



Peuplement : études comparatives, Nord-Ghana et Burkina Faso

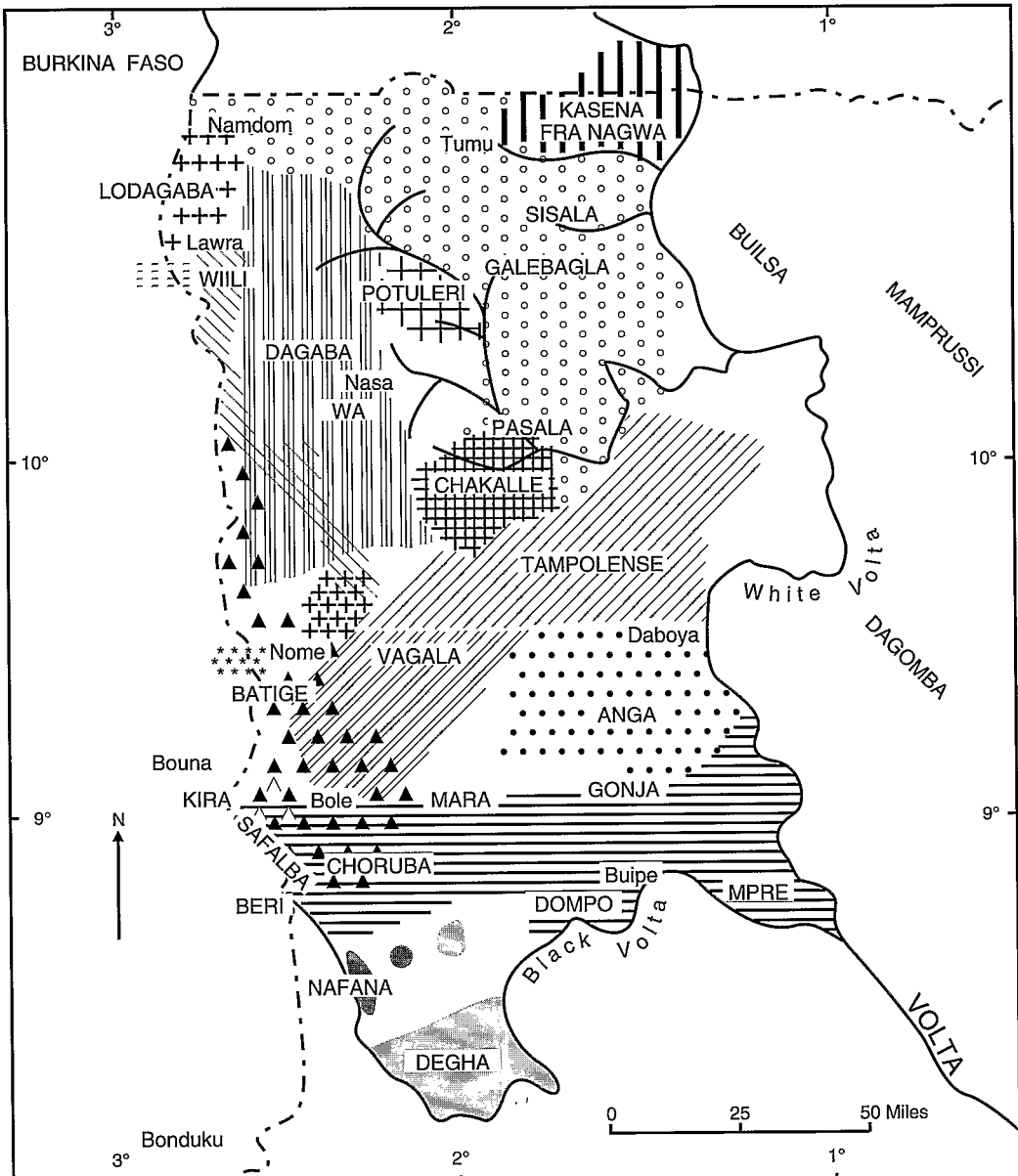
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In considering the history of the Lobi peoples, two points have to be born in mind. Firstly, "tribes" in the sense of segmentary groups do not have a consolidated history of the kind that marks more centralized groups. If we take the Dagara (LoDagaa) peoples around Nandom in the North-West of Ghana, some clans claim to have arrived from the South (from Wa), others from the North (from Mossi) and yet others from the East (from the Grusi-speaking Sisala and from Dagaba). The clan history of the Kusiele clan of Lawra, for example, traces their immediate origin to Babile, and from there to the area of Bache-Nord. In all these areas, there are today lineages of the Kusiele clan, giving support to the claims of the legend. Other clans had different histories. In this particular one the Kusiele migration may have involved a shift from of "tribal" category LoBirifor to Wiili (Ouilé) to LoDagaa (Dagara).

