

Chapter 1

Introduction

It was 19 July 2017, and the dry spell that occurred in the middle of the rainy season had already reached its ninth day.¹ Most of the women I used to visit regularly were working at their looms: farm labor had generally been reduced, although several fields were yet to be cleared. Given the drought levels reached in the preceding days, the soils were barely workable. Plants that had already germinated had started drying out. Even the most clayey soil crumbled easily when worked, and hoeing risked uprooting cereal stalks. Several planted seeds had been eaten by birds or rats, and a second planting during such a harsh period would probably have led to another failure. Anything done at this moment would have proved futile.

That night, the atmosphere in my host's compound was unusually calm and silent. The evening porridge had been served, and most of the children had scattered to the neighboring compounds. I was helping Asseta, one of my host's wives, clean the leaves of *sigda*² she had collected in the afternoon to prepare millet cous-cous (*wesla*). While doing this she was talking to her husband and co-wives about their work plans on the family's fields in the forthcoming days. The cowpea plants they had sown in June close to their compound had almost dried out, and the family was now obliged to undertake a second planting. With the next rainfall, they would have first worked the field of Fatou, the first of the three cowives, and then continued with the individual plots managed by the other household members. Fatou was very skeptical in this regard and added that, as long as the rains did not come, she did not have a plot to farm. I stepped into the conversation and asked why that situation should call her field's existence into question. To my clumsy intrusion, Fatou replied abruptly: "If you can't sow it, it's as if you don't have it!"

After several days of drought, a shower broke the dry spell. On that day, a great deal of activity animated the bush. All the way to the fields

¹ Figure 5 shows precipitation recorded during the 2017 wet season.

² *Pseudocedrela kotschyi* (Schweinf) Harms.

people were talking about their plots and crops, and everyone was looking for alternative solutions to prevent what seemed likely to develop into a considerable harvest loss. Among them, several women finally had a chance to clear their fields and sow. However, planting at this point in the season was risky. Sowing a field between the end of July and the beginning of August would have left hardly any time for the crops to grow: the first half of October, the time when most of the plants ripen, was not sufficiently far off either. Because of the prolonged dry spell, most women were obliged to reset their work schedules and make significant adjustments to their ongoing land-management strategies.

During fieldwork, disenchantment and uncertainty concerning the productivity of the land surfaced frequently within women's discourses. Fatou's exclamation above, "If you can't sow it, it's as if you don't have it!", expressed a lack of hope for a field that would not let her anticipate a satisfactory yield at the end of the season. In my research site of Tistenga, a community located near the town of Pouytenga, in the East-Central region of Burkina Faso, women's attitudes to the land they used to farm on their own account were informed by highly ambivalent feelings. The impossibility of predicting the quantity of the yield at harvest time was one of the most widespread concerns, while the possibility of a plot being suddenly redistributed, the difficulty of coping with the effects of soil depletion, and woman's involvement in several chores could significantly affect her capacity to manage land. In addition, the overlapping of various life entanglements led the women to often revise and adjust their own livelihood choices and strategies: flaws in economic activities made incomes volatile, while social support was highly contingent on the events undergone by the community, the household, and the conjugal relationship.

Despite being widely recognized as agrarian institutions, individual fields allocated to and managed by women in Sub-Saharan Africa have received relatively little attention in literature. Given the decade-long debate around women's access to land and their role in agriculture, this might sound like a paradox. The fruitful exchange between academic and applied research in this field has so far provided in-depth information and increased awareness about gendered social inequalities in agriculture. However, interventions have not always proved successful from a long-term perspective. Almost two decades after attempting to give women's individual farming recognition and accurate analysis, Whitehead claimed that "information on women

who do own-account farming but are not household heads is especially inadequate" (2009, 40).

One of the main entry points in this research is the assumption that the lack of investigation into women's involvement in individual farming has prevented an in-depth understanding being acquired of how women conceive of their participation in agriculture as both economic actors and moral subjects. The lack of a clear conceptual framing of women's individual farming in the literature has engendered blurred definitions of what is to be understood by a woman's individual field. Whether it should be considered a small plot whose production is limited to sauce ingredients, a field meant exclusively to provide for the home's consumption needs, or as an income-generating activity pursued individually, the attempt to frame fields farmed by women has often led to misconceptions around what women "want" compared to what they "need." While striving to "define" such a complex and highly variable practice like women's individual fields may yield biased results, there is a need for a conceptual reframing that takes women's subjective experiences of farming and, specifically, individually managed fields as a starting point.

Despite yielding results to be considered valid for an area with specific geographical and sociocultural characteristics, the approach adopted for this study can help shed light on some of the dimensions that are critical for access to and the use of land by women and deserve more investigation. Through ethnographic analysis of a farming pattern practiced in a specific region of West Africa, this research offers an in-depth account of how ten women with different life backgrounds make sense of individual farming as a livelihood practice at the intersection between economic practice and moral obligation. In the study site, which is mostly populated by people identifying as Mossi, the sociocultural practice examined in this work is called *beolga* (*beolse* pl.). *Beolse* consist of fields, which the household head allocates to household members (regardless of their gender) for their individual use. The common understanding of this practice in the research site suggests that a *beolga*-user, i.e. an individual holding a use right over a particular plot, can decide what crops to grow, when, how, and for what uses, while decisions regarding the plot's size, location, and the quality of its soil are primarily in the hands of the household head. However, negotiation between the household head and the *beolga*-user over the plot's characteristics is possible (Kevane and Gray 1999). With respect to

other household members who are likely to receive an individual field, however, women's social recognition as wives and mothers – namely as individuals who are expected to cater for the needs of themselves and their dependents – increases the “expectation” on them to farm an individual field, as much as husbands are expected to allocate fields for their wives to farm. While having a field can be advantageous from several points of view, the limits that women face in coping with the severity of environmental factors on farming production and their limited access to assets makes this activity challenging and, in some cases, unattractive. This last assumption applies particularly to women who compare the flaws in non-farm income-generating activities with those experienced in individual farming, an activity demanding physical strength. However, this in-depth ethnography of women's *beolse* also sheds light on the impact of large-scale transformations in the agrarian sector (mostly economic, social, and climatic) on women's individual fields as livelihood assets in which both economic and moral meanings are embedded and entangled.

In the following section (1.1), I introduce some of the most frequently debated concepts that were employed to characterize ongoing transformations in the farming sector in Africa, and particularly, the effects prompted by structural adjustments and economic liberalization on the use of land on smallholder households. These perspectives are then narrowed down to the sphere of gender relations and the lives of the women, with special attention being paid to the views of certain scholars who have attempted to reframe women's individual farming in this debate. The characteristics highlighted in large-scale changes are then reflected in the introduction of the study site. In section 1.2, I point out the contextual characteristics that may affect the use of land and perceptions of it in the field site. A brief overview of earlier approaches to women's access to land in the literature on Mossi farming systems and in Burkina Faso's tenure law complete this characterization of the broader context in which the study was carried out. In section 1.3, I present the research questions and the set of criteria and conditions that led me to identify Tistenga as my field site. Section 1.4 outlines the structure and the contents of the remainder of this work.

