

MARKING BOUNDARIES AND IDENTITIES: THE PRE-COLONIAL EXPANSION OF SEGMENTARY SOCIETIES IN SOUTHWESTERN BURKINA FASO

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Introduction

Over approximately the last 200 years, north-west Ghana and large areas of neighbouring southern Burkina Faso were the stage for a highly successful expansion of Dagara-speaking peoples. Probably setting out from an area around Wa, small groups of Dagara migrated towards the north, some of them taking a westward route, crossing the Black Volta river into today's Burkina Faso. They rarely advanced into nomansland but rather displaced peoples such as Sisala-, Dyan-, Phuie- and Bwamu-speaking groups, who then moved further west and north. Today, the Dagara occupy about 3500 km² in southern Burkina Faso, where they represent the sixth largest language group. In this paper I wish to explore the history of the north-west frontier of Dagara expansion and the interaction between the "land-owning" Phuo and the incoming Dagara.¹

The Dagara are a comparatively well researched society. Thanks to the works of Labouret, Goody, Hébert, Savonnet² and more recent studies by Dagara intellectuals,³ we are well informed about many aspects of their social organisation, economic life, belief and ritual. What has been emphasised less is the mobility of this society. One its oft-noted features, the earth shrine, is usually portrayed as an immobile traditional institution, central to the spatial and social order. Present in virtually every settlement, it spiritually protects the village territory, and its custodian regulates access to land and other resources.

The contradiction between apparently timeless earth shrines and the high mobility of lineages and residential groups calls for a closer examination of how local communities constituted themselves in the past and how they

¹ This paper is based on an analysis of settlement foundation stories from over sixty settlements, mainly in the Dano, Oronkua and Guéguéré Districts of Ioba province as well as on participant observation. Fieldwork totalling ten months was carried out in the years 1997-99.

² LABOURET 1931; GOODY 1956, 1962; SAVONNET 1970; HÉBERT 1976

³ DABIRÉ 1983; J-M. SOMÉ 1987; V. SOMÉ 1996

defined spatial boundaries and rules of membership “against” the wider natural and socio-political environment.

The Dagara share with the neighbouring groups a segmentary, non-centralised political structure and the same kind of shifting or slash-and-burn agriculture. They also draw on the same pool of concepts and values concerning land rights.⁴ Although they both belong to the Gur family, the spoken languages, Dagara and Phuo, are genetically too far apart to be mutually intelligible. Without expanding on the details of the argument I would suggest that some kind of distinct “ethnic” consciousness existed in pre-colonial times among these groups. Imagined communities⁵ were constituted along lines of extended kinship, exogamous marriage, allied patrilineal and ritual networks. These overlapping networks could cover considerable distances. In spite of the widespread insecurity which restricted frequent travelling in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a high degree of residential mobility.

To understand why the Dagara were so successful in occupying and ritually appropriating large areas, we have to know more about how the expansionist movement worked. How was the movement organised internally and what sort of relationship developed between the Dagara and the groups they displaced? Having the frontier situation in mind, I will first sketch the concepts of ritual land-ownership and village territory and then analyse the changing modes of interethnic contact and land appropriation on the north-western frontier of the Dagara expansion. This frontier region is inhabited by Dagara-Wiile, a Dagara subgroup showing some dialectical and cultural differences from the Dagara-Lobr subgroup.⁶

⁴ Cf. DACHER 1997, TENGAN 1991, ZWERNEMANN 1968, SAVONNET 1976

⁵ Cf. ANDERSON 1991. LENTZ (1998) has written extensively on the construction of Dagara ethnicity in north-west Ghana.

⁶ In Goody’s purely classificatory terminology they would be LoWiili and LoDagaa.

Concepts of ritual land-ownership and village territory

The Dagara-Wiile relationship with the land and territory is determined by a central concept: *tengan* (literally “the crust or skin of the earth”), which refers to the territory under the protection of a particular earth shrine. The *tengan* territory includes the settlement⁷ as well as different categories of uninhabited bush. The territory under the ritual protection of an earth shrine is usually an area within the range of the first settlers’ hunting expeditions, its fluid boundaries being represented either by topographical features, hills, dried up rivers, marigots, or specific trees. As the region was sparsely populated and land was available, the need to define more precise boundaries probably only occurred during colonial times. With increasing population pressure this process is still going on. Today boundaries between earth shrine areas are frequently referred to as *turbog*, originally the term for the ditch marking the limit of a field.

