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The Role of Animals in Mali

As in many third world countries, animals play a large role in the life, culture and beliefs of the Malian people. They range from being beasts of labor, sources of food, and domesticated companions, to being sacred figures or embodiments of spirits linked to certain groups or families. Their importance, because of this wide range of roles, is immense, and to define their role by any one of these categories would be a grand underestimation of their immense integration in the culture and lives of the Malian people. Therefore, to understand as best we can the full purpose and role of animals in Mali it is necessary to look at the integration of animals in Malian culture in several different roles: as domesticated animals, as sacred animals, and the changing roles of animals in the country versus their roles in cities as well as factors that may be a threat to these animals.

Domesticated animals have been a part of African culture and way of life since ancient times. In particular animals have taken part in agricultural cultivation and transport in Africa for over 2000 years. In North Africa camels, horses, mules, donkeys and cows have played a major role in every aspect of life from food, tillage, and transportation to a mark of social rank. Camels have mainly been traded for meat; used for riding, pack transport, tillage and irrigation, while horses have been seen mainly as a mark of prestigious social standing and have only sometimes been used in cultivation, recreation and the pulling of carts. Mules seem to be primarily used for pulling carts and wagons in local transport, and for soil tillage. Similarly, donkeys have been used as pack

animals and riding animals for transportation as well as for some soil tillage and cultivation. Lastly, cows are used mainly in the cultivation of heavy soils. The use of some of these animals in Mali, for cultivation, took off through 1970-1980. To begin with, oxen and cows were the most common animals in cultivation but more recently donkeys have begun to be used instead because they are less expensive to keep, move more quickly, can be used for drawing carts as well, and are more hardy than oxen or cows (Paul, "History of Working Animals").

In domestication animals can fall into several different categories: household animals, animals for consumption or those who produce certain food products, and labor animals. Donkeys, oxen and cows, as well as horses and camels, fall into the category of labor animals. Cows, however, also fall under the category of animals that produce food products along with goats, sheep, and chickens. Among these, cows, sheep and goats can all produce milk, yet the goat is the best animal of the three for this particular attribute. One liter of goat's milk can yield around 32g of protein; this is an adequate amount of protein for a whole day for a child of 11 and 72% of the needed protein for a woman-with-child (Devendra, "Goats"). This milk can also be used in the porridge that Malians often eat for breakfast or a sort of cream, "le degue," which the children sometimes eat for snack. Milk is also used in many of the other basic Malian foods, for example couscous. Goats are also the more advantageous animal to have for poor village families because of their versatility and ability to adapt. One of the major advantages to goats is their ability to eat almost anything. They are also selective eaters, which means that they are capable of selecting the plants with the greatest amount of nutritional value to eat instead of simply swallowing any plant they come upon in their foraging. This is a

wonderful attribute for them to have, particularly during the dry season, which can last from around late August or September, all the way till May or June. In villages most families will have around 4 to 10 goats, or sheep, (Diarra, “The Changing Role”), which live outside the house and who are taken to pastures during the day by the children and returned at night to pens. These pens are as much to keep them from escaping, as they are to keep out predators such as hyenas (Gouffault, L’ élevage dans la cercle de Goundam”).

While goats provide milk, meat, hair and hides to villagers, sheep also have a great value to their owners. Sheep can be used for milk production but goats are more effective in this aspect. However, sheep do offer more meat, about the same amount of offspring, a larger amount of hide and they provide fleece. This fleece is of great value to the women as it can be sold to weavers in order to make cloth (WWSF, “Moutons Mali”). Many times the women are the ones who oversee trades such as these, and increasingly, with NGO’s, and the Malian women’s form of micro lending, women are starting to be able to have their own livestock, including sheep and goats. The profits that they can make from selling wool and other animal products can then be put towards education for themselves or their children, which would otherwise be inaccessible to them. This is a large step in aiding the women of Mali. In the past, in Mali, there have been more sheep than goats, however now there seems to be an increasing preference towards goats over sheep in many villages. In a study done in 5 different Malian villages the following results were found:

Ownership patterns of sheep and goats in an agro-pastoral area in central Mali:

	Irrigated Rice sub-system		Rain fed Millet sub-system	
	Goats	Sheep	Goats	Sheep
Number of owners studied	27		16	
Number owning sheep or goats	26	15	16	9
Number owning goats but not sheep	12		7	
Number owning sheep but not goats	1		0	
Mean flock size ^{a)}	9.0	6.4	38.2	7.1
± s.d	6.03	13.51	27.75	14.31
Mean flock size ^{b)}	9.3	11.5	38.2	12.6
± s.d	5.87	17.0	27.75	18.27
Range in flock size	0-23	0-64	2-91	0-58

