

Surviving in the Periphery of the Town — the Living Conditions of Sahelian Drought Refugees in Mopti (Republic of Mali)

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Abstract: This article intends to describe the social situation and living conditions of the drought refugees living in the periphery of Mopti. The complex phenomenon of 'poverty' and of social discrimination is explained by different indicators (kind of 'informal economy', kind of dwelling, composition of food, hygienic situation). In contemporary Africa hunger has become a problem of those people who have lost their original social and economic roots. This holds especially true for the drought refugees. The transformation of nomads and peasants into proletarian and dependent outcasts will be demonstrated.

Introduction

The new rise of drought in N Mali during the early eighties (1981–1984) and, corresponding with this event, the continuously retrogressive Niger flood led to a massive migration of (semi-) nomadic and peasant groups of the sahelosaharian administrative regions (5th, 6th and 7th regions of Mopti, Timbuktu and Gao) to the S. For a second time many nomadic families have lost most of their cattle, sheep and goats, or they were obliged to sell them to escape famine. The sedentary peasant groups too, were chased away from their home regions along River Niger and the lakes on its right and left bank. The deficitary Niger flood (Fig 1) reduced the chances of agriculture ("culture de décrue", i. e. flood fed agriculture, Krings 1985).

The land-logged share croppers and free peasants, members of Songhay, Tamashek and Fulani-groups were forced to settle temporarily or definitively in the small administrative centers, the "circle- and arrondissements" — towns, especially at Mopti (45 000 inh.). The arrival of several hundreds or a thousand of refugees between 1981 and 1985 caused many organizational problems in the town.

For lack of money, food and administrative pragmatism final integration of the refugees failed. Especially there is no room to settle these families.

The town of Mopti grown up only during this century on lagoon ground filled up with clay and stones does not provide sufficient space to construct houses for the autochthon population nor for the refugees. So the drought refugees are obliged to build their miserable huts on the refuse hills on the swampy ground of the riverine plains near the dirty, stinking "paggue"-waters in the outskirts of the densely populated claybrick quarters (Fig 2). The refugee settlements are typical squatter camps without any administrative planning and control (Fig 3 and 4).

The Groups and the Fieldwork

The data for this article have been gained by interviewing and observing 61 families (i. e. about 360 people). The refugees are living in an extended family system. Several married or unmarried adults are forming residence-, eating- and living communities which are here called 'extended family unit'. Often two generations form a family unit; for instance parents with their married sons or two married brothers with their wives and children. The number of single persons is prominent, especially single women with one or two children, divorced or living temporarily separated from their husbands. The hardship of the living conditions often cause the men to work in their original home-

lands as nomadic cattle breeders or peasants, or as labourers in the cities of the south. The interviews were carried out by means of talks instead of a questionnaire for fear of administrative control is widespread.

Most helpful was an interpreter who as a resident of the refugee camp is familiar with the reality of these people. As a member of the ethnic group of Songhay being married with a Songhay and an Iklan woman he was able to speak two languages (Koiretini and Tamashek). He has learned French in Ivory Coast where he worked as a house boy for two years.

Origin of the Refugees

The majority of the refugees originates from the Sahelian North, especially from the NW Gourma around the lakes on the right bank of the Niger (Tab 1; Fig 5). Only 33 extended families migrated from Arrondissement Bambara-Maoundé (Circle of Gourma-Rharous). Seven families came from Lake Haribongo which dried out in the last decade. Another 10 family units left from Lake Garou. Since 1981 living conditions have dramatically deteriorated in line with the hydrological situation. At the moment agriculture and

