

Political-Economic History of the Upper-Sangha

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the history of the upper-Sangha region, which has historically attracted many migrations, giving the densely populated area its multi-ethnic flavor. Political relations were constructed by means of alliance and kinship exchanges of “nephew” (to an inferior group), “wife” (to a strong ally) or “sister” (to a group considered equal). Such matrimonial and fictive kinship links among groups allowed residents of the Sangha region to exchange not only goods but people, and to maintain distant trade networks, despite the latent hostility that held sway after the latter half of the 19th century. At that time, the upper-Sangha and its western reaches constituted a distinct region, where violence resulted from the influence of the Fulbé states of the Adamawa. At the turn of the 20th century, European colonialism thus began within an area already transformed from a loose, clan-based political economy organized along and among watersheds, into a trade system in a broader regional context. Intense European exploitation of the upper-Sangha's wealth resulted in serious depletion of ivory, as the French and the Germans began to compete for control of trade routes. Thorough understanding of the environmental and social consequences of today's trading in timber and non-timber forest products may depend on knowledge of how African and European economic and political systems, still functioning side by side in the region, took root there.

This paper concerns the history of the upper-Sangha, a triangle formed by the Kadeï and the Mambéré Rivers, whose confluence creates the Sangha River. The little that is known about the region before the last century is nonetheless useful when one studies the present situation. The upper-Sangha has long been a densely populated area, and has attracted many migrations (see Figure 1). During the latter half of the 19th century, the upper-Sangha and its western reaches constituted a distinct region under the influence of the Fulbé states of the Adamawa. The region was therefore politically and economically cut off from the middle-Sangha to the south, and only established permanent links to the middle-Sangha with the advent of European colonization at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, comparison of the political-economic history of the upper-Sangha with that of the middle-Sangha is helpful in achieving a regional understanding of the area.

EXPANSION OF WESTERN AND FULBÉ TRADE SYSTEMS

Colonialism was slow to reach the upper-Sangha, but once colonial outposts were established, European nations quickly began exploiting the region's riches. The Frenchmen Gaillard and Fourneau arrived in the Sangha region in 1891, before Brazza¹ moved up to Koundé in the north between 1892 and 1894, and occupied the region permanently. For their part, the Germans did not reach Ouesso until 1898, through the expeditions of von Carnapp-Quernheim, Plehn, and von Stein. From Ouesso the explorers

¹ Famous explorer Savorgnan de Brazza made a blood-pact with many of the region's chiefs, and was able to stress the importance of the development of commercial interests between Europeans and these Africans (Rabut 1989).

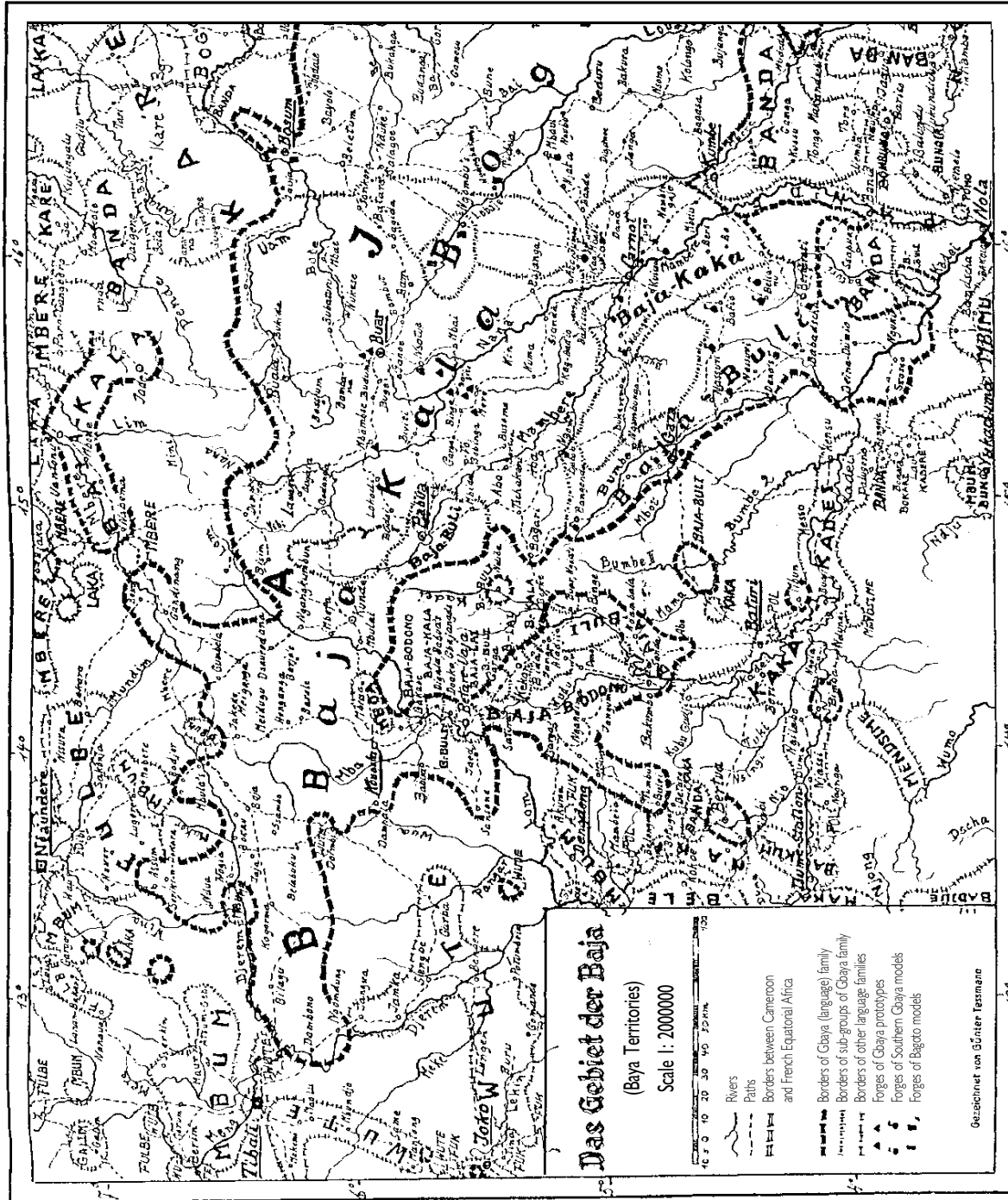


Figure 1 Excerpt from colonial map depicting ethnic groups of the Sangha River (Tressmann 1934).

moved north to Yokadouma and Bertoua, via Djem, Djimbou, Badjoue, and Maka country.