From this study at least, it appears that goats have had a major increase in popularity as the main milk-giving animal. However in comparison to other African countries Mali may still have far fewer goats than others. For example Debbie Logan, who wrote an article dealing with some of the differences between Botswana and Mali for the Population press/ Blue Planet United, observed that there seemed to be a great deal more sheep in Mali than there were in Botswana. This could also be due to which areas of the country she visited; as Dr. R. T. Wilson noted that the nomadic peoples owned more

sheep and more goats were owned by sedentary agricultures. He also noted that the herds of either sheep or goats seemed to be larger in the more arid and dry zones opposed to smaller herd sizes in more humid areas (Wilson, “Husbandry, Nutrition, and Productivity of Goats and Sheep in Tropical Africa”). The partial table, from K. J. Peter’s article, “Evaluation of Goat Populations in Tropical and Subtropical Environments” perfectly depicts this observation.

	Ecological Zone	Agricultural system	Animal	Day Management	Night Management	Food	Herd size
Mali/ Sudan	Arid/ Semi arid	Livestock	Goats, Sheep, Cattle	Free-range herding	Open camp	Browse	30- 80
Mali/ N. Nigeria	Semi-arid	Crops & livestock	Cattle, Goats	Free roaming/ herding	Penned or tied	Crop residue/ browse	5- 40
Kenya, Mali, S. Nigeria	Sub- humid	Crops & livestock	Goats, Sheep, Cattle	Herding/ tethering	Penned or tied	Crop residue/ limited grasses	5- 20

Cows are also represented in this table, showing once again their importance in the livelihoods of many Malians. For the Bamabara people it is sometimes hard to both keep cattle as well as tend to their crops, and yet the cattle are important to have so that their manure can be used as fertilizer on the fields. This difficulty is often overcome by employing a Fulani to act as a cowherd over the rainy season so that the cows do not ruin the fields by trampling over them. The Fulani employed is trusted to know each villagers cows and is paid by each villager individually. This payment can come in the form of food but more and more is in the form of money. Once the rainy season is over, the Bamabara no longer have need of a cowherd as they can use the cows to plough the fields once there is no precious crop planted in them. At this point the cows are also allowed to

wander more freely as there is no worry that they might trample the crops (Diarra, “The Changing Role of Cow Herding in Mali”).

The other animal that falls into the category of animals that produce food products is the chicken. Aichi J. Kitalyi says, “ Although ownership of poultry resides with the head of the household, women and children are the chief decision makers from day to day.” Now however, the chicken has become another animal that women have begun to be able to own themselves and thus make some profit from. The chores that go along with raising chicken are always the women and children’s duties, these duties include cleaning the area where the chickens are kept, looking after the brooding hens and the newly hatched chicks, and feeding them supplementary grains. If the chickens are raised well they will provide the family with meat as well as a continuing supply of chickens as the eggs are rarely eaten. However the problems accompanying the raising of chickens can include a high mortality rate for the chicks and a low amount of eggs laid by the hens. Many of these problems can be attributed to poor nutrition in the food and the general hardship of finding food as well as disease. Some of the differences in chickens in different African counties are shown in Aichi J. Kitalyi’s table on chicken statistics: (Kitalyi, “Socio-Economic Aspects of Village Chicken Production in Africa”).

Country	Clutches/ year	Eggs / Clutch	Egg Weight (g)	Hatchability %	Mature Weight Cock	Hen	Mortality % Cock	Hen
Ethiopia	-	-	44-49	39-42	1.1-1.7	1- 1.2	-	-
Burkina faso	2.7-3.0	12-18	30-40	60-90	-	-	83	98
Tanzania	-	6-20	41	50-100	1.2	2.2	<80	-
Ghana	2.5	10	-	72	-	-	50	50
Mali	2.1	8.8	34.4	69.1	1.6	1.02	56	-
Sudan	4.5	10.87	40.6	90	2.1	1.31	-	-

The last category of domestic animals is that of household animals. In many villages this category is filled by 1 or 2 sheep that the family keeps in the courtyard of the house or even inside the house itself. In French these sheep are called “Moutons de Case” or basically, Sheep of the House. These sheep are kept for regular eating but more importantly they are for special occasions such as the visits of important guests. They are highly valued in the family and great care is taken of them to make sure that they are in the best health and condition. Often they will be fed with sweet dried grasses as well as left over vegetables and some grains. Sometimes they also get to drink the water that is used to wash the grains (Gouffault, *L' élevage dans la cercle de Goundam*). Another animal that can sometimes be a household animal is the dog. However, it is more common in the villages for dogs to be strays or outside animals. In the cities though, dogs are becoming more common as household pets.

