



CIEA7 #16:

RECONFIGURAÇÕES POLÍTICAS E ACTORES SOCIAIS, EM ESPAÇOS RURAIS
AFRICANOS.

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Traditional structures:

challenge to modernity? the case of Djenne

The paper discusses the rise of African towns as exchange centers at ecological and economic frontiers. Djenne in particular rose at the frontiers of the Niger with the Macina and the Dogon plateau, and achieved autonomous status as a trade center connecting the Sahel with the trans-Sahara trade routes. Its population was heterogeneous and multi-cultural, and its government consisted of local (Bozo) and immigrant (Soninke) populations; under Songhay and Moroccan governors, the city councils of chefs de quartier and Islamic lawyers retained a certain autonomy. Its government resisted two religious revolutions by the Imams Chekou Amadou and el-Hadj Omar, before being subject to French administration. The 1st and 2nd Republic were basically an extension of centralism, and only the 3rd Republic passed decentralization laws which gave communities the right to elected councils and mayors. In Djenne traditional families and religious leaders still are involved in city government.

Decentralization, Urbanism, Governance, Traditional political structures.

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The questions discussed here are those of traditional political structures in the face of central government, given that African communities have had their own institutions of government for more than 2 millennia – the city of Djené shall illustrate the discussion.

Recent policies of local government and decentralization in Africa partly represent a return to pre-independence policies and even pre-colonial structures.

Long before outside influences e.g. Islam, became dominant at the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD and the institution of chieftaincy entered the Mande World around 1200, African communities were organized along their own lines.

Traditional land priests, so-called *chefs de terre* or 'land owners', were believed to have control over the forces of land (and water) determining fertility and health. Later outside conquerors with superior arms and horses set themselves up as chiefs, often legitimized by religious leaders.

The British colonizers, for example, found organized indigenous rulers e.g. in Kanem, Bornou, Hausa, Yoruba, in Nigeria and even Northern Ghana and formulated policies (*indirect rule*) which allowed these to continue to settle internal affairs as long as they did not interfere with the colonial economy. The French, after 1902 decided for direct rule. However, until independence the effects were similar: European district officers were responsible for local, regional, and national administration, with chiefs only entrusted with civil law cases. Similarly, the French relied on *chefs de canton* responsible for tax and labor recruitment. The dual system of governance, however, was present in both.

After Independence, the state model in such states as Mali and Ghana, for example, was strongly influenced by the socialist model of central planning – believed to lead to rapid industrial development. These lasted until 1967 in Ghana, and 1968 in Mali, and were followed by military rule – which we may say ended with the collapse of the Soviet System (1991 by a popular uprising in Mali, and 1992 in Ghana by peaceful transition). In the meantime, in Ghana, traditional rulers continued to have as much influence as the appointed administrators (DC or DCE). The government officially recognized traditional rulers through a representative body, the Regional House of Chiefs. In Mali, the *chefs de canton* were abolished with the 1960 US RDA government, but their sons continued to influence politics.

In Ghana, a debate resulted into the admission of traditional rulers into parliament – some chiefs are MP. By 1992 and 1996 decentralization laws were passed in Ghana and Mali, and local government institutions installed through the District Assembly Law and the *Loi No. 96-050 portant principe de constitution et de gestion du domaine des collectivités territoriales*. This created 684 rural communes with elected mayors, in addition to the 19 municipalities.

Without statistical confirmation, let us say, that most mayors are from traditional (chiefs' or imams' families in Mali – in Ghana most chiefs children are at least district assembly members). See the Web site of the National Commission of Culture:

