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Dogon

The **Dogon**, numbering about 600,000 in Mali and Burkina Faso, live mostly off cereal farming and occupy an unusual habitat, the Bandiagara escarpment, which rises 300 to 600 metres above the adjacent plain and extends 160 kilometres east of and parallel to the Inner Niger Delta. Studies since the 1930s by French ethnologist Marcel Griaule (d. 1956) and his collaborators (Dieterlen; de Ganay; Calame-Griaule; Paulme) have made the Dogon famous amongst a widely-read public and in African art circles; they are a destination for cultural tourism. The Dogon speak several languages that form a distinct branch of the Niger-Congo family, suggesting that the core culture is indigenous to the area and not, as its oral traditions had been interpreted, a result of massive migration from afar. Dogon villages are concentrated on the edge of the cliff or on the scree at its foot, inaccessible locations apparently chosen for defensive reasons. The plateau west of the escarpment and the plain east of it as far as Burkina Faso (which may have been historically the homeland of the escarp-

ment Dogon) also have many Dogon villages. Since the 1960s, Dogon farmers have resettled increasingly on the plateau and the plain, for access to more and better farmland, while escarpment locations remained stable or shrank in population.

1. RELIGION

Dogon religion includes a set of higher powers: Ama, a sky god controlling rain; Lewe, of the underworld and represented in tales as a snake; and Nomo, a presence in water bodies. The wilderness is inhabited by spirits, *jïnu* and *yeneu*, that can be harmful (van Beek, *Dogon. Africa's people of the cliffs*, 104–21). In the village, altars to patrilineal ancestors (*binu*) are tended by groups of descendants. Remote ancestors, generally associated with a migration story, are founders of localised lineages and of villages, which later split into wards or spawned neighbouring communities. The segmented structure of patrilineal descent also organises space into nested units, that is, as an area divided into sections in which the social segments that comprise it exist next to each other; these areas are, in turn, subdivided into smaller units, each attached to lower level

segments. Proximity in space reflects the closeness of social or kinship tie. At the higher level, unconnected large patrilineal groups claim large adjacent territories, in which case descent serves to define boundaries between unrelated rival political groupings (Paulme). Post-harvest Dogon rituals include masques in which the masquers don fresh green-leaf costumes. Later in the dry season, collective funeral commemorations feature masked figures wearing costumes of dyed fibers and, in some villages, carved wood headpieces prized by African art collectors (Griaule, *Masques*). A secret language (a deliberate linguistic construct developed in order to communicate amongst the initiated) taught to young men when initiated as an age group is used to narrate tales that are part of the instruction and to address the masked figures when they appear (Leiris).

These traits of the Dogon communities are similar to those of other farming groups of the savanna region, whose members speak unrelated Gur or Mande languages. Griaule and his collaborators recognised the sharing of conceptions and practices by neighbouring ethnic groups and exalted parallels to ancient Greece and Egypt. Even so, they postulated that the Dogon had remained isolated in recent centuries, and they ignored Islamic connections in the past or their own time. Early colonial censuses listed all Dogon as “animists” (Delafosse, 1:153), based on a sharp distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim; pockets of Muslims, even when native speakers of the language, were defined as non-Dogon. The Dogon “staunchly opposed to Islam” were contrasted with traders or “conquerors,” who were Muslim. The historical situation was, however, less straightforward.

West African indigenous religions are not exclusive and incorporate new elements of ritual and myth. The Dogon-speaking world comprises social segments of heterogeneous origin (Gache) in uninterrupted contact with neighbouring trader and warrior groups who practised Islam. As in neighbouring farming communities, Dogon narratives, ritual vocabulary, and practices reveal many Islamic elements (Tamari), including the major festival Sadeka (from Ar. *ṣadaqa*), which is inspired by Islamic almsgiving (van Beek, *Dogon. Africa's people*, 152).

