

The ‘Pays Dô’ and the origins of the Empire of Mali

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The griot Djanka Tassej Condé spoke:

*The twelve towns of Dò,
The four towns of Kiri,
the six towns on the other side of the river,
That is what is known as Dò ni Kiri.
Have you heard it?¹*

INTRODUCTION

Dò and Kiri are two portentous names to conjure with in the study of Mande history. Notionally they are the two small polities which united to form the foundation of the great Empire of Mali in the 13th century. Charles Monteil wrote of them:

According to traditionists interviewed at Medina, Kita, Bamako and Jenne, the true, original Mali is inseparable from the two regions of Kiri and Do; between them supremacy oscillated.²

This tradition has deep roots. Dò (‘Daw’) and Kiri (the latter also known as ‘Malal,’ or even ‘Mande’)³, first appear in the 11th century geography of Al-Bakrī as the names of neighbouring kings or kingdoms on the southern bank of the ‘Nīl’ or Niger.⁴ The AD 1154 geography of al-Idrisi contains more information, situating these two kingdoms within the land of the pagans or ‘Lamlam’:

¹ Conrad, *Sunjata*, 23.

² Monteil, *Les Empires du Mali*, 54. `` D’après les traditionnistes que nous avons interrogés à Médine, à Kita, à Bamako, à Djenné, le vrai Mali originaire est inséparable des deux cantons du Kiri et du Do, entre lesquels oscilla la suprématie ``. (Translation by the authors).

³ Niane, ‘Mali and the second Mandingo expansion’, 127-129.

⁴ Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 82.

The people of Barīsā, Silā and Ghāna make forays into the land of Lamlam and capture its inhabitants... In the whole land of Lamlam there are only two small village-like towns, one called Malal and the other Daw. Between these towns is a distance of about four days.⁵

Yet, despite such historical importance, the location, origins and growth of Dô and Kiri have largely fallen outside the scope of historical and archaeological enquiry. During the 2005-2010 *Projet Segou*⁶ we increasingly collected mentions of the historic Dô as a land located just west of our study area and centred around the modern town of Tamani. We thus decided to follow *Projet Segou* with a *Projet Dô*. However, first, one must locate the Dô.

LOCATING the HEARTLANDS of MALI

As might be expected, locating the historic Dô and Kiri is not a straight forward process – the mythic landscapes of Mali have been frequently redrawn and overlaid. The location of a place or a region often depends upon where your informant is from and therefore where their own historic tradition is centred. Indeed, at the time depths we address important places may move about or be created anew as socio-political circumstances change. Relocated populations tend to sculpt local historic landscapes to accommodate their pre-existent traditions.

In the most basic of etymologies, Kiri would imply ‘the highlands’ and Dô ‘the lowland’ valley of the river Niger. The Kiri has thus been traditionally placed by researchers in the highlands near the modern village of Kri, between Niagassola and Sibi.⁷ Placing any possible contentions about Kiri – not the subject of this present research – to one side, let us consider the location of the Dô. The problem is that there are three districts known as ‘Dô’ in modern Mande Africa, and all three compete for the status of being the true Dô (see **Figure 1**). They are, from East to West, the **Dô of Dugubani**, (near modern Segou); the **Dô of Kangaba** (situated around the town of that name), and the **Dô of Sankaran**, situated well to the south, in northern Guinea. Most academic historians would agree that the Dô of Sankaran is a recent Dô: invented after the shift of Mande populations to the west following Songhai invasions in the late 15th century. Thus, one can vacillate between the historic primacy of the Dô’s of Kangaba and Dugubani. Traditional accounts recorded in the early 20th century by Charles Monteil placed the ‘Dô’ directly to the east of Kiri,⁸ thus Dô Kangaba, while modern Malian traditionists such as the late Bakary Kone (known as ‘the Grand Griot’), placed the true Dô, as Dô Dugubani, around modern Tamani.⁹ Indeed, Mali’s contemporary festival of the Dô is held at Tamani and endorsed in its rectitude by no less a personage than the former First Lady of Mali, historian Adam Ba Konaré, patroness of the festival.

⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁶ MacDonald and Camara, ‘Segou’; MacDonald and Camara, ‘Segou, slavery and *sifinso*’.

⁷ Monteil, *Les Empires*, 9.

⁸ Ibid. .

⁹ Kané, *Sur les Pas de Djéli Bakary Kone*.