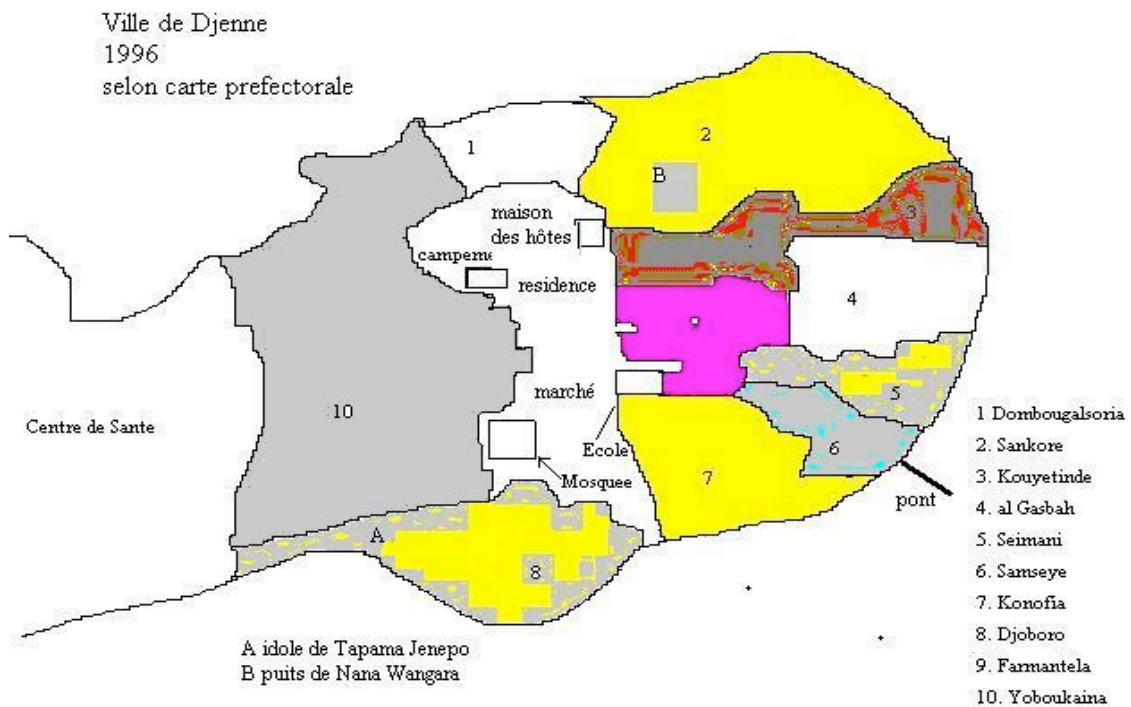
http://www.kas.de/proj/home/events/23/1/year-2007/month-2/veranstaltung_id-23754/index.html; Involve Chiefs in Local Governance:

<http://www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/index1.php?linkid=65&archiveid=1616&page=1&adate=16/04/2010>. But also a disappointed view from Mali

<http://www.iied.org/pubs/pdfs/9506IIED.pdf>

A closer look at Djené, which has been an autonomous self-governed community for long, challenges us to ask: where traditional institutions of governance exist, do we need states and laws to create new institutions, and can these overcome traditional resistance?

Before going into details, let us say that Djené had a council of the *chefs de quartier*, (let's say elders of the families) to which was later added a religious council of *ulama* (who interpreted Coranic law for the Moslim community). These two bodies formed local government (without the governors imposed by Songhay and Moroccan rulers).



Map 1

Djené has been settled, according to Susan McIntosh, since the 3rd c. B.C., presumably by populations living along the Niger – the Bozo fishermen, and perhaps pastoralists (Fulbe) and farmers.

It lies at a climatic frontier between the arboreous savannah and the arid Sahel (600 – 300 mm of rainfall), which is also an ethnic frontier between pastoral and farming populations.

Above is a map of the current town consisting of 12 *quartiers*.

We want to make two points in this paper: one is about the emergence of urbanism along the Middle Niger – the other is about Self-Government.

To speak about the Emergence of Urbanism, we have to start with the archaeological record .

The archaeologists have relied on Monteil – who stated that Djené-Jeno (Jj) was the former Djené – besides stating that Joboro on the Bani was, according to traditions, the first settlement, (map 3) Here they have identified several settlement clusters (with figures). Around Djené they did an archaeological survey with a radius of 4 km (below), and identified several other clusters. This however did not include the banks of the Bani (to the right).

However, the earliest source on Djené, the *Tarikh es-Sudan* by A, es-Sa'd, stated that Djené was previously in another location called Zoboro. Monteil mentions Diabolo and shows its location "south of the village of Perou" in his map (below,).

Thus, we have to search for the early Djené – a fishing camp of the Bozo group of fishermen who hold the landrights along the Niger and its arms – at Dioboro on Bani.