1.1 Situating Women and Individual Farming Under Changing Agrarian Landscapes

The impact of economic liberalization on smallholder farming in Sub-Saharan Africa has generated numerous discussions on the supposed competition between the farm and nonfarm sectors in smallholders' livelihoods and its effect on gendered labor systems. A process prompted by the indebtedment of countries relying mostly on cash-crop exports as a consequence of the global oil crisis (Bryceson 2019, 61), economic liberalization has been described as the restructuring of countries' market regulations (commonly known as "structural adjustments") towards the privatization of former public provisioning services to farmers and an increase in the corporate farming of crops for export (Razavi 2009, 3). Within this landscape, the introduction of land titles was proposed as a way to solve tenure insecurity (World Bank 1989, in Razavi 2009, 3). Bound up with the promise of an improvement to both agricultural exports and rural livelihoods (Razavi 2009, 3), the uptake of these policies by African countries became a precondition to the reception of loans from international financial institutions (Bryceson 2019, 61). Yet despite creating new opportunities for wage employment, liberalization became an increasing challenge for farmers trying to compete with prices established by the global crop market (Bryceson 2019, 70). In fact, contrary to initial assumptions, the removal of state subsidies on farming inputs had made smallholder households more dependent on the delivery of inputs by private institutions, while the availability of assets became an essential condition for households to withstand uncertainty (Whitehead 2009, 37–38). The impact of these transformations on the agrarian sector had various dimensions, all bundled together: the role of cash-crop economies in a liberalized, more competitive, market; the commodification of land and the impact of contractual arrangements on relationships among farmers (Kea 2010), as well as, according to Amanor (2010), on the family farm; and changes within household labor arrangements, with significant implications for domestic gender politics (Razavi 2009; Whitehead 2009; Bryceson 2019).

While not effective in strengthening farmers' resilience against shocks of various kinds, the transformations that occurred in smallholders' economies during structural adjustment gave various scholars a reason to attempt to reframe the role of land within their livelihood portfolios. Three main interpretations can be identified in this regard.

The first one revolves around the definition of “deagrarianization,” a concept introduced by Bryceson, which she describes as “a long-term process of occupational adjustment, income-earning reorientation, social identification and spatial relocation of rural dwellers away from strictly agricultural-based modes of livelihood” (2002, 726). This definition goes along with that of “depeasantization,” denoting a process whereby agriculture is no longer considered a “peasant matter” but rather turned into a waged occupation or instead replaced by other forms of nonfarm labor (Bryceson 2019, 61). A second interpretation is that proposed by Yaro (2006), who suggests replacing a unidirectional interpretation of livelihood trends with a tendency towards a “multi-cyclical” diversification of farm and nonfarm activities, a combination informed by the opportunities and challenges that are determined by ongoing circumstances (2006, 154). Ramisch (2014) describes the tendency among households in western Kenya to maintain and reinforce networks between rural and urban centers as “multilocal”. In open disagreement with Bryceson’s interpretations, almost two decades later, Paul Hebinck suggests a definition of “repeasantisation,” also proposed in combination with his term “reagrarianisation”:

Repeasantisation unfolds as the interconnection of processes of people holding on and/or ‘returning’ to rural and land-based activities, either through inheriting land from kins or otherwise, or through purchasing private land or accessing land through planned and unplanned (e.g. squatting) land reform programmes, with a (re)construction of a social-material infrastructure that allows rural producers to farm and construct livelihoods that are to a degree autonomous. (2018, 232)

A recent analysis of income-generation patterns across twenty-two countries in Sub-Saharan Africa by Davis et al. (2017) suggests the continuing significance of on-farm income generation within small-holder households. Arguing against the demise of agriculture, this last strand of scholarship seems to agree that there is integration rather than competition between the farm and nonfarm sectors. How should we frame women’s individual farming in this debate?

Authors approaching the impact of economic liberalization from a gender perspective (Gladwin 1991; Razavi 2009; Bryceson 2019) have described this as an ambivalent process whereby the creation of new opportunities for employment has been accompanied by a broadening of the gender gap in accessing wage labor and, as a consequence, between paid and unpaid labor. According to Razavi, this process has

resulted in a separation between production and social reproduction, the latter serving as a buffer for the outcomes of the first, causing uneven burden allocation among the two sectors (2009, 31–33) and the creation of the so-called “feminization of labor” (ibid., 20).

Across almost three decades, several scholars have highlighted reoccurring analytical inaccuracies suggesting a poor understanding of women’s participation in agriculture (see Whitehead 1991; Rossetti 2013; Doss et al. 2017; Palacios-Lopez et al. 2018). The tendency to see family farms as homogenous units of production in which the household head is the sole decision-maker, an argument among others supported by the New Home Economics (Becker 1965; 1981), has prompted the assumption that women are passive actors working on the farms of their husbands and, at the same time, that they are almost uniquely devoted to producing food for home consumption (Doss et al. 2017, 2–3). Coupled with discourses around the causes of high poverty levels, women often claim attention in the guise of household heads (Chant 2004; 2008; Doss et al. 2017); women who are not heads of households, by contrast, are frequently neglected by large-scale surveys (Whitehead 2009, 40). Not surprisingly, this has reproduced a confusion of claims with regard to women’s participation and decision-making in farming labor, along with a tendency to homogenize women’s claims across regional and sociocultural contexts. If the transformation of rural livelihoods had accommodated perspectives assuming the marginality of poor producing assets, individual fields would have slowly disappeared. Yet, beside the fields managed by the household heads, several women keep farming their individual fields. As argued in this study, whenever they are perceived as part of an individual’s economic arrangements and as tokens of moral integrity, their role acquires a very different shape.

The frequent neglect of women’s individual plots in statistics (Whitehead 2009, 40; Razavi 2009, 6) and high-value contract schemes (Bryceson 2019, 69) suggests that women’s fields have often been essentialized by a capitalistic perspective that views them as economically marginal in smallholders’ livelihood strategies, a standpoint still well-rooted in common thinking around women’s involvement in agriculture – something I frequently came across with during this research. My assumption is that some of this poor understanding is justified by the tendency to make sense of women’s individual fields by viewing them solely from a broader household

economy perspective. The accommodation of a logic that is mostly oriented towards the maximization of profits has caused them to be confined epistemologically to the status of low-producing assets at the margins of livelihood economies. This has led to at least two unintended consequences. On the one hand, a poor understanding of what motivates women to maintain their fields within their activity portfolios, despite their apparently marginal economic role; and on the other hand, great inconsistency about how to approach them for their significance to household economies. In this ethnography, women's plots are approached as trapped in the ambivalent nature of their being considered as assets providing security and as fields characterized by difficult management and uncertain productivity.

