

Sons of the Soil and Conquerors Who Came on Foot: The Historical Evolution of a West African Border Region

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Abstract: This article discusses the historical evolution of Dendi, a border region now located across Niger, Benin, and Nigeria. Drawing on colonial literature and mythological accounts collected in the city of Gaya, the article shows that the two subgroups at the origin of the historical identity of Dendi were affected very differently by colonization and the independence of West African states. While Songhay chiefdoms managed to build alliances with colonial powers and have adapted to post-colonial political changes, Kyanga religious authorities have been progressively marginalized under the pressure of Islam, urban development, and the state administration. The article also shows that the historical distinction between first settlers and conquerors has been challenged since the 1980s by the arrival of businessmen from Niger and neighboring countries, which turned the Dendi into a regional economic crossroad. Some of these new immigrants have become important actors in the local urban market, challenging the distinction between the “sons of the soil” and the conquerors of aristocratic origin “who came on foot,” which had long served to define the Dendi identity.

Introduction

Since colonial times West African socio-political systems have often been discussed in terms of binary societal oppositions between “indigenous people” and “conquerors,” “first-comers” and “late-comers,” “autochthones” and “immigrants,” or “natives” and “strangers.” These oppositions played a key role in the construction of identities of West African societies and remain highly significant in the control over land and building development, political privileges, labor, and taxes as well as in defining belonging in West Africa.¹ In Yatenga, for example, a strong opposition was documented between the Nyonyose indigenous people who were responsible for the religious cults with the spirits of the land and the Nakombse conquerors, who held political authority.² In the Borgu states of Benin and Nigeria, the socio-political system was also dominated by an alliance between the Baatombu autochthonous people and aristocratic conquerors.³ A similar phenomenon was also observed in the

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v13/v13i1-2a4.pdf>

Keleyadugu chiefdom in southern Mali, in the Mawri society in Niger, and in the Hombori Mountains in Mali where local power was divided between animist Dogon populations and aristocratic conquerors of Songhay origin.⁴

The Dendi region examined in this paper shares strong similarities with those case studies that have been documented in the historical and anthropological literature. In Dendi, conquerors coming from the declining Songhay empire of Gao supplanted the authority of local Kyanga chiefs. The former are said to have “come on foot” and are responsible for political authority. The latter are regarded as the “sons of the soil” and have long retained their religious power over animist cults, land administration, and natural resources. This division of function between Songhay and Kyanga subgroups, unified by a common language, is the basis of Dendi identity.

In contrast to other studies, what makes the Dendi interesting from a scholarly perspective, however, is the fact that the region was divided between French and English colonial powers in the early twentieth century and then by three nation-states in the early 1960s (Map 1). This permits an investigation of the historical evolution of the binary opposition between “autochthones” and “immigrants” when a historical frontier area is divided by different colonial rules and, later on, by a modern state border. As discussed in studies by Lentz, Miles, and Nugent, West African border regions offer interesting and original characteristics for the analysis of local political systems.⁵ In such regions, the political border between states is added to the well-known social boundary between “autochthones” and “immigrants.” Our paper explores two related questions. First, we wish to know whether the interaction of internal social stratification remained constant between warriors vs. religious subgroups even in the context of changing political boundaries. Second, we wish to examine how the relationship between autochthones and conquerors has been transformed over time by the arrival of more recent immigrants.

Using a corpus of colonial literature and mythological accounts referring to the foundation of the border city of Gaya (Niger), the article shows that the two subgroups at the origin of the Dendi were very differently affected by colonization and the independence of West African states. While Songhay chiefdoms have managed to build alliances with colonial powers and have adapted to post-colonial political changes, Kyanga religious authorities have been progressively marginalized under the pressure of Islam, urban development, and the state administration. The article also shows that the historical distinction between autochthones and conquerors has been challenged since the 1980s by the arrival of businessmen from elsewhere in Niger and neighboring countries. These new immigrants were strongly attracted by opportunities in the border region and turned the Dendi into a regional economic crossroad populated by vigorous trade diasporas. Some of the large entrepreneurs of the region have become important actors in the local urban market, challenging the distinction between Songhay and Kyanga, which had long served to define Dendi identity.