However, still, the McIntosh's have argued that the settlement presented a polynuclear structure. It is, however, necessary to specify the period because cities and town sometimes emerge from the fusion of independent villages. As we can see from map 2 below, not only Joboro which still exists today, but also Sanouna and villages on the Niger arm passing Djené in the North, Gomitogo, Roundesira, Velingara, Focolore, are part of the urban periphery.

The hydrographic réseau and inundated land which settlers must cope with is shown in the following map. The Niger divides into a northern arm, the Diaka, and an eastern arm flowing towards Mopti, where it joins the Bani. A parallel channel runs through the Kaladugu, (the independent Bambara chiefdoms of Say and Saro), before entering the Pondori and Djengeri. On this channel lies Djené, but on a link with the bani.

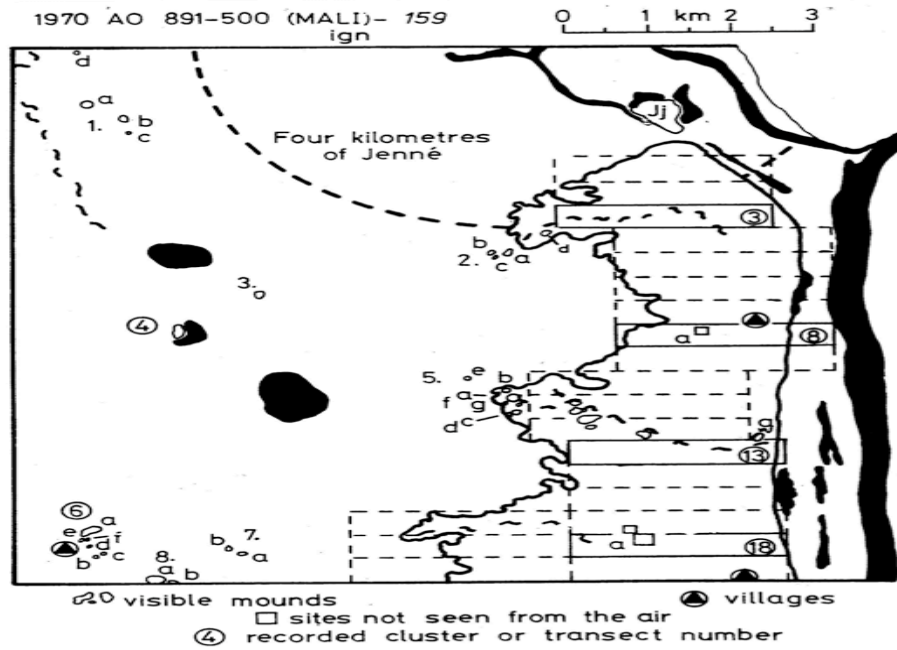


Map 2

Below details of this hydrography which has made Djené an island – between the Gomitogo channel and a connection to the Bani – which may have had two channels. In the North, the town, on the hill below, Djené Jeno, and the old Joboro in the South on the Bani. (map 6)

Djené shifted to its present location – from Djoboro on the Bani – northward along this arm. Djené Jeno, also an island, perhaps was its intermediate but not its earliest position.

The archaeologists, S. & R. Mc.Intosh who excavated at Djene Djeno in 1977 and 1981, made a reconnaissance survey which show settlements on some of the tumuli in the inundated flood plain – and speak thus of a polynuclear city. These settlements may have stood in functional complementarity to each other – fishermen, boat-builders, rice farmers, potters – with different ethnic and professional specialist groups occupying separate spaces, and later formed one settlement.



Map 3

The archaeological survey shows, besides Djené Jeno several clusters of former villages on the Bani but Joboro, the first location (in my opinion no. 8 or 13) was outside the radius and not excavated..



Map 4

The "island position" of Djené results, in my view, from a position on a meander, which surrounds the town on almost all sides by water. The strategic location bars against attacks from the land, and is ideal to guarantee the "market peace" for all who come to trade here. Its closeness to the Bani makes it also a port, and developed its trade with Timbuktu. A creek ran from North to South until the Moroccans filled it in the

16th c., forming a central axis. This means the 15th c. town was on the right of that creek and completely surrounded by water. Left is the old mosque, right the 19th c. mosque of Chekou Amadou, in the North, the garrison and the first Marka quarter. In the S. is the first Bozo quarter Joboro.

