

## 2, The Almoravids and Dynastie Changes in Ghana and Gao

The deep involvement of the rulers of Gao-Saney with the spread of Islam suggests an extensive previous exposure to the new religion. In Ghana the long lasting impact of Islam led to the overthrow of divine kingship and to the subsequent rise of an Islamic state.<sup>83</sup> Because of geographical proximity, these revolutionary changes in Ghana were highly relevant for the history of the Gao kingdom in the Almoravid period. Indeed, there are good reasons to suppose that the heartlands of Ghana were not situated in Kumbi Saleh at a distance of 850 km from Gao, as is generally believed, but in the Lakes region of the Niger at a distance of only 400 km. While the written evidence of the tenth and the eleventh centuries concerning the capital of Ghana supports its localization in the semi-desert region of Kumbi Saleh, the textual data of the twelfth Century would appear to show that the kings of Ghana were established in the much more fertile Lakes region of the river Niger.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the archaeological sites in this region, dating from the fourth to the twelfth Century, include a number of royal burial mounds.<sup>85</sup> Finally, it is in Tendirma, the centre of the Lakes region, that Zarma tradition locates the point of departure of the legendary flight of Mali Bero to the east,<sup>afi</sup> On the basis of the written, archaeological and oral evidence, it must be concluded that,

despite their expansion to the west due to the intensification of the trans-Saharan trade, the Sisse rulers continued to reside temporarily in the eastern heartlands of their empire where they buried most of their dead kings.<sup>87</sup> During the Songhay period, from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, Timbuktu to the north of this region and Gao at the eastern Niger bend were in close contact. At that time the two towns were even two alternating capitals of the same kingdom.<sup>88</sup> Because of these geographical and historical conditions, Gao might have been a province of Ghana during the Almoravid period before it became the rump state of the Sisse.<sup>89</sup>

The Almoravid expansion deeply affected Ghana insofar as it precipitated the Islamization of the court and sections of the population.<sup>90</sup> Instead of assuming these changes resulted from a Ṣanhāja conquest,<sup>91</sup> it is more appropriate to think in terms of internal developments. Actually, the available written and oral evidence suggest that, in 1076 AD, the Muslim party of the court took advantage of the rise of Islamic militancy among the Berbers to overthrow the last pagan ruler Tunka-Manīn in a *coup d'état*.<sup>92</sup> Protected by the Almoravids but not subject to them, the new ruler, Kema-Magha, set about to promote Islamic reforms. These were apparently more successful in the eastern province of Gao,<sup>93</sup> where the local Qanda dynasty had already prepared the ground for the thorough implantation of Islam,<sup>94</sup> than in Tendirma, the ancient centre of the Ghana empire, or in any other part of the country. In 1083, he was able to conquer the trading town of Tādmekka far to the northeast with the help of the Almoravids, thereby reinforcing his influence on Gao.<sup>95</sup> At a second stage, probably set in motion by the death of the Almoravid leader Abū Bakr b. ‘Umar in 1087, further disturbances

<sup>87</sup> Lange, “Chute”, 165-169; *id.*, “Almoravid expansion”, 326-342.

<sup>88</sup> According to Ibn al-Mukhtār, Sonni ‘Alī had four residences: Kukiya, Gao, Kabara/Timbuktu and Wara/Dirma (*T. al-Fattāsh*, 45/tr. 85). Leo Africanus describes both Timbuktu and Gao as capitals of Songhay (*Description*, I, 15; II, 467, 471). After the Moroccan conquest in 1591, Timbuktu became the centre of the new Pashalik and the residence of puppet Songhay kings (Abitbol, *Tombouctou*, 70-74, 90-147).

<sup>89</sup> For more restrictive views on the extension of Ghana see Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, II, 49-57; Mauny, *Tableau*, 508-511; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 27-28.

<sup>90</sup> Al-Zuhri, Ibn Khaldūn *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 98, 333.

<sup>91</sup> Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 45-46; Fage, *History*, 73-75.

<sup>92</sup> Lange, “Chute”, 165-169; *id.*, “Almoravid expansion”, 326-332.

<sup>93</sup> Flight mentions the lost stele of a *qāḍī* (“Medieval cemetery”, 100, 106).

<sup>94</sup> Al-Muhallabī and al-Bakrī *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 174, 87.