Another important aspect concerns the approach to land rights adopted in this study. None of the women approached in the field site had themselves experienced the process of land registration, nor did they know directly of other women who had undergone anything similar. Some of them considered land registration a practice that was more common in urban areas. While the non-application of tenure law to any of the cases explored in Tistenga could constitute implicit evidence for the law's difficult implementation, this cannot be argued: the women who participated in this study did not seem to be aware of this option and, when asked,³ indicated more concern about enhancing their field's productivity than in showing an interest in having their plots registered. In fact, each informant considered her own right to land as highly contingent on how she could make use of her own plot. This led me to explore such interdependence, as well as the reasons that motivate women to maintain individual fields as part of their livelihood portfolios. Specifically, I was interested in investigating the extent to which different degrees of motivation may or may not clash with the expectation that a woman should farm her own individual plot. This analysis has allowed me to understand what land meant to every woman and the extent to which the right on land represented a substantial claim for her.

Within this framework, the right to land is approached from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, it builds on women's own understandings

³ Enquiries into an interest in registering land emerged spontaneously during certain discussions with the women and were mostly prompted by my curiosity, despite not being part of this research design.

of security, together with their many nuances and inner flaws. On the other hand, the possibility to delve deeply into the experiences of ten women challenges unitary accounts of women's involvement in farming. If fostering women's claims to land is considered as a strategy pursued to give women more recognition in the farming sector and make farming an opportunity, rather than a burden, a better understanding of how women already experience farming on their own account could elicit more informed approaches with regard to what women would wish to see as more "secure" access to land.

1.2 Women and Individual Farming in Burkina Faso

1.2.1 Burkina Faso's Policies Addressing Access to Land for Women

In Burkina Faso, guaranteeing secure access to land for women was placed on the government's agenda in the early 2000s, a few years after the institution of the *Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme*⁴ in 1997, and along with the adoption of a national policy (*Politique Nationale Genre*, in 2009) aimed to foster equal access to resources and the participation of both genders in all spheres of decision-making (Lanzano 2013, 105–106). By that time, the national reform of land tenure had already undergone various transformations.

Under the revolutionary government headed by Thomas Sankara between 1983 and 1987, the creation of a new tenure law, the *Réorganisation Agricole et Foncière* (RAF)⁵ explicitly distanced itself from any form of individual property ownership by announcing the "rationalized" use of state lands according to principles of social justice and productivity.⁶ This resulted in the creation of a form of tenure for state property, the *Domaine Foncier National*. Seven years after this law was promulgated, the ensuing administration of Blaise Compaoré worked to reintroduce individual tenure of property and to improve measures to guarantee its formalization⁷ (Stamm 1998, 151). Compared to its preceding versions, the tenure law promulgated in 2009, under the new title of *Régime*

⁴ Ministry for the Promotion of Women.

⁵ *Textes portant Réorganisation Agricole et Foncière, ord. n. 84 - 050/CNR/PRES du 4 Août 1984.*

⁶ *Préambule de l'Ordonnance N° 84-050/CNR/PRES, p. 8.*

⁷ *Zatu N° AN VIII-0039Bis/FP/PRES du 4 Juin 1991, art. 3.*

Foncier Rural,⁸ makes official the state's commitment to ensuring equal access to land to all "rural actors" without distinction of age, gender, religion, or origin.⁹ The law addresses explicitly women, the young, and herders as "vulnerable groups"¹⁰ whose property rights have to be protected by the state.

The application of this tenure reform has paralleled the pursuit of a national development plan known as the *Programme National de Gestion des Terroirs* (PNGT), which saw the light of day in the early 1990s after some years of experimentation (Stamm 1998, 157). Based on the principle of decentralization, the PNGT envisaged the creation of community committees¹¹ in charge of redefining the use of delimited territorial areas that met the needs of the community's inhabitants.¹² Decisions had to be taken by community councils in constant negotiation with statutory institutions in the municipality or province through which the state attempted to improve the impact of tenure legislation in decentralized areas (Kevane and Gray 1999, 15).

While the PNGT has linked various achievements to its name down the years, probably because of its very pragmatic approach, Law 034/2009 and its latest revision in 2012 continue to experience several flaws in their application over the whole national territory, given that most rural lands are managed according to customary law. Providing people with the ability to validate their control of a fixed territory by addressing diverse political institutions, the uneven application of the law has produced an uncertain landscape of land rights and management. One of the reasons for the reform's apparent failure is the significant gap between what the law sees as an opportunity for women and the bureaucratic context that often slows down its implementation at the local level. Despite the introduction of a female quota for the membership of community committees, the restrictions on women being able to formalize their rights in administrative bodies that perpetuate decision-making by men is, according to Lanzano (2013,

⁸ *Loi N° 034-2009/AN du 16 Juin 2009 portant Régime Foncier Rural et Décrets d'application.*

⁹ *Loi N° 034-2009, art. 7.*

¹⁰ *Loi N° 034-2009, art. 13.*

¹¹ *Conseil Villageoise de Développement (CVD), formerly Commission Villageoise de Gestion des Terroirs (CVGT).*

¹² Interventions pursued by PNGT included the establishment of schools, free clinics, gardens for off-season agriculture, and the delimitation of marshes for the cultivation of, e.g., rice.

107), one of the most evident “paradoxes” in the attempt to strengthen women’s participation in political institutions. This indicates that institutionalized arenas for decision-making do not provide “neutral contexts of talk” (Gal 1991, 188), but in many cases simply end up recreating spaces in which subordination is further legitimized (ibid.). The recent direct engagement of various institutional actors, from NGOs to governmental and research institutions, in creating enabling environments in which women can register land for agricultural use, either as single individuals or as group members, can be seen as an attempt to bridge this gap.

