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THE WAR HOUSES OF THE WATARA IN WEST AFRICA*

By Mahir Şaul

This article explores the role of war houses in structuring political and economic space in the West African savanna in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The region under consideration is roughly limited by the Bani, the upper Bandama, and the Mouhoun (ex-Black Volta) rivers, an area broken up in contemporary political maps because it constitutes the border zone between different nation-states: western Burkina Faso, northern Côte d'Ivoire, and southeastern Mali (see Map 1).

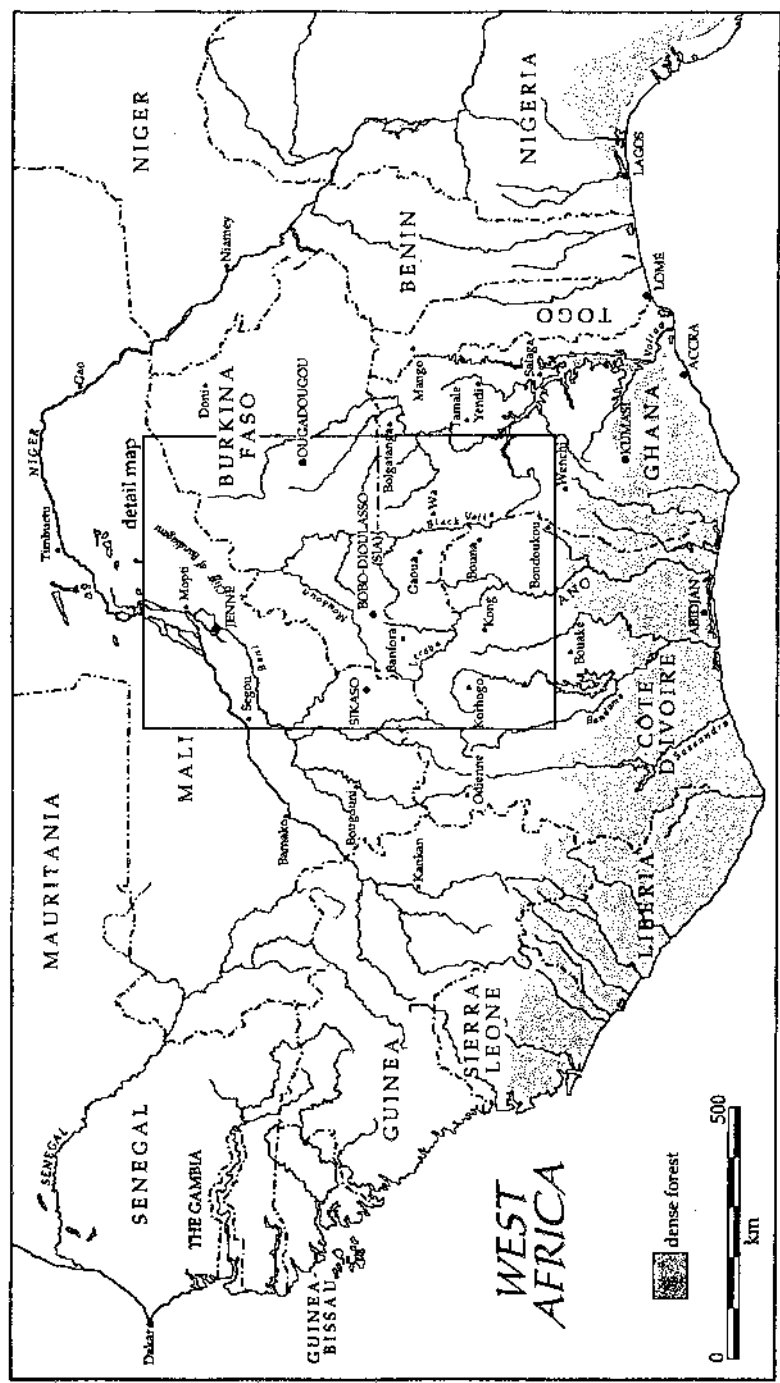
The *war house* is proposed as an ethnographic and analytical concept that improves our understanding of the political history of this region. The house is not new in African historical studies. Recently it has been used in the magisterial survey of the history of the rainforest by Jan Vansina.¹ In the West African Sudan, the word glosses a local notion (*so* in Jula), a stable social unit constituted by kinship as well as nonkinship ties but defined by reference to residence and economic and political activity.² The house group may be divided into subunits of conjugal sets that have varying degrees of economic autonomy but often retain sufficient economic pooling and cooperation to make it possible to consider them a joint production unit. The houses of the warrior stratum were, like those of the primarily agricultural population, basically overgrown domestic groups, headed usually by middle-aged men.

The houses of the war leaders differed from those of the primarily farming population mostly by their larger size, incorporating many nonkin who were employed in production, trade, and as fighters, and also a larger proportion of wives and children. The heads of these units pursued the goals of enrichment and growth. Wealth and fighting power were directly transformable into each other, because captives were turned into slaves and long-distance trade redistributed them across space. Warring careers were made possible because there was room for

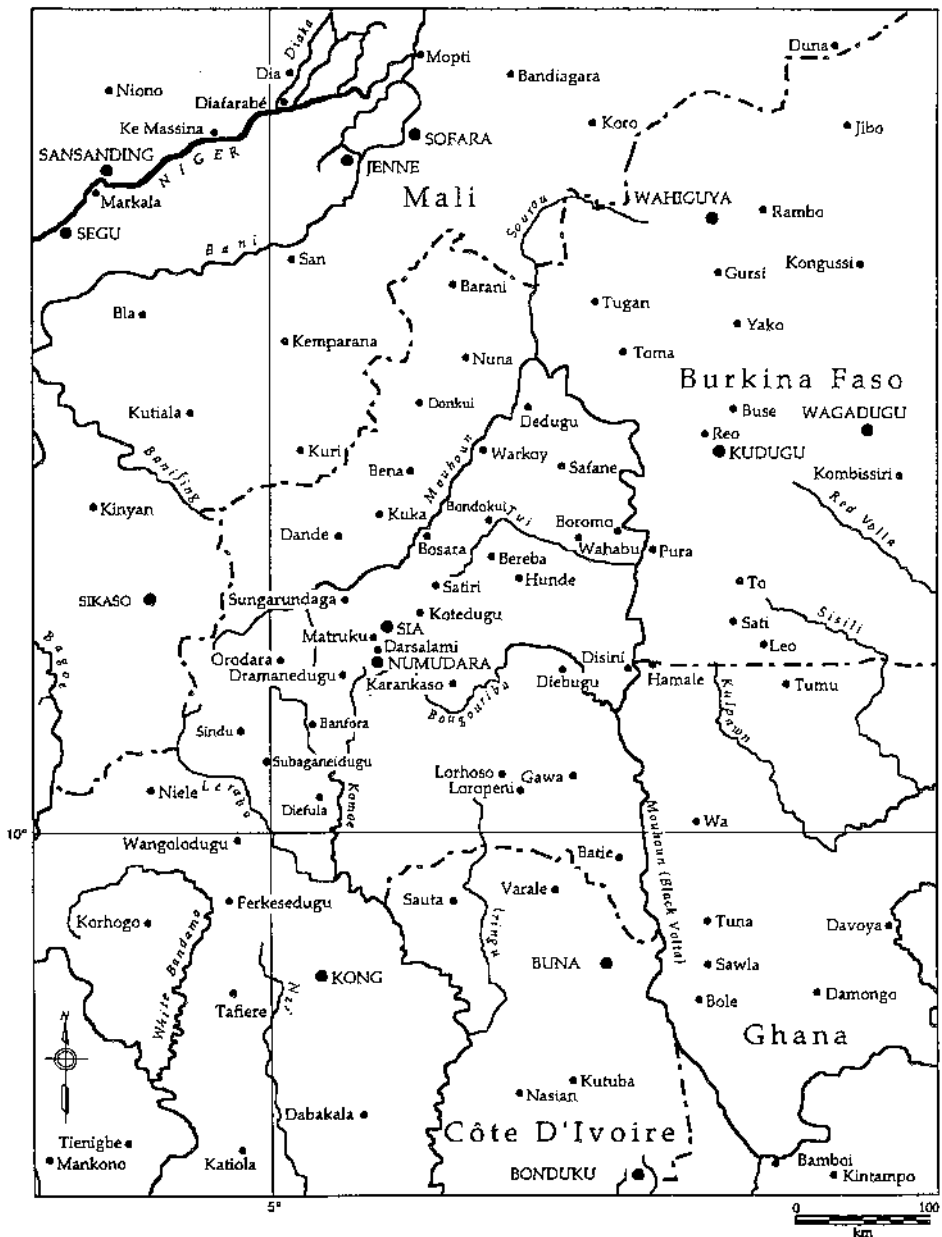
* Support for various phases of my research has been provided by the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Fulbright-Hays Program.

¹ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990).

² In the ethnographic literature the house is sometimes assimilated to a lineage, albeit an imperfect one, the difference between the two being conceived as ideology versus practice. This strategy causes a lot of confusion. Clarity is improved by reserving the word *lineage* for social categories that result strictly from patri- or matrilineation, because many populations in the area under discussion do recognize such categories, and conceptually and in social practice distinguish them from what is called here *the house*. This will become clearer as the argument unfolds in this article. Elsewhere I have discussed in greater detail the relationships between descent and the house among the agriculturist population of southern Bobo country. See Mahir Saul, "The Bobo 'House' and the Uses of Categories of Descent," *Africa* 61, 1 (1991), 71-97.



Map 1: West Africa, Showing the Area Covered in Map 2.



Map 2: The Region of the Upper Komoe, Mouhoun, and Bani Rivers

personal initiative outside kinship and community structures. The constraining power of these structures changed from place to place. The cultural strategies of many farming communities described in the ethnography of this region can be seen as attempts to reduce the drain of able-bodied men who could be lured by such career possibilities. But such measure often ended up concentrating power in the hands of elders or heads of age groups who could themselves be tempted by nonagricultural sources of revenue. In addition, some groups put themselves in interstitial roles that kept them permanently outside the control of localized communities. The balance between individual opportunity and community control was, therefore, sufficiently unstable to generate a heterogeneous stratum of warriors.

Even when they maintained a distance from villages, people of the warrior stratum were part of social organizations that were essentially similar to those of the agriculturists. They had kin and affines, including sometimes elaborate descent structures. These ties could be mobilized to strengthen military pacts or coordinate large-scale movements, but personal successes were randomly dependent on such factors. Inheritance from fathers or older siblings could provide advantages, but was also the source of destructive rivalries.

The major war leaders attacked some of the localized communities, but had many ties, including kinship and affinity, with others. Some of them hailed from these communities and appeared as their representatives and champions; others were simply the allies or partners of the villages. Sometimes villagers entered pacts with the leaders of fighting companies because they felt threatened by them. At other times they sought protection against rivals, and many agreements involved the payment of "gifts." War leaders established links with merchants and organized caravans. Strong villages would attack the caravans of one war leader but protect those of another with whom they were associated. The rivalries between warrior leaders could turn into confrontation, which could further flare up into serious wars. Thus conflict between sets of alliances led by powerful men could go far beyond a local area.

In this configuration stability resided in relations perpetuated across large distances and not in the juxtaposition of isolated communities, tribes, or chiefdoms as small islands of order separated by margins of chaos. There were no such islands of order. Defense, attack, and the likelihood of falling into captivity as well as of acquiring captives, were unremarkable daily realities, not extraordinary events following from war or a major raid to a distant land. Insecurity was general, as explained by old people in the villages today with many parables and first-hand stories. Nonetheless there was a pattern with sufficient permanence to allow a young scholar to travel the distance of more than a thousand kilometers from Jenne to Bouna in relative safety; or for the French explorers to go through the region with very small forces, by calculating carefully their itinerary and stopover points, and making use of letters of introduction and recommendation given to them by prestigious clerics or powerful men of arms. The villages were one of the elements of this pattern, themselves microcosms with host and immigrant groups, shrine offices, and permutations of affinity and descent links. They were of great fragility, despite the impression of solidity created by their thick defensive walls, because they were prone to break up into their own constituent houses to recombine into

different villages. Other elements of the pattern were intervillage confederations, war houses lead by powerful wealthy men, long-term alliances, and caravan roads. To explain how such a regional formation emerged historically is not the purpose of this article, but it is likely that the development started in the fifteenth century with an impetus that came from outside of the region.