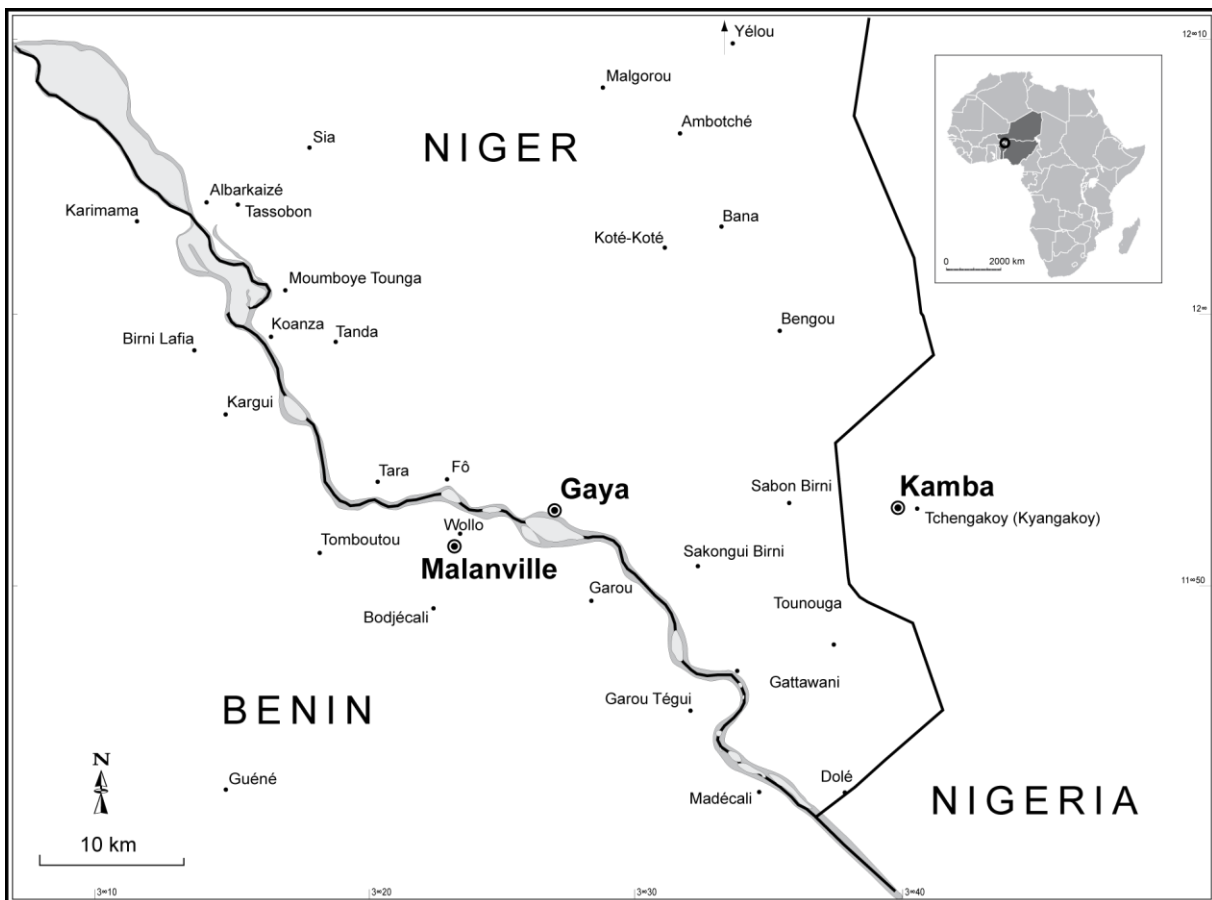
This article is structured as follows. In the next section we briefly present the main characteristics of the Dendi border region and discuss our methodology. In section three, we present the urban myths of foundation regarding the city of Gaya, in which the distinction between indigenous and conquerors took root in Dendi cultural consciousness. Sections four and five then presents some of the changes which occurred in colonial and post-colonial times

to both Songhay political authorities and Kyanga religious powers. In the final section, we conclude with a summary of our key findings.

Case Study and Methodology

The term “Dendi” means “down the river” in Songhay. It is used to refer to two different regions in West Africa: the southernmost historical province of the Songhay empire (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries), located downstream from the capital of Gao, and the contemporary border area intersected by the Niger River over 120 km between Niger, Benin, and Nigeria (Map 1).⁶

Map 1. Location of the Dendi Border Region



Cartography: the author, adapted from Dambo 2007.

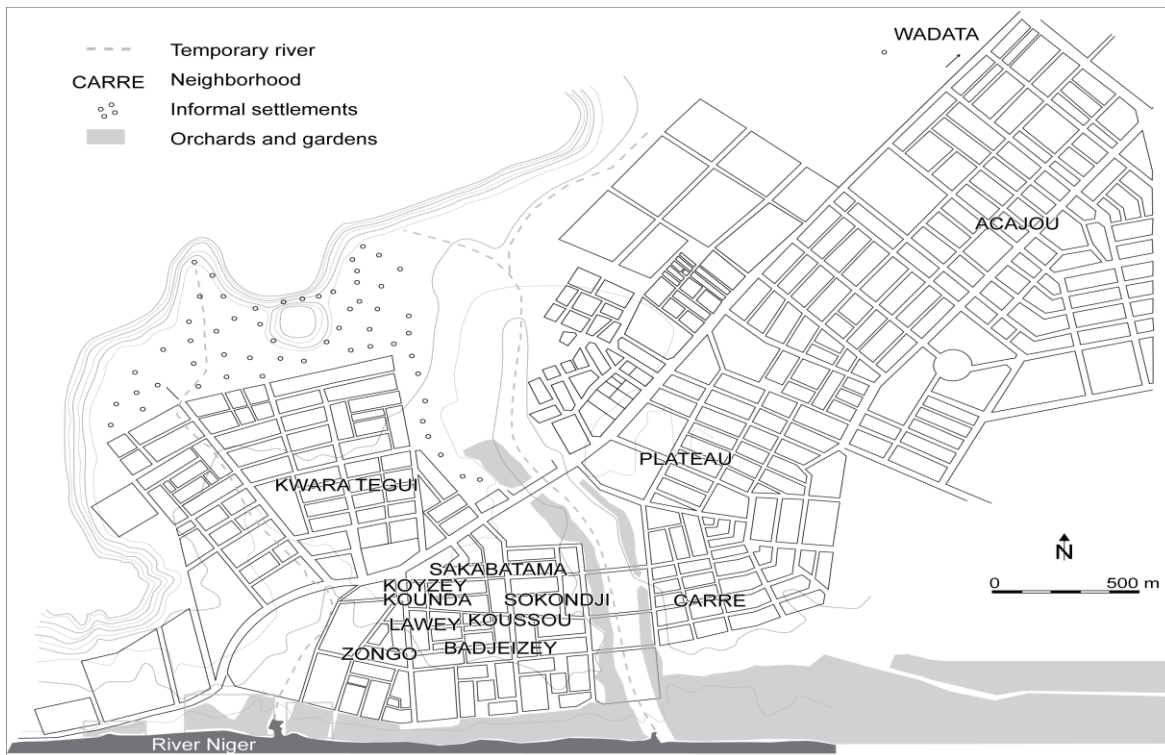
The latter, which will be investigated in this paper, is populated by six main ethnic groups: Kyanga, Zarma, Songhay, Hausa, Baatombu, and Fulani.⁷ The region was long situated on the fringe of pre-colonial socio-political entities, such as the Hausa states, the Songhay Empire, and the Borgu states and was not recognized as a major political or commercial center in pre-colonial times. Far from being an autonomous political entity, the Dendi was a peripheral set of cities and villages connected by a similar language known as Dendi. The region was also characterized by the dominance of aristocratic and warrior groups that emerged from the disintegration of the Songhay Empire over a Kyanga population responsible for traditional cults

