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## ***Learning to Live or to Leave? Education and Identity in Burkina Faso***

### **Introduction**

The main purpose of this paper is to reflect upon how more or less poor people perceive different educational systems in Burkina Faso and the roles they can play in the improvement of people's basic capabilities. Inspired by the idea that poverty must be seen as 'the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes' (Sen 1999:87), I seek to explore how such basic capabilities relate to education and identity. What happens with the children going to school compared to those who do not? Why do certain ethnic groups favour formal school education when others reject it? To what extent does formal school education reproduce the colonial divide between citizen and subject? How are education and identity interrelated in for example primary schooling and adult education?

While most scholars and practitioners would agree that there is a need to strengthen poor people's capabilities, less attention has been paid to the relationship between education and identity in postcolonial contexts. Sending children to school is not only a question of money and other resources but it is also a question of opting for a modern way of life, ideally as a civil servant. In other words, the school tends to be seen as preparing the children to leave the traditional way of life in favour of a life in the city. For someone who has been to school, farming is most often not a desirable activity any longer. Yet with the disengagement of the state and the lack of employment opportunities, there are simply not enough jobs to absorb the educated youth. A central question is therefore whether children 'learn to live', that is, to sustain and improve their basic capabilities; or if they *de facto* 'learn to leave', that is, to move from the rural village to town and, most often, engage in informal sector activities. The ideas that non-educated people have about formal education are crucial here, because they reveal how education and knowledge are perceived.

In this paper, I will explore the linkages between education and identity in Burkina Faso. Firstly, I will reflect upon central features shaping the ways in which knowledge and education are conceptualised in postcolonial contexts. The divide between so-called scientific knowledge and endogenous of knowledge and its impact on individual and collective identification are appraised. Secondly, I will describe how formal education is represented in daily life as an expression of modernity in Burkina Faso. Those who do the work of the white men (*tubabubaara*) are almost exclusively those with formal education. Civil servants are both seen as 'successful examples' but also as 'valuable resources'

by people in their home area. Official statistics show, however, that formal education still remains an opportunity for the privileged few. Thirdly, I will discuss how adult education, in this case alphabetisation in local languages, has become an educational alternative of growing importance. It offers a means to bridge the divide between 'scientific knowledge' and 'endogenous knowledge'. But adult education is not merely a question of learning to read and write. It forms part of identification processes, here exemplified by the teaching of local history in adult education in the village of Noumoudara, as well. In the concluding discussion, I will explore the complex relationship between education and identity in Burkina with reference to both formal and non-formal education. The paper concludes by suggesting that a cultural analysis of education and identity in postcolonial contexts may help us to transcend the distinction between 'education for work' and 'education for empowerment'.

### Conceptualising knowledge and education

In most postcolonial contexts, people tend to distinguish between so-called scientific knowledge and indigenous forms of knowledge. It marks off the knowledge taught in schools and universities from craftsmanship, indigenous institutions, religious wisdom and so forth that are taught outside the formal educational setting. However, the knowledge of traditional healers could neither be written off as 'non-systematic' and 'non-rational' nor could it be seen as craftsmanship. Similarly, Islamic schools in West Africa, particularly in the universities of Djenne and Timbuctou in present-day Mali, the religious *marabouts* followed by their disciples represent examples of a long tradition of higher education. Initiation into secret societies, such as the hunters' brotherhood, represents the acquisition of knowledge of practical, moral and religious character. But although people make distinctions between modern education and endogenous knowledge in everyday life, the conceptual distinction is far from clear-cut. In other words, the distinction between 'the way of the Whites' (*tubabuya*) and 'the way of the Africans' (*farafinya*), constantly referred to in Burkina, is more ideologically than empirically grounded.

The distinction between scientific knowledge and endogenous forms of knowledge is central in development discourse. Mark Hobart argues for instance that western scientific knowledge has played an important part in the problem of underdevelopment. 'Not only are indigenous knowledges ignored or dismissed, but the nature of the problem of underdevelopment and its solution are defined by reference to this world-ordering knowledge' (Hobart 1993:1). The distinction between 'scientific knowledge' and endogenous forms of knowledge originates in the European Enlightenment. As opposed to superstition and ancient beliefs, scientific knowledge would illuminate people and thus promote rational progress. The very distinction between 'scientific knowledge' and 'endogenous knowledges' can thus be traced back to a specific historical process in Europe.

In postcolonial contexts education is clearly linked to a history of foreign domination.<sup>1</sup> Education is as much a way to state whom one is as it is to obtain knowledge and knowing. In other words, education and identity are intimately yet ambiguously linked. On the one hand, formal education represents a way to become 'modern' and thus escape 'ignorance'. Pupils are sent to school 'to know the paper'. But, on the other hand, formal education is said to 'spoil' children and thus contribute to moral decline. Old people often express their regret that 'today the world has changed'. The ambiguous conception of education goes back to the colonial school system. But while the colonial divide between citizens and subjects has been aptly analysed (Mamdani 1996), this divide is particularly striking in the context of education. Those who were educated 'became' citizens, albeit they remained of African origin; only a small minority of African individuals were 'citizens' in a legal sense.