One of the central points made in this article is that war houses did not aim to achieve territorial control; their interest in land was limited to what was necessary for agricultural production to sustain the needs of their members. The most important nineteenth-century regional leaders of the area under discussion are often prosaically described as states or kingdoms, but this habit projects upon the social formation a foreign and anachronistic notion of territorial sovereignty and central administration, and hinders the understanding of its radical multicentricity. The war houses had no political borders to separate inside and outside territory, to mark off limits against rival houses or independent villages. There was ranking and personal subjugation, prototypically expressed in the alternative idioms of kinship and slavery, but no political subjecthood. The war houses operated as private enterprises.³ The relations between agricultural communities and war houses, or among the war houses themselves, can be reviewed under the rubrics of diplomacy and war, but not under political dominion, administration, or revolt. Perhaps one analogy from the politicocultural universe of European history is the corsairs of the Mediterranean, who also constituted self-serving units combining warfare and commerce, albeit without undertaking productive activity, in a setting free from an overarching normative political order that defined political boundaries and rulers within them.

This article focuses on one set of war houses in the region in question: the groups labeled *sonanki* who adopted the patronymic Wattara and who trace their origins to the area surrounding the town of Kong. This group has been prominent in the historical narratives written since the beginning of the colonial period and an impressive body of documentation is available on it. The first European accounts were written by the late nineteenth-century explorers. These were followed by early colonial reports, including a few brief but crucial writings by local intellectuals who set the main lines of subsequent inquiries. More extensive scholarly treatments appeared at the time of independence⁴ and in doctoral theses written since then.⁵ There were also precolonial written sources that have been made available in the past decades.⁶ Finally, in the mid-1970s an additional body of local scholarly

³ The use of this term is not meant to imply that the Bani-Mouhoun region had anything like capitalism, which involves different processes of accumulation and distribution of profit. The word *enterprise* is used simply to stress that there was a possibility of personal self-aggrandizement by combining military, trade, and production activities, constrained only by the limits imposed by other similar centers of power.

⁴ Edmond Bernus, "Kong et sa Région," *Etudes Eburnéennes* 8 (1960), 242-324.

⁵ Kathryn L. Green, "The Foundation of Kong: A Study in Jula and Sonangui Ethnic Identity" (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1984); Lucy Quimby, "Transformations of Belief: Islam among the Jula of Kongbougou from 1880 to 1970" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1972); Bakary Traoré, "Le Processus d'islamisation à Bobo-Dioulasso jusqu'à la fin du XIX^e siècle" (mémoire de maîtrise, University of Ouagadougou, 1984).

⁶ Ivor Wilks, Nehemia Levzion, and Bruce M. Haight, *Chronicles of Gonja: A Tradition of West African Muslim Historiography* (Cambridge, 1986).

commentary was generated on the occasion of a symposium organized by the University of Abidjan, carefully transcribed and published with a French translation.⁷ A complementary corpus of oral material was made available in a thesis by N. K. Kodjo.⁸ Interpretive efforts on the political history of this region have not kept up with this extraordinary volume of material that is at our disposal.

Contrasting Visions of the Past

The anthropology of Africa established in its formative years a contrast between centralized political systems and stateless or acephalous societies. Even though criticized from many perspectives, this dichotomy still informs many descriptions of the African past. The ethnography of the territories within the bend of the Niger River has been written mostly by French researchers who made a further association not characteristic of the British anthropologists who followed Radcliffe-Brown. They coupled the idea of a stateless segmentary lineage system with that of an ethnic group. Thus the property of being stateless or centralized was taken to be a cultural trait and was applied to ethno-linguistic groups. This perspective reinforced the tendency to focus on small areas, blinding ethnographers to broader regional processes. The ethnic groups of the Bandama-Mouhoun region were described as acephalous, but between those in the south of the region and the ones living further north, in the area between the Mouhoun and Bani valleys, a further contrast was noted. While the populations in the south, which had dispersed settlement patterns, were thought to have properly segmentary lineage systems, those in the north lived in large multiclanic village communities with complex nonkinship forms of self-administration.⁹ The political space between the villages was still perceived as acephalous, but the segmentary lineage model was found unsuitable for the internal organization of these villages. In his influential ethnography of the Bwa, Jean Capron called these populations a "civilization of villages." Capron showed that the political organization of the Bwa was not limited to the village, that villages established confederations.¹⁰ He perceptively also described that in the nineteenth century these confederations had ties with other types of political actors, like the Karantao of Wahabu, who were Muslims of Marka origin, and the war houses of Fulbe or Tukulor origin in Masina, in the Sourou valley, or between the Mouhoun and the Bani.¹¹ This description may be the starting point for a new

⁷ *Table Ronde sur les Origines de Kong*, No. 1 of the *Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan*, série J, Traditions Orales, 1977.

⁸ Niamkey G. Kodjo, "Le Royaume de Kong des Origines à 1897," 4 vols. (Doctorat d'état thesis, University of Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1986).

⁹ An important review of the phenomenon of village in this part of Africa was written by the geographer Jean Gallais, "La Signification du village en Afrique soudanienne de l'Ouest," *Cahiers de Sociologie Economique* 2 (1960).

¹⁰ Jean Capron, *Communautés villageoises bwa, Mali-Haute Volta* (Paris, 1973), 89-90, 240.

¹¹ These houses fought with each other while they drew contingents among the Bwa, Marka, Samo, and Bobo populations, in a general alignment that took the form of an opposition between the Qadiriya of Sheku Amadu and the Tijaniya of Al Haj Umar. Capron, *Communautés*, pp. 75-78.

conceptualization of regional political organizations transcending ethnolinguistic communities. Anthropologists who look at vaster regions to explore political links beyond ethnic boundaries are few, and Claude Meillassoux's broad synthetic survey of the history of the Niger Bend area, which focuses on the relationship between warfare, economy, and slavery, remains exceptional.¹²

Historians, in contrast to anthropologists, do focus on larger-scale processes beyond descent structures or village organization. Those dealing with the Bandama-Mouhoun region give an account of it that differs significantly from that of anthropologists. For historians this region included kingdoms or chiefdoms, established generally through conquest by small groups considered foreign. The most famous of these kingdoms is "The Empire of Kong," supposed to have come about in the early eighteenth century. The Burkina Faso territories within the bend of the Mouhoun River constituted the Gwiriko province of this state. Others think that the Gwiriko was not a province but an autonomous vassal state. There are also other candidates for kingdomhood in this area: the late nineteenth-century Kenedugu kingdom around Sikaso, the Sanon of Sia (Bobo-Dioulasso), the Fulbe kingdoms (or principalities, or satellite states) of Barani and Donkui in the north, that of the Karantao in Wahabu, all more or less in the same territory or overlapping. It is as if every historian had his/her own kingdom, while ethnographers vehemently protest that "their" people were never subjugated, were egalitarian and acephalous, but were perhaps only harassed by neighboring states. It is clear that these constructions of precolonial history are not in harmony with each other and can even be considered contradictory. Compromises are reached, and some historiographic problems resolved, by assuming that this or that ethnic group staged a rebellion to become independent (that is, acephalous) or to constitute themselves as another vassal kingdom.

The present article critically reconsiders this historiography by retaining its principal virtue, the recognition of region-wide political processes that went beyond the cultural specificities of particular ethnolinguistic populations or small village confederations, but rejects the vocabulary of centralized states for a finer-tuned exploration of political organization. It is true that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the so-called segmentary lineages of the Lobi in the south to the village Samo in the north, all the populations of this region had to contend with strong centers of military power that were permanent features of their territory. These centers were numerous, and had overlapping zones of influence. The notion of "village civilization" is basically a reaction to the activities of these centers. The problem of the regional histories, however, is that they are mostly variations of the "king and conquest" stories found in elementary European history textbooks. They reveal little imagination in trying to grasp the distinguishing features of the precolonial West African savanna. The notion of kingdom, even with qualifications such as "satellite" or "vassal," render the nature of the regional political order as incomprehensible as the anthropological polarity of centralized/noncentralized tribes or ethnic groups.

¹² Claude Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l'esclavage* (Paris, 1986), translated as *The Anthropology of Slavery* (Chicago, 1991).

Eighteenth-century Beginnings

Most historical accounts of the Watara start with the exploits of Seku and a person described as his brother, Famagan, taken to be origins of dynastic lines of succession ruling over vast territories that make up most of the region that is the focus of this article. The historical identities of these two individuals are confirmed by a contemporary chronicle that survived in several copies and that provides some dates to anchor their biographies. It records Seku's death in 1745, and that of Famagan in 1750.¹³ The preeminence of these two names in the narratives of the region's past is due in part to the circumstances under which the first oral traditions were recorded in the colonial period, but there is reason to believe that the stories of Seku and Famagan also convey that something novel did happen early in the eighteenth century. The Upper Bandama-Komoe region became at that time more tightly connected to the territories within the bend of the Mouhoun by increasing warfare and a larger volume of trade, and this development profoundly affected the social morphology of the farming populations of the entire area. This development was probably the result of a longer trend that had started in the fifteenth century with the arrival of a wave of Manding merchants when what is roughly represented today by the Kong-Bobo-Dioulasso-Jenne axis gained prominence. The Manding immigrants had founded the important trade town of Bego (or Bitu or Be'o) at the edge of the forest near the Black Volta, but at some point this town was destroyed and many of its cleric and merchant families came to settle in the surroundings of Kong.¹⁴ In the seventeenth century the Kong area was subjected to incursions from the east by the armies of Gonja and Dagomba, strengthening the position of the leaders who had the ability of standing against them.

The result of these and other developments was the emergence of a stratum of warriors of heterogeneous origin. They were organized as houses in rivalry with each other. They engaged in farming but also staged raids far and near and they were involved in trade to obtain weapons, horses, and other exotic items. The primary commodity they offered was captives and the trade could be conducted by barter or by using gold. The most important leaders of these warring groups were addressed as *fagama*.¹⁵

Many of these war leaders were in fact merchants rather than fighters by vocation. Their troops consisted of slaves who were trained in warfare, sometimes by professionals invited for the purpose from elsewhere. Besides organizing raids

¹³ Wilks, Levzion, and Haight, *Chronicles*, text on pp. 83, 87; translation on pp. 101, 105; commentary on pp. 131, 138.

¹⁴ See Wilks, Levzion, and Haight, *Chronicles*, pp. 1-17, for Bego-Bitu and the gold trade in this early period.

¹⁵ Different dialectal forms of the Manding language coexist in the region and are all referred to as *Jula*. Therefore one hears alternative forms, sometimes in free variation. The intervocalic velar is sometimes voiced, sometimes not, and sometimes elided. Thus we can hear *faama*, *fagama*, or *fangama*; *Sanoko*, *Sanogo* or *Saganogo*. The plural suffix is present in two forms: *-w* of the Bamana-Manding of Mali and *-ri* characteristic of the *Jula* of Kong. For the dialectal diversity of present day Bobo-Dioulasso, "a microcosm of the Manding linguistic universe" and representative of the entire area under discussion in this article, see Eren Giray, *Nsiirin! Nsiirin! Jula Folktales from West Africa* (East Lansing, Mich., 1996), 6-12, and the *Jula* texts in the book. In this article I make the plural of *fagama* as if it were an English word.

among farming populations in the immediate surroundings, another source of revenue for those among them who had large companies of fighters was the provision of military help in exchange for payment, either to troubled village communities or to other war leaders. In the region of Kong they also engaged in artisan activities such as carving or weaving. The returns from all these activities were used to purchase arms, horses, and more fighters. The major constraint was that arms and horses were in short supply as the long-distance trade networks that brought them were unreliable. The war leader/merchants operated in a competitive world made up of other people like themselves, with whom they established partnerships but occasionally clashed. Some major houses had some permanence in time, but the fame and wealth of their leaders went up and down as generations passed.