Part of the weight of evidence concerning the historic gravity of the Dô of Dugubani comes from its reputed association – mythic or otherwise – with a cavalcade of critical Malian historical figures. According to Bakary Kone

There are many historic questions which concern the Do [of Dugubani] because of the density of ancient and contemporary events which took place there and the great number of personalities who are from the Do. Sumanguru Kanté (last ruler of the state of Sosso) was born in the Do, as was SoKolon Koné, the mother of Soujata Keita (founder of Mali), who was also connected with the history of the Do Sigi, the monster buffalo of the Do. Ba-Sounou, the mother of Biton Mamari Coulibaly (founder of Segou), was born at Kamba. The Do was also the birthplace of the mother of Da Monzon Diarra, (the greatest) fama of Segou. Tukoro Nieleni, the brave woman who defied the men in the fields was born at Sirajan... Bakarijan Koné, general of Da Monzon of Segou, was born at Tamani... Jeli Bazoumana Sissoko, grand griot of Mali, was born at Koni. The pays Do also served as a sanctuary for animism. The great fetishes of Bamana Segou came forth from the Do. Yet, it is also a high and ancient place of Islam, with the celebrated ancient mosque of Basijalandugu which has stood for approximately eight centuries.¹⁰

This is not to mention that Tamani in the Dô is a central *Faro tyn* (place of the Mande demi-god Faro) – part of a trail from which humanity set out to populate the world,¹¹ a reputation still celebrated in the region. According to Dieterlen, at some point in deep history it became a key point of ritual and took on the name of Dô, viz: “The place where the bard stood gave its name to the village of Tamani. On the opposite bank the place where the men stood was called Do, 'secret'...”.¹² To amplify the foregoing there remains a dense and inter-connected mythic landscape in the region, with self-identifying living communities at the twelve towns of Dô (the Dô –dugu) as well as well-defined regional boundaries as compared to the other ‘Pays Dô.’ This critical mass of traditions makes the Do of Dugubani the most promising point to begin exploring the historic Do.

From another perspective, our excavations at the massive 72ha settlement mound of Sorotomo – one of the few major ruins associated by documents, oral history and C14 dates with the Empire of Mali¹³– supports the British historian John Hunwick’s view that the core of historical Mali may have been further to the north-east than conventional accounts would indicate.¹⁴ Our contention is that the orbit of the Mandé world has shifted gradually towards the south and west since the 12th century, thus ‘forgetting’ areas of Mandé heritage between Koulikoro and the Inland Delta. Much of this area was either ceded to or contested by the

¹⁰ Kané, *Sur les Pas* (translation from Bamana by S. Kané).

¹¹ Dieterlen, ‘The Mande Creation Myth’, 130.

¹² *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³ MacDonald et al., ‘Sorotomo’; MacDonald, ‘Complex Societies, Urbanism and Trade’.

¹⁴ Hunwick, ‘The Mid-Fourteenth Century Capital of Mali’.

Songhai Empire in the 15th and 16th century and therefore probably faded from many “orthodox” Mandé histories before the 20th century.

In short, there were very good reasons to investigate the Pays Dô of Dugubani, and we set out to do so after our 2010 season at Sorotomo. However, before delving into our historical and archaeological results, we must first briefly review some broader conceptual elements of political tradition in the Mande world relevant to understanding the socio-political nature of the Dô.

POLITICAL ORDER in MANDE: KAFU and FANGA

In our discussions in the Pays Dô-Dugubani, the ancient polity of Dô was often referred to as a *Kafo* or *Kafu*. The term *Kafu* means to ‘bring together’ or ‘assemble’ and has been used within the Mande Political Tradition (as documented since the 1880s) to designate a confederation of persons and territory ruled over by a council with a nominal head or *kafu-tigi* – usually of a particular *jamu* or lineage.¹⁵ Such *Kafu* may combine diverse lineages linked by a *dyo* or blood pact and may assemble warriors levied upon each member village in time of conflict, or – it is sometimes claimed – *Kafu* may have had more sorcerous or sacred means of protection.¹⁶ For example, some villages that we visited claimed protection from sacred swarms of bees and others by earth spirits or Djinn. Regardless, these *Kafu* demonstrate an alternative or even an initial building block to more conventional hierarchical political structures known as *Fanga* – based on coercive state power. The historical anthropologists Emile Leynaud and Youssouf Cissé, for example, claim that *Kafu* form the political basis of Mande political society and that states or *Fanga* such as the Empire Mali were ultimately built up from and dissolved into networks of *Kafu*.¹⁷ The absence of explicit reference to this two-tier socio-political structure in early Arabic sources should not be seen as an argument against their ‘medieval’ existence: Arabic ‘geographers’ understanding of Sub-Saharan political order outside of major courts and trade routes was clearly limited and relatively superficial.

