wooden constructions, which at the same time served as shady places for resting during the hot season.

The cotton harvest could be more or less extended in time depending on how much had been planted and depending on whether the farmer opted for paid labour. Many farmers preferred to pay labourers to speed up the harvest. They thereby reduced the risk of cotton being damaged by bush fires or grazing cattle and they could hope for an earlier payment from Sofitex. With paid labourers even large cotton producers could finish harvesting by the end of December, while medium producers who relied on family labour continued until early February. The cotton was then transported by oxcart to the site where it was weighed and packed into Sofitex’s containers.

March to May was the off-season in farming. Men had occasional work to do in the farms, such as clearing cotton stalks, transporting cow-dung from their courtyard’s barn to the field, repairing the cottage on the farm or clearing bush to extend their field. They also made rounds in the bush to collect plants for medicine, wood for carvings and for constructions, to trap small animals and search for honey. In the village, houses were repaired, and agricultural equipment renewed. Men often travelled to town for different businesses. Women were free to pursue their own activities, such as commercial beer brewing or to collect fire-wood and edible plants in the bush.

For everybody the dry season was a period of relative leisure, recreation and feasting. Weddings and funerals were organized, and visits made to other villages. A sequence of ritual feasts with mask dances closed the agricultural year and reopened the next, assuring fertility and reproduction of the society. People jokingly talked about this as “the season of beer-drinking”.

Farming entails labour peaks and these can be differently experienced depending on gender. Tersiguel’s (1995:123) time-use data from a cotton farming village, indicate three major labour peaks: mid-June, when there was an overlap between the sequences of ploughing/sowing and the sequence of weeding, in mid-October, when the maize was harvested and early January, when the cotton was harvested. According to Tersiguel’s data the sequence of ploughing/sowing did not seem to be very laborious. Women in Bala, however, talked about it as one of the most tiresome work-sequences on the

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55 In Bobo tradition millet is thought of as having a soul and it is, therefore, considered dangerous to bring it into the village without following a strict ritual protocol (Le Moal 1980).
farm! No wonder, because putting seeds in the soil after it has been turned over by the plough was typically a female task.

**Gendered division of labour on the common farm**

The participation of women in all sequences of farming had become crucial for its success. As mentioned, in the past Bobo women had only sown and participated in the harvest. The heaviness of these two work-sequences for women should not be underestimated, but in-between they had a period of relative leisure during which they had no other obligation than to cook and carry the meals to the fields.\(^{56}\) Women had enough time for what they considered “women’s work” (in Jula *musow ka baara*); the collection and processing of edible plants.

At the time of my fieldwork, people said that women and men did the same work in farming. Nevertheless, if details are considered, there were divisions of tasks according to age and sex. Some of these were not rigid, but others were. For example, only children aged six to nine years, of either sex, herded cattle. Herding was an everyday job, all year round. Farming units who did not have children of the appropriate age would borrow somebody else’s child for this task. Such arrangements were not paid for, but the child had the right to food and health care and should be given clothes or cash at the end of the farming season. Ploughing was a task for a man at the height of his strength. It was most commonly done by a young man, such as the eldest son or the youngest brother of the head of the farming unit. He needed the assistance of a child to “pull the nose of the oxen”. Women could even plough, I was told, it had happened on occasions when the men of the farming unit were absent or prevented by other obligations.

Sowing was a typically female task. With a little basket containing the seeds in their left hand and a little hoe in their right, women walked bent over the field making holes at regular intervals and distributing seeds in them. Men participated in sowing out of necessity, because women alone were not always able to keep up with the speed of ploughing. Ploughing is relatively rapid compared to the manual insertion of seeds into the soil. But if men had the choice, they preferred to lay out the lines for sowing rather than distributing the seeds.\(^{57}\)

\(^{56}\) Food preparation was more time consuming in the past when machine mills did not exist.

\(^{57}\) There were two ways of doing this, either with a cord between two sticks, or with the help of a T-shaped iron line tracer with three small rigid tines on the horizontal bar. In the first case, two persons were needed to place and fix the cord for one single line, in the other case, one person dragged the line tracer over the field, and thereby created three correctly spaced lines. The line tracer could only be used on moist soil.
According to traditional Bobo belief, there was a connection between women’s fertility and crop production (Capron 1973:206, Şaul 1991b, Sanon 1992). In the process of sowing women were thought to transmit some of their own fertility to the seed. According to the same logic, because menstruation is failed procreation, a menstruating woman passing near growing crops could harm the fructification of the crop.59

Young men (a younger brother or eldest son of the head) were responsible for spraying herbicides and pesticides using battery-operated pumps. This division of labour was not surprising, as the agricultural extension services had trained men, not women, in how to handle new technical equipment. The distribution of chemical fertilizers, on the other hand, had become a task for women. No technical device was used for it, women just walked bent along the rows and placed a small handful of granules at the foot of each plant.

In the groundnut harvest, from August to October, women did most of the time-consuming work. Young men went to the fields in the morning hours to dig up plants, and women and children thereafter spent the day pulling off the nuts from these plants. Men could also do this work, but as there was time enough for the women to do it, they did not consider it necessary to participate. As one young man explained it, “men do not like tasks that need neither strength nor rapidity”. Women were considered to have the necessary patience for easy but tedious tasks.

Children had a busy time in September and October, when the cereals started to ripen, because it was their responsibility to prevent birds and cattle from eating the crops. Children made themselves flutes for this purpose, and the sound of these flutes and other simple instruments were often heard during the evenings.

The cereals were harvested by men and women together, but with complementary tasks, as in the past. Men cut the stalks at their roots and laid them out in lines on the field and women proceeded behind them to collect the ears. Sorghum ears were cut off with a knife while millet was broken. In the maize harvest, stalks were not cut, but men and women walked through the field with bags, which they filled with the maize cobs as they broke them off from the stalks. Women carried the harvest home or to the farm cottage, from where a cart would later transport it to the village. Men did not carry but undertook transports by cart. Teenage girls did most of the heavy carrying, while the women concentrated on harvesting. I saw men cutting ears of millet and sorghum but was told that a woman would never cut stalks. When

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58 A further illustration of the link between the reproduction of plants and humans in Bobo thought is the word *terebe* used both to talk about a pregnant woman and about “the swelling head of a cereal plant at the moment when the grains are about to appear” (Le Bris and Prost 1981:328).

59 Similar taboos have been found elsewhere in Africa and Gausset (2002) has suggested that the rationality behind them is to protect delicate processes of production from the danger of blending with other, metaphorically similar processes.
I asked why, some explained that cutting stalks was men’s work because strength and rapidity was needed. Others offered practical reasons such as that the men usually finished their task before women and, therefore, men helped the women to get it all done.

After harvest, cereals must be transported, threshed and winnowed or de-husked and de-grained, and thereafter stored. Each crop had its specific procedure, involving men and women of different ages differently. Carrying and winnowing were female tasks: carrying was done by the young and strong while winnowing was a task for the skilled and elderly. The threshing of millet and sorghum and the shelling of maize were tasks for younger men. Their fathers supervised the work and filled the cereals in bags of 100 kg. Young men thereafter carried the bags to their storage place.

In the cotton harvest, every able-bodied person participated. Men were more active in supervision and in sorting out impurities and discoloured cotton from the heaps piled up by the pickers.\textsuperscript{60} Many farmers hired workers for picking, and this was the agricultural task for which the use of paid labour was most common. The stated reason why farmers employed workers in the cotton harvest, but rarely for other farming operations, was that cotton was paid for in cash, therefore, cash could be spent on its production. For the same reason farmers used costly herbicides on cotton but were reluctant to use it on food crops.\textsuperscript{61} Another reason for not using paid labour on food crops was that it was difficult to find people at peak moments because everybody was busy on their own farms. Labourers were available for the cotton harvest, because not all farmers planted equally large areas of cotton. The poorer farmers typically finished their harvest early and were thereafter available for paid day labour. To handle labour bottlenecks in weeding and the cereal harvest, farmers relied on the common practice of reciprocal work exchanges, as will be described in the next section, or they simply neglected or postponed some tasks. Similar strategies are also described in Bassett’s (1988) study of cotton farming in northern Côte d’Ivoire.\textsuperscript{62}

Weighing the cotton and loading it into Sofitex’s containers was an entirely male affair, organized collectively in “house”-based work teams. The cotton was carried into the container and packed by tramping. The time needed for weighing and loading the cotton made men’s agricultural work

\textsuperscript{60} Impure cotton was classified lower by the Sofitex and less paid. Not all pickers were selective when they picked, and the farm owner had an economic interest to keep his cotton clean.

\textsuperscript{61} Luna, in her recent study from cotton farming in Burkina Faso reports that herbicides were being used excessively and on all kinds on crops. The reason stated by the farmers was lack of family labour for weeding due to children’s school attendance (Luna 2018a).

\textsuperscript{62} Bassett (1988) argues that farmers choose between neglecting either cotton or food crops. To my understanding this is a simplified description, because farmers make choices involving all crops in their farm. They may choose between food crops, such as neglecting millet and prioritizing maize, or simply neglect one part of a planted area while trying to save the rest.
season 1-2 months longer than the women’s, but on the other hand they had had time for relaxation during the groundnut harvest.

Work exchanges and paid labour

In farming the timeliness of operations can be pivotal for the success or failure of a certain crop (Upton 1987, Guyer 1988). A major inconvenience of small farming units is the difficulty in raising enough labour at crucial moments. In Bala at such moments, few people were available for paid work, and most farmers didn’t even have cash to spend on workers. The large work parties of the “house” no longer existed, nor were there any traces of the work associations consisting of young men to be initiated, the ton described by Sanou (1983).

Instead of the work communities of the past, farmers in Bala had organized themselves in small and informal groups for rotational labour exchange. Such associations consisted of 5-10 persons of the same sex and same generation. Membership could be based on kinship, neighbourhood or friendship. Men and women of all ages as well as youngsters were members of such workgroups. It often happened that we came to visit somebody’s farm and found that most of the family workforce was dispersed, working together with their group mates on somebody else’s farm. The whole setup for this labour exchange was voluntary and very informal, and nobody was a member of a work group.

Work exchanges within these groups were based on balanced reciprocity. No single member could profit from the others’ labour. Unbalanced workdays were talked about in terms of debt that must be paid back later with the same amount of person/days. The main advantage for a farmer to participate in such work exchange was that he could call upon his (or his wives’ or his children’s) group mates to eliminate a labour bottleneck at a specific moment in time. For example, Hamidou, one of the farmers I encountered who had sown cereals in unploughed soil, due to lack of ploughing capacity, later invited his workgroup to help with weeding. Work groups were also frequently mobilized during cereal harvest, because this work was most efficiently done when a team of men and a team of women work together. Some smaller farming units simply did not have the optimal composition for their own workforce. For instance, it was difficult for a single man to clear a piece of bush to extend a farm, so clearing became a task for a male work group.

Another possibility for small farming units to handle labour bottlenecks was to pool two farming units’ labour forces for specific operations. For example, during cereal harvest, Jean and his brother Joseph pooled their families into a single workforce to harvest both farms. They did not calculate how many person/days each family had contributed to harvesting the field. In this respect labour pooling was different from work exchange.
In the groundnut harvest, I observed another system for labour exchange. The women of a farming unit invited their female friends to help with the work of pulling the nuts from the plants, and this help was remunerated with a share of the harvest. For every large enamel basin that a woman filled with groundnuts she was allowed to keep one small basket for herself. The most senior woman of the farming unit made the division of what each one should keep. Even women too old to farm, could be invited for such work, which gave them an occasion to earn a few groundnuts for themselves.

Apart from the practical value of work exchange (i.e. to manage labour bottlenecks), people enjoyed it. During the agricultural season everybody was stuck from morning to evening on the farm. Working together with friends was a way of socializing while working. Work conversations were always more animated between members of a work group than between members of a family.

As mentioned, the cotton harvest was the occasion when paid labour was most frequently employed. Men, women and children, everybody picked cotton. The paid workers were of two categories, either poor farmers (men and women) who sold their labour on an individual basis, or groups of friends who raised money for a common purpose. For the poor farmers it was necessary to complement insufficient farm incomes with day-labour and they had time for it because they finished their own small harvest early. In Bala such workers were not very numerous, but I was told that it was easy to hire day labourers from neighbouring Mossi settlements. Most of the paid cotton pickers in Bala were groups of friends who raised money for some common activity. For example, the newly created Women’s Association (Groupement Villageois Féminin) raised money for their common fund. Groups of youngsters worked to raise money for a feast in the dry season. Other groups of women or men sold their labour to be able to buy themselves similar dresses for the dry season festivities. Payment in kind could also be agreed upon, such as red sorghum to be transformed into beer and drunk by that group, or the promise of a pig to be consumed during a feast.

In contrast to the reciprocal work exchanges, these paid work parties constituted a net withdrawal of labour from the farming unit. Heads of farming units apparently accepted that their members worked for others, even if their own cotton harvest had not yet finished. Women, junior men and children were thereby given the possibility to earn money for their own leisure activities. Not all heads of farming units were equally tolerant of their members’ commitments outside the farming unit. One difficulty for the Women’s Association, as explained by its leaders, was to recruit and maintain its membership. Some women had not been allowed by their head of farming unit to participate in the association’s workdays, and as they had to pay fines for being absent, they had preferred to resign their membership.

When workers, whether paid or unpaid, were invited to somebody’s farm, the owner must feed them over the day. Food meant the ordinary staple of
stiff porridge together with a vegetable sauce. However, what could be acceptable food for household members was not so for invited workers. At a work invitation the food must be plenty, it must be well cooked, and it would be a good idea to serve some fish or meat with it. The better the food, the happier the workers, and the better the work advanced. Bad cooking on a day when there were workers on the farm would spoil a housewife’s reputation and make her husband feel ashamed. These meals were considered as farm-inputs, and if ever a man spent money from the common fund for milling and condiments, it would be for such occasions.

Summary: Consequences of mechanization for women

As discussed in this chapter, the introduction of new farming technologies created new labour bottlenecks, which were partly compensated with an increased involvement of women in farm work. With a plough, larger areas could be farmed than with only hoes. Therefore, women’s work in sowing became more laborious. Plough farming entailed more work in weeding, a task which previously was done by men, and women were drawn into this sequence as well. The increased need for weeding-labour was not only an effect of the expansion of farmed areal, but also of the transition from an itinerant agriculture with long fallow periods to a more permanent agriculture, the latter favouring the growth of perennial weeds. Weeding had become a gender-neutral task, but both women and men knew that it was not so one generation ago. With larger farms, there was also much more to harvest, a work sequence that traditionally had involved both women and men in specified tasks, and which now had become a major burden for the entire family workforce, because so much more was produced and there were no mechanized tools to facilitate the harvest of any of the crops.63 The old division of work tasks according to gender and age in the harvest was maintained, even though it was not always rigidly adhered to.

When it comes to the impact of farming technology on women’s labour, Tersiguel’s (1995:118-122) thorough time-use study from a cotton farming village in Western Burkina Faso indicates that women’s workload in farming increased with the level of mechanization. Women in motorized farming units spent twice as much time on farm work as women in hoe-farming unit. Women in the former category worked as much on the farm as the men did, and in addition they had their household chores to attend to. On the other hand, women in these farming units spent less time with non-farm work, compared to hoe- and plough-farmers. The category of non-farm work included various tasks from household maintenance to women’s income earn-

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63 Tersiguel’s (1995:143) study from a village in the cotton zone shows that harvest work represented between 51% and 65% of the total labour time in farming.
ing and it is, therefore, likely that these differences had more than one cause. An explanation suggested by Tersiguel is that women on the more mechanized farms had some of their heavier obligations such as carrying wood and water taken care of by carts. However, it can also be that they were under time-constraint and thereby prevented from engaging in activities such as the collection and processing of plants for condiments and income earning. Women in the less mechanized farming units on the other hand, spent more time on such activities, because they could not afford to purchase condiments and even saw an opportunity to earn some money through their sale. The various ways in which women in Bala combined their non-farm activities with their obligation to work on the common farm will be explored in more detail in chapter seven.

The relation between farming technology and women’s workload is indeed complex because different technologies had different consequences for women in the three phases of the farming season: ploughing/sowing, weeding and harvesting. The following general observations are based on a qualitative understanding of how crops, technology, and human labour were combined in time and on land to produce a harvest.

During the sequence of ploughing/sowing, ploughing was the major bottleneck in farming units which possessed only one plough-team. Women on these farms, depending on how many they were, could even have time for gathering and processing wild edible plants while the field was being ploughed. On farms possessing several plough teams, women’s problem was instead to keep up with sowing, and in such situations even men would participate. Sowing was less of a burden in those relatively few farming units who used an ox-drawn seeder. In his study from the cotton zone, Tersiguel (1995:129) observed that farmers were not motivated to invest in ox-drawn sowing machines as long as they had enough female labour. If they were to use a mechanical device for sowing, they would first have to do a second turn of ploughing or harrowing, and this would mean a considerable increase in male labour and a strain on the draught animals. In Bala at the time of my fieldwork, there were a few farmers who had sowing machines and others purchased them in that year, but it was clearly the last ox-drawn tool which a farmer would purchase (as confirmed by Faure’s study from a few years earlier (Faure 1994b)). Even when a sowing machine was used, it was only a complement to manual sowing, not a replacement. On those few farms where both ploughing and sowing was done by tractor-drawn tools, the early phase of the farming season was a period of relative leisure for women. But wives of hoe-farmers were extremely busy during that period, and so were their husbands. Hoe-farmers did sometimes have their field ploughed, and in such cases, they paid by providing day labour on the plough-owner’s farm. Hence this arrangement did not liberate the hoe-farmer from manual labour, but the advantage was that work was speeded up in the beginning of the season and could be paid back at another moment in time.
How to keep up with weeding was a major problem for those who farmed large areas using ox-ploughs or a tractor, unless they employed some weeding technology other than the hoe. The utilization of ox-drawn “weeder”, “ridgers” and herbicides had positive implications for women’s workload, because driving these tools and spraying the poison were men’s job. The harvest was not at all mechanized and women and men had their well-defined tasks within this sequence. The amount of human labour required depended primarily on the size of the farmed area. On the other hand, wealthier farmers with large farms often relied on paid harvest labour furnished by members of poorer farming units.

This short outline illustrates how different farming technologies had different consequences for women’s labour obligations on the farm, and that women therefore differed in their access to free timeslots, which they could use for individual economic activities. Increased reliance on mechanical farming technologies shifted the peak demand for women’s labour gradually from the beginning of the farming season towards its end. However, how much a woman de facto worked on the common farm depended also on who else (male and female) was member of that farming unit, and on her ability to bargain about the use of her time. Farming units’ reliance on their member’s labour constrained women in their time-use, but as I will demonstrate, women also benefited from production on the common farm. Moreover, women had a strong argument which they could use in intra-household negotiations: the threat of withdrawal of their labour at crucial moments of the farming season. This issue will be discussed further in chapter six.

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64 Basset (2002b) reports from Côte d’Ivoire that the adoption of such ox-drawn tools resulted in free time for women, which made it possible for them to venture into cotton farming on personal plots.
4. Income differences between farming units

To understand women’s economic strategies, one must understand why some farming units were wealthier than others and how the economic situation of a farming unit affected its female members’ living conditions. In this chapter I will discuss the mechanisms for economic stratification through a comparison of seven farming units, selected for maximum variation regarding their means of production (labour, tools/machinery and money), their production strategies (choice of crops, allocation of labour and money) and the size of their incomes. I will also add individual incomes, focusing on men, and outline how different conditions affected the variety of economic strategies. Finally, I will discuss the domestic economy in terms of an “annual spiral” of incomes and expenses without a bottom line, and how it operated to the disadvantage of the poor and accentuates economic stratification.

Seven cases and their common production

Shortly after my arrival in Bala, I selected seven farming units which I followed throughout the agricultural year and for which I collected detailed data on annual production and consumption. The sample was chosen to represent a maximum of social, cultural and economic criteria. More detailed information on how I constructed income and expense budgets for these families is provided in the appendix. Explanations are also given in footnotes throughout the different chapters, to make the data processing transparent.

First, a few words about the units of measurement. The cereal harvest is generally quantified by the number of bags into which grains are filled after threshing. One bag contains 100 kg cereal grains. Smaller quantities are measured by the tine, a metallic cylindrical recipient containing about 20

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65 Land should normally also be considered among the means of production, however, at the time of my fieldwork I did not see it as a major cause for economic inequality. As described by Saul (1993), the Bobo tenure system, characterized by collective ownership and nested collective and individual use-rights, was flexible enough to provide everybody with farmland, even though, as in the case of Bala, some had their farms on borrowed land on other villages’ territories. However, due to increased population pressure and the expansion of farmland, this flexibility seems have reached its limits during the 2000s, as indicated by several studies from Western Burkina Faso (Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013, Rousseau, Gautier and Wardell 2017).
litres or 17 kilos of cereal grains. Hence six *tines* fill up a bag. The empty can of concentrated tomato is the standard measure for even smaller quantities. 9-10 tomato cans (filled with a heap) corresponds to one *tine* of ordinary size. Two tomato cans are thus the same as \(1/5 = 0.20\) *tine*.

In the following I introduce the seven farming units and their production figures concerning the agricultural year 1994/95. These figures refer to the “common” domain of the economy only, which is where the bulk of the families’ livelihoods was produced. Incomes of individual men and women will be treated in later chapters, as well as their relationship to the “common” economic domain. The monetary value refers to the prices at the time. The number of active workers is based on a calculation of the number of people in the farming unit and their age.

**Patrick** headed a farming unit consisting of himself, his wife, their married son, his two wives, and a total of 6 children (2 of them above the age of 14 and none below the age of 5). They farmed 18 ha and their equipment consisted of: 1 tractor, 2 ploughs, 1 weeder, 1 ridger, 1 seeder, 1 cart, an ULV (Ultra Light Volume) spraying device and hoes. They also had 6 oxen, 18 goats and 13 chickens.

This farming unit represented the minority of tractor farmers in Bala but was relatively small compared to other tractor farming units. Even though this unit did not farm a much larger area than some of the ox-plough farmers, it produced much more as a harvest.

This farming unit produced 201 hundred kilo bags of maize, 2.5 bags of red sorghum, 25 bags of groundnuts, 5 bags of cowpeas and 1 bag of sesame. These crops represented a value of 1,282,000 FCFA. The farming unit also produced an unspecified quantity of cotton, for which it received a net payment of 100,000 FCFA after credits had been withdrawn. They had sold 5 goats and a few chickens at a value of 37,000 FCFA.

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66 *Tines* were not standardized and could differ in size. A farmer explained: “when the merchant buys my grains, he uses the largest *tine* he can find, but when he sells grains the *tine* is so small!” Apart from such differences, there was a consensus among my informants about how much a normal *tine* should contain.

67 I also collected data for the following year, 1995/96, but as some farming units had not yet finished threshing at the time when I left Bala, these data were incomplete and could not be compiled in any comparative way.

68 To calculate a farming unit’s number of active workers, I counted every able-bodied member above the age of 14 as one person, while children between 6 and 13 counted as half a person. Setting the break for adult work contribution at the age of 14 is realistic if one considers the work that young people *de facto* did. It was more difficult to value the work of smaller children and of members who participated part time in farming such as schoolchildren and elderly persons. The latter, if they were still vigorous, were generally loosely attached to the farming unit’s labour force and were free to spend time on a personal plot. I counted schoolchildren as half a person and elderly persons as a quarter of an active worker.
In total, the value of that year’s production for the common fund was 2,219,000 FCFA, or 247,000 FCFA per active worker.

Jean headed a farming unit consisting of himself, his wife, 5 children (of which 2 were over 14 years) and 2 external herder boys. They farmed 16 ha and their equipment consisted of: 2 ploughs, 1 ridger, 1 cart, an ULV spraying device and hoes. They also had 6 oxen and 20 chickens.

This farming unit represented the higher income categories among the ox-plough farmers.

This farming unit produced 78 hundred kilo bags of maize, 5 bags of white sorghum, 2 bags of red sorghum and 30 bags of groundnuts, which represented a value of 698,000 FCFA. The farming unit also produced 3,184 kilos of cotton, for which it received a net payment of 195,000 FCFA after credits had been withdrawn. The farming unit drew a few non-cropping cash incomes and benefits from the sales and home-consumption of poultry of which the market value amounted to 7,000 FCFA.

In total, the value of that year’s production for the common fund was 900,000 FCFA, which makes 129,000 FCFA per active worker.

Pierre headed a farming unit consisting of himself, his two brothers, their four wives, the men’s elderly mother and a total of 11 children below 14 years (6 of these below the age of 5). One of the boys was attending school. Pierre could not tell the size of their farmland, but the farming equipment was: 1 plough, 1 weeder, 1 ridger, 1 cart, 1 ULV spraying device and hoes. They also had 8 oxen and 2 cows. Pierre was a full-time fisherman and participated only occasionally in farm work. Instead he contributed money to the common expenditures.

In my sample this farming unit represented a case of mixed economy fishing/farming which was not uncommon in Bala, due to its proximity to the lake. Another particularity was the large number of very small children, in other words the consumers were more numerous than the active workers.

This farming unit produced 47 hundred kilo bags of maize, 3 bags of millet, 6 bags of groundnuts, 5 *tines* of cowpeas and an unknown quantity of watermelons. These crops represented a value of 308,000 FCFA. The farming unit also produced 4,035 kilos of cotton, for which they received a net payment of 266,000 FCFA after credits had been withdrawn. From his fishing income Pierre contributed 279,250 FCFA in cash to expenses of the common economy: for the purchase of draught animals, costs for medical treatment and payment of farm labourers. He also regularly brought home

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69 These children worked and ate with this farming unit during the day and slept in their parents’ home in the night.
70 Cows were kept as an investment and for the calves they produced. Large farming units aimed at having a large enough cattle stock to be able to reproduce their draught animals.
fish which he distributed among the women, with an estimated market value of about 77,780 FCFA. Hence the value of the farming units’ non-cropping incomes was 353,000 FCFA.

In total, the value of that year’s production for the common fund was 932,000 FCFA, which makes 106,000 FCFA per active worker.

**Joseph** headed a farming unit consisting of himself, his two wives, a married son and his two wives, and 7 children (of which one was over 14 years and two below 5). They farmed 18.5 ha and their equipment consisted of: 2 ploughs, 1 weeder, 1 ridger, 1 cart and hoes. They also had 5 oxen.

The farming unit was among the middle-income ox-plough farmers and an example of a three-generational polygynous family.

This farming unit produced 35 hundred kilo bags of maize, 3 bags of white sorghum, 2 bags of red sorghum, 25 bags of groundnuts and 1 bag of cowpeas, which represented a value of 366,000 FCFA. The farming unit also produced 4,200 kilos of cotton, for which it received a net payment of 337,000 FCFA after credits had been withdrawn. The farming unit drew a few non-cropping incomes and benefits in kind from the sales and home-consumption of poultry of which the market value amounted to 10,000 FCFA.

In total, the value of that year’s production for the common fund was 713,000 FCFA, which makes 84,000 FCFA per active worker.

**Ousseni** headed a farming unit consisting of himself, his two wives, his unmarried adult brother one child over 14 and another child below 5. They farmed 8 ha and their farming equipment was: 1 plough, 1 weeder, 1 ridger, 1 cart and hoes. They had 4 oxen, 7 goats, 2 sheep and 15 chickens.

Ousseni was a typical plough farmer of the middle-income category.

This farming unit produced 48 hundred kilo bags of maize and 14 bags of groundnuts, which represented a value of 319,000 FCFA. The farming unit also produced 4,000 kilos of cotton, for which it received a net payment of 225,000 FCFA after credits had been withdrawn. The only non-cropping income was a cash payment of 4,500 FCFA for ploughing another farmer’s field, and a disbursement of 2,400 FCFA from the rotational saving association in which Ousseni was a member.

In total, the value of that year’s production for the common fund was 572,000 FCFA, which makes 114,000 FCFA per active worker.

**Hamidou** headed a farming unit consisting of himself, his brother their two wives, and a total of 5 children below 14 years. They farmed 6 ha as their common field and had allocated another 0.25 ha for their wives personal farming (the harvest of which was not included in the common accounts). The farming equipment consisted of: 1 plough, 1 weeder, 1 ridger, 1 cart and
hoses. They also had 2 oxen, 3 cows, 3 calves, 6 goats, 30 chickens and 10 guinea fowls.

This was a plough farmer in the lower income category who complemented incomes from farming with the upbringing of animals.

This farming unit produced 15 hundred kilo bags of maize, 10 bags of white sorghum and 1 bag of rice, which represented a value of 157,000 FCFA. The farming unit also produced 1,006 kilos of cotton, for which it received a net payment of only 3,000 FCFA after credits had been withdrawn.\textsuperscript{71} The farming unit drew some non-cropping incomes from the sales of platted grass-mats, from the sales of a goat, a sheep and some chicken and guinea-fowls. Additional chicken and guinea fowls were consumed by the household, and their market value was included in the non-cropping incomes, which amounted to 131,000 FCFA. In total, the value of that year’s production for the common fund was 290,000 FCFA, which makes 58,000 FCFA per active worker.

\textbf{Zakaria} headed a farming unit consisting of himself, his wife and 3 children (of which one was above 14 years). He did not know exactly how much of his farmland had been planted, maybe 4 or 6 ha? The equipment consisted of various kinds of hoes, but the farming unit had employed ploughing services on part of its land, a service which Zakaria had paid for by having his male friends in his informal group for work exchange work on the plough-owner’s farm. The farming unit also possessed 2 pigs, 5 piglets and 3 chickens.

This farming unit belonged to the minority of hoe farmers in Bala.

It had produced an estimated 9 bags of white sorghum, with a market value of 59,000 FCFA. Unlike the others, Zakaria stored the cereals un-threshed, which meant that there were no bags to be counted.\textsuperscript{72} To arrive at a plausible estimation of their annual production I extrapolated from the daily quantity consumed under normal circumstances. The figure is probably over-estimated because the wife explained that grains had been lacking towards the end of the season and that she had completed from her own means. The farming unit had not produced any cotton, but Zakaria drew some income from craft and paid day labour. As he explained, this income roughly estimated at 50,000, which was just enough to cover his personal expenses and

\textsuperscript{71} Their cotton harvest had not been successful, and the value of the harvest, therefore, just covered the credits taken.

\textsuperscript{72} Zakaria’s stated reason for storing the grains un-threshed was that they would be better assured against theft. It could also have been a strategy to get as much as possible out of an insufficient harvest. As reported in an earlier study from this region, grains were threshed and filled into granaries only when quantities were large. Small quantities were stored un-threshed, in order to minimize losses due to insects (Manessy 1960:232). Moreover, Capron’s (1973:207) elderly informants explained that the un-threshed storage of grains obliged women to economize.
I, therefore, did not include it in the common budget. The category non-cropping incomes, a total value of 11,000 FCFA, consisted thus only of the sale of two pigs and a 1.5 *tines* of groundnut seeds which they had received as a gift. The total value of that year’s production for the common fund was 70,000 FCFA, equivalent to 20,000 FCFA per active worker. Ideally, the cereals which the wife contributed from her own means should have been included in these figures, but she was unable to quantify them.

To have comparable production figures for these seven farming units, I have divided the monetary value of each farming unit’s production by the number of its active workers in the chart below. The farming units are ordered according to the size of their absolute production figures, starting from the left with Patrick and the highest income and ending on the right with Zakaria and the lowest income. As demonstrated by the height of the staples, their ranking order changes when production figures are divided by the unit’s number of active workers. It is thus relevant for comparison to divide the production figures with the size of the workforce.

![Average production value per active worker in 1000 CFA (1994/95)](chart.png)

**Figure 4: Average production value per active worker in 1,000 FCFA (1994/95)**

This comparative chart confirms what other, more quantitative studies have demonstrated. First, there is an association between level of mechanization and income (Faure 1994b, Tersiguel 1995, 1998, Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013). The most mechanized farming unit (Patrick), a tractor farmer, had the largest production, while the manual farmer (Zakaria) had the smallest. Among the ox-plough farmers (the other units) which represented the majority of farms in Bala, the incomes were more varied, but those who possessed several ploughs and a larger number of draught animals produced more than those who were less equipped. Second, cotton is not grown at the expense of
food crops, as one might believe (Dao and Neuvy 1988, Tersiguel 1995, Schwartz 1999, Somé 2010, Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013). Those units which had a good income from cotton also had a good income from food crops, which can be explained by their higher level of mechanization, their larger farms and their emphasis on maize instead of low productive millet or sorghum. Third, most of the farming units had very little income from non-farm activities at least if one looks at the common economy (McPhail and Polti 1988, Faure 1994c, Tersiguel 1995:156-158). The reason why I classified the fishing income (Pierre) and the livestock income (Hamidou) as “common” incomes was that these funds had de facto been utilized for “common” expenses.

Additional individual incomes

In addition to the common incomes of the farming unit, individual men and women had personal incomes most of which they drew from dry season non-farming activities. These incomes were analogous to the zakane field of the past which individuals could farm for themselves. They were outside the head’s control and mainly used to cover personal expenses such as leisure, clothes and personal social obligations. To some extent individual incomes were also utilized to fulfill specific obligations towards the farming unit or household as a collective. This was particularly the case for women, as they were expected to pay the cost of milling and provide the ingredients for the daily sauce. While women relied mostly on beer brewing to earn money, the activities of men were more varied.

Individual incomes varied among men. For some men, their individual incomes were modest. The junior man of Patrick’s farming unit had sold honey collected in the bush and earned 7,500 FCFA. He had given 1,250 FCFA to each of his two wives and used the remaining 5,000 FCFA, to buy himself clothes. Others had found more lucrative activities. The unmarried junior brother of Ousseni had organized dance parties together with a friend. His share of that income was estimated to 125,000 FCFA in a year. He had “helped his sister” with 5,000 FCFA and spent another 30,000 FCFA to buy himself clothes. The junior brother of Hamidou had earned money in Côte d’Ivoire and at homecoming invested it in cereal trade. The set of brothers in Pierre’s farming unit all had personal non-cropping incomes, two from fish-

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73 This is somewhat a tautology because “farming” is per definition the principal activity of a “farming unit”. But, as observed by Faure (1994c:10), non-agricultural incomes were few and generally undertaken individually by men and women. The earlier World Bank study mentions that almost all supplementary incomes were derived from women’s individual activities, such as brewing, the processing of plants for condiments and farming an individual plot (McPhail and Polti 1988:85).
ing and the third from carpentry. Men’s individual incomes were of interest for women, because they could be used to compensate a deficit in the common economy. Furthermore, a thrifty junior man, who was generous towards his wife, could ease her situation if the common economy was badly managed by the head of the farming unit.

Different conditions – different strategies

Even though there were striking differences in the size of the farming units’ annual production, it was only in a longer time-perspective that one could see what these differences meant in terms of economic stratification. In this section I extend the time frame a little to describe the economic strategies applied by some of these farming units during my fieldwork in the village, which covered two farming seasons, and a follow up visit two years later.

Talking about their farming enterprise, farmers in Bala often insisted that “years are not the same” alluding to the totality of hazardous conditions which influenced the outcome of their efforts. A particular source of worry was the matter of rains, known to be notoriously irregular. In pre-colonial times farmers used the surplus of good years to put away cereal stocks which made it possible to survive the bad years, but this system was destroyed under colonialism through taxation and the extraction of labour (Schwartz 1995:276). In commercialized farming, the annual surplus was rather sold, and the money used for investments and consumption. Consequently, the annual incomes of farmers depended not only on the weather, but to a considerable extent on market mechanisms.

While the agricultural season of 1994/95, on which the above production figures are based, counted as a relatively good year, many farmers talked about 1995/96 as an even better year. This is a paradox, because weather conditions were not ideal, and news reached Bala about crop failure in the northern parts of the country. The explanation lies in the price rise on cereal, which was higher and occurred earlier than in the previous year. Farmers who had produced more than their annual needs were able to make a good income on cereal sales, and particularly so if they had the possibility to postpone the sale. On the other hand, farmers with insufficient cereal harvest, who had to purchase grains towards the end of the season, carried the negative consequences of soaring prices. Hence, market mechanisms accentuated economic inequalities between farming units, and particularly so in years when the harvested quantities were not particularly good.

