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Abstract

This article discusses the historical construction of Dendi, a border region now located across Niger, Benin and Nigeria. On the basis of colonial literature and mythological accounts collected in the cities of Gaya, Malanville and Kamba, the paper shows that the Dendi identity is based on the binary opposition between "indigenous people" and "conquerors". Urban foundation myths traditionally present the former as "sons of the soil", worshippers of the earth and land, while emphasising the aristocratic origins of the latter, "who came on foot". In this, Dendi is comparable to other West African socio-political entities such as Borgu in Benin-Nigeria, Yatenga in Burkina Faso and the Hombori Mountains in Mali; it is however rather different due to the importance of the contemporary borders, which introduced different colonial rules and paths of development.

Keywords: oral history; local politics; border regions; cities; Dendi; West Africa

1. Introduction

Since its colonial times, the socio-political West Africa systems often relied on binary societal oppositions between "indigenous people" and "conquerors", "first-comers" and "late-comers", "autochthones" and "immigrants", or "natives" and "strangers". According to Amselle (1990), the origin of such oppositions remains unclear and may have been transmitted from one West African empire to another via the various exchanges of people and ideas which occurred between the 6th and the late 19th centuries. What is certain, however, is that these oppositions played a key role in the conflicting construction of identities of West African societies, as evidenced by the various accounts which refer to them in the oral tradition, and remain highly significant in the control over land and building development, political privileges, labour or taxes as well as in defining belonging in West Africa (Kuba and Lentz 2006). In most cases, these oppositions have been redefined and negotiated according to the shifting balance of local interests and arrival of new populations of immigrants in frontier settlements (Kopytoff 1987, Lentz 2006a).

First-comer vs. late-comer arrangements have been specifically documented in the West African historical and anthropological literature. In Yatenga, for example, Izard (1985) noted a strong opposition, playing a foundational role within contemporary Mosse society, between Nyonyose indigenous people and Nakombse conquerors. While the former were called *gens de la terre* because of their relationships with the spirits of the land, the latter were known as *gens du pouvoir* because they held political authority (Lingane 2002). In Borgu, too, the socio-political system was also dominated by an alliance between Baatombu autochthonous people and aristocratic conquerors descendants of Kisra (Jones 1998, Lombard 1998). A similar phenomenon was also observed in the Keleyadugu chiefdom in southern Mali (Amselle 1990) and in the Hombori Mountains in Mali (Walther 2006). Far from being limited to pre-colonial or colonial contexts, such oppositions have also been observed in contemporary societies, as for example in the context of the construction of the modern Ivorian state, where local Ebrié populations living in Abidjan were called "indigenous", in contrast to more recent immigrants (Terrier 1997), and, even more dramatically, in the political struggle that has been opposing northerners and southerners around the concept of *ivoirité* as of the mid-1990s (Chauveau 2000).

Very few of these studies have specifically focussed on contemporary border regions. Yet, border regions offer interesting and original characteristics for the analysis of binary oppositions. In such regions, the political border between states comes in addition to the well-known social boundary between "autochthones" and "immigrants", giving the opportunity to study what happens when a historical frontier area is divided by different colonial rules and, later on, by a modern state border line. What has been the influence of colonial and post-colonial boundaries on the local construction of identities? Has the emergence of nation states and their modern boundaries led to a divergent evolution of the relations between natives and immigrants? Or, conversely, have these oppositions remained steady, illustrating Amselle's (1990: 60) argument that even if conditions change, the relationship between these social groups has been handed down over time and that it is the permanence of this opposition which should be taken into account?

The aim of this paper is to contribute to scholarly knowledge regarding these questions. We use a corpus of colonial literature and mythological accounts referring to the foundation of three cities – Gaya, Malanville, and Kamba – located in Dendi, a border area situated across Niger, Benin and Nigeria (see Map 1). The paper shows that the Dendi identity is based on the binary opposition between "indigenous people" and "conquerors". While the urban foundation myths traditionally present the former as "sons of the soil", worshippers of the earth and land, these narratives emphasise the aristocratic origin of the latter, "who came on foot". In this, Dendi is indeed comparable to other West African socio-political entities such as the Yatenga in Burkina Faso or the Hombori Moutains in Mali; it is however rather different due to the importance of contemporary borders, which introduced different colonial rules and paths of development in Niger, Benin and Nigeria.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section we briefly present the main characteristics of the Dendi border region and discuss our methodology. In section 3, we present the urban myths of foundation regarding the three cities of Gaya, Malanville and Kamba, focussing on the origin of the opposition between "indigenous people" and "conquerors". Section 4 then presents some of the changes which occurred in post-colonial times to local chieftaincy. In the final section, we conclude with a summary of our key findings and briefly comment on two potential prospects for the study of political local powers and identity.