In Mali animals also can play a large role as sacred beings or as part of the Animist belief. In the Animist religion there is a strong belief in totems and the sacred power of certain objects and living beings such as stones, trees, birds, and animals. Debbie Logan describes an encounter she had in the village of Dogon, which is in the northern part of Mali, near the Burkina Faso border, with the headman of the village, saying that there were around a dozen totem animals hung outside of the headman's house and more hung over the area where visitors could park. These totem animals are often killed and stuffed to take possession of the strength of their spirits. Small wildcats are among the most often hunted. The bones, skulls, horns, fur, fangs, feet and tails of many animals are also used in the practice of Animism. These items are used as “Juju” or talismans and totems and are mainly used by “les Marabouts” or soothsayers to help

predict the future. In Bamako, Debbie Logan describes the Artisan Market proper as an area cluttered with stalls covered in tattered awnings. Under these awnings is an assortment of bones, horns, teeth, and furs etc. all rapped up in bundles, ready to be purchased for use in Animist traditions (Logan, "A Viewpoint on Africa").

Another example of the sacredness of animals in tradition and Malian culture can be seen in the annual Masquerade parade of the people of Markala, a village near Segou. This parade consists of large puppets with people inside them as well as music and dance. The parade celebrates the origins of the Bamana people as well as their relation to animals on land and in water. The Bamana people's parade is also often joined by the parade of the Boze people who are fisherman on the Niger River, which runs right by the village of Markala. In the parade the Bamana people have puppets of Sogow, or mythical animals as well as animals that represent certain attributes and characteristics. The animals of the savannah that are represented include antelope, buffaloes, birds, and domesticated animals. The bush buffalo, Sifi represents the characteristics of strength and the power of tradition. Kono is a holy bird that is said to announce the rains, which is fitting as the parade is held in early June right before the major rains come. As for the parade of the Boze, it often includes puppets of bottom feeding fish and hippopotamuses. Along with these real animals, mythical ones are also represented. Some of these are the Ngofariman, the mean chimpanzee who is very provocative; Taasidoonin (think a little) who is portrayed as a very voluptuous woman; and Bilanjan, who is a sogo made entirely out straw and who is seen only at night, a bush spirit (Otter, "Puppets and Masks"). This perception of the sacred connection between animals and people is one that is shared throughout the whole country.

Lastly the roles of animals in villages and mostly larger cities are starting to change with globalization and an influx of western ideals and ways of life. It is interesting to note that recently in cities families have begun to own pets such as a dog or a cat. This can be problematic for the animals because the people are not accustomed to owning and having to watch out for pets. Often the pets will not be fed enough and this can result in them taking to the streets. Another problem that accompanies this new trend is that not all people in the cities respect the ownership of these pets and sometimes these pets can end up as another person's meal if they are out on the street. Another interesting trend to notice that is contrary to the celebration of the sacredness of animals is the hate and fear that some Malians have towards animals, in particular dogs, cats and sometimes sheep. Khadydiatou Sanogo from the journal "Le Republican" says "La haine et la peur des animaux domestiques sont inculquées aux enfants dès la base de leur éducation. En effet nombreuses sont les mères qui menacent leur enfant avec la venue probable d'un chien, d'un chat ou d'un mouton." This translates along the lines that hatred and fear of domestic animals is taught to children from a very young age. Also that many mothers make sure their children behave by telling them that a dog, cat, or sheep will come to the house unless they behave. This fear is again shown in the mothers teaching their children to "Tape le villain petit chien," or to throw rocks at dogs or other "menacing" domestic animals. However this negative attitude is not prevalent in most of Mali and is not too commonly seen.

The role of animals in Mali is extensive and integral to the culture and the traditions of the Malian people, not to mention important to the Animist views held at least to some degree by many Malians. While animals are starting to occupy a place as

pets, they are still predominantly seen in roles of labor and food production, as well as sacred roles. The well being of these animals is extremely important to the Malian people as much of their livelihood is often based off of the animals or their products. Recently there has been a growing problem in the health of animals due to lack of sufficient food and lack of sufficient nutrients in this food. Also there is a growing problem of pollution that will continue to present hazards to the lives of many animals in the form of plastic bags in rivers and other similar dangers. In the Mali of tomorrow there will still be a great dependence on animals and their products, however there are also more dangers and hardships facing these animals as well as the people of Mali.

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