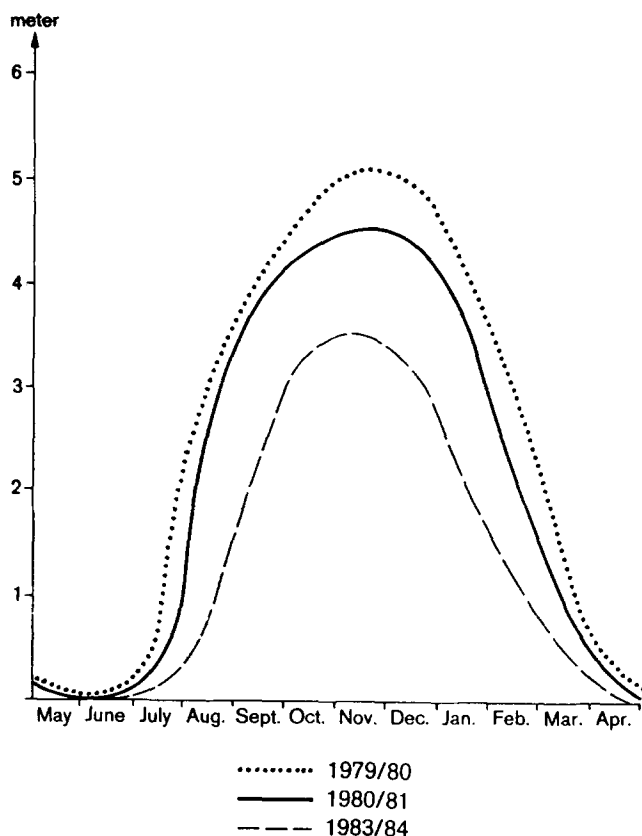
cattle breeding are severely limited. Whole village communities, for instance the people of Daga Faraba and Daga Djere have left their homelands in autumn 1984 to come to Mopti.¹⁾

Also, from other parts of the 6th region (Timbuktu), from Lake Faguibine region, the towns of Dire, Niafounke and Gourma-Rharous several families out-migrated. Three extended families came from the region of Gao (Circle of Bamba and Ansongo) over a distance of 700–900 km.

The average distance between the places of origin and Mopti amounts to 300–450 km. Only a few refugees came from the Mopti region itself, seven families, for example from Douentza about 240 km to the NE of Mopti. These are possibly families from the Gourma who for some time tried to survive in this small market town. The migration pattern clearly shows the attractiveness of the commercial place and river port of Mopti in the middle of the Malian Sahel. It is the hope to find some occasional job or some nutritional help which drifts many Sahelians to Mopti. Maize, millet, milk-powder cargos which are brought by trucks from Bamako are piled up in Mopti.²⁾

Most of the refugees left their homelands on foot. The few donkeys they possessed carried the household utensils and the wooden scaffolds for the mat huts.

Fig 1 Depth gauge of the Niger at Diré 1979–1984



source: Direction de l'Hydraulique et de l'Energie Bamako

Fig 2 Mopti: Location of the refugee settlements in the Mopti area

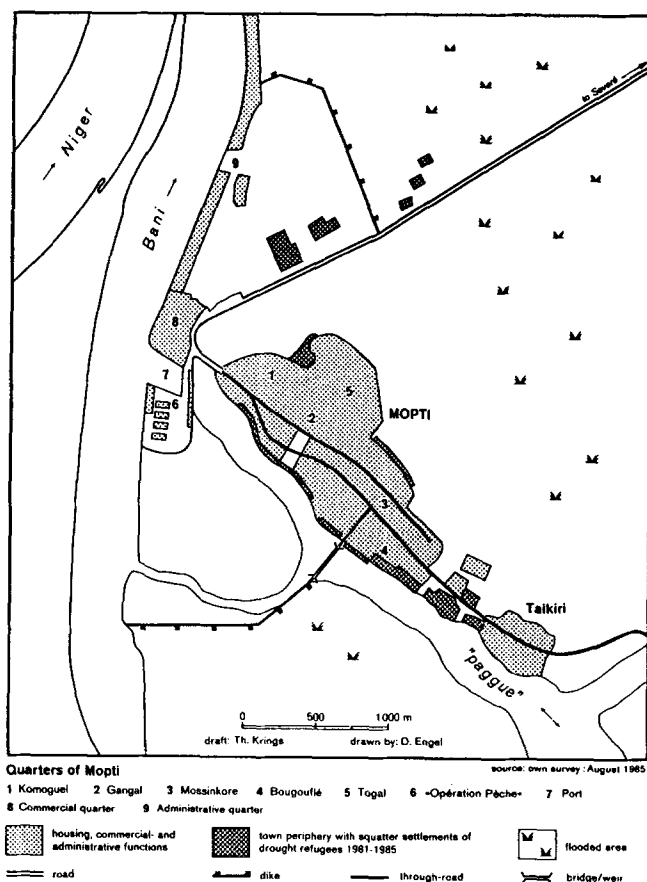


Fig 3 Seminomadic mat-tents of the Iklan (former Tuareg slaves) in the periphery of Mopti/Mali August 1985