<sup>95</sup> With respect to the towns of Tādmekka and Nsala, al-Zuhri mentions that “the people of Ghana sought the help of the Almoravids against them (*‘alayhum*)” (Hadj-Sadok, “K. al-dja‘rāfiyya”, 181). Levtzion/Hopkins omit to translate *‘alayhum* (*Corpus*, 99).



in Ghana instigated by anti-Sisse Muslims led to the overthrow of Kema-Magha and his retreat to Gao, the eastern province of Ghana.<sup>96</sup>

The evidence concerning the western origin of the Zā/Zāghē provided by the Gao-Saney tombstones, the Zā/Zarma traditions of origin and a re-examination of Ghana history is supplemented by the correspondence of ancestral names. Indeed, the name Zāghī or Zāghay – here shortened to Zāghē – can be compared to the name Zāghī b. Zāghī given independently by two geographers to a great West African king. Ibn Khurradādhbih in the ninth century located the country south of Morocco and an anonymous Persian author in the tenth century mentioned the auriferous soil of his land.<sup>97</sup> From this information it can be deduced that both authors had in mind the kingdom of Ghana. There can be little doubt that the name Zāghī was used in Ghana as well as in Gao-Saney in reference to a highly prestigious ancestral figure. The occurrence of the Zāghē name on the royal epitaphs of Gao-Saney therefore provides further evidence for the Sisse identity of the new dynasty.

Information provided by al-Zuhrī can likewise be interpreted in the sense of a Ghanean origin of the Zāghē. According to this well-informed but not fully coherent geographer of the twelfth century, the Berbers of Tādmekka raided the land of the Barbara. Since the king of Ghana is said to be related to the Barbara, it would appear that these otherwise unknown people were equivalent to the Zarma as descendants of the Zā/Zāghē and hence the Sisse.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, if al-Zuhrī was referring to the Zā/Zāghē as of Sisse origin, this would not only explain the localization of these people close to Tādmekka but also their description as “the most noble and aristocratic of the Sudan” and the further remark that “all the kings of the black Africans acknowledge their nobility”.<sup>99</sup> Considering the evidence of the epitaphs of Gao-Saney in the context of al-Zuhrī’s information on the Middle Niger, the historian gets the impression that this forms the background context for the retreat of the Sisse to Gao during the Almoravid period: the Zāghē name points to the ancient nobility of the Sisse kings, the pretentious Islamic names to their far-reaching reputation, and the beautiful Andalusian stelae to the international con-

<sup>96</sup> At the death of Abū Bakr b. ‘Umar a change of Almoravid policy towards Ghana may have contributed to the fall of Kema-Magha (Lange, “Chute”, 171), but it probably did not lead to a military intervention (see below pp. 564-565).

<sup>97</sup> Ibn Khurradādhbih in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 17. Ibn al-Faqīh borrowed the information from the former (*ibid.*, 27). The name Rā’ī b. Rā’ī given by *Ḥudūd al-‘ālam* can easily be amended to Zāghī b. Zāghī (Cuq, *Recueil*, 69). See also Lange, “Chute”, 158-160.

<sup>98</sup> In spite of a different geographical focus, my earlier attempt to identify the Barbara with the Sisse/Soso of Ghana comes close to this identification in dynastic terms (Lange, “Chute”, 170-173).

<sup>99</sup> Al-Zuhrī in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 99; Lange, “Chute”, 170-171.

tacts of their Ṣanhāja allies. All these elements can be correlated with the Barbara. But most important of all, the historian finds in the remarks of al-Zuhri, in spite of their slight confusion, a clear reference to the close connection between Ghana and the eastern province of Gao, as well as evidence of the prominent part taken by the Sisse of Ghana in the politics of Islamization pursued in conjunction with the Almoravids on the eastern Niger bend.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Gao must have been part of the Ghana empire otherwise the Sisse would have lacked a secure backing for their operations against Tādmekka, and they would not have had sufficient regional interest to launch a military campaign against this distant town. In other words, since the trading town of Tādmekka (Es-Sūq), situated 300 km north of Gao, was in control of the great trade axis leading from the eastern Niger bend to North Africa, its conquest could only serve for the protection of the trade of Gao. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that Ghana extended its influence over Gao prior to the Almoravid period, even though the Arab geographers do not mention an eastward extension of Ghanaen power.<sup>101</sup> As for the stages of Kema-Magha/Yāmā b. Kimā's reign, they can now be determined with some degree of certainty: he seized power in Ghana in 1076, he conquered Tādmekka in 1083, he was overthrown in 1087 in connection with the death of Abū Bakr b. 'Umar, and he sought refuge in Gao where he died on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1100.

The Berbers who dominated the country between Tādmekka and Gao were most likely the Massūfa.<sup>102</sup> Al-Bakrī mentions the Saghmāra in the region north of Tādmekka, a name corresponding to the present designation of a vassal class of Tuareg, the Isekkemaren.<sup>103</sup> The ruling group of the town were probably first the Tademekket, referred to in the tenth century as Tānamāk.<sup>104</sup> But later, as a result of the joint expedition of Ghana and the Almoravids against Tādmekka, the Massūfa probably began to control the northern reaches of Gao.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, the Massūfa later established themselves in the Timbuktu-Walata and the Azawagh-Takedda regions.<sup>106</sup> We may suspect their authority behind the importation of the stelae of Gao-Saney for three reasons: forming the bulk of the Ṣanhāja armies

<sup>100</sup> Historians are used to considering the Tādmekka incident of the Almoravid period solely in terms of the imposition of orthodox Islam on the inhabitants of the town (Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 45; Hunwick, "Gao revisited", 428; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 57).