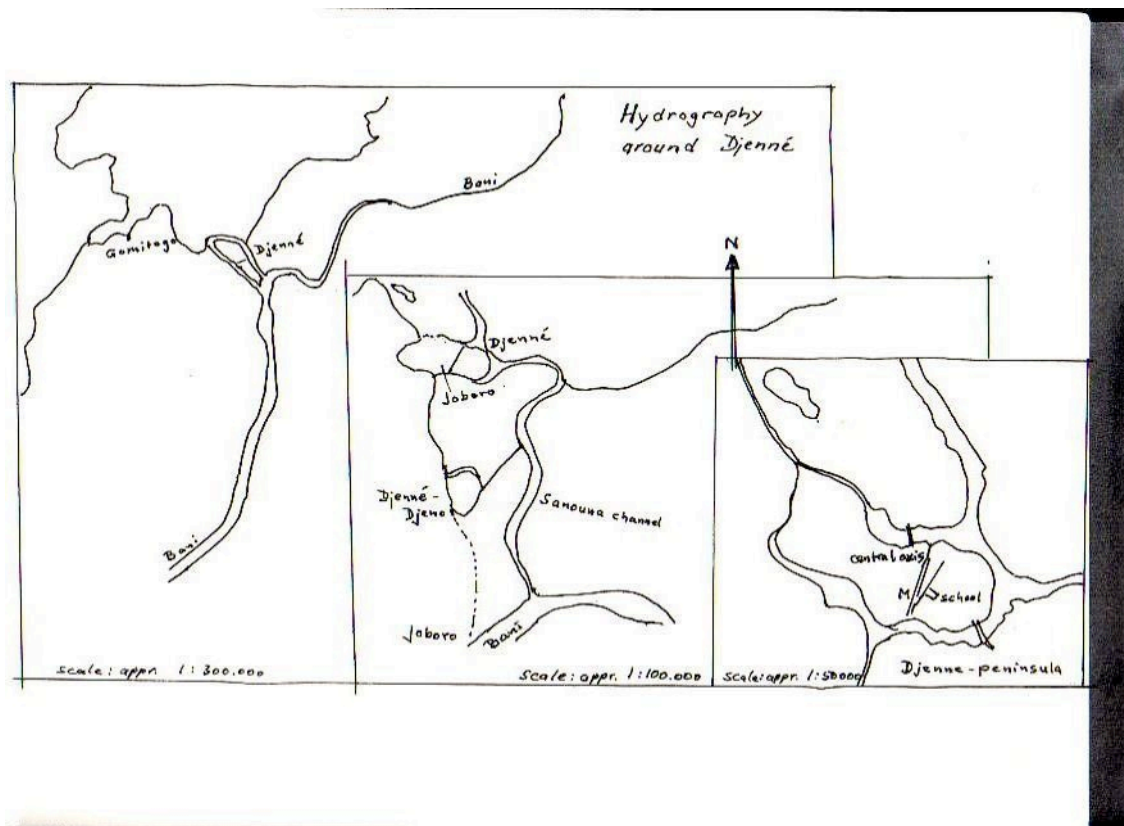
Djené had its origin in Joboro, on the Bani, but Joboro itself came from a settlement of fishermen at the junction of Niger and Diakha (Northern arm) with the same name (Joboro), from where the town of Dia – Djené's predecessor – was founded. Djené actually means Dia-ni, the "little Dia" according to local etymology.

From IGN air photo of 1959, Dia shows a similar location on an island surrounded by river. Its structure, too, goes back to the same Bozo family – the Kontao , the owners of land in Djené – and Marka-Soninke, presumably from ancient Ghana. There is reason to believe that Dia was the "capital" of Mali as described by Ibn Batuta and al-Omari.

West —————> North



Map 5



Map 6

Self-government evolved in this agglomeration of different "ethnic groups" .- the quarters 5, 6 , 7, 8 represent the original Bozo population, while 1 and 9 represent Marka, and 2,3, 4, 10 the Songhay trading partners from Timbuktu – as a council of elders of the different quarters – and since the 14th c. a second council of *ulama* as a religious instance. As these councils were ethnically heterogeneous, they often were divided with divergent loyalties in the conflicts Djenné had with surrounding territorial states. These councils are still influential in the city, despite the fact that the government of Mali's decentralization law provides for mayors and city councils elected on a party basis, and it would be interesting to study how current party factions in the council are related to the structure based on ethnic and residential sections.