2. Case study and methodology

The term "Dendi" is used to refer to two different regions in West Africa: the southernmost historical province of the Songhai empire (16th to 17th centuries), located downstream from the capital of Gao (Urvoy 1936), and the contemporary border area intersected by the Niger River over 120 km between Niger, Benin and Nigeria. The latter, which will be investigated in this paper, was occupied by Toulmey, Bossey and Kallé populations prior to the 16th century, whose presence is attested by hillocks formed by remnants of ancient villages and by deep wells drilled into the sandstone (Périé and Sellier 1950). The border region is populated by six main ethnic groups: Kyanga, Zarma, Songhai, Hausa from various sub-groups (Arawa, Toulmawa, Gobirawa, Kabaw, and Komawa), Baatombu (or Bariba), and nomads and sedentary Fulani (Bako-Arifari 1998, Dambo 2007).

Map 1. *Location of the contemporary Dendi border region*

Cartography: Walther, adapted from Dambo 2007.

The Dendi region was long situated on the fringe of pre-colonial socio-political formations, such as the Hausa states or the Songhai Empire. As the oral accounts collected in the region recall, the Dendi also constituted a periphery of the Borgu states, a pluri-ethnic socio-political formation organised around the cities of Nikki, Illo and Bussa on the contemporary Benin-Nigeria border. This loose federation was composed of autonomous political formations and characterised by the alliance of a political class, whose members were descendants of Kisira, an anti-islamic hero, and who intermarried with indigenous Boko/Busa people, the early rulers of Borgu (Boesen, Hardung and Kuba 1998, Brégand 1998, Jones 1998). Borgu is most famous for its *wasangari* people, an aristocratic population very similar to the conquerors of the Dendi, who were responsible for conducting war (Kuba 1998, Lombard 1998).

The importance of the Dendi as an economic crossroads increased as territorial borders were drawn between the French and British colonies in this part of West Africa in the late 19th century. Unlike other regions such as the Koutous in Niger whose initial position was marginalised by the colonial spatial organisation (Retaillé 1984), the Dendi has grown into a commercial hub specialised firstly on regional agricultural products and secondly on the transit and re-export of manufactured goods from the world market (Boluvi 2004, Walther 2008, 2009). This makes the study of urban foundations in Dendi interesting because most of the booming markets are nowadays inhabited by several different types of populations: "indigenous people" and "conquerors" of course, to which particular attention will be paid in this paper, but also new immigrants attracted by the economic potential of the border region.

Urban foundation myths were collected from primary and secondary sources. We used colonial literature devoted to the cities located in Dendi, including reports from the Mission Tilho (1911), and the work of Delafosse (1912), Perron (1924), Ardant du Picq (1931), Urvoy (1936) and Périé and Sellier (1950). We also conducted semi-structured interviews face-to-face with 15 different local actors from 2004 to 2005. These actors were selected on the basis of their genealogical and historical knowledge. This included local community leaders (village, district and *canton* chiefs) as well as town notables, local historians and teachers in Niger, Benin and Nigeria (see Walther 2008 for a more detailed description of the methodology). The general aim of these interviews was to examine how binary oppositions could legitimise the respective positions of social groups. In doing so, we were interested in the various arguments used by local actors to support their own classification of the society.

Particular attention was paid to ensuring the diversity of the sources of oral historical information. As noted by Amselle (1990), foundation narratives very often hide the conflicts which take place between indigenous people and conquerors or immigrants in West Africa. The Dendi border region is certainly no exception to this, and we tried to collect as many different versions of the same myths as possible, in order to go beyond the standardised accounts that aim to preserve harmony vis-à-vis the outside world. The interviews were conducted in Gaya, Malanville and Kamba-Kyangakoy, the three major urban centres located in the Dendi border region, which in 2005 had 33,000, 58,000 and 30,000 inhabitants respectively.

3. Origins of the populations and urban foundations

The Dendi region is a set of cities and villages characterised by the dominance of aristocratic and warrior groups, originating in the disintegration of the Songhai Empire, over a Kyanga population responsible for traditional cults and ownership of the land. The following sections trace the origin of these populations, which inhabit today's cities in the Dendi, and discuss the opposition between the so-called "sons of the soil" and "conquerors". We focussed on urban foundations, which can be considered as the "*pivotal historical event*" mentioned by Murphy and Bledsoe (1989: 124), allowing to distinguish between first-comers and late-comers.

3.1. The foundation of Kyangakoy and Kamba by the Kyanga

Oral history indicates that the origin of the Kyanga population, which today populates both banks of the River Niger and belongs to the Mande language group (Bako-Arifari 1997, Jones 1998), dates back to the battle of Badr in 624, in which the armies of the Prophet overcame a caravan of Quraysh pagans. Kyanga populations claim to have fled to Yemen and crossed the Red Sea before embarking on a long journey across the Sahara to their current location (Interview 4, 12/06/2005). These mythological elements, which are also reported in the Borgu region (Kuba 1998), are contradictory with linguistic studies, which noted that the Kyanga and other Mande family language groups are of West African origin, the Kyanga/Busa group being the easternmost of all (Jones 1998). Nevertheless, such a mythological origin is an important element in the construction of the identity of the Kyanga, who, in contrast to Songhai groups, cannot legitimately claim a Muslim origin, but nevertheless wish their own history to be included within a larger mythological framework.