One of the most recent government campaigns to celebrate International Women’s Day in Burkina Faso has revived the attention given to women’s involvement in agriculture and their access to land. In 2016, the Burkinabe government designated women’s entrepreneurship in agriculture as the focus of the 8th March celebrations. The title chosen on that occasion was *Entrepreneuriat agricole des femmes: obstacles, défis et perspectives*,¹³ and the logo sponsoring the campaign (Photo 1) showed a woman on a tractor working in a field, an image meant to symbolize female access to “modern means of agricultural production”.¹⁴

On that occasion, the prefecture of Pouytenga, to which the community of Tistenga belongs, organized a conference and a parade. The conference, in which I participated, was moderated by the current prefect of the municipality and joined by speakers from diverse local and district institutions working towards the greater involvement of women in economic activities and their improved access to credit. The contents discussed during the meeting pointed to access to “modernized agriculture” as a goal established by the national *Direction du Développement de l’Entrepreneuriat Agricole*, supposed to be reached by 2025. Supposedly the first labor force on family farms, women were identified as the main target. The outcomes predicted by this policy were a guarantee of more profitable and less strenuous farming work and improvements in the consumption of locally produced food. During the meeting, the speakers highlighted property titles as necessary to pursuing investments in agriculture, and they enumerated the

¹³ “Women’s Agricultural Entrepreneurship: Constraints, Challenges, and Future Perspectives”.

¹⁴ Information on the contents of the conference is taken from the transcription of the presentations, which I had permission to record.

constraints affecting women in their farming activities: (1) exclusion from inheritance of land; (2) a lack of awareness about their own rights to land ownership, as acknowledged to some extent by the law itself; (3) a widespread illiteracy rate; (4) increased domestic responsibilities; (5) a lack of access to “modern” agricultural techniques; and (6) the lack of a coordinated strategy to foster initiatives in agricultural entrepreneurship. Proposed solutions to overcome such “barriers” included carrying out awareness-raising campaigns to inform women about their rights to land and to credits to access farming inputs.

While different political representatives discussed the details of a campaign to emphasize land as crucial to women’s empowerment in Burkina Faso, a few kilometers from the town, women in the community of Tistenga had highly ambivalent views about the role of land in their livelihoods. With very rare exceptions,¹⁵ most of them had obtained access to land through their husbands or negotiated with other members of the community, while cases of formal land registration conducted by and for a woman were not known locally.

1.2.2 The Field Site

A combination of predefined research criteria and external factors guided my search for a suitable field site. The ethnic composition of the population represented the main criterion for my identification of an area for research. Despite some similarities regarding forms of land allocation to women in the region, research has highlighted how subtle differences in social organization can be meaningful in terms of land management and the possibilities of negotiation in this domain (Kevane and Gray 1999). In fact, land management systems (from land distribution to labor organization to the use of the proceeds) reflect the social organization of the group in which they are documented. Limiting the analysis to the specific farming pattern of *beolga*, commonly attributed to the Mossi, allows one to provide a unitary framework for the analysis of various cases of land use, like those experienced by the ten women whose stories are narrated in this work. I decided to focus on Mossi land-allocation practices due to my familiarity with this ethnic group, which I had the occasion to deepen during previous fieldwork

¹⁵ This point is discussed more broadly in Chapter 7, in which I explore the moral connotations of *beolga*.

experiences undertaken for my Master's degree. This choice also allowed me to take advantage of the great body of anthropological and sociological studies on Mossi social organization and farming systems.

Security reasons and the ability to find connections with the inhabitants living in the community located in this area limited my range of choice regarding the field site. Escalating tensions and isolated kidnappings along the Malian border during the months preceding the research and the warnings issued by several embassies about transits through and long stays in the north of the country led me to narrow the focus to the province of Kouritenga (Figure 1). This province covers the northern part of the East-Central region and is largely populated by people self-identifying as Mossi, or as native Moore speakers. Throughout, the region is in fact characterized by the presence of several ethnic groups, among which the Mossi represent the majority, followed by the Bisa and Fulani (Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances 2009, 45–46). The East-Central region crosses almost half of the country longitudinally, from its center to its south, up to the Togolese and Ghanaian borders.



Figure 1. Map of Burkina Faso showing the province of Kouritenga [source: Immagini © 2023 TerraMetrics, Dati cartografici © 2023 Google]

Koupéla is the capital city of the province, while the town of Pouytenga is known as one of the country's most important markets.¹⁶ Most of the communities spread across Kouritenga province have very high rates of demographic increase. With a population density of 125.8 inhabitants/km², Kouritenga represents the most densely populated province in the country after Kadiogo, where the capital is located (INSD 2017, 19). Various connections gained through both academic and private contacts allowed me to visit four communities in this province, presenting similar characteristics in their organization and in the types of activity conducted by their inhabitants. My decision to undertake fieldwork in the community of Tistenga was mainly motivated by the relations I formed with some interlocutors during my first visit, as well as their interest in collaborating with this study (see also section 3.1).

Tistenga is part of the municipality of Andemtenga and has a direct non-paved connection to the town of Poytenga, which allows its inhabitants to commute to the town frequently. The closeness and ease of reaching Pouytenga, whether by motorbike, bicycle, or with a donkey cart, reflected significantly on the activity portfolios of Tistenga's inhabitants and on women's activities in particular. The diffused production of the handwoven fabric called *faso danfani* in most communities of the province was among the most evident signs of their geographical closeness to the market of Pouytenga. Alongside other, less binding income-generating activities, several women in Tistenga worked in fact as *faso danfani*-weavers.¹⁷ Common activities among the men were masonry, seasonal work, fixing bicycles, motorbikes, mobile phones or other small electrical devices, and cattle breeding. The absence of a market in Tistenga was a reason for its inhabitants to rely on the neighboring communities for the purchase of goods of ordinary use and on Pouytenga's market for more specific items.

The proximity to the town partly justified the arrangement of infrastructural facilities in Tistenga and most of the neighboring communities. Water pumps served several neighborhoods, and the communities

¹⁶ Lahuec provides a detailed description of the historical and commercial characteristics of the town's surroundings and suggests the meaning of the name Pouytenga is "the place of sharing", from the verb *pui*, "to share, distribute", and *tɛnga*, "place" (1980, 24).

¹⁷ See Chapter 6 for a detailed analysis of the nonfarm income-generating activities undertaken in combination by women in Tistenga.

were well connected both to each other and with Pouytenga through various unpaved paths. In addition, the national electricity company had recently undertaken a project to supply power to the communities in the province, which, however, never became operative in Tistenga during my stay.

The ease whereby Tistenga's inhabitants could commute between Pouytenga and the neighboring communities increased the opportunities for income diversification. With regard to the debates around the major trends in the transformation of rural livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa, my analysis of the role of land, and of individual farming more specifically, as part of a highly diverse composition of activities shows how individual plots are maintained in women's portfolios despite their relatively poor productivity. As my analysis suggests, this can be identified in the intersection between the moral meanings ascribed to women's individual fields and the fluctuating incomes that characterize their nonfarm income-generating activities. In addition, a whole set of climatic, demographic, and economic factors contribute to shaping understandings of and approaches to land in the research area.