The divide between citizens and subjects is an entry-point to education and identity, but it is worth noting that the divide is not only a legal one. Today, the divide between citizens and subjects is to a large extent expressed as the one between educated and non-educated people. In daily life people make distinctions between 'the intellectuals' or 'the instructed', on the one hand, and 'the population', 'the villagers' or 'the peasants', on the other. While the former category allows people to be approached as individuals, the latter tends to be addressed collectively, especially in development projects. In voluntary associations, this divide is often conceptualised as between 'the people who know the book' and the illiterates. In these associations such a divide is reproduced in the distinction between 'active members' and 'automatic members' (Lentz 1995). The 'active members' are the leaders and other people with modern education who are apt to define activities and channel funding. The 'automatic members' are the villagers who are to be 'developed' by providing labour.

Far from being only a question of how to earn a living, education is tightly linked to status and identity. Those with a modern education are supposed to spatially and symbolically leave the illiterates behind. If they return to farm, they would be regarded as failures. Let me just mention one example. In 1990 I was to conduct a focus group interview in a small village in western Burkina. A young man of the age of 18 years welcomed me at arrival. He presented himself as the controller of the cotton weighing and thus seasonally employed by the parastatal SOFITEX. He had been to school in Bobo-Dioulasso and was now back in the village (probably as a school dropout). At my arrival the young man imposed himself as the mediator between the villagers and myself. I felt uneasy about this intrusion, but as it was a village in which I had not been working before, I did not want to ask him to withdraw. But in the heat of a debate around a specific question, the young man said loudly to me: 'Do not consider these people, they are ignorant, illiterate, they do not understand anything, they are not intellectuals.' An old man who had understood at least the sense of the young man's statement now furiously stood up and insulted the young man. He

shouted that nowadays children do not respect the elders any longer. The old man walked away in anger and, needless to say, the interview was spoiled and I ended it quickly.

The above example highlights potential tensions between those being 'instructed' and who possess 'the knowledge of the white man', at least speaking French and reading and writing rudimentarily, on the one hand, and those representing 'the knowledge of tradition', possessing ancestral knowledge and respecting moral values, on the other. Here the difference between 'scientific knowledge' and 'endogenous knowledge' has less to do with what is knowledge and not, than it has to do with status and identity. The young man behaved in an unacceptable manner, justified by his five to six years at school and his employment for the 'modern' cotton company. Thus the divide between 'scientific knowledge' and 'endogenous knowledge' is related to asymmetrical power relations. While a Mande proverb holds that 'ignorance is an illness' (*kunfinya ye bana ye*) (quoted by Ki-Zerbo 1992), ignorance is a state that people attribute to others; to label someone as 'ignorant' is a way to designate the 'Other' (Hobart 1993). This is particularly striking in postcolonial contexts where the state apparatus and formal education reproduce values of the former colonial power.

Debates over knowledge and knowing tend to be contested and contradictory. For instance, professor Joseph Ki-Zerbo who argues for 'endogenous development' is himself deeply rooted in a French scholarly tradition (Ki-Zerbo 1992). Among African scholars there is a long tradition of searching for 'authentic African knowledge'. Achille Mbembe argues that the 'modern African interrogation' of identification processes includes among other things an incantation that is based upon three tragic historical experiences: slavery, colonisation and apartheid. Today, the experience of globalisation may be added (Mbembe 2000b:17). These experiences have had serious consequences for Africans among which one notes the separation of the self, material and psychological dispossession and the loss of dignity. Current African identities are forged in the interface of cosmopolitanism and autochthonous values, because the desire for authenticity is to a large extent linked to globalisation processes (Mbembe 2000b:43).

The interface of what Mbembe calls 'cosmopolitanism' and 'autochthonous values' is clearly manifested when it comes to knowledge and education. Many children in Burkina start school without knowing any French, the language in which education is conducted. While they speak Dyula, Mooré or any other local language with their peers, in the classroom French is taught. So, before accessing the content of education, let alone cultivating a critical stance towards what is taught, children have to learn French. These pupils often experience conflicting claims between modern education and tradition, as eloquently dramatised in *Keïta: l'héritage du griot* (1994) by the Burkinabe filmmaker Dani Kouyaté. The young boy Mabo in the film is caught between

the knowledge of his family origin, narrated by the griot Djeliba, and the modern school, represented by his teacher.