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Their migration into the border region can be subdivided into three major trends, the first two relating directly to the cities of Kyangakoy and Kamba, and the latter concerning the city of Gaya described in Chapter 3.2.

According to local accounts, a first wave of settlement followed the Niger River from Zamfara, located in the western part of contemporary Nigeria. These Kyanga populations then settled close to the "triple point" of the present Niger-Benin-Nigeria border, where a split occurred. The main group of Kyanga decided to go up the Niger River on foot and settled close to the small Sota River in contemporary Benin. Because many young children died in the river, the Kyanga moved once again and founded Garou, considered as the first "real" Kyanga village in the Dendi.

A second wave came, according to oral tradition, from the north. Originally established in Kyangala – a place between Dosso and Dogondoutchi in contemporary Niger which would provide their name – these Kyanga reached Gao, the capital of the Songhai Empire. From Gao, they followed the Niger River downstream until they reached Katanga, a city which no longer exists but whose location is supposed to be between Koullo and Kompa in Niger (Interview 5, 22/10/2005). Subsequently, their journey took them away from the river valley to reach the village of Bella, close to Dallol Fogha, a humid fossil valley. Here, probably in the early sixteenth century, a division took place between three brothers, giving rise to the chiefdom of Kyangakoy under the authority of the elder brother Kyanga Daka who ruled from 1529-1562 (see Appendix 1), to the chiefdom of Yelou under the authority of Umaru, and to the chiefdom of Bana under the authority of the youngest brother, named Dobi (Interview 5, 22/10/2005).

The city of Kyangakoy, located nearby in contemporary Nigeria, is said to have been founded later, after a buffalo hunt which took the hunters close to a pond called Tarka. Oral histories insist on the fact that the place had to be cleared before the Kyanga could settle there permanently, stressing the fact that no former human settlement was known in the area and that they could be considered as first-comers. For centuries, Kyangakoy was the political centre of this part of the border region, until the more recent city of Kamba developed in the late 19th century thanks to the British colonial administration. The two cities experienced a

period of insecurity: the cities were vassals of the Kebbi Emirate based in Argungu, which at the time was allied with the Zarma against the Sokoto Caliphate.

The city of Kamba developed very slowly until the late 19th century, when the British arrived in the region under the reign of Kyanga Manou (1833-1906, see Appendix 1). The colonial administration was established in Kamba and a new Hausa chiefdom was installed, accentuating the rivalry between the two cities. As the economic and political importance of Kamba strengthened over time, the authority of traditional elites in Kyangakoy was correspondingly weakened. Nowadays, Kamba houses the decentralised political authority – known as the Dendi Local Government Area – and its representative, the Chairman. Kyanga traditional leaders claim the city of Kamba is built on a former field from their ancestors, its name referring to "the new growth of millet after the harvest" in Hausa, whereas "Kyangakoy" means literally "king of Kyanga". Today, commercial activity in Kamba and Kyangakoy has declined considerably compared to its levels of the late 1980s, a consequence of economic factors (notably rising oil prices), political trouble (insecurity, corruption) and religious violence against Christian traders, experienced by Nigeria as a whole and by the Kebbi State in particular (Walther 2007).

3.2. The foundation of Gaya

In contrast to Kyangakoy and Kamba, where only one ethnic group can legitimately claim the foundation of the city, different versions of how Gaya was originally founded can be collected from oral history sources. In this section, we present the two main Kyanga and Songhai historical accounts, without trying to identify which is the more legitimate. Our interest is rather to set out the social and political consequences of the division between the two populations on the organisation of the society.

From a Kyanga point of view, Gaya means "it shall last a long time". The city was originally founded by the members of a third wave of settlement which came to the Dendi border region, following the two waves previously described. The oral tradition identifies three fundamental moments: the quest for the perfect location; the urban foundation; and the meeting with the Songhai.

The story indicates that Kokoa Monzon, the founding ancestor, arrived in the region of Yauri and reached Garou Béri before arriving at Dallassié, a village opposite the current city of Gaya. In Dallassié, the Kyanga came into conflict with Borgu people whose political entities were located around Bussa, Nikki, and Illo in contemporary Nigeria and Benin (see Boesen, Hardung and Kuba 1998). Kokoa Monzon consulted his religious adviser, who told him: "*This is what is going to happen: if you decide to stay here, you and your family will live, but everyone else will die*". Unwilling to take such a risk, Kokoa Monzon decided to leave Dallassié and settled in front of Kombo, a small hill located close to the current Nigerien Customs Authorities (Interview 6, 25/11/2004). But Kombo was not safe and the Kyanga were once again forced by the Borgu people to find another location. At this point, Kokoa Monzon, who was an animist, confided in his own spirit and said: "*Today is your day. Today, I will see if you are really powerful*". Having uttered these words, he noticed a large snake extended across the Niger River, which could serve as a bridge to help him and his people to cross the river. Kokoa Monzon crossed the bridge formed by the serpent to the other side of the river, soon followed by the other Kyanga. The story goes on to specify that the chief of the Borgu people wanted to follow the same path to pursue the Kyanga, but the snake plunged into the river, drowning the Borgu warrior (Interview 6, 25/11/2004).