These points are well illustrated in the biography of Seku. According to oral traditions Seku's forefathers were carvers and weavers who settled in Tenegala, a town that was about nine kilometers southeast of Kong.¹⁶ At that time Tenegala was bigger and more important than Kong and is supposed to have been ruled by a council of notables.¹⁷ Seku became one of the richest and most powerful merchants of this town. In 1709, he sent his forces to help Abbas, the Manding leader of Gonja, to sack the wealthy town of Bouna.¹⁸ He was rewarded with a company of gunmen and gold, which he used to purchase more slaves and firearms, either in Salaga or in El Mina.¹⁹ Assistance in war in return for gold is found not only in the life of Seku or other members of the families associated with him, but also in the biographies of other famous *fagama*, including the early career of Samori in the distant Malinke country.²⁰

The town of Kong had a mixed population like that of Tenegala. The original population of Kong were Falafala, who are described as jewelers, blacksmiths, and wood carvers.²¹ Later the town received immigrants of various origins. At the time of Seku, a man belonging to one of these long-settled immigrant groups, the Bagi, was a prominent *fagama*. This man, Lasiri Gbamble, was Seku's uncle, but was also his enemy. The animosity went back to a conflict between Lasiri and Seku's father over a woman, who became Seku's mother. Jula traditions present Lasiri as the enemy of traders and Islam, a kind of magician-tyrant who collected all the

¹⁶ I. Seriba (p. 84) and El Hadj Labi Sanogo (p. 234) in *Table Ronde*

¹⁷ According to the preliminary results of archeological excavations conducted in the region, Tenegala may also be older than Kong. *Table Ronde*, 436.

¹⁸ Many of the well-known town names in this region start with a velar-explosive sound, but have been transcribed into European languages with only a velar or a labial explosive. Thus, Kpan has given Kong; Gbona, Bouna. For these I am using these modified names by which they are more widely recognized in the literature, while for more obscure villages I use an approximation of the local pronunciation.

¹⁹ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 295, 333 ff.

²⁰ Two participants in the Kong symposium, I. Seriba and Labi Sanogo, explained this early gift to Seku differently: The help he provided to the wife of the chief of Dagomba when she delivered a baby (*Table Ronde*, 85, 242). This is one of the two opposite situations in which the narrative repertoire of the region makes reference to pregnant women: Helping her to give birth accounts for political alliance; killing her causes rage that justifies a large scale attack on the party responsible for the act.

²¹ El Hadj Labi Sanogo, in *Table Ronde*, 66.

shrines of the region and incorporated them in his own, a complex cult called Nya or Nyama-Kurugu. He had also humiliated and forced into exile a Muslim cleric born in the town. This cleric invited a mercenary from Masina, and with his help established a war camp in a hilly spot some 70 kilometers southeast of Kong, called Patoni.²² He recruited local young men to train in this camp, and also organized some local groups with fighting traditions into permanent army communities.

It is not clear from the traditions whether this Patoni camp was a political project with the overriding purpose of opposing Lasiri, or rather a merchant outfit launching slaving expeditions among farming populations, but it is said that the Kong merchants had good relations with the people in this camp. Seku had an influence over them and perhaps was among the partners who funded it, as were many other merchants who were at odds against Lasiri. In his rivalry with Lasiri, Seku drew to his side many influential people: Muslim clerics as well as cult owners (*jotigi*), the "earth priest" of Kong,²³ the king (*masa*) of the Gben—who was the most powerful man in the region—and the kings of the Nabe and Myoro. The king of the Komono even gave Seku a lot of men that he could then exchange against horses. He also obtained the friendship of the commander of Lasiri's troops. With all these alliances Seku became a *fagana* himself. He attacked his maternal uncle Lasiri, defeated him, caught him in flight, and executed him and his immediate relatives. He entered Kong and destroyed the Nya cult. This event is generally situated around 1710.

It is worthwhile to stop for a moment and contemplate the identity of Lasiri, which is revealing of the political conditions in the Kong vicinity in the early eighteenth century. Bernus recorded a tradition stating that Lasiri was one of the two "Mose" rulers of the area. According to Labi Sanogo, he was a "Busanga" (or Bisa) from Kirango.²⁴ Other old families of Kong or Tenegala also claim Mose origins, and the patronymic Watara is attributed originally to these families.²⁵ The tracing of this historical name to populations that are today associated with Burkina Faso has become a matter of contention for Ivorian historians, but it is clear that there is little point in trying to resolve the issue by arguing against the actors who now claim the Watara heritage. Instead, what would be useful to recall is that there is no trace of a Mose-Dagomba political-cum-cosmological system in the region of Kong. If Mose fighters did indeed arrive in this region, they were unable to bring a Mose chieftaincy with them. On the contrary, these various origin stories reveal the cumulation of layers of distinct identities, persisting because there was no inclusive normative order uniting the warrior/merchant stratum in the region, or even creating a feeling of shared ethnicity among them.

There are other variants of the stories about Seku's early enemies. Green was told that Seku's main rival was called Tondosama, who belonged to a house that lived in Nafana, 15 kilometers east of Kong.²⁶ D. Traoré, in turn, recorded that

²² Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 333–46.

²³ Seriba and Sanogo in *Table Ronde*, 85, 242, and 249.

²⁴ *Table Ronde*, 246.

²⁵ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 1315–17.

²⁶ Green, *Foundation*, 113, 158; Bernus, "Kong," 250.

Seku had a serious conflict with a man called Kereu Sesuma. Both parts of this name make interesting references to the more recent history of the region of Kong. According to an early account provided by Binger, Kereu was the name of a family that fought against Sonni Ali (1464–1492). Kereu is also presented as a man who came from afar with a powerful cult object (*jo*). His patronymic used to be Kulubali, but when he settled in Kong he adopted Sesuma, which was that of his hosts. According to Labi Sanogo, however, Serisuma was the name of a group of Muslim traders associated with the Tarawere, Bisa blacksmith fighters who took refuge in the south after being defeated by the Songhay and contributed to the foundation of the Kereu ward in Kong. Some people simply say that Seku defeated a Traoré who himself had overthrown a Kulubali of local origin.²⁷

It is sociologically significant that all of these names refer to groups that survive as political entities in some part of the Kong region today. These traditions reveal that at the time of Seku, there were many powerful leaders competing with each other, who became his allies and enemies at different times. They also reveal that the organized groups headed by these men, their houses, did not disappear as the result of confrontations with the supporters of Seku but survived until recent times. When the French explorer Binger visited the town of Kong at the end of the nineteenth century, he was greatly impressed with the wealth and power of a man he took to be its ruler. This man, Karamokho Ule, apparently presented himself to Binger as Seku's descendant, because this is what Binger was looking for. Since then, careful genealogical work has established that Karamokho Ule was not at all a descendant of Seku; instead he was a descendant of Seku's arch-enemy Lasiri. The configuration of political rivalries of the region had changed little since those days, despite the successes of Seku. These successes may also have been exaggerated. In the closing of the Kong symposium, the canton chief emphatically stated that their ancestor Nangue had become superior to Seku while others maintained that the reputation of Seku's son Kere Mori had surpassed that of his father during the conflicts with the Ashanti.²⁸

What distinguishes Seku's faction from other political groups of that period is that they started an expansion with great energy and ambition. Armies under the command of his close relatives or their trusted slaves went far and wide, east, north, and west, to engage not only in raiding but also establishing protected colonies of jula traders along the roads to facilitate trade expeditions that brought horses and other valuable goods and took away captives. The two distant termini of trade for the merchants of the Kong region were situated north and south. To the south was the kola-producing zone, the Ano, and beyond that the coastal establishments where European merchants brought textiles, firearms, gunpowder, liquor, and cowry shells in exchange for gold and slaves. To the north lay Masina, the source for the Sahel horses, and the great merchant cities along the banks of the Niger that acted as relay points for Saharan salt, dried fish, Moroccan manuscripts, and

²⁷ Dominique Traoré, "Notes sur le royaume manding de Bobo," *Education Africaine: Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, 26 e année, 96 (1937), 58–77; Gustave Binger, *Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée par le Pays de Kong et le Mossi (1887–1889)* (Paris, 1892), II, 376; Green, *Foundation*, 160; Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 227.

²⁸ *Table Ronde*, 500 and 254.

Islamic learning. The western routes to the south created few difficulties because the forest was sparsely inhabited and the population relatively peaceful; at the eastern end the growth of Ashanti power made access to the ports of the Atlantic more problematic, and Seku's followers had infrequent but periodic clashes with the local allies of Kumasi. The trade routes to the north encouraged a different type of intervention. The higher density of the population and the prosperous agricultural and pastoral economy made the populations of this region a risk to the caravans. At the same time, they constituted temptations for gainful adventure. The major part of Seku's armies were attracted to the north, hesitantly at first, but then with increasing confidence and broader objectives. At the end, some branches of Seku's house permanently settled in the war zones of the Mouhoun Plateau, becoming thus distanced from the collateral branches that stayed in the Kong area.

The first incursions to the Mouhoun area are supposed to have taken place in the first decade of the eighteenth century under Seku's brother Famagan. By the 1730s, the lands within the bend of the Mouhoun River as well as the territories beyond it had become the stage of even larger-scale movements conducted by alliances built around the persons of Famagan and Kere Mori.

The heterogeneity of these coalitions can be appreciated from the identities of some of the leaders who took part in them. One tradition reports that Famagan left the Kong region with eight war leaders, each at the head of an army.²⁹ Some of them were Seku's sons; others were trusted slave commanders, such as the famous Bamba. Yet other leaders were not related to Seku but had some local basis for influence. Two of the eight are described as "Lobi princes"; a third is Tiemogoba, a Zara-Bobo warrior who reappears in the genealogies of the Sanon of Sia (present day Bobo-Dioulasso), and a fourth is a leader called Bwa, who held office among the Tiefo. Here we note the similarity of these alliances with those made by Seku before his showdown with Lasiri. The evidence, partly based on the subsequent history of the region, suggests that these men accompanying Famagan were leading autonomous forces.

Let us take the example of Bwa. Some recent sources from Kong tend to present Bwa as Famagan's subordinate but this view disregards his standing in his community of origin. The Tiefo belong to the Loron-Nabe, an ethnolinguistic cluster of Mande origin spread out mostly in a belt stretching between Bouna and Kong. These populations have an office called *syé*, which is a form of ritualized kingship, the near-equivalent of what is meant by *masa* in parts of the Manding-Jula world. We saw above that Seku had received the support of the *masa* of the Nabe (called Nabe-Syé in some renderings), who were in closer proximity to Kong. Bwa, instead, was the son of the *syé* of Numudara. The Watara tradition maintains that Famagan had captured Bwa in his earlier campaign and had him sent to Kong where he was trained in Watara ways and manners. In subsequent generations Numudara warriors established a strong political center with influence over a string of communities stretching on the cliff of Banfora and along the Ku valley.³⁰ They

²⁹ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 450.

³⁰ The alliance between the Tiefo of Numudara and the Vore-Bobo villages of the Ku valley is one of the little explored topics of this history, but is mentioned in Alain Sanou, "Histoire pré-

forged matrimonial relations with the Watara houses and remained their allies, even though relations were sometimes strained. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Numudara was the strongest military center in the southern Mouhoun region and had a population larger than that of Sia. The Tiefo of Numudara acted as hosts to Watara houses and protectors of some of its weakened branches.

