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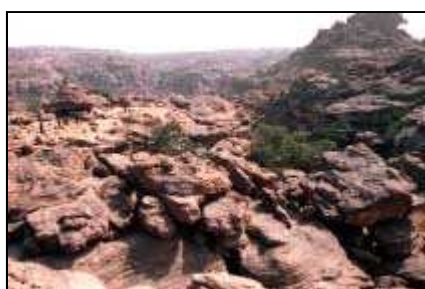
www.dogon-lobi.ch is a travel journal. Photos presented were taken during some twenty trips spread over as many years. All these journeys were made on foot in the company of my friends Ana and Serou Dolo, sons of Diangouno Dolo, the late chief of Sangha. Today Ana is the owner of Hôtel Campement Gir-Yam in Sangha and Serou specializes in the building of wells and other water retention structures.

Apart from some personal observations, the text that follows is based on the numerous ethnographic studies that have been conducted in Dogon country. It is an attempt to put a selection of photos in its cultural and historical context. Visitors' comments and suggestions are always welcome.

Dogon country lies to the south of the river Niger not far from Mopti and Djenne. The region is composed of three zones : the plateau, the cliffs and the lower plains. The plateau rises like an immense fortress to a height of approximately 300 metres above surrounding plains. It is delimited by the Bandiagara escarpment, a cliff of more than 200 km long, which runs from southwest to northeast. The plains of the Seno-Gondo lie to the southeast.



view of the Seno-Gondo plain



plateau central



plain direction Niger river

Successive waves of migrants populated the area. Over the ages peoples from different horizons had to share, not without harm, a same territory. Today the originality of Dogon country resides in its ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. A homogeneous Dogon society does not exist.

Like so many other farming societies, the Dogon have no centralized power structure. Political and religious authority very much belong to the village elders. Each region has its own traditions. Variants in belief, myth and history abound.

The face of the cliff is strewn with open caves. Overhanging rocks prevent the rain from entering. The predecessors of the Dogon sought protection from the elements in these natural shelters. They built cylindrical constructions made of earth which were used, among others, as granaries and graveyards. In the Sixties & Seventies, a team of Dutch archaeologists carried out excavations in the cliff area and brought to the world's attention the existence of two distinct cultures :

The **Toloy** culture : A large open cave overlooking the Tule valley, near to Sangha, contains a series of ancient constructions. Carbon-14 testing techniques show that these buildings date back to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. The Tolo" left no other traces of their passing.



Tule cave : Toloy culture



Tule cave : Toloy culture



Tule cave : Toloy culture

However, further archaeological investigations brought to light the richness of the **Tellem** culture. The Tellem reached the Bandiagara escarpment by the 11th century. Skeletal remains and a great many objects could be identified : clothing, household goods, glass jewellery, earthenware, wooden headrests, etc. Their houses were most probably built on the rocky slopes at the base of the cliff. The heavy seasonal rains erased any traces.



Tellem culture - Yougo Dogorou

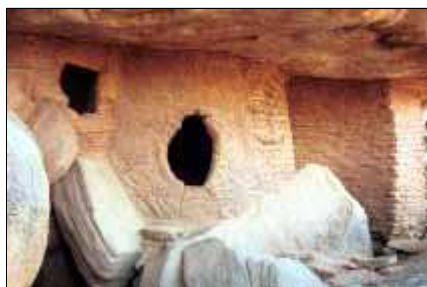


Tellem culture - Yougo Dogorou



the cliff near Ireli

The Dogon, who reached the cliffs by the 14th century, thus shared with the Tellem the same territory for some two hundred years. According to oral tradition, the Tellem moved eastwards and were supposedly absorbed by the Kurumba of today's Burkina Faso. However, anthropometric research held by the Dutch archeologists in the Sangha region demonstrated that Tellem and Kurumba are dissimilar. These studies are not representative of the whole cliff population. It cannot be excluded that residual groups of people dispersed and dissolved among the inhabitants of the plains. Hereunder a few examples of ancient constructions that have not been dated and whose builders remain unidentified. However, the work done by the Dutch in the Sixties & Seventies give us some indications : constructions made using the mud coiling technique are older than those built in sun-dried mud bricks. The latter belong to the Tellem.



saourakoum : mud bricks



mori : mud coils



panganin : stone and mud bricks

Today the people of the Seno-Gondo plain who wear the surname **Ganame** say they descend from the Tellem. They are exogamous and live in Koro, Arbinde and Yoro. Ganame means "people from Ghana/Wagadu". It could be that the arrival of the Tellem in the cliff area is related to the various waves of Soninke migrants who came from the North after the collapse of the Ghana empire in the 11th century. The origin of and descendance from the Tellem remain obscure but the many artefacts they left behind (textiles in particular) are material proof of a rich culture. It has not yet been possible to determine whether Tellem textiles were imported or locally woven. Till today archeological remnants of weaving equipment have not been found. Whatever the case is, the wearing of embroidered clothing woven according to sophisticated techniques is typical for a society having a merchant economy.

The Dogon also mention the Nongo as a people who were contemporaries of the Tellem. They are credited as the sculptors of a particular statuary style. Unfortunately no findings were made within an archeological context. No matter how difficult it may be to separate myth from reality, the Dogon say that descendants of the Nongo live in the Seno-Gondo plain at Bay. According to Hélène Leloup the Nongo may be linked to the Samo of the Yatenga province in Burkina Faso. (" Statuaire Dogon - 1994 " - pages 141/142).

Today archeological research in Dogon country is handled by the MAESAO (Mission Archéologique et Ethnoarchéologique Suisse en Afrique de l'Ouest). Many human settlements have been located and evidence of man inhabiting the plateau date back to 70'000 B.C. For a full description of the MAESAO's research, please consult : <http://anthro.unige.ch/ounjouguou/>



rock art on the plateau : unidentified



rock art on the plateau : unidentified



rock art on the plateau : unidentified

see :

- R.Bedaux "Tellem, reconnaissance archéologique d'une culture de l'ouest africain au moyen âge - Soc. Des Africanistes 1972 "
- R.Bolland " Tellem Textiles - 1991 "
- B.Gardi " Textiles du Mali - 2003 "
- H.Leloup " Statuaire Dogon - 1994 " " Textiles du Mali - 2003 "



The actual occupants of the Bandiagara cliff reached their new homeland by the end of the 14th century. The Dogon are divided into four tribes : the Dyon, Arou, Ono and Domno. They came from the Mande in successive waves and joined the cliff area near the village of Kani Bonzon. From there, they spread over the plateau, the escarpment and the plains of the Seno-Gondo. Each tribe followed a different itinerary. For a detailed description of the dispersion and itineraries of the four tribes, please consult : " Les âmes des Dogons" by Germaine Dieterlen - 1941.