When the Kyanga reached the left bank of the Niger River, several potential locations were offered to them. Oral myths state that after several temporary settlements, the Kyanga reached Sokondji, one of the urban districts of contemporary Gaya. There, according to the accounts collected, the Kyanga asked Lâta and Ouza, the two main spirits protecting the Kyanga, whether the location was safe enough to build a new city, and received a positive answer from them. Kokoa Monzon said: "*Be a mother to me. I will suck your breast. Be a father to me, defend me and protect me from all things*" (Interview 6, 25/11/2004). At the foot of a baobab tree located close to what is now Koussou Kourey district, the *Gagna-koy* responsible for traditional worship, the good health of harvest and the ownership of the land, was inducted (Interview 6, 25/11/2004). At this point, the stories collected state that the bush surrounding Koussou Kourey was inhabited only by "wild animals", in order to stress that the freshly-founded human settlement was the first. Very soon, however, the Kyanga were forced to come into contact with the Songhai, who also arrived in the region. As shown in the following stories, this encounter is a crucial moment in the definition of local identities and local authorities, which remains highly significant today.

According to the Kyanga notables interviewed, the Songhai conqueror Samsou Béri chose to settle in Koyzey Kounda, one of the oldest districts of the city of Gaya, whose etymological meaning is "the district of the king's sons" in Zarma-Songhai, while the Kyanga were still based in Sokondji and Koussou Kourey, as explained in the previous section. Mythological accounts state that "*the Kyanga and the Songhai were separated by a forest. They heard noise* [coming from the other group] *but they could not see each other at the beginning. Then, they finally met in the forest but were unable to understand each other. The Songhai waved their hands at the Kyanga, indicating that they were thirsty and wanted to drink some water. The Kyanga showed them the* [Niger] *river*" (our translation, Interview 7, 23/11/2004).

Later, the Kyanga and the Songhai agreed on the need to build a city wall, in order to protect Gaya from slave raids conducted by the Fulani. At this time, the spirits of the earth warned the two groups that this construction would have important consequences: the man in charge of the construction of the wall would, they said, die after completing his work. The Songhai Samsou Béri refused to build the wall, which symbolised the foundation of the city, and would have singled out Kokoa Monzon, the Kyanga chief. Despite the risk involved in building the wall, Kokoa Monzon accepted to do the work and designated Fara Monzon as his successor (Interview 7, 23/11/2004). When the city of Gaya was finally surrounded by its wall, the division of functions between the Songhai and the Kyanga was completed: the former would be responsible for political authority, and the latter would be responsible for religious authority, including land administration. Both groups would from now on speak the language of the Songhai.

The Songhai perspective on the foundation of Gaya is quite different from the one of the Kyanga. Songhai populations have established in the Dendi in three waves of settlement. The oldest wave dates back to the campaigns of Askia Muhammad from 1505 to 1517 (Périé and Sellier 1950). At that time, the historic Dendi formed a dependent province of Gao, governed by the Dendi Fari, who was ranked third within the Empire (Cissoko 1985). The second wave of settlement was linked to the fall of the Songhai Empire, defeated by the Moroccan troops in the battle of Tondibi in 1591. Entrenched in Dendi, the survivors of Gao, commanded by Askia Nouhou Issihak, conducted a guerrilla campaign with the help of the Kebbi Kingdom until 1599. Their political organisation, however, gradually disintegrated by 1640 following numerous internecine struggles (Abitbol 1999). The origins of the current Songhai chiefdom are in the third wave. These small groups of Songhai probably left the historical Dendi located

between Ansongo and Niamey at the very beginning of the 18th century and reached Gaya after having followed the Niger River. Among them, the two brothers Daouda and Hanga – often considered as descendants of Askia Mohammed in local accounts – are regarded as the first Songhai immigrants. Daouda and Hanga are said to have founded the city of Tanda and Gaya before establishing themselves on both banks of the Niger River. Their descendants still rule the district and *canton* chiefdom of Gaya.

The genealogy of the Songhai is reconstructed in Figure 1 from the reigns of the emperors of the Empire of Gao (known as *askias*), sometimes with mythological links between rulers. Indeed, oral history seems to focus more on the prestige of being descended from the Songhai Empire of Gao than on a "positivist" reconstruction of the line of descent. While the current leaders of Gaya explicitly claim to be descended from the 17th century Songhai *askias*, there is an unexplained break of over a century, for example, between Askia Ismail (1635) and Daouda and Hanga (about 1750), founders of the city of Gaya.

