

## 1. The Zā/Zāghē of Gao-Saney and the Almoravids

The ongoing re-evaluation of Songhay history is mainly based on the twelfth century epitaphs of Gao-Saney. Discovered just before the Second World War, they were unknown to Maurice Delafosse and they were left aside by the less philologically-minded Jean Rouch.<sup>23</sup> Owing to a lack of convincing evidence from these epitaphs, most historians, including John Hunwick, still follow the writings of Delafosse and Rouch on major points of ancient Gao history.<sup>24</sup> The reason for the neglect of the epitaphs is simple: until recently, none of the royal names provided by them could be satisfactorily equated with the rulers of available king lists and therefore their historical meanings remained obscure. My recent propositions on

the epitaphs have only been partly taken into consideration in the recent literature concerned with the history of the Niger bend.<sup>25</sup>

In order to understand the difficulties involved in interpreting the royal epitaphs of Gao-Saney, we have to briefly consider the main features of these texts. Their outstanding documentary importance for the history of the Middle Niger derives from the fact that they provide the names of three successive rulers belonging to the Almoravid period. However, since most of the names mentioned in the epitaphs are Arabic cover names, it is difficult to establish direct correlations with African names from the local sources. Several scholars supposed that the rulers of Gao-Saney, being qualified as *malik* "king", were the Zā but in the absence of any correspondence with the royal lists of Songhay this remained unsubstantiated.<sup>26</sup> Other authors adopted the opposing position that the kings mentioned belonged to a different dynasty.<sup>27</sup> The next question concerns their ethnic identity: were they Berbers or black Africans and if the latter is correct, were they Songhay or Soninke?<sup>28</sup>

Yet, the epitaphs of Gao-Saney contain several African names deserving special attention. Mainly three royal epitaphs are relevant with respect to the problem of identification. These commemorate three kings: Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh who died in 494 AH/1100 AD, Abū Bakr b. Abī Quḥāfa who died in 503 AH/1110 AD and 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb who died in 514 AH/1120 AD.<sup>29</sup> The first and third epitaph mention in the third position after the two Arabic names quite out of context the African name Zāghī or Zāghay (the spelling Zāghē

<sup>25</sup> Lange, "Rois de Gao-Sané", 264-269; *id.*, "From Mande", 276-281; Insoll, "Iron Age Gao", 25-26; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, XXXII-XXXVI; de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, §§ 381-414.

<sup>26</sup> Sauvaget, "Épigraphes royales", 429; Trimmingham, *History*, 90 n. 1; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 136. Hunwick and de Moraes Farias correctly argue that the dynasty traditionally called Zā should in fact be called Zuwā (*Timbuktu*, 5 n. 49, 332; *Inscriptions*, XXIII, §§ 422-423). However, for the sake of clarity the present essay continues to refer to the first dynasty of the Timbuktu chronicles and the second dynasty of Gao as the Zā. Indeed, in spite of the identity of the Zāghē kings of the stelae with the Zā of the chronicles, the identity of the Zuwā of the stelae remains obscure: Were they a dynasty, a ruling group or a clan? (Cf. Lange, "Rois de Gao-Sané", 264-269; de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, §§ 422-423).

<sup>27</sup> Hunwick, "Gao revisited", 429-430; *id.*, *Timbuktu*, XXXV-XXXVI; de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, §§ 99, 401-403.

<sup>28</sup> For a Berber identity: Hunwick, "Gao revisited", 429-430; Lange, "Rois de Gao-Sané", 266-267; Insoll, "Iron Age Gao", 25-26; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, XXXV. For a Soninke origin: Lange, "Chute", 169-173; *id.*, "Almoravid expansion", 327-332.

<sup>29</sup> Sauvaget, "Épigraphes royales", 419-435; de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, 3-8, 15-16 (n° 1, 4, 13a).

corresponding to a middle position).<sup>30</sup> However, it should be noted that the name occurs again on the royal epitaph of Fandā b. Arbanī b. Zāghī who died in 1203 AD.<sup>31</sup> In view of the chronological depth of at least one century between the first two and the latter inscription there can be no doubt that we are dealing here with an important ancestral figure. In the absence of any other common name, Zāghē can be taken as the dynastic name of the kings attested by the epitaphs and for the intermediate rulers for whom there are no epigraphic testimonies. There are five arguments in favour of an identity between the Zāghē and the Zā.