It is true there were some directions of movement more dominant than others. In the case of Gonja, the general movement of the Mole-Dagbane speakers has been from the south to the north, and from the east to the west, although more recently the migration has tended to go in the opposite direction, from north to south, and from west to east, that is, in the same direction as the earlier migration of Grusi speakers. Many peoples from the Nandom and Wa areas have moved down the road as far as North Ashanti. From the Bache area, large numbers have moved into the area south of Wa, south of Bole and all the way to Damongo in central Gonja. In contrast to the "tribes", the states have a more determinable history, as we see in the recent accounts of Wa and the Gonja Chronicle by Ivor Wilks. But their boundaries in space and their duration in time vary greatly and this has had much effect upon the movements of the LoDagaa (Lobi) peoples, not only on their movements but on their organisation. For "tribes" not only occupied the areas beyond the reach of states ; they were also at times included in states as commoners and later released as tribals.

Let me turn to the position of the Lobi at the time of effectively our earliest historical or ethno-historical

Page de gauche : La Volta Noire, Dapola, Cl. T. Spini et G. Antongini 1978



THE TRIBES OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORIES OF THE GOLD COAST WEST OF BURKINA FASO

GRUSI-SPEAKING

- KASENA
- SISALA
- POTULERI
- DEGHA
- CHAKALLE
- TAMPOLENSE
- VAGALA
- KIRA

MOSSI-SPEAKING

- DAGABA
- LODAGABA
- LOWIILI
- DAGAA-WIILI
- BIRIFOR
- NOME
- BATIGE
- ANGA
- SAFALBA

GUANG-SPEAKING

- GONJA
- DOMPO
- CHORUBA
- BERI

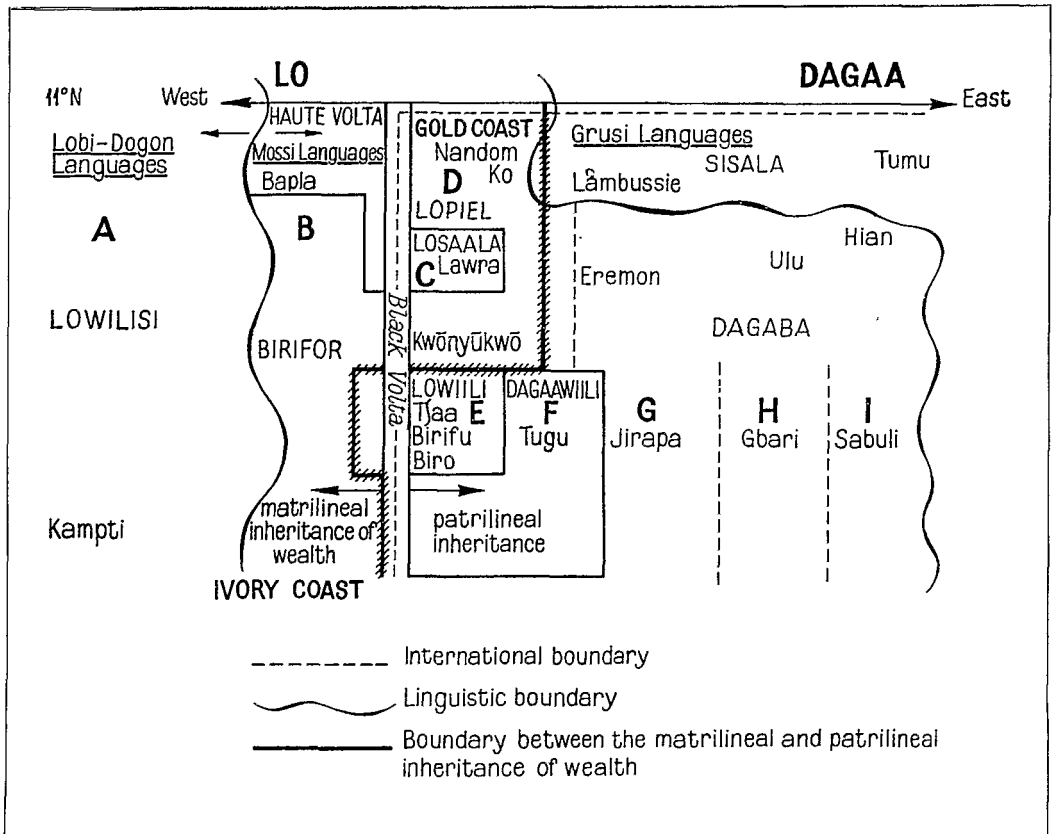
SENUFO-SPEAKING

- NAFANA

- INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES

knowledge of the area, namely the sixteenth century. Since "tribal" archaeology is so little developed, we have to rely on traditional histories and linguistic distribution. The language I am most concerned with is the Mole-Dagbane group which includes Dagara, since their distribution is tied up with the movement of the Lo speaking peoples across the Black Volta, though, as I have indicated, this was never a simple, unilateral move ; the river was long used, as it is now, as a defensive barrier. One moved across in either direction to avoid enemies. The distribution of these languages in the west of Ghana is interesting. Leaving aside the recent influx of LoBirifor south of Wa (since 1917), there is the large Wala-Dagara-Dagaba-LoDagaa group in the north-west. To the south of them lie isolated Mole-Dagbane groups, the Safalba west of Bole, the Nome and Konfosi near Tuna, the Muslim inhabitants (Mmara, from Kamaara) of Larabanga and the Hanga of the Busunu area. Traditions have it, and I see no reason to doubt them, that the kingdom of Dagomba (or its predecessor) covered virtually the whole area of present day Gonja, that they built tower-houses, now in ruins, and it is said even today on some nights you can hear the sound of their drums. Of course there were other language groups in the area ; the tongue of Grusi speakers penetrated south of Bole and tradition has it that it was these Vagella, from Sisala