In the early eighteenth century, at the time of the arrival of armies under some Watara leadership, the Mouhoun area also seems to have had a mix of farmers and local strong men. Some traditionalists maintain that the area was occupied by defenseless people, living in small communities and straw dwellings that could be set on fire at night, who were terrified at the sight of the first horsemen and rushed to the roadsides to offer their submission,³¹ but other accounts mention deadly ambushes costing the lives of many Watara fighters. The combined forces of Magan-Ule and Seku's son Kere-Mori are said to have suffered a severe defeat against the village of Dande.³² We can conclude that the Watara encountered not only farming communities but also professional warriors. Dominique Traoré who relies on information gathered in Bobo-Dioulasso, gives the names of five strong men in the Mouhoun. These men and others like them acted both as protectors and as entrepreneurs of small-scale raids. A man called Diarakabi operated initially in the region of Banfora but later came to settle in Koro, a Bobo village situated at the top of mesa-like hill separated from the main cliff. A second warlord named Amwa lived in Kpa, another Bobo village only a few kilometers from Sia (now absorbed as a neighborhood in the city of Bobo-Dioulasso). A third man called Bonnongo lived among the Dogose in the village of Kuanga, and he had around him "a few hundred men armed with muskets, bow and arrows, and spears." The fourth, an older man called Nayara, was, according to Traoré, "a kind of patriarch" among the Tagwa, lived in the village of Kuruma where he had organized the youth, and was very much feared by traders traveling in caravans. The fifth was Soma, a warrior of Manding origin who was in continuous relations with Kong even before the arrival of Famagan.³³ Elsewhere we learn that Kwirima, a village founded by the Zara, was an important military center before the rise of the Zara houses of Sia.³⁴ Famagan's forces collaborated with some of these local leaders, while they entered into conflict with some others.

One of the high points of the Watara push is their foray north of the Mouhoun River and toward the Niger River. What is best known is the expedition to Jenne that Famagan, Kere-Mori, and Bamba undertook jointly. An Arabic chronicle writ-

coloniale des Ku Domu Kon ou Vore (Bobo du Burkina)" (Mémoire de Maîtrise, University of Ouagadougou, Département d'Histoire et d'Archéologie, 1989).

³¹ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 452, 1419, 1428.

³² *Ibid.*, 511.

³³ This information is given in an undated typescript version of Dominique Traoré's study, catalogued in the library of CESAO in Bobo-Dioulasso under the title "Notes pouvant servir à l'histoire de l'Ouest Volta" [3.759 bis, 960 (613) TRA]. It includes in the beginning three pages that are omitted from the published version. The rest of the text is printed verbatim in *Education Africaine*, referenced in footnote 27. My other references to D. Traoré are to this published version.

³⁴ Mamby Sidibe, "Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et des coutumes des indigènes de la région de Bobo-Dioulasso (Haute-Volta)," *Education Africaine: Bulletin de l'Enseignement de l'A.O.F.* 64 (1927), 54-71, 54, 55.

ten in Timbuktu records this attack in November 1739.³⁵ Oral historical sources explain that the purpose of this northerly expedition was to secure the safety of the roads for the trade of horses and rock salt.³⁶ On their way, the Watara decimated the resistant population of Minyanka and subjugated smaller towns around Jenne, but did not attack Jenne itself. They moved to Sofara, the next embarkment on the Bani River northeast of Jenne, before the confluence with the Niger. Sofara was next to Koka, an important relay and bulk-breaking point in the Sahara-Savanna interface of gold and kola in exchange for salt bars and Moroccan manuscripts.³⁷ In Sofara the Watara defeated an army sent from Timbuktu where a *pasha* representing the compromise of army factions under the nominal suzerainty of Morocco ruled in an ambiguous relationship to powerful merchants. Following this expedition there is a more obscure episode in the Niger bend area. A company seems to have gone west, attacked Mamari Biton in Segou, waged wars in Fuladugu, and then returned to the Mouhoun. These events are known from oral traditions from Segou.³⁸

These sources do not tell us either the reasons for these expeditions to the region of Segou or the identity of the Watara commanders who undertook them. Monteil reported that Mamari's enemies had sent a delegation to Kong carrying a large sum in gold and asking for military help. Levtzion suggested that the request might have been addressed to Famagan when he was in the vicinity of Jenne.³⁹ Current opinion converges on Traoré's version that the incursion to the Segou region was made under Kere-Mori, who was fighting in Minyanka country before the Sofara campaign.⁴⁰

After joint expeditions the Watara leaders dispersed, going their different ways to seek their fortune with their own fighting forces. Seku's son Kere-Mori attacked first Dogose, Tiefo, and Vige populations from a base in Sungarundaga. Later he raided Minyanka country from a place near where Sikaso is now, and then returned to Sungarundaga. Bamba settled in Koro, where Dirakabi (mentioned above) had

³⁵ *Tedzkiret en-Nisian fi Akhbar Molouk es-Soudan*, trans. O. Houdas (Paris, 1913-14), 112, 113.

³⁶ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 478.

³⁷ B. Traoré, "Le Processus," 23, 24.

³⁸ First, Maurice Delafosse mentions these expeditions to Segou in his *Haut-Sénégal Niger*, (Paris, 1912), II, 283; Charles Monteil gives an account in his major history of Segou (*Les Bambara de Segou et de Kaaria* (Paris, 1924), 40-41; finally, Louis Tauxier adds information in his history of the Bambara, *Histoire des Bambara* (Geuthner, Paris, 1942). In 1795 Mungo Park was told in Segou, that Kong was a powerful kingdom in the mountains within view of the city. This geographically puzzling information was perhaps an echo of these attacks, but understood more literally it consolidated the legend of the mountains of Kong. On these fabulous mountains see Thomas J. Bassett and Philip W. Porter, "From the Best Authorities: The Mountains of Kong in the Cartography of West Africa," *Journal of African History* 32 (1991), 367-413.

³⁹ Monteil, *Les Bambara*, 40; Nehemia Levtzion, "Note sur les Etats dyula de Kong et de Bobo," *Bulletin de Liaison, Centre Universitaire de Recherches de Développement*, Université D'Abidjan, 1 (1971), 62. Kodjo was told that the person who had visited Famagan with this proposal was Mamadu Bwari from the village of Kirango, who was later killed by Mamari (Kodjo, *Le royaume*, 480).

⁴⁰ D. Traoré, "Notes," 59. See Tauxier, 1942, 73; Jean Hébert, "Une Page d'Histoire Voltaïque: Amoro, chef des Tiefo," *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.*, série B, XX, 3-4 (1958), 382; Yves Person, *Samori: Une révolution dyula* (Dakar, 1975), III, 279; Green, *The Foundation*, 333-38.

previously lived. Later he settled in the hilly region of Sindu, near the current Mali-Burkina border. In the final phase of his life, Famagan chose Bereba, in the north-east corner of Bobo country, as headquarters for launching expeditions against Bwa villages. He acted as the senior elder on major Islamic holidays when the heads of the major Watara houses gathered to discuss and coordinate trade and war activities. It is said that occasionally all of these war leaders sent a gift of slaves to Seku because he was the senior man of the house. Following the deaths of Seku and Famagan, we are told, the breach between the two collateral branches issuing from each one of them grew deeper as the physical separation solidified.

There was some continuity in the residences started by the pioneers of the eighteenth century. When a leader died, his younger brothers or sons returned to take over the settlement where he had fought. In Lobi country, for example, the successors of Seku's son Zan-Bakari repeatedly returned to the area between the Iringu and the southern Mouhoun where he had fought and lost his life. Sungarundaga remained an important residence for Kere-Mori's successors. On the left bank of the Mouhoun, in Katafura, Dande, Kundugu, Nyandane, and San, *fagamas* descended from Famagan maintained headquarters to launch raids on the Minyanka and guard the caravan route to Jenne. On the right bank of the river, the Watara, in association with their Sanon allies from Sia, waged war against Bwa confederations until the end of the nineteenth century. The mechanism of this continuity in the occupation of space will be clarified when we discuss the modalities of transmission within the house and the notions of inheritance.

Household Heads or Rulers

The most detailed accounts of the political conditions of the Mouhoun before the outset of the colonial period come from travellers' accounts at the end of the nineteenth century; I will now turn to these accounts before going further. The first French explorers went through the Upper Bandama-Mouhoun area in the late 1880s and described a fractured and chaotic political reality. Their statements are contradictory, at least partly because of the climate created by the Berlin conference of 1884-1885. Since the claim of a European power to occupy a portion of Africa was tied up with having treaties of protection signed by native rulers, these explorers turned into treaty hunters who had to seek out rulers, gather information to prove their legitimacy, and then make them sign a document. The process often worked not in this logical sequence but in reverse, starting with the signature on the document and then the search for the justification of why the dignitary in question could represent a sovereign authority. But the French explorers of the Mouhoun region were officers of the colonial army; they anticipated military conflict during the projected occupation, and in preparation for it they took upon themselves to conduct intelligence. The task was made all the more necessary because the divided metropolitan government was of two minds about colonial expansion and provided few resources. This need infused the travelers' accounts with a high degree of realism.

Gustave Binger, the sharpest and most prolific writer among the explorers of the Volta region, went through Kong and Bobo country in 1888. He wrote:

Sekou left numerous descendants spread all over the territory who have each a small commandement, but this doesn't prevent them from recogniz-

ing the absolute authority of Karamokho-Oulé and of the djemmaa of Kong, a sort of council of elders of which Karamokho-Oulé is the president and the executive power.⁴¹

Elsewhere Binger wrote: "From the northern branch of the Black Volta ... to the Baoulé [Bani] River of Jenne, there is a vast region submitted to the authority of Kong, but divided into numerous small confederations including peoples who fundamentally differ among themselves."⁴² The eagerness to accept "the authority of Kong" and Karamokho-Oulé as its executive power was undoubtedly related to the fact that Karamokho-Oulé had signed a document of protectorate. Binger's recourse to the word *confederation* in the same breath instructs us about a different reality, because it is the word he uses again later to describe the relationship between the independent Bwa villages of the Bondokui region, who were at the time in full war against the Sanon warlords and their Watara allies.

L.-P. Monteil who went through Sia three years after Binger wrote in the same vein that the Bwa and Bobo countries were controlled by the Watara, but also added that in this region there were no fewer than thirty-three *faamas*.⁴³ Binger had explained that all Watara men carried titles of *fama*, *massa*, *mansa* (which he translated as king), or *masadinn* (translated as son of king).

These European visitors, despite their great curiosity for local positions of authority, failed to identify the most significant senior men among the elders of the houses of Seku and Famagan. At the time of Binger's and Monteil's visits, the most senior man of the Seku house in the Kong region was Sokoro-Mori. Binger met this man but failed to appreciate his important position in the internal organization of the Seku family and described him simply as an incompetent drinker.⁴⁴ The elder Sokoro-Mori died in 1894, six years after Binger's visit, and was replaced by Kombi, who lived in the village of Nasian. For the Mouhoun region in the north, within the branches deriving from Famagan, the elder with the greatest seniority was Tieba Nyandane, who lived in Matruku where he had matrilineal connections, under the shadow and protection of Tiefo Amoro of Numudara. This elder watched helplessly as Samori marched north and destroyed Numudara after a fierce and suicidal defense. The defenders of the town had been abandoned by the most powerful among their allies, who either aligned themselves with Samori or chose to make separate deals with the French against him.

The reason for Binger and Monteil's failure to identify the people who filled the most senior positions among the Watara was that these positions had relevance only within their descent group. They bore no direct relationship to wealth and power achieved outside of that circle, and therefore had little significance for those who were not relatives or house dependents. The descent group elders were not necessarily major actors in the political alliances, and the people with the greatest

⁴¹ Binger, *Du Niger*, I, 324.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, 387.

⁴³ Parfait-Louis Monteil, *De Saint Louis à Tripolie par le lac Tchad. Voyage au travers du Soudan et du Sahara accompli pendant les années 1890-91-92* (Paris, 1895), 74.

⁴⁴ Binger, *Du Niger*, I, 326.

influence outside the kinship group were not necessarily the most senior within it.⁴⁵ Allies or enemies knew little about seniority ranking in the inner circle, while all recognized the rich and the strong. For example, a leader among Seku's descendants who had a much greater reputation than either Sokoro-Mori or Kombi was Bakari Ule, who lived in the village of Kaware, on the road to Bondoukou.⁴⁶ Even more powerful and famous was Moriba (or Ya-Mori) who lived in Tabiri-Koko. Because of this noncongruence between seniority rank within the group and wealth and leadership roles achieved in the wider world, researchers who tried to establish lists of succession—on the assumption that there was some kind of Watara dynasty—had difficulty achieving their task.