The encounter of the Dogon-Mande with their new neighbours and predecessors brought about a considerable blending of cultures. This is well illustrated by the stylistic diversity of Dogon architecture and sculpture. Long before their arrival from the Mande, the West of the plateau witnessed the birth of Djennenke/Soninke style sculptures. From the 15th century onwards stylistic extensions appeared in the N'duleri and Bondum regions. Whereas on the other side of the plateau Tellem statuary came into being. All these styles are incorporated into Dogon art. On the other hand, masks are of Voltaïc influence. Presence of the Dogon in the Yatenga province dates back to the 15th century. Driven away by the Mossi towards the Bandiagara cliffs, they probably introduced the masks to Dogon country. These population movements from the East also explain why the Dogon speak Voltaïc related languages.

As regards architecture, it reflects a variety of geographical zones, the constraints that these zones impose and the diversity of the people who live there. Hereunder a few examples :

- The plateau

village of Niongono (Pignari)
villages of Kargue, DaniSare, Bounou, Dara (Lowel-Geou)
villages of Borko, Tintam, Samari, Saoura Koum (Bondum)
villages of Sangha (Bombou)

- The cliff

villages of Pegue Toulou, Yougo Dogorou (Bombou)

- The plain of Seno-Gondo

The **Pignari** : The plateau gently slopes down to the flood plains of the Niger river. The region is scattered with detached tabular hills.

After the collapse of the Ghana empire in the 11th century (today's Mauritania), migrants from the north occupied new regions in the vicinity of Djenne. Their arrival more or less coincided with the installation of the Tellem in the cliff area.



niongono - pignari



niongono - pignari



niongono - pignari

Niongono : Its founding dates back to the 12th century. Its inhabitants speak Ampari-Kora, a speech variety initially spoken by the Degoga clan, an old people who preceded the Dogon of the Karambe clan (Statuaire Dogon - Hélène Leloup - page 104). The village was erected on a horseshoe-shaped hill. Isolated on its rocky peak, the village is a true fortress. Its location and defensive conception allowed the village to survive the assaults of the Mossi, Peul and Songhai invaders through the ages.

Crammed together, the buildings on top of the hill are two or three storeyed and are all cylindrical in shape. There is no space for inner courtyards and granaries are integrated into the houses. The roofs are flat and, as so often in Dogon country, are used for drying and storing various food items. The base of these buildings are made of stone so as to diminish damages caused by heavy rainfall. Today islam is the predominant religion in the Pignari.



niongono - pignari



niongono - pignari



niongono - pignari

see:

- W.Lauber " L'architecture Dogon, Constructions en terre au Mali "
- Quelques éléments sur les Dégoga à la page 148 du document (format PDF) : <http://anthro.unige.ch/ounjougu/FSLA01.pdf>



The **Lowel-Gueou** : Since Middle Ages, succeeding kingdoms extended their area of domination along the shores of the Niger. There were times of peace and unrest. The inhabitants of the Lowel-Gueou, N'Duleri and Bondum regions were joined by newcomers, who came in successive waves, seeking refuge in the cliffs and on the plateau.

Kargue : The villagers are of Djennenke descent ("those of Djenne" in Songhay). This term covers various groups of people from the Inner Niger Delta who live within the Djenne sphere of influence. They are muslim and speak a Bozo dialect called Janna-Ma. They are ethnically related to the Saman of the Waduba region (see page 31). The mosque is built on top of a rocky slope and the village is spread out below.



niongono (lowel gueou)



niongono (lowel gueou)



niongono (lowel gueou)

Dani Sare : Just like Kargue, the inhabitants are of Djennenke descent. The village is built on a large rocky hill. Its location must have been chosen for its defensive qualities. Its architectural style is marked by austere and rectangular buildings. The mosque stands in the center of the village.



dani sare (lowel gueou)



dani sare (lowel gueou)



dani sare (lowel gueou)

Bounou : The villagers say they are Dogon. However, their origins remain obscure. They are not historically tied to the Dogon of the Bandiagara cliffs. They settled down in the area before their neighbours of Djennenke descent. They speak Bangi-Me. Linguists consider it to be a language isolate with no known relatives. Bounou's architectural style is totally different from that of Kargue and Dani Sare. The village is made of two-storied buildings that look like enormous cubes with rounded off contours. The availability of palm wood made it possible to build in such a manner. The roofs are used for the usual household tasks.



bounou (lowel gueou)



bounou (lowel gueou)



bounou (lowel gueou)

Bara : Its inhabitants are related to those of Bounou. It seems Bara means "we will never leave". The escarpment above the village contains ancient granaries. These constructions were already in place before the founding of Bara. Nobody seems to know who built them. Further archaeological research may eventually date these structures.



bara (lowel gueou)



bara (lowel gueou)



bara (lowel gueou)

see :

- J.C. Moine : "Gens de Djenné" en pays Dogon - les Dianangué (Djennenké) des vallées du Diéou
- Roger Blench : http://homepage.ntlworld.com/roger_blench/Dogon/Dogon%20page.htm



The **Bondum** : The region is inhabited by descendants of the Tombo, an old warlike people. A 16th century manuscript from Timbuktu mentions the "Tombola, name of one of the many tribes who profess a pagan cult" ("Statuaire Dogon - page 32" - Hélène Leloup). They arrived in the area well ahead of the Dogon-Mande, Fulani and other river-related cultural groups. It is only from the 15th-16th century onwards that these newcomers will gain in influence.

Borko : The village is located at the far end of a closed valley. To get there one has to cross vegetable gardens that stretch out as far as the eyes can reach. Water supply is guaranteed by local springs. Caimans have made it their habitat. They are sacred to the villagers. It is their totem (**ba-binu** - see page 21). One day a foreigner who happened to be a Bozo killed a caiman. His life was spared because of the existing Joking relationship (**Mangu**) between the Dogon and Bozo people. It shows how the inhabitants of Borko (Kassambara clan of Bamana descent) and the Dogon from the Bandiagara cliffs, though different in origin, share similar beliefs. The observance of the Mangu and the belonging to a totemic clan (the caiman) is a clear manifestation of a common cultural identity. As regards the Mangu, hereunder the definition as given by Denise Paulme in Organisation Sociale des Dogon (page 277) : "a pact concluded between two regions, two villages, two families, two castes. It is a service rendered by one collectivity to another collectivity, that it will have saved from a great danger or of which it will have spared a member guilty of a grave fault."

