

■ BENIN-NIGER

Survey Along the Niger River Valley at the Bénin-Niger Border, Winter 2011

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Introduction

Our understanding of the last 1000 years in the Sahel of West Africa is, at present, largely derived from historical sources, which tell us of vast polities - empires, kingdoms or city states - and thriving trans-Saharan trade networks. But historical sources, however valuable, leave out many aspects of the history of these socio-economic systems. While in recent decades a series of archaeological excavations have added to our knowledge, the nature, extent and materialisation of polities in the southern Sahel remains hazy. How did these ‘empires’ of West Africa play out on the ground in terms of social, economic, religious and political contacts? How were these empires structured and how did they structure the social landscape of the Sahel in terms of the movement of peoples, ideas, and things?

To explore these fascinating questions, one of us (AH) was awarded a five-year ERC Starting Grant--*Crossroads of Empires*--allowing an in-depth study of a section of the Niger River, that at the Bénin-Niger border, long assumed to be of great importance in the history of the wider region and apparently at the interplay of several important polities. The area had been completely neglected from a historical point of view and was absent,

notably, from the exhibit and catalogue *Vallées du Niger*. Known as ‘Dendi’, the narrow band on either side of the river is connected to the development of the Songhai Empire. Borgou, one of the polities at the southern edge of this region, has long been studied by anthropologists and linguists as a case study of the integration of various population groups¹. Finally, this region sits not just along the axis of the Niger River, but also near the outlet of two major fossil valleys (*dallols*) of the left bank of the river, and at the crossing-point of important trade routes running southwest-northeast between the Hausa areas and the forested regions of what is now Ghana. For all these reasons, the area was an obvious choice for investigating the questions with which *Crossroads* is concerned, namely: how did the medieval ‘empires’ influence the manner in which settlement and material culture are patterned across the landscape?

To explore this, we intend to use a combined and multi-scalar approach to ancient polities, where archaeological surveys and excavations are conducted in association with ethnographic and historical enquiries. The initial goal is to obtain a picture of macro boundaries, material culture patterning and social processes--a sort of archaeological-historical land register of the area under study. Then smaller areas will be selected for in-depth studies, with a view to understanding the historical processes that gave rise to the patterns observed at macro-level. Such an approach should improve our knowledge of the past, ensuring that archaeological and historical data may be systematically replaced in their broader context.

Our first fieldwork in February-March 2011 was designed to allow for a large-scale cultural overview of the area. Using a survey method developed elsewhere, we established a survey grid along two axes. The first, a 50km axis, was laid along the Niger River, and the second, a 100km axis, was laid southward away from the river (Figure 1). The idea was that ‘coarse grained’ cultural variations might be more easily highlighted at such a scale.

Figure 1: Map showing the main localities alluded to in this text.



Archaeological Background

In Benin Republic, though historical studies have been undertaken on the populations of the Niger valley (Ayouba 1992, 2000; Bako-Arifari 1989, 2000; Debourou 1993), archaeological investigations on the history of the settlement of this valley are at their beginnings. Prior to the fieldwork described here, just one prospection had been carried out (N’Dah 2001). But when one places this valley in its historical context, which is that of pre-colonial Borgou, other archaeological studies become available. Séidou Sabi-Monra (1992), Oumarou Banni Guéné (1993) and Inazan Orou-Mora (1995) have all investigated material culture and technological practices (especially ironworking) in precolonial Borgou.

More widely still, the historical archaeology of the Niger valley between Mali and Nigeria

has been described by Nigérien archaeologists and in particular Boubé Gado, who has attempted a regional synthesis for the past two millennia in the Niger Valley downstream from Gao (Gado 1980, 1993, 2004; Gado and Maga 2000; for an overview see Haour et al. 2006). These certainly point to the need for a broad geographical outlook but the only excavations they have carried out are at sites much farther upriver from the present study area. On place-name grounds, note Gado and Maga (2000: 62), the dallols certainly appear a key historical resource: 34 villages bear the name ‘Tombo’ (past village site) in the hinterland of the *dallols*.

Close to the area we discuss here is the natural reserve the ‘Parc W’, which in its Niger side at least, had been several times investigated. Archaeological remains thought to be of historic date have been repeatedly described. The first account seems to have been that by DeBeauchêne (1969: 55), who

reported past settlement sites of undetermined age that were attributed locally to the Gourmantche and featuring grinding stones, pottery, and iron; oral tradition attributes the early homeland of the Gourmantche to the vicinity of Gao in modern Mali (Gado 2004: 161-162). Prehistorians, Vernet (1996) and Idé (2000), devoted several pages to the discussion and illustration of potentially historic material from the region. Some of the ceramics associated with ironworking and settlement contexts, unslipped and mineral-tempered, Vernet (1996) suggests were unlike any of the other southwest Niger ceramic cultures, suggesting relationships would have to be sought around *dallol* Bosso and in Bénin. Haour et al.'s (2006) description of the remains of the Parc W was based on surface collections and the surface cleaning of an iron-working furnace. Overall though, there have been no systematic investigations.