The earth shrine itself mainly consists of a stone (*tengan kuur*) and often also a tree under which the stone is buried and a little grove where sacrifices are carried out. The custodian of the shrine is called the *tengansob*, the “owner” or “master” of the shrine. He is supposedly a descendant of the first settler. It is the *tengansob* or earth-priest who is responsible for sacrifices to the earth, which is considered vital for the well-being and fertility of men, animals and crops. He also allocates land to new settlers and gives the green light to annual fishing and hunting parties operating on the land protected by the earth shrine. In case of suicide or certain other unnatural death, the *tengansob* has to intervene to repair the damage done to the earth and allow the burial of the corpse. The apparent power of such an office is restricted by numerous taboos, and there is general discourse about the office being dangerous and not very rewarding for its holder. While individuals may not fight to become *tengansob*, the patriclan segment within which the office devolves hereditarily will strongly affirm its right to choose the earth priest from its ranks.

In the process of territorial expansion, which mainly took place through the fission of domestic groups,⁸ the survival of a group of pioneering settlers on new land is only guaranteed if the ritual umbilical cord to the earth shrine of the mother community remains intact. The process of building a ritually independent settlement is a gradual one, starting with the installation of a separate earth shrine and with the first burial carried out in the new location. The process is at an end when the ritual ties are gradually cut off. The test

⁷ A settlement consisted of up to a dozen or more widely dispersed homesteads (*yie*). A *yir* is inhabited by a segment of a larger patriclan and could have well over a hundred inhabitants, a number which in our days is extremely rare, as security became a less imperative consideration after colonial pacification, and much smaller units could settle on their own.

⁸ Cf. GOODY 1958

question is , “Where do you go if there is a suicide in the village?” to which the answer comes, “We deal with the problem at our own *tengan*”.

The stone which is the symbol placed at the centre of the earth shrine is a surprisingly mobile item: it may be carried in a bag from one location to another. An earth shrine is believed to transfer its powers to any stone lying in the ground surrounding the *tengan*. That is how a “mother” shrine produces “children” (*kubile* “little stone”) which may be taken away to be installed elsewhere. In the final resort all Dagara-Wiile *tengan kuur* are believed to come from the original home in present-day Ghana.

If a new settlement is founded on land which is clearly within an existing earth shrine area and the foundation is done with the consent and help of the custodian of that earth shrine, the ritual dependence of the younger settlement is usually undisputed. Nevertheless there are a number of cases where the founding lineages have refused to ask the nearest village to them for a *kubile*, and have preferred to turn to a settlement in the region where a closely related segment of their patriline holds the office of *tengansob* (e.g. Dabole and Tampere). Whatever sort of relation may govern the allegiance, be it kinship or territorial ties, the asymmetrical relationship between settlements can be observed in ritual and may be used to establish a relative chronology: the custodian of the older earth shrines performs certain rituals for the younger settlements. Thus, because of their different degrees of dependence, the structure of major and minor earth shrines tells us something about the history of settlement.

Among the Phuo the “first-comer ideology”⁹ is less pronounced, and lineages are rather specialised, according to religious competence. The office of the earth priest (*terotie*) is associated with certain lineages. These are labelled *bara*, which might be translated “noble”. Each of the seven territorial groups has one *bara* lineage which has the final say in matters concerning the spiritual forces of the earth in that territory. Yet there are other lineages whose members may also be *therotie* and perform sacrifices at earth shrines. Other ritual functions held by certain lineages, like the master of the bush (*kamutie*) or the master of rivers and ponds (*nyipoletie*), are of similar importance. If a village is founded by a “bush owning” lineage, the first-comers, unlike the Dagara, cannot install an earth shrine on their own. As a village is not complete without an earth shrine, they will invite members of an “earth-owning” lineage to install the shrine, settle in the village and become its custodians. A ritual hierarchy between settlements is thus much less pronounced than in the case of their Dagara neighbours.

⁹ Cf. HORTON 1985

Changing modes of interethnic contact

Narratives concerning settlement history are a contested field. Especially if the first occupation of a territory legitimises the first-comers and their descendants as “landowners” who can allocate land to later arrivals, these narratives may fully be understood only in the light of old and recent conflicts. This applies not only to conflicting foundation stories within a settlement, but also to versions held by Phuo and Dagara about the early history of a particular settlement. As the majority of Dagara-Wile live on territory formally settled by Phuo whose descendants sometimes remember how their former village was taken over by incoming Dagara, there are “winner” and “loser” versions of the struggle over land. A comparative approach is fruitful: how the two sides agree or disagree, and how they make use of a limited pool of topoi, may tell us how the struggle developed and was solved, whether either violently or with a compromise.