For the purpose of this paper I want to suggest that instead of seeking to distinguish local, endogenous or traditional knowledges from so-called Western scientific knowledge and, in consequence, remain hopelessly trapped in global-local dichotomies, we need to see how knowledge and education are produced locally, be it in the modern school, Islamic teaching, initiation or adult education. To retrace 'authentic African knowledge systems' would be to miss the point, because village schools need to be contextualised in the same manner as any ritual or 'bush school', the latter institutions having been studied for a long time by anthropologists. It is the interface of cosmopolitanism and autochthonous values that must be placed at the core of analysis.<sup>2</sup>

In Burkina Faso people have experienced different kinds of education, despite the fact that the most important education has been carried out according to French curricula. Kaboré *et al.* have provided a historical review of postcolonial educational experiences and current figures on how the schooling rate has developed over the years. Formal education is to a large extent mirrored in the development strategy of the moment. While educational reforms in the 1960s and 1970s aimed at attaining 'quantitative development', the substance of the curricula became increasingly addressed in the late 1970s and, in particular, with the educational reform in 1986 (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:18-19). The current Law of Education Orientation was issued in 1996. It stipulates 'no child should be excluded from the educational system before the age of 16 years, provided that the infrastructures, equipments, human resources and current rules allow it' (Law 013/96/ADP 9 May 1996, Article 2. My translation). The Law distinguishes between three types of education in the Burkinabe educational system: 'formal education', 'non-formal education' and 'informal education'. 'Formal education' refers to primary, secondary and higher education, that is, leading to university degrees and diplomas. Within formal education access to higher education is possible, provided that the pupil has his/her diploma. 'Non-formal education' refers to functional alphabetisation, *école rurale*, education in national languages and vocational training, and so on. It is organised in a non-school setting. 'Informal education' is diffuse and daily; it is often conducted within the family and the social group. 'Informal education is non-organised whereas political authorities pay particular attention to the other two' (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:14. My translation). The consequences of this typology are easily detected. Formal education, that is, an education according to a French curriculum, is given priority and non-formal educational attempts, such as functional alphabetisation and teaching in national languages, are nonetheless recognised. But other educational efforts are defined out as diffuse and non-organised. Once again the postcolonial context of knowledge production is emphasised, regardless of the many

attempts undertaken to 'Africanise' or 'endogenise' the educational system (cf. Kaboré *et al.* 1999:25-30).

For the sake of clarity in this paper I take 'formal education' as a shorthand for the training that pupils receive within the formal school system, based on a French curriculum. The label does not, however, imply any normative statement of what is good education. I do not look into curriculum development and schooling conditions, but I am, instead, interested in the identity process related to formal education, because it can help us to understand the motives for parents choosing to send children to school or not. While it is reasonable to assume that children of educated people are more likely to go to school, I am focusing on how non-educated people perceive formal education. It is the very process of identification, both as the act of identifying and as the state of being identified, that interests me more than any description of a perceived innate identity of people. People have no problems with being Dagara (an ethnic group with many 'intellectuals'), initiates of religious cults and civil servants, but the question is how they identify with various forms of knowledge and education in different contexts. In the two following sections of the paper I will therefore analyse education and identity in two different contexts. Firstly, I will elaborate on how 'formal education' is perceived as a prime symbol of modernity in daily life and is contrasted with ideas about traditional way of life. Secondly, I will analyse the ways in which adult education seeks to bridge tradition and modernity and thus to reinforce a sense of collective identification.

### Tradition and Modernity

Formal education in Burkina Faso is very much seen as a way to become modern. In French people refer to those educated as 'instructed'; when talking about someone people might say, 'he is not instructed' (*il n'est pas instruit*). Public schools dominate primary education. About 90 percent of all primary school children are enrolled in public schools. Laic private schools represent some 3.5 percent of all school children. Taken together Catholic and Protestant schools cover less than one percent (0.7) of the pupils, whereas Franco-Arabic schools (*medersa*) enrol as much as five percent of all children (Bayala *et al.* 1997:11; see also Kaboré *et al.* 1999:30). In 1990 the schooling rate of primary school was around 29 percent and in 1998 it was more than 40 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Formal education is tied to the French colonial legacy. The early Catholic missionaries invested a lot of work in ensuring that the converts and their children received a good (i.e. French) education. The Catholic involvement was strong in formal education until the 1970s when the state took over these schools. The Catholic school was often considered to be better and more disciplined than public schools. In the 1990s Catholic schools have reopened in Burkina.

Despite a rhetoric that puts emphasis on schooling, only one third of Burkinabe children are enrolled in school at the age of seven. It is particularly the poorer segments of society whose children are not attending school. A study on education and poverty indicated that while 62.7 percent of 'non-poor children' are admitted to school, only 19 percent of poor children are. The net schooling of children between the ages of seven and twelve is 35.3 percent in Burkina Faso; in the urban area 73 percent are schooled, but there are far less (28.8 percent) in the rural area (Bayala *et al.* 1997). There is also a wide difference in schooling between the country's regions. In the North the overwhelming majority (87.6 percent) of children between the ages of seven and twelve are not schooled (Bayala *et al.* 1997; see also Gérard 1998; Kaboré *et al.* 1999; Ouédraogo 1998).