These attempted dynastic tables collapse names of senior elders with those of others who are remembered because of their great renown. The list that Bernus constructed for the successors of Seku, for example, starts with the names of the four sons of Seku, followed by that of one of his grandsons. Then we are given names whose genealogical status is unclear, partly recovered from Labouret's description of the eastern marches of the Watara war zone.⁴⁷ The same is true of the list of "Manding rulers who succeeded each other in the Bobo state" given in the pioneering article of Dominique Traoré.⁴⁸ Famagan was followed by his son, and then by his three grandsons who succeeded each other in lateral succession. When Diori takes over in the early nineteenth century, there is no longer a line of succession in evidence and we fall simply into a list of famous dignitaries. Copied from one publication to the next, such lists acquire canonical status and end up influencing the oral tradition itself, but their idiosyncratic nature is strikingly revealed when they are compared to records derived from independent sources. We happen to have an alternative list of Watara leaders in Bobo country, published by M. Sidibe ten years before D. Traoré's, and apparently based on information obtained from the Zara leaders of Sia. It does not contain any names in common with those on D. Traoré's list.⁴⁹ According to yet another brief history, the country surrounding Bobo-Dioulasso was first conquered in 1860 by Karamoko Dale.⁵⁰ This name is not to be found in any of the other lists and we can imagine that this information was given by the Watara house in Kotedugu, which will be discussed below.

The incomplete articulation between kinship rank and entrepreneurial achievement is not a recent development. It cannot be explained by rebellions and internal dissension, but appears to be a fundamental feature of the political order from the very beginning. We have evidence showing that at least in the beginning of the

⁴⁵ The cultural expression of this separation between kinship rank and personal achievements resulting from entrepreneurial activity in the wider world is discussed in Robert Launay, "Sabati-Ba's Coup d'Etat: Contexts of Legitimacy in a West African Chiefdom," in Ronald Cohen and J. D. Toland, eds., *State formation and Political Legitimacy* (New Brunswick, 1988), 45–67.

⁴⁶ Person, *Samori*, vol 3, 1687.

⁴⁷ Bernus, "Kong," 261–62.

⁴⁸ D. Traoré, "Notes," 61–63.

⁴⁹ Sidibe, "Contribution," 56–57. According to Sidibe, the first Watara who came to Bobo country was Niotou, followed by Samba, Zore, and Kokoroko.

⁵⁰ *Monographie du Cercle de Bobo-Dioulasso, Aperçu historique* (1920), National Archives of Côte d'Ivoire, microfilm 3Mi7.

nineteenth century, the situation was not different from that at the end of it. Abu Bakr al-Siddik, a West Indian who provided one of the rare early written testimonies about the Upper Bandama-Mouhoun region where he spent his adolescence, wrote that Soma Ali was "lord of that country."⁵¹ According to a reconstructed list of elders, the time is that of the reign of Somafi (fourth son of Seku) in the Kong region and that of Diori in the Mouhoun basin. Soma Ali is not part of any succession tables constructed before this text became available, and this discrepancy caused consternation to those working on the oral tradition. The mystery is the product of the dynastic frame of reference. There are actually two Soma Alis in the traditions concerning that epoch. One was son of Kere-Mori and grandson of Seku, who from his base in Sungarundaga launched attacks to the area near current-day Sikaso, and whose wealth and influence had overshadowed that of his senior elders. Labouret tells us of another Soma Ali, grandson of Zan Bakari, who raided Jimini and died in Sauta.⁵² It is hard to decide which Soma Ali should be taken as the subject of Abu Bakr's reference, and we don't know the precise term the author used to describe him either, because the text, which was originally written in Arabic, survives only in English translation. If we assume that word to be the equivalent of *fagama*, all the text says is that Soma Ali was one of the important military leaders of the region, and it is not necessary to seek an amendment to a supposed list of rulers.

The Vocabulary of Power

The lack of well-defined political positions outside the domestic structure and the descent group is also indicated in the lack of any precise terms for such positions. Today people of the region are at pains to find the appropriate Jula term to apply to the famous dignitaries of the past and are inconsistent in giving them French equivalents. Very frequently the problem leads to adopting borrowings from French to indicate positions of authority, revealing indirectly the impact of the colonial experience in the construction of this discourse. The point can be illustrated from the carefully transcribed sessions of the symposium on Kong. When El Hadj Mahaba gives a string of epithets for the types of important people that could be found in Kong, he uses the words *masa* and *nafolotigi*, which he translates as "chef" and "riche" respectively.⁵³ He also explains that his colleague Labi Sanogo's mother is descended from the Watara, that she is *masaden*, translated as "fille de chef." But immediately following this intervention, Labi himself qualifies his maternal ascendants as *rwa*, using a French borrowing (*roi*). *Masa*, used for legendary Sunjata, is translated alternatively as "roi" or as "chef,"⁵⁴ but "chef" is also the equivalent *fagama* and of *kuntigi*.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ivor Wilks, "Abu Bakr al-Siddiq of Timbuktu," in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1967), 158.

⁵² Henri Labouret, *Les Tribus du rameau Lobi* (Paris, 1931), 33.

⁵³ *Table Ronde*, 62.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 70, 78.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

The examples from this source can be multiplied, but let us look elsewhere to see how even a simple conversation displays the same hesitations. N. Kodjo elicited oral testimonies from senior descendants of the warrior and clerical stratum, with the conviction that *masa* was the name of an office of rulership, but the answers he received demonstrate instead indeterminacy. "Was Assoro a *masa*?" receives the following answer: "He wasn't *masa*. If there are many people, they follow the one who has most wealth. He is the one who is listened to. He is senior to the others. Otherwise, he wasn't *masa*." Another interlocutor separated the meaning of *masa* from wealth and influence less clearly: "With us the head of the *jamana* is called *fagama*. In other *jamanas* they say *masa*. The *fagama* is the person who gathers a lot of people around him. He also knows a lot of things." Elsewhere, we have a simple contradiction: "It is our grandfather who was *masa* there. It was his family that arranged all the problems there. It is before him that all the Bamana [non-Muslim Senufo farmers] came for audience. But this doesn't mean that he was *masa*." Kodjo also notes the term *julamasa*, a position not of power but of respect for a person recognized as arbiter and mediator for merchants.⁵⁶ In some localities of the Manding- [Jula-Bamana-] speaking world, the term *masa* primarily means a ritualized office heading a small confederation.⁵⁷ But as we see in the above examples, in the Upper Bandama-Mouhoun region this shade of meaning is fairly faint; the word can also mean a war leader more commonly designated as *fagama*, and was often used interchangeably with other terms such as *kundigi*, and even with later colonial titles such as *jamanatigi* and *dugutigi* (district chief and village chief respectively). These vacillations and shifts in usage reveal the uncertainty of the inheritors of these traditions in finding the appropriate word to designate the fluid and elusive roles of leadership beyond the confines of the kinship map within the war house.

To have a complementary European perspective on this same issue, we must turn to Tieba of Sikaso, the leader of a war house having its genesis in the same military milieu as the Wattara, even though he came to be their most formidable enemy. In 1890-1891, when the French were the allies of Tieba, Captain Quiquandon spent ten months with him, as his guest and comrade-in-arms. At the end of this period, he wrote his observations as a detailed intelligence report. Quiquandon's frame of reference is that Tieba is a "powerful sovereign," but he was surprised to find out that Tieba's activities did not cover territories that were spatially contiguous, and that even in war he ruled only over a certain part of the army that he personally owned. Furthermore, he discovered that Tieba was not the most senior man among his relatives, that he owed respect and allegiance to his elders. This point is crucial because it shows that the great fame and power that Tieba had acquired thanks to his personal qualities were independent of the descent ranking within which he was situated. Quiquandon wondered if it would not be more accurate to consider that the "sovereign" was in fact not Tieba but the head of his kinship group. This suggestion is, of course, impossible to harmonize with all

⁵⁶ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 1315, 1375 (Jula text, 1387), 1302 (Jula text, 1317), 1362, 1377.

⁵⁷ See the discussion in Jean Bazin, "Princes désarmés, corps dangereux: Les 'rois-femmes' de la région de Segou," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 3-4, 28 (1988), 375-441.

we know about Tieba's personal impact in the region, and has simply been ignored by subsequent historians.

Tieba's relations with other strong men and with independent village communities were even more perplexing. Next to villages he personally owned, there were others that agreed only to accommodate his representative as an observer, and still others that did not tolerate even a representative, even though they tried their best not to annoy Tieba. There were also hamlets owned by his relatives, or allied to them. Then, interspersed with these, and incomprehensible for the situation of a king, there were villages that fought him and looted his caravans. Quiquandon concluded that the explanation must be in the African failure to respect rulers: "The blacks are far from having the same ideas as the Europeans on royal power and the obligations due to it.... In their mind, Tieba has juridically no right at all, he has only the force, and people obey to him as to force, only when he is very near and threatening."⁵⁸

For these officers, to acquire a reputation by killing people was one thing, trying to get rich was quite another. In the aristocratic tradition of European armies, chivalric valor is the antipode of merchant calculus; in Tieba's entourage the two seemed to go together:

[In Tieba] love of war is mixed with love of glory ... but this doesn't mean that he pays no attention to more material interests, more tangible benefits. "When we will make war to Samori," he said one day, "it would be good if we stopped first to attack Tiongui; it is a rich village and we will have enough cattle to last us two years."

Quiquandon attributed this regrettable character flaw to a kind of racial atavism: "The spirit of the old greedy Julas, to whom his forefathers belonged, would sometimes surface in him, in an odd way next to the most noble instincts, bringing into his actions and words unexpected contradictions"⁵⁹

These were contradictions to late-nineteenth-century European officers in search of royal counterparts to ennoble themselves vicariously, but their African interlocutors did not perceive them as such. This is indicated in another way by the semantic development of the word *fagama* itself in more recent times. Among the modern Bamana of Mali, this word came to designate the major national merchants as well as the state dignitaries, "because wealth and knowledge cannot be imagined in a context that does not include their relationship to power."⁶⁰

The War House as an Enterprise

All the major actors designated by the term *fagama*—Seku's and Famagan's successors, their allies, rivals, and competitors such as Tieba of Sikaso—need to be considered first and foremost as the heads of powerful and exceptionally large

⁵⁸ Captain Quiquandon, "Rapport adressé par le Capitaine Quiquandon ... sur sa mission auprès de Tieba," *Journal Officiel de la République Française* 263 (28 Septembre 1891), 4692.

⁵⁹ Quiquandon, "Rapport," 4693.

⁶⁰ Shaka Bagayogo, "L'Etat au Mali: Représentation, autonomie et mode de fonctionnement" in *L'Etat contemporain en Afrique*, ed. by Emmanuel Terray (Paris, Harmattan, 1987), 91–122.

households (*so* or *sokòndò*). This is the way they thought of themselves. At the end of a long career, the erudite Charles Monteil proposed to replace what is usually called "Sudanic empire" by "clan."⁶¹ I believe he had in mind something very similar to what I am presenting here, even though the word clan is not the best choice because it assimilates the house to a descent cell and makes it difficult to discuss the complicated relationship between the leaders who headed the houses and their senior relatives.

The core of each war household was a set of relatives headed by a male elder, around whom were grouped sons and grandsons, younger brothers and nephews, and a large number of women. Also close to this core were trusted slaves who had graduated from years of military service and who could be sent to lead commercial expeditions, casted bards, and younger successful fighters of slave or free descent. They were supported by ritual specialists, the most important of whom were Muslim clerics from families affiliated for several generations. At the periphery of this circle were agricultural hamlets to produce most of the grain and meat needed by the household, and young men from allied or subjugated villages temporarily recruited for fighting purposes. Each warrior household was localized in a small settlement used as a residence by the elder, which therefore constituted the headquarters for organizing their central activities: warfare, trade, and production. They managed their wealth under the guidance of the head and some of the forceful senior members around him.

