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## **The pre- and protohistoric togué of the Niger alluvial plain, Mali**

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## Research Strategy

The archaeological settlements discovered during the survey and the Dia site all lie in the southern Inland Niger Delta in Mali. They form part of the thousands of *togué* that have been found all over the Inland Delta, from San to Timbuktu. These tell-like occupation mounds vary in date from the Late Stone Age to the present. Their golden age was in the days of the powerful medieval West-African kingdoms.

Since 1980 efforts have been made to make an inventory of the archaeological sites in the Inland Niger Delta for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of their size and preservation. The southern part of this region differs from the rest of the delta area in two important respects. In the first place, the density of archaeological sites is the highest in the southern Inland Delta and, secondly, the archaeological heritage of this region is unfortunately seriously threatened by looting. Many of the archaeological sites are illegally excavated by treasure hunters causing irreparable damage to this archaeological heritage. Scientific research is essential for obtaining the information needed to reconstruct the region's history of occupation, and emergency excavations hence have high priority.

In spite of the professionalisation and intensification of archaeological research in Mali in the last half of the last century, West Africa is still way behind the rest of the world in this field. The relatively recent development of large-scale, systematic archaeological research, and the tremendous size and diversity of the country's archaeological heritage make it a great challenge to attempt to overtake this arrears. Unfortunately insufficient means are available in Mali and elsewhere to reduce this arrears because other projects are usually given priority. Many basic archaeological research questions concerning Malinese prehistory, such as those relating to the transition from the Late Stone Age to the Iron Age and to the introduction of iron working, have consequently not yet been answered. Reducing the aforementioned arrears is a matter of urgency. This underlines the importance of all professionally gathered information.

The general aim of both the regional survey and the excavation was to obtain a better understanding of the history of occupation of the southern Inland Niger Delta in Mali.

In the context of the regional survey attention initially focused on the

following aspects:

1. obtaining a general impression of the *togué* in the southern Inland Niger Delta on the basis of their function, geographical distribution, chronology and possibly ethnic differentiation;
2. closer analysis of settlement sites using GIS as an archaeological analytical tool;
3. developing an archaeological model for the development of the settlement system and the socioeconomic organisation of the earliest *togué* community. At the time when the request for my doctoral research was submitted, GIS was a very promising new tool. Throughout the period of my research its use in archaeology intensified tremendously. Over the years the great benefit of GIS came to be widely acknowledged and it evolved into a highly satisfactory and much appreciated method. The GIS applications that were used to analyse the results of the survey are now no longer exceptional in archaeology, but are still used only very little in African contexts.

The main foci of attention in the Dia excavation were as follows:

1. the sites' roles in the earliest colonisation of the southern Inland Niger Delta. Where did the first occupants come from and in what period did they settle in the southern Inland Delta? An important issue in this context is the transition from the Late Stone Age to the Early Iron Age;
2. the sites' natural environment in the period of their occupation with special attention to the impact of the introduction of crop cultivation and pastoralism on the ecology of the sites' immediate surroundings;
3. the external characteristics of the cluster of sites around Dia, which suggest the former existence of a town, a supposition confirmed by written and oral sources. Other than the information obtained at Djenné-Djeno, very little is known about the early urban development of this region and the layout of towns.

My share in answering these research questions comprised the general scientific supervision of the excavation and my contributions towards the monograph on the Dia site complex.

The two datasets offered two interesting perspectives: the regional orientation of a survey and the site-specific depth of an excavation. Each perspective has its own opportunities and limitations, but combined, their datasets supplement one another. The survey threw light on the level of regional diversity, but was restricted to surface finds, whereas the excavation yielded detailed, chronologically stratified information, but was limited to a single site. Each approach has its own limited benefits, but combining the information they yield indisputably leads to added value and places previously obtained information in a new perspective.

Another interesting aspect of this approach is that it enabled comparison of finds recovered in an urban context with the results of a geographical survey of the rural hinterland. The Inland Delta is an ecologically rich area surrounded by a much drier Sahel landscape, and we may assume that people will have exploited this environmental diversity in the past. But to what extent was this diversity in resources responsible for the region's urban development, or was it the result of trade contacts? The great homogeneity of the region's material culture tells us that there were indeed close contacts between the urban centres and their surrounding hinterland.