Soil degradation and rainfall

The issue of soil degradation¹⁸ in Burkina Faso has received particular attention within the debate on the desiccation of the Sahel.¹⁹ A great variety of insights have been drawn on in attempts to explain the causes and long-term effects of the two droughts that struck the Sahel region between 1968 and 1985 (Rasmussen et al. 2016). Assessments of rainfall trends represent one of the most controversial aspects of this debate. Recent contributions have agreed that there is a negative trend in annual precipitation rates, with many anomalies in the monthly averages (West et al. 2008; Thiombiano and Kampmann 2010; West et al. 2016). Previous research supported the thesis of rainfall recovery in

¹⁸ Soil degradation is an indication of an alteration in the soil's health status (FAO 2019). It implies a loss or decrease in the soil's functions and a depletion of the nutrients necessary to ensure the growth of vegetation. The causes of soil degradation are several and can vary across regions, as well as between single farms. These can be triggered by the interaction between anthropogenic factors, i.e. practices of soil management altering soil regimes, demographic pressure, and climatic conditions.

¹⁹ For a broader overview of the Sahelian desertification debate, see West et al. (2017).

the Sahel region from 1995 (Nicholson 2005), which should have led the area towards a slow but enduring greening process (Olsson et al. 2005). A study by West et al. (2017) conducted in the northern regions of Burkina Faso confirmed the increase in vegetation. However, the authors attribute this to the enhanced adoption of soil and water conservation techniques by the inhabitants of the area. Despite the evident transformations undergone by the landscape, documented trends in intra-seasonal and inter-annual precipitation do not support the thesis of a recovery of rainfall (West et al. 2017).

In the central areas of the country, isohyet migration measurements have shown a decrease in annual rainfall in the past thirty years of an average of 100 mm, with potential annual variations of between 600 mm and 900 mm (Thiombiano and Kampmann 2010, 124).²⁰ Various scholars attribute this variation to the movement of the Intertropical Front (ITF), which results from the encounter between the mass of dry continental air from northern regions and a mass of humid maritime air from the Atlantic Ocean. The meeting of these two airflows creates favorable conditions for the generation of rainfall, which starts and ends at different times following the respective streams of the two air masses. This causes a later start and a sooner end to the rainy season in the northern regions of Burkina Faso compared to the southern regions (Thiombiano and Kampmann 2010, 122). The Intertropical Front crosses the zones of the country following a constant yet slow shift to the south, which results in considerable variation in precipitation between seasons and regions. In the region that includes my field site, the rainy season usually lasts from June to October, with higher precipitation rates (almost ninety percent of annual rainfall) expected in July, August, and September.

Soil degradation and erratic rainfall were greater and more urgent concerns for Tistenga's inhabitants. This was a widespread problem, particularly among women, for whom the risk of being allocated a different plot from one year to the next and the generally poor availability of finance limited their ability to invest in soil-restoration practices. This work examines local farming knowledge to describe how Tistenga's inhabitants conceived of and dealt with environmental

²⁰ Due to its size, this administrative region displays great internal variation in terms of landscape and ecosystems since the south benefits more from the rainy season than the north of the region.

factors affecting their use of the land (Chapter 4). Soils are described according to their suitability for the production of specific crops and their physical characteristics. Precipitation is classified according to its distribution during the wet season, which articulates and guides every single farming phase. It is also described through the discourses in which informants express their worries with regard to their lands' uncertain productivity and the strategies they adopt in the rainy season to prevent or contain harvest losses.

Demographic pressure, income diversification, mobility, and tenure systems

Concerns about demographic rates and resource distribution have dominated numerous anthropological debates exploring the interaction between environment and population. While Boserup predicted the increasing application of intensive farming techniques as a response by farmers to population pressure with beneficial effects on agricultural production (2005 [1965]), other scholars contended that reducing fallow periods would lead to the opposite effect, namely to rapid soil degradation (Batterbury 1998; Reij et al. 2005). Some identified the social and political outcomes of agricultural intensification as a response to increases in population. According to Platteau (1996; 2000) and Brasselle et al. (2002), intensification would trigger farmers' claims and strengthen their rights to the exploited areas, in accordance with an equation between greater investment in farming inputs and strengthened rights over plots of land. Other case studies from West Africa put a great deal of emphasis on the role of agricultural intensification in increasing the social divide between the wealthy and poorer farmers from the same community (Gray and Kevane 2001; Gray 2005; Turner 2016).

In an analysis of the impact of environmental factors on farming systems and technologies in different regions of the Mossi Central Plateau in the former Upper Volta, a group of research established in the 1960s by geographers working at the *Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer* (ORSTOM) and known as *École des Terroirs*, attempted to predict the effects of large-scale environmental and economic transformations on land allocation and management practices, together with their likely impact on land rights (Bassett et al. 2007, 106). In increasing soil degradation, demographic pressures, and growing opportunities for waged work, they saw predictors for the disaggregation of extended

households in the direction of independent nuclear families, leading to a re-evaluation of land from an “inalienable” good (Kohler 1971, 151; Şaul 1988, 264; McMillan 1995, 33; Stamm 1998, 46) to a commodity, that is, an asset to measure, register, and use mainly for commercial purposes. Within this group of scholars, Kohler (1971), Lahuec (1980), Marchal (1983; 1987), and Imbs (1987) grounded their interpretations on the idea of an increasing process of household fragmentation. This had been partly anticipated in the work of Izard-Héritier and Izard (1959), who argued that migration and nonfarm work were drivers of the decline of customary powers and the emergence of individual self-interest (in West 2006, 43). Their work²¹ suggested that the privatization or individual ownership of land might effect a transformation of tenure systems and household organization in the future.

Later studies by Şaul (1988), Breusers (1998), and West (2006; 2010) made different claims. Şaul explored the connections between differentiation in farm size and the expansion of commercial agriculture. His study identified differentials in accessing nonfarm incomes as the initial cause of intra-community inequalities, while local non-monetary practices of land allocation promoted land distribution among community members without distinction of incomes. In his view, high rates of population pressure, causing pressure over the availability of land, did not lead to those social groups without the right to inherit land being excluded, but rather to a redistribution of the available resources within the community.

Breusers took this point further by focusing on migratory processes as a factor triggering land redistribution within farming communities. By exploring the intersection between the migration of household members and the domestic cycle of the extension and fragmentation of family units, he found that such demographic changes enabled land redistribution among the remaining household members. Breuser’s analysis explained the flexibility underlying land-allocation systems, in which “the boundaries of a ‘father’s place’ (...) are all but fixed” and showed that demographic transformations at the household level cannot motivate the exclusion of any social category from enjoying land-use rights (1998, 137). Although not taking distance from the idea of an increasing use of land for an individual’s (i.e. commercial) use, Breusers’ analysis of land redistribution practices tones down the idea

²¹ For an overview of the works and the approach developed by the *Terroir* school, see Basset et al. (2007).

of a parallel trend leading towards the nuclearization of the units that was predicted by the *Terroir* school.