In the wake of Fourneau and Gaillard, Brazza began the permanent settlement of the upper-Sangha in 1892, and opened up the road to the north. On the 4th of January, 1892, he was at Bania with Djambé, the chief of the Pandé, enemies of the neighboring Gbaya and Yangéré. He met with Gbaya Boli of chief Djambala, whose lands lay next to those of Bafia, and who was responsible for the attack on Fourneau the previous year. He would later found the Berberati post near Djambala, but was at the time aiming more towards Koundé and Gaza, outposts controlled by the Lamido of Ngaoundéré. He sent Gentil, Ponel, and Clozel to continue exploration to the north, with a view to bolstering the French presence in the region, and to northern expansion via the road to Chad.

But European colonization was not the first change to shake the region of the upper-Sangha. It had always been a meeting point for peoples of various origins (notably Bantu and Oubangian communities). In the latter half of the 19th century, three factors had even led to its overpopulation: secular migration for new territory; slave raids of the neighboring Fulbé and the accompanying political system; and the growing attraction of fertile land, iron mining, and trade. The advent of Ngaoundéré's Fulbé state in the 1840s brought slave raiding to the edge of the region. It led to an increase in tribal conflict, as refugee tribes encountered local communities and engaged in slaving for the Fulbé. Finally, there was the current of Banda-Yangéré migration, which traversed the area in the opposite direction, bringing further upheavals.

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POPULATIONS OF THE UPPER-SANGHA REGION

At the end of the last century, the upper-Sangha was an ethnic mosaic without unity. There were groups known as the Pandé, BoKaré, Ngimbé, Ngoundi, Mpiemu, Gbaya, Kako, Yangéré, Mvong-Mvong, Kunabembé, some speaking bantu languages, others speaking oubangian ones. Overpopulation continued in the region until the beginning of the 20th century. The siphon-like shape of the region may have drained people from the north into it, while those coming from the south were driven to the narrow point at its base. Rather than a place of origin, the confluence of the Mambéré and the Kadeï was a place of passage (hence its complexity). It was also claimed as the point of migratory origin of such groups as the Kako, the Maka, the Bakota, and the Fang (Baumann and Westermann 1948).

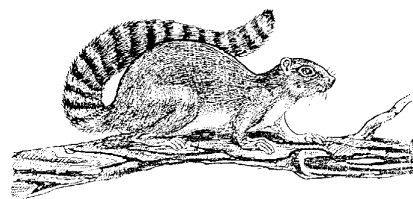
In order to understand the details that follow, it is necessary first to present a regional overview of the population. The comparison of

various traditions suggests that the Kadeï and Mambéré riverbanks were inhabited in the middle of the last century by fishing peoples, the Ngoundi, Ngombé, and the Pandé. To the middle of the two river banks and north up to the savanna, the area was occupied by the advances of two peoples in search of hunting grounds and land for itinerant agriculture: the Kako, thought to have come from the west, and the Gbaya, who came from the east. Their meeting seems to have been peaceful, and gave rise to intermarriages which led to a patchwork pattern of settlement, and occasionally to changes of ethnic names.

Later on, by their own account, two main groups of westward-moving Yangéré-Banda ran into the ranks of the Fulbé to the north. They swept into the region from the north disrupting the local population. The first of these groups, named after their chief Koumbé, settled on the left bank of the Mambéré, cutting off eastern migration. The second group, under chief Massiepa, settled in an arc from the upper stretches of the Batouri river to its confluence with the Kadeï not far from Nola, blocking all north-south traffic, driving the Kako to the west, and forcing the fishing populations onto islands. At the same time, Fulbé slave raids to the north drove a number of Gbaya tribes south to settle on the banks of the Kadeï, where they sometimes intermarried with the peoples already living there.

In the wake of these migrations, the upper-Sangha was populated at the turn of the century in the following manner: to the north and to the west were the Gbaya people. This was the area known as “Byand” in colonial reports, and was made up of different Gbaya groups in temporary alliance: the Buli Gbaya, the Mbusuku, and the Kako Gbaya (a fusion of Kako and Gbaya groups). Across the middle ran the semi-circle of Yangéré-Banda that cut off communication between the north and south. To the east were the Kako. There were a number of different groups along the rivers: on the Kadeï were the BoKaré, the Buli and Boukum Gbaya, the Ngombé, and the Bakoro; along the Sangha near Nola were the Ngoundi; the Pandé river people spread out up the Mambéré past Bania, beyond which were Gbaya and Yangéré again.

According to Poupon, the BoKaré, literally “the people of the Kadeï” (formerly known as the Karé), inhabited the banks and islands of the river. When the Bouli-Gbaya arrived, the BoKaré, who were fewer and were already busy fighting off Kako incursions, intermarried with the newcomers, and are now considered to be Gbaya. Towards the Mambéré-Kadeï confluence to the south, the Ngombé began to move north and split up, some settling on the islands of the Kadeï to the north of the BoKaré. Their departure had perhaps been prompted by the arrival of the Yangéré under chief



Protoxerus stangeri
(Illustration: Bernardin Nabana)

Massiepa, who settled not far from Nola, at the junction of the Kadeï and the Batouri rivers. Conversely, the Bakoro moved down the Kadeï, settling near Nola. To the south-west of Nola, the Mpiemu, sometime allies of the Boukoum who had been pushed back by the Yangéré, ended their migration on the Diebo. Between the Yangéré and the BoKaré were the Goundi, who had been cut off from those at Nola.