For most of the farming units in the upper and middle ranges of the income scale, economic decisions focused on what crops to plant and how to invest the surplus produced in farming. For poorer farmers, the dilemma was how to feed the household throughout the year, without losing sight of their visions for future improvements. Necessarily, their strategies were different.
Zakaria the hoe-farmer had not grown any cotton in 1994/95 and had hardly managed to grow enough cereals for his household’s needs. This farming unit usually finished its harvest early, a consequence of the smaller surface a hoe-farmer can farm, and the members had thereafter been free to take up paid work on other people’s farms. This was how the wife had obtained additional cereals so that she could make up for the deficit in provisions. In the following year Zakaria, encouraged by his adolescent son, decided that they would grow a small plot of cotton. His dream was to earn enough cash to get out of the predicament of hoe-farming. The cotton was successful, but his wife worried about their small quantity of cereals. Due to their own cotton harvest she had less time to earn additional cereals by working on other people’s farms. When the cotton was paid for, the wife would have preferred that money be used to purchase cereals, but father and son opted for a bicycle repair and the purchase of an ox. Although they still did not own a plough, their idea was that with the ox they could cooperate with somebody who had a plough and needed a draught animal. On my second visit in 1998 I found that Zakaria had been able to purchase a second ox and that he hoped to be able to buy a plough as the next investment. His son had married, and the young bride added to the family’s labour force. As it seemed, things were getting better.

Hamidou’s farming unit had had a failed cotton harvest in 1995, which had left the family with barely sufficient cereals and no cash. Hamidou had made some non-cropping cash income from selling straw mats, a sheep, a goat, some chicken and guinea fowls. He even had to borrow two bags of sorghum to feed the family, bags which would be returned at the following harvest. Difficulties continued throughout the agricultural year of 1995/96. As many farmers in that ward had failed to reimburse their credits, the Village Association had blocked the entire ward from taking out cotton credits. Consequently, this farming unit was unable to grow cotton and without means to buy fertilizers it could not grow maize either. It relied on sorghum as a food staple, which is in less need of fertilizers, but which produced insufficient quantities. In addition, the farming unit was short on adult labour during most of the farming season, because the head’s younger brother, who headed the second household of this farming unit, had travelled to northern Burkina Faso. To keep up with weeding, the farming unit hired day labourers, which occasioned additional costs to an already strained economy. The precarious situation was solved when at harvest another junior brother came back from work in Côte d’Ivoire. Having cash, he bought cereals cheaply, donated part of it to the farming unit’s common stock and sold the rest later when prices were high, thus earning himself a personal income.

\[74\] As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, hiring labourers was an uncommon move for this category of poorer farming units who in the first instance managed bottlenecks through reciprocal labour exchange.
Even relatively rich farmers experienced that “years are not the same”. Such was the case of Patrick’s farming unit, the unit with the highest income in 1994/95. The year that followed was a year full of problems. At our first encounter one of the children was seriously ill. Later Patrick had a lengthy period of illness. Not only did those health problems demand considerable outlays for medical treatment, the head’s illness coincided with the most important sequences of the farming season. Without its farm manager and being one adult short in the labour force, the family had difficulties keeping up with the work. At harvest their crops looked miserable: the cotton plants were tiny, and their maize had been flattened by a thunderstorm and the cobs had to be collected from the ground where they risked being eaten by termites. Despite these calamities, and because of the large surfaces farmed, that year’s harvest seemed to be sufficient to cover consumption needs. Even if it had not been sufficient, it would not have been a problem. It turned out that the head of the farming unit had stored away another 100 bags of maize, not from the previous harvest but from two years back, because he had, at that time, found cereal prices to be too low. Even if that buffer had not existed, the farming unit possessed enough cattle to be able to sell some without hampering its agricultural production capacity.

These three cases illustrate how poorer farming units struggled to get along, finding ad hoc solutions to immediate problems and having few options to really improve their situation, while a wealthier farming unit was better secured against misfortune. I heard stories in Bala about farming units that once had been wealthy and who had lost everything and now lived in utmost poverty. Such scenarios are possible, but it takes much more misfortune to shake the economic solidity of a farming unit like Patrick’s, than it takes for the other units mentioned above. For example, a few years after my fieldwork, Zakaria was obliged to sell his oxen and was back to hoe-farming.

Long-term illness was among the worst threats to a farming unit’s economy and to the well-being of its members. The loss of one person’s labour capacity during farming season could have a negative impact on that year’s income. Furthermore, medical treatment could become very expensive, especially if it was a matter of hospitalization in town. The total bill could reach several hundred thousand FCFA, more than the total annual income of poorer farming units. Villagers who knew that they could not afford costly treatments, avoided seeking medical care and relied instead on traditional treatments. Others sold what they could to afford medical treatment. Ann Juenet (1996:24-27) in her study of household economies in Bala, relates a case where the head of a farming unit had to undergo a surgical operation. In preparation of his absence, he reduced the farmed area and withdrew a child from school to have him participate in farm work. The farming unit’s entire cash reserve was spent on the treatment, and to raise more money he sold an ox at 100,000, a “ridger” at 15,000 and 10 chickens at a total of 6,500 Franc
The wives received no post-harvest recompense and had to take on expenses that would otherwise have been covered by the common fund.

### Summary: The annual spiral and poverty

As the empirical data show, in the context of West African smallholder farming the relationship between income and expenses is best likened to a spiral without beginning or end. Income came in during some months, major expenses were made at specific periods, and then the small expenses of daily life as an outgoing trickle all year round. Income and expenses were unevenly distributed over the year, and what mattered for the farmers was not whether the annual incomes matched annual expenses, but whether at a given moment they were able to cover a specific expense.

The period for income was limited to the harvest season, which extended over eight months, from the first groundnuts in August to the payment of cotton money in March or April. During the first part of this period the income was just enough for daily consumption, only later would cash be available for other expenses, especially the cash from cotton.

The cotton company Sofitex was notoriously late to collect the cotton and pay the farmers. The cotton was generally harvested in December/January, and many farmers paid day labourers to speed up the work in hope of an early pick up. Delayed pick up was disadvantageous, not only because the cotton lost weight under the hot sun, but the stacks of cotton could be destroyed through grazing cattle or bush fires. When the payment was not effectuated until April, the farmers would have missed most of the dry season period for investments, and they would have sold cereals cheaply just to get along until the cotton payment, the amount of which they could not even imagine.

Furthermore, in the year of my fieldwork Sofitex had established contracts with the largest producers, those who farmed at least 6 hectares of cotton, promising to pick up their harvest on the farm and paying them swiftly. Moreover, only their own credit debt would be cut on their cotton payment. The majority of the producers, those who farmed only small quantities of cotton, continued the slow procedure of selling through the Village Association. Consequently, those farmers who had the smallest economic margins, had to wait the longest for their cotton to be picked up and paid for and they had to come up for each other’s debts due to the caution solidaire.75

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75 Sofitex’s system of dealing differently with the larger producers lasted only for one agricultural year and was abolished already in 1996/97 when the Village Associations were dismantled and replaced by smaller producer groups, GPCs (Groupement de Producteurs de Coton). The idea behind the GPC system was that a small group of likeminded farmers would be
In addition to the common fund and its annual ‘spiral’ of incomes and expenses, there were personal incomes of the farming unit’s individual members. Such incomes were, at the time of my fieldwork, generally non-agricultural and followed a different itinerary. Men engaged in activities such as fishing, crafts, animal husbandry, paid labour or trade. Women engaged in gathering and processing of edible plants, paid labour, petty trade and beer brewing. Such income could be crucial for resolving unforeseen problems, avoiding debts and purchasing food during periods of shortage. The extent to which they were available for common purposes was, however, a matter of negotiation. When a head of farming unit had such income (and not all heads did), the status of this income was ambiguous. On the one hand, like the personal incomes of the other members, a head’s non-farming income was primarily for his personal expenses. On the other hand, as the head was the highest responsible for the collective well-being of the farming unit, he was morally obliged to use his personal incomes for the common good if means in the common fund were insufficient.

On the expense side there were annual peaks, which sometimes did not fit with how income was distributed over the year. Due to this misfit many came to sell products, grains for example, at times when prices were low, and to purchase the same products later more expensively. October was a difficult month for those who had children at school, and particularly so if their children were in secondary school. School fees must be paid, and as the harvest had hardly started, many farmers lacked liquidity. Other expense peaks were around the religious holidays when rice, meat and new clothes were purchased, that is Christmas and Easter for the Christians and Ramadan and Tabaski for the Muslims.

The last months of the dry season, from February to May, was a period of heavy expenditure. Not only did a series of traditional feasts and ceremonies have to be held, it was also a period for marriage and funeral celebrations. In addition, heads of farming units were busy investing the annual surplus from farming into house-building and new farming equipment. In some farming units, there was no surplus to invest. Instead food scarcity began, and those farmers started buying, borrowing and begging cereals.

For farmers who were short of food and cash a quick solution was to pick up fertilizers and pesticides delivered on credit by the cotton company and to sell these cheaply instead of using them on their farm. Their liquidity problem was thereby postponed to the end of the farming season when their cotton production turned out to be insufficient to cover the credits. Some farm-

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76 The feast of Ramadan closes the annual month of fasting. Tabaski, closes the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and is celebrated in memory of Ibrahim (Abraham) and his willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience of God.
ers never came out of their perpetual indebtedness, and in the case of cotton credits, for which the Village Association was collectively responsible, there was mounting irritation among the more successful farmers who had to cover the debts of the bad payers. The problem of credits also created tensions within farming units, because members who had worked hard on the farm found it difficult to understand why the head claimed to have received no money from the sale of their cotton.

When the farming season started again, most farmers would have spent all their cash except a few savings for daily expenses and unforeseen events. As will be explained in the following chapter, many of the small daily expenses were also seasonal, with a clear differentiation between dry season and farming season.

The interior organization of the farming unit, with its different economic domains and their insertion into relational networks outside the domestic realm, allowed for some flexibility to handle the most difficult periods of the year. Women could cover certain common expenses from their own pocket, cereal loans could be taken from close kin and friends, harvested crops and farming equipment could be sold. There were also clandestine practices, such as taking fertilizer and chemicals on credit and then selling them cheaply, taking loans and not paying them back and so forth.

All aspects considered, the “annual spiral” of the farming economy operated to the detriment of the poorer farmers. Rich farmers and merchants could profit from purchasing crops and equipment cheaply just to sell them expensively later. As will be argued in chapters to come, the poverty of some farming units put their female members under stress for finding ways to feed the family from their own means and efforts.
5. Dividing the common income

“The women are dissatisfied right now. We haven’t given them anything”’, Pierre grinned in embarrassment. I had come back to Bala on a follow-up trip and had asked Pierre if I could meet with his family members to follow up on some issues. He knew my interest in intra-household distribution matters, and therefore wanted to tell me right away, he explained. I grasped the problem: the women of his farming unit had not received their expected share of the year’s cotton money, and now they were cross.

When I met with the women a few days later, they explained: “We know that they [the men] have money, but they don’t tell us anything and we cannot do anything about it”. In the previous year each woman had received 15,000 FCFA, but they said they would be happy even with less, if only they had been informed about the economic situation. I asked if they had taken up the matter with their husbands. “We can do nothing except obey and start working again when the first rains have fallen.” They then explained a strategy for voicing their discontent. “At the beginning of the rainy season we can show our dissatisfaction: We delay our departure to the farm. If we would have left at 6 [o’clock] we would in that case not leave until 8.”

Their husbands later explained that the reason for not distributing anything to the women was that their farm needed manure, and they first wanted to see how much that would cost them. “The women are too much in a hurry. We have to resolve this problem first!” They still had some maize in stock, saved for certain expenses: “If we give each woman a bag of maize, they will know how to make money with it”. I asked if they had informed their wives about their intentions. “No, if we tell them, they will bother us. It is better to give as a surprise.” At that point in our conversation the men got a bit defensive. They pointed out that they had not even bought anything for themselves, and that they also wanted to purchase herbicide for the next farming season to avoid taking it all on credit. Finally, one of them explained: “Where you come from, men discuss with their wives and explain what they intend to do. But here in Africa, if you tell your wife, she will tell others about your plans. That is why one doesn’t tell a woman. When they see the manure on our farm they will understand.”

While the wives presented the problem primarily as a matter of not being informed, the husbands were eager to present themselves as responsible men. If only the wives trusted them, everybody would be satisfied in the end.
In Bala, as elsewhere in West Africa, transparency in household economic matters was not a common practice. There were two reasons for secrecy; both were mentioned in the men’s explanations. First, “if we tell them, they will bother us”. Men were convinced that women simply wanted their share to be as large as possible without considering the long-term requirement of responsible farm management. Men, therefore, preferred to distribute surprise gifts. Second, “if you tell your woman she will tell others about your plans”. In this patrilineal society, wives were not fully trusted due to their presumed loyalty to their own kin. Similarly, to what has been described in other West African ethnographies (Calame-Griaule 1965, Kaboré 1987, Shaw 2000, Traoré and Fourgeau 2006), Bobo men considered women to be weak in character and not always capable of controlling their speech. Women were believed to reveal details about their farming unit’s economic situation to others, thereby opening both for a stream of requests of assistance from fellow villagers and for attacks of bad magic motivated by jealousy. Heads of poor farming units feared the shame of having details of their family’s miserable situation be known.

Women in turn were reluctant to reveal their personal savings to their husbands. Their secrecy can be understood against the backdrop of unequal power relations within households. Men being in command could co-opt their wives’ money, either by borrowing it and not paying back, or by obliging their wives to cover expenses that the man would otherwise have covered.

This episode introduces the topic of this chapter: how earnings from the joint undertaking of farming were consumed, distributed and invested, with a specific focus on what women received. I base my analysis of consumption on expenditures made.

The figure below visualizes the topic, showing flows of material resources from the “common domain” to the “individual domains” of male and female members, and to some extent also from individual men to their wives. I recall my comment from the first chapter that the head’s individual domain has purposely been depicted as overlapping with the common economy, because in practice there was no clear separation.

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77 See also Shaw’s (2000) elaborate account from Sierra Leone of how men used secrecy vis-à-vis women to maintain their power, while women used secrecy to contest male power.
As we shall see, the cash and kind given to women after the harvest, even though important from the point of view of women, represented only a small part of the value that women retrieved from the common production of their farming unit. There were, however, significant differences regarding what women received. Better-off farming units produced at least a surplus that could be bargained about, while women in poorer farming units could only negotiate about how the deficit in the common economy should be covered. In better-off farming units the male head consumed considerably more of the common resources than his dependent women and junior men, because he could reach into the common fund for personal expenses. In poorer farming units the head was obliged to earn a personal income to cover such expenses, and disagreements with the other members were likely to be about who should carry certain common expenditures from his or her personal funds.

Different patterns of consumption

To be able to calculate the annual expenses for consumption of my selected farming units I had to fit the annual spiral of incomes and expenses into a budgetary year with a beginning and an end. I opted for a practical solution, which allowed my interlocutors to recall incomes and expenses. As explained in the appendix in more detail, I took the last harvest as the starting
point and phrased questions in ways that connected specific sales from that harvest with specific expenses. To calculate small recurrent expenses, I extrapolated from how much people estimated that they usually spent in a day or in a week during different seasons. The annual consumption figures are based on the period from September 1994 to September 1995, that is from the beginning of one harvest to the next.

The expenditures made from a farming unit’s common fund were both in kind and in cash and consisted of home-grown and home-consumed crops and of cash outlays for purchased goods. The cash had in most cases been acquired through the sale of crops, cotton as well as cereals, and more seldom through non-cropping activities.

The following table shows the expenses made from each of the selected farming units’ common economy. Transfers made from the common fund to individual members, such as the post-harvest transfers, are presented here as an expense category. The farming units’ consumption figures lacked the unknown quantities of small crops and vegetables, which were usually not filled into bags and thus not countable. They also did not include grains that had been consumed on the farm, between the first ripening of crops until the harvest has been brought in, threshed and filled into bags. (See appendix for more details).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Head’s personal consumption</th>
<th>Members’ individual shares</th>
<th>Non-agricultural investments</th>
<th>Purchases for common consumption</th>
<th>Non-cropping (home production)</th>
<th>Food crops (home production)</th>
<th>Agricultural production costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Jean Pierre Joseph Ousseni</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamidou</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zakaria</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total consumption in 1000 Franc CFA</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values in 1000 Franc CFA</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6: Total consumption in 1,000 FCFA (1994/95)**

At a glance one can see that the agricultural production costs, the box at the bottom of each staple, was the largest expense category for all farmers except Hamidou, who had not grown any cotton that year, and Zakaria who
had grown very little. This expense category included the credits taken for next year’s cotton farming and various other costs in connection to farming, such as the maintenance of draught animals, plough repairs, the purchase of new equipment and draught animals, paid labour and food for work parties.\textsuperscript{78} The size of this expense category shows that it costed a lot to farm, especially if one grew cotton. Sums between 800,000 and 500,000 FCFA, as for some of these farming units, were almost unimaginable for women who after the harvest were given 5,000, 10,000 or 20,000 FCFA if they were lucky. The huge cost of modern farming was one reason why heads of farming units did not reveal the total income to the other members. They claimed that women and junior men did not understand how much it cost to farm, that they failed to understand the problem of cotton credits, and the necessity to invest in equipment and draught animals. They feared that if women and junior members knew the total earnings of a year’s farming, they would want it all to be distributed without thinking about the next farming season.

As the total height of the staples reveals, high expenditure for farming was a prerequisite for a rich harvest. While Hamidou’s and Zakaria’s figures indicate that it was possible to farm at a very low cost and produce a harvest which, combined with other sources of income was possible to survive on, it was not possible to produce a surplus that allowed for investments unless one spent significant sums on its production. The relationship between high investments and high production was, however, not automatic as any harvest could fail, either due to natural conditions, illnesses or because of bad farming. In such cases farmers were left with the debts. In other words, modern cotton farming was lucrative but entailed a considerable economic risk.

\textbf{Food crops} are second in size among the expense categories, but nevertheless minor compared to what some farming units had spent on agricultural production. As explained in the previous chapter, this category represents the market value of the food crops that had been produced and consumed within the farming unit.\textsuperscript{79} The values are fairly reliable because farmers generally knew how many bags they had harvested, how many of them they had sold, how many were still in stock, and the rest was consumed. An exception was Zakaria’s farming unit, where cereals had been stored un-threshed, and where cereal consumption might, therefore, have been estimated too high, as explained in connection to the production figures. Unlike expenses for farm production, which to some extent were optional (it was possible to farm at very low cost) food was a necessary expense. It was the duty of the head of a farming unit to provide enough cereals to feed its members, and if he failed or spent food resources for other purposes, he would have to face the anger of the other members and contempt of fellow villagers.

\textsuperscript{78} See appendix for more details on what was included in this expense category and for the rationales behind this classification.

\textsuperscript{79} See appendix for details about how these values were calculated.
The **non-cropping** category represents the market value of the meat or fish produced and consumed within the household. This category should be considered in connection with “purchases for common consumption” because in those households where meat and fish from own production had not been available, it had been purchased, bartered or hardly consumed at all. Only for the fisherman’s farming unit (Pierre), was the consumption of “non-cropping” food high enough to be visible in the staple in the chart. Although in the other units some heads claimed to have purchased meat and fish with some regularity, the quantities were highly approximate, and not always confirmed by their wives’ statements. The products that women had furnished for the household’s consumption, such as home-made condiments, soap, wood and water, could not be included here for lack of reliable data on quantities. The functioning of the women-managed economy in relation to the common economy will, however, be explored in chapter seven.

The category **purchases for common consumption** includes a great many items and services, such as medical treatment, clothes for the children, school expenses, meat and fish, salt, batteries, kerosene, soap, travel fees and identity cards, occasional condiments and milling fees. These items have in common that a cash outlay had been made from the common fund by the head of the farming unit for the benefit either of the farming unit or for individual members. Some of these outlays, such as medical treatment and school expenses, were of relatively recent date, and had become the responsibility of the common fund, because this was where the most cash was. Even if such an outlay concerned a specific person, people nevertheless considered it a common expense. Other outlays replaced products and services, which generations of women had furnished with own labour: condiments, milling, lamp-oil and soap. Women still furnished these services, hence the purchases from the common fund, were only complementary.

Heads of farming units also made outlays for their personal consumption using money from the common fund, but these are listed as a separate category which I will discuss later.

In the interviews, it was the head of the farming unit who categorized the various expenses as either “common” or his “personal”. Some kinds of items were mentioned in both categories: batteries, kerosene, soap and sugar could be either for common consumption, for personal consumption or a little of each. Coffee, tea, tobacco and alcohol were always for the interlocutor’s personal consumption. The purchase of clothes was organized differently in different farming units, either the head bought clothes for all the members, or he distributed cash to the adults and adolescents and let them buy their

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80 Small animals trapped in the bush, such as partridges or rabbits were also an important source of meat, but even if people had been able to state the consumed quantities (which they were not) there was no way that I could assign a market price to them, because such game did not appear on the market.
own clothes. In the first case, his clothes were included in the common expense figures, in the second they were mentioned among his personal expenses. Some heads of farming units had purchased clothes for everybody at major holidays such as Easter and Tabaski using money from the common fund, even if they had previously distributed money to be used for clothes.

Even married junior men in three generational farming units sometimes made outlays for the same kind of items, but from their personal earnings and for their conjugal household only. This meant that a woman could be lucky to receive money for clothes both from the common fund (distributed by the head of the farming unit) and from her husband. Furthermore, as will be described later, women sometimes covered the same kind of expenses from their personal money, even if, according to the “implicit household contract” the expense should not be under their responsibility.

The complexity of relations between sub-units of the household economic system and the flexibility of “implicit household contracts” created a scope for bargaining about who should pay what. Differences in expense patterns between the seven farming units indicates that it was particularly in connection to “purchases for common consumption” that there was some scope for the renegotiation of responsibilities, and specifically for industrially made products and services which could replace homemade. For example, a man would never manually grind cereals, but he could pay for machine milling. A man would never make soap, but he could purchase soap in a shop. In other words, once a product had been disconnected from the gendered division of labour involved in its production, it was sufficiently “de-gendered” to allow for a renegotiation of its responsibility, even though, as will be discussed in chapter seven, women still furnished most of these products.

Economic inequalities between farming units, as they manifested themselves in consumption patterns are most striking if one looks at the two categories non-agricultural investments and purchases for common consumption. Their size reveals which farming unit had some cash to spend and which had very little. The non-agricultural investment category was mainly composed of house-building costs, but also the purchase of consumer goods such as bicycles and radio cassette players. Draught animals and farming equipment were not included here but among the “agricultural production costs” mentioned earlier. Projects of housebuilding were often long-term, and it took several years of purchasing materials before the actual construction could be made. High investment costs reflect wealthier farmers’ projects to construct stone houses with iron sheet roofs. Poorer households continued to construct adobe houses with the help of work groups, with a simple iron-sheet door and window shutters as the only cash outlays.

The purchases for common consumption also included social expenses in kind and in cash, that is membership fees in associations and religious congregations, little gifts of money made when visiting a funeral, sacrificial animals, food and drink purchases for major holidays, post-harvest cereal
gifts outside the farming unit and help to needy relatives and friends during the period of scarcity. I had at first singled them out as a separate category but found the figures to be so small that I included them. Ousseni’s farming unit stood out as an exception with relatively high social costs, the reason being that it had supported the funeral of a close relative. The expenditures had amounted to 180,000 FCFA, including the purchase of an ox to feed the guests, the donation of 500 kg of maize and the sum of 100,000 FCFA.81

Bringing up the topic of gifts with my informants alerted me to the fact that there was less gift-giving than I had expected after having read McCorkle’s (1988) description of “the cereal code of honor” in a Bwa village of the cotton zone, according to which there should be a constant flow of cereal gifts between households. Instead, the cereal gifts mentioned by the heads of farming units were well defined in quantity and destination. Except for a few cases when grains had been given to a male elder or to the imam, most of the post-harvest cereal transfers had gone to specific categories of women; to the women of the farming unit, to a head’s married sisters, to his married daughters, to his mother, and to his paternal aunts. Some informants explicitly stated that “men give cereals to women”. Except for the post-harvest recompense to the women of his farming unit, the male head sent cereals to his female relatives. These gifts were institutionalized and had a name: lireyana dugo (sister’s millet). The quantity was at most one bag of 100 kg but could also be just the symbolic content of a small basket. In response women sent home-made shea butter and the fermented condiment sumbala, to their brothers. These gifts were in line with a more general gender symbolism according to which a man was the provider of cereals and a woman the provider of sauce, a complementary relationship reflecting the ideal relationship between a husband and his wives. Here we see that it had a wider connotation: it structured a man’s relationship also with his female patrilineal kin. In other words, these material transfers between men and women were a way of doing gender.

It was of course impossible for people to account for all small gestures of sociability during a year, which was one reason for why the category “social expenses” turned out to be relatively small for most farming units. In addition to the post-harvest distribution of cereals, better off farming units had also occasionally given grains to kin in need. These were different from the post-harvest gifts as they occurred later during the year when cereals were scarce and prices high.

In the table the category individual shares represents the post-harvest transfers of kind and cash from the common economy to the adult members of the farming unit and the head’s personal consumption represents the

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81 The death of a close relative occasioned heavy costs, and these were both unpredictable and unavoidable. The more visitors that attended a funeral, the more the deceased would be honoured. The visitors must be given a treat with food and drinks during the celebration.
estimated value of the expenditures made by the male head with means from the common fund. These two categories are central to understanding how gendered economic inequalities were produced within farming units and will, therefore, be discussed in more detail below.

Women’s well-being within and across households

Is it possible from these farming unit’s consumption figures to make inferences about women’s material well-being in this particular year? In the table further down, I have singled out some of the expense categories, which were particularly relevant as indicators of women’s material well-being, and I have divided the totals by each farming unit’s number of consumers. The number of “consumers” differs from the number of “active workers”, on which the production averages presented in the previous chapter were calculated. The number of consumers includes minor children and other household members unable to participate in farm work. The point of dividing the totals by number of consumers (and not by “active workers”) is that it gives a more realistic picture of living conditions, particularly in those families where a few adults supplied a household with many children or elderly persons. This is, of course, a blunt assessment, as it presumes that all members benefit equally from what is consumed. As revealed by Nyantakyi-Frimpong’s study from Northwestern Ghana, it was not only unequal relations between men and women but also amongst women of the same household which explained why some children were malnourished (Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2017). Even though I do not believe that consumption is egalitarian within farming units, the approach which I suggest is a far better way to assess how women actually benefit from farming than the common focus on women’s post-harvest recompense (e.g. Luna 2018b)

The average value of consumed food crops (see Figure 7) reveals something about a woman’s life condition in more than one way. If the value is high, she was likely to have eaten well, she was likely to have been able to feed her children in a satisfying way, and she had also been able to be generous with gifts of meals to her relatives. In addition, as will be explained in more detail in chapter seven, women also used part of these cereals to barter sauce ingredients, which they would otherwise have had to produce or pay from their own pockets. On the other hand, in those families where cereals

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82 I counted every member above the age of 14 as 1 consumer. Children between 6 and 13 counted as ½, and children below the age of 6 as ¼. Schoolchildren counted as 1 person, because they consumed more resources than the other children (school material, clothes). Different members’ de facto consumption from the common budget is probably even more difficult to estimate fairly than their work contribution, so these figures must be understood as blunt estimates.
had been insufficient, the consequence for women had not only been that they had gone hungry, but they were likely to have furnished additional efforts to feed the household, especially children, from their personal means.

All these farming units’ cereal consumption was above the WHO minimum standard set at 190 kg/person/per year, which in that year’s price average would have corresponded to a monetary value of 11,400 FCFA. The relatively high per capita cereal consumption of all the interviewed farming units reflects that year’s good harvest. But there were nevertheless striking differences: The farming unit with the highest average (Jean) had consumed three times as much as the one with the lowest (Zakaria) per capita consumption. To some extent one can imagine that part of the higher consumption had been spent on generosity to visitors and on food gifts. Furthermore, the cereal consumption of Pierre’s farming unit seemed smaller than it probably was, due to the relatively numerous small children which skewed the average (small children do not eat that much porridge but generate costs in other ways, for example care and medical treatment). Therefore, members of this farming unit had probably eaten better than those of Zakaria’s, which also had low average cereal consumption. However, of crucial difference between these two is the value of the non-cropping consumption, which was relatively high in both Pierre’s and Hamidou’s farming units. In the former case this value consisted of fresh fish and in the latter home bred poultry. Women in the other farming units were likely to have used some of these cereals to access such produce through bartering. Therefore, for a valid comparison both the average values of the consumed food crops and of the food from “non-cropping” must be considered.

Another important figure that reveals something about women’s material conditions and that can be compared across farming units is purchases for common consumption. It represents the cash outlays which the head of the farming unit had made for common expenses, such as milling, medical treatment and the maintenance of children. As explained above, a low value on purchases could be compensated by abundant cereal consumption, thanks to the female practice of bartering. However, if cereal consumption was not exceptionally high, it is more likely that the woman had carried these expenses either from her personal budget or by her own efforts. If instead the value of these expenses was high, it is possible that money had been spent to ease some of the woman’s more tedious tasks. The relatively high value of common purchases in Hamidou’s farming unit, which otherwise ranked among the poorer, depended on the simple fact that women’s and men’s

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83 Cited for example by Tersiguel (1995:155). The figure 190 kg/person/year as a WHO standard is cited in several secondary sources, but I have not been able to find a primary WHO source to confirm it nor do I know how this figure was arrived at.

84 Calculated on the average of annual maximum and minimum prices (between 4,500 CFA and 7,500 CFA per bag of 100 kg).
clothes had been paid for by the common fund, while in the other farming units women and junior men had been given money to buy their own clothes.

Expensive medical treatment for one member of the farming unit could sometimes make this expense category swell out of proportion. In theory, all members of a farming unit had the right to receive medical treatment paid for by the common fund. In reality, when means were scarce and treatments expensive, this was not always possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Patrick</th>
<th>Jean</th>
<th>Pierre</th>
<th>Joseph</th>
<th>Ousseni</th>
<th>Hamidou</th>
<th>Zakaria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food crops</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>(home production)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>(home production)</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7: Value of average consumption (per consumer) in 1,000 FCFA (1994/95)*

The total of the three averages, consumed food crops, non-cropping consumption and purchases for common consumption, is an indicator of the material benefits that a woman drew from the common enterprise of farming, in addition to the cash and kind that the head of the farming unit distributed after the harvest. The important insight from these figures is that even if post-harvest transfers were important for women, as the episode at the beginning of this chapter shows, they represented only a minor part of the material benefits that women drew from the economy of their farming unit.

**Post-harvest distribution and the female share**

This is the moment to return to the issue of post-harvest distribution to individual members, and to see how these related to other kinds of expenditures from the common economy. Women, junior men and adolescent children, at least in the higher and middle-income farming units in Bala, expected to be given something in kind or in cash at the end of the harvest.85 In the following, I will mainly discuss what women received.

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85 Cereal transfers to women in compensation for harvest work, seems to be an old practice as several studies from this region confirm (Tauxier 1912:53, Manessy 1960:232, Capron
“If your wife has received her share, she should not expect anything more from you. But, if you did not give her ‘her share’, and if she sees you buy things, then she has the right to complain.” (male head)

Not all men would subscribe to the above statement, particularly not those who did not distribute anything. Many male heads denied that the “female share” was an obligation. Instead they preferred to define it as an option, depending on circumstances and on their goodwill.

Male and female informants unanimously stated that the “female share” was not comparable to a salary, because “you cannot pay a wife for her work”. However, it was really not a gift either, they argued. The expression which women used when talking spontaneously about the post-harvest transfers was *dio koridi njane* which literally translates as “the interest of the year’s suffering”, in French talked about as *la recompense*. Talking about the “recompense” my informants, male as well as female, connected it either to the work that women had done on the farm, or to the expenses that women had to make for their household or both. The following first sets of quotes argue that it is a compensation for work, and the second set of quotes that it is intended for certain expenses. Both sets include male as well as female voices. The reason why they use the words “gift” and “salary” is that I initially had phrased the question as such.

“We live together, we work together, what he gives at the end of the year, is an encouragement for the suffering that we have supported.” (female)

“It is my gift, as we work together.” (female)

“It is not a salary. It is for encouragement.” (male)

“It is not a salary. It is a gesture of recognition for what she has done on the farm. It is not to cover all her expenses. It is to make her benefit from the interest of the farm. … It is for her small expenses.” (male)

“It is not a salary. It is a gift so that she can meet certain needs. We cannot pay her. If we had to divide equally everything that we gain in a year, managements would be different and in case of a serious illness the wife would come back and claim her treatment. If there is nothing saved it is serious. That’s why we give them little by little, so that we can face certain economic problems.” (male)

“It is not a salary, it is a gift, a help to pay condiments during the year. Anyhow, our work cannot be paid for.” (female)

“It is a gift to allow the woman to cover some needs or to do some trade with.” (male)

The possibility for different interpretations of what the “female share” represented, her labour or her needs, and whether it was her right or her chance, provided men and women with different sets of arguments that they could

1973:207). The distribution of cash is a more recent practice, clearly connected to cash-cropping, but it follows the same logic.
use in bargaining. However, there was nothing like a negotiation between equal partners; the male head decided what to distribute, and it was left to the women to accept or to protest. Due to the respect that women owed their head of household they could not protest openly but must resort to more indirect means of showing their dissatisfaction. Women who were married to the head of the farming unit could use their intimate encounters to negotiate special favours, as described in Nuyantakuy-Frimpong’s (2017) study from Northwestern Ghana, but in Bala this was not an option for women married to junior men, who themselves were excluded from the farming unit’s resources. It was a customary practice that all women of a farming unit were assigned the same amounts of cash and cereals, irrespective of their labour input or their specific needs. This circumstance refutes one of the most basic assumptions of household-economic “bargaining models”: that individuals bargain alone and in their own self-interest. Therefore, women who wanted to negotiate for a greater share (and did not have bedroom access to the head of the farming unit), could only succeed if they protested collectively, together with the other women of that farming unit. Such coalitions were possible but made difficult by the fact that women were rivals for the same material benefits and by the authority ranking separating them, such as generation, age and marriage status. Coalitions were least likely between women who were in a marked hierarchical relationship, such as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. On their own, women could also resort to illicit practices such as the withdrawal of grains from the common stock (see also Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2017, Luna 2018b). Not only were there in Bala different opinions about whether women had the right to a personal share or not, it was even more delicate to establish what a fair share would be, and this was somewhat a consequence of the ambiguity of the purpose of the recompense. Was the woman expected to utilize these means for household purposes or could she spend it for herself?

Although not a salary, the recompense made the suffering worthwhile. It differed from a salary because there was no fixed sum for it. Few domestic economies in Bala could support to pay family members the salary of a day-labourer, that is 200-300 FCFA and meals during the day. That was why my male and female informants rejected the idea that the post-harvest transfers to individuals was like a salary. On the other hand, for day labourers the commitment between the individual and the farming unit ended when the salary had been paid, while for the members of the farming unit commitment was long-term and entangled with norms about ideal relations within families, something which made it more delicate to judge whether the recompense was fair or not. Consequently, it seems inappropriate to analyse the post-harvest transfers to women in terms of “wages”, as for example Lilja et al. (1996) have done in their study from the Malian cotton zone.

The recompense distributed to women in Bala could consist of cash, cereals, clothes and more rarely cooking utensils, and these items were handed
over at different moments of the year. Cereals were most often distributed directly after their harvest, cash was given after the cotton money had been paid, and clothes in connection to a major feast. Not all women received all three items, cash, cereals and clothes. Often, if they received money, they were supposed to use it for clothes, although they might instead prefer to use it for business. For a woman it made a difference whether she received a dress or a bag of sorghum. In the latter case, she could increase the value of the sorghum through brewing so that she was able to buy more than a dress at the end of the dry season.

The timing of the distribution made a lot of difference too. The earlier in the dry season a woman received her share, the more time would she have to make it grow through income generating activities. That is the reason why in the episode told at the beginning of this chapter, the women of Pierre’s farming unit were upset about not having received anything by March. As the farming season was approaching, they were about to miss the opportunity to make their funds grow by their own commercial activities.

In addition to the cereals which the male head distributed, women also had the right to collect for themselves small ears and cobs left on the field after harvest. I have no reliable figures about how much grains my female interlocutors collected in this way. In one farming unit (Pierre’s) the women explained that because they did not “have time to collect small grains after harvest”, they had been granted the right to take grains spilled during machine-shelling of their maize harvest. Unlike grains that other women collect in the farms after harvest, these quantities were mentioned both in these women’s accounts of what they received, and in their head of farming unit’s account of what he had distributed. These women, therefore, in my account seem to have received more than women in other farming units, even though the latter might have collected even larger cereal quantities in the fields.

Compared with the total annual incomes of the farming units, the post-harvest recompense stood out as extremely modest. However, as explained, the material benefits that members drew from the common farming economy were much more than what was distributed to them individually. Therefore, rather than to compare “the female share” with the total expense budget it is more relevant to compare it with how much the head of the farming unit had spent for his personal consumption from the common fund under his management. Women did not make this comparison. First, they had no means of assessing how much their husband or father-in-law spent for personal consumption, nor did they know if this money was taken from the common fund or from his eventual personal income. Women’s expectations of what they should be given after the harvest was rather informed by their general impression of how much had been harvested, and in some cases by what they knew about major purchases made and to be made. Second, if women compared their personal share with somebody else’s they were most likely to compare it with what other women received rather than with their head of
farming unit’s personal consumption. Somé’s observation that “the rural actors in cotton are more concerned with [perceived] fairness rather than justice” (Somé 2010:239) seems pertinent, and in line with Bourdieu’s idea that people tend to align their subjective hopes to their objective chances (Bourdieu 1990:62-79). Nevertheless, even though women in Bala had been socialized into not expecting benefits that equal their male heads’, they did have ideas about fairness in matters of distribution.