The wealth of the household consisted of slave troops, food resources, horses and other animals, weapons (especially firearms), agricultural slaves, money and goods of outstanding value. There was also the operating enterprise itself, which is intangible but which has a spatial aspect in the area where the military forces of the household, alone or in alliances with others, pursued its activities for a living. This spatial element of the pursuit of livelihood took different forms. First, there was the location where the household and its dependents lived and the camps where the soldiers were stationed, away from large villages or towns.⁶² The house elder controlled this area as a chief. The second element of space in a war household's holdings were the agricultural hamlets inhabited by slaves. The production of these farm centers made possible the leisure of the warrior and also of the clerical stratum. The farm hamlets of households that commanded a large amount of servile work power were scattered over a large area. The purchased slaves who inhabited these hamlets constituted practically serf communities, but the vagaries of individual *fagama* careers made these settlements unstable.

Next to these slave hamlets there were autonomous villages that willingly or by various degrees of coercion had entered into some kind of relationship with the war house. The *fagama* had a true alliance with some of these villages, accompanied by occasional affinal relations. At other times the alliance was imposed on the village.

⁶¹ Charles Monteil, *Une Cité soudanaise: Djénne métropole du Delta Central du Niger* (Paris, 1971), 40.

⁶² For this reason the clerics and merchants of the larger towns disparagingly called them *kongoso-mògò*, "bush hamlet person." Only those members of the family who engaged in commerce settled down in the Jula settlements attached to large villages that had a military presence or important trade activity.

The decision whether to join or not a war house in some kind of long-term alliance often provoked profound disagreements and animosities that could split the communities, traces of which are abundant in current village histories.

The allied villages were expected to refrain from attacking caravans under the protection of the *fagama*, which often carried his goods under a trusted relative or slave. Another expectation was that the villagers would, if necessary, host his warriors. When the *fagama* faced a major showdown with a rival, these villages could also be asked to contribute fighters, but whether this request would be honored or not depended on the villagers' perception of his strength at the moment. There was no formal taxation and the village received reciprocal gifts from the *fagama*, in the form of captives, in return for their participation. The *fagama* sometimes assigned an observer to such villages, a trusted slave who came and settled with his household. This man was considered an outsider and was not allowed to participate in village meetings. He acted primarily as an intelligence agent, reporting the major public affairs of the village to his master, and what he learned about the surrounding area and the trade routes leading to it. These villages usually also had a small colony of *jula* traders who spent part of the year in a few buildings constructed just outside of the village.

Villages that did not accept such collaboration were targets of attack, raw material for the principal occupation of the *fagama*, in Richard Roberts's words the manufacture of slaves by way of capture.⁶³ Each war house had particular target areas of such bellicose villages where they pursued their military operations. Beyond the limited zone of habitual action, important *fagama* could have a longer range of influence if they were solicited as mercenaries by strongmen who emerged among the farm communities, or by leaders of other war houses in difficulty against rivals of the same caliber as themselves. The result of all of this was the checker-board pattern of enemy and friend described by Quiquandon for Tieba. There was no circumscribed area around a *fagama*, a protected "inside" territory that was spared. The relations of protection and alliance depended on pacts negotiated with the leader. Villages helped the war leader to whom they were allied or his representatives, and worked at times against their immediate neighbors.

The noncentralized nature of these activities can be seen even in the composition of the armies. The forces attacking an enemy village or the stronghold of an enemy rival (a *fagamandugu*),⁶⁴ had a core made up of warriors owned by the head of the house that had taken the initiative and often commanded by his adult sons or other junior relatives. But it also included other units made up of companies of slave warriors belonging to different people. Rich men, and in a few documented cases also women, kept fighters who were sent to such expeditions to accompany the *fagama*, in return for a share of the booty.⁶⁵ There were also companies of free

⁶³ Richard L. Roberts, "Production and Reproduction of Warrior States: Segu Bambara and Segu Tokolor, c. 1712-1890," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* XIII (1980), 389-419.

⁶⁴ *Fagamandugu*: a village that had a *fagama*. The translation offered in *Table Ronde*, "capitale" (p. 342) is unacceptable.

⁶⁵ A woman who had such a company of soldiers in Sia was the famous Guimbi Watara. Dominique Traoré explains that whenever a military expedition was organized in the city, she

men who came to offer their services of their own free will. The catch belonged to the individual or to the owner of the fighters who made it. Collective spoils, such as a herd of livestock or a group of people caught at the end of the siege, were divided into shares and distributed among the participating companies in proportion to their contribution in fighters. Some houses proceeded later to an internal distribution of the pooled spoils. The armies themselves, then, like the trade caravans organized by the *fagama*, were partnerships somewhat similar to a joint stock company. This role of initiating expeditions in which others could participate for returns is the precise sense in which the *fagama* was the leader who gathered others around him. To open up a new territory, to prospect it and evaluate its potential, develop the strategy on the basis of local knowledge, and build a war machine that could be sustained, took not only military stratagem, but also a kind of entrepreneurial expertise that only innovative leaders possessed, and it is such people that the oral traditions of the Wattara today celebrate. Once an area was opened up, and if the haul did not collapse the local economy in the long run, a balance was established between the damages inflicted by the raids and the farming communities' reproductive capacity under these conditions.

Even though warfare is what distinguishes these households from the smaller but comparable units of village farming communities, members of the warrior stratum considered that the primary purpose of their military activity was *sòrò* (gain, profit, or return), a word that belongs in the repertoire of mercantile activities. The objectives of war were expressed in the language of trade. War was seen as a kind of trade at the same time that trade in the strict sense transformed the spoils of war into profit. The heads of large houses had personal gain objectives, but people also speak as if the family outfit were an agricultural enterprise, just as in village communities. Thus the spoils of war are also called *domuni* (food) and the purpose of a raid is said to be *denbaya balo* (feeding the children), that is, the household.⁶⁶ The two images, trade and farming, provide the discursive poles within which martial activity was placed. The trope of farming focuses on solidarity within the house group, that of trade on rivalry between seniors representing points of potential fission.

Adult members of the household, exceptionally including some women, could start to accumulate their own fortunes with the permission and encouragement of their elders, and some men could amass significant private resources by moving away from the area of operation of the household long before they reached a formal position of leadership within the kinship set. The presence of these considerable accumulated resources made inheritance a major issue. The great stakes in the

participated in it by sending a contingent of soldiers made up of people she had "purchased with her very own money" and therefore received "a share of war profits ... in conformity with custom." "Notes," 72.

⁶⁶ Here is as an example a quote describing the activities of Seku's sons: "*e ye taga dugu dō kan, ni a ka se ka o ce do, e ye domuni nyinin ora ka na i denbaya balo*" ("if they go to attack a village and are successful in penetrating it, they seek the food so that they can come and feed their household") (Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 1385). The context makes it clear that what is meant here by food is not grains, which the attackers were not interested in carrying, but booty, that is slaves, animals, and objects of wealth. It is also obvious that "the children" refers not only to the offspring of one's wives but the entire group of dependents, that is the household.

inheritance of the group's collectively managed resources created periodic strains when the senior elder heading the group died. Frequently tension between the brothers of the deceased elder and his successful adult sons led to the withdrawal of the son with his own and his brothers' private resources to a distant land. Within the houses, Watara practice swayed between filial devolution and lateral succession. The first took force from the individualistic precepts of Islam (adopted only piecemeal because the warriors were not Muslim), but the second was considered proper local practice and remains so for many people even in today's highly Islamized environment. In fact, the split between the collateral branches of Seku and Famagan is attributed to a dispute over inheritance. A knowledgeable traditionalist imagines that the separation of the two brothers came after Seku uttered the following words to Famagan: "You should know that upon my death all my belongings will pass to my sons. If you want to leave an inheritance to your sons make the lands you occupied work for you."⁶⁷

These concerns with income and inheritance color the notion of *mara*, which returns with great frequency in local discourse. This word deserves extended exegesis to disentangle the various meanings it accumulated in the past century. In the colonial period the word came to mean the administrative unit called *canton* in French. When the reference is the precolonial period, the word is sometimes used as a verb and then translated with the French equivalents of "govern," "occupy," and sometimes "rule."⁶⁸ When translating these same French words into Jula, however, interpreters tend not to use *mara* but prefer loan words such as *kumandi-man*,⁶⁹ and even speaking in Jula, Labi Sanogo resorts to the verb *kòmandi*.⁷⁰ These translations are not stable, and there is a primary meaning to be recovered. When used as a noun, *mara* makes reference to space. Then its French equivalent would be *territoire*.⁷¹ More precisely it is territory attached to the head of a house. When conflicts arose among Watara leaders in the Mouhoun region, the senior elders in the Kong region sent arbitrators to divide up the *mara* among them, so that they would not fight each other.

The relationship of these leaders to these carved-out bits of territory is expressed by the verb *sigi*, or sit. A *fagama* sat over his *mara*. Are we to understand this activity as a kind of sovereignty, or were these areas where, as in the situation described above for Tieba, some villages were trusted allies, others hostile and the target of attack? When trying to answer this question we need to consider first that the attempts to define *mara* boundaries were internal affairs within the Watara descent group and their client periphery, and not projects to regulate the entire political space. The leaders of the Watara houses were unable and unwilling to prevent the entry of other smaller or larger coercive powers into the picture. There were overlapping zones of influence and raiding activity. Crozat explained how many villages in the region of Bondokui maintained ties with several war

⁶⁷ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 448.

⁶⁸ See, for example, *Table Ronde*, 107, 108, 120.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

houses at once, making large payments to some Watara houses as well as to the Fulbe house in Donkui.⁷² Crozat described these payments as another absurdity, tribute to multiple centers, but he overlooked the benefits that villagers obtained from such relationships: not only safety but also participation in raids and commerce, slaving, and profit. In the particular case of Bondokui, the ties of the founding house of the village with Fulbe war houses persisted until the anticolonial war of 1915–1916.

The second factor to consider what sitting over a *mara* meant is the spatial distribution of raiding activity. As Labi Sanogo explained in the Kong symposium, “captives were taken everywhere.” And they were sold in the same spot where they were caught.⁷³ A Watara leader did not have to go outside his *mara* to engage in military activity. In fact, if he respected his obligations toward other Watara leaders, he was supposed to operate inside it; when he trespassed on another Watara’s *mara*, this created conflict with a person who was most likely a relative, an affine, or a friend under oath.

The normal activity of a Watara leader was to make his *mara* productive, to derive income from it by staging raids as well as receiving gifts and favors, not to rule it as a sovereign. This was explained to Kathryn Green in no uncertain terms: “If [the Watara] took a village, they took its money and some slaves to come and sell. They didn’t make war in order to become the chiefs of these people.”⁷⁴

Mara, then, was the zone for raiding activity as well as of privileged relations of gift exchange and mutual assistance with particular villages. People who claim the heritage of Watara warriors talk of *mara* as something that is developed by a person, that is owned, and that can be inherited by younger brothers or sons. The root meaning of *mara* is to save, or to economize, and therefore by extension in its nominal form also inheritance. Its semantic development into a territory subject to predatory activity stresses the individual achievement and control aspect of war territories as opposed to the communal control within the house group. The *mara* corresponds to the *fagama*, the household-enterprise head, and is his personal achievement. Like other goods he acquired in his lifetime, it can be inherited within the household, often by sons, to the exclusion of collateral lineage segments with whom ties continue to be acknowledged and toward whom other obligations remain in force. The spoils it bears are said to have been used “to drink sorghum beer” (the perspective of individual luxury afforded by this lifestyle) or “to eat” (the alternative perspective of household reproduction). Given the possibilities of growth that the acquisition of slaves, arms, and horses opened up, and the fantastic careers that were based on them, investment would be another notion we might associate with it, but this seems to be secondary in the conceptual repertoire that is conveyed to us by Jula-speaking descendants of the warrior and clerical stratum.

⁷² Docteur Crozat “Rapport du docteur Crozat sur sa mission au Mossi” *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 23^e année, 270: 4797–4801; 271: 4806–9; 272:4820–3; 273:4835–7; 274:4847–50.

⁷³ *Table Ronde*, 348–350.

⁷⁴ Basseri Watara, quoted in Green, *The Foundation*, 322.