The first argument concerns the ancestor of both series of royal names. Leaving apart the Islamically inspired reference to Yemen, the *T. al-Sūdān* begins with Zakay and *T. al-Fattāsh* with Ouā'āi.<sup>32</sup> These forms may be compared with Zāghay or Zāghī (Zāghē) of the Gao-Saney inscriptions. As de Moraes Farias insightfully argues, these names, provided by two different categories of sources, seem to correspond to attempts to transcribe the name of one and the same apical ancestor who was not a local ruler.<sup>33</sup>

A second argument concerns the similarity of a double name. Indeed, in his epitaph the third ruler of Gao-Saney is, besides his Arabic name, also designated by an African name referring to himself and to his father. Unfortunately, the African name was misread by the editor of the royal epitaphs as Māmā b. K.mā.<sup>34</sup> On the basis of a photograph of the epitaph it was later established that the personal name of the ruler should not be read Māmā but either Bāmā, Tāmā, Lāmā, Nāmā or Yāmā. These variations are explained by the absence of diacritical points in the Kufic script of the epitaphs. Taking the name Nmī which refers to a queen who died 550 AH/1155 AD as a paradigm, the editor chose Nāmā as the most likely vocalisation.<sup>35</sup> However, it is more appropriate to base the reading of the royal name on the male name of the Prince Yāmā Kūrī, who died in 663 AH/1265 AD.<sup>36</sup> Considering Yāmā b. K.mā to be the correct name of the third Zāghē king of Gao, this identifies him as the eighteenth king of the Zā called

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Khurrādādhbih mentions south of Morocco the land of Zāghī b. Zāghī (Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 17).

<sup>31</sup> De Moraes Farias, "Du nouveau", 520-521; *id.*, *Inscriptions*, 24-25 (n° 23). The clearly written final *yā'* of Zāghī excludes an *imāla* and suggests the readings Zāghī and Zāghay (here shortened to Zāghē).

<sup>32</sup> Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 2/tr. 4; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh* (*Notice historique, NH*), 332.

<sup>33</sup> De Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, §§ 434-435.

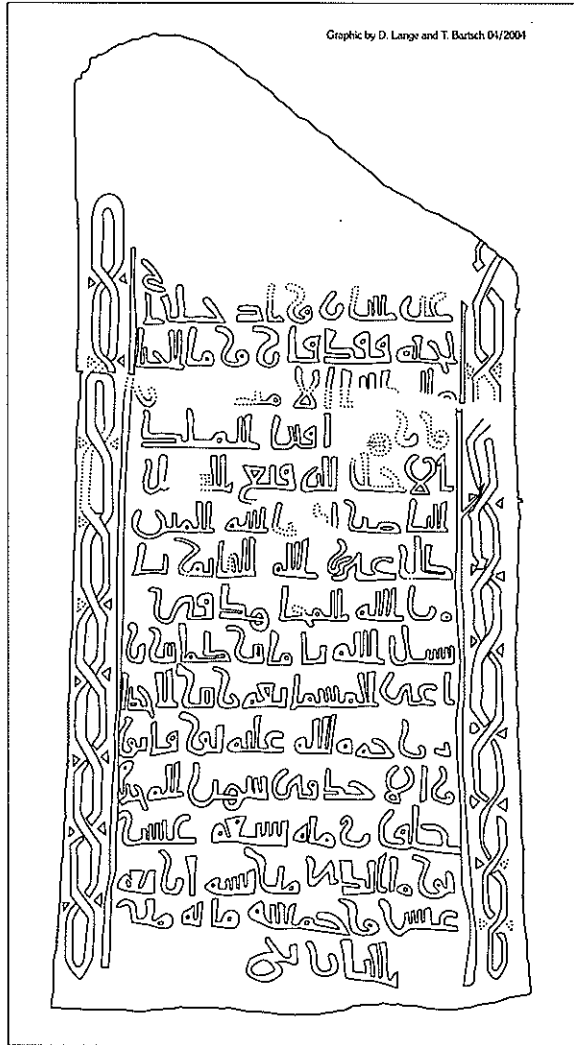
<sup>34</sup> Sauvaget, "Notes préliminaires", 7; *id.*, "Épitaphes royales", 432-433.