In the following I will try to calculate resource distribution within the farming units under study. It must be said that the comparisons that I am making are based on an overview which my informants, whether male nor female do not have. Moreover, my figures are approximations, given that they are based on estimations and on decisions about how to assign a monetary value to various items (as explained in the appendix).

The common fund and the head’s pocket

In contrast to everybody else, heads of farming units had the possibility to cover their personal expenses with means from the common fund. Their basic needs, such as food, shelter, health care and even clothes in some cases, were already included in the expense category “purchases for common consumption” covered by the common fund. What interests us here is how much they additionally spent on personal consumption and leisure activities. For most men, with the exception of those who for religious or other reasons abstained from alcohol, the largest part of their spending went into dolo, the local beer brewed from red sorghum. Many men would argue that their beer expenses were part of their social obligations and that they participated in drink exchanges as representatives of their farming units. My point, which I will develop more in chapter eight, is that women also had social obligations and engaged in social drinking, although to a lesser extent. Women had no choice but to cover such expenses from their personal earnings.

How much money men spent on leisure activities proved difficult to estimate, especially how much they spent on beer. They spent very little during farming season, that is from May to September, when they had neither time nor money to drink, when women had no time to brew, and when there was hardly any sorghum for sale. The new sorghum is harvested in October, and from then on beer starts to be gradually more available. In February, when the cotton harvest was finished the village exploded in a few months’ drinking euphoria, until farm work started again in mid-May. When men estimated how much they had spent on beer, they would state how much they usually spent per day or per week. Some distinguished between two seasons, the “dry season” and the “farming season”. I then multiplied their estimations with the total number of days or weeks of each period, but these figures were not altogether reliable.
When men stated their daily or weekly beer expenditures, their estimates seemed quite reasonable. I had had plenty of occasions to observe their habits and knew which men were privileged clients of regular brewers. When I added up their estimations, the annual expenses nevertheless seemed exaggerated. The sums spent on drinks annually by heads of farming units ranged from 11,000 to 130,000 FCFA. This raises the question of whether they really had spent that much or if some of them had overestimated the quantities because the interviews were conducted at a period when drinking was their principal occupation. On the other hand, the estimations only captured their regular intake, not the extravagances of the dry seasons last months of euphoric feasting. For that period the sums were probably underestimated, because this was when many men added the more expensive bottled beer and hard liquor to their consumption, which they generously shared with friends. An open question is whether all beer had been paid for. As chapter eight explains, men had the habit of drinking on credit and not always paying for it.

Some men did not drink, such as Ousseni and Patrick. Their expenditures for leisure activities were mainly on green tea and sugar in Ousseni’s case and for meat in Patrick’s case. Cigarette smoking was an expensive habit. Generally, it was still more common to smoke or snuff the local tobacco, which was home-grown by some and purchased cheaply on the market by others. In my sample only one head of farming unit (Pierre) smoked cigarettes but covered this cost from his personal earnings. Other expense categories which were included under the “head’s personal consumption” were clothes and shoes, travel costs, batteries and kerosene. In comparison these sums were relatively small. Middle-aged men such as Patrick or Joseph were very modest about clothes purchases while younger men, such as Ousseni or Joseph’s son Jules spent more.

The extent to which heads of farming units dip ped into the common fund to cover personal expenses was a sensitive issue. I tried a few times to approach it in very general terms, but as my interlocutors reacted defensively, I refrained from pushing the questioning further. “Yes, men spend a lot on drinking, but they use their personal money. In the dry season young men do a lot of odd jobs, building granaries, making bricks, and so forth… It is their own money they spend, not the incomes from farming!” By talking about junior men’s earning this senior head of farming unit sidestepped my question.

86 Being a privileged client meant having a standard reservation of beer set aside each time that woman had a beer sale. The client was obliged to pick up that beer to maintain the privileged relationship to the brewer.

87 Drinking tea was the principal social pastime of Muslim men who abstained from alcohol. Men’s personal expenses for meat concerned the oven-baked pork meat which was sold on Sundays in some of the beer drink places. Not all Muslim were strict on abstaining, many of them enjoyed both dolo and pork meat.
Like other members of their farming unit, male heads could have personal non-cropping income, some had it and others had none. Analytically it is important to distinguish between a male head’s “individual” budget and the “common” budget under his management, even though in practice the distinction was less clear. It happened that a head of farming unit spent cash from his personal non-agricultural incomes to solve a problem of common interest, but his personal incomes were not automatically merged with the common fund. In line with the old Bobo principle that what has been produced collectively should be consumed collectively (see Le Moal 1980:53), household members had weak claims on a man’s personal incomes. As Juenet (1996) has pointed out, incomes from fishing in Bala were more likely to be spent by the man for himself than incomes from farming, because the latter had been collectively produced.

The blurred or rather partial separation between male heads’ individual economies and the common economies under their management made it difficult to compile income and expense budgets in a consistent way. As a result, the “non-cropping” figures in the annual production chart (see previous chapter, Figure 4) are not entirely comparable across farming units, nor is the category “purchases for head’s consumption” in the consumption table in the present chapter. For those farming units (Pierre and Zakaria) in which the head had covered his personal expenditures from personal income, I did not include the latter in the common production figures of their farming units, nor did I include their personal consumption in the consumption figures. For the others, I decided to consider at least the heads’ small personal income as their contribution to the common economy. This income, generally a few thousands FCFA generated through the sale of poultry, came nowhere near the sums which these men claimed to have spent on personal consumption. I included their personal expenses in the consumption table, as they must have been covered from the common fund. A case in between is Hamidou, who de facto had contributed personal income to common expenditures (and these were consequently included in the production figures), but whose estimated personal expenses (included in the consumption table) nevertheless were twice as much as he had contributed.

The above discussion suggests a tentative conclusion about the relationship between the common fund and the head’s private purse and how these were connected to other member’s individual accounting units. When there was a surplus in the common fund, part of it easily filtered through to the head’s pocket for his personal needs. This cash-flow was not transparent for the other members, maybe not even for himself, because the money had been spent little by little. In such farming units, heads did not need to earn an additional personal income. But when means in the common economy were insufficient to cover expenses which according to the “household contract” should be covered by it, the personal incomes of the male head could be used for the wellbeing of their conjugal household or for the farming unit as a
collective. How much of his resources were spent on personal and how much on common purposes was a matter of the head’s sense of responsibility and personal judgment. Members of the farming unit could try to persuade him, but their possibility to make claims on his personal income was limited by the fact that they had not contributed labour to it. If a deficit in the common fund was not covered from the head’s personal income, it is likely to have been covered by a wife’s or a junior male’s personal earnings or efforts.

Individual shares versus the head’s consumption

Two factors made it possible, and even acceptable, for male heads of farming units to draw more material benefit from the common economy than other members: the ambiguous and non-obligatory status of the post-harvest transfers to individual members, and the blurred or partial separation between the male head’s personal pocket and the common fund under his management. The benefits which these male heads drew represent, what sociologist R.W. Connell calls “the patriarchal dividend”, defined as “the advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order” (Connell 2002:143). Junior men, who were members of their fathers farming unit, were not in a position to draw a dividend from the common economy, but once they headed their own farming unit they would. The blurred distinction between a male head’s personal purse and the common fund made it impossible to establish figures that are comparable across farming units. The interesting comparison that can be made in the following accounts is instead within each farming unit: how much the male head consumed from the common fund and how much he distributed to the other members.

Patrick had distributed 7,500 FCFA of the cotton payment to each adult member of his farming unit. The cash was intended for their purchase of clothes, and no additional clothes were paid for by the common fund. Furthermore, each of the family’s 6 children had received 5,000 FCFA, the herder boy 3,000 FCFA and a pair of shoes at 800 FCFA.

The sums distributed to the members of the farming unit can be compared with the value of Patrick’s personal consumption from the common fund. Based on his own estimations these amounted to 140,000 FCFA. The largest expense category was for grilled meat (500 – 1,000 FCFA per week), estimated at 117,000 FCFA. Other expense categories were about 15,000 for travel to town (he went 15 times or more in a year), and 2,500 FCFA for the purchase of clothes. Patrick was modest on alcohol consumption and estimated that he did not spend more than 5,000 FCFA in a year.

88 This sum was probably overestimated, because there was hardly any such meat for sale during the farming season.
Jean had, after harvest, given his wife a bag of maize, which at that time had a market value of 4,500 FCFA. He had also given her 5,000 FCFA in cash, which she had used to buy a cooking pot. No cash had been distributed to the adolescent children, but clothes had been purchased for them from the common fund. The teenage son had received a bicycle worth 87,500 FCFA.

Jean’s estimated expenses for personal consumption from the common fund amounted to 103,000 FCFA. The largest expense was for beer, about 52,000. The rest was divided between the smaller expense categories of lamp kerosene, torch batteries, Nescafé and sugar, grilled meat, clothes and fuel for his moped.

In Pierre’s farming unit each of the four wives had received 3 bags of maize at the cereal harvest, representing a value of 13,500 FCFA per wife (because they did not “have time to collect small grains after harvest”). They had also received 5,000 FCFA each from the cotton money, and an additional 2,500 FCFA for the purchase of clothes. The children were still too small to handle money, so clothes had been purchased for them from the common fund.

The three men of the farming unit (the head included) had allocated to themselves each the sum of 12,500 FCFA as pocket money. They had also purchased clothes at the value of 8,500 FCFA per male using money from the common fund. The allocated pocket money was not enough to cover their personal expenses, but the men all had had personal incomes from non-farm activities, sufficient to cover their personal consumption costs. They had even been able to take on some expenses in their conjugal households from their personal earnings.

In Joseph’s farming unit the four women had each been given a bag of maize, at the value of 4,500 FCFA. They had also each received 3,000 FCFA of the cotton money. Two children had each been given 2,000 FCFA, while the smallest children had their clothes paid for by the common fund.

Joseph had spent an estimated 85,000 FCFA on personal consumption, and most of it (about 77,000) had been on local beer. Smaller expenses had been made on grilled meat and torch batteries. His married son Jules had spent about 158,000, most of which (130,000) was on local beer. The rest was divided among several smaller expense categories, such as kerosene, torch batteries, tobacco, grilled meat, clothes, travel costs, soap and toothpaste. He did not mention having had any personal incomes during this period, hence he is likely to have covered his expenses from the common fund.

Ousseni’s two wives had received each a bag of maize after the harvest (value 4,500) and an additional 15,000 FCFA from the cotton money. Ousseni and his brother had allocated 10,000 FCFA as pocket money to themselves, but while the younger brother had additional income which well
enough covered his personal consumption, Ousseni’s estimated personal consumption amounted to 52,000 FCFA. The largest expense category was for clothes (15,000 FCFA) and the rest was for green tea and sugar, torch batteries and travel.

Hamidou had not distributed anything to the members of his farming unit. On the other hand, the common budget had paid for clothes for all its members. He had also purchased utensils for his wife at the cost of 1,200 FCFA.

The estimated budget for Hamidou’s personal consumption was around 41,000. The largest expense category was for his clothes (22,000), the second largest expense was on beer (11,000) and a few smaller sums for kerosene, batteries and travels. During this period, he had earned 23,000 from non-cropping activities, mainly through the sale of small ruminants, poultry, and craft. In other words, his personal income covered about 50 per cent of his personal consumption.

Zakaria had been unable to distribute anything from the common harvest to his wife and children. Instead it was the wife who had distributed pocket money to the larger children and purchased clothes for the smallest from her personal earnings. At times she had also covered other costs, expenses which in other farming units would have been carried by the common fund, such as medical costs.

The value of Zakaria’s estimated personal consumption was around 51,000 FCFA, most of which was on local beer, and a few minor sums for batteries, tobacco and sandals. He covered these expenses entirely with what he had earned from making baskets and wooden tools. In other words, his personal consumption did not drain the common fund. The insufficiency of the common fund did, however, drain his wife’s personal budget.

The situation of the two married men who were juniors in their father’s farming unit is particularly interesting because they illustrate how generation interacted with gender to structure the distribution of resources:89 In the first

89 Economic inequalities between men of the same farming unit hold a potential for tensions. A junior man who thinks he has received too little from the common economy is tempted to access money by other means. In Bala I heard stories about how young literate sons cheated illiterate fathers on the cotton money, and one example in Juenet’s (1996) study on household economies in Bala seem to be such a case. Other stories were about young men secretly diluting the chemicals which they should spray on the farm, so that they could sell some of it. In the words of one young man who explained this practice: “If the old man doesn’t give you anything for you to smoke, what else can you do?” On the other hand, I also got the impression that adolescent males were a bit spoilt by their fathers. At the time of the cotton payment, numerous young men in Bala proudly circulated on brand new bicycles or carried around new cassette recorders. It was commonly said that such gifts were incentives for sons to stay on the farm instead of leaving for work in Côte d’Ivoire. An in-depth study of young men’s econom-
case, Joseph’s son Jules seemed to have had access to the common fund to cover his personal expenses, while in the second case, Patrick’s son Eric, had been handed the same amount as his mother and his two wives. One difference between these two cases is that in the first the father was about to retire and had handed the management of the farm to his son, while in the second case the head maintained a firm hold on farm management. Furthermore, Jules was his father’s only son and the transfer of authority was likely to be less problematic than in Eric’s case where there were younger brothers who might not easily accept his authority. It is quite probable that the differences between these two junior men’s access to the common fund reflected their farming units’ position in its “developmental cycle”, but conclusions cannot be drawn from two cases only. In neither of these two cases were there any economic resources controlled by a man on behalf of his conjugal household. Apart from the common fund controlled by the father, there were only the individual economies of the women and junior males. These cases illustrate the extent to which the exclusive focus on conjugality in the economic literature on households is misplaced.

Pierre’s farming unit represented another interesting case, because it had the most egalitarian (among men) and transparent management. The three brothers, whose father was dead, maintained a clear separation between the joint economy of the farming unit and their personal purses and took all decisions jointly. The common economy provided the cereals, purchases and investments of common interest and personal allocations to each adult member (male and female). There was no sign of any of them dipping into the common fund for personal expenses. All three men had sufficient non-cropping incomes (fishing, carpentry and a little poultry), to cover their personal needs. They had even taken on certain expenses for their conjugal household, particularly regarding their children (school expenses, health costs) and for their house-building projects. The three households were not living together, as they were about to establish their own compounds in separate locations. In terms of developmental cycle this farming unit represents a pre-fission phase. In fact, a few years later the unit had split their farm.

**Summary: Domestic systems beyond economic models**

My description of the internal organization of the domestic economy has confirmed the point I made in the introductory chapter, that none of the household economic models fit with the way the domestic economies of these smallholders were organized. The “common economy” of the farming unit was not the joint possession of a conjugal couple, as presumed by the
“unitary” household model (Becker 1991). Nor was it the personal possession of its male manager, as presumed by the more individualistic “bargaining” and “collective” approaches (Udry 1996, Haddad, Hoddinott and Alderman 1997a). Instead, my description supports anthropologist Ann Whitehead’s argument (1998, 2001), that domestic economies in the West African coarse grain belt are subdivided into a “common” and several “individual” domains, that there are multiple interdependencies between them and that this system has to be understood in its totality. To some extent the flow of resources between domains is a matter of negotiation, but to some extent it is structured by “implicit contracts”, which themselves are negotiable. Such contracts establish what bundles of rights and responsibilities individual members have in relation to the farming unit as a collective and towards individual members of it.

More recent economic studies have paid more attention to the complexities of domestic economies. Economists Kazianga and Wahhaj’s (2013) household economic model called “voluntary contribution under a social norm”, which they have applied to quantitative agricultural production data from Burkina Faso, comes close to such an understanding, even though the study is limited to the production of crops only. The authors suggest that members of a farming unit voluntarily spend labour on the common plot because they trust that they will benefit from its production and that heads of farming units would behave in line with norms regarding the proper use of common crops out of fear of being socially stigmatized. In response to Kazianga and Wahhaj, Guirkinger et al. (2015) put a question mark to the disinterestedness of the head’s management. Analysing data from Mali they noticed that heads of farming units habitually drew a personal dividend from the common farm, and that they, therefore, were reluctant to grant independence to their married sons.

Both studies have grasped important aspects of family farms in the West African inland, aspects that accord with my own understanding of domestic economies in Bala. Yes, members of a farming unit worked on the common farm with the expectation that their basic needs would be covered from its production. Yes, a head of a farming unit who managed badly the joint undertaking of farming and who did not look after the needs of its members got a bad reputation. (And it was not uncommon that men in Bala were talked about in such terms). Yes, Guirkinger et al. are also right that the head of the farming unit drew a personal dividend from the collective farm. While Kazianga and Wahhaj based their model on an official and idealizing discourse, Guirkinger et al. revealed a practice which allows for economic exploitation within the farming unit. My point is that even though there were norms about how a responsible head of farming unit should behave, there were also

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90 For a critique of development economics’ application of individualistic approaches to West African farming economies see Bridget O’Laughlin (2007).
ambiguities, loopholes in the normative system, which allowed for male heads to draw a personal dividend from the common budget while maintaining a reputation of responsibility.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that the recompense in kind and in cash distributed to women after harvest was important for them, but that the material benefits which they drew from the collective enterprise of farming was much more than that. It included food, healthcare and shelter for themselves and for their children. For a woman, being encompassed by a farming unit meant security, and the authority of its male head rested on his ability to provide for the basic needs of its members. On the other hand, it is beyond doubt that women and junior men benefitted less from the common resources than their male head. I have argued that two factors allowed for heads of farming units to draw “a patriarchal dividend” (Connell 2002) from the common economy: the ambiguous and non-obligatory status of post-harvest transfers to members of a farming unit, and the blurred or partial separation between the head’s personal purse from the common fund under his management. Even though the post-harvest transfers to women were in line with norms rooted in tradition, it was the head of the farming unit who decided if and how much should be distributed and for what it should be used. Moreover, from his authority position he could dip into the common fund for personal expenses but was not obliged to pool his personal income with the common fund, not even if the common fund was insufficient.

Heads of better-off farming units had the most leeway to spend common resources on personal consumption, while heads in poorer farming units were obliged to find other sources of income. Hence, the latter were more likely to pay their leisure activities with income they had earned themselves. This does not mean that women in poorer farming units were better off than in the more prosperous. To the contrary, in farming units where the common economy was unable to provide for its members’ basic needs women had to find ways to compensate for the deficit through their own efforts. Prosperous farming units could afford both to care for their members and to pay for its head’s personal consumption, and this would support anthropologist Bridget O’Laughlin’s (2007) point that a farming unit’s absolute poverty is a worse threat to a woman’s well-being than the unequal distribution of resources within better-off farming units. In the large majority of middle-income farming-units the male head struggled to make ends meet, to manage the common economy in a responsible way, to keep the members satisfied, while still dipping into the common fund for their leisure activities.

Lacking insights into the management of the common economy, women generally thought that too little of the earnings went their way, and they employed various implicit or explicit modes of bargaining to increase their share. Their strategies will be explored in the following chapter.
Part II
6. Female bargaining strategies

In this chapter the perspective shifts from the male managed collective domain to female managed individual domains, from the farming units’ collective livelihood strategies to women’s individual strategies. The aim is to understand women’s economic strategies and to explore their room for manoeuvre, for a better understanding of female agency within domestic organizations where men are the recognized authority holders. I will discuss women’s agency in terms of bargaining and strategies, through social theories that nuance the economic understanding of these terms.

Women’s individual economies

I have argued that the value of what women received as direct transfers from the common economy, although important from the point of view of the women, must be considered in relation to their part in consuming what was jointly produced within the farming unit (see Figure 7). The latter provides indicators of the general living standard within that farming unit: Was there enough to eat? Had household members their medical expenses taken care of? Did they have their clothes paid? Did the common fund pay for products which the woman otherwise would have furnished by own means? These factors had implications for how women could spend their post-harvest recompense. Some women managed to make their personal means grow, accumulate and invest in personal assets, while others were unable because their earnings entered the household’s common consumption.

What were the mechanisms behind these differences? Was it only a matter of some farming units being poorer than others? To some extent yes, women’s strategies are shaped by the general economic situation of their farming unit. However, other factors played a role as well, such as the farming unit’s composition, a woman’s position within it, and specificities of the “implicit contract” applied in her farming unit. Relations outside the household were also part of the picture, as women distributed and received gifts from close kin, such as brothers, parents and adult children.

The following four cases illustrate the monetary basis for women’s agency with ethnographic detail.
Charlotte’s and Viviane’s scope for accumulation

Charlotte was in her late thirties and farmed together with her husband Jean, their five adolescent children and two external herder boys. Four of the children were girls and they worked in a team with their mother for household chores as well as her income generating activities.

At the end of 1994 Charlotte had received 1 bag of maize and 1 bag of millet from the household’s cereal harvest. She had sold them at 7,500 FCFA (the maize) and 8,000 FCFA (the millet). In addition, she had received 1 tine of maize as a harvest gift from her brothers. She had spent 6,000 FCFA on the purchase of 3 pagnes for a dress and 5,000 FCFA on red sorghum, which she then had used to initiate her dry season brewing activity. In the beginning of 1995 when the cotton money was paid to the farmers, her husband had given her 5,000 FCFA, with which she purchased 8 enamel dishes.

From plants grown on the farm Charlotte had produced a stock of dried sauce ingredients: 1 small bag of cowpea leaves, ½ a small bag of hibiscus leaves, and 1 tine of hibiscus calyces. She had also extracted 4 tines of locust seeds and 1 bag of sweet yellow powder from the pulp of locust beans. She had transformed the seeds into sumbala (Fr. soumbala), a fermented condiment, which she had used in cooking. Some of the locust powder had entered the household’s food consumption and some of it had been fed to the draught animals. Charlotte had also collected 2 barrels91 (3.5 bags) of shea nuts which she had transformed into butter, enough for her annual needs of cooking fat, lamp-oil, and soap making. She had sent small gifts of sumbala, shea-butter and soap to her brothers. During the dry season, Charlotte had repeatedly prepared beer for sale as well as mead, a fermented drink made from honey. At the end of the season she had thereby generated a net income of 25,000 FCFA, in other words, this was what remained after small expenses had been covered from it. She had then spent 18,000 FCFA on buying 9 pagnes (clothes for the girls) and 3,500 on 6 dishes (for herself).

Charlotte’s husband had paid almost all the household’s cash expenses from the common fund. This may seem exceptional considering what has been said earlier about the general expense pattern within farming units in Bala. However, one must also consider that with the help of the adolescent girls Charlotte had been able to be self-sufficient in all female produces which entered the household’s consumption. Her husband thus only paid for items which could not be home-made. Furthermore, Charlotte had access to the cereal store and often bartered maize against fresh vegetables and fish. Her husband sometimes allowed the oxcart to be used to transport firewood, but much wood was still carried by her and the girls. Except for a total of 5,000 FCFA on milling fees at moments when her husband had been short of money, Charlotte had spent very little of her personal fund on the household’s consumption, but together with the girls she had provided a considerable amount of unpaid domestic labour. She had purchased her own clothes and clothes for the girls, while the husband had paid his own and clothes for the boys, that is the son and two herders, with money from the common fund. Charlotte had also allowed herself to spend between 300 FCFA and 600 FCFA per week on beer, depending on the season.

91 One barrel contains 220 litres, hence 11 tines.
At the following harvest of 1995 Charlotte received 1 bag and 4 tines of maize, 2 bags and 5 tines of millet, and 1 bag of red sorghum. She also received one tine of maize as a harvest gift from her brothers. She sold the maize at 12,500 and the millet at 21,250 and invested the sorghum into brewing. She used the money from the cereal sales to pay for milling, to buy pagnes and to buy dishes. In the beginning of 1996, her husband gave her 15,000 from the cotton money, and she bought a cooking pot (7,500 FCFA), pagnes and a headcloth. After these expenses, she still had 10,000 FCFA in savings at the time of the interview.

Charlotte’s case shows that it was possible for a hard-working woman to increase her capital through dry season brewing. The initially purchased 5,000 FCFA worth of sorghum had in a few months grown to a net capital of 25,000 FCFA. Good health, vigour and skills were also conditions for success. The availability of the girls’ labour had facilitated her work, and their input also explained how Charlotte could be self-sufficient in home-made produces such as shea butter and sumbala. In recognition of their work, Charlotte had bought pagnes for the girls from her personal budget. As this farming unit was relatively successful, Charlotte did not have to worry about food security and could, therefore, rely on the maize stock to barter vegetables and other ingredients for the meals. She had to spend very little of her own cash on household maintenance, and she could invest in utensils and clothes for herself and the girls.

Viviane was in her forties and married to Patrick, head of a motorized farming unit. In this farming unit, there were two distinct households, one consisting of Patrick, Viviane and six unmarried children, the other consisting of their eldest son and his two wives. During farming season, they lived together on the farm, organizing food preparations and household chores in common. Only two of the six children were girls (7 and 13 years old) and they assisted Viviane in her daily activities.

At the end of 1994 Viviane had received 1 bag and 2 tines of maize from the common harvest. She had sold it at 8,800 FCFA and used the money to buy 3 cooking pots and 2 large basins. Early 1995 she had been given another 6,000 FCFA from the cotton payment and had bought herself 3 pagnes. Viviane had farmed a plot for herself at the edge of the common farm, and there she had produced 1 tine of soybeans, which she had transformed into sumbala. She sold some of it at 250 FCFA, which she used to buy other condiments. She had not picked locust beans, but she had extracted the seeds of the hibiscuses that grew on the borders of the farm and sold them. Viviane had also made a personal stock of dried sauce plants: 1 tine of hibiscus leaves, one bag of hibiscus calyces, 1 tine of cow-pea leaves and a small basket of yolokotulu (the flowers of a tree called yoloko). She had sold nothing of it but had used it in cooking at times when sauce plants were hard to find.

In June Viviane had collected 3 bags and 3 tines of shea nuts and sold 1 bag at 3,000 FCFA. She had transformed the rest into butter. With the money

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92 Compared to what Juenet (1996) reports from that same year in Bala, this is a realistic figure for women who had the possibility to make use of the dry season for income earning.
from the sale she had bought sesame seeds to be sown on her personal plot and had spent the rest on clothes for the children. She had used her shea butter in cooking, for lamp-oil and for soap making. She had produced 15 balls of soap, of which she had given away 3 as gifts. With dry season beer brewing Viviane had generated a net capital of 7,000 FCFA, which she had used to buy 11 enamel dishes and 2 pagnes. She had earned another 1,250 through small trade (such as selling hibiscus seeds as mentioned above). With that money she bought a few clothes for the children.

The head of the farming unit annually provided one bag of salt paid from the common fund. This salt was used by the women of both households. He also paid for milling during farming season, and occasionally for meat and fish. Batteries and medicines were also paid from the common fund. The farming unit owned a cart, which was used to transport all the firewood. With her personal money Viviane purchased condiments in addition to what she produced herself and paid milling fees during dry season.

After the following harvest (1995) Viviane received 1 bag of maize and acquired another 2 tines browsing the farm after harvest. She sold the maize at a total of 10,000 FCFA. She also harvested 9 cans of sesame on her personal plot, which she sold. She spent 2,200 of this money to buy herself two new jars for brewing. In early 1996 she received 7,500 from the cotton income, but she was unwell at that time, and at the time of the interview she still had that money saved with the intention to invest it in brewing.

Both Charlotte and Viviane were middle-aged wives of relatively successful farmers. They had few worries about food security and were not constrained in their work by pregnancies and the care of small children. Both were still physically strong. They had both been able to spend resources on sociability such as beer drinking and the distribution of small gifts. Viviane had generated less personal income than Charlotte had, which could be due to differences in household composition. Viviane received less assistance in her daily work, because her daughters were both fewer and younger. Viviane’s daughters-in-law managed their own household and their labour was not entirely at her disposal. For labour intensive operations such as the preparation of shea butter and brewing, she called upon the help of her married daughter, who in compensation received a share of the product. Viviane’s daughters-in-law were nevertheless of some help to her, because during farming season the three women took turns in cooking. This gave Viviane some free time for her own activities. Waking up in the cottage on the farm she could spend early mornings cultivating her personal plot and collecting shea nuts, while Charlotte and other women in the village had not yet started their long walk to their farms. Viviane had more cash outlays for household maintenance than Charlotte had. Not only did Charlotte’s adolescent girls contribute to producing a lot of condiments, Charlotte also had access to the maize store and could reach into it for barter transactions. Vivian, on the other hand was given a ratio of maize for food preparation and had to make do with it. What she could not access through bartering she had to pay from her own means.
For both Viviane and Charlotte, their economic strategies could be said to aim at avoiding cash outlays for household maintenance and to invest in objects of female wealth such as utensils and clothes, which not only bestowed their owner with prestige but also constituted their savings (see also Shipton 1995). Utensils and clothes were a woman’s personal belongings, she could take them with her if she left her husband, and at her death they were passed on to her children as inheritance (see also Traoré 2010b:154).

Evelina’s and Jeanne’s struggle to make ends meet

Evelina was 28 years old and had three children between 1 and 7 years. She was married to a junior man in Pierre’s farming unit consisting of three brothers and their wives and children. After the cereal harvest in December 1994 she had received 1 bag of maize from the common farm. She had sold it at 4,500 FCFA and bought 3 pagnes for herself. She had also received 2,500 FCFA, when the head of the farming unit distributed money to its adult members for the purchase of clothes. In early 1995 she had received another 5,000 FCFA from the cotton payment.

In April-May 1995, when women harvested locust beans from the trees, Evelina had been occupied with caring for her child who was ill. She, therefore, only managed to produce 1 ½ tines of locust seeds and had sold 4 cans of them at 600 FCFA. She had transformed the remaining 1 tine and 1 can into sumbala and had used it in cooking. She had also extracted yellow powder from the locust beans, little more than 1 tine, and all of it had been consumed. She did not remember when her sumbala had finished, maybe it was in January 1996, and she had gotten along until April before it was possible to pick locust beans again. In May-June 1995 Evelina had collected one bag of shea nuts and transformed it all into butter. She had sold some of it to have money for milling. Her shea butter had lasted until January 1996, and since then she had bought what she needed for cooking. In fact, somebody had stolen the remaining butter from her house when she was in hospital with her child! Evelina did not produce her own soap, but another woman of her farming unit had given her a few balls.

Evelina usually undertook dry season income generating activities, for example in 1995 she had sold home-made couscous, and retailed dried fish. She had used this money to pay for condiments and milling. In the dry season of 1996, however, she was not able to generate any income, due to the repeated illness of her child. As we shall see, she was not only tied down by the care of this child, the funds which she would otherwise have invested in income generating were drained consequently.

After the harvest in December 1995 Evelina received one bag of maize, which she sold at 6,000 FCFA. She also received another 1,500 from the sales of maize that had been spilled during machine shelling. With this money Evelina bought milk for her ill child. Later she received 7,500 FCFA from the cotton money. In that period, she was in hospital with the child, and spent all that money on medicines and food.

Normally, during farming season costs for milling and condiments were covered by the common fund, but during dry season the women had to come
up with these expenses by their own means. Cereals and sometimes fish were provided by the common fund. Evelina’s husband occasionally gave her money for milling from his personal income. He also contributed to the purchase of soap, kerosene and batteries. The provision of condiments during dry season was Evelina’s own responsibility. The child’s illness prevented her from making a stock of dried sauce plants, and she was, therefore, obliged to solve the condiment problem on a day-to-day basis. How much money she had spent on it was difficult to estimate: sometimes she purchased dried sauce leaves at 15-25 FCFA, sometimes she collected fresh leaves, and sometimes she bartered cereals against fresh vegetables. She spent 30 FCFA/day on stock cubes, and a purchase of shea butter at 25 FCFA would suffice for 2-3 preparations. Evelina spent only 150 FCFA on salt and obtained the rest through barter. She also bartered for *sumbala*. For barter transactions she used cereals from the common stock, but she must be careful not to finish her ratio before the other women of her farming unit. She spent 1,000 FCFA on soap, in addition to soap given by a co-wife and purchased by her husband. Furthermore, she paid 5,500 FCFA for medicines for the child, and abstained from buying clothes for herself, except a *pagne* at 2,000 FCFA to carry the baby in.

Evelina had used personal money for the medical treatment of her child (7,500 FCFA + 5,500 FCFA + 1,500 FCFA for the milk), because she worried about the large expenses which her child had already generated to the common fund (around 90,000 FCFA). Her husband also contributed from his personal pocket, having paid another 6,000 FCFA for milk and handed her some cash for her stay in town with the child.

Unlike the previous cases, Evelina had not been able make use of the dry season to earn a personal income. Instead she had spent the little money she had on medical treatment for her child. She found it difficult to fulfil her obligation to provide the daily sauce. Typically, she had sold both *sumbala* and shea butter for punctual needs of cash, although she did not have enough for her own needs. She had also sold her maize at the time of the year when the price was low, because she needed the money. Her economic strategies can be described as an *ad hoc* struggle to make ends meet.

Despite these difficulties, Evelina had some basic security from being a member of a larger farming unit, where cereals were enough so that some of it could be used in barter. Furthermore, in a poorer household such a costly treatment of a child would not even have been possible. One advantage of being a member of a larger farming unit was that the economic risk of illness was shared among a larger number of people. Why then had Evelina spent personal money on medicines? The reason was that in large farming units, women were generally very attentive to what kind of favours the other women and their children got. It could be problematic for a woman to stand out as having caused heavy expenses to the common economy, if later another woman of that farming unit had a similar problem and felt that her case did not receive the same consideration. Furthermore, it could happen that a head of a farming unit simply decided to withdraw a patient from a treatment because he judged that the expenses had reached the limits of what could be
afforded. Therefore, according to health staff in Bala, women sometimes secretly took their babies to the health centre, without their husband’s permission, and paid for the treatment from their own means.

Jeanne was around thirty and had three children between 7 and 19 years old. The farming unit consisted of herself, her husband Zakaria and their children. They farmed with hoes only and had a constant problem with how to produce enough staple food. The household members engaged in various income generating activities, and these incomes were managed individually. The husband occasionally brought home small bush game to be consumed. He never bought meat and the few chickens he bred he sold to cover personal expenses. Of the three children only one was a girl, and at the age of 9, she was of limited help in household activities.

Jeanne had not received a personal share from the common harvest, as the harvest was hardly enough to feed the household throughout the year. She had thus to create her personal fund by her own efforts. She had spent early mornings, evenings and Sundays working a personal plot on the family’s farm. At the end of 1994 she had harvested 3 tines of red sorghum, which she used to brew beer for sale. She had also harvested 4 tines of groundnuts, of which 2 had been used in cooking and the other 2 sold at 1,000 FCFA to buy condiments. Furthermore, she had extracted 1 tine of locust seeds, which she transformed into sumbala and used in cooking, and 1 ½ tine of locust powder which had entered into the household’s consumption. On the farm she had collected and dried 5 litres of okra, and some hibiscus calyces, which she later used as sauce ingredients. She had relied on fresh leaves when such were available either in the bush or on the farm. She had bartered salt using grains from the common stock. Furthermore, she had collected 2 bags of shea nuts, of which she had sold 4 tines at 2,000 FCFA. The rest she had transformed into butter and used for household needs such a cooking, lamp fuel and soap making.

Husband and wife were members of informal groups for work exchanges. When one of these groups came to work on the couple’s farm, a decent meal had to be served. To be able to buy condiments for such work parties, Jeanne had worked as a day labourer on five occasions and had been paid 250 FCFA a day. Twice, when it was her turn to profit from the work of her female work group, she had sold that group’s labour to another farmer, whereby she had earned 2,500 FCFA. In previous years she had worked for pay in the cotton harvest of larger farms, but in 1996 she had no time for it because her farming unit had its own cotton to harvest.

Jeanne also used to brew beer for sale, but in 1996 she had only done it twice. She had generated a net capital of 4,400 FCFA, which she intended to invest in more sorghum and to replace some broken jars. Unfortunately, there was an epidemic of meningitis, and people had been told by the authorities to have themselves vaccinated. Ideally such expenses were to be paid by the head of the farming unit from the common fund, but Jeanne’s husband did not have the money, so she paid 2,400 FCFA to vaccinate herself and the children. What she had left was insufficient to start her planned beer brewing, and Jeanne did not expect her husband to be able or willing to compensate her for the vaccination costs. Except for the vaccination Jeanne had very few expenses: 2,000 FCFA for clothes and 450 FCFA to buy soap after her homemade soap had finished. Very occasionally she had spent 10-15 FCFA on beer (the
In 1996 Jeanne harvested 3 *tines* of red sorghum from her own plot, and one *tine* of groundnuts. She used the sorghum for commercial brewing and had the groundnuts still in stock at time of the interview. From her personal funds she distributed 500 FCFA to each of the two smaller children as pocket money, while the eldest son was expected to be able to provide for himself.