The characteristics of *Kafu* and *Fanga* are compared in Table 1. As described these are, of course, polarizations. Many *Kafu* were, at some points in time, undoubtedly *Fanga* in the making.

We believe that the 18th/19th century *Kafu-Fanga* system, in some form, may be reasonably extrapolated back in time to the epoch of Mali and before. Certainly the French colonizers found a system in place whereby *Kafu* were both autonomous confederacies for self-defence and regional politico-judicial building blocks of the Segou *Fanga*.¹⁸ Even if we must be

¹⁵ Cissé, *Structures des Malinké de Kita*, 24; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 55; Perinbam, *Family, Identity and the State in the Bamako Kafu*, 149-177.

¹⁶ Leynaud and Cissé, *Paysans Malinke du haut Niger*, 161.

¹⁷ Ibid. .

¹⁸ Oloruntimehin, *The Segou Tukolor Empire*, 161-2.

cautious in their application, they are undoubtedly more relevant and appropriate than more abstract social evolutionary forms such as ‘chiefdom’ or ‘state’ extrapolated from models derived from the distant Mediterranean or even Polynesia.¹⁹ The *Kafu-Fanga* framework can usefully be borne in mind when considering our initial field results from the Dô-Dugubani.

KAFU	FANGA
○ Lineage-based gerontocratic power structures and/or ‘blood pacts’ between lineages	○ Dynastic rulership
○ Limited region (c.30km radius)	○ Begins as a regional polity, but then expands over hundreds of kilometres.
○ Representation of members, strong tendency to heterarchy.	○ Notional councils of the nobility, but certain rulers may veer towards coercive dictatorship.
○ Goals: self-defense and/or exercise of a ‘cult’	○ Goals: expansion and predation (tribute)
○ Largely village based.	○ Settlement hierarchy with variety of settlement types.
○ May exist independently or as a semi-autonomous polity within a Fanga	○ Tends to form out of, and dissolve into, Kafu.

Table 1. Attribute summary for Mande Kafu and Fanga socio-political organizations.

MISSION PAYS DÔ 2013

The Pays Dô Project, delayed by the 2011-2013 Malian conflict, was the first foreign archaeological research mission in Mali since 2011. Our November 2013 fieldwork was preliminary, and it is expected that it will be expanded as soon as the security situation and funding permits. As with our previous work around Segou,²⁰ our methodology consisted of sessions of inquiry with local amateur historians, griots and elders on a village by village basis. In contrast to our interviews around Segou, we found that Dugutigi (or village heads) normally chose to speak for themselves rather than through their griots, and there were normally multiple interventions by other elders during our interview sessions. Subsequent to

¹⁹ See Johnson and Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies*; Pauketat, *Chiefdoms and other Archaeological Delusions*.

²⁰ MacDonald and Camara, ‘Segou’; MacDonald and Camara, ‘Segou, slavery and *sifinso*’.

meetings with assemblies of village elders, guided archaeological survey was undertaken around villages with mapping aided by use of GPS. Surface collections of ceramics were undertaken at all sites to facilitate an attribute-based comparative analysis of the assemblages. This work was aided by the preexistence of dated ceramic sequences established by us in previous research in the Segou region between 2005 and 2010. Seydou Camara and Kevin MacDonald worked together in collecting local oral traditions and all shared in archaeological survey and surface collecting work. Our fieldwork centered around seventeen localities, all on the right bank of the river Niger: these included Baraoueli (a centre of ‘traditionists’), four of the villages of Dô, including the old capital of Dugubani, as well as six cult localities, four major tell sites and two large tumulus fields (Figure 2: Site Map).

SUMMARY of HISTORICAL RESULTS

Our historical research found remarkable agreement across the Dô of Dugubani concerning the region’s ancient settlement and political structure. Sources unanimously agree that the Dô Kafu was a free association of villages, each of which retained a degree of autonomy. There is also a preserved list of the rulers of Dô-Tamani, all of the Koné *jamu*.²¹ In some senses this is a classic lineage-based Mande *Kafu* social form. But there is more to it than that. The alliance of Dô at Dugubani turned on three main features:

- a blood pact for mutual defence (presumably for protection against Sosso and other predatory states after the breakup of Ghana/Wagadu in the 11th and 12th centuries),
- a religious cult with a shared group of objects of power – still termed ‘fetiches’ locally and known as being part of the ‘cult of Dô,’ and
- a calendar of seasonal shared festivals including harvest time and collective fishing events.