<sup>35</sup> Viré, "Note sur trois epitaphes", 375. For the translations of the third epitaph see Sauvaget, "Épitaphes royales", 433.

<sup>36</sup> While Sauvaget hesitated between the reading Bāmā and Nāmā ("Épitaphes royales", 438), de Moraes Farias established that Yāmā was correct ("Du nouveau sur les stèles", 515-517).

Chart 16: Epitaph of the third ruler of Gao-Saney – Yāmā b. Kimā b. Zāghē (503-514 AH; 1110-1120 AD)

Biyu-Kī-Kīma by the *T. al-Sūdān* and Yama-Kitsi by the *T. al-Fattāsh*.<sup>37</sup> Hence the name of the inscription should be read Yāmā b. Kimā b. Zāghē.<sup>38</sup> The identification of Yāmā b. Kimā with the eighteenth ruler of the Zā is further supported by the chronological position of both figures. Counting back three reigns from Yama-Kitsi, we reach the sixteenth ruler of the Zā called Kusoy- or Kotso-Dārē who, on account of his name and a radical change of his residence (as we shall later see), appears to be the same as the preceding Kusoy- or Kotso-Muslim, the first Muslim king of the Zā dynasty.<sup>39</sup> According to the *T. al-Fattāsh*, the inhabitants of



Gao adopted Islam between 471/1078-9 and 475/1082-3.<sup>40</sup> This chronological closeness between the first Zāghē and the first Muslim king of the Zā suggests

<sup>37</sup> Al-Sa'di, *T. al-Sūdān*, 3/tr. 5; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 332-333.

<sup>38</sup> Lange, "Rois de Gao-Sané", 264-269; *id.*, "From Mande", 276-281. De Moraes Farias gives the different possible readings of the name K.mā (*Inscriptions*, 16).

<sup>39</sup> Lange, "Rois de Gao-Sané", 258-269. On the duplication of Kusoy/Kusoy-Dārē and Kotso-Muslim/Kotso-Dārē see Lange, "Chute", 162.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 332-333.

that these two are identical. The reign of the first king of the Zāghē in Gao therefore lasted between 19 and 23 years.<sup>41</sup>

A third argument is based on the Arabic loan names of the epitaphs. As previous scholars observed, the names of the first three Zāghē kings of Gao-Saney correspond exactly to the names of the Prophet Muḥammad and his two successors, the Califs ‘Umar and Abū Bakr.<sup>42</sup> Kings of the desert edge who adopted the names of the Prophet and the first two Califs must have considered themselves to be the first Islamic rulers of Gao. This is precisely what the *Tārikhs* assert with respect to the fifteenth king of the Zā, Kusoy or Kotso Muslim with the succeeding Kusoy-Dārē being – as we have seen – probably the same person. Although the Zāghē and the Zā pretended to have been preceded by pagan rulers, we know that both lines of rulers succeeded to Muslims.<sup>43</sup> Therefore the two lines of rulers share the important characteristic of distinguishing themselves on false grounds as Muslims from their pagan predecessors.<sup>44</sup>

A fourth argument builds again on the identity of names. A Kufic epitaph of Gao-Saney commemorates the death of ‘Ā’isha, daughter of King Kūrī, who died in 1117 AD. It has been suggested that King Kūrī is identical to Diata-Koré and Kū-Kuray, the last or the last but one pre-Islamic king of the Zā mentioned by the *T. al-Fattāsh* and the *T. al-Sūdān*.<sup>45</sup> If we consider that the first Islamic king of the Zā, the first or the second successor of Diata-Koré/Kū-Kuray, came to power between 1078/9 and 1082/3, it is not unlikely that his daughter died about 1117 AD and thus outlived her father by at least 37 years.