Two years later Jeanne’s situation had not improved. She had been granted a credit by the village’s women’s association, 93 15,000 FCFA, but had been cheated by a young man who had promised to deliver red sorghum and never did. Jeanne’s broken jars had still not been replaced.

Unlike Evelina, Jeanne’s problems seemed to be rather permanent. She did not lack initiatives or plans for how to improve her situation, but had no margins for unforeseen events, and had to postpone her plans repeatedly. The way she was cheated on the sorghum purchase illustrates the vulnerable position of this household. Had she been married to one of the wealthier and influential farmers, this would probably never have happened to her.

For both women it was unforeseen expenses related to their children’s health that spoiled their possibilities to make use of the dry season to earn personal money. Their cases illustrate Whitehead’s claim (with reference to North-eastern Ghana), that women were socialized into being particularly altruistic in relation to their children’s well-being (Whitehead 1984 [1981], 1994:48–49).

To sum up, these four cases exemplify the differences between farming units regarding what women could bargain about. In the first two cases, there was a surplus that could potentially be bargained about. These women had received a personal post-harvest recompense and could also use cereals from the common stock to barter items for household consumption. In the second two cases the bargain was about how to cover a deficit in the common economy. In Evelina’s case, it had been a matter of medical costs, which she partially had covered from her own means. Jeanne had paid health-related costs as well but had also compensated for insufficient food provisions. In fact, everything that Jeanne had done to generate a personal income; her personal plot, her work for pay and her brewing, all these revenues had been spent on household maintenance. On the other hand, because her family’s farm was small and quickly harvested, she had been able to do much of this work during times when women in better-off farming units were still tied up with working on their common farm. Hence, from a superficial understanding of gender relations in households Jeanne could be said to have the most autonomy, as she had more time for own-account activities than the other

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93 The money came from the governmental credit programme *Fonds d’appui aux activités génératrices des femmes* (FAARF). The programme aimed at promoting women through small loans distributed through the agricultural extension service to local women’s organizations.
women. But, as I hope to have shown, she was the most tied down with the impossible obligation of making ends meet.

Agencies, strategies and modes of bargaining

Are women who have been brought up to care for others unable to perceive their own well-being as separate from other household members? Are they thereby contributing to sustaining inequalities? That is what economist Amartya Sen suggested (with reference to India) in his texts about how differences in “perceptions” affect intra-household bargaining. Sen used the Marxist concept “false consciousness” to describe the phenomenon (Sen 1989, 1990). Sen’s article triggered a lively debate, demonstrating that the matter of resource distribution within domestic units connects to a wider problem of female agency and how it can be conceived (for overviews see Hart 1997, Kandiyoti 1998). Three fundamental questions emerged from these discussions: First, how can one conceive of agency in cultural settings where personhood is understood differently from the autonomous individual in the European tradition? Second, do subordinate persons have agency? Third, is agency always rationally and consciously calculated?

With regard to the first question, the juxtaposition of Western individualism with non-western “dividualism” has been nuanced by various studies showing that even when personhood is relationally constituted there is still scope for persons to act on their own behalf (Karp and Masolo 2000, Wardlow 2006). In her Melanesian account Holly Wardlow demonstrates how various actors foreground relational or individual aspects depending on the situation, and how sometimes individualistic behaviours can be motivated by relational ideals of personhood and vice versa that people can draw on relational institutions in the pursuit of individual goals. Moreover, as pointed out by Karp and Masolo, the distinct opposition between individual and community and the construction of relational personhood as backward, is itself a product of Western thought (Karp and Masolo 2000:5,21). The idea of individualistic personhood should thus rather be understood as an ideological construct.

With regard to the second question, that is the issue of subordinate persons’ agency, Wardlow utilizes the term “encompassed agency”, which she defines as “actions that produce effects, but effects whose ends are beyond the individual’s actions and for a wider purpose” (Wardlow 2006:13). A

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94 In the later text Sen did not mention “false consciousness” but maintained the argument as such (Sen 1990).

95 A term coined by Marilyn Strathern to refer to personhood in Melanesian societies where “…persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them” (Strathern 1988:13)
similar concept is “subsumed agency” utilized by anthropologist Rosalind Shaw in a study of the Temne in Sierra Leone, where the most powerful acts were those performed indirectly and often invisibly (Shaw 2000). The agency of Temne women and junior men was to some extent subsumed by authority holders such as husbands and “big men” who acted through them. However, the “mediatory capacity of subordinates also enables the subordinate to block the agency of those who act through them: women, for example, can do this by refusing to cook or farm for their husband.” Shaw goes on to conclude that “these notions of indirect or mediated agency and of women being both controlled and controlling are paradoxical only according to a Western construction of the individual in terms of autonomous agency” (Shaw 2000:45).

The third question, whether agency is always consciously calculated, can be approached through Bourdieu’s strategy concept: among the possible options for action open to an individual, some are more likely to be chosen than others, because they are well-known, inscribed in the person’s habitus since early childhood (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986, Bourdieu 1990). Bourdieu defines a “strategy” as:

“a practical sense of things, or, if one prefers, what athletes call a feel for the game (le sense du jeu), ..., which is gained through experience of the game, and which functions this side of consciousness and discourse (like the techniques of the body, for example)” (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986:111).

Strategies, in Bourdieu’s sense, are thus fundamentally different from what they mean to economists, who assume that individuals consciously rank their preferences on a one-dimensional scale and make choices to maximize utility. What they are trying to maximize, whether income, consumption, or well-being in a wider sense, varies between different approaches, thus the economists’ definition of “utility” boils down to it being whatever is being maximized (Folbre 1986:250). When people do not act as expected, economists attribute this to cultural factors, such as pockets of inertia, absence of decision making or norms and values constraining the individual’s agency (Kabeer 2000). In this mode of thought, pure economic rationality is imagined to exist under layers of cultural irrationality (see also Moore 1994:94 for a similar comment).

The concept of “bargaining”, as employed in the household economic literature, seems to refer to the conscious and explicit manifestation of a divergent opinion with the aim to maximize utility. However, the economic literature is silent on the actual bargaining process. Its existence is inferred rather than described (Xu 2007, Doss 2013).

I suggest a broad understanding of intra-household bargaining, both regarding how people negotiate and what they bargain about. Bourdieu’s concept of “strategies” and of “symbolic capitals” which people strive to accu-
mulate, makes it possible to think of “bargaining” as a strategic practice which is purposeful but not necessarily consciously calculated, and which can manifest itself through various acts, verbal and non-verbal, explicit and implicit. As my ethnography shows, the aims of many of women’s strategies were undeniably material (food, clothes, money, etc.). But, besides covering basic human needs, these material resources bestowed their owner with symbolic capital in the form of recognition and social esteem. If one wants to understand what people strive for, the potential of a material resource to generate symbolic capital must be considered.

Throughout this study, I show that although women’s agency is encompassed by male-managed households and farming units (and in extra-domestic matters by the corporate organization of men’s age grades and patrilinearly structured “houses”) women do have a large variety of choices in their pursuit of individual goals. Women can choose when and how to employ various means for implicit or explicit protest. But they can also opt for compliance as a strategy. Hence, contrary to the economic literature, I suggest that even compliance, submission and endurance are means through which women bargain, and particularly so in a context where it is considered disrespectful to argue with an authority holder. From such a perspective women’s labour on the farm, their cooking and processing of wild plants and their commercial activities, were silent modes of expression in which women bargained for their “(culturally defined) projects” (Ortner 2006). Through the correct performance of tasks, and by a respectful attitude, a woman could build up recognition as a good wife, which improved her access to resources, esteem and influence. On the other hand, if her expectations were not fulfilled, and if she considered that other household members failed to live up to their part of the “implicit contract”, she was likely to turn to other modes, such as sullenness, foot-dragging, sloppy fulfilment of duties or complete refusal. Even taking practical action to resolve a problem without alerting anybody to it should be thought of as part of the bargaining game.

Finally, how does my broad understanding of “bargaining” relate to “agency”? Unlike agency, defined as the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001:112), bargaining is acts explicitly or implicitly directed towards a person or a collective. Thereby it comes close to Sherry Ortner’s idea of “agency of power” (Ortner 2006:139). Bargaining always takes place in a context of power, and as consequence the modes of bargaining which are socially acceptable for specific actors are products of power relations. In the following I will point to some key notions which were central to the construction of authority within domestic units in Bala, but which also could be used as reference and as tools by subordinate members in intra-household negotiations.
Male headship and ranking principles

Every farming unit in Bala had a male head with the authority to take decisions concerning choice of crops, labour allocation and how incomes from the common farming project should be spent. Heads of farming units were commonly middle aged or young men. Men in their fifties, when they had a married son, tended to appoint him as the farm manager, thereby liberating themselves from the daily nuisances of organizing farming, while still being the recognized authority figure of the family. Women had no right to be consulted on decisions concerning the farm and the common economy, because they counted as newcomers to their husband’s house, land and lineage.

“When she arrived, she found the man in his compound. He is free to organize his compound as he likes. She has no say.”

“The woman found me here at arrival. I made her come here. I am in charge of her everywhere. I inform her because we live together. Anyhow, I can decide without informing her. She will notice. I have nothing to inform her about, and she has nothing to decide about”

These statements by male heads of farming units alluded to the fact that a woman at marriage left her kin and settled with her husband. The only rights a woman could acquire to land and buildings were secondary use rights conditioned by her marriage to a specific man. She depended on him; hence she had no say. That was the reasoning behind the statements above, and this female voice confirmed that she shared this understanding.

“He is your husband. He is in charge of you. That is why a wife cannot tell him if she is dissatisfied.”

In the quotes above male heads referred both to “ownership” and “anteriority” in justification for their authority. The two notions are common as structuring principles in African lineage societies, and they are closely connected in the sense that “anteriority” implies “ownership” (Kopytoff 1987). As mentioned in chapter two, the descendants of the first settler in Bala would forever be considered as “owners” of the village, and the “houses” and the ethnic minorities were hierarchically ranked according to their order of settlement. Within domestic units “anteriority” gave husbands authority over wives and parents authority over children. It also gave elder siblings authority over younger siblings, a first wife authority over a second or a third, and so forth. In short, the principles of “anteriority” and “ownership” structured relations between groups and between individuals, within the village and within the domestic unit.

The reference to “ownership” makes the male head’s authority seem absolute and non-disputable, but to some extent he must earn this authority by his behaviour. In Bobo and Jula languages, the words for “owner” (te and tigi)
have a wider and slightly different connotation than the English word in western capitalist societies. In West Africa, “ownership” is not just a matter of property, but the idea is more one of “being the custodian” and of “being in charge” of the property and of those persons who depend on it. The local word “owner” is in French translated as *chef*. The *chef* of a farming unit was thus both in a position of authority and of responsibility towards the members. He was expected both to see to the well-being of its individual members, and to assure the long-term stability of the unit. He should thus be able to balance various individual quests against the long-term interests of the collective.96

The authority ranking of the other household members among themselves was fuzzier because of the intersection of the different ranking principles, such as gender, age, generation and marriage. The relationship between a woman and her adult son is an example of a seemingly reversed gender hierarchy, since parenthood weighed heavier than gender. For a junior married woman, it might not always be evident whose words carried more weight, her husband’s, who was junior to the head of the farming unit, or her mother in law’s who was married to the head of the farming unit. Other examples of fuzzy authority ranking would be among junior wives who entered the same household according to different protocols, an arranged marriage carrying most weight in the eyes of the family, a “love” marriage carrying more weight in the eyes of the husband. Amongst men it was not only age that operated to establish a hierarchy, but also if and when they had participated in the initiation ceremony, if they had been born by a first or a second wife, or if their fathers related to each other as younger and elder. Fuzzy authority ranking gave a leeway for different interpretations and hence a scope for bargaining.

“Scarce means” and “irresponsible women”

A head of a farming unit would sooner or later have to involve his sons in the management of the farm and thereby also the mother of his sons. Ideally a man should not keep any secrets from his mother and he should listen to her advice (Roth 1994).97 As a consequence, the more involved a young man was in the economic management of the farming unit, the better informed would his mother be, and the greater her chances to influence decisions even if she was not directly consulted.

97 See Ly (1979) for a similar description of the mother-son relationship among the Mandinka of Mali.
This mechanism is illustrated by the following differences in the extent to which heads of farming units let other members take part in decisions about their common economy. Patrick, who farmed with his wife, their children, one married son and his wives, consulted his married son on decisions related to farming and expenditures. He thereafter informed his wife, but not his daughters in law, about decisions taken. In contrast, the three brothers of Pierre’s farming unit took all decisions jointly but did not inform their wives. Joseph, on the other hand, who farmed with his two wives, their children and his married son and his two wives and children, was about to retire and had appointed his eldest son Jules as farm manager. The son took all decisions, but not without consulting his father. The son informed his mother but not his wives. Jean, who farmed with his wife and their children, had not yet involved his son, but discussed major decisions with his wife. Zakaria on the other hand, whose son was a few years older than Jean’s, discussed with his son but not with his wife. A few years later, as soon as the son had married, he appointed him as farm manager.

The economic situation of a farming unit was never in its totality revealed to its members, women and junior men.

“Some women do not believe their husband, so therefore it is preferable only to talk about expenses [and not about incomes].”

“You never talk about such things with the women. Never! They are not concerned. Except if you notice that they have the same idea as you. Then you can approach them a little.” …… “If there is improvement in the family, if things change, then you can tell. Then everybody is happy. But two who are miserable come easily into conflict. When things are difficult you should not say anything to your wife.”

The idea that scarcity obliged men to exclude women from the management of the common economy was often expressed by men in interviews: “In your country men let their wives have a say because you live in plenty. There is enough to satisfy everybody”. Even heads of relatively wealthy farming units referred to limited means as a justification for why women and junior men should be excluded from economic management.

“There are unforeseen events, there are sicknesses. If you distribute to your wife just to satisfy her, one day you will have problems. Even a million FCFA will not satisfy a woman! … You should avoid the humiliation of having to ask elsewhere for the solutions of problems in your family.” (male)

These quotes reflect men’s dichotomous thinking about men being responsible and women being irresponsible. Men were not thought to be born responsible but acquired this quality with age and education. This meant that younger men were only gradually given information and increased responsibility within the farming unit. In the role expectations of a “head of farming
unit” lay that he should be more responsible in economic matters than everybody else:

“A woman who is conscious about the future can think and give her opinion about a project” ... “No, in my compound there are no women capable of this.”

“If she knows the amount, she will want to spend everything at once, and then when there are expenses she will come back and claim more. That is why we prefer to hide the sums .... It is for the same reason that we hide the money for young children who can think of nothing else than spoiling it. ... Women are responsible but not in matters of money. It is money which makes many women become rebellious.”

Women faced this massive distrust with a great deal of pragmatism:

“As you can do nothing against his will, it is better to accept his decision to avoid beatings. If you disagree with a purchase, the day you use that object, your husband will remind you of your refusal. Then you could say nothing, and you would have been beaten [for nothing].”

“If you like it or not, that’s how it is. If you don’t agree you can leave and another [wife] will come.”

“Asking him understand” or taking action

Members of a domestic unit rarely bargained about resources in a public, straightforward face-to-face discussion. Authority ranking made it difficult for household members to address claims to the head or to contest his decisions without violating his right to be respected and exposing him to the risk of losing face. Therefore, women and other subordinate members employed various silent means of “making him understand”. “If he speaks to me and I refuse to respond, he understands that I’m not happy with him”, explained one woman. Silent communication followed conventions, otherwise the message would not be intelligible. Not talking to a husband, not cooking for him, not heating water for him to wash, refusing him sex and being deliberately lazy on the farm, were common modes of female communication with their husband or head of farming unit. Both men and women mentioned them in response to my question how a woman would show that she is dissatisfied. However, in actual situations, such postures were open to interpretation, and the person to whom the message was addressed could choose to disregard it.

Communication could be franker when two persons met in private, because a man who listened to his wife’s opinions risked less loss of prestige if
there was no audience. The intimate encounters between husband and wife were privileged occasions for a woman to try to influence her husband. 98

Otherwise, communicating through an intermediary was the appropriate way to negotiate with a hierarchically superior, a principle which applied within households as well as in the local society at large. 99

In some bargaining situations there was no verbal communication at all, instead subordinate household members simply took action, that is they did what they considered should to be done, even if they could be punished for their disobedience later. Sometimes they covered an expense from their own means, even if they thought that the common fund should have paid for it, or they let the common fund pay nevertheless, but in an indirect way: “My husband pays the salt. If it is finished, we tell him. He may tell us to find a solution (se débrouiller). I tell my co-wives, we take from our cereal provision, barter and divide (the salt amongst us).”

Were men able to understand women’s indirect modes of “making them understand”? The following quotes seemed to indicate that they were.

“If a woman shall do something against her will, surely the work will be badly done. From the result and from the expression of her face you will know that she is not happy”.

“Some women start a dispute. Or they refuse to give him water to wash, and to satisfy him in bed.” ….. “Some men would call for her and talk with her, some would give her money. Others would leave her to be annoyed and when she is tired of it, she will be back in a good mood. …. If it was me, I would say nothing. If it is a matter of eating, even if she is not cooking, I know where to eat…. ” *grinning*

Although few men admitted that they would give in to pressures of this kind, women did have power due to the gendered division of labour. They had specific duties on which men depended, such as companionship, food, sex and farm labour. These services were either not available on the market or not daily affordable. Agarwal (1997:18) claims that the withdrawal of services, which is a common female strategy all over the world, is less effective than more explicit forms of bargaining. Claudia Roth (1994), on the other hand, in her study of urban Zara women, highlights such practices as manifestations of female power. These practices should be understood as reactions against male authority and I agree with Roth that their efficiency lies in men’s dependency on women for gender-specific tasks. Women need, how-

98 The Mossi proverb “a woman’s field is made at night” (Kevane and Gray 1999:1) and the Dagaaba proverb “a woman’s cooking pot is filled at night”(Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2017:72) allude to the same idea, that the intimate encounters between husband and wife are occasions for bargaining about household resources.

99 See for example Le Moal’s description of how men’s junior age groups communicated with the elders, always in a ritualized manner through intermediaries (Le Moal 1971:127ff).
ever, to apply the withdrawal of their services with much care and finesse, lest they deviate too much from the ideal behaviour of a wife and be labelled recalcitrant or worse.

A woman who withdrew her labour

One evening, during that golden hour before sunset when farmers return to the village, Mariam and I were relaxing in front of our house, when Jules cycled into the courtyard. After the usual greetings and some small talk, he initiated the purpose of his visit: The family was in the midst of their cotton harvest and his mother had spent several days without appearing on the farm. Her labour was badly needed, and her behaviour set a bad example for the other women. Jules, therefore, suggested that we talk to her.

When later Jules’s mother Angélique, a woman in her mid-forties popped into our courtyard we brought up the topic and she reacted defensively. First, she enumerated the various funerals and other events which she had been obliged by kinship norms to attend. She then went on to point out that she had been working hard during the entire farming season, so why fuss about a few days of absence? She thereafter switched to talk about the past, when her children were small and when there had been nobody except her and her husband to do all the farm work. Now that she was old and tired, didn’t she deserve to take it easy? Wasn’t it time for the younger generation to take over? When she had finished her monologue, Mariam said jokingly: “You were eager to work in the cereal harvest, weren’t you? Now that it is time for the cotton you refuse. Cotton will not fill your stomach. That’s why! You refuse because you don’t have an interest [in cotton].” At that point Angélique could not prevent herself from grinning. This was the closest she ever got to admitting that she deliberately refused to participate in the cotton harvest. Throughout the remaining farming season Angélique persisted in being irregular on the farm. Her son continued to be frustrated, but as he said, “What can I do? I must forgive her each time. She is old. If she dies while being angry with me, it is not good.”

This example hints at the possibility that women’s withdrawal from farm work could be a response to distribution policies within her farming unit. Women’s preference for cereals over cotton was not only a matter of food security. As mentioned, women had the possibility and the acknowledged right during cereal harvest to fill their personal bags with the smaller cobs and ears. The cotton harvest on the family farm did not entail any option for personal earnings, and whether or not a monetary recompense would be distributed once the cotton had been sold, was entirely in the hands of their male head. Should Angélique’s behaviour be understood as a rationally calculated strategy, or was it more of an un-reflected gut reaction? If her aim was to protest against a too small personal share of the cotton income, why

100 A mother’s curse from the other side of the grave was a particularly serious threat to a person’s well-being (Roth 1994:139ff).
didn’t she say so when we asked her? There are several possible interpretations of this incidence. Was her reluctance to admit that she deliberately stayed away from farm work a discursive façade of being an ideal wife, which she put up to compensate for her more recalcitrant practices? Or did she consider that her withdrawal from the cotton harvest was a clear enough message to her son, and that she, therefore, did not find it necessary to explain her reasons to us? Or, was she simply fed up with work and, therefore, stayed away from this work sequence because it entailed the least personal advantage? Whatever her motives, she managed to annoy the other members of her farming unit, particularly the women, as her son later reported.

Given that women often spoke about withdrawing their labour (as for example the wives of Pierre in the beginning of chapter five), without necessarily going through with it, and given that when they actually did it (as in the case above), they might have preferred not to speak about it, it is problematic to draw conclusions from quantitative interview studies about women’s bargaining ability. In a quantitative study from the Malian cotton zone about 15 per cent of the women had stated that they had the right to refuse to work on the family’s communal farm (Lilja et al. 1996). But what these statements meant in relation to actual practices is hard to grasp. Moreover, it is not clear whether the authors thought of the other 85 per cent of the women as not having any bargaining ability at all.

Women were differently positioned within their farming unit to be able to withdraw their labour: middle-aged women with adult sons had more leeway than the younger women who were married to these sons. Generally, women’s withdrawal of labour was more a matter of foot-dragging and being late than of total refusal. Women (and even men) who were notoriously lazy in common undertakings provoked the resentment of the other members, and such controversies were often said to have caused farming units to split. Hence, for the withdrawal of labour to be a useful tool for women in consciously calculated intra-household bargaining all women of the farming unit must cooperate on a common strategy.

If it is “in the interest of us all”

Even though men and women in Bala subscribed to the principle of the head’s authority, there were situations in which his authority could be contested with reference to other recognized principles. One such reference, which recurred in interviews with both women and men, was the idea of common interest, in Bobo pepe siara, literally translated as ‘peace for us all’.

“If it is in the interest of us all, you say nothing about it. But if it is not, you can state your point and make him change his opinion.” (female voice).
People could have divergent opinions of what they meant by “interest of us all”. Which was the social unit referred to as “us all”: the conjugal household, the farming unit, the lineage, the village? And how was “interest” defined? Hence, the notion opened possibilities for interpretation and thereby for negotiations, in which actors could draw on various local and supra-local discourses about men’s and women’s rights and responsibilities and vis-à-vis various social groupings. In some situations, the notion of “common interest” could provide a woman with a justification to act against the will of her husband or head of farming unit, but the same notion could also justify a man’s punishment of his wife for disobedience. If such a dispute became public, its evaluation by kin and fellow villagers could be either to the man’s or to the woman’s advantage and thereby influence future interpretations of what the “common interest” is.

These variations can be understood with reference to Bourdieu’s dual concept of recognition/misrecognition (Bourdieu 1990, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:143). For the actors, the challenge would lie in having their actions “recognized” by significant others, as being in line with the “common interest” of any relevant social unit, such as the household, the farming unit or the lineage, while at the same time achieving the “misrecognition” of other possible driving forces of more egoistic kind. Intra-household bargaining is thus enacted in the intersection between individual and social agency.

Naila Kabeer (2000:44-45) argues, with reference to Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital and how individuals are differently positioned to accumulate it, that men are best placed “to pursue officialising strategies”, that is to produce an equation between their self-interestedness and that of the larger social good. “Men’s pursuit of private advantage is often presented as being in the legitimate interests of their households and the wider community and, hence given official status. Women, by contrast, tend to resort to unofficial, private and often clandestine, strategies to achieve their individual goals” (Kabeer 2000:45). The way men and women in Bala referred to ‘common interest’ to approve or condemn certain actions (as in the quotes above), suggests that Kabeer’s point is valid also in the West African setting. Women’s subordinate position implied that they were less likely to get away with behaviour that deviated from the norms and were, therefore, more likely to carry the blame in case of a controversy with a man. However, this needed not always be so. If a man’s behaviour was a flagrant deviation and the woman’s behaviour was correct, the public evaluation of their behaviour could be to the woman’s advantage. It was more important for women to stay within the norms of accepted behaviour than it was for men, but if they had managed to build up a position of respectability, they were more able to influence their situation through implicit and explicit bargaining. Hence, the paradox is that the very norms that constrained women and positioned them
as subordinates could be used by women to their advantage. Women differed in their capability to make use of this option, not only due to specific personal qualities, but also because they were differently positioned in the household and family structures and in the local society.

Summary: Thinking through women’s agency

As I have shown, it is difficult to uphold a conceptual separation between individual self-interest and the collective interest of the farming unit. That goes for women as well as men. They all had a vested interest in the collective undertaking of farming and in the wellbeing of the family. Gender, age, generation and marital status defined the rights and duties that individuals had vis-à-vis the farming unit as a collective. Masculinity and relative seniority were parameters connected to being in charge of the collective, while femininity and relative youth were parameters connected to being at the service of and being cared for by the collective. In a long time-perspective it would even be naïve to think that interests could be disconnected from the well-being of their children. Not only were children the only economic safety for old age in this local context, but a woman’s children could give her access to both status and power and particularly so if her son became a head of a farming unit. Consequently, women with only daughters and those without children sat with a weaker hand for old age.

Women exercised agency both when they took part in collective projects of their farming unit and family and when they went after their own personal interests. Moreover, their personal interests resulted to some extent from role expectations attached to being a wife and mother. As subordinate members of a social body they enacted agency both when they participated in a common project, and when they rejected, refused or actively sabotaged it. The latter practices were often silent, hidden or illicit and fall under the category which James Scott has labelled “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985). Examples of women employing similar practices have been reported from various parts of the world, reflecting women’s shared predicament of being subordinate (Kandiyoti 1988, Agarwal 1997, Kabeer 2000, Wardlow 2006). Criticisms have been raised against Scott for depicting peasants’ strategies as too individualistic and consciously calculated and for romanticizing their resistance, thereby glossing over the stability of the power structure (Hart 1997, Kandiyoti 1998). Can one conceive of strategies other than consciously calculated? I suggest that Scott’s concept of “weapons of the weak” is applicable to practices that women in Bala employ but prefer to think of them more in the Bourdieuan sense as a “feel for the game”.

Various feminist authors have pointed out that Bourdieu did not exploit the full potential of his practice theory for the analysis of female agency. In his most criticized book La domination masculine, Bourdieu (1998) focuses
on how women have incorporated their subordination, and how they are but objects in men’s strategies to accumulate symbolic capital in competition with other men (Lovell 2000, McNay 2004). In the words of Terry Lovell (2000), Bourdieu “rarely considers women as subjects with capital-accumulating strategies of their own” (p.21).

The idea of “encompassed” (Wardlow 2006) or “subsumed” (Shaw 2000) agency resolves the puzzle of how women can be both subjects with their own strategies and objects of men’s strategies. Elaborating on the concept of “encompassed agency”, Wardlow suggests that women sometimes have the very limited choice of either submitting themselves to the projects of others or withdrawing from them, and she labels the latter “negative agency”, which she defines as “the refusal to cooperate with others’ projects, the refusal to be encompassed” (Wardlow 2006:14). The behaviours which Wardlow enumerates as examples of women’s “negative agency”: the refusal to farm, to speak, to carry out tasks demanded by men, to participate in marriage transactions and the refusal to stay in marriage, correspond to what Scott would call “weapons of the weak”. I have, however, doubts about the pertinence of Wardlow’s concept “negative agency” in relation to my study. Most of these practices, as observed in Bala, did not allow women to opt out of encompassment. Even when a woman eloped, she opted out of encompassment only temporarily. As soon as she moved in with another man she was again encompassed by a domestic unit where norms about a wife’s ideal behaviour were likely to be similar to where she had come from. Hence, the notion of “negative agency” as defined by Wardlow, is interesting to think with but not entirely convincing in relation to my material. Unlike the women in Wardlow’s study, my interlocutors stayed within the limits of acceptable behaviour, even though some came very close to these limits. I suggest instead that such female practices should be understood as non-verbal statements in intra-household bargaining. Such statements were generally understood by their counterparts, the proof being that women and men in Bala gave almost identical answers when I asked how a woman would signal discontent. Men had since early childhood had many occasions to observe and develop a sense for what women meant when they acted in a certain way. Girls incorporated these skills as they spent time with their mother thereby developing a practical “feel for the game”.

It is maybe Rosalind Shaw’s definition of “subsumed agency” which best grasps women’s agency in a society where men are the acknowledged authority holders. Shaw does not resort to any concept like “negative agency” to explain how subsumed or mediated agency bestows a subordinate person with the power to block or distort the authority holders’ agency. For Shaw, the agency of the subordinate is thus not of a different ‘negative’ kind but part and parcel of the relationship between authority-holder and subordinate. A conclusion that can be drawn from Shaw’s analysis is that greater autonomy would not necessarily make subordinate persons become more power-
ful, but rather entail a loss of their power to block or distort the agency of authority holders.

I hope that my description of female strategies in Bala has shown that a woman’s self-interest was inseparable from the relations of which she was part and from the rights and duties which these relations entailed, according to various “implicit contracts”. A woman was a wife, a mother, a co-wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother-in-law, a daughter, a sister, a member of a farming unit and a member of a kin group and that is who she was. All these aspects of her identity entailed relationships with other persons or with a collective. The problem, from the perspective of a woman, was instead how to handle the often conflicting claims and expectations that followed from her various relational identities, how to prioritize some and manoeuvre around others how to interpret the terms of the implicit contracts to her advantage and to refute other interpretations. Furthermore, as I show in the chapters to come, relations not only motivated women to act in certain ways, women could also draw on relations and make use of relations to enhance their agency and to act by proxy of other persons. They were also instrumental to their agency, that is to their “relational agency”.

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7. Producing the meals

It was lunch time on the farm. The family workforce gathered in the shade of a tree. Men sat together, the women together and the children constituted a third group. The woman in charge of the day’s meals placed a dish with *too*, a stiff porridge, amid each group. She distributed the sauce, a vegetable relish, in several small enamel dishes and placed them in everybody’s reach, and thereafter sent around a dish with water to wash hands. Everybody was hungry. Full hands of *too* were broken from the larger chunk, slightly dipped into the sauce and put into the mouth. *Too* filled the stomach and the sauce gave it flavour and helped it slip down the throat. Both were needed to make up a meal.

This chapter describes how women produced the daily meals, including the ingredients that entered meals. I deliberately speak about these activities in terms of “production”, in agreement with Dunaway’s argument against the “false analytic divide between production and reproduction” (Dunaway 2013:5). She argues that the analytical separation of reproductive from productive activities, obscures the extent to which women’s unpaid activities, including the reproduction of the labour force, constitute factors of commodity production. Moreover, in the context of smallholder farming, where women produce items that can both be consumed and traded, differentiating between production and reproduction makes little sense. Following Dunaway, I suggest that the activities described in this chapter add “hidden value” to the cotton commodity. This does not mean that the women themselves thought about them in these terms. For them all these activities were part of their overarching project of keeping the family ‘in good health’.

This chapter explores the options that women had and the strategies they employed to fulfil the female duty of providing the daily meals. The aim is to investigate the conditions for women’s agency in their individually managed sphere of the domestic economy. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, a woman’s access to time and resources was shaped by conditions within her farming unit and by her position within it. As a result, there were significant differences between individual women’s material conditions and scope for action. Many of the activities assigned to women’s individual accounting unit were both inputs to the general well-being of the domestic group and conditioned by circumstances within the group. In short, the production of meals is a suitable example through which the intertwinement of male and
female, common and individual economic spheres of the domestic economy can be demonstrated.

Like in many other West African grain-farming societies it was considered a male duty to provide the cereals for the *too* and a female duty to provide the sauce ingredients. The basic dish is thus an appealing symbol of gender complementarity: *too* and sauce were equally important and one without the other did not constitute a meal. However, as has been explained in previous chapters, the ideology of gender complementarity intersected in this case with the principles of the “common” and the “individual”. Cereals were produced as a “common” undertaking, with the labour contribution of both men and women, while the sauce was a woman’s “individual” responsibility. Hence, men provided the cereals, but they did it with the labour contribution of women. Furthermore, it was not a generalized male responsibility to provide cereals, but the particular duty of the male head, in his role as manager of the produces from the common farm. The head’s capability to fulfil this duty depended on his ability to manage and maintain family labour on the farm. While it was the individual duty of a woman to provide the meals, her ability to fulfil this duty was conditioned by the male head’s ability to provide enough cereals and to offer good working conditions. In other words, her agency on these matters was encompassed by her farming unit and by conditions within it. Moreover, through her contribution to the farming unit’s wellbeing, working on the common farm and providing the meals, she exercised “encompassed agency”.

Women rarely relied only on their own work for individual undertakings: they drew on the work of children (small and adult), daughters-in-law, mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters and female friends. In other words, they exercised agency by proxy of other persons, that is “relational agency”. Many of these relations were hierarchical, structured by age, generation and marriage. Some of them were certainly exploitative, at least in the short time perspective. However, a prerequisite for the ability to draw on other person’s labour was that there existed a long-term relationship entailing prospects of reciprocity and that there was a tacit agreement to “misrecognize” the instrumentality of these relations as something else, such as friendship, kinship obligation, love, caring for and being cared for (see Bourdieu 1990, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:143).

I will proceed with an outline of women’s non-agricultural work at large and thereafter continue with detailed descriptions of three female work processes which have in common that their end products entered the daily sauce, but they could also be sold, purchased or replaced with a different purchased product. These were the “leaves” utilized in the daily sauce, the African locust bean (Lat. *Parkia biglobosa*) and the shea nut (Lat. *Vitellaria paradoxa*).  

101 Focusing on these three work processes allows me to demon-

101 Formerly known as *Butyrospermum paradoxum* or *Butyrospermum parkii*. 
strate that women made multiple choices for how to adjust both their production and consumption practices to various constraints and to highlight how access to money and relations added to their available options. It also allows me to show how women’s options and constraints differed depending on the general situation of her farming unit and on the woman’s position within it.

Conditions for women’s work

The itinerary of farming set the conditions for women’s individual activities as they fitted their tasks into free time slots. They also stretched their workday to the limits of what was physically possible. As I will show, when tasks were too numerous and time too scarce, women who could afford it purchased some of the products and services which were under their individual responsibility, sauce ingredients and milling in particular. Male heads of farming unit sometimes also paid for these items, but as explained in the previous chapter, their driving force to take on such expenses, was how to make best use of the available labour force on the farm. As long as women fitted their individual tasks within the timeslots left over by the common farm work, they were free to manage their work as they found best. They were also in full control of the fruits of their labour. It would in fact have been a break of etiquette if a man took a too active interest in how his wives managed their time, work and money. Women thereby had some leeway to take actions which were not directed by their head of farming unit.

During the harvest season, large farming units tended to organize cooking in common, which meant that all married women took turns in being responsible for the meals. After the harvest, the cooking community split and each woman cooked daily for her husband and children. When a man had more than one wife, they applied either a rotational schema, that is one wife cooked for the entire household and received the husband at night, or each woman cooked every day and the husband rotated among his wives for eating and sleeping. Two general principles crystallized from the diversity of cooking arrangements: In farming units with more than one conjugal household there were often two distinct cooking regimes, one during the farming season, and the other during the dry season. The female duty to provide the daily meals was both a ‘common’ duty towards the farming unit, and an ‘individual’ duty towards her husband and children. Her responsibility for fulfilling this duty was individual, but with the option to collaborate with other women and to draw on the labour of children. The exercise of agency through other persons is what I call “relational agency”.

The flow of women’s labour in meal production within the domestic economy is illustrated by the figure below. Here we see that in a poly-conjugal setting, women provided meals for all members of the farming unit (including invited work-parties) during the farming season. During off sea-
A main characteristic of women’s work was its temporal fragmentation. I realized this when I tried to measure how much time women invested into shea butter and sumbala production. I found it to be impossible to measure, because a woman would rarely stick to doing only one thing. Not only did she perform several tasks simultaneously, like opening locust beans, while cooking or caring for children, sometimes she would interrupt what she was doing and walk away for an errand or a social call. On other occasions a female visitor would give her a hand while sitting down for a chat. If the work had to be set aside, it was not always possible for the woman to tell me when she would continue that specific operation. And although she understood that I wanted to participate in all the steps of a specific production process, by the time she had remembered to call for me, she had already finished the work.