Local traditions agree that the historic Dô was composed of 12 villages²², but the list varies slightly from one informant to the next – it being inevitably said by each interviewee that one must never pronounce the names of all 12 villages in the same day. Thus, lists were left one short of twelve and incorporate some variability. Despite this, all of our informants were unanimous in saying that Dugubani (or Dodugubani, a ruin west of Tamani) was the principal town or ‘capital’ of the ancient Dô, and governed by the Koné *jamu* (lineage). According to most, Siyen (modern Bassialandougou, aka ‘Bassila’) was the first village settled in the Dô region, founded by the Dembélé *jamu*. Other informants claim it to have been Kanba,

²¹ Diarra, *Nyola N’Golo Diarra*, 142.

²² D.T. Niane (‘Mali and the second Mandingo Expansion’, 127) wrote that “[the] powerful Dodugu kingdom had twelve towns, whose names are not reported by oral tradition”. On the contrary, we found that the names of these towns are readily forthcoming from many informants when questions are posed in the right geographical region! Further, our informants uniformly stressed the fact that Do never was a powerful kingdom, but a confederacy centred upon a pact, or a shared cult, rather than a king.

founded by the Sako²³. In both narratives, the villages are claimed to have been formed shortly after the ‘fall of Wagadu’ (i.e. in the 11th - 12th centuries). The lists of the 12 Villages of Dô, as recorded amongst our various informants fall into two groups: an orthodox canon of relatively localized and nondescript village localities covering an area of c.45 by 30km or, alternatively, a combination which includes the principle villages of the ‘orthodox’ group – augmented by ancient urbanized localities in the vicinity of Segou, including the great Marka towns of Markaduguba, Bussen and Sansanding.²⁴ These may relate to two distinct federations of Do at two different time depths, or the latter list may merely be a *telescoping* of the 12 villages of Dô into the later regional history of Segou and imperial Mali.

Another important village of Dô was Tozougou, a living locality of cult activity, and the spot around which – according to legend – the Dosigi – or monster buffalo or *femme-buffle* of Dô, an important ‘fifth business’ at the beginnings of the Sundiata epic – dwelled and was eventually slain in its monstrous form.²⁵ The landscape centrality of Dugubani, Sien and Tozougou in Dô ideology is supported by the presence and survival of several important sacred localities: the notional tomb of the Dosigi 1km east of Tamani, the emplacement of the Five Royal Fetishes at Koni, an extant centre of mask and marionette production at Deningoura, localities of annual regional bull sacrifice at Dugubani, and sacred water bodies with sacrificial trees beside Tozougou and west of Koni.

The political order of the Mande *Kafu*, and the clear association of Dô with cult activity, led to relatively unique aspects in the region’s economy and its relations with the exterior. Our informants were keen to stress that the Dô Kafu did not participate in systems of tribute or taxation, but rather long-maintained its autonomy. The recent historic loss of this special status is something which seems to rankle. Thus the following two interview excerpts:

When we gave taxes that was in the time of Bamana Segou. I am speaking here about the [earlier] epoch of the kafu-tigi. These were the heads of lineage territories... [Before the Segou Fanga we paid no taxes]. [Later] The tribute of our kafu was paid at Boadjé. The Traoré Massalen were over there. It was to them that we had to pay the disŋngŋ [le prix du miel]. They would collect the disŋngŋ which would go to Ségou. Today (elected) prefects have taken the place of our kafu-tigi.

Dô 2013-4 **Almamy Kané, village head of Basijalandugu, age 70 years.**

or

At that time, (before the Segou Fanga) there was no payment of taxes. Dô is much more ancient than Ségou. Ségou even came out of the Dô, here. One must remember the dispersion of the 12 villages of Dô. Our people dispersed and went on to found Ségou...

²³ See also Bazin, *Commerce et Predation*, note 4.

²⁴ See MacDonald and Camara, ‘Segou’.

²⁵ Niane, *Soundjata*; Conrad, *Sunjata*.

When Bakarijan [war leader of Da Monzon and regional head of Dô-Tamani] rendered [ritual] service to the king of Ségou, he sent his emissaries to thank us. They accompanied Bakarijan himself to come and thank us and returned to their land.
(Dô-2013-ms7) **Samba Koné, dit Dugutigi, earth priest of Dugubani, age 35 years.**

As with taxes, the scourge of war also seemed to avoid the land of Dô:

No great conflict could come and touch us here. No one would destroy our village. This is a village of great connoisseurs [holders of occult knowledge, sorcerers]. A certain number of times, others would try to come and attack us. But they were always chased away by our bees. These bees are still there. ... War has never touched us here. We have refused to be subjected by the fanga.

