2, The Almoravids and Dynastic 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. 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. Furthermore, the archaeological sites in this region, dating from the fourth to the twelfth century, include a number of royal burial mounds. 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. On the basis of the written, archaeological and oral evidence, it must be concluded that, 

n° 25a. The corresponding dates for these are 1203, 1280(?), and 1253 AD (Inscriptions, §§ 545-547). Similarly the Fulani jihadists adopted the Hausa language a short time after their conquest of Hausaland at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Barth, Travels, I, 493-495, 476-477).

In the region between Sumpi and Goundam up to fifteen artificial elevations have been counted which seem to correspond to royal burial mounds (Raimbault/Sanogo, "Problématique des buttes", 249-269, 520-522), See also Mauny, Tableau, 93-111.

Urvoy, Histoire, 58; Gado, Zarmatarey, 143; Olivier de Sardan, Concepts, 407.
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. 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. 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.

The Almoravid expansion deeply affected Ghana insofar as it precipitated the Islamization of the court and sections of the population. Instead of assuming these changes resulted from a Sanhaja conquest, 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-Manin in a coup d'état. 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, where the local Qanda dynasty had already prepared the ground for the thorough implantation of Islam than in Tindirma, 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 Tadmekka far to the northeast with the help of the Almoravids, thereby reinforcing his influence on Gao. At a second stage, probably set in motion by the death of the Almoravid leader Abū Bakr b. 'Umar in 1087, further disturbances

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88 According to Ibn al-Mukhtar, Sonni 'Ali had four residences: Kukya, Gao, Kabara/ Timbuktu and Wara/Dirma (T. al-Fattâsh, 43/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).
89 For more restrictive views on the extinction of Ghana see Delafosse, Haut-Sénégal, II, 49-57; Mauny, Tableau, 508-511; Levitian, Ancient Ghana, 27-28.
91 Levitian, Ancient Ghana, 45-46; Fage, History, 73-75.
93 Flight mentions the lost stele of a qadi (“Medieval necrology”, 100, 106).
95 With respect to the towns of Tadmekka and Nsala, al-Zuhri mentions that “the people of Ghana sought the help of the Almoravids against them (alayhum)” (Hadj-Sadok, “K. al-dja'afiya”, 181). Levitian/Hopkins omit to translate alayhum (Corpus, 99).
of the trans-Saharan trade and its eastern heartlands of commerce. During the Songhay empire, Gao had been a province to Timbuktu to the north of it. At that time it had been an independent kingdom. *Because the Songhay empire it may have been a province to Timbuktu, the rump state of the empire.*

As it precipitated the decline of the empire. Instead of assuming that the Songhay had taken over the written and oral evidence, one must reflect that the court took advantage of a political opportunity. The last pagan ruler of Gao was a client of the Songhay empire, but not subject to it. The Songhay initiated a number of dynamic reforms. These included the construction of roads to connect Gao, *where the local forces had been weakened through implantation of the Songhay.* The Songhay empire, or in any case the king of Songhay, replaced the trading town of Gao by Gao as a regional center, thereby removing what had been a potential center of instability set in motion by the Songhay empire.  

The story of the Kukiya, Gao, Kabara/ Kandake, Kankan, etc., describes both Timbuktu and Gao. In the Moroccan conquest of Gao in 1240, the residence of puppet kings at Timbuktu was also destroyed. 

*A. Ide, Haut-Sénégal, II, 49-50.*

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*P. B. Herring, Kankan, 106.*

*The Songhay empire of Timbuktu mentions that "the people of Gao"* (Hadj-Sadok, "K. al-\-Sā'y, G. al-Kabar, 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.66

The evidence concerning the western origin of the Zâl/Zâghê provided by the Gao-Saney tombstones, the Zâl/Zarma traditions of origin and a re-examination of Ghana history is supplemented by the correspondence of ancestral names. Indeed, the name Zâghi or Zâghay – here shortened to Zâghê – can be compared to the name Zâghi b. Zâghi given independently by two geographers to a great West African king, Ibn Khurradâdhibhâ 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.97 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 Zâghi was used in Ghana as well as in Gao-Saney in reference to a highly prestigious ancestral figure. The occurrence of the Zâghê name on the royal epitaphs of Gao-Saney therefore provides further evidence for the Sisse identity of the new dynasty.

Information provided by al-Zuhri can likewise be interpreted in the sense of a Ghanan origin of the Zâghê. According to this well-informed but not fully coherent geographer of the twelfth century, the Berbers of Tadmekka raided the land of the Barbâra. Since the king of Ghana is said to be related to the Barbâra, it would appear that these otherwise unknown people were equivalent to the Zarma as descendants of the Zâl/Zâghê and hence the Sisse.98 Indeed, if al-Zuhri was referring to the Zâl/Zâghê as of Sisse origin, this would not only explain the localization of these people close to Tadmekka 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”.99 Considering the evidence of the epitaphs of Gao-Saney in the context of al-Zuhri’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 Zâghê 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 contacts of their Sanhâja.”

But most important of their slight confusion and the eastern province by the Sisse of Ghana, the Almoravids on the other part of the Ghana empire for their operations and a regional interest to label Gao, was in control to North Africa, its emirate Gao. Therefore, it is not Gao prior to the Almoravids that we mention an eastward migration of the Magha/Yámâ b. Kintu’s descendants: he seized power, he was overthrown in his own land and sought refuge in Gao.