Another approach to settlement foundation stories among the Dagara is to link them to the independently established relative chronology of earth-shrine areas, thus combining narrative and non-narrative sources. If we follow the three-generation model of Dagara earth shrines, we find some regularities in the way each “generation” portrays contact with the Phuo.

Most foundation stories use a widespread stereotype. A hunter comes across a place with stagnant water and fertile soil. He becomes the first settler. The new place turns into a little settlement, as the hunter goes back home and fetches some of his family members, friends or allies. This idealised discourse is usually not maintained when earlier populations are mentioned. In most cases the cultural concept of creating new village territories in the “virgin” bush had to be adapted to a situation of interethnic contact. Three different sets of topoi may be discerned and linked to the different phases of the settlement process.

The oldest Dagara settlements in the research area are Tambiri, Napala, Oouorpon and probably also Dano and Guéguéré. Their status as having old, independent earth shrines is undisputed. Nevertheless there may be a problem with sources in the case of the last two, as both became administrative headquarters during colonial times. This is especially true of Dano, which was the seat of the powerful *chef de canton* Nanfaa and where settlement histories as well as ritual relationships with other villages may have been reinterpreted for purposes of legitimation. All these settlements, which can be labelled “first-generation” settlements, have given *kubile* to more recent settlements.¹⁰ The narratives about how they acquired their earth shrines usually refer to a peaceful change of territory. The shrines were handed over by the previous

¹⁰ While foundation stories may have been manipulated by the colonial innovation of political chiefs, the basic structure of earth shrines seems not to have been substantially altered. In spite of its tremendous power during the colonial era, Dano has only two dependent earth shrine areas: Mebare and Bolembar.

inhabitants, a version corroborated by Phuo informants in the cases of Ouorpon, Tambiri and Dano. The considerable reputation of their earth shrines is partly based on such a “legal” transfer. This version gains substance from the fact not only that Dano and Ouorpon bear Phuo names, but also that until recently the Phuo had some ritual ties with these settlements.

It seems that at an early phase of interethnic contact, probably in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, the region was rather sparsely populated. The first Dagara to arrive asked for some land to farm and settled alongside the Phuo.¹¹ The security of an established community and good ecological conditions in the settlement, especially the availability of water throughout the year, were probably crucial for the choice of the first Dagara. What followed was a period of peaceful cohabitation. There are stories of friendship: in some cases a Phuo married a Dagara woman, which is how the Phuo earth shrine came to be given to her offspring when the original owners migrated further away. Furthermore, the identification of Dagara and Phuo patrilineal clans having the same taboos, and sharing a joking relationship may also have its roots in that period. This is a period of fluid ethnic boundaries: clan conversion and linguistic-cultural assimilation was not rare. This is especially clear with respect to the Phuo, among whom more than half the patrilineal clans claim Dagara, Bwaba or yet other ethnic origins.

In a second step the community of the first Dagara settlers grew, as more and more relations from the extended kinship network, frequently collateral relations, joined them. Following the rhythm of their more or less mobile swidden cultivation, many Phuo communities took the choice to move out “voluntarily”, sometimes handing over the earth shrine to the new settlers. Where this was not the case, interethnic tension increased, and instances of stealing livestock, and even murder, occurred. Ethnic markers, like different burial ceremonies, became more important, and conflicts could easily lead to armed hostilities along the hardened ethnic borders. This period is reflected in Phuo village names, which have meanings like “we are enduring” (Gnimi), and their Dagara correspondent Navrinkpe, “we enter against all odds”. In some restricted areas real war seem to have broken out, ending frequently with the retreat of the less numerous Phuo. But this was not the rule. As a Phuo proverb puts it, “It is more effective to build a house in order to drive out the others than to use arrows on them”.

Confrontations between Dagara and Phuo are a frequent topic in the foundation narratives of “second-generation” Dagara settlements, which were probably established not long before the colonial period. These settlements, Kankani, Oronkua, Bankandi, Sabole, Pontieba, Dakoula and Yo, usually claim to be ritually independent. Yet few of these claims are undisputed. While it is clear that their earth shrines, unlike those of the “first generation”, were not handed over by the Phuo, a lot of controversy surrounds who actually

¹¹ There is a widespread taboo among the societies of the region against refusing land to a well-intended new settler, even if he is a stranger.

installed the shrine. Either the *kuur* (“stone”) at the centre of the earth shrine was in reality only a *kubile* (“little stone”) given by an already established Dagara settlement (thus admitting ritual dependence), or else the installation of the earth shrine was done independently, with a stone brought directly from the old homeland in present-day Ghana.