Dô 2013-ms4 **Almamy Kané, village head of Basijalandugu, age 70 years.**

But why would the Dô Kafu have such privileges? More importantly, what was the nature of the 'Cult of Dô' which seems to be very much at the heart of this matter? There were many vague indications, but every once in a while you have an interview which introduces real clarity and insight into a situation. Such a one we had with Samba Koné, the spiritual proprietor of Dugubani:

Q: What was the actual status of the 12 villages of Dô? Were they all independent or were they under the control of a single ruler?

R: Dô was under the rule of a king. He was at the foundation of the Dô, from which issued all the other Dô. This was Moriba Koné. He was the supreme master of the ensemble.

Q: So he was a real *fama* [king]?

R: No, he was not a king in the normal sense. He was the chief of our land, the supreme chief of the Dô.

Q: Did he have an army?

R: No, he retained *connoisseurs* [keepers of sorcerous/spiritual knowledge]... The celebrations of the New Year would take place here, in the Dô... Every village which took its fetish from the Dô here at Dugubani took the name of Dô.

Q: Thus, one could consider the Dô as a source of fetishes?

R: That's exactly it.

Q: But you say: 'When you come and take one, wherever you go to install yourself takes the name of Dô.' That's difficult to understand,

R: All of the great personages which you know of, if they don't come from Tamani, you'll find that they come from one of the Dô [-dugu] installed on this side or the other of the Niger river... Every great person of Mali somehow has their origin with the Dô.

Q: So, are you saying that the Dô was itself a great fetish?

R: I cannot affirm that. Let's just say that there was a great fetish; an object to which one made offerings. At the time, children were forbidden from seeing it. Furthermore, one must not reveal its secret, and one must be a legitimate person to have seen it. It was the

white cream that one offered it. Then, one offered *sɛnkɛrɛn* [porridge] to the djinn.

Chickens were then added to that.

Q: Where does one find these *djinn*s? In the water? In the forest?

R: There is a forest here that one calls “*Tonkolobatou Ton wolonfla tu*”²⁶. It is near here at Dugubani. That is our *lieu de culte*, though our rituals have been abandoned... The cult [of Dô] was organised from the time of Moribani Kondé [Do’s first ruler, interchangeable with Moriba Koné mentioned above] because it was he who first met the *djinn*s here. They gave to him great spiritual power and understanding after he left Manden. It is here that he met these *djinn*s and they gave him great power and showed him where to settle. So it is he who came here to establish the hearth. And it is the 12 persons who came after him who took fire from that hearth. That fire which was carried from here had the name of Dô, and it was carried with them.

(Dô -2013-ms7) **Samba Koné, dit Dugutigi, earth priest of Dugubani, age 35 years.**

The implications of these last few lines are fascinating. Samba Koné appears to be talking about ‘shrine franchising’: a process documented in recent years by Timothy Insoll, and more historically by Meyer Fortes in Northern Ghana.²⁷ ‘Shrine Franchising’ is the establishment of new shrines with fragments of powerful existing ones - much like the powering of Catholic altars with the fragmentary relics of saints. This process has now largely ceased in the Islamicised areas of Mali, but Fortes and Insoll’s work provides insights into how this process might have worked. Effectively, the franchising of shrines in Ghana facilitates political, genealogical, and territorial connections.²⁸ To this Insoll adds that networks of shrine-kinship guide the movement of trade goods and people (via marriage).²⁹ In the Mande world the physical nature of the power-pack of such shrines may well have been *Boli*, traditional objects of spiritual power, formed out of dried sacrificial blood and excrement over a framework of bone, sometimes placed in shrine houses or vestibules or buried as a form of supernatural landmine.³⁰ The continued reputation of the *connoisseurs* of Dô as makers of magical amulets of great price for the most powerful in the land potentially corresponds with the ancient reputation of the region. We may thus be looking at a sort of power beyond the militaristic and coercive, or even the religious – the power of cult.

Finally, the role of the Dô of Dugubani is a critical plank in the foundation myths of the Empire of Mali and is well known throughout the region. Indeed at each interview we were

²⁶ The translation of this name is problematic, due to the fact that the Bamana language has a strong tonal element. The difficulty lies in the translation of “ton”, which, in different tones, could mean “association”, “mound” or even “cricket [the insect]”. Since the interviewee was not asked about the meaning at the time, it is impossible to reconstruct it now. We favor the translation: “The forest at the core of the association (i.e. sacred grove) with seven mounds”. In light of the tumulus phenomenon mentioned below, the notion of seven mounds is tempting, but the other possibilities remain open.

²⁷ Insoll et al. *Temporalising Anthropology*; Fortes, *Time and social structure*.