The Songhai have their own narrative of the founding of the city, which differs significantly from that of the Kyanga. While the Kyanga claim that their ancestors established themselves in Gaya prior to the arrival of the Songhai, the descendants of the Songhai claim that Gaya was only temporarily occupied by the Kyanga. Chief Ekoye (1985) tells the following story about the establishment of the Songhai: "*El Hadj Hanga, founder of Dendi, left the Songhai* [Empire] *to settle in Garou (Benin). There, he married Tassa, Village Chief Dakou's daughter. Tassa gave birth to Samsou Béri and Hari Gani. When Dakou died, Dizi was designated as his successor. When Samsou grew up, he tried to overthrow Dizi and proclaim himself village chief. But his mother objected. Faced with opposition from his mother, he crossed the river to the left bank with a few disgruntled allies and founded the village of Tara*" (our translation). After the founding of Tara, the story indicates that Samsou Béri looked for another site, which eventually became Gaya. This story presents many similarities with the general socio-political organisation in Borgu, notably because in both regions the aristocracy allied to the indigenous people by marrying the village chief's daughter. Such an alliance had the advantage of ensuring some security for the indigenous leaders and to allow aristocrats to secure the support of traditional deities and a legitimate political sovereignty (Kuba 1998). Furthermore, both regions have faced significant conflicts between members of the aristocracy, which encouraged the migration of small groups of conquerors, who have increasingly imposed cultural characteristics on indigenous peoples.

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Figure 1. *Genealogy of the Songhai princes of Dendi*
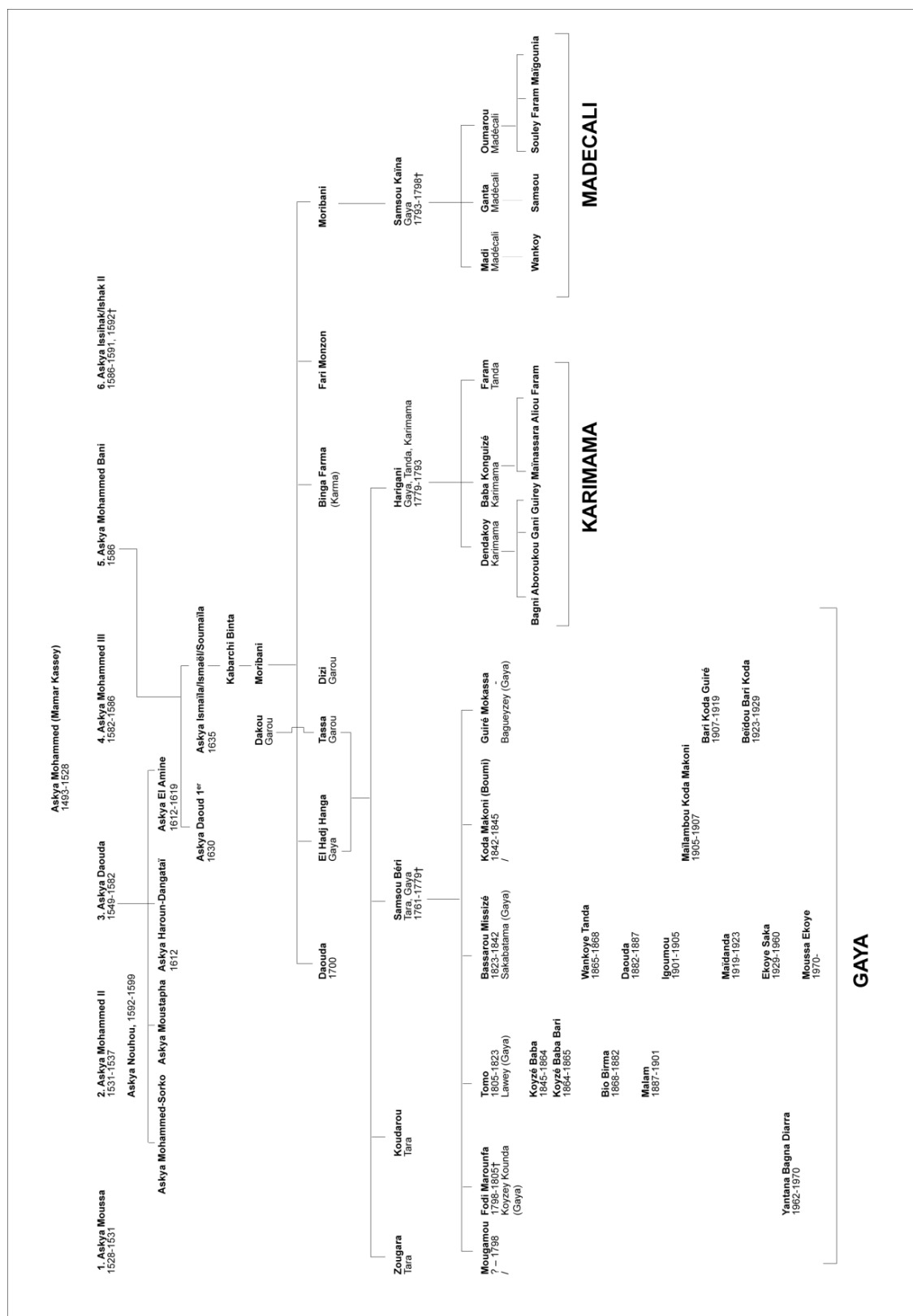
Sources: Tilho 1911, Delafosse 1912, Perron 1924, Ardant du Picq 1931, Urvoy 1936, Périé and Sellier 1950 and author's enquiries, 2004-2005. The dates indicate the reigns.