Historical Background

The picture of settlement of this part of the Niger valley as it is described by oral traditions is very complex, and it lacks any real chronological definition. It seems to involve successive influxes of populations, which more often than not cohabited with each other rather than replaced one another. Political or economic ties link many of the groups, and many maintain labels as 'outsiders'. We draw here on some of the earlier colonial writings, which have been supplemented lately by more in-depth studies by Béninois and Nigerian scholars, among whom Bako-Arifari (1998, 2000) is the major source. In particular, Bako-Arifari has taken care to show the situational nature of 'ethnic' identity, which serves as a useful foil to the essentialist picture that was painted by some earlier authors. His examination of the 'Dendi' in the trading centres of Borgou, for instance (1998), has clearly demonstrated that the label is not based on common ancestry or origin, but rather on a desire to perpetuate common identity markers ('Muslim', 'trader'—cf. the Hausa) and a feeling of shared language. Until we reach a better sense of the historical trajectory, we can do little

more than introduce the main actors, acknowledging that there remain considerable areas of controversy regarding their sequence and that this in any case certainly underestimates the real complexity of the matter by presenting past populations as a collection of colliding billiard balls.

The Tiengas (also Tchangas or Kyenga) are alleged to have an eastern origin – near Mecca (Perron 1924), from Arabia (Nicholson 1927), or from Egypt or some West African location to the south-east or north-east, such as Sokoto (Idris 1972: 75, no. 1; field notes, Birnin Lafiya February 2011). Linguistically, Kyenga belongs to the Mande group, and is today a minor language losing out to Dendi and Hausa², with an estimated 5000 speakers over Bénin and Nigeria. The Tchanga are said by Perron (1924) to have founded villages on either side of the Niger, which was passable by numerous fords – many of which are extant settlements today.

The next arrivals on the scene are the Songhai. The *Tarikh es-Sudan* makes several mentions of Borgou, but, as notes Hunwick (2003: xl), attempts to control it by Sunni Ali, Askia Muhammad and Askia Dawud were unsuccessful. A campaign reported around AD 1505-1506 produced many captives including the future mother of Askiya Musa (Hunwick 2003: lii, 109). Songhai's political impact on the region seems, all in all, to have been faint. Perron (1924) suggests that although the Tchanga lost their command of the region, they retained independent quarters within the centres, while according to Idris (1972: 74) only Madékali passed entirely into the hands of the Songhai. Much more notable was the cultural impact, through the Dendi. The Dendi people are speakers of the southern Songhai dialect Dendi, and 'Dendi' itself means 'to go downriver'. In north Bénin, the Dendi group is seen as the result of southward migrations from the sudano-sahelian zone, for military, commercial and religious motivations (Bako-Arifari 1998). Lovejoy (1978) has suggested that most Borgou long-distance traders must originally have been from Songhai, and most early trade with Songhai.

Perron (1924) mentions two final strands of immigration into our region: Beriberi from Damer-gou (north of Zinder, Niger) and Fulani from Nigeria. To these we can add the Gourmantche, whose origin is placed in modern Burkina Faso, and who are associated with the creation of royal dynasties even in places today influenced by the Dendi, such as Karimama where they are recognised as ‘chefs de la terre’ (Bako-Arifari 2000: 130); and the Torodbe coming in from Futa Jallon at the borders of modern Guinea and Sierra Leone (field notes, Pékinga).

Though, as is seen in the account above, many settlements are linked with particular groups or leaders in oral tradition, there are no real data to enable us to date settlements. As we saw in the previous section, archaeological work in the area has been near non-existent, though several authors make passing mention of physical remains. What is certain is that within this highly dynamic population mix there clearly existed considerable activities in trade and manufacture, and these aspects form a

central part of the *Crossroads* project. To give just the example of salt, Perron (1924) describes how in the past century the salt deposits of the *dalloi* Fogha, ‘véritable rivière de sel fondu’, would attract traders from the then-Dahomey bringing kola nuts and karité (shea butter), Hausa with English cloths, and Zarma and Maouri from the north bringing millet and other foodstuffs. The region lay astride trade routes between the major centres of the Volta and Hausa areas.

Ethnographic Survey: Some Remarks on Craft Specialists

This part of the fieldwork aimed at getting a broad picture of regional variations in populations, craft activities, technical traditions, and material culture patterning. The idea was to work along similar axes as those followed for the archaeological survey; that is, from Pékinga to Madékali (with a small extension southward, along the Nigerian border), and from Malanville to Kandi. Given previous work done by one of us on pottery making in Niger

Figure 2: A potter and her husband, a woodcarver, in the Quartier Tounga of Malanville.