Finally, a number of Kako groups were spread throughout the triangle. Different groups were to be found on either side of the point of the triangle. The Mpiemu and the Mvong-Mvong fled north towards Nola, where two groups remained. Another group settled in Moloundou. Two other groups migrated to Congo. Finally, two communities headed north towards Berberati but were pushed back by the Yangéré and went to Yokadouma, where relations with the Mvong-Mvong were hostile up to the arrival of the Germans.

TENSIONS AND TRADE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Whatever the situation may have been at the start of the 19th century (and this will never be completely ascertained), starting between 1840-1850, permanent hostility was endemic due to the conflicting patterns of migration. Brazza's companions rightly referred to the region as the "warring Sangha." There were communities such as the Mpiemu, who were moving upward to the north, and those coming from the east and the northeast (Banda and Gbaya). Still others were coming from the north (other Gbaya), or from the west, attempting to return to the region after having been run off (Kako), not to mention peoples who had long been there and who had managed to protect themselves (Pandé).

The slow movement of the Kako and Gbaya in search of hunting and gathering sectors, into areas where agriculture was also profitable, radically changed the situation. War broke out in all its forms, from conventional warfare (in which a battle ended immediately after the first deaths), to feuds, rapes, banditry, slave raids, ethnic incorporation, and wholesale extermination. Explorers began to distinguish between this increasingly dangerous region and others to the south. Whereas Gaillard, who had been sent after Cholet by Brazza in 1891, was able to travel up the Sangha to Nola without a single act of violence, Fourneau's northward expedition on foot along the banks of the Mambéré on foot met with a terrible attack. He escaped by paddling downstream in a hollowed-out canoe without stopping for several days: "On either bank of the river, a host of villages and thousands of men pressed together rain projectiles on

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us” (*Bulletin Colonial de l’Afrique Française*, August, 1891). He did not find safety until he reached Nola.

The Kako have a name for the upper-Sangha triangle: *Kombokula*, the “red powder forest.” They claim to have inhabited the region in the first half of the 19th century, although they do not claim to have originated there. The geographic context of the triangle does not suffice to explain its attraction to these peoples, any more than does its function as a place of refuge from Fulbé slave raids. Its rich game, abundance of redwoods, and fertile land attracted the diverse peoples that converged there. In the 1920s, *Kombokula* was still considered the region’s storehouse. A meeting place and a place of magic, it is described by historians and others as a succession of savannah and of forests rich in trees which furnish the red powder used in body painting (Hilberth 1962).

The forests of the upper-Sangha are forests not comprised of *kola*, but of *kula* or *ngula*, the red bark which was scraped for beauty and body care. The red powder was an evident sign for all those who passed through *Kombokula*. In the Betare-Oya region of Cameroon, the Kako are still called the “red men” by their neighbors. This red powder was a much sought-after item, and the Banda traded it for weapons with neighboring groups. A noteworthy point is the fame of the region’s forest (among loggers, and others) for its abundance of redwoods. But while *Entandrophragma cylindricum* or “sapeli,” is most known in commerce, another tree, the “*padouk*” (*Pterocarpus soyauxii*, to which the term *ngula* or *kula* refers throughout the Congo) was the object of intense trade in the last century (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1969; Bouquet 1969). Should it be concluded that far-flung trade had already reached the region? Such was not the case in the latter half of the 19th century, but what happened before that remains a blank.

In fact, we know nothing about the first half of the 19th century. The most that can be advanced is that the Gbaya had slowly settled the upper reaches of the upper-Sangha in what is now the Carnot, Berberati, and Gaza region. There they met Kako groups, most likely coming from the other direction, from west to east. There is no memory of animosity between the groups, and they most likely coexisted peacefully, intermarrying from time to time. This is also how the term Gbaya-Kaka may be understood in the Carnot region. The dominant Nbwako Kako clan of Batouri found themselves among the Gbaya of Carnot and, according to traditions reported to Tessman at the turn of the century, some of them were integrated with the Gbaya following intermarriages and a demographic imbalance to their disadvantage. Ethnic identities go back and forth along clan borders (a point to which this paper will return) as intermar-

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riage and numerical superiority can lead to changes of ethnic affiliation even without violence or war. Thus the term “Gbaya-Kaka” refers to a matrimonial-clan system, and not to a linguistic or ethnic category.

Clan affiliation shifts, quite frequent in the upper-Sangha, were further intensified by the severity of generalized hostility linked to the arrival of the Banda-Yangéré and to pressure from the Fulbé, who used one group to conduct slave raids against the other. Some groups entered into treaties with the Fulbé, destabilizing the region by conducting raids on their behalf. Indeed, some local leaders became warrior-chiefs of Fulbé troops.

Thus, it was only with the Yangéré and Fulbé invasions that relations in the area deteriorated. War replaced links based on alliance by marriage, the only institution that had allowed zones of peace and trade to be established. These links were disrupted because, as the Kako tell it, “There came a time when the Gbaya no longer respected family ties, and that is what led to our departure.” The same thing is said of the Yangéré, who had also engaged in alliances and intermarriages once they had settled in the area, now grouped together under the Bera name.

The “Bera” Kako (Bolesse, Djendjoku, Mekotu, and Gwapil, among others) were not, however, particularly peaceful. Settled today in Cameroon, mostly at Ndelele and Gamboula, they accuse the Yangéré of having forced them to leave the Mambéré. In that time, they explain, there was no chief as there is today, only a courageous hero who led their hunting and war parties from Batouri to Bandia. Some of them, the Mbolomo, Mbodjoko, Mbobanga, and Nandjemi clans, elected to stay there, while others left the area for points further south and east. Today they are found in Nola, in Salo, in Bayanga, and some of them in Bambio. There as elsewhere, they lived side by side with other groups, forming a group that is now known as the Sangha-Sangha.