The architectural style, however, seems close to that of the neighbouring plains to the north. The villagers remember the times when, under the reign of Askia Mohamed (ruler of the Songhai Empire - 15th century), a Songhai representative visited the village. Today the house, though not in use, that was allocated to him is still there. It is said that he left behind some personal belongings.



borko (bondoum)



borko (bondoum)



borko (bondoum)

Tintam : The village lies on the plateau in an area difficult of access. Its isolation and nearly impregnable location may explain why its inhabitants remained animist. However, with time passing, the village architecture and its statuary art were deeply influenced by Djennenke, Songhay and Dogon culture. The past intense metallurgical activity of Tintam is evidenced by huge slag heaps and fragments of old furnaces that can still be seen today on the outskirts of the village (see photo below). These are the remnants of an old flourishing industry : iron was probably used for the manufacturing of arms and agricultural implements. There was no lack in commercial outlets on the plateau and in the neighbouring plains.



tintam (bondoum)



tintam (bondoum)



tintam - slag heaps

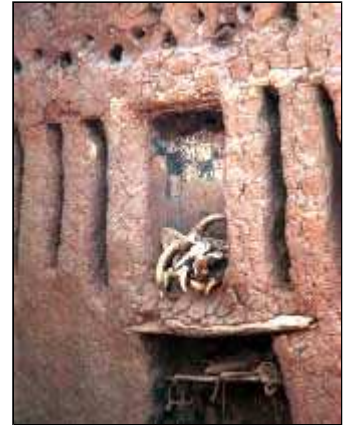
Samari : As so many villages on the plateau, Samari took refuge on a rocky hill. A characteristic of the region are the many buildings that have a doorway placed in a niche. In "L'architecture Dogon", W.Lauber sees similarities between these entrances and the traditional Mauritanian front porch. The outside walls of the houses at the periphery of the village look as if being fortified against enemy attacks. The North Central plateau suffered a lot at the hands of the Fulani. Their installation at Dè on the plateau dates back to the 15th century. They were a constant threat to the region.



samari (bondoum)



samari (bondoum)



samari (bondoum)

In **Saoura koum** ancestral traditions and islam seem to complement one another. The youngsters of the village follow their religious education at the coranic school and at the same time, old traditions and seasonal rituals are not being neglected. The Odompilou feast is held in the dry season. The dancing starts towards sunset and stops late at night. For many hours the villagers dance to the beat of huge drums. Many male dancers wear women's clothing such as scarfs and amber necklaces. This disguise symbolizes one of the most common themes in Dogon rituals : fecundity and renewal of the land and, by extention, of the Dogon people.



saoura koum - odompilou



saoura koum - odompilou



saoura koum - odompilou

The old village of Saoura koum no longer exists. Its site is situated close to the actual village. Well aligned stones on the ground show the contours where buildings used to be. Parts of old defense walls with embrasures are still in place. The inhabitants of the new village explain that their ancestors had to defend themselves against bands of Fulani horsemen.



the abandoned village



the abandoned village



defense wall with embrasure

Ethnographic research undertaken by Marcel Griaule since 1931 concern the actual occupants of the **Bandiagara escarpment**.

The Arou and Dyon tribes live in the Sangha area. No matter what their tribal origin is, they both wear the surname **Dolo**. Family names often evoke the circumstances of the installation of the first migrants. The name Dolo refers to water holes discovered by a hunter's dog in the vicinity of today's Sangha. The Dyon settled there first. In "Les Devises des Dogon", S. de Ganay explains the meaning of Dogon names (**Tige**). Each tribe, region, village and village quarter has a name that refers to a mythic or historic event. These names inform us on itineraries taken and describe the circumstances of the migrants' arrival in their new habitat. In the same way, an individual's first name refers to events surrounding his/her birth.

The Sangha agglomeration consists of 13 villages. Some like Diamini-Na and Sangui are set back from the cliff on the plateau and others like Bongo and Gogoli stretch out up to the edge of the escarpment. The village of Sangha itself is divided in two parts separated by the "field of the Hogon" : Ogol-Da and Ogol-Ley.



gogoli



bongo



ogol da

Each family house is composed of a central courtyard surrounded by several buildings and granaries. Many of these houses have an entrance hall; a place where the elderly who no longer leave home like to spend their day. It is a good place to stay in contact with the other villagers. The edges of the roof terraces are protected with low walls. The roofs are used for drying and storing various food items. Houses, roofs and outside walls are uniformly plastered. The whole looks like some abstract composition made of forms with smooth angles and contours.



ogol ley



ogol ley



ogol da

The geographical zone of the better known cliff architecture extends from Kani Kombole to Damasongo. The cliff stands more than 300 metres high. The upper part of the cliff is scattered with open cave sites. Its base is a slope made of piled up boulders of rock. The villages have been erected midway where the cliff's face and the slope meet.



ireli



the cliff and the slope



the cliff between ireli and pegue

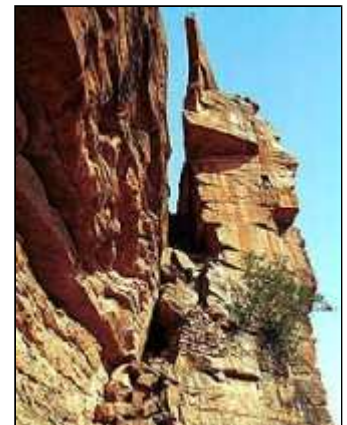
Pegue Toulou : The lower part of the village is built on the slope among the rocks and the upper part gives the impression of being glued against the cliff's wall. Dogon houses and Tellem constructions merge together. Many of these ancient cave dwellings are still in use and serve as granaries or collective burial places to the Dogon. There are two ways to reach the village : either one follows meandering tracks going up the slope from the plain below. Or one descends through narrow openings in the face of the cliff.



pegue toulou



pegue toulou



pegue toulou

The traditional Dogon house is made of a central room which is flanked by a cylindrical room (the kitchen), by two rectangular side rooms and by an entrance hall. As usual, the terrace serves as a storing space for foodstuffs. The traditional granary with its conical roof made of millet thatch is a familiar site in many parts of Dogon country. In the cliff area, slope declivity and the narrowness of surface available for construction are such that the base of many granaries is to be supported by pillars or stone walls.



pegue toulou



kundu kikin



banani serou

Yougo Dogorou : The patronymic surname of Yougo Dogorou's inhabitants is **Doumbo** which means "rock". The elderly say this name refers to Bamba, a region where they stayed temporarily before moving to and settling down on the isolated mountain of Yougo.