A final fifth argument has to do with the identity of a late thirteenth century king of Gao. Indeed, it would appear that the ruler Fandā b. Arbanī b. Zāghī of the epitaphs, who died in 1203 AD in Gao-Saney, is the same as the 22<sup>nd</sup> king of the Zā. The latter is called Fanda-Diaroa by the *T. al-Fattāsh* and Tib by the *T. al-Sūdān*.<sup>46</sup> If we consider that the reign of Yāsiboy, the 27<sup>th</sup> king of the Zā, ended towards 1300 AD, it appears that from Hūnabonūa-Kodam/Abū Bakr to Fanda/

<sup>41</sup> Five earlier inscriptions for commoners discovered in Gao-Saney dated between 1042 and 1095 AD show that the Zāghē kings relied on an earlier local tradition of epitaphs (de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, 31-37).

<sup>42</sup> Sauvaget, “Notes préliminaires”, 6-7; *id.*, “Épigraphes royales”, 434; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 135-136.

<sup>43</sup> Evidence provided by al-Muhallabī and al-Bakrī *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 174, 87.

<sup>44</sup> While earlier historians considered the Zā to have been Berbers (Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, I, 192; Rouch, *Contribution*, 169-179) it is now generally thought that they were Songhay (Fage, *History*, 80; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 134; Hunwick, *Shari’a*, 5).

<sup>45</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 332; al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 3/tr. 5; Trimingham, *History*, 90 n. 1; Lange, “Rois de Gao-Sané”, 262.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 332-333; al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 3/tr. 5.

Chart 17: Kings of the Zā/  
Zāghē dynasty of Gao

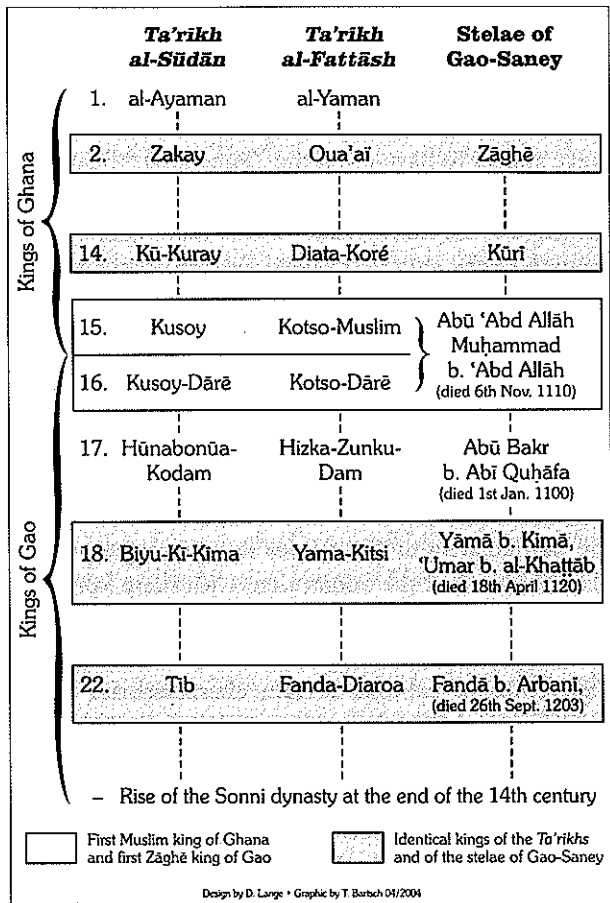
Fandā six kings reigned for a period of 103 years, while from Fanda/Fandā to Yāsiboy five kings reigned for a period of 97 years. As the average of 17.2 years in the first period compares well with the average of 19.4 years in the second period, it is quite likely that the Fandā of the stelae is indeed identical with the Fanda-Diaroa of the list of the Zā.

Having established the identity of two sets of kings claiming descent from the same ancestor, the earliest belonging to the second half of the eleventh century and the latest to the beginning of the

thirteenth century, it follows that these kings were members of one and the same dynasty. Clearly, the Zāghē were neither subordinate kinglets nor a short-lived dynasty.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the identity of the Zāghē and the Zā should put a stop to all speculations about several dynasties ruling for a short period at the beginning of the twelfth century side by side in relative independence at Gao.<sup>48</sup> Inversely, it has to be admitted that the Zā at a specific time of their history had strong foreign connections.