²⁸ Fortes, *ibid.* .

²⁹ Insoll et al., *ibid.* .

³⁰ Colleyn and Levy, *BOLI*; MacDonald, ‘The least of their inhabited villages’.

not spared from a detailed recounting of the legendary hunt for the Dô Sigi (the monster buffalo of Dô), the recuperation of the hunters' reward (Sogolon Kondé), her marriage to the ruler of Kiri, and its aftermath: the birth of Sundiata – first emperor of Mali - and the joining together of Dô and Kiri. The political metaphor at the heart of this myth – the union of Dô and Kiri via this marriage has long been apparent.³¹ The irony that a kafu and its cult may have been at the ideological heart of a predatory empire is just one of many seeming contradictions within the world of Mande social relations.

The region's long history of social complexity – from the origins of the Dô in the 12th century to its role as a sacred place in the 19th century Segou Fanga - makes it difficult at this stage to attribute and differentiate aspects of political organization across these epochs. Ultimately an attempt to untangle this web will require a more extensive collection of traditions and accompanying archaeological research. Initial archaeological results, to which we now turn, are equally surprising.

SUMMARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

The results of our archaeological work in the Dô lend support to traditional historical narratives on several key points. The archaeological remains demonstrate a stable, settled landscape that extends back in time well before the 13th century, prior to the Empire of Mali's inception. This landscape has two important characteristics that correspond with the historical characterization of the Dô. Firstly, settlement in this fertile region is curiously sparse and uncentralised. Even the notional capital of Dugubani only consists of two mounds of 6 and 8 ha respectively. When compared to the dense, clustered, urbanised settlement at the core of Segou or the Middle Niger from c.AD 400 to the 19th century, it is clear that very different settlement dynamics were at work in the Dô-Tamani. Tentatively, one might assert that this is reflective of the more heterarchical political order of the Dô. Secondly, there is a deep-time ritual aspect to this landscape, manifest in both remembered sacred and monumental aspects (tumulus fields), which supports our view of the Do as an area of ritual centrality, rather than of hierarchical, military and commercial dominance.

The ruins of Dugubani, the claimed site of the Do's former capital, (Figure 3 – plan) are situated just west of the modern town of Tamani. The two mounds stretch one after the other along the banks of the River Niger. The smaller, and westernmost, is the more stratified of the two at 4m height above the plain. Several features visible on the surface of this taller mound help us to roughly date the final occupation of this settlement: we find the remnants of fine lateritic pebble floors, which were also standard features at Sorotomo, 50km to the east.³² Its pottery abandonment assemblage is also comparable to that of the earliest layers of Sorotomo. Interestingly, while sharing the rim forms and decorative motifs of the Sorotomo assemblage, Dugubani lacks some diagnostic decorative elements such as braided strip roulette which occur in the post 1300 AD layers of Sorotomo. Although hardly definitive

³¹ Bulman, 'The Buffalo-Woman Tale'.

³² MacDonald et al., 'Sorotomo'.

until we undertake excavations, data so far would indicate this western mound's occupation as being prior to and during the time of the early Mali Empire. The eastern tell site, on the other hand, features many tobacco pipes and is relatively shallow. It is most likely associated with the time of the Segou state. Indeed, the journal of the French explorer Soleillet indicates that there was still a small village there in 1878.³³ According to Karamoko Jara of Tozugu (Dô 2013 – ms5), the site was abandoned due to warfare, and a subsequent period which saw several unexplained deaths convinced the remaining population to leave. We do not know whether this refers to the first or second foundation of Dugubani, and there is controversy as to whether or not any descendants of the founding Koné clan now live in Tamani.

Our surveys found only three other abandoned settlement mounds in the region: Kana-tomo, Tombeau Dô Sigui, and Soungola. Kana-tomo is a small (1ha), but high (3m) stratified tell around 5 km south of Tozugu, and on the village's land. The inhabitants of Tozugu explained that its inhabitants had gone to a place called Kana, to the south, a long time ago, and that their lands had devolved to the people of Tozugu. The ceramics collected on the surface of the mound are very similar to those at Dugubani's western mound, dating the final occupation to a similar period around c. AD 1100-1300. Tombeau Dô Sigui is locally designated as the place in which the legendary buffalo was killed and buried. It is, however, not a tomb, but a settlement mound, of similar dimensions to Kana-tomo, and with surface ceramics indicating a similar age. The mound has been partially destroyed by the building of a deep well and a chicken farm. The third site, near the modern village of Soungola, 5km south of Tamani, was inhabited during the Segou period on the basis of its pottery and tobacco pipe fragments. It consists of a 1ha area with low mounds, no more than 1m in height.