In open disagreement with the main conclusions drawn by the *Terroir* school, West identified the large farm model, known as *pugkènga*, as a sustainable household response to environmental constraints. Rather than excluding each other, household extension and fragmentation, he suggested, should be considered parallel processes responding to temporary organizational configurations of the units (West 2006, 2010), while the pooling of resources and income diversification should be regarded as important sources of household maintenance. According to West, scholars of the *Terroir* school failed to predict that farm and non-farm activities could be integrated within same livelihood strategies, rather than being mutually exclusive. This balance could guarantee the coexistence of both extended and nuclear households (West 2006, 52).

The prediction by the *Terroir* school's scholars of a gradual dissolution of the extended farming household seems closely aligned with more recent interpretations supporting the *deagrarianization* thesis arguing for an "occupational adjustment" moving rural African economies from the farm towards employment in the wage sector (Bryceson 1996; 2002). The *Terroir* school in fact claimed a gradual nuclearization of households was being caused by a shift towards commercial farming and a more individualized use of land. Şaul and Breusers argued rather for a redistribution of land within households. In particular, Breusers stressed the importance of the migration of young generations and their interest in commercial agriculture. West argued for household extension and fragmentations as parallel processes moving along with the redistribution of resources and the units' livelihood decisions.

In Tistenga, population growth was often mentioned by village inhabitants as resulting in problems with the availability of land. Based on the data collected in the field, households of up to thirty members could dispose of an overall land area of two to six hectares divided into plots of different extent, depending on the number of the members in the unit.²² In line with Şaul, Breusers, and West, systems of land allocation in Tistenga were characterized by practices of land redistribution of plots among extended household members and of

²² This information uses data gathered through field measurements undertaken among the seven households to whom the women involved in this research belonged. These data are discussed more extensively in Chapter 4.

land being leased to neighbors. However, what helped reinforce the rights to land was the possibility of intensifying its farming, a practice seemingly controlled by the men. As a consequence, several women gave up investing in intensification techniques, being convinced that a possible withdrawal of land would not have led to their claims being heard, resulting in a likely lack of returns or even a loss for them.

1.2.3 Women and Individual Farming in Mossi Studies

Known by the name *beolga* (*beolse* pl.), women's fields in Tistenga were cultivable surfaces, usually about half a hectare in size (or less), on which women used to spend part of their working day during the rainy season producing cash crops or cereals, either alone or with the help of their families. The crops they harvested were usually used to fill needs that their livelihoods did not always allow them to predict. Patterns of land allocation similar to that of *beolga* have been documented with reference to other ethnic groups in Burkina Faso.²³ In most of these cases, women are the holders of access rights to land, while use rights are mediated by the male person responsible for them, often the husband (Marchal 1987, Kevane and Gray 1999). While unmarried women defer to their fathers or uncles, married women and widows depend primarily on their husbands and in-laws, though still retaining the possibility to address such requests to their families of origin or to other land-holders residing in their same community.

In the research area, the available land was managed along the lines of two main allocation patterns. The first, known as *zaksoaba-pvto* (literally "fields of the household head"),²⁴ comprised a varying number of fields of different sizes whose yields were intended to benefit the entire domestic unit. Harvested crops on *zaksoaba-pvto* included staples used to fulfill the household's food requirements, while a smaller amount of cash crops, if any, was sold to cover expenditure for, e.g., medicines or school fees. The second farming pattern, called *beolga*, involved the allocation of fields to single household members. The management of these plots and the use of their proceeds were under

²³ Vokouma (2009) provides a brief overview of some of the most common individual forms of land allocation to women in Burkina Faso across ethnic groups.

²⁴ An in-depth explanation of the term and its multiple connotations is provided in section 4.1.1.

the full control of their users, who could benefit individually from the harvest. Compared to other household members, women were expected to receive a *beolga* from their in-law's family shortly after marriage. Crops harvested from individual fields were usually stored and sold to cover expenditures that were considered one's own. The most common expenditures for which women were solely responsible as individuals included purchases of clothing and condiments and the grinding of cereals. Any shortages of staples within the household were ultimately buffered through the women's own harvests.

A vast literature in the field of Mossi studies has engaged with farming systems and forms of social organization since the late 1950s. In this framework, *beolga* has mostly been interpreted as forming a part of household agricultural systems, although its analysis has tended to remain marginal. As pointed out above, French sociologists in the *Terroir* school provided detailed descriptions of labor organization and land management in various regions of the Mossi Plateau in the former Upper Volta by accounting for the difficulties households were widely experiencing in meeting their food requirements through extensive land-use practices, partly resulting from the involvement of younger male generations in waged employment.²⁵ While Lahuec (1980) observed an increasing crop diversification accompanied by involvement in commercial agriculture in the areas surrounding Koupéla, Kohler (1971), Imbs (1987), and Marchal (1983) identified a trend towards the rapid nuclearization of larger domestic units. In this context, female *beolse* have often been regarded as fields providing food stocks to be consumed before the household's staples (Marchal 1987) and as being allocated to women to provide for their own needs and those of their children (McMillan 1986).²⁶ To date in the field of Mossi studies, only a few contributions have specifically sought to account for the *beolga* farming model.

²⁵ Jean-Marie Kohler (1971) conducted his study on the community of Dakola in the North region; Jean-Paul Lahuec (1980) focused on the community of Zaongho, in the vicinity of Koupéla and Pouytenga, part of the East-Central region; Jean-Yves Marchal (1983) carried out research in the Yatenga province in the North region; and Françoise Imbs (1987) worked in the area close to Koudougou, part of the West-Central region.

²⁶ Marchal's description of *beolga* evokes Meillassoux's interpretation of women's fields as assets allocated to mitigate the effects of their exploitation within the domestic unit (1978 [1975], 92).

In the 1990s, research on Mossi agricultural patterns explored forms of access to land and its distribution, a topic increasing the concern with gender issues (Breusers 1998; Sawadogo and Stamm 2000). Among these contributions, institutional forms of access to land and the lack of ownership for women were interpreted as informed by gendered social norms, which, far from being characterized by rigidly circumscribed tasks and responsibilities, were instead defined as complex bundles of rights and duties leaving room for gender negotiation and claims going beyond preexisting power asymmetries. This scholarship has focused on particular land-use practices by women in Mossi households.