Whichever may be the case, it is clear that the Phuo left the earth shrines of these settlements without initiating the Dagara. This is one of the situations where the hunter foundation story gains particular weight in filling in the legitimacy gap. Nevertheless a problem remains: in many “second-generation” Dagara settlements, people sometimes find traces of nocturnal sacrifices. These deeply disturbing secret sacrifices are attributed to the Phuo, who admit sacrificing at their former shrines. In fact the entire former settlement area of the Phuo is dotted with more or less ritually active spots.

I initially assumed that the secret sacrifices were a way of reminding the Dagara who the real owners of the land are. But it seems rather that the Phuo find it difficult to give up former shrines because there is a genuine need, or even an obligation, to honour them. If there is still any old resentment because of the strife between their forefathers and the incoming Dagara, they carry out their sacrifices secretly by night. Wherever a peaceful change of territory occurred, as in the case of Ouorpon, these sacrifices are carried out in daylight and ultimately with the participation of the Dagara earth priest.

Around the turn of the century, there was a third stage in Dagara expansion. On the one hand the bush areas between the established Dagara settlements were gradually brought under cultivation, and seasonal encampments at the bush farms were turned into permanent villages, while on the other hand the settlement frontier advanced further north. In the first case the new settlements received their earth shrines from the older, “first-” or “second-generation” settlements, and their ritual dependence is not disputed. Villages like Ouorpon and Tambiri thus ritually controlled up to a dozen villages and quarters where branches of their earth shrines were established. The hierarchical relationship is confirmed by both sides, though in practice the degree of dependence might vary considerably, ranging from yearly thanksgiving offerings to the only reluctantly admitted duty to consult the *tengansob* of the “mother” shrine in any case of a suicide in the village.

Along the settlement frontier in the north, Dagara villages were founded around the turn of the century on land within the jurisdiction of a Phuo earth shrine. While Zintio’s *tengansob* acknowledges its dependence in earth-shrine matters on the Phuo settlement Bonzan, other Dagara settlements like Wahable, Gnitigba and Yiwale have a more antagonistic relationship with their neighbours. They acknowledge that the Phuo have some rights on parts of their land, such as fishing in seasonal ponds or harvesting fruit trees, but they do not acknowledge their ritual overlordship and rather claim dependence of an older Dagara settlement in the hinterland.

The youngest Dagara villages, Gagnime, Saniba and Panra, were founded between the 1930s and 1950s. As in the case of Zintio, their earth shrines are

branches of the Phuo shrine at Bonzan, whose ritual competence is undisputed. The *pax colonia* seem to have played a considerable role in changing the balance of power in favour of the Phuo and halting the advance of Dagara earth-shrine areas. On the other hand the possibilities of the Phuo to chose the exit option were considerably reduced. Hardly any open, uninhabited spaces are available any more, as Bwaba settlements are located immediately north of Phuo villages. The two main pre-colonial Dagara strategies of land appropriation, namely slight demographic pressure through the influx of new settlers and open conflict, have thus ceased to be effective. How much importance the Phuo actually give to maintaining their ritual competence over territory may be illustrated by the case of Batiëni, a village entirely settled by Dagara farmers except for the earth priest, who is the last remaining Phuo settler.

The question remains, what made precolonial Dagara society so successful in occupying land. Part of the answer may lie in their more mobile strategy of ritually appropriating landscapes. Compared to the Phuo, the installation of earth shrines is a much easier task for the Dagara: the *tengan kuur* is a comparatively mobile symbol, and ritual competence over the land is less fragmented. While the incoming Dagara were probably aware of the original owners of the land and their spiritual control over it, there was always an alternative, though confrontational, strategy to establish earth shrines through filiation from an existing Dagara shrine. These shrines became symbols where local identities could crystallise and thus transcend the latent antagonisms between individual *yir* or patriclan segments. While the *tengansob* was never himself a military leader, he seems to have played a considerable role in mobilising military alliances. Ultimately, further allies could be brought in through relationships with a “mother” shrine in the hinterland. The system of hierarchical earth shrines may thus be seen as a cultural strategy able to create solidarity and military support beyond immediate local communities. The confrontational strategy, successful though it was, was nevertheless not compatible with the underlying concept shared by all groups in the region, namely that first-comers conclude a contract with the spiritual forces of the land and thus enjoy certain rights over late-comers. This is how the “first generation” of Dagara settlements, which acquired their earth shrines through a compromise with the Phuo first-comers, are seen as more legitimate and thus more powerful.

N.B. The author is aware of the highly persuasive and simplifying character of maps showing apparently precise territorial units with neat borders. Nevertheless, the visual representation of social phenomena that have spatial consequences may be considered a useful device provided it is understood as an abstraction of a complicated and at times highly disputed reality.

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