<sup>101</sup> It should be noted that Ibn Baṭṭūta, who stayed in Gao for a whole month in 1353, likewise does not mention the overlordship of Mali (Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 300-301).

<sup>102</sup> Hunwick, "Gao revisited", 424-430; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 56-58.

<sup>103</sup> Lhote, "Contribution", 334-340.

<sup>104</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 50-51.

<sup>105</sup> Al-Zuhri *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 99.

<sup>106</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūta *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 235. Norris, *Tuaregs*, 35-40; *id.*, *Arab Conquest*, 44, 78, 277.

with the Lamtūna, they had far-reaching contacts in the Almoravid empire, they were present in the region, and they had the desire to encourage Islamic reforms in the Sudanic kingdoms.<sup>107</sup> Two contradictory factors may have influenced their support of the Sisse/Zāghē kings of Gao: either both parties had developed some animosities towards the Lamtūna leader of the Almoravid movement who succeeded Abū Bakr b. 'Umar in 1087, or the successful rival king of the Sisse in Ghana relinquished an earlier alliance with the Almoravids. Since, according to al-Idrīsī, the new king of Ghana acknowledged the suzerainty of the Abbasids in 1116 AD (and apparently not that of the Almoravids), it is perhaps more likely that the Sisse were ousted from power by a group of Muslims objecting to the close alliance with the Almoravids.<sup>108</sup> Anyway, having conquered Tādmekka with the help of the Almoravids earlier, the Sisse now benefited, notwithstanding their defeat in Ghana, from the support of the Ṣanhāja of the Gao region. With respect to the patronage implied by the shipment of the Andalusian stelae and the residence in Gao-Saney, there can be little doubt that the far-reaching Islamic reforms of the Almoravid period, including the introduction of judicial courts in particular, were the result of Sisse/Zāghē, not of Ṣanhāja activities.<sup>109</sup>