Kevane and Gray (1999) analyzed women's right of access to land and explored negotiation within the social constructs regulating land-allocation processes. Their analysis draws on intra-household (mainly conjugal) negotiation to consider also women's extra-household negotiations as a trend experiencing rapid improvements in response to the scarcity in available land. This led the authors to predict the increasing participation of women in the land market and therefore increased access to land through new channels and types of relationship. An article by Thorsen and Reenberg (2000) investigated the contribution of women to their households' crop production, showing how the labor organization in their fields was strongly informed by gender norms and responsibilities. The authors argued that, while women used to talk of themselves as "groundnut producers," a share of their harvests was used for the production of millet, which was mostly used for consumption (see also Cavicchioli 2018). Some years earlier, a study by McMillan (1987; 1995) about the impact of a resettlement project based on a rigid redefinition of land-use patterns in use among settlers had already highlighted the normative meaning of *beolga* within households and accounted for what might be reinterpreted as compensation practices enacted under the conjugal contract. In fact, McMillan's study showed how the neglect of women's fields by the project led husbands to provide harvest gifts spontaneously to their wives. This was meant to compensate the latter for both their lack of fields and the overproduction of crops harvested from the lands assigned within the project's framework.²⁷

²⁷ My documentation of the biographical narratives of the women informants who took part in my fieldwork (four of whom are presented in Chapter 5) revealed that one of them, here introduced as Zenaabo, had been part of that resettlement project and had undergone a similar situation as that described by McMillan.

The lack of recent contributions focusing on the *beolga* farming pattern can partly be justified by the increasing interest in recent years in exploring the interplay of national policies and local institutions on the subjects of claims to land on the one hand, and the difficulties in framing women's involvement in individual farming on the other. The increasing pressure exercised by global markets has provided a breeding ground for the emergence of new (self-)employment opportunities and, at the same time, increased economic uncertainties. Despite representing the main source for household subsistence for several rural communities, the perception of land, both for domestic and individual use, has been affected by such transformations. Farming yields are increasingly combined with other nonfarm sources of subsistence within livelihood diversification strategies. In addition, climate challenges are posing increasing constraints on production and causing changes to farmers' practices of land use.

Contributions have so far privileged a normative approach to the analysis of *beolga* and, to different degrees, forms of negotiation within the conjugal pair.²⁸ However, a critical analysis of how women perceive the normative dimension that regulates access to land and how its incorporation mirrors women's moral concerns would help us understand the importance of *beolse* in women's lives and livelihoods: if contextual circumstances are subject to continuous transformation, and if those changes are inevitably reflected in relations of production and morality, how does this shape the value of individual fields in women's perspective? Are they still perceived by women as "securing" assets? And if so, under what conditions?

In this work, women approach the idealization of a woman's commitment to individual farming by (un)willingly questioning this narrative: why should *beolse* be part of a woman's livelihood portfolio? Why should a woman who is not farming an individual field fear being criticized by others? In other words, where do the tacit limits between

²⁸ Kevane and Gray compare practices of land allocation among Mossi and Bwa in southwestern Burkina Faso. Thorsen and Reenberg focus on Mossi and Bisa households in the South-East province of Boulgou (East-Central region). However, the latter two authors make no distinction among farming patterns because of the numerous similarities in the social organization of the two groups (2000, 48). It is possible that the omission of the word *beolga* is motivated by the attempt to account for farming patterns in both groups and therefore to talk more generally of "women's fields."

deliberate choice, choice by need, and obligation lie in a woman's perspective when it comes to engaging in individual farming?

By intersecting women's life histories with their personal economic and moral concerns regarding land management, my research provides new insights into the ambivalence of land for women to suggest pathways for more effective support to women in the farming sector.

1.3 Research Questions and Planning

1.3.1 Research Questions

This work contributes to existing research on women's involvement in agriculture by addressing both women's access to agricultural assets and the constraints that prevent women from benefitting from such activity. Specifically, it takes *beolga* as an entry point to address so-called "women's fields" and suggests an approach to understanding what an individual field means to a woman under shifting and uncertain livelihood circumstances.

This research builds on an analysis of the experiences in individual farming reported by ten women of different ages and socioeconomic statuses all living in the same community.²⁹ It investigates how women conceive of land under uncertain livelihood conditions by exploring the motives that lead them to engage in their agricultural activities. Two complementary spheres of investigation are combined here. The first looks at the livelihood circumstances within which women undertake their individual farming activities, more specifically one's social network, individually pursued provisioning strategies, and the occurrence of specific events that might affect a woman's life course. The second dimension is subjective and focuses on the attitudes that motivate women's livelihood choices and their personal understandings of the norms surrounding land allocation to women.

A key assumption in this thesis is that a woman's temporarily perceived uncertainty affects her evaluation of *beolga* as either a crucial or a marginal asset. A woman's willingness to devote herself to individual farming is also affected by such shifts in evaluation. In this research, I

²⁹ Section 3.1.3 provides more specific information regarding the sampling of the ten female informants.

identify and explore the life entanglements in which these “shifts” take place.

My investigation of the role played by individual fields in women’s livelihood strategies therefore starts from an in-depth account of women’s life circumstances. In this work, broader circumstances, such as climate factors and market fluctuations, are approached as reflected directly in the lives of women and their perceptions. Moreover, attention is paid to the intersection between the role of *beolga* in women’s livelihood portfolios on the one hand, and social norms expecting every woman to farm a *beolga* on the other. At this stage, this work asks to what extent individual perceptions of *beolga* affect a woman’s motivation to engage in individual farming with respect to her own evaluation of land. The main research questions could be then summarized and ordered as follows: (1) What strengthens *beolga*’s presence within women’s livelihood portfolios? (2) How do women assess *beolga*’s contribution to their livelihoods? (3) What affects a woman’s motivation in undertaking individual farming?

The choice of highlighting women’s perspectives about individual fields allows us to focus on what women consider as hindering or enabling their decisions in accessing and using land in the attempt to narrow the gap between policy-making and their beneficiaries, whose conceptions of “wealth” and “well-being” (assuming a literal translation of either concept always exists) are seldom investigated.

1.3.2 Fieldwork Organization

Fieldwork was divided into two phases, the first from January to May 2016, the second from June to October 2017. The research was designed to cover approximately a one-year period due to the crucial role played by seasonal factors in this study.