Fig. 2 : Diagram to illustrate the use of the directional names, Lo and Dagaa, for external reference.



country, who met the Gonja when they came from the Beagu area, now in north-west Ashanti. That tongue includes the Tampolense to the east and the Pougouli to the west. But the Mole-Dagbane speakers were obviously in dominant positions since that was the language of the Muslims of Larabanga and of Salfalba who were presumably attached to the court. It was also the earlier language of the keepers of the Gonja royal cemetery at Mankuma. And it was the language of the outlying states, or division of states, at Bouna, Dorimon (on the Black Volta) and of Wa (fig. 2).

There is today no trace of the "true" Lobi language spoken by the Lobi of Gaoua, except for a few recent immigrants into western Gonja, where they are known as Miwaw or LoWilisi. Indeed it is difficult to recover any traces of their movements since the word used for them, a variant of Lo, is also used for some of the Dagari speaking peoples. One of the few traces of their earlier presence comes from the north-west region around Lawra where local tradition, embodied in the Bagre myth, recounts how the Kusiele clan arrived in the area looking for farmland and found the houses of the previous inhabitants standing there. These were the Dzanni, true Lobi speakers, now found around Diébougou. Potsherds and sometimes floors, partly tessellated, from their houses are often found in the region and are pointed to as belonging to the Dzanni. And indeed, the strongly hatched sherds and the occasional open-ended pot handles are similar to those that were being made in Diébougou when I visited the town some years ago.

It is said that the Dzanni sometimes return to the north-west of Ghana even today, to tend to their shrines or make a sacrifice. I myself have never seen this happen or discovered an adequate report of such a visit, but it is certainly possible that some may have come at the instigation of a diviner. It is worth reporting that on one such ruined site near Gwo, I found a much worn model of a cow in terracotta, some 20 centimetres long¹. At the time, it was the only terracotta object reported from northern Ghana. In recent years, we have seen the staggering collection of Koma objects, dated to the sixteenth century, that have come from the region south of Navrongo and west of Wa². Given the nature of the heads and given the bronze helmets reportedly found in the vicinity, it looks as though another powerful state existed in that region, possibly connected with the important trading centre of Yagaba that we find on early nineteenth-century maps. In other words, there has been much more political change in that area than had been suspected, with the possibility (which I had earlier raised but not pursued in a forthcoming article on "the political systems of the Tallensi", *Cambridge Anthropology*, 1991) that politics like the Tallensi, with the balanced opposition of Namoos and Talis, may well have resulted from the

1. I deposited these in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge.

2. See for example in the catalogue, *Close-up*, of the Center for African Art, New York, 1990.

decline, abandonment or expulsion of the power of a particular state. That also seems to have happened in the areas around Bouna and Wa.

As far as the movement of peoples from Ghana is concerned (and there is also a suggestion of Bobo movements from Sisala country), this was certainly affected by the rise and fall of states in two ways. Firstly, those who wanted to lead a more independent style of life were forced to move out of the way of expanding state systems. Secondly, they were forced to move, often across rivers, in order to escape from the search of states for human booty. In addition, there are a number of reasons of their own: conflict among or between adjacent groups, a shortage or exhaustion of farm land (a common enough experience given the type of extensive agriculture). These considerations affected the timing of the westward crossing of the Volta, a question that I am often asked and to which I am reluctant to respond. In the first place, I do not think the study of genealogies is of much assistance, since these so easily adapt themselves to current situations and are subject to forgetting, telescoping and deliberate manipulation. If the move was caused by the expansion of states, then it may have been sudden. If because of raids, it was a continuous movement back and forth as happened at the end of the last century under the attacks of the forces of Samory and Babatu. Farming and local conflicts would lead to a more continuous pressure in a particular direction. At present, I would place more emphasis on the latter, although over the long term the activities of states have certainly had their effects on the distribution and movement of these acephalous, segmentary, perhaps even interstitial, peoples. Given this view, I would not imagine it possible to provide a date, though badly-needed archaeology may prove me wrong; the process would be rather like the so-called Anglo-saxon (and Frisian) invasions of England, which took place before, during and after the Roman occupation. I would imagine the Dzanni were last, say in the middle of the eighteenth century. Much earlier, events in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries would certainly have had their effects, since actions like the killing of the *tendaanas*, the Earth priests, by the incoming *Dagomba* would not have been met with passive acceptance. But it is perhaps the process and results of the movement that are more interesting than its timing.