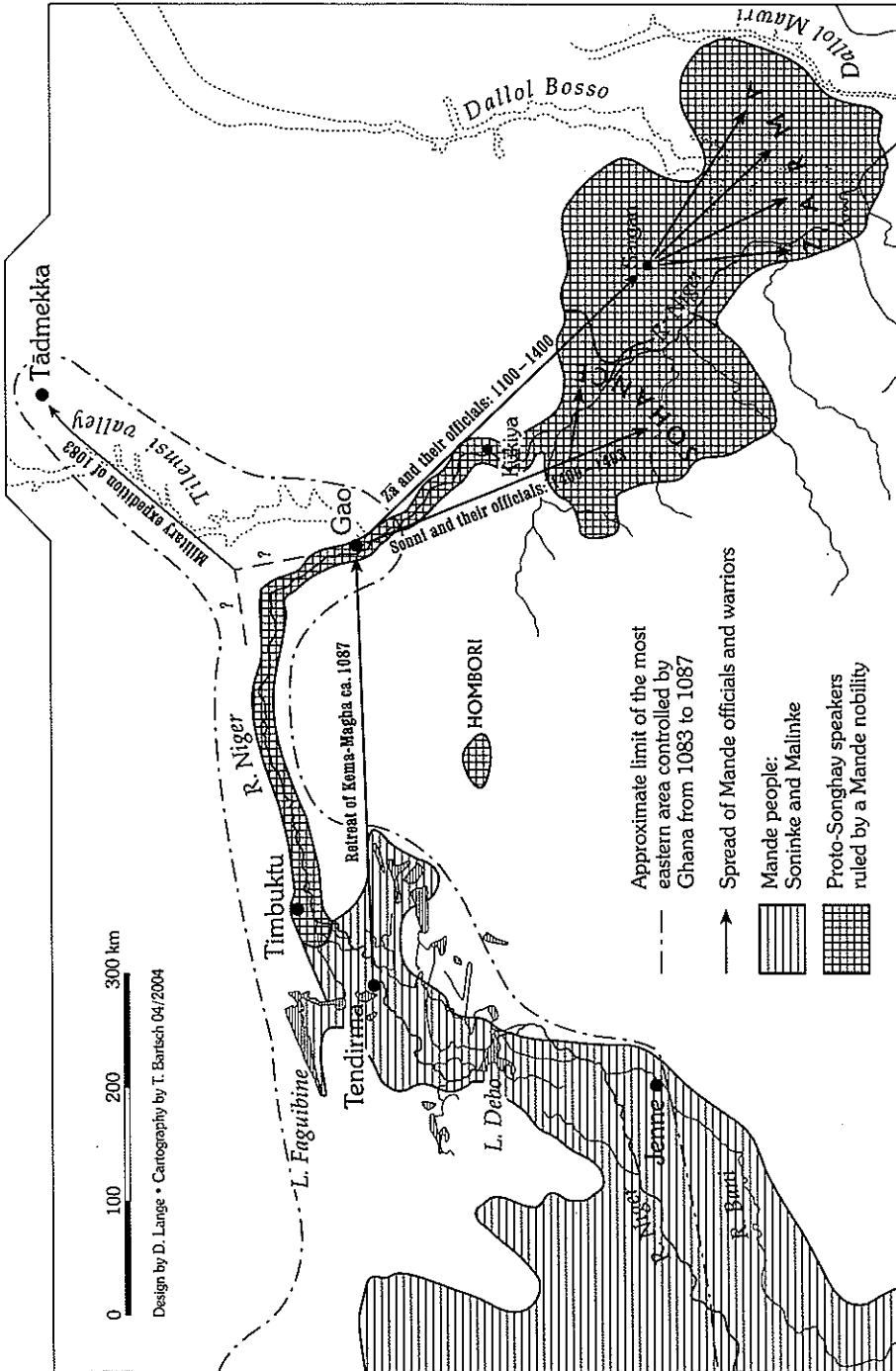
Once established in Gao-Saney, the Sisse continued to cherish their heritage as kings of Ghana despite their military defeat: they claimed descent from their great ancestor Zāghē, they prided themselves on being the first promoters of Islam (although the Qanda of Gao had been Muslims before them) and they rejected their local predecessors as pagans. These different allegations should be considered as an attempt to legitimize the encroachments of a refugee dynasty on the local royal house of the Qanda. The pairing of a number of stelae indicating that kings and queens, princes and princesses were nearly equally represented, is in this respect highly significant. It would seem to imply that the Zāghē followed a matrimonial policy consisting of deliberate marriages between Sisse princes and Qanda princesses. Besides the obvious intention to highlight the superior ancestry and the more profound Islamic faith of the Sisse kings, the precious tombstones of Gao-Saney with their elaborate epitaphs also give particular publicity to the politically relevant marriages between Zāghē men and Qanda women.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Bosch Vilá, *Almorávides*, 245, 256-257; Hunwick, "Gao revisited", 426-428; Lange, "Almoravid expansion", 342, 347-348.

<sup>108</sup> For arguments in favour of a breach between the Lamtūna and the Massūfa after the death of Abū Bakr b. 'Umar and a Lamtūna conquest of Ghana, see Lange, "Almoravid expansion", 342-347, and *id.*, "Chute", 169-173.

<sup>109</sup> Lange, "Chute", 156-158, 162-165. The introduction of judicial courts can be inferred from the lost stele of a *qādī* (Flight, "Medieval cemetery", 100, 106).

<sup>110</sup> Lange, "Rois de Gao-Sané", 261-262. For a new interpretation see below pp. 562, 563-564, 565.



Map 9: The domination of Ghana in the east and the subsequent spread of Mande officials and warriors, 11th – 15th centuries

The middle position of the Zāghē between the Ṣanhāja and the Qanda is also apparent from the residence of the newcomers from Ghana in Gao-Saney. Situated four kilometres from the royal town Gao Ancien, the twin town Gao-Saney was mainly inhabited by North African traders.<sup>111</sup> Within immediate reach of the nomads, the Zāghē were in a much more precarious position than the Qanda who most likely continued to reside in Gao Ancien as subservient kings. The archaeological record seems to confirm the existence of a royal court residing in Gao Ancien, since luxury goods were more frequent in Gao Ancien than in Gao-Saney. The archaeological findings also indicate that the inhabitants of Gao-Saney were not solely North African traders but also black Africans.<sup>112</sup> Although craftsmen must have been prominent among the inhabitants of Gao-Saney, there could also have been room for a substantial group of Soninke refugees from ancient Ghana. A rectangular building with massive walls of fired bricks to the west of the occupation mound of Gao-Saney could have been the tomb or the commemoration *qubba* of Yāmā b. Kimā, the founder of the Zāghē dynasty.<sup>113</sup> Its position indicates that the Zāghē resided in the western part of the town of Gao-Saney, facing Gao Ancien. Such an exposed position meant that the refugees from Ghana were much more in need of the goodwill of the nomads than the Qanda of ancient Gao. Furthermore, their constant encroachment on the earlier, largely independent but now closely controlled Qanda must have produced many frictions and hence must have necessitated continuous support from the surrounding nomads until the Zāghē definitively asserted their own authority over the entire country.