Ethnic Composition of the Refugees

The overwhelming part of the refugees in Mopti are Bella. These Tamashek speaking former slaves of the Tuareg nobles traditionally show the closest relations to the urban center of Mopti. As a semi-nomadic population element the Bella normally live in the surroundings of the Tuareg camps in the Gourma. In drought periods many of them switch from their free semi-nomadic life to a temporarily sedentary handy-man-existence in the towns of the Inland Delta.³⁾

At the moment the Songhay represent the second largest ethnic group among the drought refugees. As peasants, small scale merchants and artisans they form the most important sedentary group in the Niger valley and near the great lakes in the North. The Songhay refugees who today live in Mopti come from the towns in the Northern Niger area (Diré, Timbuktu, Gourma-Rharous, Niafouké). Relatively small is the percentage of Fulani and Bozo. The nomadic lifestyle and the greater adaptability of the cattle breeding Fulani to extreme drought situations and the still existing solidarity among the Fulani clans save them from extreme proletarianization in the periphery of the towns. This holds also true for the nomadic Bozo-fishermen who used to live in straw-huts near Mopti along the Bani river.

Arrival Period of the Drought Refugees

Between 1981 and 1984 the number of drought refugees increases rapidly (Tab 3). This evolution corresponds with the catastrophic decrease of the annual Niger flood in this

Fig 4 Iklan woman with her children in Mopti August 1985



| Region of Mopti | no. of families |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| (5th region) | |
| Circle of Douentza | 7 |
| Region of Timbuktu | |
| (6th region) | |
| Circle of Timbuktu | 3 |
| Circle of Diré | 5 |
| Circle of Goundam: | |
| Arrondissement Raz-el-Mâ | 1 |
| Arrondissement Farach | 1 |
| Circle of Gourma-Rharous: | |
| Gourma-Rharous town | 2 |
| Arrondissement Bambara-Maoundé | 33 |
| Circle of Niafounké | 5 |
| Region of Gao | |
| (7th region) | |
| Circle of Bourem: | |
| Arrondissement Bamba | 2 |
| Circle of Ansongo | 1 |
| Ouahigouya (Burkina Faso) | 1 |

Tab 1 Origin of refugee living in Mopti in administrative units
n = 61 own census: August 1985

period (Fig 1) which dramatically restricted agricultural land use including cattle and sheep breeding in the Niger area.

The highest immigration rate is registered at Mopti in 1984 when one of the lowest ever registered Niger floods was observed. Before 1978 only a few families had migrated to

Tab 2 Ethnic composition of the drought refugees, in per cent
(36 persons)

| | |
|------------------|--------|
| Iklan (Bella) | 65,6 % |
| Songhay | 24,6 % |
| Fulbe | 4,9 % |
| Bozo | 3,3 % |
| Mossi | 1,6 % |

Tab 3 Arrival period of the drought refugees in Mopti n = 61 (in %)

| | |
|---------------------|--------|
| before 1979 | 4,9 % |
| 1979 | 1,7 % |
| 1980 | 4,9 % |
| 1981 | 3,3 % |
| 1982 | 16,4 % |
| 1983 | 16,4 % |
| 1984 | 42,6 % |
| 1985 | 9,8 % |
| (January to August) | |

Mopti. This corresponds to the observation of Amselle (1981, p.5) that in the middle of the seventies many refugees of the first drought (1969–73) had returned to their home regions.

Economic Activities of the Refugees

The analysis of the economic activities of the drought refugees is difficult, because most of them have not specialized "professions". They rather combine different activities like salary work, small scale trade and mendicity, activities which hardly can be registered by statistics nor by interviews. This kind of 'economy of misery' is usually classified by the so called 'informal sector'. The daily upkeep of the people is not at all guaranteed. Their attitude to life is characterized by fatalism which is underlined by a remark of the refugees: "Il faut chaque jour chercher quelque chose à manger" (every day one must find something to eat).