In addition to this sparse evidence of abandoned settlements, it would appear that some of the Dô's extant villages, such as Siyen, Kanba, Koni and Tozugu, have had an occupation of considerable time depth. Earlier settlements of the same age as Dugubani's older mound are probably lie beneath the present-day villages. For instance, no more than 200 metres from Siyen we visited an iron smelting area whose associated pottery is comparable to that of Sorotomo. Since there were no further settlement remains in a 2km radius, it seems highly likely that the smelting site is linked to an early occupation somewhere beneath the village of Siyen itself. The claimed antiquity of two of the mosques in the Dô, those of Siyen and Kamba, frequently claimed in oral history interviews to be amongst the earliest in Mali, might corroborate the view that these villages may were settled in or before the 13th century. However, even when we take into account the age and size of the present villages (e.g. Kanba = 19ha, Syen = 11ha), limited settlement remains indicate that the historical Dô would have been a sparsely populated region in comparison to surveyed settlement landscapes in adjoining regions (e.g. the Mema,³⁴ the Macina,³⁵ Segou,³⁶ and the Inland Delta³⁷).

³³ Soleillet, *Voyage à Segou*.

³⁴ Togola, *Archaeological Investigation of Iron Age Sites in the Méma Region of Mali*.

³⁵ Bedaux et al., *Recherches archéologiques à Dia*.

³⁶ MacDonald and Camara, 'Segou'; MacDonald and Camara, 'Segou, slavery and *sifinso*'.

³⁷ McIntosh, *Ancient Middle Niger*.

In light of this, the real revelation from the archaeology of the Dô was its enormous tumulus fields. We first encountered these at *Wéré djan*, 2km north of Kanba ([Figure 4 – Wéré djan plan](#)). We were led there by villagers who told us that they dug into these tumuli for building materials and to recover the pots considered excellent for storing shea nuts. Some of these excavated pots – in the Sorotomo regional style – were shown to us. *Wéré djan* has more than 60 monumental tumuli in a roughly NW to SE alignment. Their diameters range between 5 and 15 metres, their heights from 50 cm to 2m. Of the 62 tumuli recorded, 22 present traces of pillage. The pillaging, however, allowed us some notion of their stratigraphy and contents. Smaller pots were embedded in the surface of the mounds, probably as post-inhumation offerings. Larger storage vessels prized by the villagers were found buried within the tumuli, at or below ground level. In instances of completely robbed out tumuli, scattered human remains (fragments of long bones, skulls and teeth) were visible alongside the occasional, broken, unsuccessfully recovered pot. It was also apparent that the tumuli are built of local clays covered by a thin carapace of lateritic cobbles and gravel.

Once alerted to the presence of the tumuli at *Wéré djan*, we began to notice them elsewhere. The Baroueli-Tamani road dissects two such fields, one of which, near the village of Tégébé, we explored in depth. Across an area covering an astounding 75 hectares, we documented more than 200 tumuli ranging from 5 to 25 metres in diameter and up to 4 metres in height ([Figures 5 and 6 Tégébé Photo & Plan](#)). Most of these are in a good state of preservation. However, it was not until we returned to the UK and were able to look at satellite imagery that the full extent of the Dô's tumulus fields became clear. For example, it was apparent that our survey had only covered about a third of the Tegebe tumulus field. Indeed, a systematic and comprehensive satellite survey of the region showed that there are in fact 87 tumulus fields, amounting to thousands of tumuli, scattered to the west of Segou on both sides of the Niger, with a clear concentration in the Dô of Dugubani ([Figure 7 – Tumulus Field map](#)).

Remarkably, both a vehicular and walking radius survey around Tégébé and inquiries at local villages failed to identify settlements immediately associated with this vast necropolis. The absence of adjoining settlements suggest either that these tumuli are associated with mobile populations or that these fields were central points to which the villages of Dô would journey between 2 and 8km to bury their dead.

So far, our only dating evidence from the tumuli comes from the robbed out large vessels we were shown at Kanba, and the secondary offerings, that we found eroding from the surface of tumuli at both sites. These occurred at 20% of Tégébé's 202 recorded tumuli. In terms of rouletted motifs these ceramics show an interesting pattern which places them relatively early in the regional sequence. When one considers the proportional evolution of roulettes, including the dated pottery assemblages of Sorotomo and Tiebala,³⁸ near Segou, one sees that higher proportions of fish vertebrae roulettes and twisted cord may place the Tegebe tumulus

³⁸ MacDonald et al., 'Sorotomo'; Curdy, 'Tiébala'.

field rather earlier than the 13th century Sorotomo assemblage (Figure 8 – Seriation with Roulette photos). Of course this seriation is very preliminary, but a relatively early date is also supported by the fact that the local oral traditions, which remember the Sorotomo period so well, are completely mute on the subject of these tumuli.