The fragmentation of women’s time allowed for flexibility. Women made use of small leftovers of time in between those obligations which according to the informal “household contract” were fixed in time, such as the early morning sweeping of the courtyard, or the heating of bathwater before sunset. A woman rarely sat with her hands idle. If she carried an infant, she attached the child in such a way that it could reach the breast to suckle without
interrupting her work. Even when a woman rested or chatted with friends, there was always something for her hands to do; cracking open groundnut shells, opening locust beans, plucking the leaves of sauce weeds and so forth. For a visiting friend it was natural to help with whatever work was going on.

When I describe women as doing this and that, the reader should keep in mind that many women had access to other women’s and girls’ labour. For these women it was thus more a matter of managing their own and other person’s labour than to actually do everything. A woman’s labour force consisted of her own children and of children living under their tutorship, particularly the girls. She also had some authority over her daughters-in-law. Middle-aged women could rely on assistance from their elderly mothers for some tasks. Women also frequently engaged in informal but reciprocal work exchanges outside the domestic unit.

Women always had children around them, and children were encouraged to be useful from an early age. Around the age of seven boys left the mother’s sphere and became their father’s helpers. Girls continued to work with their mother and thereby be educated for womanhood. The training consisted of participating in the work under the mother’s supervision and doing it over and over again until the body remembered every move and measure, an apprenticeship through body hexis (Bourdieu 1990:68-79). Girls were in charge of the heavy but simple tasks, such as pounding maize or carrying water, and they were only gradually introduced to the more complex work processes such as cooking, brewing, and the processing of various wild food and medical plants. When girls married at the age of 16-17, they were expected to be competent in all these tasks, and a badly educated bride would shame her mother. Once a woman’s daughters had married and moved out, she was left to carry out all those tasks by herself, unless she had a younger co-wife or daughters-in-law living in the compound. But, even when daughters had married and moved to their in-laws, they often continued to help their mother on specific occasions. Frequently young married women made shea butter together with their mother rather than with their mother in law. Mothers also continued to help their married daughters, for example by providing them with cooking utensils and enamel dishes. A woman’s work-companionship with her daughters-in-law was less intimate, in some cases even tense. Whatever a woman’s relationship with her daughters-in-law, by gradually building up a position as the senior woman of the farming unit, she could free herself of many of the more tedious tasks, such as pounding and grinding cereals, going after water or sweeping the courtyard. Women, therefore, had an interest in their sons’ early marriage and to have the young couple stay in their farming unit.
The female working day

The itinerary of a female working day depended on the period of the year, the age of the woman, her position within the household and many other parameters that differed from one individual to another. Roughly there were two kinds of working days, the days of the farming season and the days of the dry season. The farming season started in mid-May and ended in January/February, depending on the quantity and kind of crops on the farm.

During farming season women had very little time for activities other than farm work. Therefore, they tended to postpone some tasks, such as the processing of plants into condiments, soap-making, the maintenance of tools and utensils, the collection of firewood for storage. Not possible to postpone were for example the care for babies, the processing of cereals into flour, cooking and the collection of water. The woman had to find time for these activities before and after the working day.

Women woke up very early during this period. Before four o’clock the sound of women’s cereal pounding was heard all over the village. When day broke around seven, the house and the courtyard were swept, yesterday’s dishes washed, and the day’s cooking completed. Infants were bathed and cared for. As quickly as possible everybody got ready for the walk to the farm. For some families the walk took between half an hour and one hour. Other farms were so far from the village that their members lived there during the farming season and only came to the village on occasional visits. These women had time in the mornings and evenings to maintain a personal plot or to collect plants, but on the other hand, they lacked some of the facilities of village life, milling machines and traded condiments in particular.

Farm work was expected to have started by nine, as judged from the position of the sun. Latecomers were scolded by the male head, who arrived before the others on his bicycle. There was a lunch break (for about half an hour to an hour) and a shorter break in the afternoon. Work ended around five or six.

During the day on the farm, women had to find time to collect plants, wild or cultivated, for the next day’s sauce. Women who farmed an individual plot needed to attend to it. They did this either during the lunch break, while the others were resting, or before and after the common farm work. The walk back to the village was also used by women to collect edible plants and branches of dead wood for the fire, which they found along the path.

At home numerous tasks were waiting for them, and there was little time before the sun set at seven. The cereals must be taken to the machine for milling (unless the woman ground them manually), water must be collected and heated for the family members to wash themselves, a sauce for the evening meal must be cooked. In this period people went to sleep early. Towards nine o’clock the village became quiet, but in many courtyards, women could
be seen late into the night busy besides their cooking fire in preparation of the next day’s meal.

On the farm men worked as much as the women, but back in the village they had few obligations. On their bicycles they moved rapidly between home and farm and around in the village. Occasionally they had an errand such as mending a broken tool, acquiring chemicals or fertilizers, or to discuss a problem with the leaders of the village’s association. Unlike women, men always had a little spare time during the morning and evening hours for social calls, to sit down for a quick calabash of beer, and to discuss farming strategies with other male farmers.

On Sunday mornings Christians went to church and afterwards women did their market errands, washed clothes and tried to keep up with the many small household tasks which had been neglected during the week. Women who farmed an individual plot could spend a few hours working on it. For Muslims Friday afternoon was for prayer and rest, and they also had part of the Sunday off to attend the market. People did not work equally hard during the entire farming season. There was a period of less work in September and October when there was no more weeding to do, and the harvest work had not yet begun. Days on the farm were shorter, the lunch breaks longer and there was even time to take days off for other activities. The harvest season had its most intense period in November to January and gradually work diminished in February, depending on how much cotton there was to pick.

After the harvest women disposed more freely of their time. They could sleep a few hours longer, but never past sunrise, and they were able to take a little nap in the shade during the worst heat of the day. Their workday often started with a walk into the bush to collect edible plants or firewood. They left before sunrise to get the work done before the heat started. Women aimed at making a stock of firewood enough for cooking during the following rainy season and they also collected wood for their multiple wood consuming activities such as the production of shea butter, sumbala and brewing. Although some families brought home wood by oxcart, wood from new clearings or illegally cut in a distant place, women carried home much of their annual need of firewood on their heads. Water collection was another task for mornings and late afternoons. During daytime women were either occupied in their courtyard with routine activities such as pounding or grinding cereals and cooking, or with specific projects such as grinding sorghum for brewing and smashing shea nuts for butter extraction.

Women also had time to socialize, to maintain bonds with relatives, to assist celebrations like marriages and funerals. Those who had relatives in other villages could acquire their husband’s permission to visit them. Feasts were frequent, and in many of these women were eager participants. Women were also required to brew beer and cook for feasts and ceremonies. Preparing a girl for marriage and preparing a deceased for burial were other female responsibilities. Towards the end of the dry season women participated in
housebuilding and repair work. They drew water for the men who made the adobe bricks, and when the construction was finished, women plastered the floor and the roof terraces. Women’s occupations during the dry season were indeed very varied. In the following sections, therefore, I describe a few selected activities which have in common that they produced items which entered the daily meal.

The daily meal and its variations

The everyday diet of *too* with sauce may seem monotonous, but there were many possible variations of it. *Too* tasted differently depending on the cereal used and through the addition of potash,102 “bitter water”103 or shea butter the taste could be varied further. However, the large potential for variation was in the sauce. The most common sauces were based on various kinds of leaves, combined and used during different periods of the year. The villagers distinguished between two categories of sauces: the gluey ones (Fr. *sauce gluante*) and the dry ones (Fr. *sauce pâteuse*). The most common gluey sauces were prepared from dried and pounded baobab leaves (*Adansonia digitata*), dried okra or the dried calyces (i.e. the flower sepals) of the “red kapok” (*Bombax costatum*). Typically, dry sauces were the early weeds of the beginning of the rainy season, which were cooked with shea butter. Shea butter, peanut paste, or sometimes sesame were the fats used in cooking. Other common ingredients were *sumbala* (the fermented seeds of *Parkia biglobosa*), stock cubes, chili peppers, salt and potash. Cooked cowpeas were eaten as a stand-alone dish, with spicy shea oil poured over it. On special occasions, particularly when there were invited or hired workers on the farm, a soup with fish or meat was served in addition to the *too* with sauce. The quantities of meat and fish were seldom enough to let everybody have a bite, but a little of its bouillon was spilled into the vegetable sauce, whereby everybody could taste its flavour. Rice, eaten with meat or fish in a spicy peanut sauce, was a prestigious dish eaten on holidays such as Christmas or the end of Ramadan, but not affordable for everybody.

Between meals of *too* with sauce, which were ideally eaten three times a day, there was almost all year round some snack to eat: fruits, groundnuts, “bambara groundnuts”104 or grilled maize cobs. When food was scarce, the daily number of cooked meals was reduced or left out. Towards the end of the dry season sorghum beer often replaced food for the adults while the little food that was left was saved for the children. While waiting for the

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102 Potash was a salt extracted from the ashes of millet stalks.
103 “Bitter water” was obtained from sorghum dreg left over in brewing. A little of it was diluted in water, which was then utilized to season the *too*.
104 *Pois de terre* in French and *Vigna subterranea* in Latin.
crops to mature, people survived on cowpea-leaves boiled with a little maize flour. However, people did not consider that they ate well until they could fill their stomachs with *too*.

**Porridge from cereals**

The reduction of cereals to flour and the preparation of *too* were entirely female responsibilities. Women managed this work as they found best, drawing on the available labour force of children. A woman’s ability to do this work was, however, conditioned by the distribution of cereals to her from the common stock, a circumstance which illustrates the extent to which the female economic sphere was “encompassed” by the farming unit and the conditions offered within it.

In farming units that consisted of several conjugal households there were two distinct principles for cereal distribution, depending on the cooking regime: During farming season the man in charge of the cereal stock handed out a daily ratio to the woman on cooking duty. His responsibility was to make the grains last until the next harvest, and when grains became scarce, the ratio was reduced. When, after the harvest, the farming unit ceased to function as a cooking community, each married woman received a bag of cereals with which she was free to household as she found best.\(^{105}\) Each wife received the same quantity, irrespective of how many children she had, and would have to make do with it for the same time-span as the others. As a result, women who had many mouths to feed would have to complement from their own means, while others with few children could use some of the cereals for other ends, and still have enough to feed her husband and children. The principle that each woman received the same quantity was old and not particular for the Bobo only.\(^{106}\) Men stuck to it as the best way to avoid disputes and jealousy among women. When the farming unit consisted of one married couple only and their children, the wife received a bag of cereals with which she should household during a certain time, and thereafter she would be given another bag and so forth, throughout the year. Unless she finished her grains too quickly (which would make her husband suspect her of diverting them) the wife was free to manage them as she found best. In all

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\(^{105}\) The pattern, that there was one system for distribution of cereals in the dry season and another during the farming season, mirrored how cereals had been managed in the past, as described in Bobo ethnographies (Capron 1973:327ff, Le Moal 1980:50). At harvest every married woman had been given an amount of millet, which should cover her cooking needs throughout the dry season, while the content of the large common granary of the “house” was not touched until the rainy season and the content handed out in small ratios.

\(^{106}\) The same practice has been reported by Capron (1973:328) and Traoré (2010b:154) for the Bwa and by Rondeau (1994:122) for the Senofo. On the other hand, Le Moal in his Bobo study claims that women were given different quantities depending on the number of mouths to feed (Le Moal 1980:50).
the farming units it was the duty of the man in charge of the cereal stock to manage them wisely so that there was enough left when the arduous work of farming started. This meant that in some years, women were told already early in the dry season that cereals were finished and that they had to find their own solutions to how to provide the meals.

Maize was pounded in a large wooden mortar, while sorghum and millet were ground on a milling stone, a flat rectangular stone with an uneven surface. It was placed on the ground and the woman kneeled in front of it and ground the grains by rubbing an elongated stone, which she held at both ends, back and forth over it. Only millet could be reduced to flour right away. Grains of sorghum and maize have a hard skin, which must be removed through pounding. The bran was thereafter winnowed away, and the grains were washed. Even if a woman took the cereals to the machine mill, where she paid for having it reduced to flour, she would still have to pound and wash the grains before milling. Flour could not be stored because it turns bad quickly. Therefore, pounding and milling were among a woman’s recurrent routine activities. According to a study made in the Gambia, cereal pounding was not only time consuming, it was also the most energy demanding activity among women’s non-agricultural tasks (Haswell 1981).

Cooking the stiff porridge was another of the recurrent female activities. Flour was diluted little by little in water and boiled under constant stirring. The woman sat on a little stool facing the cooking pot with the fire burning under it. With both her hands she held a long handled wooden spade with which she stirred the porridge. As it thickened, she moved the spade strongly back and forth so that the porridge swung with a smacking noise from one brim to the other, but without spilling over. When boiled enough, the porridge was shifted to the enamel basins from where it was later eaten. It took considerable skill and strength to prepare a well cooked and smooth too, without lumps and burns. It was particularly demanding during farming season when too was frequently prepared in kettles large enough to feed twenty persons or more. Too could be saved from one day to the next and did not need to be prepared for every meal. Sauces, on the other hand, turned bad easily and were preferably prepared fresh for every meal.

Sauces from plants
A large number of plants were used for sauce preparation. In Bala I identified about 40 common sauce plants, wild as well as cultivated, some very seasonal others consumed throughout the year, and this was probably not even an exhaustive inventory (Helmfrid 1998). All these plants were simp-

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107 For example, the edible mushrooms listed by Taïta (1997) as being appreciated in Bala, were not mentioned by my interlocutors, probably because the interviews were undertaken at
ly called *naan* in Jula, the word meaning both “sauces” and “sauce plants”. There are four distinct seasons for sauce plants, depending on their availability in the bush, on the farm and on the market.

During the dry season (*sonma sere*), from January to May, when all ground vegetation had dried, women collected young leaves from specific bushes and trees. They also searched for specific weeds that grew in wet places, for example besides a pond. Leaves from several species could be dried and consumed during the entire year, while others were cooked fresh only. For some species it was the calyx, that is the flower sepal, which was consumed. Many of the sauce plants of the dry season were not easily found nearby. They were becoming rare due to the extension of farmed areas and the increased pressure on the remaining bush. In addition, the many draught animals that were pastured in the bush competed with the women for these leaves. Women who could afford it bought or bartered fresh vegetables during this period. In fact, some women said they did not collect any sauce plants at all during this period but relied on their own dried stock and purchased the rest. Gardened vegetables such as okra, cowpea leaves, hibiscus leaves, tomatoes, onions, eggplants and cabbages were brought to the village by Zara tradeswomen. Elsewhere, the dry season was a period for irrigated gardening, but due to lack of water there was no such activity in Bala.

From May to June (*tugu sere* = work starts), the principal sauce ingredients were weeds which grew spontaneously after the first rains. Many of these early vegetables were much appreciated for their taste, and because they marked a change in the daily menu. Some species were consumed only while they were tiny, while others were collected during the entire rainy season. These weeds typically grew on young fallows and had become plenty as the village had expanded into the former fields. Furthermore, the grazing oxen, introduced in Bala for ploughing, had helped spread new kinds of sauce plants formerly unknown in Bala. Some of this season’s sauce plants were common weeds on farmed land. To some extent farmers spared them during weeding. However, there was a conflict of interest between women’s a period when they were not available. Other plants might have been omitted for the same reason.

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108 See Šaul *et al.* (2003) for a historical overview of vegetation change in Western Burkina Faso, and Gray (2003) for an account specifically from the cotton zone. Both texts point to the expansion of farmland and the gradual disappearance of long fallowing as causing less plant diversity.

109 It is quite possible, as suggested by Traoré and Fourgeau (2006), that young women in other villages of the cotton zone no longer collect sauce plants in the bush, and that this feminine knowledge is in the process of getting lost. The availability of edible plants within walking distance is likely to be of some importance. Bala has the advantage of being close to a forest reserve with a lake, and women went there to collect some of their dry season sauce plants (Taïta 1997). My principal interlocutors were middle-aged or elderly women, who maintained that they continued to use such plants like their mothers did, even though some plants had become more difficult to find.
sauce needs and men’s wish to be modern farmers with tidy fields in line with the teachings of the agricultural extension services.

The rainy season (*pin sere*) extended from June to September. During this period “sauces” such as the leaves of cowpeas and various hibiscuses, okra and the calyces of the green *Hibiscus sabdariffa* variety,\(^\text{110}\) were collected in the fields. These plants had either spread spontaneously from the previous season or been planted on the borders, along the pathways and besides the cottage. Many women sowed the seeds of certain weeds on their garbage heap near their house to have sauce plants growing nearby. In the rainy season women also prepared sauces from fresh baobab leaves. In their dried form baobab leaves were a principal sauce ingredient throughout the year.

From September to December the rains gradually stopped (*joma sere*). Cultivated as well as spontaneous sauce plants were becoming rare. Women collected groundnut leaves and a weed, in Bobo called *denme* (Lat. *Ceratotherca sesamoides*), which grew spontaneously in the fields after harvest. Other common sauces of that period were based on sesame or on the dried flower calyces of the green *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, both cultivated on the farm.

The conclusion to be drawn from the above description is that the most difficult period for women to find sufficient sauce leaves were the two periods of the dry season. The second part of the dry season (January to May), was particularly difficult. The dry season was also the period when men were the least likely to contribute cash to sauce expenses as they did not need women’s labour on the farm. During the two periods of the rainy season, on the other hand, sauce plants were abundant, first as common weeds, later as cultivated species on the farm. Some of these plants could be dried and stored, and it would have been possible to make a stock for the dry season or even for sale. However, time constraints due to farm work, prevented most women from fully exploiting this opportunity.

**Sumbala from locust beans**

The African locust bean tree (Lat. *Parkia biglobosa*), in French called *néré* after its Bambara/Jula name *neré/nete* (Bobo *nen*, plur. *nan*), was among the useful trees which were spared when bush was cleared for farming. Its fruits are large beans, about 45 cm long and 2 centimetres wide. When they ripen, the pulp into which the seeds are embedded turns yellow. Each component of a locust bean was useful in some way. The seeds were transformed into the fermented condiment, *sumbala* (Fr. *soumbala*), very rich in proteins and thereby of great nutritional value (Diawara, Sawadogo and Kabore 1992-93, 

\(^\text{110}\) *Hibiscus sabdariffa* existed in several varieties, distinguishable through the colour of their calyces. The calyces of the red variety were used for infusions and cold drinks and were in Bala mainly grown for sale. The fleshy calyces of the greenish or whitish varieties were consumed as a sauce ingredient. The leaves of all the hibiscuses were also consumed in sauces.
The yellow pulp was pounded and sifted into a powder, sweet and rich in energy (Ftaïta et al. 2007:84). This powder was of particular importance in years when cereals were scarce, and people survived on a gruel made from it. In ordinary years it was eaten as a snack or fed to the draught animals. The empty bean pods were burnt, and potash extracted from their ashes. They could also be left to soak in water, and the water was poured over adobe roof-tops to make them waterproof.

Locust bean trees grow spontaneously in the bush but have their optimal conditions on farmed land. Even though the entire work process from picking the beans to making sumbala from their seeds was women’s work, locust beans from farms were considered men’s property. Only beans picked in the bush counted as a woman’s individual property. In principle a head of a farming unit could sell all the locust seeds from his farm once the women had finished extracting them, but a responsible head would let the women keep as much as they needed for cooking.

The production of existing locust bean trees in Bala was insufficient for women’s needs, and in years when they did not produce well, there was a potential for controversies about ownership. I was told that farming units from Bala who farmed on borrowed land in a neighbouring village had been prohibited from exploiting the locust bean trees on these farms. Furthermore, the principle that tree crops on farmland had an owner was not always respected and thefts were common. Therefore, there was a tendency that locust beans were picked too early, and hence wasted since unripe beans were unfit for sumbala production (see also Gausset, Yago-Ouattara and Belem 2005).

Different farming units applied different principles for the management of locust seeds. For example, one head of one farming unit let his wife keep only the quantity of seeds that she needed for a year’s cooking and sold the rest. He then used this money to buy a bag of salt and sometimes paid household expenses such as milling fees. Another head of a farming unit said that he never interfered with his wife’s use of the locust seeds as he trusted her to manage it wisely. On the other hand, he never contributed anything to household expenses such as salt or milling. These two examples illustrate how entangled the woman’s economic “accounting unit” was with the male-managed common economy of the farming unit and how difficult it therefore was to evaluate which of the two women was better off.

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111 Due to the abandonment of long fallowing, the natural regeneration of these trees on farmland was at risk. Moreover, the mechanization of farming had led many farmers to reduce the number of trees (Ftaïta et al. 2007:120-121). In Bala farmers were reluctant to having locust-bean trees on their farm, arguing that their wide and dense foliage shaded the crops.

112 Similar controversies have been reported in relation to shea trees, resulting from the increased international demand in shea since the late 1990s (Rousseau, Gautier and Wardell 2017).
Sumbala, the condiment produced from locust seeds, was made in several steps, of which some could be done little by little and others must happen in one sequence. In some of these steps many people could help, while others must be performed by the housewife herself. Opening the pods was slow and monotonous work, done by women of all ages and by children. In rare cases, even men could be seen to help. The beans were opened, the content dried in the sun, pounded in a large mortar and strained. This way the seeds were separated from the yellow powder of the pulp. Finally, the seeds were washed and dried in the sun. Now they could be safely stored.

When the beans ripened women were in a hurry to pick as much as possible before somebody else took them, and to extract the seeds before the farm work started. Most of these seeds were stored away until a time when there was less work on the farm, usually in August and September. The actual processing took 3-4 days and begun with the pounding of the seeds to remove their outer layer. Then they were winnowed, washed and put to boil for 12-24 hours. The seeds were pounded again and washed before the second boiling, which took 4-8 hours. The secret of a good sumbala was a long cooking time, which eliminated microbes that could interfere with the desired fermentation process (Diawara, Sawadogo and Kabore 1992-93, Ftaïta et al. 2007:96). Much wood was needed, and wood collection was what women in Bala considered the hardest part of sumbala making. For some the provisioning of water was also a problem. After the second boiling the seeds were placed for fermentation. Women in Bala had different ways of doing this. Some spread the seeds flat on an empty bag while others put them in a special basket. The bag or basket and the seeds were powdered with ashes or maize flour and then covered with big leaves. Finally, some objects to scare away spirits of dead persons were placed on top.113 It was thought that if a spirit touched the seeds, the sensitive fermentation process would be spoiled.

Not all women were able to pick locust beans, and few were able to extract enough seeds for their cooking needs. Picking these beans was an acrobatic exercise. Women used long sticks with a bent nail on top of it to loosen the beans from the twigs. The trees were huge, and women tried to reach the beans from standing on a branch and with their sticks stretching themselves as far as they could. Accidents could happen and the harvest should not start before the old women of the village had performed a protective ritual. Children were active helpers and crawled out on the weaker ends on the branch-

113 Objects which were thought to have this protective power were chili peppers, charcoal, straws of a sweeping broom or the weed called denme (Lat. Ceratotheca sesamoides). They were used by Bobo women to protect other sensitive produces as well, such as a beer brew or flour that had been ground for brewing. Similar practices for protecting a brew (Traoré 2010b:37) and fermenting sumbala (Ftaïta et al. 2007:97) have been reported from Bwa villages.
es. Of the 19 women (from 8 case families) that I interviewed for household economic data, five had not picked any locust beans at all in 1995. Their reasons were pregnancy or that they had been unwell. One of them, Mahmou, the wife of Drissa, had bought seeds, one tine (about 20 litres) to make *sumbala* for the year’s consumption. Viviane, the wife of Patrick, had made *sumbala* from soybeans, which she had grown on her personal plot. The other three women had bought a little *sumbala* now and then.

The quantities produced by the 14 women who had picked locust beans varied. Charlotte, the wife of Jean, had produced 4 *tines*, while Zoénabou, the wife of Hamidou, had only enough to fill 2 tomato cans (1/5 *tine*). The women who were most able to produce a lot of locust seeds were those who were in good health and who had adolescent children to help them. Only four of the interviewed women had sold locust seeds even though they did not have enough for their own needs. Two women had used this money to pay for milling. The two others had bought themselves a cooking pot each.

It is difficult to estimate a household’s annual need of locust seeds. Charlotte, who had produced 4 *tines* for a household of 8 persons was the only one who considered herself self-sufficient. Women’s use of *sumbala* in cooking differed, some used it a lot, others less. The example of two co-wives, married to Drissa’s younger brother illustrates the possible variation: The two women alternated in cooking for the same four members of their household. Both had extracted 1 *tine* of locust seeds. After four months one of them had finished hers, while the other had made the same quantity last for ten months. Some women rarely cooked with *sumbala*, due to its rareness and relatively high price: “We consume it a little in April and a little during cotton harvest, that is all….”. None of the women of my case families had sold any *sumbala*, but they had given away some as gifts, mainly to brothers and elderly female relatives. In all families the yellow powder from the pulp had been extracted and eaten or fed to the draught animals.

Considering the difficulties women encountered in producing enough *sumbala*, one may wonder how they prepared sauces without it. The most common replacement was the stock cube, simply called *maggi* after the well-known brand name. In fact, if a housewife had the choice of spending money either on *sumbala* or stock cubes, the latter were considered more price-worthy as they gave more taste for the money. An even cheaper replacement was *monosodium glutamate*, called “white maggi”. For those who were not looking for the cheapest alternative, peanut paste and sesame were considered valid replacements because they had much flavour. There were a few alternative options to produce *sumbala*-like condiments from other seeds. However, not all options were equally available to all women, due to differences in both taste and know-how. Mossi women, knew how to process the seeds

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114 The 19 women whom I interviewed belonged to 8 different farming units, Drissa’s farming unit does not figure in the previous chapters due to incomplete data on the common economy.
of cultivated hibiscus species. Some Bobo women in Bala had picked up this practice, while others disliked the taste. The latter nevertheless extracted the seeds from the hibiscuses on their farm and sold them. An acacia tree growing in the bush also provided seeds which could be utilized. Mossi women in Bala collected them, but the Bobo women took no interest. Cultivated soybeans, finally, were a relative new alternative for sumbala production, which some women had learnt at a workshop organized by the social services. “If once you have tasted sumbala from soybeans, you don’t even want the locust seeds any more”, said Viviane who grew soybeans on her personal plot.

Locust beans were harvested in April-May, at a time when women were relatively free. It was thus not primarily time that put a limit to their production of sumbala, rather the scarcity of these tree fruits and the difficulty to pick them. Furthermore, the trees did not produce equally well every year. The time of my fieldwork was the second year of bad production, and women were lamenting it. Even though women hardly managed to pick enough for their needs, both locust seeds and the yellow powder were exported from the village. Buyers were the same market women who habitually sold sumbala in Bala and local male traders buying small amounts and selling en gros to urban based traders.

Butter from shea nuts

Unlike locust beans, shea nuts were not perceived as a scarcity in Bala. Instead, the constraining factor for their full exploitation was women’s lack of time. The fruits ripen from June to August, which was also the period for ploughing, sowing and later weeding. It rained almost every day and the nuts were rapidly spoilt if not conserved by boiling and smoke-drying. The problem has been known since colonial times, when efforts were made to increase shea production for the needs of the European oil industry (Bagot 1958). Since then, the earlier start of the farming season and women’s increased involvement in farming has further accentuated the dilemma. Tersiguel, in his study from a cotton farming village reports that some farmers had even eliminated shea trees from their farms with the argument that women’s time would be better spent on farm work than on shea collection. These farmers claimed that they purchased oil for their wives’ cooking (Tersiguel 1995:85). In Bala I observed that women in the most mechanized farms, where much of the sowing was done by a seeder, were less occupied at the beginning of the farming season and could spend more time on shea collection. But their farms had fewer trees on them and these women, therefore, relied on shea from bush and fallows.

Shea trees (Vitellaria paradoxa), in French going under the Wolof name karité (Jula sii, Bobo mon), were scattered all over the farmed landscape. They also grew in the bush and on fallows, but like the locust bean trees, shea trees produced best on farmed land. Shea was among the useful species
that were spared when a new farm was cleared. The fruits, the size of a large and round plum, were tasty but very perishable. They were particularly appreciated because abundantly available at a time when many families did not have enough to eat. Of greatest value to the rural populations was the nut inside the fruit, because of the multi-purpose fat that could be extracted from it. Shea butter was the most commonly used cooking fat, but it was also used for soap making, skin treatments, lamp fuel, medicines and ritual purposes. It does not turn rancid quickly and could thus be stored for extended periods. Shea also had a commercial value that extended far beyond the village markets. Since the devaluation in 1994, shea export from Burkina Faso increased and after a few years became one of the country’s major export products, used for example in beauty products and chocolates (Ftaïta et al. 2007:59).

As a result, many women as well as men came to be engaged in shea production (Elias and Arora-Jonsson 2017, Rousseau, Gautier and Wardell 2017). However, at the time of my fieldwork the increased international demand for shea did not make itself felt in Bala. Instead, women were struggling to collect and to conserve enough shea nuts for their own household needs. As the production of shea butter was limited by farming women’s lack of time, there was a potential conflict between the market’s demands for shea and its local utilization. Ideally if enough shea had been available, women in Bala would have added it to most dishes in their culinary repertoire, but it could also be entirely left out as sauces could be prepared from only leaves, water and salt. Even though women in Bala found it hard to produce enough butter for their needs, they sometimes sold some due to a need for cash.

Usually women would try to collect enough shea for their annual needs and to conserve the nuts so that they could be safely stored until a time when there was less farm work. Many women extracted smaller amounts of butter already in early June, because the sauce plants available during this period were particularly tasty if cooked with shea butter. Otherwise, September seemed to be the main period for butter extraction. There was much butter for sale, and the price was at its annual low. It was the need for cash which made women sell some of their butter. At this period, the new crops had not yet been harvested and men as well as women were short of cash and there was little other produce to sell.

The process of shea butter production consisted of several steps, some of which could be done little by little, while others must be performed on one single occasion. Children and women of all ages could participate, but it

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115 In October I purchased shea butter at 144 CFA/kilo, which was the lowest during my fieldwork, and in May and June I paid 333 CFA/kg, which was the highest price.
116 As described in the literature there were regional differences in how shea butter was made, therefore, my description may differ from observations made in other parts of the country (Bagot 1958, von Maydell 1983, de Beij 1986, Association Néerlandaise d'Assistance au Développement (SNV) 1992, Ftaïta et al. 2007).
was the housewife who managed and supervised the work. The fruits were collected from under the trees on the farm and in the bush and carried home. Thereafter the nuts were removed manually after a short boiling. The pulp around each nut was removed manually after a short boiling. Thereafter the nuts were boiled to prevent germination and dried, either in the sun or smoke-dried in a special oven which many women had in their house. If the nuts were not well dried before storage, they easily moulded. In this period women and children brought home headloads of shea fruits every day and dumped them in a corner of the yard. Left in the rain, nuts soon started to germinate, which made them unfit for high quality butter. Women preferred to sell such nuts to merchants, while they stored those which had been instantly conserved until they had time for the next steps towards butter extraction.

The next step was to crack open the nutshells by pounding them a large mortar and to separate the kernels from the shell pieces. The kernels were thereafter crushed, smashed on a grinding stone with a small wooden pestle. This was done in small quantities of three or four kernels at a time. The smashed kernels were further crushed by pounding in a mortar. Some of these steps were technically simple but monotonous and time demanding. It was common that elderly female relatives helped with such tasks and that small children participated as best as they could. These different steps could be done little by little when the housewife or another household member had some spare moments.

When the time came to extract the butter, several steps must be performed in one sequence. In this the middle-aged women worked closely together with their adolescent daughters, who must acquire the skills in preparation for marriage. Butter extraction was a typical operation for which women engaged in reciprocal work exchanges. It was also appreciated for socializing.

The previously smashed and pounded shea crumbs were roasted little by little in a large kettle over fire. Still hot, the woman transferred the crumbs to her milling stone, where she ground them, transforming them into a brown, fatty liquid. This liquid was mixed with lukewarm water in a large kettle. Now was the time to separate the fat from the dirt and shea fibres. The woman bent over the kettle, legs spread out, lowered her arms into the brownish liquid and started to beat it rhythmically with her bare hands for about an hour. Slowly the colour of the liquid changed from brownish to whitish as the fat coagulated. At this point a little hot water was added and ten minutes later cold water to speed up the coagulation. Soon it became possible to lift up whitish chunks of fat, while most of the dirt remained in the water. The shea butter had now been extracted, but it was still dirty. It was thereafter rinsed in water a couple of times and put in a kettle to boil. After extended boiling, the woman carefully skimmed off the clean upper layers of fat while the dirt sunk to the bottom. Boiling and decantation could be repeated several times to obtain a perfectly clean butter. The best butter was used for cook-
ing, the inferior as lamp fuel. Although most commonly several women and girls were working together in butter extraction, it was the owner of the butter who performed the last step, the decantation, to assure its quality. If the butter was for sale, she would also mould it to small balls to be sold at 5 FCFA each. According to a time-use study quoted in Ftaïta (2007:41) it took 12 hours of work and 8 kg of firewood to extract 1 kg of shea butter.

Even though it was exhausting, the most pleasant step in the process of butter extraction was its beating, women affirmed: “It is the women’s tom-tom”, one woman said, alluding to the rhythmical beating of the butter, intersected by handclapping. In other years groups of women would hire a griot (traditional musician) to beat the drum while the women were extracting their butter. During my stay in Bala no such events were organized, due to some cases of tragic death that had occurred during that period.

 Shea butter was a woman’s individual property. If in a domestic unit there were several married women, each one produced and managed their own butter. On their cooking days women drew on their personal stock of butter to cook for their domestic unit. Women also used shea butter to make their own soap and to fuel their own lamp. The lamp that women generally used was a flat iron bowl, with a spike that was stuck into the adobe wall. The wick was made of twined cotton. In the past women had to provide shea butter for their husband’s lamps, but at the time of my fieldwork many men possessed kerosene lamps and torches and bought their own kerosene and batteries for them.

 For daily cooking, no other produce could replace shea butter. Industrial cooking oil, which was sold in the shops, was far too expensive. Women in Bala used it on rare occasions, on feasts or if they fried food for sale. Although peanut-paste and sesame contain fat, they were not considered as replacements. Even a peanut sauce could be improved with a little shea butter added.

 There were considerable differences in how much shea the 19 women (of my 8 case families) had been able to collect and conserve for storage. The maximum was three women who had conserved about 22 tines each and the minimum was three other women who had conserved only 3 tines each. Only the former had produced enough shea butter to cover her annual needs for soap-making, cooking and other purposes. Four other women said that they would have been self-sufficient if they had not sold some of their kernels earlier in the year. For some, their own shea butter had lasted only for three months. Like with the locust-seeds, it was the middle-aged women with children of age to assist them, who were best able to procure themselves.

 What did women do if they ran out of shea butter? Some women bought it. Others bought nuts, which they transformed into butter. The scope of this trade was difficult to assess, as most of it went on from woman to woman. Certainly, there were women who consumed their butter until it finished and thereafter got along without cooking fat. This was not a recent pattern.
nutritional survey, undertaken in some Bobo villages in the 1950s, revealed great annual variation in the intakes of shea butter and sumbala (Mazer (Médecin Capitaine) 1954:13).\(^{117}\)

How much shea butter a woman could use in cooking depended on how much she allocated to other utilizations and whether she sold some of it. Out of the 19 women interviewed all except two (from Pierre’s farming unit) had made their own soap (or had had it made for them).\(^{118}\) One of the two was Evelina, who’s case has been related in chapter six. Some women underlined that they preferred to use their butter for soap-making rather than for cooking. “You can cook without butter, but you need to have soap to wash yourself”. If a woman managed to renegotiate the terms of the ‘implicit household contract’ so that the husband or the common fund contributed more to the purchase of soap and kerosene, she would have more butter available for the preparation of quality meals (or for sale).

In women’s statements about how to make a husband pay for household expenses, soap often emerged as an example: “If you have a lot of dirty clothes, you just pile them up, one on top of the other. That will make him buy soap for you to do the laundry.” Another woman simply stated that: “If he doesn’t buy soap, I refuse to wash his clothes.” The detailed expense data of my case families, as summarized in chapter five, confirms that soap was an item about which bargaining was possible. In half the farming units the male head had spent money on buying industrially made soap, which was available in the village shops or on the market.

Although women found it difficult to produce enough shea butter for their needs, there was an out-trade of shea kernels from the village. Village-based male traders bought kernels in small quantities and sold them en gros to traders in town for further exportation. A reason why women sold shea kernels even though they didn’t have enough for their own needs, was that these kernels were unfit for high quality butter. These were the nuts which, for lack of time, had been left in the rain until they had started to sprout.