<sup>47</sup> Sauvaget, "Épitaphes royales", 438; Hunwick, "Gao and Almoravids", 418, 430; Insoll, "Iron Age Gao", 25-26; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, XXXV.

<sup>48</sup> De Moraes Farias thinks that the "Caliph period" of Gao was characterized by a rotational system of rulership having resulted from a pact of different powerful groups of the area (*Inscriptions*, §§ 400-403). His distinction between the earlier and the later *mulūk* is in many aspects similar to my distinction between the Ghana and the Gao Zāghē (*ibid.*, §§ 422, 430).



Who were the kings of the desert edge who dared to take the highly prestigious names of the Prophet and his two successors? One conclusion to be derived from this presumptuousness is that the bearers of these names were not in direct and continuous contact with the Arab world. Indeed, spatial and cultural distance appear to have given the Zāghē kings the idea that they were accomplishing in their own ethnic milieu a task comparable to that of the Prophet and his two successors. The ideosyncrasy of the naming seems to exclude the Zāghē from belonging to the widely travelled Saharan Berbers.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, no minor kings south of the Sahara would have compared their own achievements to that of the great ancestral figures of Islam. Hence the highly prestigious Islamic loan names adopted by the first three Zāghē rulers imply that they must have been important and well-known kings who, in their own region, could compare their status to that of the Prophet Muḥammad and his two successors in the Mediterranean world. The Berbers were in close contact with the Arabs of North Africa and they did not have any tradition of ancient and famous rulers of their own. Therefore, the particularity of the names is more appropriately explained with respect to black Africans of the Sudan than with their Saharan neighbours.

What was the relationship between the Zā/Zāghē kings and the Almoravids? Since the first two royal stelae are of white marble and the Kufic writing of their epitaphs exhibits certain characteristics of Andalusian workmanship, it was suggested that they were produced in Almeria in Southern Spain and that the Almoravids were the connecting agents.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the precise dates of the deaths of two kings and a queen, which must have been known prior to the actual fabrication of the stelae, bear witness of continuous and close relations between Southern Spain and the Middle Niger. The organizational structures necessary for the repeated sending of stelae through the Sahara would not only seem to imply excellent Berber communication across the Sahara but also a certain degree of political influence of the Berbers on the Gao kingdom.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, the complex arrangements needed for the production and transportation of the stelae also show that the beneficiaries of these efforts were important rulers in their own right and not insignificant subjects of the Almoravids.<sup>52</sup> These and other consid-

<sup>49</sup> It should however be noted that some notables of Ghana visited Andalusia by a detour on their way to Mecca (Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 98).

<sup>50</sup> Sauvaget, "Notes préliminaires", 5; *id.*, "Épigraphes royales", 421; Viré, "Note sur trois épigraphes", 368.

<sup>51</sup> Altogether Flight mentions seven different stelae in white marble. Three of them have exact dates including the day, the month and the year ranging from 1100 to 1110 ("Medieval cemetery", 105-106). See also de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, 3-9 (n° 1-5).

<sup>52</sup> On the basis of the title *malik* given to the kings of Gao-Saney, Sauvaget supposed that the Zāghē were subordinate kinglets ("Épigraphes royales", 438).

erations imply that the Zāghē were highly renowned black African kings. Besides their boastful association with the most prestigious figures of Islam, the great attention bestowed on them by the Berbers indicates that they were members of a dynasty benefiting from considerable regional fame.

