

---

Brégand, Denise. -- *Commerce caravanier et relations sociales au Bénin. Les Wangara du Borgou*. Paris-Montréal, L'Harmattan, 1998, 272 p., cartes, bibl. (« Sociétés africaines et diaspora »).

David C. Conrad

---

The problem of definitively identifying the merchants of sub-Saharan West Africa who are collectively known as "Wangara" has engaged the interest of scholars from the times of the Arab chroniclers to modern historians like Nehemia Levtzion, Ivor Wilks, and Paul Lovejoy. The Wangara have long been identified with the early Muslim commercial networks of Ghana, Mali and their neighbors, and "Wangara" also came to signify corporate groups controlling the external trade farther east in Songhay, the Volta basin, and the Hausa citystates. Denise Brégand begins this book with a comprehensive overview of Wangara history and goes on to provide new insights into their activities in the caravan commerce of Borgou (chapters I & II). Brégand employs perspectives from the entire corpus of written sources combined with her own extensive fieldwork in Benin to focus on Borgou. Profiting from commerce in gold, salt, kola, slaves and horses, Borgou was the center of a vast precolonial network of criss-crossing trade routes that were key to the rise and fall of early sudanic polities. Describing "les quartiers Wangara" (chap. III), the author provides brief histories focusing on the Wangara communities in Borgou's principal trading centers of Djougou, Kandi, Nikki and Parakou. Outlining the internal structures of these urban enclaves, the author discusses Islamic influences and political dynamics of the power structure, which in the case of Parakou lead to an interesting discussion of the relations between the imam and the *Ba Kparakpe* or hereditary leader of the local Wangara population, who is appointed by the secular chief. In this context, Brégand affirms that social

tensions involving the Islamic fundamentalist *wahhâbiyya* movement are present in Borgou, just as they are in Muslim-influenced communities across sub-Saharan West Africa. The author provides additional perspectives on related issues such as the sociological factors influencing the distinctive architectural character of the Wangara quarter in Parakou (pp. 92-93), and circumstances of female power involving the *Ya Okpe*, who exercises the hereditary function of overseeing women's prenuptial purification rituals (p. 96).

Students of the Mande world will be particularly interested in Bregand's exploration of Mande *jamuw* (clan names or family identifies) among the Wangara of Borgou. These include the Traore, Cisse, Ture, Sylla, Fofana, and Kumate (Konate), as well as a group identified by the name Mande. Brégand's investigation contributes significantly to our knowledge of the Mande presence in Songhay territory, and of the more extended diaspora as far east as the Sokoto Caliphate. Here the depth of coverage varies a good deal, partly owing to the abundance of oral tradition for some (e.g. Traore, Ture) and its scarcity for others, especially the Fofana. Brégand avers that she is primarily interested in migratory movements, not ethnic origins (p. 112), which perhaps accounts for the fact that some points of this discussion involving cultural perspective might have been developed a bit more than they were. For example, the Sylla are normally identified by informants in the Mande heartland of southern Mali and northeastern Guinea as being of the five *mori* (marabout) lineages originating in Wagadu, but Brégand reveals that in Borgou the Sylla refer to themselves, and are thought of by others, as Fulani (Mande Fula). Brégand mentions two possible hypotheses as to why this might be so, but both are based on the assumption that the Wangara Sylla of Borgou are originally Fula who carry a Mande *jamu* (p. 110). This might be the case with some lines of descent, but it would have been interesting to see Brégand speculate on other possibilities based on her extensive research in this area. For example, one must ask if somewhere during the long route of dispersion, these could not have been a melding of Maninka *moriw* with Fula muslims, e.g. among those who arrived via Bornu and/or Kaogi in present-day Nigeria. Such speculation should take into account the now familiar fact that so-called "ethnic" identities are closely tied to occupation, whereby according to Mande (e.g. Bamana, Maninka) perspective, a farmer can become a "fula" simply by turning to cattle-herding.

One of the most engaging chapters (V) describes the economic and social relationships of the Wasangari and the Wangara. In addition to being prime raiders of caravans, Wasangari horsemen of Borgou conducted razzias that produced large numbers of slaves to be exchanged for the horses they required, while the Wangara who dealt in horses among other coveted goods, "étaient la classe esclavagiste par excellence". Thus, observes Brégand, "Wasangari et Wangara étaient imbriqués dans des systèmes complémentaires" (p. 136). In the same chapter, Brégand discusses the role of the *alfas* who supply Wasangari with magical amulets containing Quranic verses to assure success in battle, pillage, and capturing slaves. Aware of similar practices elsewhere in West Africa, the author expresses interest in whether or not some of the ones she discovered are particular to Muslims in Borgou. Indeed, an excellent comparison would be with practices originating much nearer to the original Wangara homeland: in the Mande regions from Jenne in Mali southward into northeastern Guinea, Manden *moriw* and traditional diviners prepare amulets called *nasiw* and other protective devices that are designed for purposes very similar to those found in Borgou.