Given the high percentage of non-schooling in Burkina Faso a relevant question to ask is why it is so. My fieldwork material suggests two main clusters of problem for people not sending their children to school, namely financial problems, and social and cultural issues. Financially, poor people prefer not to send children to school because it is too expensive. Although public schools are free, parents still need to buy schoolbooks, writing material, proper clothing and so on. To put a child in school involves expenses and the financial dimension of schooling is critical to most people. Parents who are relatively 'better off' try to hire private teachers to train the pupils after school hours. But many parents see the prospects for their children to 'succeed' and get a job after school as uncertain. Today, the argument goes, even university graduates have difficulties in finding work, so how can those with only primary and secondary school get a good job? Investment in education is a great cost for many parents with diminishing prospects for a payback in terms of a job with a decent income. Beyond these immediate expenses it is also a question of labour. In rural communities, children's labour is needed in production. The young boys often help in farming and livestock keeping, and the girls get involved in cooking and other domestic tasks. In the cities the girls' workload may be heavy, as they have to do much housework. Children may also be expected to conduct petty trade. Boys and girls under the age of 10 often sell items in the street or in the market place.

There is also a cultural dimension to the low level of schooling in Burkina Faso. Schooling is associated with modernity, implying that the children are to leave the rural way of life behind them. The school is seen as 'spoiling' the children. They go to school to get a job, but are unable, and often unwilling, to do farm work any longer. Schooling may then involve a double loss: a financial burden and a drain of labour. In particular, girls' schooling is problematic, because the girl is to get married elsewhere and only her in-laws will benefit from her skills and labour (Gérard 1998:198). While the fact that schooling has turned pupils away from the rural area and manual work is nothing new, struc-

tural adjustment programmes have direly reminded people that even the well-educated might have serious difficulties in getting employment.

There are remarkable differences between different ethnic and religious groups with respect to schooling in Burkina Faso. I will take two examples: Fulbe non-schooling, and Dagara schooling. Fulbe pastoralists are often reluctant to let their children go to school. Many Fulbe informants in the Banfora region stated at several occasions that 'the Fulbe do not go to school'. Instead, when the white colonialists wanted children for schools, the Fulbe sent their 'slaves'; that is, their former captives the Rimaibe to school. But the Fulbe children stayed outside modern education. Today, however, the Fulbe see that 'their slaves' have become government officials and that Fulbe interests are not defended. One Fulbe man said to me, 'the government is Haabe [that is, for non-Fulbe Black Africans] and only God supports the Fulbe'.

Koranic schools represent another form of schooling in line with local Muslim moral and educational values. In particular, the Franco-Arabic schools (or *medersas*) seek to integrate Muslim teaching with knowledge of French and other subject matters. These schools are managed by Muslim brotherhoods in urban centres and have classes from primary education to high-school degree. The high-school degree gives access to universities in Arabic countries, such as Egypt, Yemen and Saudi-Arabia (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:30). The Franco-Arabic school provides an interesting compromise between modern education and Islamic teaching, in particular for many Fulbe. For instance, the only two Fulbe who speak rudimentary French in the village of Djalakoro, in which I have worked for a long time, have both attended the Franco-Arabic school. The Franco-Arabic school is a relatively recent urban phenomenon, but the Koranic schools tend to remain in rural areas (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:30).

However, the Fulbe represent one extreme of non-schooling and the Dagara, an ethnic group of southwestern Burkina and northwestern-Ghana, represent another. The Dagara have many 'intellectuals', occupying important posts in state administration. The single most important factor explaining this is the presence of the Catholic mission. The conversion experience among the Dagara has been analysed elsewhere (e.g. Poda 1997; Tengan 2000) and also in relation to political leadership (Lentz 1998). But to my knowledge less attention has been paid to the impact on schooling and the many Dagara intellectuals in at least the Burkinabe state administration.

The examples of Fulbe and Dagara show the different roles played by religion. Christianity in the Dagara case has been instrumental in bringing these Dagara children to school. But Islam seems to have contributed to preventing the Fulbe children from going to school. The politically significant aspects of knowledge production can scarcely be more evident. Koranic schools are defined as religious and traditional, but Catholic schools are intimately linked with modernity and progress. Although laic public schools dominate in Burkina, the impact of Koranic and Catholic schools needs to be taken into



account. Gender differences are strong in religious schools. Boys rather than girls are those who dominate in Koranic schools and thus those who will inherit the cultural capital of Islam (Gérard 1998:205).

There is an ongoing debate over primary education and its role in development, because 'education' has become a panacea for overcoming almost any obstacle to development. State agents and other development practitioners often argue that 'we need to work for a change of mentalities', which in fact implies that those without education are 'ignorant'. Schooling of girls is especially considered to be critical for development to take place. Marie-France Lange highlights how the discourse on girls' schooling is based on utility. Policies that are conceived to favour schooling of girls and training of women are enclosed in a utilitarian discourse, which imposes upon girls a schooling under conditions and upon women a utilitarian training (Lange 1998:9).

