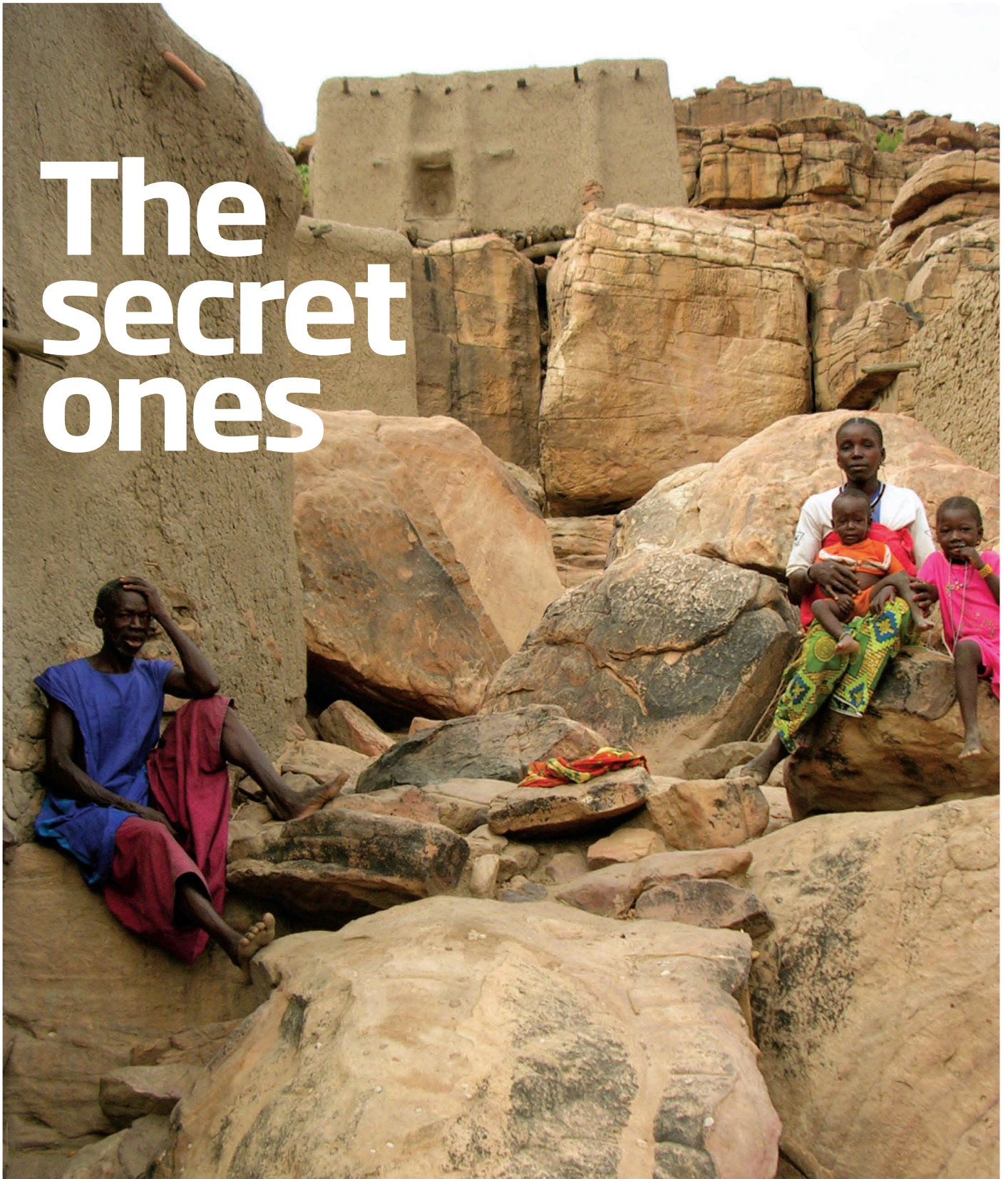


The secret ones



In an inaccessible valley in Mali lives a language that hides as much as it communicates. How did this “anti-language” emerge, asks **Matthew Bradley**

WHEN Westerners say “Timbuktu”, it is as if we are talking about the ends of the earth. But the city’s remoteness is nothing compared to the small village of Bounou, tucked inside a rugged cul-de-sac valley 250 kilometres to the south. No European had ever visited the surrounding Bandiagara region until French colonial officer Louis Desplagnes reached it in 1904 – and even he didn’t get as far as Bounou.

Abbie Hantgan is one of the few Westerners to have reached the village in recent years. She can still recall the last leg of her journey, after an arduous two-day bus trip to the small market town of Konna (see map, page 45). It was the height of the rainy season, meaning that a 5-hour journey by donkey cart was the only way to traverse the canyon where Bounou perches.

“The track was flooded waist-high,” she says. “But the floodwater didn’t keep the cart from finding every rock and rut in the track along the way.” Eventually, they reached a boulder marking the end of the track and she saw Bounou “hanging on the cliff side”. It was, she says, “a scene out of time”.

For Hantgan, Bounou’s remoteness was one of its main attractions. She wanted to document the words spoken by its inhabitants, the Bangande. Although these people share much of their culture with the surrounding Dogon people, their language, called Bangime, is very different and has many unusual characteristics. Understanding its origins could therefore tell us a lot about the history of this little-explored area of Africa, while also offering a way to investigate the birth and evolution of languages.

As Hantgan embarked on her visit to the region, she knew it came with its share of risks. She was taking over research started by the young Dutch linguist Stefan Elders, who passed away while working in Bounou the previous year. He had contracted a stomach ailment and the isolation of the village meant he couldn’t reach a hospital in time.

Elders’s work was part of the US National Science Foundation’s Dogon Project, headed by linguist Jeffrey Heath at the University of Michigan. The project investigates relationships between the various languages spoken by the Dogon peoples living on the Bandiagara Escarpment and the adjacent Seno Plain. Some 80 named Dogon speech varieties exist, which Western linguists categorise as 22 separate languages and many more dialects.

Hantgan’s experience meant she was ideally qualified to take Elders’s place in the project. While volunteering with the US Peace Corps in



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Mali, she had learned Fulfulde and a Dogon language called Bondu-so. Both would prove useful in her doctoral research into Bangime. Fulfulde, used as a lingua franca or bridge language in Bounou, provided her with a tool to talk to local people and elicit words in Bangime, while Bondu-so helped illustrate possible connections with the other Dogon languages.

Hantgan began by compiling a list of common words in Bangime – a task that often attracted derision from the locals. “Every day, villagers on the way to their day’s work in the fields would see me seated inside with my notebook and pen, asking a consultant to repeat the difference between ‘moon’ and ‘water’ over and over again,” she remembers. “With their hoes over their shoulders, they would make fun of me for spending another day sitting in the shade instead of going out to tend crops.”

It was a lonely and frustrating time for her, cut off from contact with family and friends and without even a shortwave radio to remind her of home. But she soon found an ally in the village chief – although he had initially been anxious about her research. He said it upset him that visitors from other Dogon villages often asked why the Bangande have different surnames and don’t look like the rest of the Dogon, even though the Bangande consider themselves to be a Dogon people. Despite concerns that the research might emphasise those differences, he could see how much effort Hantgan was putting in. When villagers would chide her within the chief’s earshot, he would say: “She is tending her crops! The pen is her hoe, and the notebook is her field.”

Once Hantgan had compiled a suitable >

A Bangande family relaxes outside their home (left); the village of Bounou perches on the side of a remote canyon (top)

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