(from 2002 to 2010)³ and central Bénin (in 2002), the survey focused on pottery producers. Fieldwork presented an opportunity to fill a gap between three contrasting and well documented potting areas: that of Zarma, Songhai and Bella to the north of the River Niger; that of Hausa potters to the west; and that of Baatonu (Bariba) and Boko potters to the south.

While such focus led to favour localities where active or retired potters could be interviewed and possibly observed, other enquiries were also made locally. These included a collection of oral traditions pertaining to the history of village communities, an identification of the geographical and social origins of their inhabitants, the localisation of other craft specialists, and preliminary interviews with former craft specialists or their descendants (weavers, dyers, blacksmiths, woodcarvers) (Figure 2). All in all, enquiries were made in 17 village localities and in three districts of the town of Malanville. Thirty-eight potters were observed and/or interviewed, as well as two blacksmiths, a former weaver, and three former dyers. A further enquiry was made some 300km further south, in two districts of the town of Parakou, where pottery making and blacksmithing are still very much alive.

As regards pottery traditions, the area under study may be divided into three broad geographical zones. The first stretches along the River Niger, from Pékinga to Malanville. It is characterised by the production of long-necked polychrome vessels of the kind typically observed in Zarma and Bella communities from the other bank of the River, both south of and around Dosso (Niger), and up the River, until Tillabéri. Unsurprisingly, all the potters interviewed originated from these areas, two or three generations ago. They consider themselves either as Bella (i.e. former slaves of the Tuareg; see Gosselain 2008) or, more often, '*debey boro*'; that is, endogamous craft specialists. This subgroup is especially found in Niger, along the Dallol Bosso, and usually regroups potters and weavers, potters and blacksmith, or potters and woodcarvers. According to most people interviewed, long-necked polychrome vessels are rather new in the area, hav-

ing entered the picture when Nigérien *debey boro* started to settle on the western bank of the River Niger during the 20th century. Pottery making is said to have been formerly in the hands of Gourmantche women, an affirmation that needs further enquiries.

The second geographical zone is situated to the east of Malanville, from Garou Tegui to the Nigerian border and further south. Here, vessels are made with the same shaping technique as in the first zone – 'converging pounding' (see Gosselain 2010) –, but they have a more globular body, a short neck and no painted decoration. Typologically speaking, such vessels evoke Hausa water jars made in the Sokoto area, both in Niger and Nigeria. Yet, potters interviewed claim a Zarma origin and present themselves as *debey boro*, whose ancestors came from Niger and settled in Hausa communities. A process of acculturation is clearly at work here, and is even recognised by some women, who explain having abandoned polychrome painting because 'it is time consuming and local customers are not ready to pay a higher price for it.'

The third geographical zone starts south of Guéné and extends southward and eastward into Borgou. Here, pottery making is not restricted to endogamous craft specialists. It is in the hands of Mokole, Baatonu, and Boko women; that is, people whose language belongs respectively to three different groupings: Yoruboid, Gur, and Mande. Yet, they use a similar shaping technique (moulding) and produce shell-shaped vessels with short everted necks and a decoration consisting in a single band of string-roulette impression or a wavy-line motif traced with a comb.

We thus see that the research area is characterised by some well-marked boundaries in regard to pottery traditions, at both the technical and typological level. According to oral testimonies, some of these boundaries would coincide with ancient policies or political spheres of influence. This is especially true in the area situated between Birnin Lafiya, Garou and Guéné. Yet, some of the pottery traditions involved are rather new in the area, which

forces us to consider how, and why, stylistic boundaries could have been maintained throughout time, and possibly after the decline of former polities.

Another interesting observation concerns dyeing activities. An abandoned workshop was identified in Karimama (Figure 3) and former dyers interviewed. They claim a Gourmantche origin and consider their craft to have been learned by ancestors in the Hausa country. Up to the first half of the 20th century, Karimama was the main dyeing centre in the area and was frequented by weavers and traders living along the River Niger. Given its historical importance and possible role in the political rise of Karimama, this craft will be studied in more details during the next field season.

Figure 3: Dyeing site of Karimama.



Archaeological Investigations

Archaeological survey methods were adapted to the specificities of the study area. Since the existence of archaeological sites in the region was already known, (a series of sites had already been found in 2001 by Didier N'Dah), our aim was to develop the survey more systematically and over a larger area. To highlight the distribution of archaeological sites in the landscape, and to pick up any specific spatial patterning of ancient material culture, we chose to carry out a series of linear surveys spaced at regular intervals along two major axes. The first of these axes, between Pékinga and Madékali, followed the shore of the Niger River over 50km, while the second followed the road between Malanville and Kandi, north to south, on a distance of about 100km.