Education is seen as a prime factor in becoming 'modern' and 'developed' and thus escaping 'ignorance'. But the educated may also lose power and influence in local settings as illustrated by the following example. A man I know well since many years back (let us call him Bwa) is acting as the Master of the Earth or Earth Priest (*dugukolotigi* in Dyula or *chef de terre* in Burkinabe French). The Master of the Earth institution is common in rural societies on the West African Savanna. The Master of the Earth is the eldest living agnatic descendant of the first settler of a site and is in charge of the community's relations with the Earth. He is the one in charge of conducting sacrifices to the spirits of the earth and the ancestors so as to ensure fertility. He distributes land and gives land to strangers who want to settle there. The idea of being first is ingrained in this vision of the world: first, the Master of the Earth is the descendant of the first settler; and second, he is the eldest living man in the lineage of the first settler.

Bwa who is in his 50s is acting as the Master of the Earth of the locality. He is thus an important person in the local setting. He has never been to school. Once Bwa told me that his maternal uncle did not allow him to 'make the bench' (*faire le banc*), a fact that he deeply regrets: 'I could have been someone, you know'. However, Bwa is a descendant of the first settler of the site, but he is not the oldest living descendant. His elder brother (let us call him Moussa) resides in the same locality and is the one who should normally occupy the position of Master of the Earth. This extraordinary situation seems to be due to two factors. Firstly, sacrifices to the Earth are seen to 'spoil the prayers', that is, this kind of sacrificing is *against* Islam. Moussa prays five times a day and avoids alcoholic beverages. Although Moussa should conduct sacrifices to the spirits of the Earth he explained to me that this is not compatible with Islam. Secondly, Moussa has been working as a medical officer and been employed by the state. He retired relatively recently and returned to his home locality. Thus Moussa has been to school and received an education, but this also made him less apt to occupy the position of Master of the Earth. But Bwa 'stayed with his uncles'

since he was a boy and thus learned a lot about rituals of the Earth. He acquired the knowledge of how to act in agrarian rites and how to make 'reparations' (purifying rituals) in case of bloodshed (cf. Hagberg 1998; Hagberg 2001a). Bwa is the bearer of crucial local knowledge, but he has not 'made the bench'.

This example illustrates that 'formal education' does not necessarily make a person knowledgeable. Bwa possesses knowledge that is critical for the well-being of the community. This knowledge, however, is located outside the frame of both formal and non-formal education; it is instead what the law refers to as 'informal education', being 'diffuse' and 'non-organised' (Law 013/96/ADP 9 May 1996). But the case of Bwa and Moussa shows how education not only relates to knowledge but also to identity. While Bwa identifies himself as Master of the Earth and guardian of tradition, his brother Moussa is locally defined as 'intellectual' and Muslim.

### **A Quest for Identity**

The preceding discussion on how education relates to discourses on tradition and modernity leads on to the question of individual and collective identification. People with formal education are simultaneously identifying with a certain way of life and are identified by others as being 'intellectuals'. The divide between so-called scientific knowledge and endogenous knowledge is reinforced in this process. Yet most children in Burkina Faso still do not go to school. One study indicates that the schooling rate is slightly more than 40 percent (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:45) while another estimates net schooling of children between the ages of seven and twelve is 35.3 percent in Burkina Faso (Bayala *et al.* 1997:18). Only 19 percent of 'poor children' are in primary school. Thus schooling does not reach the majority of children in Burkina Faso. It is for this reason that informal education must be assessed as a means by which the divide between formal education and non-formal education may be bridged.

The Franco-Arabic schools are interesting in the context of collective identification. These schools aim to ensure an education that applies to non-Islamic educational systems and that simultaneously emphasises Koranic teaching. While the traditional Koranic schools remain in rural areas, the Franco-Arabic schools are urban-based. The emergence of Franco-Arabic schools is an expression of the close linkage between education and identity. Parents want to ensure that their children receive a good education, but they should remain within the moral values of Islam. In other words, the requirements of formal education are respected, but Koranic teaching is thought to strengthen the morality of the pupils.

Adult education has become increasingly important in many African countries. Today, most French-speaking African countries have inscribed the use of national languages within their educational programmes (Alidou-Ngame 2000). In Burkina Faso, emphasis has been placed on 'functional alphabetisation' to eradicate illiteracy and to increase people's productive

capacities. In other words, such alphabetisation campaigns should support a rural youth capable of modernising agriculture and animal husbandry (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:25-28). In the 1960s and 1970s attempts to combat illiteracy by means of 'functional alphabetisation' seem to have had a relatively limited impact. But since the 1980s – in particular the Alphabetisation Policy in 1984 – there has been a growth of adult education in Burkina. During the school year 1990/1991 there were 2,356 alphabetisation centres with about 70,000 pupils; six years later (the school year 1996-1997) there were 4,669 centres with more than 130,000 pupils (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:55). There has been a steady growth in female participation: from 39.8 percent in 1990-1991 to 50.6 percent in 1996-1997.

State agents and developers often promote 'functional alphabetisation' with the argument that it responds to illiterate people's needs. By learning book keeping and the ability to read and write instructions, the argument goes, these people will get the knowledge they need to be 'developed'. Efficiency is seen as the rationale for alphabetisation as it will improve their basic capabilities (cf. Sen 1999). But in practice alphabetisation is not merely functional and there are good reasons to take a close look at the content of the educational material. I will therefore show how history is narrated in adult educational material in the village of Noumoudara.