Kinship, Descent, and Affinity among the Watara

Relations between the war houses took many forms. One pattern was long-term solidarities established by kinship ties, but here we need to disentangle a wide variety of bonds that only superficially appear similar. It should be clear from what has been said so far that in this part of West Africa the adoption of a patronymic is not necessarily related to descent or any other kind of kinship. It is well attested from the colonial period as well as from oral traditions concerning the time before that, that entire groups changed their patronymic, taking that of their hosts or following alliances with a stronger partner, or in order to differentiate themselves from a rival. Besides people issuing from house slaves, bilateral relatives, and clients, totally foreign groups encountered in the war zones assumed the name Watara. Labi Sanogo, for example, explains that after Kele Mori attacked and left the Gben population (along the Leraba River) a person called Miryen sat there to replace them; he was of Gben origin but was known by the name Watara.⁷⁵ There were houses that adopted the Watara patronymic scattered over the entire region from the Bandama in the south to the confluence of the Bani and Niger in the north, and as far east as the boundary of modern Ghana.

Within this amorphous mass of people who adopted the patronymic, there were smaller sets that did have the appearance of something like a kinship group. Some clusters of houses have traditions of common historical experience and genealogical connection. These clusters are sometimes referred to as *kabila*. But these sets too are amalgams of branches of different sorts. The connections between them are sometimes explained with prototype stories. When bilateral kinsmen and dependents of slave origin within a large house were successful and had numerous progeny, they became the starting point of separate lineage segments that split in time from the unit encapsulating them to constitute distinct but dependent branches. The ties between the resulting branches can be very intricate. Rich Watara men preferred to give their daughters to their prominent slaves to keep them in the house. While assimilation into the house and even several generations of solidarity and dependency status among groups is usually not sufficient for the merging of patrilineal statuses, this kind of affinal mixing sometimes reinforced historical ties with kinship connections in such a way that genealogical links are difficult to sort out.

Within these clustered and historically connected segments one finds yet smaller subsets in which the links are presented as simple patrilineal series that have very little ambiguity. Thus the leading figures of some Watara houses traced their ancestry directly to either Seku or Famagan. Here we are in the domain of patrilineal descent proper, as conceptualized and theorized in social anthropology. This subgroup, who are today a tiny minority among all those who claim the name Watara, is a non-localized agnatic structure, thinly scattered over a vast territory. The location of these houses depended on the contingencies of history; it played no role in descent segmentation. Descent in turn played no role in conceptualizing the territory.

⁷⁵ *Table Ronde*, 342. See also the discussion on the meaning of the term Watara in *Table Ronde*, 116-130.

To facilitate a closer reading of the historical material, it is useful to note at this point a particular mechanism for maintaining these identities. Most of the lineages that have produced important political characters, whether Wattara or not, are attached to the memory of a towering historical figure, such as Seku, Famagan, or Lasiri Gbambele. The preeminence of such names creates at first the impression that the descent group claims its origin from the famous historical figure. More detailed investigation into the internal traditions of such groups reveals, however, that the major historical figure is often only a secondary source of the identity. Semi-mythological genealogies usually go back a few generations before the famous ancestor to more obscure founders, who came from distant lands and are of clouded ethnic origins. These distant forebears provide the group with a distinct personality; but by opening up the possibility of creating new stories of connectedness in points of the ascendance not in the limelight, they also allow the blocs of houses to come together into larger groupings. The metaphor of house is used at different levels of inclusiveness in this structure. Sometimes, the lower levels of segmentation are distinguished as "hearth" within the house.

In the vicinity of the town of Kong at the end of the nineteenth century there were four major branches originating in Seku's sons. None of these lived in the town of Kong itself. They chose instead as headquarters small hamlets (*sigiduga*). Some of these hamlets were at a distance of 200 kilometers from Kong. This dispersal, too, is traced to the strategies of Seku himself: "Seku installed a son here, a son there; one son in Djendama, one in Tiemene, one in Nassian. These sons two by two come to join him, and together they go to attack a village."⁷⁶

On the Mouhoun plateau, there are three branches that derive from Famagan, referred to as *guru*, more commonly heard as *juru* (cord or cable), and labeled after the sections of an army (chest, right and left hand). There were three other branches of dependent status with an ambiguous position of intermediaries that are traced to slave companies established in the eighteenth century: Bambajon, the Fenminabaga, and the Nyekele.⁷⁷

There were also houses on the Mouhoun plateau tracing direct descent to Seku. The oldest and most prestigious of them was in Sungarundaga, held by the successors of Kere-Mori, son of Seku. Their raiding zone was in the west, the Tagwa and Minyanka countries (now in Mali). The rise in the 1870s of Tieba of Sikaso, who targeted the very same area, led to unproductive confrontations with him and they entered the final decade of the nineteenth century weakened.

A second house linked to Seku was in Kotedugu, in the southeastern part of Bobo country. It was of junior status, but because of the important role it played in the early colonial period (briefly explained in the Postscript to this article), it is worthwhile to describe it. This house started in the nineteenth century as a warrior colony next to a village called Kokana by its Bobo population. There are contradictory stories about its origins. According to some sources from Kong, it was started by Sori Famagan, grandson of Seku and son of the famous Jangina. According to another account reported by Yves Person, Kotedugu was started by Karamogo Dali

⁷⁶ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 1385.

⁷⁷ Quimby, *Transformations of Belief*, 15.

(presumably another son of Jangina) who was sent away after having a conflict with his uncle Kombi.⁷⁸ The recollection of this conflict may have something to do with the prominence that this branch acquired in the colonial period and the resentment felt by members of the senior branch in the vicinity of Kong. In the nineteenth century the Kotedugu house was the leading force of a coalition of militarized communities of Vige, Puguli, and Tiefo origin living south of the Bobo speech area, toward the river Bougouriba, collectively called Janginajòn (the slaves, or people, of Jangina). With them, the Watara of Kotedugu organized raids to the area north of the Mouhoun River.

South of Bobo country, in Tiefo territory, the Watara of Seku also held a residence in Dramanedugu. Further east, between the Iringu and the southern course of the Mouhoun, in the territory opened up by Zan-Bakari, the important centers were Loto (near Diebugu) and Loropeni. A split following a disagreement led to the foundation of a third center further south, in Sauta, staging raids as far as Buna. Even though the history of Watara activity in this area goes back to Seku's own early career, this was not easy territory for the warlords. Bernus writes that the Watara in this region were like small enclaves entrenched in fortified villages in the middle of warlike populations.⁷⁹ This is probably a reference to the long siege, lasting from 1888 until 1895, that some Birifor villages undertook against Loto. The Watara in this place, and also in other parts of the Mouhoun, are often described as foreigners. It is clear that this manner of speaking only perpetuates a colonial stereotype supported by strange speculations on culture history. At the beginning of the colonial period these Watara houses had at least two centuries of presence, and strong alliances with Gan and Jan war leaders, while much of the farming Lobi population had immigrated into the district after the eighteenth century.

Among the war houses of distinct ethnic origin but with long-term ties to the Watara, the best known are the Tiefo of Numudara, who were briefly mentioned above, and the Sanon of Sia who need to be discussed elsewhere.

It is important to note that neither the historical ties nor even the descent ties imposed on the houses a strong obligation to collaborate with each other. Even the major branches of Seku and Famagan's descendants coordinated their action only in some instances, and most of the time they simply stayed out of each other's way. They could also work at cross-purposes, and sometimes they clashed. The most dramatic instance of the shattering of old alliances happened in the final decade of the nineteenth century, when the confrontation of two giant foreign armies, one led by Samori and the other by the French, created crushing pressures.

In less eventful times communication and coordination between warrior houses was achieved by a wide variety of means. When there was an agnatic link, it provided a privileged arena for coordination. Genealogy created seniority ranking in generations and age. Elders played the role of arbitrators and classificatory sibling-ship encouraged conformity and promoted trust in partnership. Even relatives,

⁷⁸ Kodjo, *Le royaume*, 792; Person, *Samori*, 3, 1898. Person's version seems to be based on a colonial monograph; see note 50 above.

⁷⁹ Bernus, "Kong," 268.

however, often had recourse to mediators outside their kinship group. This role fell upon *karamogow*, Muslim clerics. They were associated with warrior houses primarily as ritual specialists. The warriors used the Muslims' know-how for spiritual protection and strength, which were the only underlying causes of success in war and worldly achievement in general. But the clerics also helped negotiate in difficult situations.⁸⁰ For example, when the Watara started to fight each other in the Mouhoun region in the early eighteenth century, "the elders in Kong" had a meeting and dispatched three Muslim clerics to serve as arbitrators.⁸¹

When a diplomatic agreement was reached between important house heads, the clerics made it binding by administering to the parties an oath (*kari*) over the Qur'an. In the nineteenth century the clerics of the Watara carried the patronymic Saganogo, but behind this patronymic we again find several unrelated groups of different geographic origin.⁸² One Saganogo group called "of Tunuma" were the main mediators between the Watara and the Sanon of Sia until the 1870s, when, following a disagreement, they withdrew from their colony adjacent to Sia to found Darsalami some fifteen kilometers to the south.

A war leader whose superior strength was mutually acknowledged could also act as a mediator between lesser warlords or arbitrate in conflicts between allied villages. Samori's son, Saranke-Mori, for example, played such a role on the eastern bank of the Mouhoun River, between two formerly allied war leaders who fell out, Babato and Amaria. The effort failed and Babato and Amaria started an all-out struggle that became a side episode in the final colonial push in the area, Babato throwing his lot with the British while Amaria sided with the French.

In summary, the strong military leaders of the Mouhoun region came from a variety of backgrounds, and the impression of homogeneity created in the literature by cursory references to descent ties or to the widespread nature of the Watara patronymic is very misleading. Where there were true patrilineages, as in the well-documented cases of those issuing from Seku and Famagan, the house that was the effective unit of action for these leaders was not simply a segment of the agnatic structure. The leaders as persons occupied a specific location in the agnatic structure, but their influence in the world was not a consequence of this position. The house was a large group of people, including many unrelated dependents, who came together, stayed together, and prospered thanks to the personal initiative and managerial skills of its head. Inheritance played a role in the perpetuation of these houses but did not guarantee the permanence of their influence as one generation succeeded another. Watara men married non-Watara women and this made their children members of local matrilineages, even if they themselves were initially outsiders.⁸³ These ties also were important for alliances.

⁸⁰ It is noteworthy in this respect that many clerical families are said to derive from ethnoprofessional groups of bards or blacksmiths.

⁸¹ *Table Ronde*, 107-108.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 230.

⁸³ Many of the communities south of the Mouhoun River recognize matrilineages as well as patrilineages, each playing varying roles in social organization. Whether the Watara of the region of Kong recognized matrilineages among themselves, misrecognized as simple affinity, is a question worth pursuing.

Despite these multiple ties, the people belonging to the military stratum had some sense of distinctiveness vis-à-vis farmers, which is expressed in the label they used for themselves: *sonanki*.⁸⁴ According to some people this word is simply a local pronunciation of the word *soninke*,⁸⁵ which in turn can be related to labels such as *sonni*, and *songhay*. *Sonanki* came to demarcate the warriors from the Muslim clerics who were their associates. In our day there is a tendency to interpret all identity labels as ethnicity, but Bernus warns us not to treat *sonanki* as an ethnic category.⁸⁶ "The one who makes war, who attacks you, who chases you and takes your belongings, he is the one called *sonanki*. In Jula one would say 'the one who doesn't fear god' otherwise it is not a species of unbelievers (*banman si*)."⁸⁷

The *sonanki* were also diverse in terms of standing and fortune. They were a distinct sector of the population, differentiated by their occupation, which made them similar to an estate in the European sense, as suggested by Jack Goody.⁸⁸ We have to remember, however, that there was no basis for a statutory category, and they were also not a class of rulers. Most of them were slaves, and remained of humble standing until the end of their days, shouldering all the risks of the military occupation but benefiting little from the glory. Very few of them achieved respect, wealth, and power. The linchpin of the regional political order was the military leader, the organizer, who might not be a fighter himself, because as we have seen, many who acquired the title *fagama* came from a trader or Muslim background. At the height of his career, a particular *fagama* could develop a coercive power that neutralized all his rivals and constrained the autonomy of village communities, but this was held in check by the possibility of wider alliances against him, and in any case was a temporary state, a brief hiatus, in the longer-term multicentricity of the political order.