But as in the case of the Gbaya-Kaka, this is a matrimonial-clan grouping and not a linguistic one. Some of them, finally, migrated further afield, perhaps in search of peace: at the beginning of the century, they could be found along the Ibenga and the Motaba, but remembered, according to Darre, having come from the north. Darre’s description shows their Kako origin in a number of linguistic terms in their social organization, but it also shows major changes. Being near the east-west trading routes of the middle-Sangha, they must have picked up certain linguistic and cultural characteristics from other groups.

The dispersal of these groups was only the effect of previous developments that had made the upper-Sangha a multi-ethnic region in which no one group enjoyed a permanent domination over

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the others. All of these groups were organized within an acephalous (or permanent leaderless) social structure such that dominance of one or the other group depended on the personal strength at a particular moment of a charismatic leader who possessed supernatural powers. Because his emergence did not follow systematic patrilineal lines, his disappearance or loss of power (as manifested by successive failures), caused fierce contests which often ended in splits and in the creation of new groups. When no new leader emerged, the groups dispersed to clan or multi-clan villages under the charge of elders and notables. In the absence of central political institutions, it was therefore necessary for other structures to assure the cohesion of these groups and, in times of peace, to regulate trade and exchanges among them.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

In the second half of the 19th century, history mixed clans, tribes, and individuals inextricably, constantly redrawing maps, hopelessly confusing accounts of events, and making it impossible to describe group structure without reference to historical processes. Small clan factions that resulted from division or from war were too weak to subsist on their own in a permanently hostile environment; some of them willingly joined large centers that could assure their protection in exchange for submission. Interclan marriage would later make them, if not equal partners, at least integrated allies in a multi-clan collective that resembled a “tribe,” in the political sense of the term. For the slightest of reasons, however, these ties could be undone, leading to new alliances, and new leaders.

These intermittent processes of concentration and dispersal, of accumulation and dwindling of power and of peoples, were made possible by the flexibility of social organization. Despite a marked, clan-based patrilineal structure, most of these societies were subject to a degree of fluidity that went beyond the cycles of family or clan development, that were determined by various individual, political, economic and historical contexts. This fluidity makes it impossible to define these groups in terms of a particular “house,” nor do I think that such a definition could have been applicable in the distant past.

Nevertheless, clan structure in the large sense was, and still is, the principal characteristic of the region. Oral history is always recounted in clan terms. When Brazza reached the upper-Sangha, he too described the groups in terms of clans. The line, the clan, the tribe, the ethnicity are always designated by the same prefix (*mbo-*), whether the object be the village, the clan, the tribe, or a war-party, depending on the political status of the group at a given point in history. It is the fluidity of social organization which allows the same

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concept to cover different parental, structural, and political ties, all of these uses being found within the same region. The ethnic designation is essentially political; it allows one group to absorb and include another, the clan being indivisible and perpetual by definition.

The clan is all the more important as it is the only thing that defines the theoretical limits of consubstantiality, which underlie strict rules governing exogamy. Despite certain non-patrilateral recruitment methods such as adoption, abduction, dependence, and cognitive links, patrilineation and exogamy remain the basis around which groups are organized. Its strength lies in the notion of common blood, a notion shared by all the peoples of the upper-Sangha, and which also underwrites the political importance of blood pacts (Copet-Rougier 1997). When the ethnic referent changed, the clan survived within the new unity. It could hardly be otherwise in a situation in which groups were constantly splitting up, uniting, and splitting again.

One example of this is the Kako tradition which recounts the migratory adventures of the group known as the Bera (cf. *supra*). Following their displacement as far as Bania, those who did not continue to the south or east set off again under their chief Nguembé, and arrived at Nguku rock on the Kadeï after having traversed the Batouri, which was held by Massiepa's Yangéré. It was at Nguku that they met the Komba, who were impressed by Nguembé's power and decided to accompany him on his adventure. By their own account, they had previously been Mpiemu of the Mbondja clan. Now, to justify their uniting with Nguembé, they claimed that they were "nephews" of the Kako.

This point should be emphasized, as it recurs again and again in historical explanations: rallying to a political group is always expressed through family ties and through alliances in which the ties of brother-in-law or of maternal uncle-birth nephew structure the creation of groups. There must therefore have been matrimonial exchanges in which the Komba were in the position of taking wives. There exists today a group of clans known as the Kako-Komba, but there also exist clans of Komba in other Kako groups.

Although they were eventually transformed into ties of marriage or kinship, other, cruder means of integrating groups were used. The Kako-Bera can again serve as an example. Once they had settled on the right riverbank of the Kadeï, they allied themselves with their neighbors to combat the Ngombé on the islands. After refining their strategic maneuvers, they attacked from all sides, killing the Ngombé hero. The Kako exterminated all that came before them, women, children, and goats, and they burnt all of the wealth, indicating a desire to annihilate rather than to pillage. In the face of such de-

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struction, the surviving Ngombé gave in and begged for peace saying: “It is over, now we will become like you.” In this way, they were assimilated with the Kako, as was often the case at the time. Vanquished peoples lived with their conquerors, gradually being absorbed through marriage and losing their ethnic identity, although not their clan identity. This was the way of things, say the Kako, but this is also what makes historical reconstructions so tricky. Groups disappear, new ones appear, and the accounts, transmitted from individual to individual, become contradictory within the same group.