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\(^{117}\) The average daily intake of shea butter was according to Mazer’s survey only 0.31 g from March to June, but 1.6 g during the rest of the year. (March to June are the last months before shea nuts can be collected). The average daily consumption of sumbala, the fermented seeds of the African locust bean, was 6.8 g per person from July to October and nothing at all during the rest of the year (Mazer (Médecin Capitaine) 1954:13).

\(^{118}\) Women made soap from boiling shea butter with potash. It was a complicated process, surrounded with taboos, and consumed a lot of firewood. Usually, young women would ask an elderly woman to make soap for them, in compensation for a few balls. Some women preferred to make soap with caustic soda instead of potash. This process did not involve lengthy boiling, but caustic soda entailed a cash outlay and was not easily accessible because sold only in town.
Strategic purchases and barter

The above description of a few female work processes illustrates that women had various options in response to time constraints and the shortage of certain wild plants. One set of options was adjusting consumption: one sauce-plant replaced another, shea butter could be completely left out, and *sumbala* was produced from other seeds. Alternatively, women prepared sauces with peanut paste instead of *sumbala*. Cultivated plants were replacing wild plants rather than *vice versa*, a trend which has been confirmed by Traoré and Fourgeau (2006).119

Money added to the available options. With money women could purchase some of these products (or their industrially made replacements). However, women had difficult access to cash and they rather took on considerable labour efforts simply to avoid making cash outlays. The commoditization of condiments did not necessarily improve the nutritional value of the meals, for example when *sumbala* was replaced with stock cubes and when so-called “tomato powder” (*tamatimuugo*), a red powder of unknown origin, compensated for a lack of vegetables.120 It had, however, the advantage of allowing women to handle labour bottlenecks. By purchasing certain products and services during the worst labour peaks, women converted money to time. Machine milling, and condiments were what women commonly paid for on such occasions.121 Later, during the agricultural off-season, women converted time to money through income generating activities, such as petty trade or beer brewing, as will be explained in the following chapter. Commoditization also entailed an option for women to renegotiate the “household contract” to make the husband or the common economy take on costs which women hitherto had provided through their own efforts.

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119 The shift from gathered to farmed sauce plants implies a transfer of feminine labour from the dry season to the farming season. It also implies increased reliance on dried instead of fresh plants, throughout the agricultural off-season. Furthermore, as Chastanet (1991:283) has argued, based on data from Senegal and with reference to other studies from the West African inland: the abandonment of gathered food plants leads to a loss of knowledge and resources. Among the consequences for rural populations are impoverished nutritional status and reduced capabilities to survive periods of famine.

120 A study of children’s nutritional status in Burkina Faso reveals the paradox that children in the relatively rich farming areas of the western parts were as undernourished as in the poorest central parts (Sawadogo 1995). Difficulties to provide a rich and varied sauce can be part of the problem, in combination with the shift from nutritious millet to low-nutritious maize or white sorghum, as observed in the cotton zones by Bassett (1988) and Şaul (1991b). Deteriorating food quality has also been reported from the Malian cotton zone (Jonckers 1995).

121 It might be that women in Bala actually spent more time on earning the money for milling than they would have spent on hand-grinding, as Schoonmaker Freudenberger (1994) calculated with reference to Senegal and the Gambia. However, when Schoonmaker Freudenberger questions the usefulness of machine mills, she misses the important aspect of temporality: Access to machine milling makes it possible for women to handle labour bottlenecks.
There were at the time of my fieldwork two functioning machine mills in Bala. These were operated by male private entrepreneurs, successful farmers who had invested in a milling machine to generate additional non-farm incomes. It cost 50 FCFA to have one “tomato can” (0.2 tine) of cereals reduced to flour. Women’s utilization of machine milling was very seasonal, as revealed by one of the mills’ account books. From May to November, which was the most intense period for farm work, the mill’s monthly intake had been more than twice as much as it had been during the other months. These figures indicate that machine milling was employed strategically to resolve a labour-bottleneck and that it was not a regular habit for most women (Juenet 1996).

A simple mathematical operation shows that if all the consumed food cereals would have been machine milled, the annual milling costs of a ten-person household would have been at least 57,000 FCFA. As will be explained in the next chapter, some but not all women would have been able to earn that much during the dry season, and if there was more than one wife in the household, the milling cost for each wife would have been less. However, even if daily machine milling had been affordable for some women, they were not likely to choose this option because they had other plans for how to utilize their money. In relation to the total income of a farming unit, 50,000 may not seem to be much (a man could easily spend that sum on drinking in a year), but it was far from the sums that the heads of farming units in my sample claimed to have spent on milling. One estimated his contribution to 26,000 FCFA, while another had contributed nothing. Other heads situated their annual milling expenditures between 3,000 and 5,000 FCFA, and only during the farming season.

The seasonality of the purchase of sauce ingredients was the opposite of the seasonality of machine milling. As has been explained, women were most likely to spend money on sauce ingredients during the dry season, when less edible plants were available. Even though, during the rainy season, women were constrained by farm work, they managed to collect leaves for the daily sauce because these were easily found. However, not all women were at that period able to constitute a stock of dried sauce plants to get them through the dry season. That was the principal reason for why in the dry season women spent money on sauce ingredients. Dietary variation was another reason, and those who could afford it bought fresh garden vegetables or fish, which were available during the second half of the dry season.

122 The monthly intakes of that mill were 330,000 CFA from May to November but only 112,500 CFA during the other months (Juenet 1996:14-15).
123 9-10 “tomato cans” made 1 tine, and 6 tines made 1 cereal bag of 100 kg. (50 CFA*10*6) = 3,000 CFA to mill a 100 kg bag = 30 CFA/kg. The WHO estimate for self-sufficiency in cereals is 190 kg/person/year, hence 1,900 kg for a 10-person household.
A woman who wanted to buy sauce ingredients in Bala had three alternatives: She could provision herself at the Sunday market, buy from one of the ambulant tradeswomen who in the dry season walked from compound to compound with their wares on their head, or she could ask within her network of friends and relatives if somebody had specific produce to sell. The latter kind of transactions were particularly difficult to observe and to assess their scope. The impression I got from talking with women was that it was mostly the processed products from shea nuts and locust beans that were traded in this way. One reason why women bought from each other was that at periods some products were not even available on the market. I experienced this problem frequently. When we ran short of a condiment, the best solution was to pass the message to our acquaintances and sooner or later a woman would show up at our doorstep with the product we had asked for. Buying from fellow villagers was also a matter of trust. The more distanced the relationship, the greater the risk that the product would be of inferior quality. In a conversation about the purchase of shea nuts for her own butter production I asked a woman how she knew that the nuts she purchased would make good butter: “If the woman is of good morality, you’ll get good quality. The bad quality [nuts], we sell them to the traders, who’ll go and kill somebody else with them”, she said laughingly.

On the weekly market the sale of condiments was entirely in the hands of Zara women from the neighbouring village Satiri. A general principle, observable elsewhere in West African condiment markets, is that everything was sold in small quantities to be accessible for women’s limited purses. The market women arranged their wares in small heaps or pyramids which had a standard price, 5 FCFA, 10 FCFA, 25 FCFA, depending on the produce. By reducing or augmenting the size of the heaps the trader accommodated price fluctuations while maintaining the price per unit. Bulky products, such as dried leaves or seeds were measured in the large empty cans of tomato concentrate.

During the dry season female traders, carrying their wares on a tray on their heads, roamed the village in search for customers. Mostly they sold products which could not be stored for long, fresh fish and vegetables such as tomatoes, okra, hibiscus leaves and cabbages. Others sold groundnuts, dried condiments or dried fish. A striking feature of this trade was that transactions were frequently paid in cereals. Some of these women even refused cash as payment. According to classic economic theory, barter is considered an archaic form of trade. This view has, however, been challenged by anthropologists who argue that barter should be understood in light of its social

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124 A fourth alternative would be to make purchases in one of the shops. The shops, however, did not offer sauce plants, only non-perishable industrially produced condiments such as stock cubes, salt, tomato paste and cooking oil.
context. As “context varies, so will the feature of barter itself” (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992:1-2).

I suggest that in the context of mechanized commercial cotton farming, Bobo women’s cereal barter was a logical consequence of the time constraints under which they provided the daily sauce and the concentration of resources in the hands of male heads of farming units. Through cereal barter women could make the common economy pay for condiments. In other words, women practically renegotiated the terms of the “household contract”, but without having to confront the husband or head of farming unit.

As has been explained, women were most likely to want to buy sauce ingredients in the dry season when there was a lack of edible plants in the bush and on the farm. This was also the period in which men were the least likely to contribute money for such purchases. Women were reluctant to use their personal money for common expenses. Their access to cash was difficult, and they wanted to spend the little money they earned on more tangible goods such as clothes or enamel dishes. Women, therefore, exchanged some of the grains handed out by the head of the farming unit for cooking against vegetables and other condiments. The Mossi in Bala described this barter as a typically Bobo practice. “If you pay attention, you will see that those saleswomen never come to our part of the village”, said a Mossi man, adding that he would not allow his wives to barter cereals, because barter was expensive.

My own bartering experience confirmed that barter was indeed more expensive than purchase: I bought two tines of sorghum at 2,600 FCFA, which we then bartered against sauce ingredients for the total cash value of 1,600 FCFA. A crucial difference between my barter and the villagers’, was that I had paid for the sorghum at a moment when its price was already high. Had I purchased it directly after the harvest, at 750 FCFA per tine, the barter would have been a better affair. And still, the price I paid was not even the annual maximum that year. In other words, the later in the dry season, the more profitable the barter was for the tradeswomen. Economists thinking in terms of utility maximizing households would probably label this cereal barter a cultural leftover from the past, preventing resources to be allocated efficiently, but it certainly benefitted women on both ends of the transaction.125

Barter transacts were not hidden, they often took place in the family’s courtyard and were easily observable. “It’s her own maize”, explained my landlord when we saw his wife exchanging grains against vegetables. The crux of the matter is that no man could really know the origins of the grains he saw a woman barter. It could be the small grains which women had the right to collect for themselves after the harvest, it could be a gift from her brother, or the grains from her cooking ratio, but it could also be grains secretly withdrawn from the common stock. The way women managed grain

125 The tradeswomen could further increase their gains if they were able to store the cereals a few months before selling them.
was outside the realm of male control, which gave women room for manoeuvre.

Bobo men seemed to accept their wives bartering, as long as they were served meals without having to spend cash. In the words of one woman:

“Even if I have money, I will not use it for salt. Some men know about it [the barter]. Because it is the man who shall pay the salt and if he does not give the money… Others don’t know but they do not try to understand where the salt in the sauce has come from”.

Even though women’s cereal barter was tolerated to some extent, there were men who suspected that their wives abused it for their own benefit. One head explained that he intended to reduce the daily cereal ratio distributed to the women because he suspected that they sold part of it. Other men talked about their suspicions in a more joking manner.\footnote{Men’s suspicion about women withdrawing grains for personal purposes is mentioned already in the earliest ethnographies from the region (Tauxier 1912, Cremer 1923-1927).}

It was striking that in the interviews women particularly referred to “salt” to explain their barter practices. Both women and men talked about salt as a male responsibility and hence women’s references to salt could have functioned as a socially acceptable justification for their cereal barter. Salt was the only sauce ingredient that could not be produced locally.\footnote{As late as in the 1950s salt was a little consumed luxury item and women generally used potash to flavour their dishes (Manessy 1960).} It is possible that in the past, women’s acceptable cereal barter had been limited to salt and that they gradually had extended the practice to other commoditized foodstuffs. Whatever the historical facts, only those women who were part of a farming unit which produced enough cereals could do this. It was the general economic condition of a woman’s farming unit, and her position within it, which set the conditions for how she could make use of the various options described in this chapter.

**Summary: If agency, what kind of agency?**

I have in this chapter explored the various strategies that women employed to provide the daily meals, despite time constraints and the heavy labour demands of farming, despite seasonal food shortages and despite the decreasing availability of wild food plants. I hope to have shown that these female work processes were complex and required skills, stamina and lots of decision making. Women made multiple choices which allowed them to adjust to changing circumstances: they adjusted their production practices, such as their management of tasks and time, and they adjusted their consumption practices, for example by replacing some products with others or
by purchasing some products and services. Money was crucial for women’s scope for action, and since they had very little of it, they employed it strategically. They purchased products and services at moments when they had too much other work. Hence, money could be converted into time. Later they converted time into money through dry season income earning.

Moreover, women explicitly and implicitly renegotiated the “household contract’s” terms for the division of expenditures. Their informal cereal barter should be understood in this sense. Women had ways to pressure men to pay for items which women would otherwise have furnished. They were not always successful (in most cases they were not) and I do not claim that women were overthrowing the household contract, but there was a potential for change in the details, small windows of opportunity, of which some women were better positioned to make use of than others.

But, was all this really about agency? Weren’t these female activities not just routine practices? I recall that Ortner differentiated agency from routine practices, agency being about “intentionality and the pursuit of (culturally defined) projects” (Ortner 2006:139). As I mentioned in chapter one, Ortner is not clear about how she defines “projects”, but I interpret her bracketed (culturally defined) that anything which is considered worth striving for in the local context can count as a project. In Bala, the work processes described in this chapter were central to what it meant to be a woman. Moreover, a woman’s cooking and house-holding capacities were to a large extent public. Work-invitations on the farm and holidays on which cooked food was distributed were occasions on which a woman could demonstrate her skills through the quality of her preparations. In other words, through the exercise and skilful management of household activities women constructed themselves publicly as “good wives” (or, in case of failure, as less good wives).

Ortner conceived of agency as operating within two fields of meaning, the first being about intentionality and the pursuit of projects, the second being about “acting within relations of social inequality, asymmetry and force” (Ortner 2006:139). As I have described, members of a farming unit were under the authority of a male head, but there were also other intersecting lines of differentiation such as gender, age, generation, kinship and marriage, sometimes resulting in fuzzy authority ranking and a leeway for different interpretations and scope for bargaining.

A woman could make herself respected by her husband’s kin and in the local society through excellence in the fulfilment of female responsibilities. She could also, as a means of protest, withdraw her services. “Refusal to cook” or “cooking badly”, were among the actions enumerated by men and women in response to my question, how a wife would make her husband
understand that she was discontented. Thus, the gender division of labour, which attributed some tasks uniquely to women and which made men dependent on women for these tasks, not only resulted in women having a heavier workload, it also gave them the bargaining power as, for example, demonstrated in Roth’s (1994) study of urban Zara women. However, one should be careful not to conclude (as Roth seems to do) that mutual dependency implied a balanced or even egalitarian relationship.

Women differed in their personal capabilities to succeed with their undertakings. Moreover, their agency was conditioned by circumstances within their farming unit. A woman’s membership of a particular farming unit and her position within it, conditioned her access to time, cereals, money and other persons’ labour. As a member, and particularly if she was a senior member, she had contributed to producing the timeslots, cereals, money and other person’s labour on which she drew. Her agency was thus conditioned by circumstances which she herself had contributed to creating, but within the power structure of her farming unit. In that sense, whether she acted as member of the farming unit, or as a manager of her own economic domain, she exercised “encompassed agency” (Wardlow 2006:13). The wider purpose which these activities aimed at was the survival, well-being and reproduction of the family. There was, however, from a woman’s perspective, a significant difference between the two domains of activity: on the farm she worked under male headship and did not control the fruits of her labour, while in meal production she was her own manager and controlled the fruits of her labour, even though most of it was consumed by the farming unit as a collective.

My detailed description of some female work processes also revealed the extent to which women drew on other people’s labour to accomplish their individual duties. If a woman had daughters, they were her primary work companions until they married. When her sons married, she could draw on the work of her daughters-in-law. Women also nourished relations with female friends of their own generation with whom they were in long-term relations of reciprocal labour exchange. Expressed in Bourdieuan terms, women built up a personal social capital which they could draw on to exercise “relational agency”. Membership in a family and farming unit, and motherhood in particular, were assets that translated into ‘relational agency’.

The extent to which women relied on relations for their individual projects will be further highlighted in the following chapter dealing with women’s personal income earning.

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128 “Bad cooking” as a means of female protest has been described in other West African ethnographies, such as Stollers (2010) account from the Songhai in Niger and Gottlieb and Grahams (1993) from the Beng of Northern Côte d’Ivoire.
8. Brewing for income

Fatimata was busy with brewing. With a large calabash bowl, she shifted the hot brew from the stove’s large pots into two buckets. She carried the full buckets into the house and transferred their content into large ceramic vases. She had to move many times back and forth, between the stove in the courtyard and the large vases in her house, before all the hot liquid had been transferred. “Look, how money makes us suffer!” she said as sweat was pouring down her face and neck. The temperature was around 40°C in the shade, but where we were standing close to the large brewing-stove there was no shade. Instead the stove was radiating heat after many hours of fire.

The following morning Fatimata’s courtyard would be full of men chatting and drinking. There would be loud talk and laughter. Important and not so important issues would be discussed. Fatimata would catch fragments of conversations and learn what was going on in the men’s world. Her female friends would crowd the hot little room from where she administrated the beer sale. The ambiance of a cabaret, as the beer sales were called in local French, was appreciated by men and women alike, and cabarets were pivotal in the village’s social life. Nevertheless, what motivated the brewer was not primarily sociability, but the prospect of money earning.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the conditions of women’s agency with regard to income earning. I limit my exploration to the sale of home-made beer, which was the most common and most lucrative economic activity of women in Bala. Based on a detailed account of the brewing process and of the commercialization of beer, I identify mechanisms which lead to some women being able to take advantage of the beer trade more than others, depending on their positioning within the intersecting structures of gender, age and generation (within the household), and kinship, alliance, class and ethnicity (outside the household), and their ability to manoeuvre these positions.

As illustrated by the figure below, beer-sales and other income earning activities were means by which women attracted a cash flow from outside the domestic economy into her individual “accounting unit”. Some of this cash fed into the common economy through women’s preparation of meals (as described in the previous chapter). The main feature of these incomes was that they were outside of the male head’s control, hence women could manage them as they found best.

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129 An earlier version of this text has been published in the edited volume: “Beer in Africa” (Helmfrid 2010).
My quantitative information on the beer trade in Bala is drawn from two surveys undertaken in 1996, at different periods of the year, covering all the women who brewed for one week, a total of 66 instances of brewing. From amongst the 48 brewers identified and interviewed by my assistant, I picked out 10 particularly interesting cases for follow-up interviews.

The changing context of beer drinking

Sorghum beer, called *kpin* in Bobo and *dolo* in Jula, is a common drink in the entire savannah belt of West Africa. It is a filtered, opaque, reddish drink, with a sweet-sour taste and average alcohol content between three-and-a-half and four per cent per volume (Bismuth and Menage 1961). Its high nutritional value is well documented. Red sorghum (a variety of *sorghum bicolor*), the principal cereal for brewing, is even more nutritious in the form of beer than in the form of porridge (FAO 1995: chapter 5). Because of ongoing fermentation, this beer could only be kept a day or two. Due to its short shelf-life, women in Burkina Faso had been spared market competition by industrial copies of this brew.

For the Bobo, as for other societies in the coarse-grain farming belt of the West African savannah, beer was part and parcel of traditional religious practice. It was poured over shrines and altars as offerings to ancestors and...
spiritual entities, and it was consumed in the social gatherings which accompanied such acts. I was told in Bala that in the past, beer had only been brewed and consumed on such ceremonial occasions, and only old people were allowed to drink it. At the time of my fieldwork beer continued to be consumed in its ritual context, but it was also the principal dry season pastime activity of men. Ancient and more recent holidays were taken as occasions for alcohol consumption.\(^\text{130}\) The dry season was jokingly talked about in Jula as *doromin tuman*, “the period of beer drinking”, and farmers argued that they merited this distraction after the hard work of farming.

Women brewed for various kinds of occasions: beer for ritual purposes on the demand of elders or of a group of men, beer to be served in the homestead in celebration of a holiday, beer through which an informal work group consumes its joint earnings, and finally, beer aimed at being sold to generate an income for the brewer. The brew was the same, but there were differences in who provided the sorghum, who owned the brew and how the brewer was remunerated. When women brewed at the demand of others, the sorghum was provided by those people, and the brewer was allowed to keep a quantity of the beer in compensation for her labour.\(^\text{131}\) When the purpose of the brew was to generate an income for the brewer, she purchased the sorghum from her own means, and owned the income of its sale.\(^\text{132}\) The focus of this chapter is on women’s commercial brewing only.

Even though I was told in Bala that “in the past” beer was only consumed on ritual occasions, colonial sources bear witness that beer has been sold by women in this region since the beginning of the twentieth century (Tauxier 1912, Şaul 2004). Similar to other parts of Africa (Bryceson 2002), this region experienced a marked augmentation in commercial brewing after World War II (Lentz 1999, Jolly 2004). Three factors had favoured the expansion of commercial brewing; first, the development of grain markets had made it possible for women to access sorghum outside the domestic context, second the cash earnings from migrant labour had made it possible for young men to purchase beer and third, the increasing availability of attractive consumer goods such as cotton prints, soap and enamel dishes had motivated women for income earning (Lentz 1999).

\(^\text{130}\) Even Muslim holidays were celebrated with drinking, at least by those who did not abstain from alcohol. The local Muslims were divided on the issue of drinking. While non-Bobo Muslims advocated abstention, many Bobo claimed that it was part of their tradition.

\(^\text{131}\) Earlier ethnographers (Tauxier 1912:53, Manessy 1960) report that Bobo women habitually siphoned off some of the grains handed to them for brewing, and that they used these grains for commercial brewing. These authors described the practice as illicit, but to what extent this was their own interpretation is impossible to know.

\(^\text{132}\) In my survey covering 66 instances of commercial brewing in Bala, there were only two instances of women brewing and selling for somebody else. In one case, the brew belonged to the brewer’s husband, and in the other case it belonged to her mother.
In the cotton zones, women’s beer business had expanded further when in the 1970s and 1980s farmers adopted ox-plough farming, which allowed for increases in both cotton and cereal production. Due to their increased involvement in farm work women came to rely entirely on the dry season for income earning, a period which had always been a time for leisure, rituals and feasting. With cotton money in their pockets men’s thirst for beer increased. Women’s interest in cash earnings converged with men’s interest in drinking and the female brewing business thrived. During the 1980s there had also been a growing demand for industrially made bottled beer, even in the rural areas. In Bala I was told that after the payment of the cotton money, successful farmers would show off by generously paying for rounds of bottled beer for their friends, and that women who engaged in this retail trade could make a good profit. However, since the establishment of a small tavern selling refrigerated bottled beer, a few years before my arrival, customers had lost interest in the lukewarm bottles that women could offer. In addition, the 50 per cent devaluation of the FCFA in 1994, had led to a change in consumption habits. Consumers turned away from relatively expensive industrially made products towards cheaper locally made products. Women in Bala had noticed an increasing demand for sorghum beer. However, as they came to realize, another effect of the devaluation was that cereal prices rose. Those farmers who had produced a surplus to sell were happy, but for women it became increasingly difficult to make a satisfactory profit from brewing.\footnote{The price rose more dramatically in 1996 than in 1995, and there was no harvest failure or general scarcity of grains which could have otherwise explained the phenomenon (CRPA des Hauts-Bassins 1995:17, 1997:6).}

That was the situation when I conducted this study.

The skills and labour of brewing

The general principles for brewing are the same all over West Africa, but in the details there are regional and local differences both in the art of brewing and in the alcohol content of the beer (Bismuth and Menage 1961).\footnote{I do not know the alcohol content of sorghum beer in Bala, but I experienced it as less strong than the lightest bottled beers Brakina and Sobbra, which have 4.2 per cent.}

Brewing requires several days of hard work and a mastery of delicate magical and micro-biological processes.

First, the sorghum must be made to germinate. This is the malting process. Grains are soaked in water with wood ash for 24 hours and thereafter kept moist between layers of ashes for three days.\footnote{Red sorghum has a high content of toxic tannins, and these are neutralized when grains are soaked with ashes (FAO 1995:chapter 3).} The sorghum is then thoroughly washed and left to germinate for another three or four days depending on the development of the sprouts. If the sorghum malts for too
long, the beer will taste bad.\textsuperscript{136} The malted sorghum is then sun dried and coarsely ground, either manually by the woman on her grinding stone, or taken to the commercial milling machine. So far, the work can be done beforehand. The collection of firewood is another preparatory task. Big logs are needed from species that burn slowly and give off much heat. Women either carry them home from the bush, or purchase cartloads of wood.

A woman needed her husband’s permission before she could start brewing, because she would then be occupied for three days and not available for other duties. Furthermore, she could not have intercourse during these days because sexual activity by the brewer was considered to have a negative impact on the beer’s fermentation.\textsuperscript{137}

Brewing started with water collection. All the large ceramic vases in the brewer’s house were filled. During this period many wells were dry, and women and children had to walk to one of the two water-pumps in the village, where they spent considerable time waiting for their turn. Most brewers relied on the help of others for this work sequence. In contrast to wood and milling, water was not commercially available in Bala.

When all the vases were filled, the pounded bark of a scrub, in Bobo called saliafré (Lat. Grewia lasiodiscus), was rubbed in the water to make it become gluey. This substance would later clear the brew by making the flour sink. The malted sorghum flour was then mixed with the gluey water and distributed among the pots of the brewing stove. More water was added, and the liquid was made to boil. This was the mashing sequence.

A stove for brewing consisted of two to six large pots, placed on stones and joined with clay, leaving only a space for fire under the pots and an opening for wood to be inserted. Women, who could afford it, preferred to buy aluminium kettles for brewing, because ceramic pots were fragile and could even break during a brew.

On the first day the mash must be made to boil, but it did not need to cook for long. The woman could soon transfer it back to the vases inside her house. Usually women brewed a larger quantity than could be contained in the pots, so she had to boil the liquid in portions. In such cases the procedure of transferring the mash from the house to the stove, make it boil, and bring it back into the house was repeated several times.

The next sequence was the lactic acid fermentation or souring. If the storage vases had not been in use for some time, the brewer would add a little uncooked mash to each of them as a starter.\textsuperscript{138} Later, in the night, she would

\textsuperscript{136} Brewers in Bala malted their own sorghum. Unlike from Šaul’s study of brewing in central and eastern Burkina Faso (Šaul 1981), there was, at the time of my fieldwork, no market for malted sorghum in Bala.

\textsuperscript{137} Similar taboos in relation to brewing and other sensitive production processes have been reported from various parts of Africa, as discussed by Gausset (2002).

\textsuperscript{138} Brewing vessels in regular use contained micro-organisms which triggered the souring process. This can explain why this particular step is not mentioned in other detailed accounts.
splash the rest of this starter over her entrance while pronouncing a magic formula for success with the brew and with its sale. The woman supervised the brew carefully throughout the night until it reached an ideal balance between sweet and sour. She then skimmed off the clear liquid on top and hurriedly transferred it to the stove. What was left at the bottom was then filtered twice through a basket so that as much as possible of the liquid was extracted. It was then boiled separately for a more concentrated taste and later added to the brew.

The second boiling took most of the second day, depending on the size of the brew. Now and then the brewer skimmed off foam from the surface, agitated the brew with a large wooden spade, and moved the firewood so that heat reached all the pots equally. From looking at the colour and from how much the level had sunk in the pots, she knew when the brew had been sufficiently cooked. She then transferred it back to the vases in the house.

Not until the brew was lukewarm could yeast be added. In the meantime the brewer started scrubbing her calabash drinking-bowls, the plastic cans for serving the beer, and even the small wooden stools on which the customers would sit. Usually the yeast was added in the evening, and the beer-sale started on the following morning. The sales day had its busy moments with customers arriving at the same time and wanting to be served instantly. Beer must be filled in cans, calabashes must be rinsed, the pay must be collected, and small change given back. Women often helped each other with the sale.

Managing time, money and helpers

My detailed description of brewing highlights the complexity of the work, the timing and the amount of labour and equipment required. Figures from my survey of brewers in Bala, undertaken during two different weeks in

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139 In Bala most houses inhabited by Bobo women had white splashes over their entrance. In interviews many of the younger brewers claimed that they had made the splash without pronouncing anything and without knowing the sense of this gesture. Either that was their truth, or they simply did not want to talk about the ritual meaning of this practice.

140 Women saved yeast from one brew to another. Leaving the dregs of the fermented brew to dry in the sun produced cakes of yeast which could be stored. Women could also produce new yeast from the sorghum itself.

141 Plastic cans, a rest product of chemical use in cotton farming, had entirely replaced the calabash gourds formerly used to serve beer. Women had several ways to clean the cans, involving sequences of treatment with some of the following substances: hot water with potash, lemon juice, sorghum bran, the foam collected from the top of the boiling brew. Each liquid was left to operate in the cans for several weeks so that the full treatment extended to 3-4 months. Despite the treatments, new cans tended to leave a bad taste with the beer.
1996, demonstrate the extent to which women relied on others, both for access to equipment and for help with brewing. Brewers handled labour bottlenecks differently, through the strategic combination of time, money and the help of others. Water collection and the beer sale were the work sequences for which brewers most frequently drew on help. These tasks must be performed at specific moments and it was not possible to purchase these services. Only a minority of brewers reported having received help with wood collection and cereal grinding. These services could be purchased in Bala, and the survey revealed that quite a few brewers had actually done this. Other brewers had avoided the cash outlay by doing the work themselves, little by little. The actual brewing process was a sensitive matter of applying one’s personal skills, which could explain why most brewers had adapted the size of the brew to what they could manage alone. Among those women who had had somebody to assist them with brewing, the mother/daughter dyad dominated, that is the helper was either the brewer’s daughter or her mother.

The networks that women maintained for mutual assistance consisted of dyadic relationships which were actively maintained. My beer survey revealed that the persons who had helped the brewers with work and brewing equipment, represented practically every close relationship a woman could have with other females: her mother, her mother-in-law, her grandmother, her aunt, her sister, her co-wife, her brother’s wife, her girlfriend, her daughter, her niece, her daughter-in-law. The brewer either lived with these persons in her contemporary household (in-laws and co-wives) or she had grown up with them in her family of origin (mother and sister). The mention of “friends” shows that relations of mutual assistance could be developed outside the networks of family and household, kinship and alliance, but these cases were few.

A clear pattern of age and generation structured specific kinds of assistance. For example, junior women, who had not yet acquired the equipment for brewing, borrowed the premises of senior women. The large ceramic vases for storage and the cooking pots represented heavy investments, and women acquired such property only little by little, through purchase, gifts or inheritance. Of the 48 brewers interrogated, 23 women (26 cases of brewing) had brewed on the stove of another woman. In most cases the proprietor was

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142 Most brewers had collected the wood by themselves (31 out of 66 cases), but almost one-third had purchased wood (21 out of 66 cases). Only in the remaining eight cases had the brewer been assisted with wood collection. Cereal grinding was another service which was commercially available. In more than half the cases the brewer had taken the grains to the machine mill (35 out of 66 cases), 24 women had ground the cereals themselves and only in the remaining 18 cases had the brewer drawn on the help of others. As a contrast, most brewers had relied on help for water collection (46 out of 66 cases). In 18 cases the brewer had collected water all by herself, and in two instances she had paid women to do the work. Most brewers had brewed alone (in 44 out of 66), but in 22 cases a brewer had been assisted. Most brewers reported that they had received help during the beer-sale (54 out of 66 cases).
either the brewer’s mother-in-law (11 cases) or her mother (10 cases). In the
remaining five cases the brewer had borrowed the premises of a grandmoth-
er, a female friend, a co-wife and an aunt. The owner of the equipment did
not receive a cash payment but was given a can of beer.

Another aspect of inter-generational cooperation was brewers’ frequent
reliance on girls, the brewer’s daughters or girls under her tutorship. Girls
performed much of the heavy and tiresome work such as carrying wood and
water and grinding the sorghum. They also assisted throughout the brewing
process, whereby they gradually learnt the skills. When a brewer considered
her junior helper ready to make her own brew, she assisted with this under-
taking. Generally, girls’ work was not paid for, but was understood as an
apprenticeship, part of a long-term relationship of mutual assistance. Girls
who were regularly working with a brewer could expect to be given clothes
for the annual feasts.

The most striking pattern in the survey data is the extent to which brewing
and help with brewing was gendered as an exclusively feminine activity.
Only one male helper was mentioned, a boy working as a household servant
with one of the regular brewers. A few more boys could be contained within
answers such as “my children helped me” (boys do sometimes help with
carrying water and firewood), but that would not change the overall picture.
The advantage that some women had, to use the family’s oxcart for the
transport of wood, can be considered as a support attributed by their male
head to their brewing business. However, among 66 instances of brewing
there were only four such cases. In three cases the brewer had used the fami-
ly oxcart for free while one had paid at a reduced price.

When brewers purchased a service, they bought it, in most cases, from a
man. Owners and employees of the machine mills were men, those who de-
ivered wood by cart were men, and those who sold the sorghum were men.
One brewer reported to have paid women to carry water for her, and another
had purchased wood from “some old women”, but these were exceptions
from the general pattern that brewers either drew on the unpaid help of other
women or on the paid services of men.

Managing customers in the cabaret

Brewers employed various strategies to attract new customers, maintain reg-
ular customers and marginalize bad payers. Some precipitated a portion
of the brew to be ready on the evening before the actual sales day. In local
French such beer was talked about as palapile. Palapile made it possible for
clients to taste the beer and make reservations for the next day. The four
semi-professional brewers did not need to publicize, because everybody
knew the weekdays of their brewing itinerary.
To attract a new client or to reinforce relations with a client, brewers distributed gifts of beer. I experienced this, when, as a newcomer, I often found a can of beer on my doorstep, with greetings from a specific brewer. Such gifts made me feel obliged later to go to her cabaret and spend some money there. At the beer sale brewers also often distributed a free calabash of beer to clients before they made their order. In local French this practice was called lenga and was also found in other kinds of market transactions. Customers sometimes claimed that it was their right to receive lenga, but brewers insisted that it was not. Brewers generally set aside a quantity of the beer for lenga, and when it was finished, it was finished. If a brewer later wanted to favour somebody, she could instead make a reduction on the price. Some brewers who brewed seldom confided that they consequently applied a lower price for relatives and friends.

Many customers wanted to drink but did not have money. The brewer’s dilemma was that if she was too strict and refused to serve on credit, she would lose customers. Serving beer on credit could be a way to nurture a lasting relationship with reliable clients. On the other hand, if the brewer was too generous, her beer sales would end up as a loss. To succeed with her beer business a woman must have a good knowledge of people, to assess when to accord credit and when not, and the ability to handle sometimes rather difficult customers. Notoriously bad payers were simply ignored by the brewer, who served everybody else except that person. Sometimes there would be arguments, but in most cases the person would understand the implicit message and leave the cabaret.

Potential profits and actual gains

Brewing could be lucrative for some but not all women. The brewers’ stated earnings varied considerably, but some of them were probably underreported in the survey answers. Furthermore, profits from brewing were not easily comparable, as both incomes and production costs differed from one brewer to another. The common way to talk about the size of a brew was to cite how many tines of grains were used. I recall that a tine contains about 17 kilos of cereal grains. Brews from three tines of sorghum were the most common, but large brews of seven tines, and small brews of one-and-a-half

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143 In other accounts from the region this initial gift of beer is described as a right of the customer (Saul 1981, Voltz 1981, Lentz 1999).
144 Four of the ten brewers whom I interviewed after the survey, admitted having stated incorrect income figures in the survey.
tines were also reported. The amount of beer that could be made from one tine of sorghum turned out to be around 50 litres.145

To assess the profit a brewer could make, I calculated the potential incomes and the production costs of two ideal types. The first represented the category of semi-professional brewers. She had high production costs as she paid for wood, milling and sorghum, and a high income as she sold her beer at the highest price and was restrictive on free drinks and price reductions. The second had low production costs as she utilized sorghum in her possession after the harvest, carried home firewood and ground the sorghum alone or with the help of others. On the other hand, she sold her beer at the lowest price and her income was, therefore, less. In addition, she was more generous with discounts and credits. For this category of brewers, it was particularly difficult to disregard friends’ and relatives’ expectations for discounts and credits because they brewed seldom and, in contrast to the first category, they were surrounded by kin, in-laws and friends.

The accounts of these two ideal cases converge on a potential gain of between 1,500 and 2,000 FCFA franc per tine of sorghum. Irrespective of the amount of grains, a brew and its sale took three days, but work intensity and the need for assistance differed. If only these three days were considered, the daily earning of a brew of three tines would amount to between 1,500 and 2,000 FCFA, and twice as much if six tines were used. Compared to what a woman could earn with day-labour in the cotton harvest, 200-300 FCFA in addition to free meals, brewing seems indeed to have been lucrative. But on the other hand, the brewer worked longer days, even during the night, she was assisted by others and she had previously spent time collecting firewood, malting and grinding the sorghum.