and ownership of the land. The descendants of these two populations are still called Dendi today whatever their Nigerienne, Nigerian, or Beninese nationality.

The transformation of the Dendi from a periphery into a regional commercial center resulted from its strategic location on the border of three West African countries. Petty trade had been present since colonial times, but it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the region emerged as a commercial hub specialized on regional agricultural products (rice, millet, maize), manufactured goods (second hand cars and clothes, cement, cigarettes), and oil. Such development was mainly due to alien traders, who established vigorous trade diasporas in the main cities of the Dendi. Previous studies show that the majority of Zarma, Hausa, and Igbo merchants that settled in the Dendi came from other regions in Niger and West African countries.⁸ This pattern is comparable to that found in the northeast of Ghana or the north of Benin where commercial diasporas are also strongly attracted to border regions.⁹ These merchants contributed to the growth and prominence of the three main border markets of the Dendi: Malanville (Benin), Kamba (Nigeria), and Gaya (Niger), whose evolution we investigate in depth in this article.

With an estimated population of 36,709 in 2010, Gaya is now composed of four old neighborhoods (Koyzey Kounda, Lawey, Sakabatama, and Badjeizey) that are controlled by the Songhay and two neighborhoods (Koussou Kourey and Sokondji) that are dominated by the Kyanga.¹⁰ These six neighborhoods, which make up the old town of Gaya called

Map 2. The City of Gaya



Cartography: the author, adapted from Department of Geography 2006.

Dendikourey, are surrounded by the more recent developments of Kwara Tegui, Plateau, Carré, Acajou, and Wadata that have expanded around the old city of Gaya since the 1950s and that

are populated by more recent immigrants from Niger and the surrounding countries (see Map 2 above).

The city of Gaya is an ideal case in which to study the interaction of internal social stratification and external influences because it combines both a strong chiefdom and a booming border market dominated by recent immigrants. In the neighboring city of Malanville, located across the River Niger, representatives from the former chiefdom have experienced difficulties in regaining their power in local politics despite a recent revival of traditional chieftaincies that followed the advent of democracy in the early 1990s. Consequently, this case is less instructive in examining the contemporary relevance of the binary opposition between first and late-comers. In the Nigerian city of Kamba, located fifteen miles east of Gaya, traditional chiefdoms are still influential, but the market has severely declined, due to the increase in customs checks, a state of insecurity marked with armed attacks, increasing petroleum product prices, and the implementation of Sharia law. As noted by Walther (2009), this situation has led to the departure of most of the foreign (Christian) traders from southern Nigeria, which also limits the utility of this case in examining contemporary economic elites arrangements with local authorities.

We draw on urban foundation myths which establish the boundaries between first-comers and late-comers to examine how binary oppositions could legitimize the respective positions of social groups and how they evolved over time. In doing so, we were interested in the various arguments used by local actors to support their own classification of the society. The myths were collected from different sources: We used colonial literature devoted to the cities located in Dendi and conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with fifteen different key informants from 2004 to 2005 selected on the basis of their genealogical and historical knowledge.¹¹ This included local community leaders (village, neighborhood and *canton* chiefs) as well as town elites, local historians, and teachers.¹²

Different versions of how Gaya was originally founded were collected from oral histories. In this article, we focus on the two main Kyanga and Songhay historical accounts, without trying to identify which is the more legitimate. Our interest is rather to establish the social and political consequences of the division between the two populations on the organization of the society. Particular attention was paid to ensuring the diversity of the sources of oral historical information, because foundation narratives very often hide the conflicts which take place between indigenous people and conquerors in West Africa.¹³ The Dendi border region is certainly no exception in this, and we thus attempted to collect as many different versions of the same myths as possible in order to get beyond the standardized accounts that aim to preserve harmony vis-à-vis the outside world.