Were the Zā/Zāghē local kings of Gao? The information provided by Arab geographers clearly shows that prior to the Zāghē the rulers of the Gao kingdom were already Muslim. Al-Muhallabī in the tenth century mentions that the king of Gao “pretends to be a Muslim” and al-Bakrī writes towards 1068 that the kingship in Gao was only given to Muslims.<sup>53</sup> However, the Zā/Zāghē were eager to distinguish themselves from their pagan ancestors: the Zāghē kings’ adoption of the names of the Prophet Muḥammad – Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh – and his two successors, was meant to mark the beginning of a new and Muslim era.<sup>54</sup> It is indeed difficult to imagine that Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad had Muslim predecessors of his own dynasty who ruled in Gao. Even more strikingly, the king lists of the *Tārīkhs* brand the predecessors of the Muslim Zā as pagans who should be cursed by Allāh, for none had adopted Islam.<sup>55</sup> If they had been the ancestors of the Zāghē, the earlier Muslim kings of Gao would not have been so easily turned into despicable pagans. Therefore it is more appropriate to suggest that the testimonies pertaining to the Zāghē and the Zā refer in fact to a line of rulers who immigrated from somewhere else.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, al-Maghīlī, who stayed in Gao at the end of the fifteenth century, writes that both Sonni ‘Alī and Askiya Muḥammad pretended to descend from Muslim conquerors of the country, although they belonged to different dynasties.<sup>57</sup> This conquest apparently occurred during the Almoravid period and led to the Islamization of the Gao kingdom.<sup>58</sup> Earlier, during the period of the Qanda, the impact of Islam on the local people must have been very limited since al-Bakrī remarks that the subjects of the Muslim king of Gao continued to worship idols.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, it was not

<sup>53</sup> Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 174, 87.

<sup>54</sup> Sauvaget was convinced that the Zāghē were neophytes (“Épitaphes royales”, 428, 434). Similarly Trimmingham (*History*, 90 n. 1) and Cuoq (*Histoire*, 134-136).

<sup>55</sup> Al-Sa‘dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 3/tr. 5; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 332.

<sup>56</sup> Likewise Cuoq supposes that the Zāghē had after their arrival – from Kūkiyā – precipitated a revolution in Gao (*Histoire*, 134-136).

<sup>57</sup> Al-Maghīlī *in*: Hunwick, *Shari‘a*, 13, 17/ tr. 69, 72.

<sup>58</sup> Chronological considerations have to be based on the number of 30 rulers said to have reigned between this conquest and Sonni Alī (*Shari‘a*, 13/tr. 69). This number corresponds precisely, as Hunwick observed, to the number of Zā and Sonni kings between the first Muslim king of the Zā, Kusoy, and Sonni ‘Alī (*Shari‘a*, 69 n. 1).

<sup>59</sup> Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 87.



only out of conceit that the descendants of the enigmatic conquerors claimed that their Muslim ancestors had imposed their authority over a pagan society.

Did the Muslim conquerors of the Almoravid period come from Kukiya? According to the *T. al-Sūdān*, the Zā originated in a place called Kukiya. It is here that the only Timbuktu chronicle available to Barth and Delafosse situates the foundation of the Zā dynasty: the foreign hero al-Ayaman is said to have been recognised as king after he had killed the demon-like fish whom the local population worshipped.<sup>60</sup> Since the chronicle does not mention any transfer of the dynasty from Kukiya to Gao, some early scholars thought that the name served as an alternative designation for the town usually called Kāghu/Gao.<sup>61</sup> Contrary to the localization of the Zā legend at Kukiya, the second Timbuktu chronicle, *T. al-Fattāsh*, clearly connects the foundation account of the Zā kingdom with the town of Gao. According to this more profane version, the Yemenite hero spoke a language different from that of the local people and was much taller. He is said to have become the ruler of the country because of his ability to protect the sedentary people against the nomads.<sup>62</sup> Independent from the question of Zā origins, various references in *T. al-Sūdān* and *T. al-Fattāsh* to Kukiya indicate that a locality of this name was situated about 150 km downstream of Gao close to the modern village of Bentia.<sup>63</sup> Lying closer to the Songhay mainlands, one might think that the town would have been more of a stronghold of traditional beliefs than Gao.<sup>64</sup> However, a number of funerary Arabic inscriptions show that Kukiya-Bentia was inhabited by a Muslim community perhaps from the beginning and certainly from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards.<sup>65</sup> Kukiya therefore did not remain a centre of traditional “Songhay” in spite of Islamizing tendencies spreading from Gao. It is quite unwarranted to see it as the cradle of the Zā dynasty.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 4/tr. 7-8; Barth, *Travels*, III, 657-660; Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, I, 60-64.

<sup>61</sup> Houdas in: al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, tr. 6 n. 3; Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, I, 192 n. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, (NH), 330-331.