When in Gaya, the Songhai apparently found a clearing and, after having consulted their religious advisors, said: "ir na gayi nago", which is Zarma-Songhai for "we have kept this place". Chief Ekoye (1985) adds: "*When they arrived in Gaya, the Songhai found that the Kyanga were cultivating the place but had not yet founded a village. Those Kyanga lived on a river island for fear of the Fulani who were coming from the east. The Kyanga first refused to welcome the Songhai, believing that they were Fulani. But once informed of the good intentions of the Songhai, they agreed to meet them. Kyanga and Songhai met in a place after having pledged their word of honour. The Songhai then asked to see the village of the Kyanga, which did not exist at the time. They asked the Kyanga for permission to build a village*" (our translation).

Another Songhai version states that the city of Gaya was founded from the neighbourhood of Lawey (Interview 8, 20/11/2004). Stories collected in Gaya indicate that El Hadj Hanga, the Songhai ancestor who came to the border region in the 18th century, had several religious advisors who settled with him in Tara. These religious advisors noticed smoke coming from the east, indicating that other people inhabited the area where the current city of Gaya is located. The Songhai went in that direction to try to get in touch with those unidentified people through a thick bush. When they arrived where the fire was burning, El Hadj Hanga and his people saw an uninhabited clearing. The Kyanga had obviously left. Their own earth priests had indicated that another group of people was trying to get in touch with them. Over the following days, a competition between the Kyanga and Songhai religious advisors took place and, after several unsuccessful attempts, a meeting was organised between the two groups. On this occasion, the question of why the Kyanga were not permanently settled in their clearing but had instead taken refuge on the islands of the river was raised; the Kyanga claimed, as in other oral accounts discussed so far, that they feared being enslaved by the Muslim Fulani.

After the foundation of Gaya, the history of the Songhai princes of Gaya appears rather hectic and involves a large number of towns along the Niger River (Dambo 2007). On frequent occasions, the rivalries of succession led to open or latent conflicts based on shifting and conflicting alliances. For example, the Songhai chiefdom of Gaya formed an alliance with the chiefdom of Tanda and Garou Béri, while Karimama became allied with the chiefdom of Kompa, Madecali, and Tara (Séré de Rivières 1965). This evolution presents interesting similarities with that of the Borgu states, marked by a strong tendency towards territorial

division. This lack of centralization has been interpreted in the literature as a result of the elective system of succession, which induced conflict between brothers because all the sons of a king could succeed their father and forced them to look for new villages to rule, and a strong attachment to the values of honour and war by the *Wasangari* aristocracy (Lombard 1965, 1998).

Later on, the colonial period radically changed the power relationships in favour of some traditional chiefs eager to ally with the French and build their own zone of influence. The local chiefdom of Dosso, for example, located north of Gaya, progressively turned into a regional power extending over the "Zarma country", through the skills of Chief Aouta, who actively collaborated with the French (Rothiot 1988). More locally, the privileges and spatial limitations of the chiefdoms were transformed according to the attitudes of local elites vis-à-vis the French military, and a new territorial division was introduced by the creation of the *cantons* and their chiefs.

3.3. The colonial origin of Malanville

With 60,000 inhabitants, Malanville is now the largest urban centre in the Dendi. In contrast to the majority of the cities in the border region, Malanville's origins are primarily due to the French colonial presence in the north of Benin. Oral tradition relates several versions of the founding of Malanville and Wollo, an older village now included in the urban agglomeration (Interview 1, 09/04/2005, Interview 2, 06/09/2005, Interview 3, 02/12/2005, and Interview 11, 29/09/05).

According to local accounts, the current site of Wollo was temporarily occupied during the 18th century by Fulani from Karimama, who would come to trade with the newly-established city of Gaya, by Sorko fishermen originally from Gaya, and by a bandit named Mwoney Tassi. The first sedentary resident is said to be Mounkaïla, a Zarma who came from the left bank of the Niger River. Mounkaïla was accompanied by his son Gabo and by a young man called Souleymane, considered his adopted son and who accompanied him fishing.

Until the late 19th century, the village of Wollo was of very little importance. The arrival of the French colonial troops in 1897 altered the situation considerably. Until that time, the dominant chiefdom in the right bank of the Niger River had been Karimama, located upstream from Malanville (Urvoy 1936). The colonial troops obtained the cooperation of the

chiefdom of Karimama before the administrators transformed the political landscape of the border region. Village and district chiefdoms were very often restructured either by creating new political entities or by removing its leaders if they proved insufficiently cooperative, as they did in Niger.

The populations of several fishing hamlets scattered throughout the river valley were also gathered together on a single site named Tassi ("sand" in Zarma), where the contemporary city of Malanville now stands. The new location was renamed Malanville by the French Corps of Engineers based here, in honour of Henri Malan (1869-1912), colonial governor of Dahomey from 1909 to 1911. The strategic importance of the city for the supply of the Colony of Niger intensified from the 1930s onwards, with the introduction of ferry boats on the Niger River; however, the local market only developed significantly when a new bridge was built over the river in 1958. Over the following decades, the market became one of the main commercial centres in the region, with a strong specialisation in regional agricultural products, notably rice and onions (Walther 2007, 2009).