Houmoudara is located some 25 km south-west of Bobo-Dioulasso and is the 'capiital' of the 'Tiefö country'. The ethnic group Tiefö belongs to the Mande family and they are firstcomers to the area, or better, they are those who are locally considered to be firstcomers and therefore occupy the position of Master of the Earth (*dugukolotigi*). The Tiefö have a reputation as warriors in the region and they refer to their legendary leader Tiefö Amoro, who was renowned, and feared, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a great warrior. Tiefö Amoro refused to compromise. But in 1897 the Dyula Emperor Samori Toure took Noumoudara under siege. After a one-week-siege during which Samori lost many people Noumoudara was defeated. According to the Tiefö, Tiefö Amoro was betrayed by the actions of their neighbours the Bobo and the Dyula in general and a Tiefö woman called Filamuso Mori Dawo in particular. She spoiled the gun-powder of the Tiefö and put *fonio* (a local cereal) there instead. This betrayal was what defeated Noumoudara. Many people were killed. Some testimonies estimate up to 2,000 deaths (cf. Hébert 1958). Tiefö Amoro who had promised never to become a slave of Samori and surrender alive, killed himself when he realised that he would be defeated.

These events that occurred a few years before the territory became under French command shape the ways in which the Tiefö look upon themselves and how they perceive other peoples. These events also influence how others see the Tiefö.<sup>4</sup> The Tiefö refer to their legendary warrior leader and glorify their past. A Tiefö intellectual once declared: 'I am proud to know that my ancestor

did not surrender, but that he kept his word not to be taken by Samori. He was defeated, but he did not surrender'.

The Tiefo are often described as 'a disappearing people' in Burkina Faso. Firstly, the historical memory is scant. Except for the story of Samori's destruction of Noumoudara, most Tiefo have obscure notions about history. Many admit not really knowing from where they originate, a fact that was stressed in one of the few studies on the Tiefo (Hébert 1958). But most Tiefo seem to share the interpretations of some critical events that occurred in the 1890s, notably the battle of Bama and the destruction of the Tiefo 'capital' Noumoudara. These 'Tiefo interpretations' contrast with other interpretations defended by members of neighbouring peoples, notably the Bobo and the Dyula. Secondly, the Tiefo language is indeed 'disappearing'. With the notable exception of two villages the Tiefo language is not spoken any longer. All Tiefo speak Dyula, the lingua franca of the region, albeit with a Tiefo accent. Most other ethnic groups of the region – for example the Gouin, the Karaboro, the Sambla and the Bobo – speak their own language besides the Dyula. But the Tiefo do not. The Tiefo have difficulties in finding their place in present-day Burkina Faso, and some say that they have 'become' Dyula!

It is in this context that adult education in Noumoudara can be understood. People obtain access to reading and writing, but they also learn about local history. The centre for adult education in Noumoudara has two classes with parallel alphabetisation sessions. The two class-room buildings are built in concrete. While the village groups provided manual labour, a development project furnished building material and skilled labour. The teachers are paid by the project, but the villagers have to provide them with food. In Noumoudara, alphabetisation in Dyula takes place in the dry season when there is less farm work. The first school year comprises 50 days, and the second school year 30 days. Fifty women have been 'alphabetised' thanks to the school.

This 'functional alphabetisation' has stimulated other interests besides reading and writing skills. There are books in the school and a monthly journal *Hakilifalen* ('Change of ideas') is produced in Bobo-Dioulasso to support adult education in the entire region. One woman stated: 'We cannot write letters to our friends and therefore all people have to be alphabetised'. Local history is predominant in many books. There is one book *Horonyakelew* ('The noble wars, the wars of freedom') that narrates the historical events in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the preface it is said, 'these are the speeches [*kumaw*, cf. French *paroles*] of the old people'. The book narrates the revolt of the Sambla in 1916, the Noumoudara massacre in 1897, the wars in Péni in 1892 and in Bama in 1893. Another book treats the revolt in Bona, *Bonakaw ka muruti*; here again the contributions of several old men are acknowledged in the preface. A third book concerns Dyula proverbs, *Julkan taleenw*. There are also two volumes of tales, *Tariku ni Maana*.<sup>5</sup>

It is striking how tradition is represented in these books. Although a more in-depth analysis of these books remains to be done, three remarks can be made. Firstly, in these books history is first and foremost narrated by 'big old people' (*mogokorobaw*) or 'big old men' (*cekorobaw*). The speeches of old people are treated as pure and the writers of the books, curiously anonymous, define themselves as 'translators'. Thus these are the 'true' and 'authentic' speeches that have first been collected and then written down!

Secondly, ethnic identities are treated as unproblematic categories in the books. The Sambla, the Tiefo, the Bobo and the Dyula are referred to as representing homogeneous identities. In this sense, the books reproduce ethnic stereotypes that are used daily in Burkina Faso. They locate different groups of people within local history. The books thereby provide a means by which collective identification is strengthened.