<sup>63</sup> Desplagnes, *Plateau*, 73-76. Considering that Kukiya derives from *gungu* “island”, Delafosse suggests that the name could be applied to various localities (*Haut-Sénégal*, I, 192 n. 1).

<sup>64</sup> Rouch, *Contribution*, 167-172; Hunwick, *Shari’a*, 5-6.

<sup>65</sup> De Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, n° 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 196, 198, 199, 200. An inscription from Egef-n-Tawaqqat, a site 7 km northwest of Kukiya-Bentia, is dated either 1182 or 1201 AD. See also de Gironcourt, *Missions*, 32-36, and Viré, “Stèles funéraires”, 490-499. De Moraes Farias explicitly rejects the notion of “cultural authenticity” as applied to Kukiya (*Inscriptions*, 451).

<sup>66</sup> In spite of the information provided by *T. al-Fattāsh*, this is the case with Rouch, *Contribution*, 167-172, Trimmingham, *History*, 84-85, Fage, *History*, 76-77, Cuoq, *Histoire*, 134, and Hunwick, *Shari’a*, 5-7.

Where did the Zā come from? Since the evidence from the *Tārikhs* is only concerned with founding events of Kukiya or Gao, we should turn our attention to present-day traditions of origin. Since the most obvious descendants of the Zā are the Zarma, we have to take into account their historical recollections.<sup>67</sup> It is well-known that the Zarma trace their origins back to the foundation heroes Zabarkan and Mali Bero (the great Mali). The latter came from the country of Melle, or more precisely from the locality of Dirma/Tendirma in the west,<sup>68</sup> where he and a number of companions are said to have mounted a base of a granary by which the group miraculously flew to Sargan in Zarmaganda.<sup>69</sup> In some versions of the legend, the group made a stop-over in Gao.<sup>70</sup> In accordance with the Melle tradition of origin, which seems to refer rather to the Islamized kingdom of Ghana than to Mali properly speaking,<sup>71</sup> the traditionists insist that the Zarma are Mallance, “people of Melle/Mali”.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, there are a number of cultural traits, including the language of the bards and the dragon-killing motif, which attest strong connections with the Soninke.<sup>73</sup> Although the legendary tradition of a flying base of a granary seems curious, it would appear to refer to the shift of a number of people from the Lakes region of the Niger, i.e. ancient Ghana, to Gao in the Almoravid period.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the stay of Mali Bero in Gao seems to correspond to the subsequent rule of the Zā/Zāghē, the ancestors of the Zarma. The later flight of the group to Sargan and their dispersal in Zarmaganda and other (later) Zarma countries most likely refers to the progressive takeover of the territorial administration of the Gao kingdom by the Zā/Zāghē and their officials from the previous Qanda ruling group.<sup>75</sup>

Which language did the early Zarma speak? At present the Zarma inhabit a region which extends from the Saharan fringes in the north to the dry valley of

<sup>67</sup> Gado, *Zarmatarey*, 127-134; Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts*, 400; Lange “Rois de Gao-Sané”, 272, and *id.*, “From Mande”, 285-286.

<sup>68</sup> Urvoy, *Histoire*, 58-59; Gado, *Zarmatarey*, 140-143; Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts*, 406; Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 183.

<sup>69</sup> Urvoy, *Histoire*, 59-61; Rouch, *Contribution*, 207-208; Hama, *Histoire*, 105-108; Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts*, 315, 406-412; Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 156-242.

<sup>70</sup> Ardant du Picq, *Population africaine*, 17-18; Urvoy, *Histoire*, 60.

<sup>71</sup> Gado, *Zarmatarey*, 122, 146, 154; Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 232, 234; Lange, “Altes Mali”, 610-621.

<sup>72</sup> Gado, *Zarmatarey*, 129, 145; Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts*, 406; Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 180.

<sup>73</sup> Gado, *Zarmatarey*, 127-128, 145-154; Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 181-183.

<sup>74</sup> Similarly Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 187-188. In this context the designation ancient Ghana, perhaps chronologically less misleading, refers to the same region as old Mali (Lange, “From Mande”, 285-288).