The Berbers who were the most likely the Massúfa, a name of Tadmekka, a name of the Tuareg, the Isékêms, the Tademekket, referred to the joint expedition of the Massúfa later established the Takedda regions.100 In the stelae of Gao-Saney to terms of the imposition of the

66 At the death of Abû 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).


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


100 Historians are use

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of Kema-Magha

zāghē provided by the geographers to a great extent to the location of their ancestral names. Could it be, as is suggested by some historians, that the zāghē name points to the seat of the Sise of Ghana in the politics of Islamization pursued in conjunction with the Almoravids on the eastern Niger bend? Furthermore, Gao must have been part of the Ghana empire otherwise the Sise would have lacked a secure backing for their operations against Tádemeka, 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 Tádemeka (Sa-Si) 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 Ghanaian power. As for the stages of Kema-Magha/Yamā b. Kimā's reign, they can now be determined with some degree of certainty: he seized power in Ghana in 1076, he conquered Tádemeka 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 6th November 1100.

The Berbers who dominated the country between Tádemeka and Gao were most likely the Masūfa. Al-Bakrī mentions the Saghmāra in the region north of Tádemeka, a name corresponding to the present designation of a vassal class of Tuareg, the Isekkenarem. The ruling group of the town were probably first the Tádemelkett, referred to in the tenth century as Tānwmâk. But later, as a result of the joint expedition of Ghana and the Almoravids against Tádemeka, the Masūfa probably began to control the northern reaches of Gao. Furthermore, the Masūfa later established themselves in the Timbuktu-Walata and the Azawagh-Takedda regions. We may suspect their authority behind the importation of the stele of Gao-Saney for three reasons: forming the bulk of the Sánhâja armies.

106 Historians are used to considering the Tádemeka incident of the Almoravid period solely in terms of the imposition of orthodox Islam on the inhabitants of the town (Levretion, Ancient Ghana, 45; Hunwick, "Gao revisited", 428; Cuq, Histoire, 57).

107 It should be noted that Ibn Battûta, who stayed in Gao for a whole month in 1353, likewise does not mention the overlords of Mali (Levretion/Hopkins, Corpus, 300-301).


107 Ibn Battûta in Levretion/Hopkins, Corpus, 50-51.


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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. Two contradictory factors may have influenced their support of the Sisese/Zaghè 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 Sisese in Ghana relinquished an earlier alliance with the Almoravids. Since, according to al-Idrisi, 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 Sisese were ousted from power by a group of Muslims objecting to the close alliance with the Almoravids. Anyway, having conquered Tadmekka with the help of the Almoravids earlier, the Sisese now benefited, notwithstanding their defeat in Ghana, from the support of the Sanhaja 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 Sisese/Zaghè, not of Sanhaja activities.

Once established in Gao-Saney, the Sisese continued to cherish their heritage as kings of Ghana despite their military defeat; they claimed descent from their great ancestor Zaghè, 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 Zaghè followed a matrimonial policy consisting of deliberate marriages between Sisese princes and Qanda princesses. Besides the obvious intention to highlight the superior ancestry and the more profound Islamic faith of the Sisese kings, the precious tombs of Gao-Saney with their elaborate epitaphs also give particular publicity to the politically relevant marriages between Zaghè men and Qanda women.

109 Lange, "Chute", 156-158, 162-165. The introduction of judicial courts can be inferred from the lost stele of a qādhī (Plight, "Medieval cemetery", 100, 106).
The Almoravid empire, they encouraged Islamic reforms that may have influenced their parties. The parties had developed some of the Almoravid movement who succeeded the rival king of the Sisse in Mali. Since, according to the intermarriage of the Abassids in North Africa, it is perhaps more likely that the Muslims objecting to the conquest of Tadmekka with some benefit, norwisting to the far-reaching Islamic Sumba. The far-reaching Islamic courts in the Sumba activities.109

needed to cherish their heritage and claimed descent from their Arabic sultans. (One of the first sultans of the Saljuqs, before them) and they claimed descent from the Saljuqs of a refugee dynasty on the throne. The number of stelae indicating the former nobility equally represented, is high enough to suggest that the Zaghrul followed the invited islamisation between Sisse princes and attendants. The superior ancestry, the precious tombs and the age of the particular publicity to the Kabdua, and to the Qanda women.110

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The middle position of the Zaghê between the Sanhâja 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.\textsuperscript{111} Within immediate reach of the nomads, the Zaghê 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.\textsuperscript{112} 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 Yâmâ b. Kimâ, the founder of the Zaghê dynasty.\textsuperscript{113} Its position indicates that the Zaghê 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 Zaghê definitively asserted their own authority over the entire country.

3. The Domination of Mali and the Emergence of the Songhay

Three related aspects of historical developments on the Middle Niger between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century are distinguishable: the political, the dynastic and the ethnic. Beginning with the political, this period saw the expansion of Mali from the upper Niger to the eastern Niger bend. Up to now, the rise of Mali and the inclusion of the Gao kingdom into this empire have mostly been described with the presumption of an ethnically homogeneous and stable situa-

\textsuperscript{111} Insoll, \textit{Islam, Archaeology}, 45-47; \textit{id.}, "Iron Age Gao", 23-27.

\textsuperscript{112} Insoll, \textit{Islam, Archaeology}, 32-33, 45-47; \textit{id.}, "Iron Age Gao", 23-27.

\textsuperscript{113} Flight suggested that the building called structure Q was the tomb of one of the kings commemorated on the stele, while Insoll prefers the identification of the building as a qubba (for both references see Insoll, \textit{Islam, Archaeology}, 25-27). In view of the royal burial mounds of ancient Ghana, the structure Q may perhaps also be considered as the Islamic adaptation of the pagan worship of deceased kings (cf. al-Bakî in: Levitzion/Hopkins, \textit{Corpus}, 81).