In any case a brewer’s main interest was in the cash in her hands at the end of the sales day, and she did not attribute a monetary value to time and effort. Under normal circumstances the profit from a brew of three tines would have been sufficient for the three pieces of cotton print needed for a woman’s dress and possibly even to cover its sewing cost.

Even though many brewers’ stated earnings were considerably below the potential profits I had calculated, most brewers insisted that no other commercial activity was as lucrative. It must be said that they had few other options. Bala was far from urban and semi-urban markets, and the local condi-

145 The reported sales figures in my survey indicate a variation from 35 to more than 50 litres beer per tine of sorghum (the lowest figures were probably due to underreporting). Reasonable estimates which I made together with two different brewers in Bala concluded that one tine had produced 50 litres of beer, and this figure was also confirmed later by a brewer in Bobo-Dioulasso. Juenet (1996), based her calculation of women’s potential profit from brewing in Bala on the assumption that 1 tine of grains made 40 litres of beer. While Juenet assumed a smaller quantity of beer per tine, she calculated a higher price for its sale, not accounting sufficiently for the many discounts and unpaid credits. Hence, our estimations of the potential profitability of brewing converge on similar sums.
ment trade was dominated by Zara women from a neighbouring village, who unlike the Bobo identified with a tradition of being traders. Even though there were Bobo women who sold on the weekly market in Bala, their commerce was irregular, small scale and local, and generated low profit.146

**Seasonality of commercial brewing**

Brewing was a seasonal activity and its profitability differed according to period. During one week in February, we counted 48 beer sales in Bala.147 A total of 143.5 *tines* of sorghum had been utilized, and if one *tine* of sorghum produced 50 litres of beer, then a total of 7,175 litres had been drunk during that week. The village had at that time 1,308 inhabitants above the age of 20 (INSD 2000b), which makes for an average daily beer consumption of five-and-a-half litres per adult. If all beer had actually been paid for, the average daily expenditure for adults in Bala during that period would have amounted to between 275 and 412 FCFA, which was a little more than what a person could earn on day-labour in farming. It has, however, to be kept in mind that half of the village’s population were women, who drank relatively little, and that some men and women never drank for religious or other reasons. It is, therefore, reasonable to estimate the daily consumption of an average male drinker during the leisure period from December to May, to have been about twice as much as the village average, that is more than 10 litres.148 From June onwards beer production went down, because most brewers were occupied with farm work. During one week in the beginning of June, when the planting season had started, we counted only 15 *cabarets* in Bala, and their beer production corresponded to an average daily consumption of two litres per

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146 These observations were based on a market survey which I organized in April 1998. A total of 88 traders were counted, and 34 of them were women. 13 of these women were from Bala, and only 6 of the latter identified as Bobo. Compared to women traders from other villages, the locals were less professional both in the sense that they traded fewer products and that they did not habitually trade on other markets. Half of the local market women only traded seasonally, which reflects their heavy involvement in farming. The weekly market in Bala was mainly an import market, that is merchandises were brought from elsewhere to be sold in Bala. Local women, the ethnic Bobo in particular, were in comparative disadvantage, because they lacked the mobility, the networks and the capital for this kind of trade. Hence, these women had specialised in selling what they could produce locally, and which gave them very little income: cooked food and snacks. In the dry season there was also a lively ambulant trade by women selling vegetables, fish and condiments from a tray on their head. Even this trade was dominated by Zara women.

147 The two weeks during which I surveyed all the beer-sales in the village were selected not to coincide with major feasts during which free beer would be served.

148 This estimation seems plausible in the light of Voltz’ (1981) observation, that during feasts men drink between 10 and 20 litres sorghum beer per day.
adult above 20. Later, from July until the cereal harvest in October, beer became even scarcer due to the non-availability of red sorghum.

The four semi-professional brewers, who knew how to brew with other grains, continued their business throughout this period with satisfactory incomes 149: “In that period people are in a hurry. They order their dolo by the calabash, drink it quickly and pay in cash. Some will even pay old credits just to be served. No need to distribute lots of lenga.” 150

The seasonal character of brewing had the effect that the potential for profit was at its lowest during the period when the largest number of women were active in this trade. Hence, women who were not married to farmers, and who therefore were free to brew even during farming season, were best positioned to make a good profit from this activity.

Men wanted to drink cheaply

In the years that followed the devaluation of 1994 it had become more difficult for women to make a good profit from brewing due to the increase in cereal prices. In Bala the male elders maintained their right to set the price of the local brew, and men were expected to control the behaviour of their wives on this matter. At the time of my fieldwork the two-litre can was supposed to cost 100 FCFA. The four semi-professional brewers disregarded the elders’ decision and habitually sold their beer at 150 FCFA per two-litre can. These brewers defended their price with the argument that their beer was better and stronger than the ordinary brew in the village. Despite their higher price they did not lack customers. In fact, the most influential farmers and even some of the elders were among their regular customers. During my sojourn in Bala many of the village women augmented their price as well because sorghum had become expensive. From shortly after the harvest until the end of the dry season the price of a bag of sorghum had doubled, and it was hardly even available in Bala. Women could only find sorghum for sale in neighbouring villages. They then had to carry it home or pay for transport. The price of beer became an issue, with men complaining and brewers defending their price rise. Claire, a middle-aged outspoken woman, made the point when she explained that: “The men try to forbid us to raise the price, but it is men who sell sorghum so expensively to us”. Brewers in Bala thus came to be squeezed between on the one hand market forces outside their

149 It is possible to brew the white varieties of Sorghum bicolor and even maize, but these techniques have been brought to Bala by outsiders, and only few of the Bobo brewers said that they knew how to do it. They preferred the red variety because being sweeter “it can take more water”, that is a larger quantity of beer could be brewed from it.

150 Beer sold in small quantities was more expensive per litre compared to when it was sold in two-litre cans.
control, and on the other hand the local authority structure which men used to their advantage in trying to keep the beer price down. However, as it turned out, the men had no means for enforcing the lower price and brewers either augmented their price or refrained from brewing altogether. Some turned to retailing liquor instead.\footnote{The retail trade in liquors, locally made vodka and pastis, was dominated by women as an extension of their beer trade. Preferably liquor was retailed during periods when its turnover speed was rapid, such as during feasts, especially nightly dances. A mouthful of vodka was a quick way to maintain the desired alcohol level while dancing. The liquor trade also flourished in years following a bad harvest, when there was a general lack of cereals. In such years, women switched almost entirely from selling beer to selling liquor.}

Male customers had other, more subtle means to avoid paying the full price of their consumption, and I often wondered how some farmers could afford to drink as they did. Zakaria, one of the poorer farmers, explained his strategy; first, he avoided drinking in places where beer was expensive and the prices non-negotiable; second, he drank on credit with the promise to pay when he had the means. Sometimes he reimbursed such credits in kind:

> “I’m a craftsman. It happens that one of these women comes to me for a need of basket. Normally I have some ready-made in stock. I’ll show her one and tell the price. If she is interested, I tell her to take it without paying, that ‘I’m paying my credit like that…’). The woman is very happy that day, because finally a debt has been reimbursed……” *grins*

For the brewers, it was a problem that customers drank on credit and never paid. Many of them could have doubled their gains if all the customers had paid their consumption. Brewers considered these sums as lost and complained bitterly about credit drinking. It cannot be ruled out that they got some benefit from letting some of their clients get away with not paying, but such considerations were not voiced by the brewers.

As other studies of small scale trade have demonstrated, credit arrangements keep trade going and are beneficial to both parties (Clark 1994, Cornwall 2007). However, mutual benefit does not rule out inequality. Brewers in Bala lived in a situation in which part of their working capital was consumed by their clients.\footnote{Lentz made the same observation in Northern Ghana and her explanation is that: “That women demand money for beer is still somewhat disreputable in the eyes of the men.” (Lentz 1999). Willis’ (2002) noticed this phenomenon in his Tanzanian study as well.} Women differed in their ability to handle this problem but could do little to force a client to reimburse. They could refuse to serve him, but this strategy was only effective when there was a lack of beer in the village. Men were aware of their superior bargaining power, but they also knew the limits of it:

> “We drink and then we don’t pay”, said Jean laughingly in response to my question how men could afford drinking. “The brewers and the drinkers need
each other. For example, if I go to drink in one place where I owe a lot, the woman can refuse to serve me. But then she takes a risk, because I might have had the intention to pay her that day……. If she refuses, I’ll take that money and spend it somewhere else. On the other hand, there are days when beer is rare in the village. If I owe money everywhere, I may have to go thirsty that day. Then, I have to pay some of my credits.”

Men acted strategically in paying some of their debts and not others. Brewers who were active during periods when beer was scarce had a stronger bargaining position to recuperate old debts, while those who brewed only occasionally and when there was plenty of beer in the village, were the least likely to recover unpaid credits.

Women also wanted to drink cheaply

People remembered that, in the past, women were not allowed to drink, and particularly not in public. Even at the time of my fieldwork there was some stigma attached to women’s drinking, which does not mean that they did not drink. While men drank in the yard, women squeezed themselves into the brewer’s house. Women could not afford to drink like men. While the two-litre can was the common order of a male customer, a woman often bought her beer by the calabash bowl, containing about a quarter of a litre.

Women had various strategies which allowed them to participate in the sociability of drinking. One such practice was the “women’s price”, a reduction given by some brewers to female customers. This phenomenon confused me at first, because some brewers stated that the price of beer was different depending on whether the client was a man or a woman, while others denied that such a difference existed. As I found out, the price reduction was a not generalized practice, but an implicit agreement between women who sold beer cheaply to each other. As Fatimata explained: “….it depends on you. If you accept to sell me the two-litre can at 100 FCFA, then I’ll sell it to you at the same price. But if you sell me your beer more expensively, I will sell mine expensively to you as well.”

Not all women had an interest in such a deal: “At my beer sales everybody pays the same price. I have enough customers. If I want to make a gift to somebody, I can give a calabash bowl for free, but it is not for everybody. Anyway, myself I don’t like to move around (me promener) to drink….”

The brewers who maintained the same price for women as for men were either those who drank rarely, or those who brewed more frequently than the average. In other words, “women’s price” was an implicit contract between

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153 The practice of female traders selling cheaper to female customers is not unique to Bala. Gracia Clark in her study of market women in Kumasi, Ghana, describes the same phenomenon (Clark 1994:290).
women with approximately similar habits in brewing and drinking. Women also collaborated for cheap drink in other ways, for example a group of friends could agree that each time any of them had a beer sale she would set aside a large can of free beer for them to drink jointly. Such restricted collaboration, as well as the more generalized “women’s price” could be applied by the same brewer, but not all brewers applied it.

These practices were among the many little discounts which reduced a brewer’s profits. However, when brewers gave discounts to other brewers in a reciprocal way, it was less of a loss than a saving strategy whereby they secured personal funds from potential claims by household members and earmarked them for socializing with female friends.

Brewers in households

So far, I have described brewers’ strategies and demonstrated how, similar to female traders elsewhere, they “move between and knit together household and marketplace activities in intriguing ways” (Seligmann 2001:3). I discuss how conditions within the domestic unit shaped a woman’s ability to make money with brewing. Household and farming units provided women with both motives and means for income earning: the terms of the implicit household contract motivated women to earn money, so that they could fulfil some of their duties vis-à-vis their household. The means on which women drew, that is their grains, cash and helpers, were also to a large extent made available from within the domestic unit.

A brewer’s starting capital consisted of cereals in her possession after the harvest. In better off farming units, women were given post-harvest gifts (in grain and in cash). In poorer farming units, women had to content themselves with the small ears and cobs which they had the acknowledged right to collect on the farm after harvest. In addition, women who had brothers or a father who was still active could count on them for small post-harvest gifts. Not only did women in better off farming units start the brewing season with a more substantial working capital, they were also more able to safeguard it against being depleted by household expenses. In poorer households, women often had to dip into their personal savings to resolve urgent problems, such as lack of food or the need for medical treatment, costs which in better off farming units were carried by the common budget. Given their more precarious economic situation, women in the poorer farming units were also more vulnerable to losses in their beer business, for example if their beer stayed unsold or if a cooking pot broke during a brew.

Women in poorer farming units did have one advantage: the harvest on their family farm finished early, mid-November for some, due to the smaller quantities of crops. They were thereafter free to engage in personal income earning before other women. Often, these women worked as day-labourers
in the cotton harvest, but they also had the possibility to brew at a time when other women were still harvesting on their family farm. At this period, it was possible to make a good profit from brewing, because grains were cheap, men had already some cash in their pocket, and beer was not yet abundantly available. Women in the most commercially managed farming units were also free to start brewing relatively early, because reliance on hired labourers sped up the cotton harvest on these farms. It is the middle category of farmers, those who farmed large areas with family labour and reciprocal labour exchanges only, who maintained their womenfolk the longest on their farm.

Handling the husband

In Bala, and for the Bobo women in particular, brewing was a perfectly respectable occupation, connected to Bobo religious custom and the old division of labour. Moreover, the activity took place in the homestead under the eyes of the husband or compound head. Unlike women of the Jula and Zara ethnic groups, who had a history of being traders, Bobo women only got permission to travel to other villages with some difficulty, which was a prerequisite for a lucrative retail trade. Bobo men did not think of trade to be a respectable occupation for their wives, and especially not if it involved travel, but the sale of beer was acceptable.

Many men in Bala were ambivalent about women’s earnings. On the one hand they expected their wives and daughters-in-law to be able to provide for themselves to a certain extent, and they could appreciate a woman’s thriftiness. On the other hand, many men feared the prospect of women becoming economically powerful. “Look at the behaviour of women with money”, said one middle-aged head of a farming unit, “They do not even respect their husband!” Also, among the men in Bala there was a widespread lack of respect for women’s business, as demonstrated by the practice of drinking without paying and by men’s ways of joking about it.

The sums that most women earned were modest, and it was difficult to see how they could constitute a threat to the authority to male headship in any objective way. Even successful brewers depended for most of their basic needs on the joint economy of their farming unit. Men’s ambiguous feelings about women’s incomes were, therefore, more likely to reflect an anxiety of being considered unable to care for their household. As, described by Roth (1994:12) for the Zara, a man’s authority within his family is conditioned by his role as a provider.¹⁵⁴ In many farming units in Bala, means were insuffi-

¹⁵⁴ Men’s ambivalence about women’s income earning is a common theme in West African ethnographies of women. The expression “second husbands”, which has been reported both from Ghana with reference to women’s market trade (Clark 1994) and from the Gambia referring to women’s vegetable gardens (Schroeder 2001), contains ambiguous connotations of
cient even for meeting the basic needs of its members, not to mention their desires for attractive consumer goods, which could not be easily met even within the more prosperous farming units. Hence, most heads of farming units ran the risk of being accused of not being a good enough provider.

Even though women’s incomes were modest in relation to the total budget of the farming unit, they were important for women, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter. Women needed money to handle labour bottlenecks in the fulfilment of their household duties. They also liked to keep personal savings to resolve upcoming problems, such as illness or food scarcity. If possible, however, women did not want to spend their personal savings on household expenses, but invested in clothes, enamel dishes and utensils for themselves and their daughters, items which were a woman’s personal property, which she could take with her if she left her husband and could pass on in heritage to her children.\(^{155}\)

A husband who was supportive of his wife’s income earning allowed her to spend time on it, and sometimes even helped her out economically. He spread word about her brew, and on the day of the sale he spent many hours in his courtyard drinking and chatting. He paid for beer for visiting friends, who would then be incited to be generous in return, which kept the sales going. Such cooperation between a brewer and her husband or compound head was not unusual, as I could observe, and could be one reason why in the survey as many as 16 out of the 42 brewers,\(^{156}\) said that they informed their husband about their earnings, and 13 claimed that they would even hand him a gift of money if the sale was successful. Was this a sign of a trend which Şaul, in his study of brewers in central Burkina Faso, suggested was emerging among “monogamous, westernized, Catholic couples” who were “doing away with the system of having separate budgets and developing a joint estate” (Şaul 1981:762)? I suggest it was not. I did not encounter any woman who had given up the separate management of her income. Women in Bala differed in the degree to which they let their husband have an insight into their personal economy, but I met no one who had merged their personal income with the funds managed by their husband.

women being able to provide for themselves and husbands thereby losing authority over their wives.

\(^{155}\) Shipton, based on a study from the Gambia, argues that farmers’ post-harvest purchases of consumer goods is their way to make savings without appearing to be asocial and to “protect their cash from themselves as well as from their kin and neighbours” (Shipton 1995:259). His observation is particularly relevant for women who, due to their subordinate position, can find it hard to withstand various claims. Moreover, it is difficult for women to keep cash savings safe. More than one woman in Bala told me about how their hidden money had been stolen. Principal suspects were close family members.

\(^{156}\) The survey covered 50 beer sales by 48 different brewers of which only 42 gave relevant answers to these specific questions. Others did not answer at all, or their answers showed that the question was irrelevant for their case, such as “my husband is absent”, “the sorghum belongs to my mother” or “I’m living with my uncle”, just to quote a few.
Even though 16 out of 42 surveyed brewers said that they revealed their earnings to their husband, only nine would let him have a say about how this money was to be spent, and two of these women specified that they would consider his opinion “only if it is useful for me”. It is also noteworthy that two of the thirteen brewers, who stated that they gave some money to their husband if their beer sale had been successful, said they kept their total earnings secret and they would not let him have a say about how these earnings would be used. Their money-gifts could thus be a strategy to pay off the husband not to take an interest in how the rest of the money was used.

The most common explanations brewers gave for why they informed their husband about their earnings, gave him money, or would let him have a say about its use were: “because we live together” (9 instances) and “he is my husband/he is in charge” (3). These statements appealed both to the idea of spouses’ joint interest and to the man’s authority position within the household. Other answers referred to economic support which the husband had given: “he gave me money for equipment” (1) and “he gave me money for sorghum” (1). These statements confirm Šaul’s observation that a man who sponsors his wife’s brewing acquires some influence over her business (Šaul 1981). The same idea emerges from the most common negative answers to my questions: “he didn’t give me/pay for the sorghum” (4 instances). Other explanations given by the brewers were: “it is none of his business” (2) “he does not bother” (2), “he will borrow and not pay back” (1) “he doesn’t inform me of his earnings” (1), and “our relation is bad” (1).

Emerging from the various explanations quoted above are two distinct models for the ideal relationship between spouses: one emphasizing their joint interest and the absolute authority position of the husband, the other alluding to a “conjugal contract” according to which rights and responsibilities are explicitly linked. The former model comes close to the Christian ideal of “spouses being one”, while the latter reflects the Muslim principle that a husband’s authority depends on his proper fulfilment of responsibilities, as described in Roth’s (1994) study. It would be simplistic to interpret these differences as reflections of their religious affiliation. If religion plays a role, I suggest instead that one should think about these two ideal models as being available and valid in a local setting, and that both women and men make use of them strategically, depending on circumstances and depending on how they want to present themselves. Hence, rather than evidence of an emerging joint estate (cf. Šaul 1981:762), some brewers’ openness about

157 Blinded as I was by the Gender and Development literature’s focus on the spousal relation, I limited my questions to ask about brewers’ relations to their husband. More open-ended questions, such as “are you revealing your incomes to somebody? To whom?” would have been more appropriate and given additional information.

158 In fact, the statement in local French “il ne s’interesse pas” could be understood both as “he does not bother” or “it is none of his business”.

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their incomes vis-à-vis their husband could be both an indication of their obedient respect for him and a statement towards the researcher (and the research assistant) about what kind of wife they would like to be considered. Furthermore, if these women really applied the openness which they evoked in their answers, it was a sign of trust, which they could anytime withdraw if misused. If the husband, or any other household member, tried to access her money by persuasion, theft, borrowing without reimbursing, or by letting her take on expenses which she considered outside her responsibility, a woman could switch to being secret about her incomes and still be within the norms of acceptable behaviour.

Summary: The elusive profit of brewing

As discussed in this chapter, the mechanisms that structured a woman’s ability to earn money with brewing were complex and contradictory. Women had many options to act strategically throughout the process of brewing and the beer sale. They could use money to compensate for lack of time or use time to compensate for lack of money. In between the extremes of the richest and the poorest, there were various combinations of women having either time or cash or both.

The picture was further complicated by differences in household composition and individual women’s position within it. For a woman, membership to a large farming unit implied living and working with other women and children, with whom relations for assistance could be developed. Such relations extended beyond the domain of brewing and encompassed all female responsibilities. Senior women in three generational households benefitted most from having other women around, as they commanded their juniors and were themselves exempt from some of the more tedious household responsibilities. Junior women were more tied up with household obligations and the care of small children. On the other hand, junior women could benefit from the brewing equipment and the experience of the senior women. Through skilful management of relations, brewers could thus, to some extent, compensate both for lack of time and lack of money.

Women of the same household did not always get on well with each other, but in my beer survey there were a striking number of cases of co-wives and in-laws having helped each other. Those who were on bad terms with the other women of their household, or who lived in small households and without children of age to help, had the option to maintain relations for mutual help with women of their family of origin or to develop such relations with friends. In other words, even though conditions within a woman’s household or farming unit were important in shaping her ability for income earning, there were other options.
The complex, intersecting and sometimes contradictory mechanisms that structured women’s ability to earn money, created some leeway for them to navigate between various relational positions inside and outside the domestic unit. Individual differences in women’s stamina, brewing skills, and talent for handling relations further complicated the picture.

There was one category of women that stood out as different: the four semi-professional brewers who brewed several times a week throughout the year. As I have pointed out, they were able to make more profit than most brewers, because they brewed even during the agricultural season and they were less entangled in obliging relations of kinship and affinity and could, therefore, act in a more business-like manner. What these women had in common was that they were not married to farmers and were freer to manage their own time. On the other hand, their households must purchase much or most of their cereal for consumption, so cash incomes were, therefore, badly needed. These four brewers represented very different situations. Two of them were married to civil servants, which set them apart as a distinct class. Their households were not necessarily wealthier than the richest farming units in Bala, but they had a more expensive lifestyle with regard to housing, clothing and schooling. Salaries of civil servants being modest, it was common in such households that both husband and wife had additional income. The third of the regular brewers was married to a blacksmith. This household maintained a small farm, but the husband’s and wife’s individual incomes were important components of their livelihood. The fourth brewer was a divorced woman who sustained herself and her children through brewing. Her case was exceptional, because most commonly in Bala, divorced women and widows were integrated in a farming unit, either through remarriage or through living with kin. Taken together the category of the four regular brewers was heterogeneous but distinctly different from the majority of brewers in Bala. For reasons explained above, these women managed to cash in an important part of what male farmers, the wealthier in particular, spent on beer in Bala.
9. Concluding summary

Women in smallholder farming units in the West African cotton zones are at the lowest end of a global production chain. They provide much of the “hidden”, unpaid and underpaid labour that goes into cotton production, including the work of reproducing the labour force (Dunaway 2013, 2014, Luna 2018b). Moreover, in times of crisis, they are the buffers that compensate for their farming unit’s failure to assure the well-being of its members, using their personal means to support the household.

It is well documented that the adoption of commercial cotton farming in inland West Africa resulted in women being drawn into farm work to an extent previously unknown. It is also uncontroversial to state that women generally received a disproportionally small portion of their family’s cotton incomes. There are, however, not many studies that have tried to pinpoint women’s benefits from cotton farming or investigated the mechanisms for resource distribution within smallholder farming units.

The aim of this study has been to interrogate female agency in the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farming as they were played out in the mid-1990s. Research questions emerging from this overall aim have been: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship?

Domains in the domestic economy

In the first part of the thesis, encompassing chapters two to five, I investigated the functioning of the smallholder economy, thus addressing the first research question: *How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function?* In relation to my empirical description, I discussed different household economic models utilized by economists and concluded that they fail to grasp relations within complex domestic units such as the multi-generational, multi-conjugal farming units of West African farmers. Hence, studies based on these models are likely to misrepresent such domestic economies. I have suggested a more relevant approach, sup-
ported by West African ethnographies, which describe domestic economies as systems of interconnected domains: the “common” domain of the farming unit, and the “individual” domains of its male and female members.

The organizational principle of interconnected common and individual domains has been a recurring theme in my analysis. Within the individual domains incomes and expenditures were managed by the person in charge, without interference by the male head of the domestic unit. Nevertheless, norms about who should pay what structured how individual resources could be used. These norms were gendered so that women were expected to use some of their personal income to provide for ingredients for the daily meals, while men could use theirs entirely for personal expenses such as clothes and leisure. Moreover, productive activities within individual domains were framed by the obligation of all members to participate in the farming unit’s common activities, directed by its male head. Hence, individual women and men must fit their own-account activities into timeslots left over by their obligations on the common farm.

Agricultural mechanization and commercial cotton farming had affected women’s time and ability to conduct their own-account activities. Not only had the agricultural season become longer, the introduction of plough farming had resulted in new labour bottlenecks. Larger fields could be farmed and depending on the level of mechanization women’s labour peaks gradually shifted from the beginning towards the end of the farming season. All steps in farm production could to some extent be facilitated by ox- or tractor-drawn tools, except for the harvest. How much women actually participated in farm work also depended on who else was a member of her farming unit and their relative status according to gender, age, generation and marriage. Depending on her status within the family, a woman could be more or less successful in negotiating the scope of her work on the common farm.

The relationship between common and individual domains was systemic in the sense that changed circumstances within one domain influenced conditions within another. For example, when commercial cotton farming required women to work more on the common farm, they were left with less time for individual activities. The fact that women managed their separate economic domain outside the male head’s control, does not mean that they were autonomous. I suggest instead that Connell’s idea of female “gender regimes” within a male dominated “gender order” best captures the status of women’s economic domain (Connell 1987). Furthermore, I have described how the twin principles of the “common” and the “individual” intersected with structures of power and inequality such as gender, age, generation and marriage, making the domestic domain a complex system of rights and obligations, that is “implicit household contracts” “which spell out the claims and obligations of different members to each other and which are backed by the norms and rules of the wider society” (Kabeer 2000:25).
Mechanisms for economic inequalities

To answer the second research question - *What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification?* - I made a detailed analysis of income and expenditure, based on empirical data on production and consumption, as discussed in chapter four and five. To extract this data, I devised various methods for calculating the domestic economy in monetary terms, while paying attention to variations between and within households.

Even though there were no really wealthy farmers in Bala there were, nevertheless, important differences in farming units’ economic status, manifested in how they managed to get along from one year to another and in the kind of investments they were able to make (agricultural equipment, house building, non-agricultural businesses). Poor farming units were often small in membership, because women and junior men tended to leave if conditions were too bad. Women, if they had the possibility, eloped to move in with another man, unmarried girls eloped with a boyfriend, while young men and boys had the option to run off to Côte d’Ivoire for work. Several mechanisms operated to the disadvantage of smaller and less mechanized farming units. More mechanized farming units (tractor-farmers and some ox-farmers), with access to fertilizers and enough family labour, were able to produce a good harvest with a surplus, at least when weather conditions were benign. Less mechanized farming units (hoe farmers and some ox-farmers) were not able to produce enough for their needs and had to rely on other sources of income. Market mechanisms operated to the advantage of the more prosperous. If those who had produced a cereal surplus were able to postpone their sales until shortly before the following harvest, when the prices had more than doubled, they could make a good profit. Poorer farmers sold their grains cheaply due to the urgent need for cash and eventually had to purchase grains expensively later. Merchants profited from the annual price fluctuations on grains through purchases when prices were low and sales when prices were high. Differentiated ability to cope with risks, such as crop failure or sickness was another factor which contributed to economic stratification. The wealthier could sell some of their assets without jeopardizing the following year’s farming, while poorer farmers easily got stuck in a vicious cycle of indebtedness, and as a last resort would sell their means of production. The timing of necessary expenses in relation to the incomes from farming was another factor operating to the detriment of the poor.

I have suggested that the farming economy should be understood as an *annual spiral* of incomes and expenses, with incomes being limited to a few harvest months, major expenses being tied to specific moments in time and small expenses being made all year round. What mattered to the farmers was not whether annual incomes matched annual expenses, but whether they were able at a given moment to cover a specific expense. Poorer farmers were generally short on liquidity. The cotton company Sofitex was notori-
ously late in paying for the cotton, which aggravated farmers’ liquidity problem. The cotton was harvested December to February, and when the payment was not effectuated until April, farmers would have missed most of the dry season period for investments.

In recent years, the process of stratification seems to have increased, as some studies indicate (Gray 2008, Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013, Gray, Dowd-Uribe and Kaminski 2018). Some reasons are the low world market price on cotton, the unfavourable exchange rate between the US Dollar and the FCFA and the high costs of imported agro-chemical inputs. Other reasons are found at national and local levels, resulting from the reorganization of Burkina Faso’s cotton sector. Without subsidies on agricultural inputs and without a price stabilization fund, the economic risk of cotton farming has been pushed down to the producers, who in addition are under greater pressure to pay back their credits. The smaller producer groups (GPC) which in 1996 replaced the Village Associations (GV) as intermediaries between the farmers and Sofitex, have been able to put stronger pressure on members who failed to pay their debts. As a result, many small producers have been pushed out of cotton farming. Their food security has diminished as they no longer have access to fertilizers on credit, which for the smaller cotton producers has been the principal advantage of cotton (Gray 2008, Gray and Dowd-Uribe 2013, Gray, Dowd-Uribe and Kaminski 2018). The paradox is thus that during the 2000s Burkina Faso’s cotton production has continued to boost and to expand into new areas, injecting much needed monetary income to rural economies, while at the same time there seems to have been a process of pauperization going on in the cotton zones.

Women’s benefits and the patriarchal dividend

Having paid close attention to women’s positioning in the domestic economy throughout Part I, to answer the third research question - *To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming?* - I interrogated their social and economic status in greater detail in Part II. In chapters six to eight, I investigated women’s room for manoeuvre within the context of cotton farming: the ways they managed time, labour, money and relations to fulfil their various duties, and to earn some personal income through commercial beer brewing.

Through my detailed investigation of a few farming unit’s production and consumption budgets I had hoped to be able to pinpoint how much women benefitted from the cotton economy. The undertaking proved complicated for several reasons. Most of what was consumed within the farming unit had been produced within it, and it was, difficult to assess both the quantities and the monetary value of these products. Moreover, conditions of production and consumption differed between farming units and it was a challenge to compile the economic data so that they became comparable. This said, the
most valuable outcome from the exercise was that it helped me understand the functioning of the domestic economy and made me think about how women’s material well-being in smallholder farming units could be assessed.

I suggest that a useful indicator for women’s material well-being would be to sum up three averages drawn from the annual budget of household consumption: the value (per person) of home grown food crops consumed during the year, the value (per person) of non-cropping products produced and consumed within the farming unit, and the value (per person) of purchases made from the common fund for household consumption. Not included in this indicator are expenses for farming, house building and the male head’s personal leisure activities, because their benefit to women was less evident.

An important insight from compiling these budgets was that the post-harvest recompenses, distributed to women by the male head, even though they were important from the point of view of the women, constituted only a minor part of what they benefitted from the common undertaking of farming. Their most substantial benefit was food, shelter and having their (and their children’s) health expenses taken care of. It also became clear that not all farming units were able to provide their members with these basic living conditions, and that some women were constrained to cover such costs through their own means and efforts. My investigation of income distribution within farming units, with particular attention to women’s material well-being, supports the point made by O’Laughlin (2007), that a farming unit’s absolute poverty is a worse threat to a woman’s well-being than the unequal distribution of resources within the better-off farming units.

As discussed in chapters five and six, the position of being the “head” of a farming unit entailed both authority and the responsibility to care for the well-being of its members. Two recent economic studies have discussed the ambiguous moral connotation of male headship and its implication for distribution policies within farming units. Kazianga and Wahhaj (2013), based on data from Burkina Faso, have suggested that members of a farming unit voluntarily spent labour on the common farm because they trusted that their head would look after their well-being. In response, Guirkinger et al. (2015) have put a question mark to the heads’ disinterestedness, referring to data from Mali showing that heads of farming units habitually drew a personal dividend from the common farm. While Kazianga and Wahhaj seem to have based their model on an official and idealizing discourse, Guirkinger et al. revealed a practice which allowed for economic exploitation within farming units. The point I would like to add, with reference to my fieldwork in Bala, is that even though there existed norms about how a responsible head of farming unit should behave, there were also ambiguities, loopholes in the normative system, which allowed for male heads to draw a personal dividend from the common budget while maintaining a reputation of responsibility.
In Bala it was beyond doubt that male heads drew a dividend from the common economy of their farming unit. “The patriarchal dividend”, as defined by Connell is “the advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order” (Connell 2002:143). I identified two ambiguities that made it possible, and even acceptable, for male heads to draw more material benefit from the common economy than other members: the ambiguous and non-obligatory status of the post-harvest transfers to individual members (male and female), and the blurred or partial separation between the male head’s personal pocket and the common fund under his management. The male head could dip into the common fund for his personal leisure activities, and it would be disrespectful of others to question this practice. Whether or not a man utilized his personal earnings for the well-being of the farming unit or conjugal household was left to his personal sense of responsibility. Other members had weak claims on these incomes, because they had not contributed labour to earning them. It was of course only the male head who could draw a personal dividend from the common economy, junior men had no formal access to the common fund. However, one day they would head their own farming unit and also benefit from the “patriarchal dividend”.

“Women’s work” and economic strategies

The fourth research question - What economic strategies were available to women? – focused on the various strategies that women employed to carry out their household duties and to earn a personal income, despite the time constraints due to their increased involvement in farm work. As we have seen in chapters seven and eight the two issues of earning cash and managing the household duties were connected.

As described, women in Bala received a relatively small portion of the incomes from the joint project of farming, even though it was much more than the post-harvest recompense. In the best of cases they benefitted from food security, shelter and having their health expenses taken care of. On the other hand, women’s contribution to the common economy was much more than their agricultural labour. The activities labelled “women’s work”, which women undertook within their individually managed economic domain, included a multitude of work tasks centring around the care for children, serving the meals and keeping the homestead tidy. Such work is in economic theory labelled “reproductive” and generally externalized from economic accounts (Dunaway 2013, Benería, Berik and Floro 2016: 179-226). However, as I have demonstrated in chapters six to eight, women’s activities were essential components of smallholder livelihoods.

To think about women’s strategies, I draw on Bourdieu’s concept of strategies as a practical sense of things, a sense du jeu, inscribed in the habitus rather than consciously calculated. This strategy concept is inherently differ-
ent from how strategies are conceived in rational action theory which dominates economics. Consequently, and in difference to the intra-household bargaining literature in economics, I suggest that “bargaining” should be understood broadly, both regarding how people negotiate and what they bargain about. As intra-household bargaining in Bala took place in the context of power, the modes through which women (and junior men) could negotiate access to resources were more varied and more subtle than the simple exchange of verbal statements. As common in hierarchical relations elsewhere (Agarwal 1997, Kabeer 2000:45), bargaining in Bala entailed indirect or silent modes of communication, including women’s bad performance or strategic withdrawal of work tasks and even escape to her family of origin.

The general economic situation of the farming unit was a crucial factor determining what could be negotiated about. In better off farming units, women had the possibility to bargain for a “bigger piece of the pie” (as expressed by O’Laughlin (2007)). In poorer farming units, bargaining was more likely to be about how the deficit in the common economy should be covered. I have shown (in chapter 6) how women in poor farming units struggled to compensate for insufficient cereal harvests, to provide the condiments entirely through their own efforts and even pay health related expenses. Women in better-off farming units still had to work hard but were better cushioned against misfortune. Differences in age and generation also mattered, as well as the composition of the farming unit. Middle-aged women with adolescent daughters at their service were much better positioned to fulfil their household duties and were even capable to build up a small personal saving. Young wives, on the other hand, with small children at their care, had a hard time to keep up with the labour intense female work tasks and were hardly able to make any savings.

In order to understand how women managed their individual economic domain, I took a close look at two categories of feminine economic activities: the production of condiments for the vegetable sauces that accompanied the daily meal of stiff porridge (chapter 7) and the commercial brewing of sorghum beer (chapter 8), which was the most common way for women in Bala to make money. Within the first category I investigated three kinds of condiments: the many plants, farmed and collected, which entered the sauce at different periods of the year, the production of shea butter, that is the multipurpose fat which was the main cooking fat in Bala, and sumbala, a condiment made from fermented seeds of the African locust bean. It had become increasingly difficult for women to collect the plants which they habitually utilized for sauces. Wild edible plants had become rare due to the expansion of the farmed area and the increased pressure on the remaining bush. Women’s lack of time made it difficult for them to constitute a dried stock from plants which were plenty during farming season. The main problem for the provisioning of shea butter was that the nuts had to be collected and conserved during the most labour-intensive period, at the beginning of the agri-
cultural season. The difficulty with *sumbala* production was the insufficient 
fruit production of the African locust bean trees in Bala. Both shea butter 
extraction and the production of *sumbala* were complex and labour intense 
work processes that involved female helpers of all ages.