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Lange, “Rois de Gao-Sané”, 269-257; *id.*, “From Mande”, 285-288; *id.*, “Chute”, 169-173.

Dallol Mawri in the east and to the Niger in the south. Although certain bards still recite the accounts of origin in Soninke, their spoken language is a dialect of Songhay.<sup>76</sup> In view of the linguistic situation characterized by the spread of Northern Songhay to the oasis of Tabelbala 1400 km north of Timbuktu and to Agadez 860 km east of Gao,<sup>77</sup> and of Southern Songhay to Hombori in the south, it seems that Songhay must have been spoken in the Niger valley and in the Zarma country, in Zarmaganda and Zarmatarey, since ancient times.<sup>78</sup> It may be noted in passing that the Northern Songhay speakers are composed of three sedentary groups, the inhabitants of Takedda/In Gall, of Agadez and of Tabelbala, and of two nomadic Berber groups, the Idaksahak and the Igdalen; a third nomadic group, the Iberogan, are black African vassals of the Igdalen.<sup>79</sup> Because of the considerable linguistic differences between the two Songhay languages, the separation between Northern and Southern Songhay might be traced back to a period before the arrival of the Zā/Zāghē to the area east of Gao. Since today only a minority of Songhay-speakers consider themselves – to a certain extent – to be Songhay,<sup>80</sup> it is only modern convention that applies this name to the two languages. In order to avoid any confusion with the later ethnogenesis of the Songhay on the Middle Niger, it is more appropriate to use the artificial terms Proto-Songhay and respectively Proto-Songhay speakers. Because of their numerical weakness the Soninke-speaking Zā/Zāghē and their followers doubtlessly began to adopt the language of the local Proto-Songhay population shortly after their arrival at Gao towards the end of the eleventh century.<sup>81</sup> A rapid takeover of the local language by the foreign ruling group is indicated by a number of inscriptions from Gao-Saney providing “Songhay” terms, the earliest dating from 1203 AD.<sup>82</sup> Though probably preceded

<sup>76</sup> Hama, *Histoire*, 103; Gado, *Zarmatarey*, 128, 145-146; Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts*, 225; Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 182.

<sup>77</sup> Cancel, “Étude”, 306-307; Barth, *Travels*, I, 334-335. The Dendi and other southern Songhay speakers are not considered here because their migration to the south was most likely the result of the Moroccan invasion of Songhay in 1591 (Rouch, *Contribution*, 213-221).

<sup>78</sup> Rouch, *Songhay*, 12-16; Nicolai, *Dialectes*, 14-25, 263. I now prefer to explain the Mande identity of the Zarma solely on the basis of the eastward expansion of a Zā/Zāghē elite, while earlier I conceived it in terms of a Mande substratum (Lange, “From Mande”, 299).

<sup>79</sup> Bernus, *Touaregs nigériens*, 70, 72, 323. The Iberogan may have been sedentary people of the dry valley of Azawagh before the coming of the Iullemmeden (*ibid.*, 75). The Songhay dialect of Agadez is now extinct (Bernus/Bernus, *Du sel*, 16). See below map 11 on p. 521.

<sup>80</sup> Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts*, 339-340; *id.*, *Sociétés*, 25.

<sup>81</sup> The research of Robert Nicolai and others with respect to the linguistic relationship of Songhay with Targi, Gurmance and Mande concern in the first instance Proto-Songhay and not Songhay (*Parentés linguistiques*, and *La force des choses*).

<sup>82</sup> De Moraes Farias plausibly argues that the Gao-Saney inscriptions n° 23, 28 and 29 each have a Songhay name in the second position while a Songhay kinship term seems to occur in

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by other officials of the Sisse regime, members of the new dynasty and their followers began from the end of the eleventh century onward to supplant the agents of the Qanda dynasty in the provincial districts. Despite their dispersal beyond the eastern Niger bend and the loss of their original language, these members of the Sisse establishment retained their Ghanean tradition of origin. A number of successive situations progressively led to the ethnogenesis of the Zarma: the integration of the Zā into the local population, the alignment of the Zā with Mali and the opposition between the Zā and the emerging Sonni dynasty.