Thirdly, the defeat of Tiefo Amoro is described in heroic terms in *Horonyakelew*. While the Bobo, the Dyula and Filamuso Mori Dawo are portrayed as traitors, Tiefo Amoro who refused to become a slave and chose to commit suicide, is portrayed as a hero. He took off his warrior clothes (which would otherwise have protected him) and let his albino servant kill him. The corpse was buried in his courtyard (*Horonyakelew* N.d.:20). The ideal of Tiefo Amoro as one who did not surrender is reproduced in the books. It gives the Tiefo a place in the history of the region.

Narratives of the past are critical to the ways in which identities are forged. Adult education in Noumoudara is not only 'functional' in the sense that it supports people's basic capabilities to improve their living conditions, but it is also central to collective identification as 'Tiefo people'. It urges adult people to be stimulated by reading, because through the books they may listen to 'the speeches of old people' who have already passed away.

## Discussion

So far this paper has sought to reflect upon how education is perceived by more or less poor people in Burkina Faso. I have particularly tried to show the extent to which education is associated with discourses on tradition and modernity and how different kinds of education relate to individual and collective identification. Children going to school obtain access to something different than those who do not. Yet many parents in Burkina choose not to send their children to school. The financial costs linked to formal education are definitely critical. The need for children's labour, especially in rural areas, is another factor. The distance between home and school is also important. Not all Burkinabe villages have a school. But education is also associated with identity. A son going to school may later be unwilling to take up farm work, because he has become intellectual. Girls' schooling is often not seen as useful by uneducated parents. She will marry elsewhere and only her in-laws will benefit from her skills. A Dyula marabout stated:

If a girl will study, she will have open eyes, she will become independent, she will not feel shame any longer and she will get a hard head [she will not be submissive]. Thus, she will refuse the choice [of husband] of the parents. (Quoted by Gérard 1998:198. My translation.)

The growth of Franco-Arabic schools is an interesting example of bridging between tradition and modernity. The moral values of Islam are maintained together with teaching in French, Maths, History and so on. Adult education is another bridge. It provides adult persons with an opportunity to read and write in a local language. But as I have shown adult education may also give them the opportunity to identify with the past. In this concluding discussion I will move a step further and 'on the basis of people's perceptions' reflect upon the roles that different educational systems can play in the improvement of people's basic capabilities (cf. Sen 1999; see also Hagberg 2001b).

Ideally, education should of course support people's capabilities to get a job, and simultaneously empower individuals to improve their own living conditions and those of the society as a whole. However, the expression widely used in Burkina is that people with education are 'instructed', putting emphasis on the transfer of knowledge from the illuminated teacher, backed-up by the formal educational system, to the pupils who are supposed to receive this instruction. In reality, formal education is not a one-way process, but would be more appropriately described as encounters (of people, epistemologies and institutions) in specific settings (classroom and schoolyard) with the explicit purpose of learning. The contexts in which formal education actually takes place is an interesting topic to be studied. That is why I have tried to explore linkages between education and identity. In the interface of cosmopolitanism and autochthonous values in African contexts (cf. Mbembe 2000b), education is very much part of individual and collective identification.

Much has been said and written about education in Burkina Faso, but at least in public debates one gets the impression that the interrelatedness of education and identity is left aside. In July 2001 the majority political party CDP organised a conference on education. It was established that the Burkinabe educational system has many weaknesses: of educational supply, regional and sexual disparities, the insufficiency of personnel, insufficient infrastructures, the inappropriateness of training for employment, the weak involvement of partners [i.e. donors], and lack of funding.<sup>6</sup> In Article 2 of the Law on Education Orientation (Law 013/96/ADP 9<sup>th</sup> May 1996), this lack of basic infrastructure is apparent: no child under the age of 16 should be excluded from the educational system, provided that infrastructures, equipment, human resources and school rules allow it. In other words, if there is a school with a teacher no child could be prevented from going to school!

It could be argued that a country like Burkina Faso should first seek to solve the material and human problems of providing an adequate schooling. The issue of non-schooling would then find its solution, because the supply of

education would improve in quantity and quality. Although I strongly sympathise with the idea that major investments need to be made in the educational sector, it worries me that the role of education in people's individual and collective identification is addressed so rarely. What happens, for instance, with people who have been to school and who are not able to sustain themselves? And what are the potentials of alternative forms of education?

Dropouts from school and unemployed people with university diplomas form part of a steadily growing urban youth. Many of them sustain themselves by subsistence activities in the so-called informal sector; and some even get into 'illicit activities'. While high school and university students are a political force that has played and continues to play an important role in the country's postcolonial history (Hagberg 2002 in press), these youths experience serious difficulties in finding ordinary jobs. Many of these youths seem to be what Ferguson (1999) has called 'disconnected'. When Copperbelt mineworkers in Zambia expressed a sense of abjection of an imagined modern world 'out there', they were not simply lamenting a lack of connection. Instead, they articulated a specific experience of disconnection. Ferguson reminds us that disconnection, like connection, implies a relation and not the absence of a relation.