In "Les âmes des Dogons ", G. Dieterlen does not mention any Doumbo migration via Bamba. But in "Les Devises des Dogons - page 40", S. de Ganay states that the **Tige** (see page 10) of Bamba is " bamba dumbou dumbou " meaning " rock, the rock of Bamba ".



bamba mountain in background



yougo dogorou



yougo dogorou

Yougo Dogorou is unique. It is perched next to the top of an isolated mountain separated from the cliff. A gigantic rock, called "the anvil", rises next to the village. Open caves sheltering Tellem and Dogon constructions overhang the village. In ancient times the inaccessibility of the site protected Yougo Dogorou against the outside world. Today its isolation has the opposite effect. Most of the adult population moved to the villages of the Seno-Gondo plains where working conditions are far easier. The village is inhabited by a few families and some elderly people who are the guardians of the local altars. On certain occasions family members and relatives will visit the village. On the death of an elderly parent, they will gather in numbers and participate in funerary rituals and dances.



yougo dogorou



yougo dogorou



yougo dogorou

The face of the cliff to the West of the village is strewn with open caves containing constructions left by the Tellem. The first Dogon migrants from the Arou tribe took up residence at the foot of this cliff. Traces of their passage are still visible. Old foundations can still be discerned and millstones lay around. There are no paths leading to this place. One has to make a way around and over huge boulders.



initial place of settlement



initial place of settlement



initial place of settlement

As regards traditional belief, two localities in Dogon country are of crucial importance. In both cases the Arou tribe assumes supreme authority :

Arou is the place of residence of the Hogon whose religious authority spans the whole land. As a priest of agrarian rites, he represents the Earth, fertility and life. He is to ensure the perpetuation of his people.

As regards Yougo Dogorou, this is where commences the Sigui, the ritual that commemorates the first ancestor who died in the form of a serpent (see page 42). The ritual takes place once every 60 years and symbolizes the renewal of generations.

It is also in this village that the sacred cave of Albarga is located, the old man of the myth who was discovered by Yayeme, the lady who confiscated the masks from the Andoumboulou (see pages 37 & 40). People come from afar to make sacrifices for protection against sorcery. Also, in case of serious problems having to do with masks, the village elderly will be consulted by visitors and matters will be discussed in the Togu Na bordering the central village square.

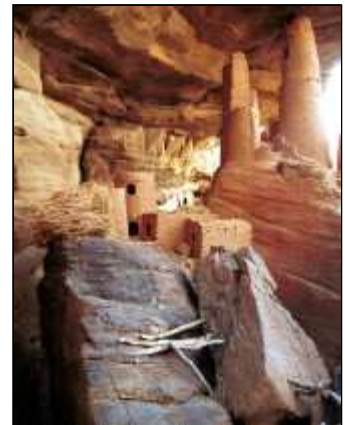
Marcel Griaule mentions in "Masques Dogons - page 765 " the existence at Yougo Dogorou of Albarga's walking cane which is used in rites for rain making. Today this rite is still of actuality. Villages in the region that suffer from severe drought may call for this cane to intervene and block the evildoers who are responsible for the lack of rain. Once every three years, a delegation from Yougo Na, Yougo Dogorou and Yougo Piri will visit those villages that asked for help. By means of the cane the culprit will be ritually uncovered and he will die within the three years that follow.



yougo dogorou - 1986



yougo dogorou - 1997



yougo dogorou - 1997

With time passing, people abandon Yougo Dogorou. Uninhabited houses are unkept. After a few rainy seasons they come crumbling down. The older constructions built inside the open caves seem to stand the test of time. But even then they do not always resist. Hereunder an example of the same spot photographed a few years apart : among a group of centuries old towers, two of them collapsed (photo in the middle).

Plain of the Seno-Gondo :

Although the plains to the south of the Bandiagara escarpment have been inhabited since the 14th-15th century, effective defense of the area against enemy attacks was about impossible. The Dogon living there had to seek refuge again and again in the cliffs as they were often raided by Peul and Mossi horsemen.

It is since the colonial occupation that villages had the opportunity to grow and develop. Many cliff villages have a "parent" village down in the plains. There is plenty of space and life is easier. The land is good for agriculture and the crops are often better than on the plateau. Their millet granaries are bigger then anywhere else in Dogon country. As stone is not available in the region, most constructions are made with mud bricks. Its manufacture is a true industry. Today animism loses its appeal in favour of islam and village life is subjected to social and economic readjustments.



koporokenié pé



koporokenié pé



koporokenié pé



oropa



village peul



construction of a well

Architecture and traditional religion :

Architecture, social organization and religion cannot be dissociated. The various types of buildings that form a village go together with the cults that govern religious life. There are four main cults :

- The Wagem cult addresses the ancestors of the extended family.
- The Lebe cult deals with the renewal of the land and of the Dogon people.
- The Binu cult is to maintain harmony between the human community and the supernatural forces of the bush.
- The Society of the Masks directs public rites enabling the transfer of the souls of the deceased to the beyond. But in contrast to the Wagem, Lebe and Binu cults, the Society of the Masks has no architectural edifice where to practice its cult. Masks represent the bush and its mysteries. Rites and sacrifices are performed in a natural cave outside the village.

The mosque is still another place of worship. Today Islam is an important component of religious life in Dogon country and the mosque makes part of its architectural landscape.

Hereunder a description of the main buildings that form a village and of the various cults linked to them :

The **Ginna** (associated with the Wagem cult) :

The house of the village founder is the center of the extended patrilineal family. The most senior member among the successors in direct descent of the founder is the lineage elder. He is head of the extended family, namely, the Ginna Banga. In case a village is made up of several quarters, then each quarter has its own Ginna. It is a two-storeyed building : the Ginna Banga lives on the groundfloor, the 1st floor is a granary store for the extended family and the ancestor altar, the Wagem, is located on the roof terrace. This altar consists in a set of bowls. Each bowl represents an ancestor. The founder, his successors and the other men of the village all have their own bowl. It serves as a receptacle for their souls. The purpose of the Wagem cult is for men to stay in contact and maintain a dialogue with their ancestors. On different occasions family members will make sacrifices on the altar. The Ginna Banga is in charge of the cult.

Hereunder two examples of rituals practiced in Sangha :

The **Gorou** ritual : Once a year (December/January) each Ginna commemorates all ancestors of the extended family. Sacrifices are being made and the ancestors' souls come and drink from their bowls. It is also on this occasion that the men in charge at the Ginna decide whether time has come to start preparations for a new Dama, for example, the ritual that enables the recently dead to attain ancestor status. In case they want to go ahead with a new Dama, they will ask the Hogon to obtain permission from all other Ginnas in the village. If they refuse, a new request may be formulated a year later at the next Gorou. A Dama is very costly in terms of agricultural products needed for preparing beer and food. This is the main reason why the Dama ritual is so often postponed (see page 34).

The Gorou ritual is not only limited to the Ginna. Each family maintains at home an altar for their own deceased family members, some of whom are still very present in the hearts and minds of the living. It is called the **Tirè Kabu**.

b) The Kikinu Mono ritual (= gathering of the souls) : Before the Dama, the souls of the recently deceased roam about the bush in the vicinity of the villages. The purpose for the Kikinu Mono ritual, which is held just after the Dama, is to enable the recently dead to attain their status as ancestors. On this occasion new bowls will be added to the family altars. The Kikinu Mono is held exclusively in the Tirè Kabu.