Discussing Islam vis-à-vis indigenous ritual and belief in Borgou (chap. VI), Brégand takes into account oral tradition from the bards known as *gesere*, along with her other sources. *Gesere* are the Soninke equivalent of the Mande *jeliw*, all of whom are among the West African oral specialists collectively referred to as "griots". At least some ancestors of the *gesere* apparently arrived in Borgou after centuries of peregrinations via the Mali and Songhay empires. In West African sudanic populations long influenced by Islam, it is common for the oral traditions to attach extra spiritual power and political prestige to the most distinguished lineages with claims that their founding ancestors originated in Arabia, Yemen, or Misr (Egypt), often identifying them as active participants in the life and times of the prophet Muhammad. Brégand points out that the tradition of Wasangari origine runs directly counter to the normal trend, claiming that their collective ancestor Kisira fled from somewhere near Mecca because he had refused Islam (p. 151). In considering the possible significance of the fact that "les références à l'islam ne sont citées que pour dire que Kisira l'a refusé", Brégand supports the view that oral traditions are adjusted over time to suit new socio-cultural developments and legitimize the ascendancy of various power groups, in this case the Wasangari. In the event of any future consideration of this material, one could suggest a course of inquiry based on the acknowledged *gesere* connection with Songhay: it might be useful to explore possible links between *gesere* (and Wasangari) perceptions of the anti-Islamic Kisira with rural pagan Songhay traditions recalling the great imperial conqueror Sunni Ali Ber (1464-1492) as the "sorcerer king" in contrast to the urban Muslim populations' rejoicing in the pious reign of Askiya Muhammed Ture (1493-1528). In any case, Brégand subsequently suggests an interesting correspondence between Kisira's refusal of Islam and a custom at the town of Nikki, which is central to the Wasangari system. She reports that despite Muslim cultural domination in neighboring areas, they were unable to modify the traditional ritual of the enthronement of a new Sinaboko or king of Nikki: "Le tronc du *Sinaboko* reste du domaine exclusif de la culture des *Wasangari*, et l'islam ne s'est pas immiscé dans les rituels traditionnels." And she points out that "cette fermeté dans la fidélité aux ancêtres et aux cultes conforte la thèse du refus de l'islam par les *Wasangari*" (p. 165). In the same chapter, further attesting to Brégand's talent for introducing provocative elements into her study, is the section involving the relationship between Muslims and traditional spiritualists in ritual power quests. The author's overview of the most important Baatombu fête, the *sokoru*, which marks the beginning of the new year, describes practices involving fire rituals that may or may not be pre-Islamic (there are counterparts in other Islam-influence societies). These fire rituals resonate with fragmentary references in Mande oral tradition, the significance of which might to some degree be illuminated by Brégand's study of the much more distinct ritual survivals in Borgou. The author concludes this chapter with a section in which she presents several fascinating examples of syncretism in Mokollé territory north of Kandi, e.g., she describes one case where "une tombe de musulman a été transformée en lieu sacré d'un culte préislamique" (p. 174).

In chapter VII, Brégand adds to the usefulness of her study for historians by expanding her scope to include other West African commercial groups, acknowledging that despite having had similar origins the various ones subsequently evolved according to their individual internal dynamics (p. 179). She elaborates on the differences through a fascinating comparison of the relations between traders and chiefs in various market centers including Kong, Wa, Buna, and Bobo-Dioulasso. The author illuminates internal

power issues by comparing the roles played (or not played) by Muslims (representing the commercial elite) during rituals of royal enthronement and burial in the different commercial centers. She finds it significant, for example, that in Gonja and Kpembe, Muslim clerics play leading roles in treatment of the royal corpse, whereas no such thing is allowed in rituals accompanying the Mossi king's death: "Si la présence des représentants des musulmans est fréquente dans les rites qui accompagnent la mort du roi, ils ne participent pas partout aux rituels du pouvoir" (p. 185).

In Brégand's final chapters she continues her pursuit of new perspectives on the commercial dynamics of Borgou into modern times, seeking to determine if and how traditional commercial activities have been carried on by descendants of the early Wangara, how they have been affected by changing economic conditions, and how all of these factors continue to be influenced by Islam. In this book Denise Brégand combines effective anthropological strategies and well-grounded historical awareness with innovative field-research and insightful analysis to produce an important contribution to our knowledge of the social dynamics and historical framework of sub-Saharan West-Africa's commercial networks.