Disconnection, like abjection, implies an active relation, and the state of having been disconnected requires to be understood as the product of specific *structures and processes of disconnection*. What the Zambian case shows about globalization is just how important disconnection is to a 'new world order' that insistently presents itself as a phenomenon of pure connection. (Ferguson 1999:238)

In line with Ferguson I find that the educated but unemployed youths in Burkina feel disconnected from an imagined world 'out there'. They have acquired the skills to take cognisance of global flows of information, but they have difficulties in finding a place in Burkinabe society. Dropouts from school and less successful youths face a double loss: they experience disconnection from the modern world and they fail to fulfil social obligations (supporting parents, getting married etc.). But the picture is nonetheless more complicated than that. Burkinabe society also displays many positive examples of people finding jobs in the state administration, for projects or for NGOs. The ingenious *bricolage* that people do to sustain or to make a living (*se débrouiller* in French, *ka bamba* in Dyula) creates new dynamics. While Ferguson focuses on 'structures and processes of disconnection', I find it necessary to pay specific attention to individual agency. The reason is that individual experiences of connectedness have an impact on Burkinabe society as a whole. They are successful examples of being 'connected' and thus 'developed', and as such they express that, realistically or not, 'connection' to an imagined world 'out there' is within the limits of the possible.

Alternative forms of education shed new light on the linkages between education and identity. Children in Franco-Arabic schools remain within 'traditional spheres' of life. They acquire reading and writing skills, but they are less

exposed to ideas of connectedness. The Fulbe who have gone to these schools are often using their skills in business, e.g. cattle trading or shop keeping. But many also tend to lose their skills when they go back to the village.

Adult education carves out a new space of literacy in that people read and write in a local language. But these skills are not merely 'functional' for development activities and associational life. They also contribute to strengthen and ingrain individual and collective identification by means of local history. This is an interesting interface of cosmopolitanism and autochthonous values. Mbembe and others have reminded us that the desire for authenticity is to a large extent linked to globalisation. Adults who are trained in the village of Noumoudara do not aspire to become connected to the new world order in the same way as the dropouts from school do. But they do aspire to become connected to outside organisations, such as development projects and state services, to improve the living conditions of the family and the community. Investments in housing (iron roof, building in concrete), technology (plough, draught animals) and other activities (petty trade, social obligations) may well be facilitated by the skills they have acquired in school. These adult pupils are stably settled in villages and the impact of education on village life is easier to assess.

In this paper I have explored the linkages between education and identity. I have demonstrated the extent to which education forms part of discourses on tradition and modernity and argued for the importance of going beyond positivistic knowledge conceptions to understanding the processes of identification involved. The analysis of the socio-cultural dimensions of education seems to be urgently needed in postcolonial contexts where the state apparatus and formal education reproduce the legacy of colonialism. While formal education faces many problems in present-day Burkina Faso, Franco-Arabic schools and adult education are no panacea either. Instead, I would like to argue for the necessity to carefully investigate the socio-cultural contexts in which different educational systems are implemented.

## Notes

1. In anthropology the process of knowledge production is increasingly under scrutiny, taking a critical look at the role of the anthropological fieldworker, and the power relations of knowledge production (Fardon 1985, 1995; Gupta & Ferguson 1999; Moore 1996; Strathern 1995).
2. There is a wealth of recent writings on African postcolonial identities (e.g. Mbembe 2000a; Werbner 1998; Werbner & Ranger 1996).
3. The exact figures presented are 28.86 percent schooling in 1990: 35.02 percent for boys and 22.43 percent for girls. In 1998 the figures are 40.87 percent: 48.00 for boys and 33.40 percent for girls (Kaboré *et al.* 1999:45).



4. The fieldwork in the 'Tiefö country' forms part of an ongoing research that aims to elicit the ways in which 'Tiefö-ness' is expressed today. Particular attention is paid to the role of history and religion in the construction of Tiefö identity.
5. The books used for the analysis are the following: 1) *Horonyakelew*. N.d. Bobo-Dioulasso: Ministère de l'Agriculture et des Ressources Animales & Coopération Française; 2) *Bonakaw ka muruti*. N.d. Bobo-Dioulasso: Ministère de l'Agriculture et des Ressources Animales & Coopération Française; 3) *Julakan taleenw*. N.d. Bobo-Dioulasso: Ministère de l'Agriculture et des Ressources Animales & Coopération Française; 4) *Tariku ni Maana: Burkina Faso ni Jamanawerew ka Tariku*. 1997. Tome 1. Bobo-Dioulasso: Elisabeth Mariam Millogo Traoré with support by Coopération Suisse au Développement; 5) *Tariku ni Maana: Burkina Faso ni Jamanawerew ka Tariku*. 1997. Tome 2. Bobo-Dioulasso: Elisabeth Mariam Millogo Traoré with support by Coopération Suisse au Développement.
6. The conference was commented on in the Burkinabe newspaper *L'Observateur paalgä*. <http://www.lobserveur.bf/quotidien/select.asp?Numero=894>.

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