The Foundation of Gaya

Gaya was founded at the end of the eighteenth century by Kyanga and Songhay populations. The following sections present different versions of the foundation myth and discuss the opposition between the so-called “sons of the soil” and conquerors “who came on foot.”

“There Were Only Wild Animals” – The Kyanga Version

Oral history indicates that the origin of the Kyanga population, which today occupies both

banks of the River Niger, dates back to the battle of Badr in 624 AD 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.¹⁴ These elements of the myth, which are also reported in the Borgu region, contradict linguistic studies, which find that the Kyanga and other Mande family language groups are of West African origin in which the Kyanga/Busa group was the easternmost of all.¹⁵ Nevertheless, such a mythological origin is an important element in the construction of the identity of the Kyanga who, in contrast to Songhay groups, cannot claim a Muslim origin but nevertheless wish to situate their history within a larger mythological framework.

For the Kyanga “Gaya” means “it shall last a long time.” The oral tradition identifies three pivotal moments: the quest for the perfect location; the urban foundation; and the meeting with the Songhay. The story indicates that Kokoa Monzon, the founding ancestor, arrived 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. 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.”¹⁶ 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. 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 confided in his own spirit and said: “Today is your day. Today, I will see if you are really powerful.”¹⁷ Having uttered these words, he noticed a large snake extended across the Niger River, which served as a bridge to help him and his people to cross the river.

Oral myths state that after several temporary settlements, the Kyanga reached Sokondji, one of the neighborhoods of contemporary Gaya. There, according to collected accounts, the Kyanga asked Lâta and Ouza, their two main protective spirits, whether the location was safe enough to build a new city and received a positive answer. 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.”¹⁸ At the foot of a baobab tree located close to what is now the Koussou Kourey quarter, the religious leader (locally known as *gagna-koy*) responsible for traditional worship, the bountifulness of the harvest, and the ownership of the land, was inducted. At this point the stories collected state that the bush surrounding Koussou Kourey was inhabited only by “wild animals” emphasizing that the freshly-founded human settlement was the first. Very soon, however, the Kyanga were forced to come into contact with the Songhay, who also arrived in the region.

According to the Kyanga elders interviewed, the Songhay conqueror Samsou Béri chose to settle in Koyzey Kounda, one of the oldest parts of the city of Gaya, whose etymological meaning, is “the neighborhood of the king’s sons” in Zarma-Songhay. The Kyanga remained in Sokondji and Koussou Kourey. Mythological accounts state that “the Kyanga and the Songhay 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 Songhay 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].”¹⁹

Later, the Kyanga and the Songhay agreed on the need to build a city wall 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 Songhay Samsou Béri refused to build the wall, which symbolized the foundation of the city and instead urged Kyanga chief Kokoa Monzon to take on the task. Despite the risk involved in building the wall, Kokoa Monzon accepted and designated Fara Monzon as his successor in a symbolic gesture of resignation to the military superiority of the Songhay.²⁰ When the city of Gaya was finally surrounded by its wall, the division of functions between the Songhay and the Kyanga was completed: the former would be responsible for political authority, and the latter would exercise religious authority. The Dendi identity would from now on be based primarily on the historical alliance between native and immigrant, these two groups being unified by a common language of Songhay origin.

“We Have Kept the Place” – The Songhay Perspective

Songhay populations established themselves in the Dendi in several waves of settlement, the oldest dating back to the campaigns of Askia Muhammad from 1505 to 1517.²¹ The second wave was linked to the fall of the Songhay Empire in 1591, and the third gave birth to the current Songhay chiefdoms of the region that probably left the region located between Ansongo and Niamey at the very beginning of the eighteenth 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 Songhay 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 neighborhood and *canton* chiefdoms of Gaya.