We may speak, therefore, of a political ethnic identity, and above all of a clan-based identity: whole groups switched “ethnic” affiliation, but maintained their previous clan identity. Small groups became a clan of the conquering people, larger ones became sub-clans of stronger clans, eventually losing their separate identity over five or six generations. The war used ethnic categories to establish relations of domination that were inscribed in kinship terms which erased the hierarchy over time. Kinship was a limiting factor in political constructions based on an institutional hierarchy of subjected groups. Once vanquished, the latter would have to fit into a category of kinship, and not into an autonomous political category. Integrated at first as nephews (that is to say, as captives), they become full members of the dominant clan.

The status of permanent slave, properly speaking, did not exist, and those hostages who were not exchanged were adopted. Fulbé influence brought major changes in this fluid situation, so characteristic of Sangha region social systems. When taken in small numbers following a war or an abduction, it was traditional for captives to be integrated through adoption or to be kept as hostages until they could be exchanged. Matrimonial alliance also had an important, highly political role in assimilation, as it created the ties that linked groups with the dominant group to which they had rallied. The marriage system was part and parcel of the political structure, as they were both based on the clan structure. It is difficult to know, for example, whether the Komba were in a position of inferiority or not, since time has erased these relations.

In fact, the position of wife-takers held different meanings depending on the circumstances. In times of peace, the one who takes a wife is in a socially inferior position relative to the one who bestows such a valuable gift. The same logic of matrimonial alliance can be found on the group level. By taking wives from the Bera, the Komba became brothers-in-law and united peacefully with them, acknowledging the leadership of the Bera chief and his clan. Globally, they became the nephews of the Bera. As in the individual

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kinship link, however, they will be “kings” in the house of their uncle, and they may sometimes succeed him as chief. In times of war, however, the one who takes a wife is a predator; he affirms his domination by taking the wives of the vanquished (or by simple ambush and abduction). Instead of the relation being brought about by an alliance of brothers-in-law, this step is skipped over in favor of hierarchical blood links, the offspring from which have an ambiguous status as nephews of vanquished groups. But if another war were to come along, and were those who had bestowed them to recover their “sisters” and their children, the latter would have the status of nephew-slave at their uncle’s. It would then be several generations before the inequality was erased.

The multiple meanings of kinship ties, closely linked to political circumstances, could also institute relations of perfect equality, however. To put an end to a war, and to seal a new alliance, a blood pact was made between chiefs, and this had considerable weight. Indeed, throughout the whole region, mixing blood meant making it the same, prohibiting violence among those who had entered into such a pact: by mixing their blood, they became consanguineous and the same blood would henceforth run through them. The law forbade the spilling of one’s own blood, much as it forbade incest. Violent or sexual contact with identical blood brought weakness and death. In fighting, when one encountered a former blood-brother captured by and fighting for the enemy, all violence was prohibited, and the combatants were to spare each other. Remarkably, this symbolism is still shared throughout the upper-Sangha, despite the multi-ethnic character of the region. It was the exchange and traffic permitted by this shared symbolism and the associated kinship system that allowed the groups to develop into a regional system.

In fact, political alliances were reinforced with blood pacts through the exchange in marriage of direct sisters (or daughters), a practice that was normally forbidden.² This practice offered a way of uniting on equal terms, as opposed to the hierarchical relation implied by the unilateral gift of a wife.

Thus political relations were constructed by means of alliance and kinship, and depended on whether one was a “nephew” (inferior), a brother-in-law through the gift of a wife (ally) or through the exchange of sisters (equal). The matrimonial and kinship links between the groups allowed them to exchange not only goods but people, and to maintain distant trading networks despite the state of latent hostility which held sway, especially after the advent of the Fulbé influence.

The history of the second half of the 19th century can no longer be characterized in clan or tribal terms; rather, it is a history of regions and villages, of migrating groups and of population centers gathered around a chief and commercial, artisanal, and warrior centers under the sway of a clan.

² In the region’s kinship systems, the exchange had to be made between indirect sisters (ones classified as such), which confirms the fact that hierarchical kinship ties between groups were essentially political.

THE UPPER-SANGHA: THE FAR REACHES OF THE FULBÉ ECONOMIC SYSTEM

In the middle of the 19th century, the country of the upper-Sangha between the Mambéré and the Kadeï was rich in resources, densely populated, and torn by strife; it was, in short, a powder keg. Hostility had been intensified in the region by the influence of the Fulbé states from further north, which were trading societies. Antagonisms grew sharper, the motivations for pillage changed, and the shifting concentrations of human, commercial, and military populations changed the geopolitical situation of the region. The history of the second half of the 19th century can no longer be characterized in clan or tribal terms; rather, it is a history of regions and villages, of migrating groups and of population centers gathered around a chief and commercial, artisanal, and warrior centers under the sway of a clan. Hamlets and villages that found themselves in the orbit of these centers spread out for dozens of kilometers around them.

Even though it was hundreds of kilometers from Ngaoundéré and was considered dangerous and unsubdued, this remote region was one of the axes of slave raids. Whereas the upper-Sangha had been a multi-ethnic meeting ground and a loosely ordered regional grouping, it was only with its integration into the Fulbé sphere of influence that it became a viable regional system. With the establishment of the Sokoto Empire at the beginning of the 19th century, slave trading reached as far as the upper-Sangha.

Though the Adamawa's relations with Sokoto were peripheral, it nevertheless supplied them with several thousand slaves each year. The number of slaves that Adamawa sent to these markets is generally estimated to be several million, which is sufficient indication of the drastic draining of the local populations. The Adamawa Fulbé states that grew up in the Sokoto area, and Ngaoundéré, especially, became the most active suppliers of slaves. Endemic slave raids and frontier wars were central to the establishment of the Fulbé states. As most of the slaves were sent to other states for tribute or more usually for money, the perpetuation of the system depended on there being a steady supply of slaves from beyond the borders of the territory.