## The Regional Survey

In order to answer the various research questions I studied the evidence obtained during the *Projet Togué* – a dataset comprising information on 834 *toгуé* – supplemented with the results of my own three fieldwork campaigns in 1995, 1996 and 1997, in which I revisited 128 of those *toгуé*.

Using GIS to compare the distribution map of the sites with geomorphological information on the area shed light on the *toгуé* occupants' site-selection strategies. A preference for specific sites, for example close to good fishing grounds, arable land or pastures, may tell us something about the occupants' socioeconomic background. Whereas many of the sites are distributed along waterways in a ribbon pattern, others show unmistakable clustering. Differences in the sizes of the sites and their clustering patterns reflect hierarchic differentiation between the sites and the urban development of the region.

Thanks to its great ecological wealth, the Inland Delta had a lot to offer its much drier surroundings. The region was also strategically well situated for the trans-Saharan trade. The waterways probably played an important part in transporting the imported products to the hinterland, where they were presumably exchanged for surplus farming products. The surface finds reflect the degree to which the occupants of the abandoned settlements had access to the various trade networks.

Dating the last occupation phase was crucial for the research because it made it possible to chronologically differentiate the individual sites. Two approaches were followed to determine that last occupation phase:

1. dating on the basis of phase-specific artefact types;
2. dating on the basis of the surface pottery.

The surface artefacts were also used to determine the sites' functions: were they permanently occupied settlements or special-activity sites? At some sites burial pots or flat graves provided a glimpse of the former occupants themselves. Such finds combined with any surviving surface architectural remains provided an impression of the layouts of the settlements. In some cases sites could be associated with local oral traditions on the basis of information obtained from the local population.

An important research question was whether the composition of the surface finds and differences between individual assemblages from the investigated sites revealed any ethnic diversity between the settlements' occupants. The surface

finds however show a high degree of homogeneity and no other form of intersite differentiation besides chronological. As we know from historical sources that the population of the Inland Delta indeed consisted of different ethnic groups, this could imply close contacts between the sites and an extensive exchange network of commodities and products. It should moreover be borne in mind that any intrasite differences will not be reflected by surface finds. On top of this, the existence of a multitude of different ethnic groups makes it difficult to individually distinguish specific ethnic groups.

## The Excavation

The settlement complex at Dia consists of an agglomeration of three large archaeological sites: Dia-Shoma, Dia and Dia-Mara. They are separated from one another by various depressions. With an area of 49 ha, Dia-Shoma is the largest. It is also the only one of the three that was permanently abandoned. Dia, measuring 23 ha, is still occupied today, while Dia-Mara (28 ha) has been largely abandoned but is still partly in use, e.g. as a burial site. There are many more sites in the immediate vicinity of the Dia complex.

Three complementary archaeological research methods were used in answering the formulated questions: a regional survey, a site survey and an excavation. The research was carried out in four field campaigns (1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2000-2001 & 2002), of two to three months each. The excavation was restricted to Dia-Shoma and Dia-Mara. The local population did not allow us to excavate in Dia itself.

Before the excavation was started a surface survey was carried out at Dia-Shoma. The best positions of the excavation units were determined on the basis of the results of that survey. In total, 18 excavation units were plotted at Dia-Shoma and Dia-Mara. Of those units, thirteen were excavated to the natural subsoil. In the case of the other five units the digging was stopped before that level was reached. All the trenches were excavated in 10-cm layers, with each exposed surface being interpreted and recorded. Differences between stratigraphic units were determined on the basis of colour, soil composition and density. All the excavated sediments were sieved through a 1-cm mesh width. Only wall sherds smaller than 3 cm were counted. All the other wall sherds were collectively described. All the rim sherds, including those smaller than 3 cm, all base fragments and all exceptional wall sherds were individually described and stored. Extensive sampling was carried out in units A, B, C and F for the purpose of gathering botanical and zoological remains. In the other units only layers of ash and hearths were sampled, except in the last field campaign. The recovered human skeletal remains were analysed by physical anthropologists (V. Zeitoun, E. Gatto & H. Rougier).

The history of occupation and the dynamism of the settlement can be followed over a period of almost 3000 years on the basis of the stratigraphically obtained evidence. The earliest occupants and their origins can be inferred from the oldest remains. These finds and the results of the analyses of the samples inform us about the introduction of the use of metal and the domestication of rice and animals.