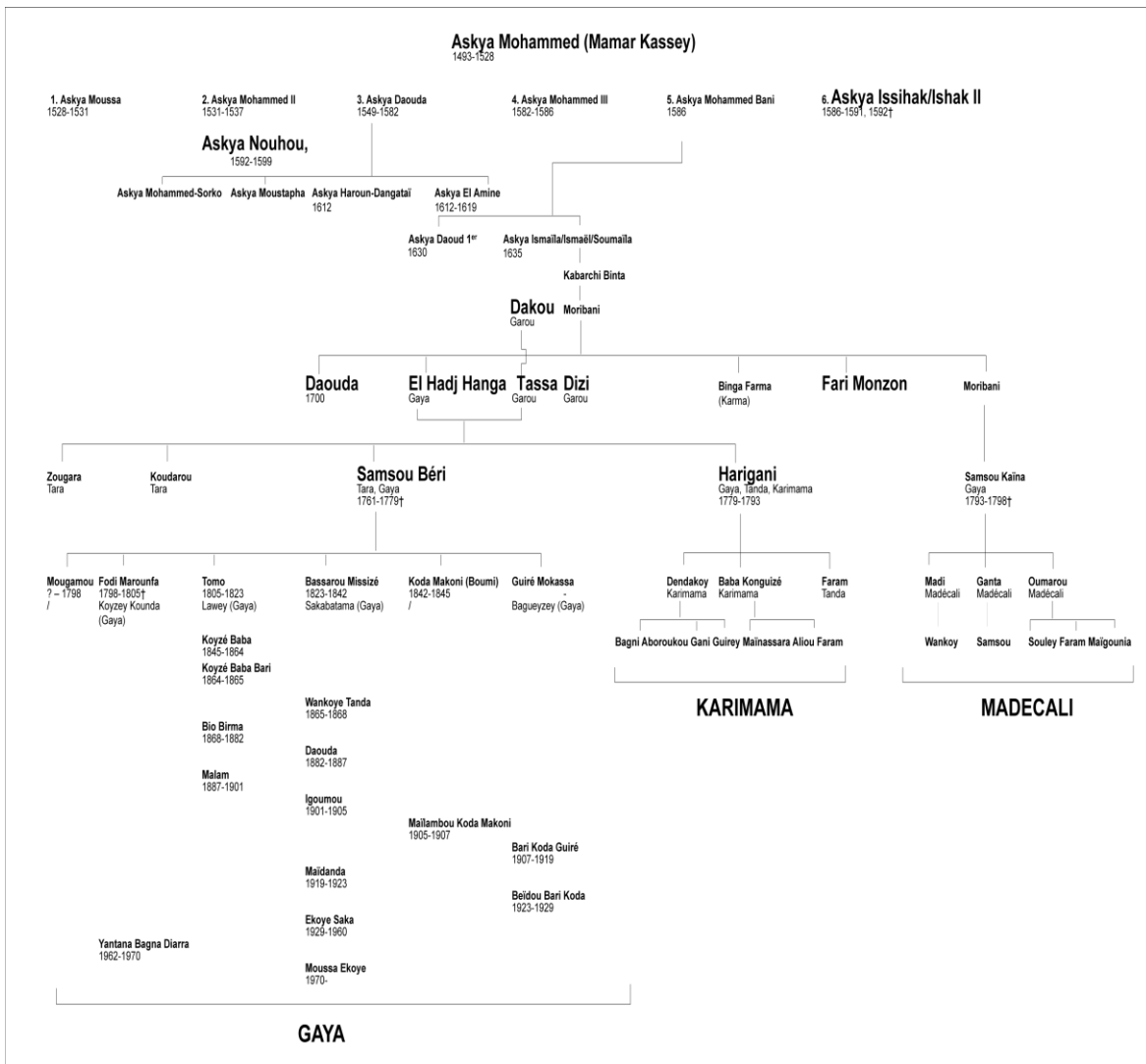
The Songhay have their own narrative of the founding of the city, which differs significantly from that of the Kyanga. While the Kyanga claim that their ancestors established themselves in Gaya prior to the arrival of the Songhay, the descendants of the Songhay claim that the Kyanga had only temporarily occupied Gaya. Chief Ekoye (1985), former *canton* chief of Gaya from 1970 to 2011, tells the following story about the establishment of the Songhay: “El Hadj Hanga, founder of Dendi, left the Songhay [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 shares many similarities with the historical socio-political organization of Borgu, notably because in both regions the aristocracy allied with 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 allowed aristocrats to secure the support of traditional deities and a legitimate political sovereignty.²² Furthermore, both regions have faced significant conflicts among members of the aristocracy, which in turn led to the migration of small groups of

conquerors, who then increasingly imposed their cultural characteristics on indigenous peoples over whom they ruled.

When in Gaya, the Songhay apparently found a clearing and, after having consulted their religious advisors, said: “*ir na gayi nago*,” Songhay for “we have kept this place.” Chief Ekoye adds that when the Songhay arrived in Gaya, they found that the Kyanga were cultivating the area but had not yet founded a village. Kyanga populations lived on a river island for fear of Fulani raiders from the east. The encounter between the two groups occurred once the Kyanga were informed of the peaceful intentions of the Songhay. “Kyanga and Songhay met in a place after having pledged their word of honor, says Chief Ekoye. The Songhay 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].”²³

Figure 1. Genealogy of the Songhay 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. Names mentioned in the text are in bold type.

Another Songhay version states that the city of Gaya was founded from the neighborhood of Lawey.²⁴ Stories collected in Gaya indicate that El Hadj Hanga, the Songhay ancestor who came to the border region in the eighteenth 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 Songhay went in that direction to try to get in touch with those unidentified people through a thick bush. When they found the burning fire 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 Songhay religious advisors took place, and after several unsuccessful attempts a meeting was organized 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.

The Colonial Period and the Rise of Nigerien Chiefdoms

After the foundation of Gaya the history of the Songhay princes of Gaya appears rather hectic and involves a large number of towns along the Niger River. Often rivalries of succession led to open or latent conflicts based on shifting and conflicting alliances.²⁵ During the two centuries preceding colonization the leadership of Gaya dominated political disputes. In 1798, for example, the chieftaincy passed to the descendants of the Songhay Samsou Béri, as described in the genealogy in Figure 1. The reigning princes of Gaya built on this genealogy to justify their exclusive right for the chieftaincy of the city against the descendants of Harigani and Samsou Kaïna, who also ruled Gaya from 1779 to 1798 and inhabit the nearby towns of Tanda and Tara. Again, this evolution presents interesting similarities with that of the Borgu states, which are 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 sons were eligible to succeed their father. This forced them to look for new villages to rule and cultivated a strong attachment of the *Wasangari* aristocracy to the values of honor and war.²⁶

Starting in the late nineteenth century the British, French, and Germans worked to expand the dominion of their colonies of Nigeria, Dahomey and Togo, respectively. Over the course of several campaigns and settlements military outposts were established such that the territorial limits of English and French territories and those separating the French Soudan from Dahomey were finally fixed. In 1909 a permanent outpost was constructed at Gaya attaching the region decisively to the *Cercle* of Niamey, part of the Colony of Niger.