At the end of the last century, eight to ten thousand slaves were taken yearly. Since slaves were primarily trading goods, the Fulbé had a "self-contained and self-perpetuating rationale" for their slave raids (Burnham 1995: 158). Requiring a constant supply to meet the needs of its internal and external trade and of its army, the Fulbé State became a predator in the surrounding regions. The remoteness of these areas made raids consistently difficult, and a system of posts was set up that embraced the whole area in a regional network. The

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impossibility of subjugating these vast areas full of rebellious peoples, the need to secure the caravan routes, and the desirability of establishing bases for further expeditions led to the creation of commercial and military centers in Gbaya country.

The first of these posts was Koundé, which was established in the 1850s. Koundé grew rapidly, as it was the base for further ranging expeditions, the centre of Fulbé administration in the southeast, and an important regional market. Slaving expeditions set off from Koundé to the upper-Sangha. On their return, the Lamido, the Fulbé religious and political leader, took half of the valuables resulting from expeditions, the warrior chiefs helped themselves after the Lamido, and the remainder of the spoils were divided among the victorious warriors. Koundé levied taxes on caravans that wished to travel past Gaza, whereas other caravans paid “6000 cauris (cowries) per person and per draft animal at the Kalebina river” (Mizon 1895). He adds that Koundé is “the warehouse for all of the Adamawa’s trade with the countries that flow into the Sangha and its tributaries, the Doumé, the Kadeï, the Mambéré.” As Brazza explains:

It is a remarkable phenomenon, and one that has surely occurred in other periods, that individuals more or less linked to the Fulbé and speaking their language who are spread throughout the country [i.e. the upper-Sangha] establish their precedence over the locals, pave the way for further expansion, and then serve as support for the organization of the land (CAOM Gabon-Congo, III 13 d).

The Hausa³ dominated trade; the Fulbé maintained political and military domination. In the wake of Fulbé expeditions, trade became the primary means of interaction among communities, with facilitation through intermarriages with local women. In these ethnically-mixed marriages in the upper-Sangha region, it was preferable to be in the position of taking a wife, as social and political hierarchies were determined by success through conquest and of domination. In upper-Sangha trading networks, the three goods that principally attracted commerce were ivory, kola nuts, and slaves.

Along with the Hausa merchants and the chiefs with ties to Ngaoundéré, the local chiefs began to consolidate their power by means of military practices that conferred slaves, goods, and prestige. Because the Fulbé cavalry was useless in the forest and inept in the swamps of the savanna, these new chiefdoms raided tribes that neighbored these inhospitable environments.

Arriving from either side, the French and the Germans everywhere encountered chiefdoms set up along the lines of the Koundé model, extending in a line that more or less followed the border

In upper-Sangha trading networks, the three goods that principally attracted commerce were ivory, kola nuts, and slaves.

³ “Hausa” was the customary term for all merchants, whether they were from Hausa, Bomoua, or Kanouri communities.

between the forest and the savannah: Bertoua, Batouri, Gaza, and Koundé. They were established under the leadership of a charismatic chief who had made a pact with the Fulbé, and who had managed to gather a number of multi-ethnic clans around himself, whether by means of force or by the attraction of security and of growing trade.

GAZA

Located on the second Boumbé, a tributary of the Kadeï, Gaza commanded the upper-Sangha and access to the region. According to French explorer Mizon, the area around Gaza was populated by numerous villages, built on the small hills that overlooked the savanna. The area and its surroundings were contested by the groups of the triangle, as were leadership and slaves. All of the movement, however, followed the northwest/southeast axis towards Koundé and Ngaoundéré, while Gaza functioned as a magnet. The reaches of this vast area were linked by a number of trails. Ideally, political and matrimonial networks made it possible to travel without being immediately attacked.

Oral tradition tells us that Gaza attracted a number of clans, and that the iron works that were built there were greatly appreciated in the region. People came from afar in search of tools and weapons. At the start of the last century, the Kako-Ndobu of Batouri still went there to get weapons, especially *mbotos*, or *mboso*, as they are called in Gbaya. These *mboto* were large oval sheets of iron. Some of them were reserved for matrimonial compensation. These had to be perfect and unused. In order to make sure of this, they were run through the hair, and at the least snag, were turned down. The rest of them were used, often by village smiths, to make iron tools. Tessman also mentions slicing knives and long narrow lance heads as specialties of Gaza.

In spite of conflicts, everyone came to Gaza to exchange cowries (shells that served as currency) for the iron that was forged there. One could also find ivory from the south and salt brought by the Hausa. All the accounts describe an abundance of elephant herds in the Kadeï and Mambéré regions, which was another reason for Hausa commerce to establish itself in the region. According to Brazza:

Gaza is the Adamawa training center closest to the Mambéré after Koundé, and it serves as the base for the operations of a shifting population of Fulbé who come to sell livestock and horses, and for Hausa who buy kola and ivory there in exchange for merchandise from the north. A master who can barely read the Koran runs a school

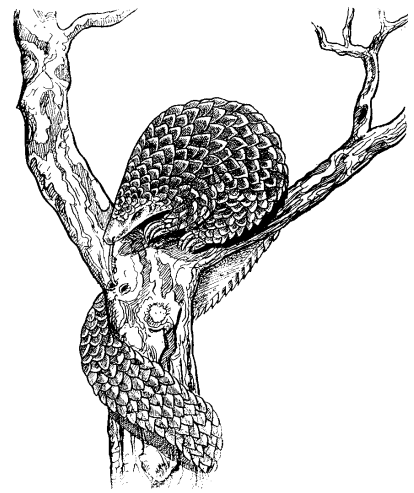
All the accounts describe an abundance of elephant herds in the Kadeï and Mambéré regions, which was another reason for Hausa commerce to establish itself in the region.

there. One finds merchants from Yola and Bornou there. There is a small daily market, and cowries are used as currency. Every two days a steer is butchered, and the stock is replaced with stock from Koundé (CAOM, Gabon-Congo, III 13 d).