The Economic Activities of the Male Refugees

A great part of the adult male Bella people is occupied with the production of clay bricks which can easily be formed by the application of simple wooden frames in the numerous clay holes around the town. The clay brick production is a seasonal activity which can only be carried out during the dry months (November to April). This work is very exhausting, dirty and badly paid; it is reserved to the socially disclaimed former Tuareg slaves, the Bella (Iklan). The clay brick production moreover depends on the situation in the construction sector. There is also tough competition between the Bella and Songhay brickers. In 1985, between 2,5 and 5 CFA was paid for one clay brick. According to the labour assignment and physical condition a labourer can make between 150 and 500 bricks a day which corresponds with daily earnings between 550 and 1250 CFA. The brick production is often combined with the transport business. The more well-off Bella possess donkeys which can carry two brick-sacks. Others acquire a two-wheeled barrow which is drawn by man. Mainly building materials, sand, clay-bricks and water barrels are transported. The transport business is not dependent on seasons and constitutes a complement to the production of clay bricks. These activities are supplemented by and combined with different handy-man-jobs (e.g. discharging of trucks and river-boats, watchman-services, commissions etc.). The Songhay men use to combine the clay brick production with distinct small scale crafts and repair services such as the production of decorated leather pillows, leather and string ropes, the repairing of rice-sacks and the production of simple mattresses sewing up grass (*Echinochloa stagnina*) in plastic awnings.

All these jobs offer only irregular and little earnings. The payment is conform to duration and difficulties of

the accomplished work. It rarely exceeds 500 CFA, an amount which is considered as fairly good daily earning.

The Collecting Economy

An important source of income for the Bella is collecting and transporting of wood. The chronic deficiency of fire wood in the Sahelian towns renders some earning-possibilities for the refugees. For cutting and collecting of fire wood the Bella both men and women walk in small groups for about 30 or 40 km to the bush of the Dogon land, the only region where still some bush vegetation exists. There is a certain labour division between the different Bella families, some collect and cut the wood, others carry it to the town. There exist real trade chains. In the refugee camps the wood is sold to small scale Bella women traders who let cut up some wood by their male family members. They themselves assort the firewood to handy bundles which they sell to the towns' households. The daily earnings are small (200–500 CFA) and irregular. The urban fire-