4. "When the grass eats the horse": Since the Independence

The traditional political and religious authorities described in this article have undergone profound changes during the second half of the 20th century, following the establishment of modern states. The attitude of these states vis-à-vis traditional leaders has varied greatly in different situations.

Thus, in Niger, traditional political leaders first became closer to the government of Diori Hamani (1960-1974) when the President found it necessary to consolidate national unity and fight the Sawabe party, before gradually moving away from the regime because of its heavy contributions on rural populations. Later, traditional chiefdoms found it more difficult to use the single party of Seyni Kountché (1974-1987) for their own ends. Himself from a noble Zarma family, President Kountché showed a strong willingness to reform traditional chiefdoms so as to exert greater control over them (Abba 1990). Yet there never was a fundamental questioning of the chiefdom in Niger, perhaps because, according to Olivier de Sardan (1984: 203), "*as colonization, the ruling Nigerien bourgeoisie rely on the (reformed) traditional aristocracy and entrusted the aristocracy to "hold firm" the rural areas and control the peasant masses*".

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The relatively favourable disposition of the Niger authorities towards traditional chiefs did not prevent chiefdoms to redefine their prerogatives. Urban district chiefs and *cantons* chiefs, in particular, have seen their influence diminish considerably as regards local affairs in urban areas. These traditional authorities currently undertake a mediation role in local affairs between households, or between the Prefecture and the decentralised municipality on one side and the citizens on the other side. State or municipal authorities, as well as numerous community committees set up by aid agencies multiply the possibilities of action or protest and allow urban dwellers to circumvent the powers of traditional leaders and to air their grievances to official bodies, sometimes regarded as more legitimate than chiefdoms.

Representatives of the state and new mayors are forced to spare the traditional chiefs or face damaging obstruction to their activities. Their situation is furthermore complicated by the fact that many of these representatives are insufficiently anchored locally (decentralised municipalities were only created during the 2000s). Mayors must then preserve the traditional structures in the hope that they will collect sufficient taxes for urban investments, which may in return promote their re-election. Very often, they act as mediators between the various village or district chiefs rather than engage in direct confrontation with traditional leaders.

The situation is radically different in Benin, where, after independence in 1960, the Marxist regime of Mathieu Kérékou restricted the power of traditional chiefs (Jones 1998), unlike in Niger and Nigeria. As reported by the disenchanted son of a former district chief in Malanville: "*The* [Marxist] *Revolution really got on our nerves! It led to the overthrow of traditional values. Look! Today, the grass eats the horse!*". During the Revolution, traditional leaders were seen as representatives of feudalism and witchcraft and were identified as a threat to the power of the single party in rural areas. Following the National Conference in February 1990, which marked the advent of democracy, the claims related to the exercise of chiefdoms have gained momentum, but representatives from the former chieftaincy have experienced difficulties in reinvesting massively in local politics.

Because of the seniority of the decentralised institutions and the weight of its traditional leadership, traditional chieftaincy remains a key player in local politics in Nigeria (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2003). As in Niger, traditional leaders continue to collect taxes on behalf of the Local Government Areas (LGA). Since Lord Frederick Lugard, Governor

General of Nigeria from 1912 to 1919, the western regions of the country have been administered under the principle of indirect rule, i.e. a traditional local power structure incorporated into the colonial administrative structure and responsible for the settlement of local conflicts. The choice of this mode of government was motivated by fear of problems that could have followed the fragilization of local cultures. Traditional institutions and local leaders were generally maintained wherever possible.

5. Conclusion

Founded around the 16th century jointly by the Kyanga and Songhai populations, the Dendi border region is structured around a binary opposition between "indigenous people", who used to be responsible for the traditional religion, and "conquerors", responsible for the political power which structures the construction of local identities, a common and disputed occurrence in West Africa (Meillassoux 1971: 23).

For the Kyanga, these narratives evoke a succession of key moments: forced migration with the spread of Islam, the search for the ideal location under the leadership of a founding hero, the attempts to establish contact with the newly-arrived Songhai conquerors, and the sharing of power which results from this encounter. For the Songhai, oral history emphasises the important lineage linking the former *askias* of the Songhai Empire to the populations who rule today's village and *canton* chiefdoms, and the superiority of a highly hierarchical society such as that of the Songhai over peasant chiefdoms. Stories collected locally from the Kyanga indicate that an arrangement with the Songhay was inevitable, considering their military power. Indeed, as shown by previous accounts, Kyanga Chief Kokoa Monzon decided to build the city wall symbolising the military defence at the time of the founding of Gaya despite the warning of his oracle, who predicted certain death. His decision can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of resignation to the military superiority of the Songhai and as the beginning of the division between two different roles played by the Kyanga *Gagna-koy* (religious leader) and the Songhai *Laabu-koy* (political leader) in Gaya.