The colonial period radically changed power relationships in favor of the traditional chiefs eager to ally with the French and establish their own zone of influence. The local chiefdom of Dosso, for example, located north of Gaya, progressively became a regional power extending over the Zarma country through the skills of Aouta, the chief of the Zarma or Zarma-koy, who actively collaborated with the French.²⁷ The memory of this episode remained alive among the people of Gaya. As one elder reported: "Upon arrival of the White Men, the Zarmakoye

destroyed the Tessa kingdom and other chiefdoms Finally, the whole district of Dosso belonged to him, whereas before the arrival of the whites, there were chiefs who had their portion of land and Dosso was only a village, which was controlled by rotation."²⁸ Locally, the privileges and spatial limitations of the chiefdoms were transformed according to the attitudes of local elites vis-à-vis the French military. A new territorial division was introduced by the creation of the *cantons* (districts) and *quartiers* (neighborhoods) and their respective chiefs. As a consequence certain representatives of the Songhay gained significant power in terms of traditional chiefdoms. This division enabled the French commander to levy taxes and to mobilize local workers for forced labor.²⁹

This fragmentation of political territory also sharpened the emerging hierarchy of chiefdoms within the Dendi.³⁰ For example, in Gaya the creation of *canton* chiefdoms in 1927 allowed the city chiefs to administratively control the affairs of the neighboring village of Tanda, which had comparable influence in the region during the pre-colonial period. The institutional inequality between the central *canton* and the villages increased as village boundaries outside of Niger grew by incorporating neighboring hamlets while those of the *canton* remained static.³¹ One consequence of this manipulation of political territory was that the chiefs of important villages refused to allow the secession of hamlets located within their jurisdictions. If they did allow hamlets their independence it came at the price of a reduction of their territorial power and of their share of taxes collected from the village.

The socio-political evolution of the Kyanga followed a very different trajectory. In contrast to other West African regions such as the southwest of Burkina Faso, where territorial chiefs maintained their traditional authority, the power of the Kyanga chiefs progressively declined.³² This occurred for two reasons. First, colonization contributed to reducing the influence of the chiefs of the land (*gagna-koy*) in subordinating them to the village or *canton* chiefs. The former did not have official status in the colonial political administration and were not permitted financial compensation, while the *canton* chiefs were granted the right to collect taxes on harvests and livestock in 1953. Secondly, the power of the chiefs of the land also declined as a consequence of the expansion of Islam, which contributed to the declining legitimacy of the traditional animist cults that sustained them. The Gaya region was well known for the Hausa *bori* cult that included special rituals, dances of spiritual possession, and a distinctive music as well as unique therapeutic practices. The cult was forbidden by the caliphate of Sokoto and by the British administration in Nigeria, but it continued to be practiced in the region of Birni N'Konni, Dogondoutchi, and in the Dendi.³³ In time *bori* practices were limited to individual and family observance before they become stigmatized as fetish by the expansion of Islam that affected every rung of society and in the rural areas of the Dendi region. The cult temporarily gained popularity following catastrophic events such as droughts or epidemics, but by the mid-1950s it had almost completely disappeared. The decline of animist cults profoundly affected the Kyanga who, in the process, lost their traditional privileges. By contrast, the traditional chiefdoms of the Songhay were legitimized by the colonial structures.

Since Independence

Following the independence of Niger in 1960 the religious authorities of the Kyanga became further marginalized and were replaced by different actors whereas the Songhay chiefs emerged as territorial administrators.

Songhay Chiefdoms and the State

In contrast to Benin where after independence in 1960 the Marxist regime of Mathieu Kérékou restricted the power of traditional chiefs, Nigerien traditional chiefs have retained their influence.³⁴ 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 taxation of rural populations. Later, President Seyni Kountché (1974-1987), himself from a noble Zarma family, showed a strong willingness to reform traditional chiefdoms so as to exert greater control over them.³⁵ Yet there never was a fundamental questioning of the chiefdom in Niger, perhaps because “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 [our translation].”³⁶

In the ensuing decades the Nigerien chiefdoms adapted to political change. In some areas, such as land use, they become privileged interlocutors in land conflicts. They also benefited from reforms designed to align land use and agricultural administration that charged traditional chiefs with certain decisions about the use of land for development or cultivation by newcomers.³⁷ In other areas, such as urban governance, traditional chiefs were forced to redefine their prerogatives. Neighborhood chiefs and *canton* chiefs, in particular, have seen their influence diminish considerably in local affairs in urban areas. Chiefs look back with nostalgia on earlier years: “In this time, people made things easier for the chiefs. Today, only the duties and the title of chief remain. We the chiefs are obliged to work and we can no longer count on the chieftaincy to make a living.”³⁸ Traditional authorities currently perform a mediation role in local affairs between households, or between state representatives and the decentralized 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 traditional leaders and to air their grievances to official bodies, which are sometimes regarded as more legitimate than chiefdoms.