Women had several options for how to provide the daily sauce despite the 
constraints of time and the shortage of wild edible plants. They could adjust 
consumption; one sauce plant would replace another, shea butter could be 
entirely left out and *sumbala* could be produced from other seeds. The ten-
dency was that cultivated plants replaced collected plants and that industrial-
ly made condiments replaced home-made. Money added to the available 
options, because women could handle time squeezes through the purchase of 
some products (or their industrially made replacements). Later, during the 
aricultural off season they would convert time to money through their own-
account income generating activities. If successful, women could thereby 
create an economic buffer which would allow them to handle time squeezes 
during the farming season.

Women could also try to make their husband or head of farming unit pay 
for condiment purchases or milling. Even though it was rare, the detailed 
investigation of a few farming units’ expense budgets (in chapter 5) revealed 
that the commodification of some products and the availability of industrial-
ly made replacements made it conceivable for men to take on expenses 
which women otherwise would have carried. Such was the case for industri-
ally made soap (replacing shea soap) or kerosene (replacing shea butter for 
lamps). Men sometimes even paid for condiments and milling, even though 
it was rare and mostly when they needed women’s labour on the farm.

Hence, I have argued that commodification entails a possibility of small 
changes in the informal household contract about who should pay what, but 
such changes are not likely to come about without frictions and negotiations. 
If women did not succeed in convincing their head of farming unit to take 
over some costs, they had indirect or hidden modes of making the common 
economy pay for products which they would otherwise have had to furnish 
from own means or efforts. Women’s cereal barter should be understood in 
this way, that is women used grains from the common stock to barter for 
salt, condiments and vegetables.

The sale of home brewed sorghum beer was women’s principal means of 
making money. In fact, the sale of beer was a means through which women 
as a collective retrieved part of the cotton money which men spent on leisure 
activities. But, as I have demonstrated (in chapter 8), not all women were 
equally positioned to make a good income from brewing. Women from bet-
ter off farming units had a starting capital in the form of grains in their pos-
session after the harvest, and they could take a loss in case their beer-sale 
failed. Women from poorer farming units did not always have starting capi-
tal, and they had no margins for losses. Moreover, the beer trade was under-
taken within a setting where men were the authority holders. Male elders
decided at what price the beer should be sold, male farmers set the price of the sorghum which the brewers purchased, and male customers drank on credit without paying back. Despite these tribulations and the physical hardship of brewing, women unanimously stated that there was no other activity in Bala which could match its profitability.

Among the brewers, four women stood out as being best positioned to make a good profit. These women were not married to farmers and were, therefore, able to brew throughout the year. Being able to brew even during periods when other women were tied up with farm work, made it possible for these four brewers to maintain a higher price and to pressure customers to pay their credits in order to be served.

To sum up, the separateness of women’s individual economic domain, managed without direct interference of their husband and male head of farming unit, comprised a possibility for women to realize their own projects. I have outlined some of the strategies that women employed to fulfil their gender specific work tasks, make ends meet and try to constitute personal savings. The separateness of women’s economic domain should not be understood as a sign of female autonomy, quite the contrary. The farming unit’s general economic status set the conditions for women to succeed with their own-account activities and determined their ability to make savings beyond basic survival. Moreover, the composition of the farming unit and a woman’s position within it structured her access to time and helpers which allowed her to get ahead with her undertakings. Throughout the second part of the thesis I have mentioned that women in Bala to a large extent drew on other person’s labour, both in their various laborious work processes for home consumption and in their commercial undertaking. It was mainly through their membership in a farming unit and through relations of kinship and affinity outside it, that women had access to relations on which they could draw to realize personal projects.

**Female agency in male managed domestic units**

While studying the organization and functioning of the domestic economy, with a particular focus on women’s activities, I have assessed women’s agency as manifested through their economic strategies, to answer the fifth research question: *How could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship?*

I have investigated women’s contribution to farm labour (as described in chapter 3), their contribution to feeding the family (as described in chapter 7) and their undertakings to earn a personal income (described in chapter 8) and how they drew on other persons’ labour to realize them. The material benefits that women drew from their various activities and their potential for negotiating a better bargain have been discussed in chapters five and six.
At the end of chapter seven, I discussed whether the fulfilment of the complex work processes labelled “women’s work” could really count as “projects”. Were they manifestations of agency or just routine activities? The answer depends on what definition of agency one draws. The anthropological definitions on which I have drawn differ from those commonly used in social sciences and development. In its widest sense, agency is the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn 2001), while Ortner (2006) understands agency as operating in two fields of meaning, “agency of (culturally defined) projects” and “agency of power”. I read Ortner’s bracketed “(culturally defined)” in the sense that anything worth striving for in a specific cultural context could count as a “project”. I argue thus that the female work activities that I describe are valid as manifestations of female agency. The fulfilment of these activities could be projects in themselves, but also means for women to achieve other projects. Through the skilful exercise and management of household activities women could gain respect and acquire social esteem. These activities also contained the potential for women to build up a personal saving, to be invested in female wealth such as utensils, enamel dishes and clothes for themselves and their daughters, items which besides their economic value bestowed their owner with symbolic capital in the form of prestige.

Regarding Ortner’s second field of meaning, “agency of power”, it is beyond doubt that women in Bala exercised agency in a context of unequal power relations. The principal authority holder within the domestic unit was the most senior male, while other members were differently positioned vis-à-vis him and each other due to intersecting structures of inequality, such as gender, age, generation and marriage. Hence, in the complex social web constituting a domestic unit, women were both subordinate and authority holders. Moreover, the same gender norms which constituted women and men as inherently different and women as subordinate, could be used by women to their advantage. First, the fact that women managed their own economic domain gave them leeway to undertake activities outside the reach of male authority. Second, the fact that men depended on women for gender specific tasks was not only a burden but also a source of power for women. Third, the local gender order’s explicit linkage between male authority and male responsibility gave women a socially accepted leeway to disregard a husband or head of farming unit who failed to live up to a minimum of responsibility regarding the family’s well-being.

The notion, common in social science (see Calhoun 2002), that agency is about individuals standing up against social structure, is of little use for understanding the paradoxes of women’s agency in a context such as Bala, where women and men exercised agency not only as individuals but also as members of a social body, sometimes through the social body and by proxy of other persons.
I have drawn on Ahearn’s (2001) idea that agency can exist in different modes. Wardlow’s concept of “encompassed agency” defined as “actions that produce effects, but effects whose ends are beyond the individual’s actions and for a wider purpose” (Wardlow 2006:13) fits well with how women in Bala exercised agency as members of a collective. A similar concept is Shaw’s “subsumed agency” which suggests that the most powerful acts are those performed indirectly and often invisibly (Shaw 2000). Both concepts imply that women have the power to block the agency of more powerful authority holders through their non-participation in the projects of the latter.

The agency argument of this thesis can be summarized as follows. Even though women undertook income generating activities for their own account, they were members of a domestic unit for joint production and consumption, the farming unit. The rights and responsibilities which women had both in relation to their domestic unit, and towards its individual members, shaped their needs and their abilities to undertake their own-account economic activities. Women had vested interests in the collective undertaking of their farming unit, and thus exercised agency when they contributed (or not) to its success. Their agency in that respect should be understood as “encompassed” (Wardlow 2006) or “subsumed” (Shaw 2000), because women acted as part of a social body, rather than as individuals. When women undertook activities for their own account, these were conditioned by norms about gender and the ideal relationship between the common and the individual domains. Moreover, women drew on other person’s labour for their undertakings, hence having access to relations on which they could draw for assistance, a mode of agency which I have called “relational agency”.

From the perspective of a commodity chain approach, women’s activities constituted unpaid or underpaid labour through which they subsidized cotton production. In other words, they added “hidden” value (Dunaway 2013) to the cotton commodity, value which was neither reflected in the price paid by Sofitex to the farmers, nor in the post-harvest recompenses distributed to women by their male heads. In fact, my study confirms what Meillassoux once argued in connection to the plantation economy in Côte d’Ivoire, that global capitalism articulated with local power structures to provide cheap labour (Meillassoux 1970 [1964]). According to the commodity chain approach, exploitation can occur at every level of the chain, the mechanisms being context specific at each level. In Burkina Faso, the well-being of cotton farmers depends not only on the world market price of cotton, but also on government decisions on producer prices, on the functioning/malfunctioning of the cotton company, on urban/rural relations and on relations of power within domestic units. Jessie K. Luna, in her recent study from Burkina Faso, describes how actors at different levels of the cotton commodity chain (i.e. cotton company managers, extension agents, male farmers and women farmers) resisted being exploited while at the same time justifying their own exploitation of less powerful actors (Luna 2018b:44-74,
I would like to add that even women, if they had the possibility, would exploit the labour of junior women and children. But, as Luna has shown, exploitation at the lowest levels is more about passing on the economic squeeze than becoming rich off somebody else’s back.

However, the articulation between global capitalism and local subsistence in cotton production is more complex than presumed by either Meillassoux or the “commodity chain approach”. Not only are the subsistence activities of smallholders (women in particular) subsidizing the cotton commodity, adding “hidden value” to it, but farmers have also benefitted from cotton production for their subsistence. It is well documented, and my study confirms it, that cotton farming gave access to credits, fertilizers and technology with which farmers could increase their food production. As my data indicate, it was the farming units who were excluded from growing cotton who were the poorest and who had to complement subsistence farming with other sources of incomes to feed themselves. In other words, the case of Burkina Faso’s cotton farmers illustrates that it is possible to be both exploited by and benefit from cotton production, at least to a certain limit. Recent years’ fall in the profitability of cotton is worrying. In this context I want to nuance what I have written elsewhere (Helmfrid 2004), that the adoption of cotton farming had been to the detriment of women. In fact, if the farm was well managed and the basic needs of the family members taken care of (as discussed in chapter 5), women in cotton farming units could be better off than those farming little or no cotton, despite the hard labour and lack of time for their individual economic activities. Women in poorer farming units had more leeway to engage in income generation activities, but as all their earnings and efforts aimed at sustaining their household, it is questionable if their relative autonomy was an advantage.

Finally, even though women in Bala were exploited (by capitalist cotton production and by the local patriarchal gender order), the driving force for them to exhaust themselves with various laborious tasks needs to be appreciated in relation to their commitment to care for the wellbeing of their family, for their children in particular, and thereby for themselves. Unlike Amartya Sen (1989), I do not imagine women to suffer from false consciousness, unable to separate their own wellbeing from that of their children. Instead, I argue that women’s well-being was inseparable from their relational roles as mother, wife, daughter, sister, and so forth, and that this circumstance is central to understanding their agency. During interviews I used to ask about their plans for the future, and I was frustrated when many women did not come up with anything more ambitious than hoping for their family to stay in good health. Later I came to wonder why I had not taken their answers more seriously. Maybe they did indeed consider the well-being of the family to be their life project, in Ortner’s terms, it could have been their overarching “(culturally defined) project”, encompassing and giving sense to everything else that women undertook.
Appendix:
How household budgets were constructed

My analysis of intra-domestic economic processes is mainly based on insights gained through the construction of detailed household budgets for a few selected farming units. The numerical data generated by this undertaking are presented and analysed in chapters four and five. This note aims to explain how these figures were arrived at. It describes the steps in the process, highlights the difficulties and points to the various decisions I took to transform the diverse items of these farming units’ annual production and consumption, into numbers which could be totalized and compared.

The selection of farming units

Shortly after my arrival in Bala, I selected seven farming units, which I followed throughout the agricultural year and for which I collected detailed data on annual production and consumption.\(^{159}\) I selected the case families through a combination of reason and random, with the aim to constitute a purposive sample with maximum variation (Lavrakas 2008, Guest 2014). I started from a census list established in 1990, kindly shared by the *Programme Coton*\(^{160}\), which the agricultural extension agent in Bala helped me to update to the situation prevalent in 1995. From that list, and in discussion with civil servants in Bala, I picked out seven farming units representing the maximum of diversity with regards to social, cultural and economic criteria. Hence, my small sample included Bobo, Mossi and Jula; Catholic; Protestant, Muslim and traditionalists; households composed of one conjugal unit as well as others composed of several; one-generational as well as multi-generational households; monogamous as well as polygynous couples; tractor farmers, ox-plough farmers and hoe farmers; cotton growers and non-cotton growers; farmers with and without substantial non-agricultural incomes; different levels of formal education; men who had been working...
abroad and those who had not; women who originated in Bala and those who came from elsewhere; beer brewing women and women who abstained from the alcohol trade. A major advantage of this diversity was that I got in touch with people outside my host family’s network, neighbourhood and lifestyle and got to learn things from various perspectives.

In these seven farming units I collected 27 individual accounts of annual production and consumption, 12 from men and 15 from women. While the seven male heads provided information about the common economy under their management and about their individual purses, women and junior men talked about their individual incomes and expenditures, including what they received from and contributed to the common economy and individual members. Only one woman did not want to talk about her personal budget, but this lack of data does not affect the presentation I make of that farming unit’s common economy. Furthermore, I had interviewed four women of a farming unit which was excluded from the data presented in chapters four and five, due to incomplete information about its common economy. Information from these four women has been incorporated into chapter seven, treating the female economy. It would have been interesting also to learn about the individual economic strategies of children and elderly persons (the latter are only loosely attached to the farming unit of a son), but I decided to stick to the narrow focus of husbands and wives of productive age, when I realized that interviews were both delicate and time-consuming.

In all, the interviews made me understand how these domestic economies functioned as a system of common and individual “accounting units”, but I was unable, for several reasons, to mathematically seize the complex transactions between sub-units of the domestic economies. One reason was a problem of accountancy: data from the individuals’ “accounting units” could not be added up as if their incomes were pooled with the common economy, nor could they be treated as entirely separate, as if the farming unit was a conglomerate of autonomous and self-sufficient individuals. How to assign monetary values to various products and services was another problem. This proved to be particularly difficult for the female budgets, as many of the products and services provided by women had no market price. Even for those that had a market price, it was not possible to make reasonable estimates of their quantities. I, therefore, decided to limit the accounting exercise, as presented in chapters four and five, to the common part of the farming unit’s economy and opted for a more descriptive account of the individual economies of women, as presented in chapters six to eight.

Collection and structuring of economic data

Preliminary interviews made me realize that people had difficulties in remembering their annual production and consumption figures if they were
asked to cite them right away. They could, however, remember specific income by thinking about what they had bought with that money, and vice versa, they could remember a specific purchase by thinking about how they had obtained the money for it. This insight made me work out a questionnaire which as far as possible connected major incomes with major expenses. Small and recurrent expenses were estimated on a weekly basis and extrapolated for the year or the season. After testing, the questionnaire was reworked several times. My female assistant conducted the interviews in Jula. I assisted during half of the interviews and let my assistant conduct the rest.

Initially my approach to constructing household budgets was inspired by a manual elaborated by anthropologist Eva Poluha (1992). It was an adaptation of conventional anthropological methods to the needs of short-time consultants who wanted to understand households’ survival strategies. Poluha’s (1992) suggestion for how to categorize the many small and diverse items of farming households’ production and consumption, so that they could be summed up and made comparable, proved useful. She suggested a broad division between expenses for “home consumption” and expenses for the “reproduction of the farm”, and a further subdivision of the former category into “consumed goods from own production” and “consumed goods that were purchased”. I kept this broad subdivision but added a few more categories to make it more suitable for my research questions.

Poluha’s manual was conceived according to a unitary model of the household and did not consider the possibility of individuals having own economic survival strategies vis-à-vis the household and vis-à-vis individual household members. As my interest was to find out how much a woman gets out of the common enterprise of farming, and as I wanted both to relate her share to other expense categories and be able to compare it across farming units, I further modified the setup: I created the expense category “purchases for the head’s consumption”, which represented the personal expenses a head of a farming unit had made from the common fund, and the category “women’s individual share”, representing the post-harvest recompenses in kind and cash distributed to women from the common fund. In the process of compiling the data I became aware of the specific situation of married junior men within the farming units, who in some cases were excluded from the management of the common fund, and in other cases had access to it for their personal expenses. I tested to further subdivide the male and female “individual accounting units” into “senior” and “junior”, hoping to grasp the role of seniority for intra-household distribution. However, it became impossible to present all these small sub-categories in a single table. I, therefore, ended up with two expense categories representing transfers from the common budget to individual members of the farming unit: first, members’ individual shares, representing the total of post-harvest gifts in kind and in cash given to women and junior men of the farming unit, and second, pur-
chases for the head’s personal consumption, representing the outlays made from the common fund by the head of the farming unit for his personal consumption.

Temporal framework of accounts

The data, on which my discussion of the sample households’ economies in chapters four and five is based, was collected through recall interviews in March/April 1996. At the time of the interview people had not yet finished consuming their harvest from 1995/96, and some farming units still had their cereals un-threshed, which made them difficult to quantify. My data on production and consumption in that agricultural year were thus incomplete. To obtain complete information about how a year’s production was consumed and distributed, I started the recall of incomes and expenses as far back as the harvest of 1994/95, hence September 1994 when the early groundnuts ripened. The period covered by the production and consumption figures in chapters four and five thus extend from September 1994 to September 1995.

If one considers the lengthy period of recall and the un-exactness of the time frame, how reliable are these data? The annual totals of recurrent expenses were extrapolated from estimated weekly expenditures multiplied by the number of weeks in a year. The exact beginning and end of the period, therefore, does not matter. Such expenses could, however, not be estimated with any exactness. Large expenditures were remembered with more accuracy, and in most cases, there was no doubt about from which year’s harvest they had been covered. Exceptions are a few specific expenses made after September 1995, which could have been covered with incomes from the new harvest. A more likely source of inaccuracy is that expenses which had occurred way back in 1994 were forgotten. Such deviations certainly exist but are probably of minor importance in the overall picture.

A more important source of confusion was the costs involved in agricultural production, of which some had been paid with money saved up from the preceding harvest, while others were taken on credit and would not be paid until after the following harvest. The latter was the case for most of the expenditures related to cotton farming, that is seeds, pesticides and chemical fertilizers, the cost of which are cut from the cotton payment after the harvest. The expense category agricultural production costs as presented in chapter five (“dividing the common income”) thus consists of a mixture of paid and not yet paid expenses. As a consequence of including the cotton credits among that year’s expenditures, there is an imbalance between the farming units’ annual production figures (as presented in chapter 4) and its

\[161\text{ In 1998 during a follow-up visit I interviewed the same persons on the same issues, but without going into details of incomes and expenses.}\]
consumption figures (as presented in chapter 5). An exact balance could not be expected anyway, because calculations were based on a mixture of exact values and rough estimates. This said, the exactness of the data is sufficient for my purpose, that is to allow for a discussion about how much women receive from what is produced on the farm, and to compare women’s economic situation across the income disparities of farming units.

The “value” of home-consumption

Another issue was how to attribute calculable values to the diverse items produced for home-consumption. Instead of limiting myself to mapping cash flows only, I decided, as far as possible to account also for the part of food production which was consumed by the members of the farming unit, as I would otherwise have missed the most crucial factor for well-being.

There are several ways that one could attribute values to items produced and consumed within the domestic unit, and these can be classified into two broad approaches. Either the item’s value is calculated on its production cost, that would be the Marxist approach, or it is calculated on its market value, and that would be the approach of liberal economics (Gregory and Altman 1989:22ff). As pointed out by Goldschmidt-Clermont (1987) all approaches have flaws and practical difficulties, but production pricing in a setting where paid labour is rare, such as in Bala, is particularly problematic.

For the above reasons I decided to attribute market prices to items which had a known price, such as cereals and groundnuts, meat from domestic animals and fish. This made sense for several reasons: Farmers in Bala did sell these products, and even for those who did not sell, the option existed, and they knew the prices. The application of market prices allowed me to consider the time factor and its impact on price. During my stay in Bala in 1995-1996 cereal prices more than doubled from one harvest to shortly before the next (CRPA des Hauts-Bassins 1995:17, 1997:6). A farmer who was able to store a surplus of maize until shortly before the next harvest had thus the possibility to earn twice as much from its sale compared to somebody who had to sell early due to an urgent need of cash.162

In short, the use of market prices to calculate the relative wealth of farming units better reflected lived realities in Bala than would calculations based on production costs. Assigning a market value was not a problem when accounting for products that had been bought or sold. It was more difficult to

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162 To some extent this market mechanism was counterbalanced by the local practice of cereal loans. It was common that a poorer farmer, towards the end of the season, approached a better-off relative or friend with the request to borrow cereals to be reimbursed at the coming harvest. In such cases one borrowed bag shall be reimbursed with one bag, regardless the fluctuating market price.
account for products that had been produced and consumed in the household or distributed as gifts. Practically I resolved this by using an average price calculated on the annual maximum and the annual minimum prices for those cereals that were consumed little by little during the year, while other products were assigned a value which approximately corresponded to the price it had at that time of the year.

Another problem was how to account for items that were commoditized to a very low degree. This was the case for firewood and water, for specimens of the wild flora and fauna that were consumed within the household. The same goes for a variety of cultivated plants, which women grew on the edges of the farm. Economists would in this case resort to “shadow pricing”, a technique by which monetary values are assigned to products and services which do not have a market price.163 A woman’s subsistence production would be valued by what she could have earned if she had spent that time on income earning, for example as in Bala, on beer brewing. This monetary value would be fictive as far as it disregards the resulting price fall on beer if all women started to spend all their time on brewing and the resulting price rise on condiments if all women started to buy them on the market. Shadow pricing also disregards the seasonality of activities, such as the difficulty to sell beer at times when men have no cash, and to brew at times when no sorghum is available for sale.

Besides my inability to perform this mathematical exercise of shadow pricing, I found it reasonable to refrain from assigning values to women’s subsistence production and domestic services. Not only did many products lack a market value, it was also impossible to make any reasonable estimates of quantities, unless I had done daily supervision and data collection. Most of the products and services that individual women provided for the household’s consumption fall into this category.

How production figures were arrived at

Chapter four (“Income differences between farming units”) describes what the seven farming units produced in a year, and points to economic inequalities between them. It explains the rationale behind the farming units’ different production strategies, their combination of crops and their mix of cropping and non-cropping incomes. Below I explain how production totals, as presented in chapter four, figure 4, were arrived at.

163 A shadow price can either be arrived at from a complex mathematical model such as linear programming, or it can be calculated on other values than the market price, such as (i) the opportunity cost per unit, (ii) the marginal value product per unit, (iii) the maximum amount it is worth paying to hire the resource (Upton 1987).
Included in the category “food crops” are mainly cereals: maize, millet and sorghum. Groundnut was another important food crop, and some farmers had grown sesame and cowpeas. To assign a monetary value to these products, I proceeded in the following way: Those quantities, which were consumed during the year, were calculated on an average between annual maximum and annual minimum prices. For food crops that were sold, the actual price was stated. For those distributed after the harvest, as gifts or recompense, the lowest annual price was calculated, because that was the sum the farmer would have received if he had sold it at that time. On the other hand, food crops given as help to persons in need were assigned the highest annual value, because such gifts were due during the period of food shortage when prices were high. For cereals set aside as seed for the next farming season, the maximum annual price was applied, because that was the price the farmer would have had to pay had he bought seeds shortly before the planting season. The values of all those categories of food crops; consumed, sold, given away and set aside as seeds, were then totalled to give the value of the income of food crops, as presented in the tables.

Incomes from cotton farming were calculated on the net income, that is the gross earnings after the cotton credits had been subtracted. According to the national cotton company Société Burkinabè des Fibres Textile (Sofitex), the cotton credits amounted to 30 per cent of a farmer’s gross earnings on cotton in that year. That is, if production was normal. In individual cases credit costs could be much higher and even outweigh the gross earnings, because of crop failure, or due to the widespread practice of utilizing some of the fertilizers on food crops.

The category “non-cropping” includes various incomes from trade, craft, fishing, livestock rearing and paid labour, such as cash earnings from sales, but also to some extent items, that had been produced and consumed within the farming unit. For example, I included poultry and other domestic animals that were eaten or used as gifts and gave them an average value of the minimum and maximum annual prices. The fisherman (Pierre), who regularly contributed fresh fish to the meals of the members of his farming unit, estimated the quantities. I then attributed a value to this contribution by calculating the average of the prices of the cheapest and the medium cheap species. It was relevant to account for this produce because I assumed that otherwise the households would have spent cash on buying either fish or meat. However, I could only account for items which had a market price and of which the quantities could be reasonably estimated. For small animals

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164 The following year the share of the credit amounted to 50% of the gross payment (Ministère de l'Industrie du Commerce et des Mines 1995).
165 Fish were classified in three price categories (Juenet 1996:14). I did not consider the most expensive category for consumption, because first, these species were rare in a catch, and second fishermen were likely to sell such fish.
hunted in the bush both the quantities and the value were impossible to estimate.\textsuperscript{166} For the same reason I did not account for other products from the bush: fruits, plant medicines, wooden tools, and so forth. The principles I applied for attributing values to products can be put in question, but I consequently applied the same principle across all the farming units. All items included in the production totals were also included, with the same monetary value, in the consumption totals presented in chapter five, “Dividing the common income” (Figures 6 and 7).

How reliable are these figures? Generally, farmers knew very well how many 100 kg bags of cereals, groundnuts or cowpeas they had harvested, and they also knew the prices at different times of the year. Not included are the values of the many small crops such as hibiscuses, okra, chili peppers, pumpkins and earth peas, which were grown as sauce ingredients or as snacks. It was simply impossible to estimate their quantities as they were consumed little by little right from the farm. There were also unknown quantities of grains consumed during the harvest, before cereals were threshed and filled into bags. In fact, for some farmers that period extends over three to six months, a circumstance which I have never seen being problematized in relation to the reliability of agricultural statistics. Even though part of the cereal production is not captured by production figures, this bias concerns all the farming units, and does not hamper comparisons.

The cereal production of the hoe-farmer (Zakaria) was more difficult to assess because he stored his sorghum un-threshed and let his wife thresh it little by little. To arrive at the annual production figure, I extrapolated from the content of the little basket which his wife used to measure grains before grinding it. Its content usually lasted for three days. But, as the woman explained, grains from their farm were not always enough. Towards the end of the season she would reduce the ratio and even complete from grains obtained through her own means. In other words, this farming unit’s production figures are likely to have been overestimated because they reflected the minimum amount of grains which the farming unit would have needed, rather than what it actually disposed of.

While the figures for cotton production and the bulk of the food crops are reliable in most cases, income from other activities are more estimated. For most heads of farming units such income was non-existent or insignificant compared to the income from the collective farm. Non-farming income was more important for junior men and women who habitually used the dry season to earn a personal income. Such income was kept by the individuals and not pooled with the common economy under the male head’s management. They are, therefore, not included in the charts showing the common production of the farming units.

\textsuperscript{166} Most of this hunting was probably illegal, which explained why people were very vague about how much game meat they had consumed.
How consumption figures were arrived at

After having described how the seven farming units earned their living and highlighted economic inequalities between them in chapter four, I proceeded in chapter five to examine their consumption patterns and to explore economic inequality within farming units. Below I explain how these consumption figures were arrived at.

**Agricultural production costs** consist of both paid and not yet paid expenses, as explained above, and they also include both recurrent and investment costs. Most of the credits were for cotton seeds, fertilizers, and chemicals, costs which would be subtracted when the cotton was paid for. The costs of day labourers were also among the expenditures that would be covered after the harvest. Other costs would require direct payment, from means saved since the previous harvest. The repair or replacement of tools, the vaccination of draught animals, the purchase of animal feed, and the motorized farmer’s purchase of gasoline and oil, were such examples. Such expenditures were recurrent. Then there were costs, which were more of an investment, for example the purchase at the end of the season of a sowing-machine, a draught animal or a heifer for future breeding. Such costs would hopefully contribute to make the farm production more profitable in the future, but they had not contributed to producing that year’s harvest.

My rationale for including both paid and not yet paid expenses in the annual agricultural production expenditures was to make the connection between a specific harvest and its costs. I thought it would be interesting to see how much a specific harvest cost to produce. According to that logic, I should not have included agricultural investments which would only benefit forthcoming harvests. However, the differentiation between agricultural investments and recurrent costs proved difficult to make. Depending on circumstances, the purchase of a plough share, for example, was for one farmer part of the recurrent costs (ploughshares wear out and must be replaced) but for another farmer it was the only investment he could afford with the profits from that year’s farming. In the end it was less the item as such than the timing and circumstances of its purchase which would make me classify a purchase as either a recurrent cost or investment. As such classification would tend towards randomness, I finally decided to keep all expenses related to farming in one single category.

The procedure for calculating the value of the farming units’ consumption of **food crops** has already been explained in connection to the production figures. It was more difficult to make reasonable estimates for other kinds of expenditure. In the category **purchases for common consumption** some were recurrent while others were occasional. To remember the latter, the head of the farming unit would recall the purchase in connection to specific sales of cereals or other products. Thus, the informant would explain that “I sold x and used the money to buy y”. Clothes, school expenses, medical
treatment and identity cards were typical occasional expenses. Figures for the recurrent expenses, on the other hand, were estimates. Sometimes the informant would say “I usually buy meat for the family at 100-200 FCFA each week”. I would then calculate the annual value of meat purchase on the average of 100 FCFA and 200 FCFA, which I thereafter multiplied with the number of weeks in a year.

Many expenses were seasonal and in such cases I multiplied the estimated sums with the number of weeks of that season. For example, heads of farming units were most likely to contribute to milling and condiment purchase from the common budget between May and November, because they wanted women to spend their time on farm work rather than on household chores. In addition, most heads of farming units claimed that when they invited a work party to their farm, they covered those food expenses from the common budget. However, when they enumerated actual expenses, very few such costs were mentioned. For the few instances of such costs being enumerated, I listed them among the “agricultural production costs”, because providing the meals was part of what it cost to have workers on the farm.

Information given by a head of a farming unit about his contribution to “purchases for common consumption” was not always confirmed by the accounts of its women. This was particularly the case for small recurrent expenses such as the purchase of meat, soap or milling fees. Such divergences can be attributed to the difficulty in estimating recurrent expenses, but the pattern in those cases was that the male heads imagined their contribution (from the common fund) to be more, while the woman estimated it to be less. However, even though I consequently based my calculations on the higher estimates of the male heads (for the simple reason that the head is in charge of the common budget and, therefore, all other figures regarding the common budget were based on his estimations) the value of such contributions was extremely small. Hence the divergences between men’s and women’s accounts were insignificant in light of the general pattern that men contributed relatively little cash to small recurrent household expenses. The bulk of the values accounted for in the category “purchases for common consumption” refers to punctual purchases of costly items such as clothes, medicines and the like, which were considered to be the responsibility of the farming unit.

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167 See Sen (1990) for a discussion about how differences in men’s and women’s “perceptions” about contributions affect intra-household resource allocation.
Sammanfattning på svenska

Bomullsodling och ölförsäljning
Hushållsekonomi och kvinnlig agens i Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso är Afrikas största exportör av bomull. Som familjearkbetskraft inom de bomullsodlande småbrukarfamiljerna utgör kvinnor den yttersta länken i bomullens globala varukedja. Men ytterst lite av världsmarknadspriset på bomull kommer dem till del.


Efter en inledning (kapitel 1) och bakgrund (kapitel 2) är avhandlingen uppdelad i två delar. Del I beskriver familjejordbrukets gemensamma ekonomi, dess produktionssätt (kapitel 3), inkomstskillnader mellan familjejordbruken (kapitel 4) och fördelningen av inkomster inom dem (kapitel 5). I Del II flyttas fokus till kvinnorna och till deras förhandlingsutrymme och ekonomiska strategier (kapitel 6). Deras strategier åskådliggörs i de båda efterföljande kapitlen vilka beskriver det kvinnoarbete som låg till grund för måltiderna (kapitel 7) samt den ölbyggning som de flesta kvinnor bedrev för att tjäna egna pengar (kapitel 8). Kapitel 9 utgörs av sammanfattande slutsatser.

Den första forskningsfrågan - hur var familjejordbruks ekonomi organiserad och hur fungerade den? - besvaras i kapitlen 2 - 5. Utifrån mitt em-


För att åskådliggöra processen som ledde till ekonomisk stratifiering före- slår jag att jordbrukens ekonomi ska förstås som en årlig spiral av inkomster och utgifter. Inkomsterna var begränsade till ett fåtal skördemånader, större
utgifter aktualiserades vid vissa tidpunkter medan de mindre utgifterna var jämnt fördelade över året. Det viktigaste ur jordbruksarens perspektiv var inte huruvida de årliga inkomsterna täckte utgifterna, utan om det vid en viss tidpunkt fanns pengar för att betala för en viss utgift. När så inte var fallet tvingades man sälja av sitt spannmål till underpris eller skuldsätta sig.


Analysen av några familjers produktions- och konsumtionsbudgetar gav underlag för att besvara den tredje forskningsfrågan - I vilken mån kunde kvinnor dra nytta av bomullsodlingen? Jag undersökte vilket handlingsutrymme kvinnorna hade, hur de förvaltade tid, arbete, pengar och relationer för att fullfölja sina olika förpliktelser och för att tjäna egna pengar.

Trots att kvinnornas andel av de gemensamma inkomsterna var betydligt lägre än vad deras manliga överhuvuden spenderade för egen konsumtion, visar min detaljerade genomgång att den nytta kvinnornas drog av den gemensamma jordbruksproduktionen var betydligt mer än de skördegåvor kring vilka det så ofta blev diskussion. Den gemensamma ekonomin, inklusive inkomsterna från bomullen, skulle normalt garantera basfödan, hälsorelaterade kostnader och boendet. Så var fallet i de mera välmående familjerna. Dessvärre kunde de fattiga, mindre framgångsrika jordbruken inte erbjuds sina medlemmar denna grundläggande materiella trygghet. I de familjerna måste kvinnorna uppbåda ytterligare arbetsinsatser och spendera egna pengar för att kompensera otilräcklig matförsörjning och bristen på kontanter. Min slutsats blir alltså att den ojämlika fördelningen av tillgångar inom de mera välmående familjerna utgjorde ett mindre hot mot kvinnornas välbefinnande än den absoluta fattigdom som vissa familjer levde i.

För att besvara den fjärde frågan - Vilka ekonomiska strategier kunde de använda sig av? - tittar jag i kapitel 6 – 7 på hur kvinnor förvaltade tid, pengar och relationer för att klara av sina specifikt kvinnliga förpliktelser gentemot familjen och för att tjäna egna pengar. Jag tittar också på vilka informella praktiker som kvinnor ägnade sig åt för att få den gemensamma ekonomin att stå för utgifter som de annars själva hade behövt ansvara för. I
kapitel 6 utforskar jag hur kvinnor förhandlar om tillgång till resurser och argumenterar för en vidare tolkning av begreppet ”förhandling” än det som vanligtvis används inom hushållsekonomiska studier. ”Förhandling”, menar jag, ska inte bara förstås som en ordväxling, men kan också innefatta handlingar som signalerar ordlösa budskap, i linje med Bourdieu’s strategibegrepp som en sense du jeu, en ”känsla för spelet” (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986, Bourdieu 1990).


Genom att under jordbrukets viloperiod brygga öl till försäljning kom kvinnorna i besittning av en del av de bomullsinkomster som män spenderade på egna näten. Denna verksamhet beskrivs i kapitel 8. Jag visar också att möjligheten att tjäna pengar genom ölbyggnation var ojämnt fördelad. Kvinnorna i de välstående familjerna kunde ofta börja ölbyggningssäsongen med ett startkapital och de behövde inte spendera sina mödosamt intjänade pengar på familjens försörjning, vilket kvinnor i fattigare familjer ofta gjorde. Exemplet illustrerar hur kvinnornas individuella ekonomiska sfärer var åtskilda från men ändå beroende av familjejordbrukets gemensamma ekonomi.

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Published by Stockholm University
Editors: Gudrun Dahl and Christina Garsten

Based on fieldwork undertaken in Burkina Faso in the mid-1990s, this study investigates the functioning of the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farmers with the overall aim of interrogating female agency. The thesis attempts to answer the following interrelated research questions: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship?

Permeating the analysis is the insight that domestic economies of many West African farming societies consist of separate but interconnected economic domains, the “common” economy of the farming unit and the “individual” economies of its male and female members. It demonstrates that women have vested interest in both the common economy and in their individual and that women’s individual undertakings, to a large extent, are motivated by their gendered responsibilities towards their domestic group. The study argues for an agency concept which captures the different modes in which women exercise agency, both as individuals and as parts of social bodies.

As much as the context of Burkinabe cotton farming has undergone changes since the mid-1990s, this thesis has relevance beyond its historic contribution to ethnographic studies of West African cotton farming. Focusing as it does on the internal organization of the domestic economies of farmers, with special attention to gendered and other intersecting power relations, it provides essential background knowledge, empirical as well as theoretical, for understanding the livelihoods of contemporary cotton farmers.