Hereunder a selection of photos showing Ginnas all over Dogon country :



sangha : ogol ley



sangha : ogol ley



sangha : ogol ley



sangha : ogol da



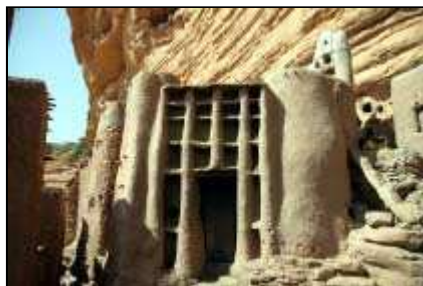
sangha : dini



sangha : bongo



sangha : sangui



banani amou



banani amou



ibi



yanda



kassa



dalekanda



wakara



andiou



saoura koum



samari



tintam



kamba bandie



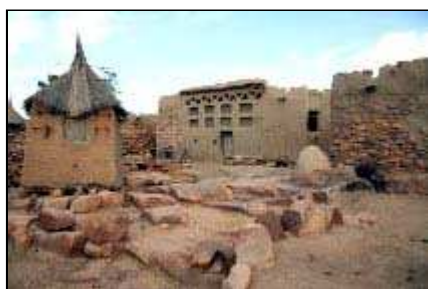
kamba sinde



kamba sinde



kamba sinde



mendeli guine doulou



mendeli guine doulou



gono ore



gono ore



gono ore



mendeli guine doulou



gono mo



gono mo



gono mo



gono mo



gono mo



konsogoule



niongono



nando



House of the **Hogon** (associated with the Lebe cult) :

The Lebe cult is associated with the agricultural cycle. It is addressed to **Lebe Seru**, the first ancestor of the Dogon who was buried in the Mande and has resurrected in the form of a serpent. He guided his people to their new homeland. Earth from his grave in the Mande was taken on the journey eastwards. At destination (near the village of Kani Bonzon) a first altar made of ancestral earth mixed with the one of the new land was erected. These were the beginnings of the Lebe cult. Their migration not yet completed, the four tribes (Dyon, Arou, Ono, Domno) took each a part of this first altar and spread over the plateau, the escarpment and the plains. After having reached their final destination, the members of each tribe (the Arou excepted) divided their part of the Lebe between themselves and founded new villages.

Each village built an altar containing some of the ancestral earth. The Hogon is its chief priest. He is in charge of all religious and agrarian rituals that are to guarantee sufficient future crops and by extension to ensure the perpetuation of his people. Agrarian rituals, such as the **Bulu**, need the intervention of both The Hogon and the Binu priest : their activities complement each other. The notion of the "resurrected" Lebe is closely linked with the agricultural cycle : after the harvesting, follows the sowing. Each time life has the upper hand.

The oldest man in the village will assume office as Hogon (except in Arou). He must observe many taboos. The traveller passing through will find it out soon enough : it is strictly forbidden to shake hands. Once enthroned, the Hogon no longer has the right to have physical contact with anyone. This is also valid for his wives and children. His first wife will prepare his meals. But chastity remains obligatory until death. Also, he is no longer allowed to leave the compound. Reunions will be held and people will be received at his house.



sangha : ogol da - house of the hogon



sangha : ogol da - house of the hogon



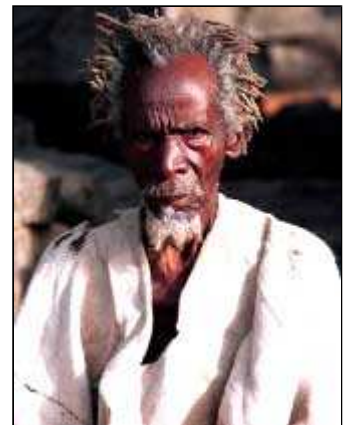
sangha : ogol da - house of the hogon



sangha : ogol da - the hogon



sangha : ogol da - the hogon



nombori : the hogon

House of the **Hogon of Arou** :

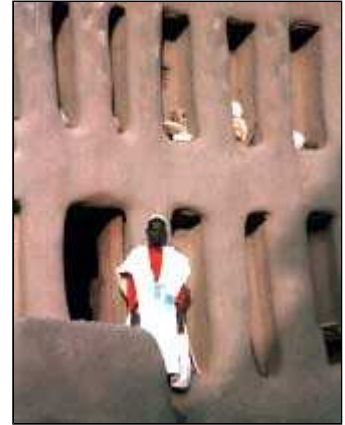
Unlike the other tribes, the Arou did not split up their part of the Lebe, and instead chose to erect a single altar at Arou-près-Ibi. The Hogon of Arou is elected to his post by leading members of the Arou tribe. It is not a post coveted by anyone. One does not choose to be candidate. Some members are just liable to be chosen as the next Hogon. He will be informed of the fait accompli. Various rituals will take place before his assumption of duties. For example, the newly elected must cease to exist as an ordinary human being. Symbolic funerals are to be held and celebrated. During this time he will retreat for some 10 days in a big cave not too far from Arou. The place is called Komo-Sese. After this period of isolation he will return to Arou. It is at this point in time that his nomination as Hogon will become effective.



the hogon of arou



the hogon of arou



the hogon of arou

Komo-Sese is a very large open cave. It shelters various Tellem and Dogon constructions : houses, granaries, altars and Binu shrines. On arrival from the Mande, the Arou tribe chose to settle down in this location. Not far from there, they erected the residence of the person who would become the first Hogon of Arou. The new dignitary had to be carried from the cave to his new house. Today, Komo-Sese is no longer inhabited but as part of his enthronement, the future Hogon is to spend some 10 days in this particular spot, after which time he will be brought on somebody's shoulders to his new and final residence.

The photo in the right bottom corner shows a rain altar, the **Andugo**. Sacrifices on the altar will cause rainfall. It is made of pottery fragments and "thunder stones" which are said to fall from the skies with thunder and lightning.



komo sese



komo sese



komo sese : rain altar (andugo)

see :

- G.dieterlen "Le titre d'honneur des Arou - 1982"
- N.Wanono "Le Hogon d'Arou: chef sacré, chef sacrifié? - Regards sur les Dogon du Mali"

The **Binu** shrine :

Several patrilineages make up a clan. Clan leadership belongs to the Binu priest. His mission consists in maintaining harmony between supernatural forces of the bush and clan members. They will call on him for all kinds of problems of a mystical nature (unexplained diseases, divination, etc ...). Whereas the responsibilities of the Ginna Banga are transmitted through succession, those of the Binu priest are acquired in a very different manner :

The Binu is a supernatural and protective being that manifests itself to an individual in the form of an animal. Whilst walking through the bush, this individual will be given an object, such as a stone, as a sign of alliance (Duge). Ethnographic literature has it that the discovery of the Duge by the person in question is proof of his ability to communicate with the spirit world and that consequently it is his duty to assume responsibility as Binu priest. From there on, the new priest will wear the Duge in the form of a necklace. But in reality, the Duge is not just a stone found in the bush by a person in a trancelike state. It is rather the necklace itself which on the death of the priest, is hidden by family members until the day it is rediscovered by his successor. One says that the Binu "sleeps" until the day the Duge is rediscovered. Only one out of the three existing Binu's in Ogol-Da was active in early 2006.