State representatives and the new mayors of urban agglomerations must engage with the traditional chiefs in order to prevent them from obstructing their agendas. Despite their waning official and traditional power in local affairs this relationship vis-à-vis state and local officials means that they remain important players in local politics. Similarly, even though the political decentralisation project of the 1990s has diluted the prominence of the traditional chiefdoms in according more responsibility to the locally elected officials of new municipalities it has simultaneously increased the capacity of chiefs to function as political impediments due to the persistence of statutory provisions that predate the reforms. The interesting relationship between the former *canton* chief of Gaya on one side and the current departmental prefect of Gaya and the mayor of Gaya on the other side illustrates the degree to which traditional chiefs

have retained their customary functions as intermediaries and mediators. The *canton* chief of Gaya held office since 1970 and has remained an important local authority despite the accession of the prefect and the mayor. Drawing on his vast experience he has been able to maintain an interesting position relative to the prefect, whose assignment has evolved and powers eroded in the course of successive regime changes. Confronted with the transfer of some of his power to communal authorities, the prefect must also be careful to avoid affronting the traditional chief. In this sense the chief has retained a certain, if informal, influence in neighborhood concerns, issues related to health, taxes, education, and conciliation.

The chief has also retained impressive influence relative to the mayor by affirming that his support is necessary to “communicate with the population” and to effectively collect taxes. Mayors must, therefore, take traditional structures into account in the expectation that they will then permit them to impose sufficient taxes to fund the urban improvement projects that, they hope, will secure their re-election. As the mayor of Gaya impatiently commented: “In the current situation I would prefer to focus on infrastructure investments first . . . to show the people that the local government is here and effective even if it’s still quite new.”³⁹ The mayor’s relationship with traditional authorities is actually less conflicted than it would appear at first glance since decentralization did not significantly affect the balance of power at this level. A certain kinship exists between traditional and local government institutions in the same way that there is a strong bond between the new local and prefectural governments that are united under the banner of the National Movement for the Society of Development (MNSD)—the ruling party from 1989-1993 and from 1999-2010. This type of relationship is not isolated to the department of Gaya, where mayors have managed to balance local issues by positioning themselves as authorities that listen to the demands of their citizens and mediate between different neighborhood and village chiefs.

New Immigrants and the Marginalization of Kyanga Authorities

Since the 1980s, when Gaya first emerged as an international commercial center, the merchant elite have become more active in local real estate markets. These investors have been most interested in agricultural land that can be exploited with modern irrigation techniques situated in the Niger River Valley on the periphery of the city of Gaya. Recent studies have shown that real estate investments in the region have increased since the 2000 to the benefit of a small group of brokers responsible for 17 percent of agricultural land sales in the region between 2001 and 2008.⁴⁰ For new immigrants from other parts of Niger and neighboring countries acquiring land is one of the only ways to invest in agricultural production to the extent that they cannot rely on land gifts or inheritance.

The real estate investments of new immigrants have also focused on suburban areas, which allowed them to take part in real estate speculation that accompanied the urbanization of Gaya. At the time of Niger independence in 1960 Gaya had fewer than 5,000 inhabitants and occupied only the eastern area around the road to Benin (around the present site of Dendikourey). Internal growth and the influx of migrants encouraged by the trading opportunities close to the border subsequently reorganized the dense urban space of the neighborhood of Dendikourey. The explosion of residential growth initially occurred in the west in Kwara Tegui, the customary seat of the *canton* chief since 1957, and housed a significant population of migrants

from the Dosso region. In response to an annual growth rate of over 5 percent the city embarked on massive residential development to the north—167ha for the neighborhood of Acajou, 21ha for Carré, and 44ha for the area known as Fara—in a total of over 257ha of subdivisions. This figure is in stark contrast to the original area of Dendikourey, which covered only 24ha, indicating that the area of subdivision development represented more than ten times the area of the historical center of Gaya.

These residential real estate developments, strongly colored by speculation and clientelism, did not generate revenue windfalls for the Kyanga. Kyanga property owners were able to purchase land (one lot per hectare or half a lot per group of ten bounded parcels) and settle in these new neighborhoods. However, in several instances agents appropriated their properties without adequate compensation under the pretext of developing public infrastructure (i.e. Koranic schools or high schools) to serve the expanding city.⁴¹ These practices created grievances among Kyanga property holders whose agricultural land was losing value in the face of urban development. As one Gaya representative stated: “When you own a field you have less chance than one who wants to develop it and build a house. You can build a house on a field but you can’t do the opposite. This means that everyone who owns a field near the city is sure that one day he’s going to lose his land as the city expands.”⁴²

Traders became important actors in the urban real estate market as land speculators but also as developers of industrial areas for the warehouses that supported booming commerce. These investments served the traders based in Niger as well as their Nigerian counterparts based in Malanville, the neighboring city in Benin, who had also invested heavily in the development of Gaya in the 1990s.⁴³ In Gaya these property acquisitions served the thrift and illegal export trade to Nigeria that both required large scale storage capacity. In the space of several decades the massive real estate investments combined with increasing public investments transformed the urban fabric of the small city of Gaya but also affected the ancient balance of power between the Songhay and the Kyanga.