2. POLITICS, ALLIANCES, CONFLICTS

Dogon collective opposition to Islamic political centres is more specifically related to the memory of two major nineteenth-century hegemonic movements in the Inner Niger Delta. The first of these was led by Seku Amadu Bari (Shaykh Aḥmad Bārī, whose full name was Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Saʿīd Lobbo, al-Māsīnī, d. 1845), a native Fulbe Muslim leader, whose holy war beginning in 1818 established a loosely organised empire directed from Hamdullahi, the newly created capital on the Bani River, northeast of Jenne, at the edge of the Dogon plateau. Seku's religious convictions did not impose limits on the empire's relations with other political leaders or prevent hostile relations with neighbouring Muslim power centres, as attested by such relations with the Kunta Islamic establishment of Timbuktu, contrasting with support for the “pagan” rulers of Segou on the Middle Niger. Some forty years later, a second Islamic movement conquered the Inner Niger Delta and Dogon country, under the Futanke leader Al Hajj Umar Tal (al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Ṭāl, whose full name was ʿUmar b. Saʿīd

Ta'1, al-Fūū, d. 1864). It sparked Lobbo resistance that claimed Umar's life, after which his nephew Ahmad Al-Tījani (Aḥmad al-Tījānī, d. 1887) established his garrison and capital in Bandiagara, on the Dogon plateau itself.

During these turbulent decades, Dogon relations with both powers were variable, not uniformly confrontational. Dogon political structure was not centralised, nor can Dogon social identities be ordered as a series, according to which people belong first to a small group, all members of which then belong to a larger unit alongside others, all of which in turn belong to a yet larger social grouping, a series of identities nested as if in smaller boxes in successively larger ones. A multitude of ethnic, lineage, territorial, and linguistic labels assumed simultaneously and cumulatively placed individuals and groups in heterogeneous groups, where members of one group belong individually also in other groups defined according to different traits; thus, groups overlap and intersect, instead of constituting neat nested categories (Martinelli, 399). This did not favour unified action. The escarpment villages maintained local autonomy, organised in combative leagues (called *cantons* in ethnographies) comprising ten to fifteen villages, based on patrilineal ties or oaths between their ancestors (Dieterlen, *Les âmes*). They included a town of Dogon-speaking Muslim fighters and traders, who lived off marauding and captive-taking but maintained ritualised defensive relations with farming villages, serving also as intermediaries in negotiating ransom with Fulbe groups in the plain (Holder). The relations of rival leagues with exogenous powers ranged from solidarity to avoidance to outright antagonism. Fulbe groups affiliated with Hamdullahi had alliances

with some of these Dogon leagues as they attacked others (Paulme, 44). During the nineteenth century, Dogon villages on the plain abandoned the old Dogon religion and assumed Islam officially, whereas those rejecting Fulbe authority migrated farther east, to the Moose kingdom of Yatenga. Later in the nineteenth century, the Futanke of Bandiagara controlled Dogon villages on the plateau (Palau-Marti, 12–41). Therefore, during the nineteenth century, Dogon communities, far from being isolated or simply resisting, interacted in various ways with Islamic centres in their vicinity. They also participated in the regional exchange economy, acquiring the cowry shells that they used lavishly for body ornamentation, in art-work, and as money.

3. SPREAD OF ISLAM

Under colonial rule, Dogon villages experienced a steady expansion of Islam, earlier than other villages in neighbouring areas experiencing a similar expansion, and they thus became forerunners of Islamisation in Mali and Upper Volta (present-day Burkina Faso). The syncretistic attitude to Islam of the followers of the old Dogon religion and the possibility for individuals incrementally to assume social identification with Islam long before taking the step of conversion seems to have helped the expansion of Islam. Many Dogon participated in circular work migrations (Dougnon) and were recruited into the colonial army. Returnees arrived as Muslims, and, even if some of them slid back to their old beliefs or remained inactive in the face of community disapproval, the number of conversions continued to increase. Growing market involvement, the view of Islam as an aspect of urban culture of modernity, and younger

men's search for greater autonomy have been invoked to explain this development (Beaudouin 213; Bouju, 198). After the political independence of Mali from France in 1960, many Dogon communities reached a tipping point; Muslims gained recognition as part of local society, built mosques, and appointed *imāms*. The agricultural colonisation of the plain and plateau and concomitant emptying of escarpment village sites precipitated the process. Ironically, as the publications of the early generation of French ethnologists entrenched the image of Dogon as inveterate traditionalists, the communities they wrote about rapidly acquired a public Muslim character (a minority of them converted to Christianity).

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