A large proportion of the population in the region remained committed primarily to agriculture and lived in complex heterogeneous villages. Yet the distinction between peaceful farmers and professional warriors in the accounts of this region is somewhat overdrawn. The response to the presence of raiding enterprises was variable. Certain groups or entire communities developed privileged ties with particular war houses, while other communities discouraged involvement with them. Outside the group of owned slaves, among the free agriculturists, the line between professional fighters and those who were primarily farmers was thin. Freelance banditry was tempting for youth who were rigorously trained for defense in initiation cycles. The classic example of the "farming populations" that opposed the Watara is the

⁸⁴ Person, *Samori*, I, 78, note 24, gives a local explanation deriving *sonanki* from *so* ("sacrifice"), but on philological grounds this etymology is somewhat uncertain. In the Bobo language, the functional equivalent of *sonanki* is *kefari*.

⁸⁵ This is for example the position of I. Seriba. *Table Ronde*, 167–68.

⁸⁶ Bernus, "Kong," 254. Compare Green's contrasting opinion, *The Foundation*, 218ff.

⁸⁷ *Si* ("species" or "race") is the word most people translate as ethnic group in comparable contexts. Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 1307 (Jula text, 1321).

⁸⁸ Jack Goody, "The Overkingdom of Gonja," in Daryll Forde and P. M. Kaberry, eds., *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1967), 186ff.

Lobi, who remained dispersed, living in fortified village wards of modest size.⁸⁹ This settlement pattern proved effective in defense not only against the Wattara, but later also against the limited forces that the French were willing to allocate to subjugate this distant periphery of their colonial empire. But the view that the political organization of these dispersed populations was limited to segmentary lineage processes and revenge killings during feuds needs to be reconsidered. Fortified Lobi wards also established coalitions that attacked each other as well as outsiders, and as elsewhere, in these conflicts emerged leaders who tried to establish supremacy by threatening other villagers and imposing on them monetary contribution as gifts and fines.⁹⁰ Revenge is sometimes simply a formulaic expression to account for hegemonic ambitions (see note 19 above).

In the northern part of the Mouhoun area, farmers joined the strongest communities able to withstand the threat, to form large fortified villages. The most successful of these villages also invited and incorporated militarized groups to live as a separate ward next to them. They became the leaders in establishing leagues that were formidable military forces, as the French learned in the first decades of colonial occupation. Membership in these leagues was not always voluntary and there were ties between them and various *fagamas* who sometimes lived at large distances. The monetary gifts given to the latter were for protection, but also to secure their help against other military centers, or other leagues with ties to another *fagama*. Such ties intensified the rivalries within the stratum of war houses and also swelled the ranks of their armies with farmers. In some zones a set of villages established long-term, occasionally ritualized, ties with a military house or set of related houses. The Tiefo of Numudara and Sanon of Sia have such ties with surrounding village communities, and these ties cannot be assimilated either to conquest or to segmentary processes articulated by descent.

The Meaning of Gwiriko

The idea that there was a kingdom or vassal state in precolonial Mouhoun takes its strength in no small degree from the magic of naming. I will therefore end this discussion by scrutinizing the somewhat mysterious name Gwiriko. The term was introduced into the historiography of the region by Dominique Traoré.⁹¹ He maintained that in the precolonial period this term applied to the territory that had been conquered by Famagan, which incidentally corresponded to the cercle of Bobo-

⁸⁹ A pioneering collection of essays, *Guerres de lignages et guerres d'états en Afrique*, edited by Jean Bazin and Emmanuel Terray (Paris, 1982) brings a wealth of material to bear on the neglected topic of warfare and political organization, although still around the contrast between acephalous societies and kingdoms. In this book the contribution of Pierre Bonnafé, Michèle Fiéloux, and Jeanne-Marie Kambou, "Un Vent de folie? Le Conflit armé dans une population sans Etat: Les Lobi de Haute Volta" (pp. 73-141) discusses the Lobi case in great detail. Two other outstanding contributions in the same book, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan's "Le Cheval et l'arc" (pp. 189-234) and Eliane de Latour's "La Paix destructrice" (pp. 235-65), dealing with different parts of what is now the Republic of Niger offer material and interpretive insights that can profitably be compared to the present article.

⁹⁰ An example reported by Henri Labouret in 1918 is given in Jean Hébert, "Révolte en Haute Volta de 1914 à 1918," *Notes et Documents Voltaïques* 3, 4 (1970), 53.

⁹¹ D. Traoré, "Notes."

Dioullasso in the colonial period, and thus had become the name of the kingdom he had created. Traoré did not explain the meaning of this name; this was done thirty years later by Father Jean Hébert in a radio conference: "This Manding word means 'beyond the faraway rest point (*au-delà de la longue étape*)' but others say 'behind the forest'."⁹² The first one of these two translations was then repeated by J. Capron,⁹³ and from there it was copied into many other publications, often without mentioning the source. Notwithstanding this popularity of the word in the realm of print, many fieldworkers were puzzled to discover that in the surroundings of Bobo-Dioullasso, the word *Gwiriko* is unknown to most Jula-speaking elders.

In the symposium on the origins of Kong, the former school teacher I. Seriba explained that the name Gbirin applied to the territories south of the Leraba River, and that Gbirinko meant north of this river.⁹⁴ It is in the transcription of this explanation that we find for the first time a correct spelling of the word according to the conventions adopted for the Jula language, and a hint to a sounder etymology. Another relevant observation is that the Leraba River was the border between the French colonies of Côte d'Ivoire and Haute Volta. This meeting was conducted mostly in Jula, as it was attended by local scholars noted for their knowledge of oral traditions and Islamic sources, but these two terms were used with meanings recapitulating colonial administrative boundaries and by a retired teacher who was speaking in French.

Some of the elders interviewed by N. Kodjo in the region of Kong in northern Côte d'Ivoire told him that the term *gwiriko* applies to the provinces in the south—Dyirmini, Dyamata, and Ano—as well as to the remote areas of the Voltaic north. Kodjo also reports that, according to the same elders, the primary reference of the word is the Atlantic coast, that is, the area beyond the rain forest, but this information is not taken further into consideration in Kodjo's thesis.⁹⁵ Let us now look at the etymons that form the compound in order to clarify its meaning.

Clearly, the word is made up of *gbirin* and *ko*. *Ko* is the location suffix frequently encountered in toponymic compounds and means "beyond." The root word of the compound, *gbirin*, is given in the Jula speech of Bobo-Dioullasso the sense of "uncultivated forest"—that is, the remote, little inhabited, and unknown area past the fallow lands that are periodically opened to agriculture. More specifically it may refer to the rainforest from the perspective of someone who lives in the savanna zone. *Gbirin-ko* has thus the meaning of lands beyond the unused woodlands that border the familiar territory. It has the connotation of no-man's land, wild and dangerous territory. We see that the associations of the word *gbirin* in the area

⁹² This lecture broadcasted in 1967 has been printed posthumously as Jean Hébert, "Une grande figure de Bobo-Dioullasso: la princesse Guimbé Ouattara" in *La Haute Volta Coloniale: Témoignages, recherches, regards*, sous la direction de Gabriel Massa et Y. Georges Madiéga (Paris, 1995), 509–522.

⁹³ Capron, *Les Communautés*.

⁹⁴ *Table Ronde*, 86. A second reference to this term was made later in the same meeting by the imam of Bobo-Dioullasso, El Hadj Mahaba, when he explained that the sons of Fa Maghan were not the only people who were chiefs in this territory (p. 316).

⁹⁵ Kodjo, *Le Royaume*, 387.

of Bobo-Dioulasso is consistent with some of the information given in the Kong area, which points in the direction of the rainforest.

From all of this we can conclude that *gwiriko* was a word used in the surroundings of the town of Kong with a vague directional referent, but not as the name of a circumscribed area. It does not refer primarily to western Burkina Faso or to the bend of the Mouhoun River. This explains its lack of currency among the Jula-speakers of that area. Before the publication of D. Traoré's article, the name Gwiriko was not used by traditionalists or by anyone else as the name of a kingdom or even a precise geographic location. None of the writings on the region dating from before 1937—that is, the local written sources of Islamic origin, the narratives of the late precolonial explorers, the long reports of the colonial period, or the early writings of school-trained local intellectuals—make reference to Gwiriko. The only reason educated people now know this name is because after 1960 it entered secondary school textbooks and is inscribed in the memory of every schoolboy and girl in the region.

Postscript: Colonial Events and the Interpretation of History

In the early months of 1897 Samori marched against Kong, which he suspected of entering into collusion with his enemy Babemba of Sikaso by supplying him with horses and other trade goods. After destroying the town he pursued the elders of the house of Seku. The leading elders of the house fled north. Bakari Ule, Badyula, and Yamori found refuge with Pentyeba, the head of the branch in Kotedugu. Kombi, the most senior of all of Seku's descendants, died in his flight, but the sacred objects of the family that he carried with him were also eventually delivered to Pentyeba. Against the threat of Samori, Pentyeba very early decided to ally himself with the French. This made him one of the few Wattara elders who could stand on his feet when the hurricane of the first phase of colonial occupation subsided, and also gave him a strong tie to Caudrelier, commander of the French forces in the Volta region.

The French proceeded to establish a kind of indirect rule. They defined administrative units in the occupied territories that they labeled *états*, which, they maintained, were ruled by the friendly leaders who had helped them. They recognized Pentyeba as the supreme sovereign of all the Wattara and offered him the entire area within the bend of the Mouhoun River. Pentyeba needed more allies and negotiated sharing this territory with two other Wattara elders, Tieba Nyandane who was the elder of the house of Famagan, and Mogofin who headed the Seku house in Sungarundaga. Thus came into being in the Mouhoun plateau three "Etats de Kong."⁹⁶ The French also expected some minimal control of this entrusted territory. With the fresh resources made available under the new situation, Pentyeba started a true war of conquest in the zone of his state. The population proved impossible to

⁹⁶ For the other *Etats* created in the Mouhoun region at that time see: Jeanne-Marie Kambou-Ferrand, *Peuples Voltaïques et Conquête Coloniale, 1885-1914* (Paris, 1993).

control with this indirect administration, and the *états* were gradually dissolved. First was phased out that of Dafogo, successor of Tieba Nyandane, and the remaining two were abolished in 1915.

This brief colonial episode had a longer grip on the imagination. First, it generated specifically targeted claims on the part of the descendants of Seku and Famagan.⁹⁷ Less directly, it made it possible to talk about the nineteenth century in terms of the colonial administrative units of the twentieth century. "Les Etats de Kong" were not contiguous units; they were a motley collection of villages that the three Watara elders divided among themselves on the basis of realistic prospects of control, leapfrogging each other, and also interspersed with unruly "independent" villages that were relegated from the beginning to French military authority. Still, the *canton* administration behind them created the possibility of imagining the domain of the *fagama* as mappable units. By the 1930s, when local intellectuals educated in colonial teacher training schools were attempting to write a local history comparable to that found in French schoolbooks, they could use the memories of "Les Etats de Kong," which were now genuinely of the past, to generate kingdoms and aristocracies for a discourse that had protonationalist overtones.

⁹⁷ An example of how political claims could shape the reporting of traditions, and how conversely European interest in traditions was locally interpreted in light of the possibility of obtaining administrative positions is provided by a remark from 1921. In one of his political reports of that year, the administrator of Bobo-Dioulasso reports that the historical research undertaken by Louis Tauxier, an administrator turned prolific ethnographer and historian, in the city created a lot of commotion because it gave the impression that important changes were imminent in the organization of the indigenous chieftaincy. Cercle de Bobo-Dioulasso, Rapport Politique, 1^{er} Trimestre, 1921, National Archives of Côte d'Ivoire, 5EE 1(3).