### *General introduction*

The beginning of urbanisation depends on the employed definition, key criteria being the size of the site, the presence of monumental mudbrick architecture (such as town walls), increasing specialisation in subsistence strategies, diversity in trade contacts and an extensive cemetery. The overwhelming amount of pottery, sadly mostly in a severely fragmented condition, enabled us to set up a local typological sequence, while a comparison of the finds from Dia Shoma and those from Dia Mara shed light on differences in the development of these two satellite sites.

While the site survey at Dia-Shoma was of great help in locating interesting excavation sites, the regional survey was beneficial for placing the excavation data in a regional context. With the aid of aerial photos, 102 archaeological sites were inventoried and visited within a circle with a radius of 5 kilometres around Dia. One of the results of the regional survey was that burial in flat graves was not restricted to Dia-Shoma, but indeed a regional practice.



## Development?

The survey and the excavation yielded well-documented information on a large number of archaeological sites, several distribution maps and information on the extent to and rate at which archaeological remains in this region are being affected by looting. The research also generated some new questions, and provided an empirical basis and an essential database for further discussion and the development of theories on the history of occupation and the urbanisation process of the southern Inland Delta. For many years this discussion had revolved mainly around the urban centre Djenné-Djeno and its immediate surroundings. The present research has now shown not only that the history of occupation and the urban development of the southern Inland Niger Delta actually started much earlier than hitherto assumed, but also that several urban centres evolved side by side. It is now generally acknowledged that such urban centres should always be considered in relation to their surrounding hinterland, and that it should be borne in mind that they were able to reach such a high level of development only within an already existing, efficiently functioning settlement system. The survey has shown that Djenné-Djeno indeed had such a hinterland and formed part of a differentiated, structured settlement system within which other large settlements, such as the town of Dia, were also able to evolve.

An unforeseen outcome of the research was an understanding of the extent and rate of the damage being done by illegal looting. They are actually quite alarming: we found that the illegal looting of archaeological sites had doubled in five years' time. These are the only concrete figures available on looting in Mali and elsewhere in Africa and they confirm existing concerns regarding its extent and rate. If this development is not stopped, we will in the near future find ourselves without a database with which to reconstruct the history of this region. The consequences will be disastrous for the future of the region's inhabitants.

It is necessary - indeed crucial - for the results of scientific research to be distributed to the widest possible public. Museums can play an important part in this respect. The bitter need to contribute towards a better understanding and appreciation of African peoples and their histories is underlined by the following quote from the speech that the French president Nicolas Sarkozy gave on 26 July 2007 at the Université Cheikh-Anta-Diop in Dakar, Senegal, during his first official visit to Africa south of the Sahara:

*« La drame de l'Afrique, c'est que l'homme africain n'est pas assez entré dans l'histoire. Le paysan africain, qui depuis des millénaires, vit avec les saisons, dont l'idéal de vie est d'être en harmonie avec la nature, ne connaît que l'éternel*

*recommencement du temps rythmé par la répétition sans fin des mêmes gestes et des mêmes paroles.*

*Dans cet imaginaire où tout recommence toujours, il n'y a de place ni pour l'aventure humaine, ni pour l'idée de progrès.*

*Dans cet univers où la nature commande tout, l'homme échappe à l'angoisse de l'histoire qui tenaille l'homme moderne mais l'homme reste immobile au milieu d'un ordre immuable où tout semble être écrit d'avance.*

*Jamais l'homme ne s'élance vers l'avenir. Jamais il ne lui vient à l'idée de sortir de la répétition pour s'inventer un destin.*

*Le problème de l'Afrique et permettes à un ami de l'Afrique de le dire, il est là. Le défi de l'Afrique, c'est d'entrer davantage dans l'histoire. C'est de puiser en elle l'énergie, la force, l'envie, la volonté d'écouter et d'épouser sa propre histoire.*

*Le problème de l'Afrique, c'est de cesser de toujours répéter, de toujours ressasser, de se libérer du mythe de l'éternel retour, c'est de prendre conscience que l'âge d'or qu'elle ne cesse de regretter, ne reviendra pas pour la raison qu'il n'a jamais existé. »*

*(<http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/root/bank/print/79184.htm>)*

If the results of the research discussed here can do anything towards refuting this complete misrepresentation of Africa's past I will have succeeded in my task.