Fieldwork in 2016 was carried out during the dry season. During this period of the year, the temperature varies between 20/35 degrees from January to March to 40/45 degrees in April and May, and agriculture is practiced mainly as horticulture. This activity is usually carried out on small plots (usually not exceeding 20 m²) where plants are watered daily using well water. In Tistenga, a small group of women were involved in off-season agriculture. The humanitarian organization leading projects in the province had provided the fenced area in the central neighbourhood with two wells, which, however, tended to dry

up quickly during the dry season.³⁰ Discouraged, several women had abandoned this activity, while a few others – mainly elderly women – maintained their plots and tried to overcome water problems by collecting water from the nearest pump, for the area allocated to horticulture did not have its own irrigation system. People, particularly young men, took advantage of this annual period to go abroad for work, while both men and women used it to engage in one or more small-scale trading and handicraft activities of different kinds, particularly weaving. The first phase of fieldwork served as a preparation for the second phase, during which farming work was documented in greater detail. Indeed, fieldwork in 2017 took place during the rainy season. As staple crops are grown mostly under rainfed conditions, in this period of the year most of the time is spent in the fields. However, in gaps between farming periods, some people might resort to parallel nonfarm activities to earn cash. This research phase was dedicated to the documentation of all activities characterizing farming work, from manuring to harvesting, and to the exploration of local farming knowledge of the use and characteristics of soils and plants. The interdependence and alternation between farming and other income-generating activities were also observed in my work with the ten research participants and were interrelated with their involvement in *beolga* farming.

This articulation of fieldwork phases and seasons has deepened my understanding of the interchangeability between agricultural and non-agricultural activities and has allowed me to assess the importance and limits of agriculture in providing for household subsistence. Yet one limit to this articulation is the impossibility of aligning observations documented for the 2017 farming season with those on post-harvest management documented during the 2016 dry season. Information collected through interviews and questionnaires helped me bridge this gap and allowed me to identify elements of continuity across both years and seasons. As explained in more depth in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), questionnaires had been designed to provide retrospective documentation of post-harvest management in the year preceding the enquiry. This exercise enabled me to collect data for 2015 (the year preceding my first fieldwork) and 2016. Post-harvest management

³⁰ Interview with the woman representative of the community committee (CVD) in Tistenga on March 3, 2016.

for the 2017–2018 dry season was explored through interviews and conversations with women and men farmers about the *prospective* use of the harvest with respect to the quantity harvested in October of the same year.

1.4 Outline of the Book

This work consists of eight chapters, including this introduction and the conclusion. This chapter has provided an introduction to the most common paradigms and evidence framing land use, and specifically the practices of the allocation and management of individual plots, under large-scale transformations undergone in the agrarian sector in recent decades. I briefly introduced what informed the identification of the field site, as well as the choice of focusing my ethnography on the *beolga* farming pattern, which I identified as an entry point into an in-depth understanding of how women perceive land as part of their lives and livelihood strategies. While women's involvement in agriculture has been extensively addressed in recent years, the research design and the questions address the poor exploration of women's individual farming under this set of circumstances and challenges.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review of the main contributions investigating women's involvement in farming in Africa and access to land. The review highlights how recent and current approaches to women and land still bear the legacy of several decades of studies in which female farming has been understood as a product of a rigid division of labor by gender (Guyer 1988b; 1991), while failing to clearly address how women conceive of land, especially in the case of individual fields. The chapter ends by illustrating the approach developed and adopted in this study to grasp the multiple understandings of land by women and, more specifically, the role of individual fields (*beolse*) in women's livelihood portfolios.

Chapter 3 presents the community where fieldwork was conducted as a setting involving the diverse actors who took part in the research, including the community, the hosting family, the key informants, the research assistants, and the researcher. I reflect upon my role as a researcher and on how reciprocal perceptions derived from this ethnographic encounter have affected how the research unfolded, from daily interactions with my informants and their households to adjustments to my handling of specific research methods and tools.

Chapter 4 describes how land was allocated and farmed in Tistenga. I analyze the strategies of land use adopted by the households to which the ten women belonged and shed light on how environmental factors such as rainfall variability and the scarcity of fertile land informed the farming choices households adopted. I show how individual fields (*beolse*) were negatively affected by this decision-making process, as the allocated fields tended to have more degraded soils. Given the risk of significant harvest losses, collective fields (*zaksoaba-poto*) were in fact assigned to more fertile plots and benefitted from greater applications of inputs. Women, who represented the majority of *beolse* users, agreed with such prioritization while being aware of how their field management could be negatively affected by this ranking. This analysis contributes to exploring further the nexus between intra-household resource allocations and gender roles by revisiting the common dichotomy between women's and men's fields, thus providing a more accurate understanding of tenure at its intersection with local farming systems.

In Chapter 5, I adopt a biographical approach to explore the experience of four of the ten women informants about the management of individual fields under specific life circumstances. I then proceed by analyzing women's life entanglements in order to identify those I call "dimensions of (in)security", namely factors cutting across most of the biographical narratives that affected the women's perceptions of *beolga* at that given moment in their lives. This analysis suggests that the reasons driving women to engage in their farming activities lie in the material and social circumstances that characterize their livelihoods and in their ability to deal with them.

Chapter 6 builds on the mapping of women's life entanglements in the previous chapter to further investigate how these "dimensions of (in)security" affect women's practices in managing individual fields and the attitudes – in this context reflecting Johnson-Hanks' definition of *postures* (2005) – that women embed and enact as prompted by given circumstances. Specifically, the chapter engages with the economic role of *beolga* – here defined as an asset – within the arrangements of activities that women undertake to form their own "provisioning architectures". Individually led economic arrangements comprising *beolga* farming often consist of combinations with other nonfarm income-generating activities that are expected to buffer possible internal failures. This allows me to describe women's economies as

centered on the identification and pursuit of needs rather than as oriented towards increasing their incomes. For a woman, maintaining a *beolga* means keeping a basis through which she can fulfil her needs and whose absence would oblige her either to give up her goal or ask for financial help from another person, an attitude stigmatized if performed on a regular basis.

Chapter 7 explores *beolga*'s moral connotations and the social norms prescribing how a woman and her husband are supposed to take part in (or are exempted from) the allocation and management of a *beolga* and the use of its proceeds. The expectations conveyed by the conjugal contract underpin a moral commitment in favor of *beolga*. Men argue about the importance of providing their wives with land and consider its avoidance a sign of indifference on their part. For women, committing themselves to individual farming allows them to demonstrate their own economic independence, deemed by various informants as a sign of integrity. Conversely, avoiding a commitment to farming and showing a lack of interest in *beolga* is considered a sign of bad conduct. This chapter connects with the previous one by showing how attitudes in field management mirror the moral values surrounding the types of social relationships that are most crucial to women and how one's commitment to *beolga* is commonly perceived. This chapter presents morality as contingent and therefore as questionable and negotiable: a meaningful change in a woman's life circumstances may affect her attitude towards individual farming. This change reflects a woman's perception about the moral prescription according to which she is supposed to farm a *beolga*.

Chapter 8 summarizes the findings of each chapter and suggests evidence-based solutions for practitioners and policy-makers that more clearly mirror women's perception of land and their own interest in engaging in individual farming.

Staying Grounded



Photo 1. Logo of the 8th March 2016 campaign printed on a faso danfani fabric [Photo by the author]