Clan members have a close relationship with a totemic animal or plant (ba-binu). In "Graine de l'homme, enfant du mil-pages 33/34", J.Bouju gives the following example : In the village of Sibi-Sibi the Karambe clan's totem is a snake. One day an inhabitant of Sibi-Sibi was saved from drowning by a water serpent. It was through the animal's intermediary that the Binu manifested its alliance with the Karambe clan. Since that day, it is strictly forbidden for the Karambe to hunt, kill and consume snakes.

In Sangha, the Walu (antelope - hippotracus) is Ogol-Ley's totem and the panther is Ogol-Da's totem. These animals are regarded as the protectors of the clans concerned and will not be hunted or eaten, nor will clan members dance with masks representing them. When a Dogon travels or sleeps in the bush his totem will look after him.

However there is a particularity to be noted between the two Ogols. Ogol-Ley respects both the Walu and the panther. As a sign of respect for their neighbours, Ogol-Ley considers the former as their second totem. As regards Ogol-Da, it does not consider the Walu as their second totem. Thus Ogol-Ley dances neither with Walu nor with panther masks. But for Ogol-Da only the panther mask remains taboo.

Today the Binu cult loses some of its influence. Other religions, science and the medical world in particular give alternative answers to the protective function of the Binu.

Binu shrines are single-chambered constructions decorated with reliefs and geometric designs. The white marks on the façades are millet gruel libations made during agrarian rites. These rites are to ensure the coming of the rain, the regeneration of nature and abundant harvests. Hereunder some examples :



sangha : ogol da



sangha : ogol da



sangha : ogol da



sangha : sangui



sangha : sangui



sangha : sangui



sangha : gogoli



sangha : gogoli



sangha : bongo



sangha : diamini na



kani kombole



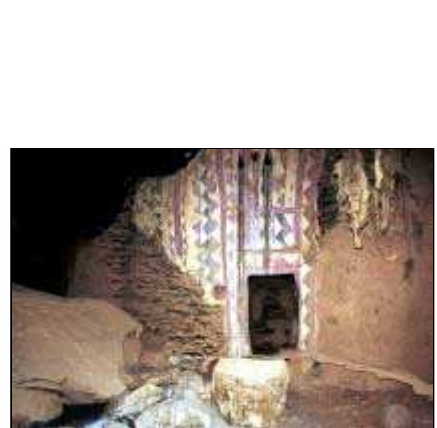
yaye



banani amou



neni



yougo dogorou



komo sese



komo sese



komo sese



yendouma ato



yendouma ato



yendouma ato



ireli bolon



kamba sinde



kamba sinde



The following constructions have no religious function but, the smithy excepted, are often adorned with fertility symbols, one of the major concerns in Dogon belief. At the founding of a village, the Togu Na and the menstruation hut are erected first.

The **Togu Na** is a shelter open on all four sides and supported by stone or wood pillars that carry a roof made of millet thatch. The ceiling is too low for a person to stand upright. Women have no access to it. It is a shaded place where men discuss village affairs and where they can rest. Manual crafts, such as weaving ropes and baskets, can be done there too. Both the Togu Na and the Ginna belong to the men making part of the same family lineage. In theory, there are in a village as many Togu Na's as there are Ginnas, for example, patrilineages.

In the plain of the Seno-Gondo the pillars are made of wood and are often ornated with representations of masks and symbols of fecundity : men and women with disproportionate sexual organs. The older pillars are of an archaic style and radiate a power that the newer ones seem to have lost. Many have been stolen and still continue to fuel the market for African antique. At first the original owners thought they could contain the problem by partially cutting off heads and breasts. All of this was done to no avail. The old Togu Na of Madougou is still in place. Some other Togu Na's have pillars that had to be rearranged and there are those, like the one in Youdiou, that have been ravaged by theft. This is how thieves go about their work : during the rainy season villagers work in the fields and, when night comes, they are fast asleep. This is when, under cover of the night and with the help of bad weather drowning any other noise, thieves go into action. On the plateau and along the escarpment, the Togu Na's have pillars made of stone and earth. Sometimes they are supported by circular piled up stone walls.

see :

○ Tito & Sandro Spini "Togu Na - 1977"



mendeli guine doulou



madougou



madougou



diankabou



diankabou



diankabou



anakila



koporokenie pe



koporokenie pe



koporokenie pe



koporokenie pe



koporokenie pe



Menstruation hut (**punulu**) :

The menstruation hut is situated on the edge of the village. Women having their periods are considered impure. This is where they sleep and have their meals during their so-called "state of impurity". It is a temporary way of exclusion from village life. These dwellings are circular in design. In "Villages perchés des Dogon du Mali - page 157", this round form makes J.C. Huet think of a confined enclosure like a pen separating women from the rest of the village. To back up his argument, he gives the example of the menstruation hut in Arou which is a circular enclosure without roof. The outside walls are often decorated with symbols of fecundity, for example, individuals with oversized sexual organs.

see :

○ J.C.Huet " Villages perchés des Dogon du Mali - page 157 "



tabitongo



tabitongo



tabitongo



tabitongo



gono orey



kamba sinde



kamba sinde



tiogou



tiogou



samari



samari



samari

The **smithy** is a sober looking shelter consisting of a thatched roof resting on a piled up stone wall. Craftsmen like the smiths are divided into endogamous casts and live at the fringe of Dogon society. They do not marry with people outside of their community. There are two distinct casts : the **Jèmè-na** and the **Irine**. The Jèmè-na plunge their roots in a faraway past. For example, smiths of the Degoga clan (who belong to the Jèmè-na cast) preceded the Dogon in the Pignari (western region of the plateau - see page 05). The Jèmè-na mainly live in the Seno-Gondo plain. On the other hand, smiths of the Irine cast were originally Dogon farmers who learned the trade of blacksmithing from the Jèmè-na. Although the craft has almost disappeared today, the Jèmè-na are the ones who master the art of iron extraction. As regards the Irine, they manufacture agricultural implements using pig iron (the raw material produced and sold by the Jèmè-na in ancient times). The Irine also work wood. It is among them that the great Dogon sculptors are to be found. Apart from their craftsmanship with iron and wood, smiths are accredited with healing powers. They also intervene as mediators in conflicts that arise among villagers. This is a responsibility that they have in common with the Hogon. Smiths hardly ever live in their home village. They will settle in a village with an opening for employment. The Irine often wear the patronymic surname of their village of adoption. It is said that a Jèmè-na is free to take over a job held by an Irine whenever that would suit him. A decision an Irine can only but accept. In view of the smiths' mobility in time and space, one may wonder indeed what was their real impact on the evolution of "Dogon culture". The smith's working place may have an unassuming and sober look, the artistic creations that have been produced there are among the most dazzling manifestations of the Dogon cult system.