The Dô tumulus fields are without parallel in Mali in area or density of monuments. From the satellite imagery we are looking at 10 larger fields of more than 100ha hectares, each of these containing in excess of 300 monuments. The only West African archaeological example of a comparable phenomenon is that of the Senegalese Tumulus and Megalith zones, which feature necropoli associated with relatively small-scale settlements. Though the tumuli are different in character, there are indeed parallels with Becker and Martin's classic study of recent historic Serer tumulus fields which often dwarf nearby settlements.³⁹ They note:

[in the Serer zone] one sometimes finds impressive tumulus groups – sometimes 200 to 300 tumuli- which constitute a cemetery unique to a village community.[...] Often, one finds a real dispersion of small cemeteries which correspond to the divisions of villages into several quarters. [...] thus, villages with multiple quarters possess larger cemeteries. Two types of larger cemeteries are encountered: those with tombs placed tightly together forming a compact ensemble, and those with tumuli found scattered over vast spaces, sometimes of almost a kilometer [...]⁴⁰

(Becker and Martin 1982: 275)

As such, and given the relatively un-hierarchical socio-political context of the Serer in Senegal, the association of these monumental fields with a Mande *Kafu*, does not at this initial stage appear contradictory. Furthermore, this unique proliferation of tumuli again underlines the long-term ritual/sacred centrality of the Dô and is without parallel in the more densely settled regions of the Middle Niger.

CONCLUSIONS

While much recent scholarship on the oral traditions of Mandé Africa has focused source criticism on *griotism*, emphasizing aspects of performance and mediation in the present, this occludes the fact that oral histories still contain knowledge of the past, however prone to mutation and re-contextualization they might be. The persistence of Dô as a central place in Mandé consciousness – from when al-Bakri first heard of it in the 11th century to the present

³⁹ Becker and Martin, 'Rites de sépulture préislamiques au Senegal'.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 275 : “[...] on trouve [dans les pays serer] parfois des ensembles impressionnants de tumulus groupés – parfois 200 à 300 tumulus – qui constituent le cimetière unique de la communauté villageoise. [...] le plus souvent prédomine une réelle dispersion de petits cimetières qui correspond alors à une division des villages en plusieurs quartiers [...]. Ce sont donc les villages plus regroupés qui possèdent les cimetières les plus grands. Toutefois deux types de grands cimetières se rencontrent: soit les tombes sont très rapprochées les unes des autres et forment un ensemble assez compact, soit les sépultures se trouvent éparpillées sur une grande étendue – parfois près d'un kilomètre [...]” Translation by MacDonald and Gestrich.

day – is in itself a case in point. The consistency of explanation of the historic Dô by oral tradition across the four Dô-dugu visited, and the richness of regional heritage sites (both tangible and intangible), augur for the validity of the basic elements of the Dô narrative: Dô as centre of cult, Dô as federation, Dô as sacred Mande landscape. The actual time depth of these attributes must be a subject for archaeological investigation.

By the combination of oral histories, written sources and archaeological enquiries, we have been able to elaborate an historical geography for the Dô area centred on Dugubani. Within this framework, we are able to cross-examine various forms of evidence, and come to a point where historical narratives intersect with physical, archaeological realities. While oral histories and Arabic or colonial written documents are certainly complicated and problematic source materials whose historical accuracy is often questionable, a process akin to triangulation with the aid of a wide range of informants and archaeological studies can lead to more robust historic narratives.

For the Dô, the importance of the propagation and maintenance of a network of shrines has become apparent as one of the major factors driving the socio-political development of the Dô of Dugubani. Parallels with more recent ‘shrine franchising’ in Northern Ghana provide an interesting avenue for future research. The irony that a confederacy of villages and its cult may have been part of the ideological foundation of the Empire of Mali is just one of many seeming contradictions within the world of Mande social relations.

It is our priority to undertake extensive excavations and geophysical survey at the key site of Dugubani to document its internal organisation and provide an absolute chronology for its settlement. While one of the revelations of this initial survey project has been the discovery of vast tumulus fields, the testing of these monuments will require a longer-term commitment by multiple research teams. Many, many archaeological snapshots of individual inhumations will be necessary to understand their social implications and situate them within the region’s history. There is always more to do in Mali.

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