Conclusion

Founded in the second half of the eighteenth century jointly by the Kyanga and Songhay populations, the Dendi border region has long been structured around a binary opposition between “indigenous people,” who used to be responsible for the traditional religion, and “conquerors,” responsible for the political power, a common occurrence in West Africa. For the Kyanga, the narratives collected 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 Songhay conquerors, and the sharing of power which results from this encounter between the Kyanga religious leader and the Songhay political leader. For the Songhay, oral history emphasizes the important lineage linking the former *askias* of the Songhay Empire to the populations who rule today’s village and *canton* chiefdoms, and the superiority of a highly hierarchical society over peasant chiefdoms. The foundation myths present two different historical justifications for this social structure. The Kyanga defined themselves as the first settlers of an estate whereas the Songhay, in contrast, claim permanent occupation of the region to justify their social seniority.

Since colonization, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the authority of traditional chiefdoms of the Songhay and the religious classes of the Kyanga has evolved along starkly different paths. Niger's independence was hardly a historical break for the Songhay chiefdoms, which managed to forge alliances with the colonial powers and develop a formal political status within the apparatus of the young Nigerien state. By contrast, the authority of Kyanga chiefs began to decline in the colonial period, and then disappeared completely in the second half of the twentieth century in both of their traditional domains. On the one hand this decline was a result of the disappearance among all segments of society of animist cults and practices. On the other hand Kyanga authority was profoundly affected by its loss of control over natural resources and land use, which became the domain of the state (in the areas of water, forests, flora, and fauna) and the *canton* chiefs (resolution of land disputes and property tax collection).

In terms of recent external influences, the development of Gaya as a regional commercial center played an important role in the decline of Kyanga influence to the extent that the attractiveness of the city led to the development of massive subdivisions on their ancestral lands on the urban periphery. These developments certainly benefited local officials and the numerous merchants that established themselves in the region. These actors dabbled in profitable real estate speculation with the parallel goal of developing commercial properties to stock the goods from cross-border trade. The arrival of these "new immigrants" led to an historical decline of Kyanga influence over real estate and the consolidation of the Songhay chiefdoms and realigned the binary opposition that had, until recently, characterized the Dendi.

Notes

- 1 Kuba and Lentz 2006, pp. 1-30; Meillassoux 1971, p. 23; Lentz 2010.
- 2 Izard 1985, pp. 378-93; Izard 2003, p. 185.
- 3 Jones 1998; Lombard 1998; Brégand 1998, pp. 23-30; Kuba 1998.
- 4 Amselle 1990, p. 59; Piault 1971, p. 286; Walther 2006.
- 5 Lentz 2003; Miles 1987; 1994, pp. 42-51 and pp. 145-74; Nugent 2008.
- 6 Urvoy, 1936.
- 7 Bako-Arifari 1998; Dambo 2007.
- 8 Walther 2008, pp. 173-202; Walther 2009; 2012.
- 9 McKim 1972 ; Grätz 2004.
- 10 Demographic projection based on Africapolis, a harmonized database on urbanization in West Africa available at: <http://e-geopolis.eu>.
- 11 Tilho 1911, pp. 505-12; Delafosse 1912, pp. 238-52; Perron 1924; Ardant du Picq 1931, pp. 477-500; Urvoy, 1936 pp. 23-117; Périé and Sellier 1950.
- 12 See Walther 2008 for a more detailed description of the methodology; see also Walther 2011 for an earlier version of this paper published as a working paper.
- 13 Amselle 1990, p. 61.
- 14 Interview with M. Moumouni, notable, 06.12.05, Gaya.
- 15 For Borgu, see Kuba 1998 ; for the relevant linguistic studies, see Jones 1998.
- 16 Interview with A. Amadou and M. A. Diafago, notables, 25.11.04, Gaya.

- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Interview with A. Béri, A. Amadou and A.A. Diafago, notables, 23.11.04, Gaya.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Périé and Sellier 1950.
- 22 Kuba 1998.
- 23 Ekoye 1985.
- 24 Interviews with M. Gani, chief of Lawey, 20.11.04, and 06.10.05, Gaya.
- 25 Dambo 2007; Séré de Rivières 1965, pp. 79-83.
- 26 Lombard 1998.
- 27 Rothiot 1988, p. 11.
- 28 Interview with A. Na Argoungou, notable and former teacher, 22.11.04, Gaya.
- 29 Interview with Sambou Daouda, chief of Koyzey Kounda, 15.12.04, Gaya.
- 30 Bako-Arifari 1997, p. 5.
- 31 Ibid. 1997, p. 19.
- 32 Lentz 2006; Kuba 2006.
- 33 Pasian 2010; Masquelier 2009.
- 34 Jones 1998.
- 35 Abba 1990.
- 36 Olivier de Sardan 1984, p. 203.
- 37 Bako-Arifari 2002, p. 4.
- 38 Interview with M. Gani, chief of Lawey, 29.11.04, Gaya.
- 39 Interview with H. Dan Barro, mayor of Gaya, 04.09.05, Gaya.
- 40 Walther 2008, pp. 130-132; Cantoreggi et al. forthcoming; Jaubert et al. 2011.
- 41 Bako-Arifari 2002, p. 22.
- 42 Interview with A. Na Argoungou, notable and former teacher, 19.11.04, Gaya.
- 43 Bako-Arifari 2002, p. 21.

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