dalekanda



dalekanda



dalekanda



kundu gina



kundu gina



kundu gina



bounou



mendeli guine doulou



kundu gina

Altars :

In practice, communication with the beyond is made through food and blood offerings on altars. There are altars at all levels of the community : individual, family, village and regional altars. Hereunder some examples :



ama (god)



ama (god)



ama (god)



ama (god)



ama (god)



ama (god)



mono (for the young incircumcised)



mono (for the young incircumcised)



pegu (foundation altar)



pegu (foundation altar)



tooru (foundation altar)

The Mosque:

Although its spreading goes back to the 11th century, Islam was more or less limited to urban centers such as Djenne, Dia, Timbuktu and Gao. It was the faith of the elite in power and of the trading community. It is only after a series of holy wars in the 19th century that Islam definitely took root in rural zones and in Dogon country.

Most villages have a mosque. Today's dynamism of traditional mud constructions manifests itself, among others, in a variety of mosques that show stylistic features that are characteristic of Dogon architecture. Mosques with façades composed of niches with checkerboard and triangular patterns became a familiar sight.

The mosque of **Kani Kombole** is a good example. It is situated at the foot of the escarpment. There is ample space for building. The mosque is wide and its four sides are decorated with colonnades and niches. This is a clear reference to the façade of the Ginna namely, the traditional house of the extended family.



kani kombole



kani kombole



temba

The mosque of **Nando** is a case apart. Its foundation seems to go back to the 12th century. It is older than the wellknown mosques of Djenne and Timbuktu. In those days the Tellem were still the masters of the Bandiagara escarpment. Today many questions remain unanswered as to the circumstances of its founding. A local legend says that a giant built the mosque within a few days. Not far from Nando he left a footprint in the rocks (see photo hereunder). In those ancient times the only town close by and already converted to Islam was Dia (on the Diaka, arm of the Niger). Was the Nando region already a transit passage for early trans-Saharan trade routes linking West to Northern Africa ?

Through the centuries, the regular plastering with mud explains why the mosque on the outside has a great resemblance with Dogon architecture. Inside the mosque, however, the walls are Islamic in design and are decorated with themes from the Koran : A pair of scales is weighing the souls of the deceased so as to determine who will go to heaven or hell.



nando (pignari)



nando (pignari)



nando (pignari)



nando (pignari)



nando (pignari)



nando (pignari)



nando (pignari)

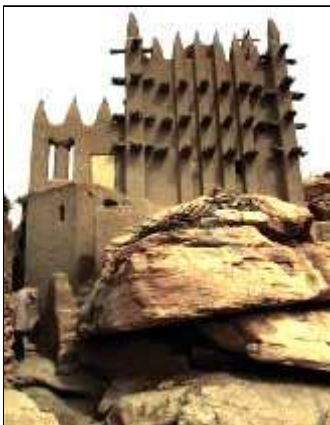


nando (pignari)



nando (pignari)

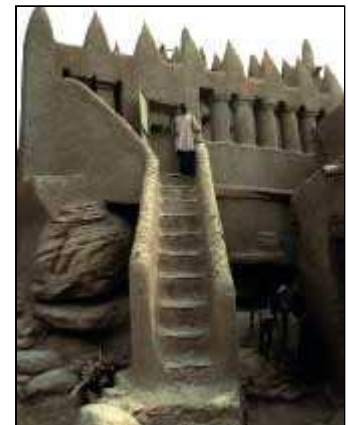
On the plateau, land suitable for cultivation will never be used for any other purpose. Villages are built on hills that dominate the area. **Kargue** and **Danisare** are no exceptions to the rule. Space available for construction is limited. Both mosques stand high and their contours are adjusted to the uneven topography of the site.



kargue (lowel geou)



kargue (lowel geou)



kargue (lowel geou)



kargue (lowel geou)



kargue (lowel geou)



kargue (lowel geou)



danisare (lowel geou)



danisare (lowel geou)



danisare (lowel geou)

Ningari is situated in the center of the plateau (Waduba) not far from **Kani Gogouna**, capital of the **Saman**. This group is ethnically related to the Djennenke of the Lowel-Gueou (see page 06). But unlike them, they adopted the local language and culture of their Dogon hosts. The arrival of the Saman in Dogon country dates back to the 15th century. Just like the Dogon, the first migrants reached the south of the Bandiagara escarpment near the village of Kani Bonzon, and from there on, moved towards the center of the plateau. Their settlement in the Waduba is the result of many migrations that span some 300 years and that were caused by incessant conflicts along the shores of the Niger river. Dogon and Saman concluded alliances and shared a same territory in a relative peace. Originally the Saman were no agriculturists like the Dogon. They were a warlike people making a living from plundering. This attitude served the Dogon to a certain extent as a rampart against the Fulani enemy located at Dè on the plateau to the east. In the 19th century, however, to extend their domination on the plateau, the Saman sided at first with the theocratic state of Sekou Amadou, and thereafter with El Haj Omar, the Futankobe conqueror. Both these states were leading a holy war in the region. The Dogon never forgave their Saman allies of their treachery. Among Dogon masks, one mask represents the "Samana". When this mask dances, it will make all kinds of funny gesticulations and the spectators will laugh at it. Conflicts still arise on occasion. In the nineties the Saman in Kani Gogouna intended to build a new mosque at the site of an old Ginna (traditional house of the extended family). As the Saman have no rights on land ownership, the Dogon opposed the project and got their way after a tense spell of time that could have deteriorated into violence. The mosque of Ningari is stylistically close to the mosques of the Niger river bank. Today, after living for so many centuries on the plateau, the Saman say they are Dogon but they will not forgo their Djennenke identity.

see :

- J.C. Moine : "Gens de Djenné" en pays Dogon - les Dianangué (Djennenké) des vallées du Diéou
- o G.Holder " Poussière Ò Poussière "



ningari (waduba)



ningari (waduba)



ningari (waduba)

The pinnacles of mosques are always exposed to rain. To limit water infiltration, they are topped by specially made earthenware.