As in many other regions in West Africa, first-comers generally retain the responsibility for traditional cults with the spirits of the land (Lentz 2010). In the Dendi, the *Gagna-koy* enjoyed authority in the field of spirituality and traditional cults, being responsible for the cycle of rain-fed crops and bush fruit. Contrary to other parts of West Africa such as Southwestern

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Burkina Faso (Lentz 2006b, Kuba 2006), his authority declined over time due to the expansion of Islam, which reduced the legitimacy of traditional cults, and to the development of the modern states, which increasingly invest in land and control of natural resources.

The arrival of the Songhai in Gaya brought major changes to the local political landscape. Gradually, their hierarchical principles of organisation, based on war and princely lineage, imposed themselves throughout the region. "*Gradually*", observes Olivier de Sardan (1984: 91), "*the principle of spatial anteriority that characterised peasant chiefdom turns into a principle of genealogical anteriority, typical of an aristocratic chiefdom*" (our translation). Yet, only the Kyanga are recognised as *Laabizey* ("sons of the soil"), while all the other populations, including the descendants of the Songhai Empire, are called *Che Kaanda*, which means literally "they came on foot". It matters little that these "sons of the soil" are originally from elsewhere, as the local myths recall, since their status as natives is legitimised by the symbolic clearing of the site of Gaya and by their (former) responsibilities within the traditional religion.

This work suggests several possible avenues for the study of local power and identity in the Dendi border region. Firstly, it would be interesting to extend the analysis to include the contemporary consequences of such a binary societal opposition. As briefly mentioned in this paper, the Dendi is nowadays composed not only of "sons of the soil" and conquerors, but is also an increasingly attractive destination for a new category of immigrants represented by the traders involved in the circulation of goods and agricultural investors mostly active in the irrigated production of agricultural products. Some of these entrepreneurs have become important actors in the local urban market and have successfully occupied political positions in the newly-decentralised local communities, challenging the traditional organisation of power at the local level. More research on the conflicting or cooperative relations maintained between this new economic elite, whose success is based on the exploitation of border differentials, and the traditional elites described in this paper would certainly contribute to a better understanding of the local political context.

A second avenue of research would be to extend the geographical scope of the analysis and compare the Dendi with other regions within West Africa, a path that has already been shown by Lombard (1998) in his comparative study of Bariba and Mosse socio-political systems. The strong opposition between "sons of the soil" and "conquerors" is certainly not specific to

the Dendi. As this paper shows, it has especially strong similarities with the one seen in the Borgu states located between Benin and Nigeria, or with Yatenga in Burkina Faso. In both regions, the conquerors supplanted the authority of local chiefs, who lost their political authority but retained their religious power. Despite their political differences – Yatenga was more centralised than the Borgu or the Dendi, the chief of land was more powerful in Borgu than in Yatenga – and different rules of succession, these societies appear to have shared some common characteristics in their political system. Similar characteristics can also be found in the Hombori Mountains located in eastern Mali, where local power was divided between animist Dogon populations and aristocratic conquerors of Songhai origin (Walther 2006). In both cases, local identity was intimately linked to the decline of a centralised political structure (i.e. the Songhai Empire of Gao) and the need to find a refuge in order to rebuild a society characterised by a high degree of marginality vis-à-vis the regional population centres. In Dendi and in the Hombori Mountains, such a binary opposition appears to have particularly resisted the historical changes brought by war, migration, colonisation and the creation of modern nation-states.

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Appendix 1. List of Kyanga chiefs from Kamba and Kyangakoy, 1529-2005

1. Kyanga Daka, 1529-1562

2. Kyanga Kauri, 1563-1594

3. Kyanga Sanga, 1595-1611

4. Kyanga Miji, 1616-1657

5. Kyanga Maza, 1658-1681

6. Kyanga Barkassa, 1682-1707

7. Kyanga Taru, 1708-1729

8. Kyanga Dawa, 1730-1756

9. Kyanga Kamba, 1757-1782

10. Kyanga Bado, 1783-1798

11. Kyanga Kema, 1799-1808

12. Kyanga Bargi, 1809-1832

13. Kyanga Na-Shiko I, 1833-1861

14. Kyanga Namata, 1825-1833

15. Kyanga Manou, 1833-1906

16. Kyanga Giwa, 1907-1918

17. Kyanga Ango Sikan Kyanga Na Shiko I, 1919-1926

18. Kyanga Arzika, 1928-1935

19. Kyanga Mamman Dan Bashiro, 1936-1939

20. Kyanga Na-Shiko II Dan Kyanga Manou, 1940-1959

21. Kyanga Yahaye Arugu, 1960-1980

22. Kyanga Dantani, 1981-1985

23. Kyanga Sako Mailafia, 1985-1985

24. Kyanga Ibrahim Wata, 1985 to this day. Kyanga Ibrahim Wata was Village Head from 1985 to 1998, District Head from 1998, and elected at the King Maker Argungu Emirate Council in 2004.

Source: author's enquiries, 2004-2005.

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