Prospections along the Pékinga-Madékali road were carried out every 5km, spending one hour to the north and one hour to the south of the road. On the other hand, along the Malanville-Kandi road we spaced out the investigations a little more to be every 10km, adjusting the position of the survey transects in order to follow dry or watered riverbeds. In both cases, we carried out investigations both on the way out and back. The number of surveyors varied between two and five persons. Each findspot was localised using a GPS, and a brief description of the place and of the material found was made. The description included the geomorphological positioning of the site and its vegetation cover, as well as a qualitative estimate of the abundance and distribution of material. Information concerning the decoration of surface pottery was, as much as possible, recorded, distinguishing broad categories of decorative techniques such as impression, incision, roulette or paint. Photographs of the sites and of the artefacts present completed the observations. No archaeological surveys were made inside present day villages. Finally, in addition to the survey grid, we also took note of sites visible from the road along which we travelled. We therefore obtained a relatively extensive macro-scale snapshot of the region.

Over 400 archaeological find spots were identified, which included very important pottery concentrations related to settlement mounds and extensive furnaces and slag complexes. The sites are clearly more numerous close to water sources, with an overall high density of sites in the Niger Valley and a sharp drop in the density of find spots when moving away from the river into the hills. In the hills, sites are also located close to wet or dry riverbeds. Settlement mounds are characterised by their morphology and the large concentration of potsherds covering any exposed area. One site, Birnin Lafiya, evidenced several pottery pavements and was selected for test pitting (see below). Sites related to metallurgical activities vary in size and morphology (as do associated slag mounds), but are generally located on the lower foothills near water sources. As regards pottery styles, the analyses are still in progress, but it is already apparent that the area can be divided into two large zones based on the decoration of pottery. Interestingly, it seems

that the boundary between the two stylistic areas is recognised today as a former political boundary.

To complement these data on a broad regional scale, we carried out a more detailed preliminary study at one settlement mound, near Birnin Lafiya. Two test pits were excavated. The first one (S1) was set up at the top of the mound to get an idea of the stratigraphy, and the second (S2) was placed near the beginning of the slope where an eroding pottery pavement was visible – some 15m from S1. Given the preliminary nature of the work, sediments were not sieved.

In the first pit (2m x 1m oriented east-west), we excavated in artificial spits of 25cm. Finds consisted of potsherds, charcoal and bone fragments throughout the stratigraphy. The excavation was ended at 125cm due to lack of time, but archaeological layers seemed to continue below that level. In the second test pit (2m x 1.5m oriented north-

Figure 4: Trench SII at completion, showing two potsherd floors and a third eroding at the surface, as well as one of the fired earth ‘posts’, a charcoal-filled pit and an earth ‘bench’.



south), the excavation, to a depth of 30cm in levels of 10cm, revealed two other seemingly superposed pottery pavements below the one visible on the surface, and an unfired earth structure (some sort of bench?) associated with one of the potsherd floors. Finally, a series of structures – possibly the remains of postholes – made up of piles of burnt earth and charcoal were identified. These structures, apparently laid out in circle, cut into the first and middle potsherd pavements (Figure 4).

Thus while our first pit shows the importance of the vertical extent of the site, the second one indicates the good preservation of actual structures such as pavement floors associated to earth furniture. Birnin Lafiya is clearly an archaeological site of some promise and we plan to carry out more sustained investigation in the next field season.

Future Research Directions

The pilot survey carried out in early 2011 and described here has proved very encouraging and we plan a six-week follow-up season in January-February 2012. The main aims of this will be to:

- continue the identification and localisation of archaeological sites in the valley, working to refine the spacing of the survey grid used here
- start to build up a chronological and cultural sequence by conducting excavations at Birnin Lafiya and exploratory test pitting at 2 to 3 other localities, sieving all sediment
- conduct investigations of the geomorphology of the river and its affluents with an aim to gaining a sense of any shifts in time
- carry out oral investigations allowing us to shed light on the settlement of the current populations
- undertake geophysical prospections with a view to determining the extent of various sites
- continue interviews with craft practitioners, extending geographically in a first phase southwards into Borgou, then eastwards into Nigeria and ultimately into the Gourmantche area of Burkina Faso

In the longer term we are also continuing our survey of the literature relating to West African craft specialists and plan shortly to begin an examination, through museum holdings and historical sources, of the nature and extent of trade in textiles up the Niger River from the Atlantic, especially for the Bussa region.

Together these various elements will, we hope, help to piece together the archaeological and historic heritage of this part of the Niger Valley.

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Footnotes

¹At least three colloquia have been held on the theme: in Parakou, Bénin, in 1995 (CELTHO 2000); Parakou and Nikki, in April 1999; and Bayreuth (Boesen, Hardung and Kuba 1998).

²http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=tye

³See <http://crea.ulb.ac.be/Afrique.html>

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