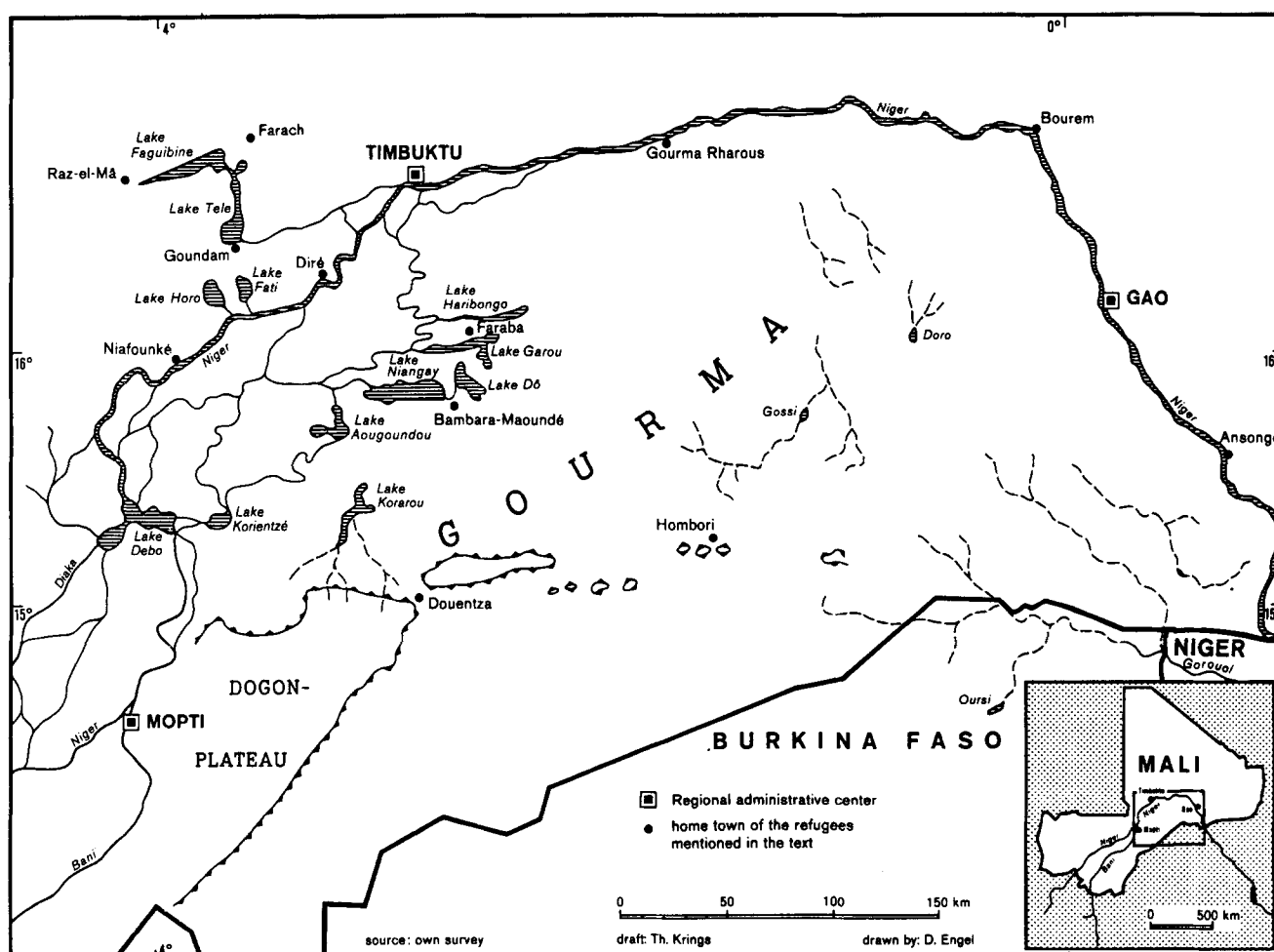
wood trade is ruled by sharp competition among the different sellers. Bambara and Dioula traders transport enormous quantities of fire-wood on river boats down-stream and dominate the whole fire wood trade.

The Physical Exploitation of the Bella Women

The young unmarried Bella women earn their living as servants in urban households. The 'typical' Bella jobs range from washing, cleaning, courtyard clearing and water-carrying to maize-, millet- and rice-pounding. Wages are extremely low, and working-days are long. Payment in kind is frequent. The women get the hulls of the pounded maize or of the millet, if lucky, a little bit of break-rice. Lentils, an unknown food-stuff imported as food-aid are given to the refugees who don't know how to prepare these lentils.

Another important source of income for the young women is prostitution. The high share of single Bella women in the refugee camps is its supposition. Concubines be-

Fig 5 Mali: Origin of the drought refugees



tween Bambara-, Marka-, and Bozo-men and Bella servants are quite common in Mopti. In this sector, too, payment is made by small gifts or in kind.

Older women who cannot work hard anymore try to earn something through small scale trade. They sell sauce-ingredients like 'Maggi', onions, pepper, soap, detergents, dates, ground-nuts, sugar, green Chinese tea etc. This small scale trade is usually combined with domestic handicraft. Older Bella women produce decorated gourd-lids made by plant strings (*Hyphaenae thebaica*, *Phoenix reclinata*) called "lefe" in Tamashek, and winnowing-fans which are sold for 75–100 CFA. The Songhay women have specialized in plaiting of sitting-mats. Members of the blacksmith-caste like some Bella women produce decorated leather pillows and wooden vessels.

Mendicity and Solidarity among the Refugees

Mendicity plays a dominant role in the 'informal' economy. Physically handicaped and partially paralyzed people resort to begging in Mopti. Old and blind persons are led by children through the streets. The Koran demands distributing of alms to the poor. Great solidarity and social cohesion exists in the refugee camps. It is impressive to see a weak-minded lonely woman being served with a meal several times a day by her neighbour.