Brazza's pro-Fulbé politics prevented him from "seeing" that slaves were the principal commodity. He spoke of this only at a much later date. He also described the Fulbé's "indirect government" of these far-flung regions; when peoples submitted without a fight, their chiefs became the representatives of the Lamido, and were surrounded by other representatives, generally Hausas. According to Brazza, they and their families "constituted a core around which small-time traders from outside the country would gather. These clusters of population would assimilate the locals and constitute little trading centers like Gaza."

In Gaza as elsewhere, commerce was by all accounts flourishing: slaves, ivory, kola, baskets, game, and food were exchanged for salt, clothes, cloth, meat, iron, leather, and weapons according to market laws dictated by the Hausa. The currency was the cowrie, which bears witness to the importance of northern, rather than southern, trade networks. Upon arriving in the region, the first colonizers were struck by how different it was from the south. Fulbé clothes were common, and there were also some guns from the north. The chiefs were outfitted with Fulbé swords and horses. Fulbé honorific titles (Yerima, Kaigama) replaced the usual designations for chiefs and notables. Even the defense strategies were borrowed from the Fulbé, and the centers like Gaza were surrounded by defensive trenches. Thus there was thus a clear distinction between an upper-Sangha turned towards the northwest under the politico-commercial influence of the Fulbé, and the middle-Sangha, turned towards the south and serving as the last outpost of Congolese trade.

The lack of contact between upper- and middle-Sangha can be explained by reference to the different magnets to which the populations were attracted, some in the northwest, others in the south. For the former populations, these magnets were essentially politico-economic. According to Gaillard, the only firearms that were to be found in the upper-Sangha in 1891 came from Hausa trade and the Fulbé network: flint guns, powder, and English pearls were exchanged for ivory (*Bulletin Colonial de l'Afrique Française*, October 1891: 16 Gaillard). As widespread as this trading network seems to have been, the region was linked to Yola, where the English were anchored and were distributing merchandise (pearls). Thus, the south's long distance trade did not link up with that of the north.



Manis tricuspis
(Illustration: Bernardin Nabana)

The link had not been made in 1891; and when Gaillard granted a concession to establish a Dutch trading post in the Sangha-Boumba-Njoko sector, he claimed that European goods were unknown there. At Nola, there was no means of exchange to distribute southern goods to the north, while in the lower-Sangha, “the locals were in contact with Afourous (merchants on the Congo) and demanded flint guns, flint, and stuff for their ivory” (*ibid*).

But additional factors prevented the meeting of these two important commercial and political currents. The south of the upper-Sangha was far from peaceful, and its populations blocked the routes. This was a constant factor before and during the arrival of the colonial powers. Based on slave raiding and trading, the process of political centralization had not effected the same degree of transformation in all areas. In the upper-Sangha, where temporary submissions had not led to chiefs being included in the Fulbé hierarchy, there were disturbances caused by the rivalries and the shifting alliances of chiefs and clans. There were also disturbances due to shifting interests with regard to the Fulbé: at times pacts were drawn up with them and clans became their privileged intermediaries in trading networks, and at other times they revolted and cut off trade routes. The beginnings of commercial organization in this area were often replaced by banditry and pillage.

TRADE REDEFINED THROUGH COLONIZATION

Brazza’s first observations in 1892 eloquently describe the situation at that time. Struck by the density of the population, he remarked that “this region is the Fulbé’s path to southern expansion and trade,” extending as far as the meeting of the Sangha and Mambéré rivers on the territory of the Yangéré chief Massiepa and bordering on Ndélélé (in Cameroon) to the southwest. The region’s instability was heightened by the ambitions of different leaders, mostly Gbaya and Yangéré, who were trying to take advantage of the situation. Their jockeying for influence required that Brazza have a keen understanding of the political relations among all these groups. He did not believe that ethnicity was the formative social characteristic of the upper-Sangha, and instead dealt with matters in terms of clans, groups, and leaders. At this time, and perhaps as a result of Brazza’s explorations, the different names used to refer to central African communities vanish from colonial literature and disappear from “ethnic” maps. Brazza described the political situation of the upper-Sangha thus:

The dense and vigorous population is spread among closely spaced villages and divided into clans whose temporary alliances can sometimes unite one to two thousand warriors

under a single chief. They can also undertake expeditions that the populations of the riverbanks or of the south would not be able to manage, expeditions they cannot resist (CAOM, Gabon-Congo III 13d).

Brazza cites this tendency to probe, explore, and conquer as the reason the riverbank populations retreated to the islands and islets of the Sangha. He blames this state of instability on the influence of the Fulbé and Hausa, toward whom these same populations were hostile, despite their imitation of Sangha-region social structure:

The instability of these groups due to temporary and local interests means that these masses, who sometimes lay waste to large swaths of land, are incapable of contributing to the maintenance of peace, or of contributing to the organization of a country that would be very prosperous if everyone were not constantly on the watch and ready to flee as soon as they hear that chief “so and so” is rounding up his warriors (*ibid*).

Hostilities in the region grew worse, however, with the arrival of the French. Each chief of the upper-Sangha, linked to the Fulbé network in some way, whether as friend or foe, wanted to be the privileged intermediary between the Fulbé and the newcomers. Each of them saw a political or economic interest without understanding that in reality these interests would result in submission to the newcomers. Their ambitions required that their neighbors be neutralized, and this was the reason for the last wars. In Bania, the Pandé sought to block Brazza’s progress to the north; near the future site of Berberati, chief Djambala attempted the same thing. In 1894, chief Massiepa’s Yangéré intervened, allying themselves with the Byanda (chief Bafio) to cut off the road to Gaza and to prevent Brazza from dealing directly with the Fulbé. Finally, the Gbaya of Djambala fought with the Yangéré for the same reason. In short, if Brazza found the region highly unstable and bellicose, his presence only worsened the situation; however, his perspicacity enabled him to understand the players and their motivations clearly.

