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 150 miles further south. No European had ever visited the surrounding Bandiagara region until French colonial officer Louis Desplagnes reached the area 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-long bus trip to the small market town of Konna (see map). 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 properties. 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 broader Dogon Languages 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 Mali, she had learnt Fulfulde and a Dogon language called Bondu-so. Both would prove useful in her doctoral research into Bangime. Fulfulde, also used as a lingua franca or bridge language in Bounou, provided her with a tool to talk to the locals 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, being 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 – even though 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 number of words, her next task was to...
needs a rethink, he says.

might suggest that the classification system
Honolulu, who points out that scholars tend to
not related to any other spoken language. That
discovered language isolate – a tongue that is
borrowed words like sushi, pergola and
Bangime's vocabulary seemed to share roots
vocabulary of a given Dogon language to be
was not unusual for at least 50 per cent of the
Dogon languages join words to form

Orphan languages
Further evidence for Bangime’s uniqueness
appears to be the fact that its grammar is radically
different from the other languages spoken by
Dogon groups. To give an example: while the
Dogon languages join words to form
compounds – as does English, think football,
rainstorm or driveway – Bangime doesn’t. On
the contrary, prefixes are found in Bangime,
while being notable by their absence in the
Dogon languages.

These differences are somewhat surprising,
because in other ways, the Bangande and
Dogon cultures are very similar. The Bangande
dress themselves with the same clothing and
jewellery as the Dogon people, and both use
Tellem structures – buildings carved in the
cliffs – for granaries and burial grounds.

Looking at the archaeological record, it is
easy to assume that people who share such
material cultures are part of a single language

Life in the remote Bandiagara region comes with
many hardships
community. This has been the basis for
theories about the origins of the Indo-
European languages we speak in Europe and
Asia, for instance. Yet the unusual relationship
between the Dogon and Bangande reminds us
that we can’t rely on these assumptions.

What leads a language to become an isolate?
Campbell notes that isolates may be the
orphaned of larger linguistic families whose
other members have slowly died out – perhaps
because the speakers adopted other
languages. Many social, political and
economic factors probably influence which
languages survive, and which perish – but it is
possible that tongues like Bangime represent a
collapsed effort to resist shifting to others
words.

The first hint of this comes from the very
name Bangande. Bangi translates as secret,
hiden, or furtive, and -áːn is a plural suffix –
sáːn in English – so the combination
translates as “furtive ones”. The word Bangime
represents a concerted effort to resist shifting to others
words.

Hantgan discovered further clues as to why
the Bangande have come to refer to
themselves as “furtive ones” – and might explain why they have been determined to
keep their own language.

The Bangande’s eagerness to retain their
secrecy may have even led Bangime to develop
what British linguist Michael Halliday calls an
anti-language. That’s distinct “dialect” that
seems to mark off a group of speakers from
the larger society”, resulting in an “anti-
society” language, he says. It is one common element of
such dialects, but Bangime’s anti-language
also uses more elliptical tactics.

Hantgan didn’t become aware of the
existence of the anti-language until near the
end of her third year of work in Bounou, when
she had gained some conversational
proficiency in Bangime. She started to see a
pattern in which some terms were the polar
opposites of the things they described. For
example, a particular white-barred tree was
referred to as “black-eyed,” and a particular
black-barred tree as “white-eyed.”

As her mastery of the language improved
even more, Hantgan began to notice that
many words she had asked the villagers for
didn’t regularly appear in natural speech,
where circumstances were often preferred.
For example, she had previously recorded the
term sáːn for fen. One day, she heard a garden fence being referred to as “stick(s) put
into the ground so that people may pass next
to the rice.” Similarly, cakes were sometimes
called “powder which has been sweetened”,
while sunglasses were “black things to hide the
eyes”.

This sort of linguistic theatricality and
deception are an example of what Mark Padel
at the University of Reading calls “a powerful
social anchor.” He has argued that languages
devolve to deceive and exclude others, as much
as to ease communication. A roundabout way
of describing objects is just one strategy that
helps the Bangande set themselves apart from
other groups and perhaps help distance themselves from the passing traders
who may have begun to pick up their everyday
words.

A lasting legacy
The slave trade also seems to have left its mark
in the way Bangime distinguishes social class.
The “articistic”, who claim to descend from the
families who harboured the escaped slaves,
speak in a high register associated with a
more complex tonal system, compared with
the speech of the “serf” population, who are
thought to be descended from those escapes.

A process known as over-regularisation shows
them the nuances and exceptions. For
instance, non-native speakers of English may
say “catched” instead of “caught”.

Such errors can be difficult to overcome, and
they sometimes feed back into the native
language. In other words, erroneous forms can
explain why grammar gets simpler over
time for languages that have a lot of
contact with outsiders, like English. It is easy
to imagine that the escapes learning Bangime
as a second language over-regularised its tonal
system. This happened in a similar way to the
distinct from those descended from the native
inhabitants.

The targeting conflict in Mali means that
fieldwork has been halted for the foreseeable
future – yet there is much more to discover.
One of Hantgan’s long-term research goals is
to investigate links between the origin of the
Bangande people and the Dogon cultures.

Previous researchers had suggested that
when the Dogon arrived about 600 years ago,
they displaced the existing populations in the
region. As evidence, they pointed out that
historical Tellem structures and funerary
remains don’t seem to correspond to present-
day Dogon material cultures.

The Ounjougou research project at the
University of Geneva, Switzerland, however,
has revealed how pre-Dogon and Dogon
material culture and funerary practices subtly
influenced each other. In other words, it is
possible that the cultural similarities the
Bangande share with the Dogon may just as
well have flowed from the Bangande’s
eascent to the Dogon’s as vice versa.

This is but one possibility, of course.

Alternatively, the ancestors of the Bangande
may have arrived in the region along with
those of today’s Dogon, but speaking an
unrelated language. Other groups may have
also moved to the area, with only the
Bangande resisting the shift to a new
Dogon language. But until the security situation
in Mali improves, it won’t be possible to gather
fresh data related to these hypotheses.

At present, Hantgan is eagerly working as
a newly minted postdoctoral fellow at the
School of Oriental and African studies in
London. Her position will see her begin
field research soon in rural Senegal, but she
does hope to return to her friends and
research in Bounou. Despite the hardships,
her enthusiasm is as strong as ever. She
loves the landscape, the trees, the
rainbow of vowel harmony and the ladder of
consonant mutation, these are the intricacies
that make human speech so fascinating to
me,” she says. 

Matthew Bradley is a writer based in Massachusetts.