The Living Conditions of the Refugees

The Material Property

The most important property of the immigrated people is their dwelling. Usually it is a round dome-shaped hut which clearly demonstrates the nomadic origin of these Sahelians. The most precious parts of this dwelling are the wooden scaffolds which consist of several wrapped rounded boughs to which the plaited mats are fixed with little strings. The value of these wooden scaffolds comes to 1500–2000 CFA. The side-walls consist of coarse-meshed plaited mats of

Vetiviera nigritana (Fig 3). The mats for the roof are collected from the urban refuse like cloth-rags and remains of plastic which cover the plaited mats for rain protection. Some families have got the mats in the town as a gift. A layer of old Burgugrass (*Echinochloa stagnina*) on the roof-mats soaks with rain water. However, none of these measure does stop infiltration entirely. After heavy storms these materials quickly rot away. Swarms of flies and mosquitos are attracted by the mouldy darkness of the huts. Small earth-dams around the dwellings cannot prevent the water from flooding. The total value of a hut comes to 3000 CFA.

The utensils of an average Bella household are listed in Tab 4.

The property of the Bella woman consists only of the most elementary objects.

The Hygienic Risks

Many diseases are related to these living conditions. Malaria is endemic. The rates of bronchitis and of tuberculosis are likewise very high. The waste water ditches and erosion furrows⁴⁾ are filled with refuses and provide breeding places for grubs, vermins and bilharzia. The ground around the huts is covered by excrements. Often carcasses of dogs and donkeys are not set away for days. Drinking water is of horrible quality. The households of the wealthier citizens only dispose of piped water. The refugees live on the dirty surface-water which they lift from cement-wells.

The extension of the town and the total lack of waste water elimination in the lagoon area cause an enormous contamination of the well-water by amoeba, coli-, and cholera bacteria. Regular cholera epidemics in Mopti and in the Inland Niger Delta (September 1984 and July 1985) are as accepted with fatalism as the yearly measles epidemics which kill a high percentage of small children.⁵⁾

Ignorance, poverty, a lack of hygiene and the deficient provision of the public "Peoples pharmacies" with medicaments render it difficult to fight these diseases.

The Nutritional Situation

The uncertain income situation implicates permanent malnutrition. Many families can afford only one proper meal a day. The staple food consists of maize and rice⁶⁾. From the maize-hulls which the Bella women get as payment for their domestic services, they prepare the African 'to', a porridge-like meal which is eaten with a sauce of okra, onions and Hibiscus-leaves (in French: "Oseille"). Many families eat the 'to' in the evening as the only warm meal. In the morning a rice soup ("bouillie") sweetened with some sugar is eaten. The main diet is rice which at the moment is much more expensive than maize coming from foreign food aid. In August 1985 50 kg of American maize were obtainable

Tab 4

- 1 moskito-net
- 2 plaited mats for the floor of the hut
- 1 sitting mat (plaited with leather string decoration)
- 1 plastic mat for praying
- 1 earthenware jar for drinking water
- 3 iron cooking-pots
- 1 smaller iron cooking pot
- 2 enamel-dishes
- 1 electric torch (batteries usually empty)
- 2 blankets (a patch-work blanket made of old textile-rags and a synthetic blanket)

Fig 6 Refugee settlement on fenced lots in Mopti August 1985



at 5000 CFA, whereas the same quantity of rice required between 15 000 and 20 000 CFA.

Many refugees get additional cereal by mendicity or by collecting grain from damaged bags of cereal. Hunger is stilled by some ground-nuts (a handful for 25 CFA) or by hot sweetened tea. Some grams of green Chinese tea with a little sugar cost 125 CFA. Even the poorest afford to drink tea which is always consumed in company. Drinking of green tea, originally a north African and oriental custom, has in the Sahel become a substitute for meals.

Only a minority can afford to buy meat and fish. If meat is bought only the cheapest parts like offals or break-fish are acquired. For sociocultural reasons fruit and vegetables are not eaten. The diet is mainly based on carbohydrates. The supply with proteins is insufficient which explains the high rate of children with bloated bellies.