All of the colonial reports of the time insist on the fact that the region’s tribes were interested in direct trade with European firms, the more so as they were unfamiliar with colonial practices (Käzelitz 1968: 40). For them and for their chiefs, it was the way to extend their trading activities which had been monopolized by the Hausa, thus augmenting their status, wealth, and prestige. A further characteristic of the early colonial encounters was the permanent hostility among neighboring tribes, which colonizers, whether German or French, were able to exploit. Gaining the goodwill and the trade of

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the whites was a certain advantage over the enemy. To achieve colonial favor, and to preserve the advantage gained from the colonial presence, it was common practice to kill the neighboring tribe's emissaries to the whites.

The case of chief Bafio is exemplary in this respect. Bafio had instigated the attack on Fourneau's mission, and had caused all of the villages along the Mambéré to rise up against him. Brazza explained Bafio's politics thus: he would thereby become "the master of communications between us and the Fulbé, and thought to monopolize to his and his allies' profit Fulbé and Hausa trade along the Mambéré" (CAOM, Gabon-Congo, III 13 d). According to Brazza, such ambitions over general affairs could be explained with reference to preceding events. When Bafio conquered Bello, the Ngaoundéré war chief, between 1878 and 1887, he was "the most important chief in the land between the Mambéré and the Kadeï;" he had allied himself with the Fulbé, and had been one of the main auxiliaries in their conquests.

With the removal of Bello, Bafio became the principal promoter of insurrection against the Fulbé and Hausa. He had prepared this rebellion long in advance, and he brought it about that from one day to the next, the Fulbé and Hausa throughout the land were massacred. Only Ngaouchobo resisted. The latter was one of "the great slaves of Hardo Aissa, and one of the main war chiefs who joined with Bello in the campaign against the south. He had built himself a network through marriages and alliances with secondary chiefs closer to the Mambéré." He was able to mount a resistance due to new defensive strategies (large trenches around the villages) and through the help of his new allies.

A few years earlier, when Brazza had allied himself with Ngouachobo to punish Bafio for his attack on Fourneau, they had dispersed the clans allied with Bafio. These clans dispersed among a mosaic of little villages in the region, and it was the same people who reappeared when the whole region rose up in 1894. At the junction of the Mambéré and the Kadeï, Massiepa, who had previously been an ally of the whites (he had helped Fourneau), had allied himself with Bafio. Between them, they threatened to cut off communications between Bania and the Fulbé-dominated north. The routes became so unsafe that the little post of Batouri (not to be confused with the Kako village of Batouri further to the west), between Bania and Babadja, had to be evacuated. Resistance grew stronger toward the island of Comassa, until the outbreak of the conflict on the Batouri River at the start of 1894, when Massiepa raised six thousand men equipped with five or six hundred guns.

In the absence of any centralized power, control of the trading routes was an important means for the warrior chiefs of the upper-Sangha to maintain and augment their leadership. These stakes led to alliances among chiefs who had long been enemies, with a view to preventing the French from trading directly with the Fulbé. Commercial interests had achieved what political interests could not.

The revolt was put down, and in 1894 the upper-Sangha was under the control of the colonial administration. The object of the revolt had not been to defend a territory in the name of independence, but to control an intermediary zone which linked the Fulbé trading network to the north with that of the whites in the south. In the absence of any centralized power, control of the trading routes was an important means for the warrior chiefs of the upper-Sangha to maintain and augment their leadership. These stakes led to alliances among chiefs who had long been enemies, with a view to preventing the French from trading directly with the Fulbé. Commercial interests had achieved what political interests could not.

These ambitions came to an abrupt end after the Berlin treaty of 1894, which granted the Ngaoundéré region to the Germans (who did not subdue it until 1901). The Tchakani incident of 1896 in which Goujon, who had been left there by Brazza, crushed the Fulbé forces merely anticipated the policies that Brazza, by his own admission, would have had to pursue given that they continued to conduct slave-raids on territory that had become French. The Fulbé system was, thus, followed by colonial law.

But as pro-Muslim policies crumbled, criticism arose against Brazza and the financial difficulties of the Congo. Because of its remoteness, the upper-Sangha was expensive. For the moment, it was not producing any revenue, and it had lost its strategic importance in the race to Chad. In 1897, occupation of the Sangha was reduced to the minimum – a single post at Carnot. Then it was replaced altogether by the concession system, leading to the pillaging of the wealth, rubber and ivory, and to a confusion of concessionary and colonial powers (see Coquery-Vidrovitch, this volume).

The intensive exploitation of the upper-Sangha's wealth began at the same time as the French and the Germans began competing to control trade routes. In fact, the Germans did not establish a link until 1899, after the founding of the German commercial post at Moloundou. Preoccupied by the commercial politics of the region, German explorer and concessionary director von Stein did his best to divert trade for the benefit of Cameroon, thus reproducing the old commercial policies of the Fulbé:

The various problems that negotiations have so far presented enable one to foresee a sharp improvement in trade relations in the eastern part of the region (i.e. the Kadeï) in the near future. Hausa merchants continue to send ivory to Ngaoundéré, and from there to the English Niger-Congo company. In exchange, the products that are imported for the most part from the English company are salt, pearls, cloth, and few guns or munitions (DKL 1902: 42-44).

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Explorer von Stein notes that the reserves of ivory to the south were exhausted following Hausa commerce. The small rubber trade seemed to him dependent on the fluctuations of the Hausa market, which raised the price, and he did not predict the full development of the business until all the ivory stocks had been exhausted. In this he concurred with his competitor Brazza, who also predicted the rapid disappearance of ivory throughout the region. This early paucity of ivory indicates the intensity the ivory trade, as it was the only item found on both sides of the two commercial zones. But European traders and administrators were not concerned with this drawback, as the dearth of ivory was compensated for by the region's wealth in rubber. Rubber would have its hour of fame, and the whole country and its population would be subjected to a methodical and complete harvest, leaving it drained of both wealth and men (Coquery-Vidrovitch, this volume).

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