The Powerlessness of the Refugees and the Power of the State

The refugees form the lowest social class within the urban society. Proletarianization and marginalization characterize their situation. Malnutrition and the high rate of infantile mortality demonstrate the degree of pauperization. The survival in the 'informal sector' is only possible by the combination of different economic activities. Production of simple goods (e.g. clay-bricks), small scale trade, and paid work which still has some slavish traits form the basis of their life. In the administrative and trade center of Mopti with its "civilisation de type capitaliste" (Gallais 1984) the refugees not only live spatially in the periphery (Fig 2) — on the refuse hills of the town —, but socio-economically, too, they are pushed to the margin of the urban society.

With their cheap labour force they support the structural power of the big traders, transport-men and functionaries. For the work they neither get social security nor any other benefit in return. Although tons of cereal supplies are piled up in the administrative center of Mopti the refugees get only very little food-aid. Only once in the first six months of 1985 each household in the camps of Taikiri got 4 kg of maize, a quantity which is sufficient for a five-persons-household for two days only.

Public utilities such as water supply and electricity are available for the rich people only who reside in their large brick courts. No supply of drinking water is provided outside of the housing areas because piping installation can only be afforded by the wealthier families.

The sad lot of the refugees is not regarded as an urgent problem by the public services, whereas the cheap labour force of "the people from the North" is seen with sympathy. The urban bourgeoisie benefits from the calamity of the Sahelians. For permission to settle on property fenced lots the refugees have to pay a rent of 500 CFA per hut and month. A few years ago, it was tried to levy taxes on them which led to conflicts with the tax collectors and the police. At the moment the drought refugees are freed from taxation.

Prospects

The direct consequence of the latest drought is an uncontrolled migration of many people from the N to the S. Former cattle-breeders and peasants become proletarianized wage labourers and beggars in the periphery of the town after they have lost their herds and fields.

The standard of living is distinctly lower among the refugees than among the urban poor. Malnutrition, diseases, high children mortality, and total dependence on the local political elite control their life.

The refugees rank lowest in the social class structure. They cannot completely be integrated in the urban society by reason of their low social status. Only a few manage to become permanent residents and citizens of the town.

Several families have left Mopti for their homelands. Abundant rainfall in July and August 1985 have improved the chances for cattle breeding and agriculture in the Sahel. It is hoped that all refugees can in the near future return to their villages and range land in the Gourma and the Inland Niger Delta.

Footnotes

- 1) On the map of the National Geographical Institute (Paris, I.G.N.), scale 1:200 000 (sheet Timbuctu-East) these localities are spelt "Daka-Dyérevé" and "Férhiba".
- 2) Since 1984 there exists an asphalt road from Mopti to Gao — 600 km —, the terminal of the Transsaharian road. This facilitates the transport of aid-goods to Gao.
- 3) Gallais (1975, p. 93) gives an explanation for the traditionally strong connections between the semi-nomadic Iklan and the administrative centers in the Malian Sahel. At the beginning of the colonial era the Iklan found in the towns protection against their Tuareg masters in the so called "quarters of liberty". Since 1950 with their social emancipation they started to do some seasonal works in the towns. In colonial times the Iklan were reputed to willing, unexacting labourers and hodmen who had been unreplaceable in the public work-sector ("travaux publics") of the colonial state. Interesting is the remark, that seasonal job migrations of the Iklan in the towns had been properly appreciated by the Tuareg because they were able to appropriate a part of the wages paid to them.
- 4) The waste water flows into the stagnate 'paggue' surrounding the town (Fig 2). Out of 435 casualties the Health Service of Mopti registered 93 cases of Malaria, 74 cases of intestinal infections, 30 poisonings, 43 cases of pneumonia and bronchitis, 11 cases of jaundice and 6 cases of cholera (Gallais 1984, p. 182).
- 5) In 10 extended families 18 children died under 12 years of age between 1982 and 1985. During the first 6 months of 1985 these families lost 5 children during a measles-epedemy.
- 6) On the markets of Mopti millet was not available in August 1985, because in 1984 there was a very poor millet and rice harvest in the area.

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