In **Tanga**, however, the mosque's pinnacles are surmounted with overturned three-legged bowls. Archaeologists do know well this type of ancient earthenware that is commonly found in excavations in the cliff area (Tellem caves) and along the shores of the Niger. It looks as if the inhabitants of Tanga, having at their disposal a number of ancient pots, used these instead of the usual earthenware specifically made for protecting pinnacles. Next to the mosque's entrance there are still more pinnacles with pots. Do they serve any religious purpose or is it just a matter of using up the remaining pots ?



tanga (n'duleri)



tanga (n'duleri)



tanga (n'duleri)

Hereunder still some other mosques showing a variety of stylistic features:



dourou



bandiagara



songo



boui (lowel gueou)



bargue



borko (bondoum)



koko (lowel gueou)



oropa (seno-gondo plain)



seno-gondo plain

The Society of the Masks :

Masked dance performances are held on the occasion of funerary rituals (Dama & funerals). These rituals are governed by the Society of the Masks. This society gathers all circumcised men, young and old. Young boys become members after having been circumcised. Authority is established according to age. Many members sculpt their own mask.

Before, in mythical times, death did not exist. Instead, men metamorphosed into serpents. Yet, after the breaking of a taboo, the Dogon were exposed to death. The Society of the Masks celebrates the cult of the first ancestor who died in the form of a serpent after having transgressed a taboo. Ever since that time, death has been transmitted to men through contagion (not to be confounded with the ancestor Lebe Seru who resurrected and who is immortal).

The Society of the Masks is directed by the **Wala Banga** (chief of the mask altar). Amadingue Dolo was the Wala Banga of Sangha. He made part of the informants working for Marcel Griaule's team. Amadingue died in 1985. Ethnographic literature refers to the Awa Society. According to Amadingue Dolo the name **Awa** is wrong. The correct name is **Jeme**. In Sigi So (the secret language of the Sigi) Awa means Kanaga.



amadingue dolo - wala banga



dancer sculpting his own mask

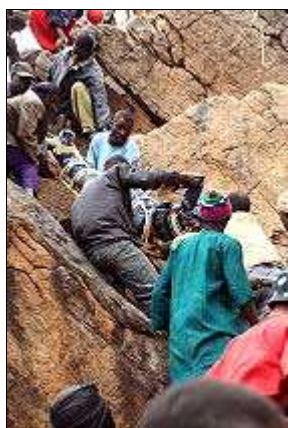


kanaga dancers

Funerary rituals :

Funerary rituals consist of the burial, the funeral and the Dama.

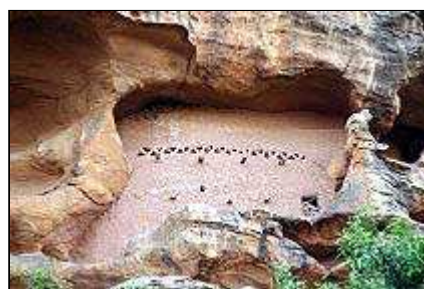
The **burial** is held within a short period of time following death. After having wrapped the deceased in a mortuary blanket, the body is pulled up with ropes to the burial site higher up in the cliff. The face of the cliff is strewn with caves of which some serve as cemeteries. The blanket is recovered. Later during the funeral it will play a central part in the Baga Bundo ritual. On the plateau burial cave sites are located next to each village.



yougo dogorou



yougo dogorou



cemetery of yougo dogorou

The **funeral** (Yimu Gono) is held a few days later or even several months after that the body was lain to rest in the cemetery. The purpose of funerals consists in restoring harmony between the world of the dead and living. The soul of the deceased must be conducted to the hereafter.

The **Dama** marks the end of mourning and the passage of the soul of the deceased to the land of the ancestors. This ritual takes place around Mai/June. There is a small and a big Dama. The small Dama is still regularly held. It concerns one individual only. The big Dama concerns all villagers who passed away since the previous big Dama. Many years may go by between two Dama's; 10 to 12 years and even more (see page 15). Before, the Dama entailed a human sacrifice. Today this practice has been abandoned.

The funeral (Yimu Gono) :

Most funerals are held between December and February. The harvesting is over, the granaries are full and the next sowing season will begin in a few months only. Since there is no work in the fields, men and women may go about other business. Time has come to organise funerals for those who passed away in recent months. A funeral lasts two or three days. Many visitors will come and offer condolences to the family of the deceased.

Dances and mock battles (for example against the old Fulani enemy) are held day and night. Close relatives and visitors mime battle scenes in the village center, around the house and on the roof terrace of the deceased. They fire blank shots with locally made flint rifles and fight with spears, shields and lit torches. The noise is ear-splitting and the participants are, from time to time, enveloped in a cloud of burned gunpowder. The atmosphere is often festive.



kundu andou



yougo dogorou



kundu gina



kundu andou



yougo dogorou



kundu andou

The more dramatically powerful moments take place on the roof terrace of the deceased. Some of his personal belongings are deposited there. In case he was an old war veteran, a life-size dummy dressed in military uniform will be clearly visible from all around.



kundu andou



kundu andou



kundu andou



kundu andou



kundu andou



kundu andou

Some dignitaries and close parents climb on the roof and sacrifice a goat. Rituals vary from village to village. In Kundu the goat is castrated before it is killed and is then thrown from the roof onto the ground. In Yougo Dogorou the animal is not castrated. Instead, after it has been killed, the sacrificer will take off the hide and leave the carcass on the roof. After the blood sacrifice it is the masked dancers' turn to mount on the terrace and dance. The purpose of these ritual activities consists in attracting the soul of the departed out of his house so that it may commence its journey to the Hereafter.



kundu andou



yougo dogorou



kundu dogomo



kundu andou



yougo dogorou



kundu gina



kundu andou



yougo dogorou



kundu gina

The dancers pay a last homage to the deceased and climb down the roof terrace. A close parent, a son or brother, remains alone on the terrace, kneels down, scratches the ground with his hands and throws earth over his shoulders. He is looking for the **Kine** (a component of the soul) of the deceased that is to return as the **Nani** (the respondent) in a newborn baby.

Meaning of the Nani : The deceased choses among his descendents a respondent who when grown up, will make sacrifices to his ancestor on the Wagem altar (Gorou ritual - see page 15). The act of transmitting a part of one's soul to a descendent, is a form of reincarnation.



kundu andou



kundu andou



yougo dogorou

In case the deceased leaves behind a widow then the same ritual is performed differently. For example, the masked dancer kneels down at the house's entrance and pays his respects to the widow who at the same time is looking for her late husband's Kine by means of a calabash that she is holding in her hand.



kundu andou



kundu andou



kundu andou

see :

- Polly Richards " Imina Sana : (masques à la mode) - A study of Dogon Masquerade at the Turn of the Millenium 1994-2000 page 149 "
- G.Dieterlen " Les âmes des Dogons - pages 126/127 "

The funeral of the Hogon of Sangha :

His funeral was held in 1985 about six months after his death. The night preceding the first day of the funeral, a black chick is sacrificed and affixed to a thread suspended over the central village square of Ogol-Da. This is a purification ritual concerned with protecting upcoming events against witchcraft. The ritual is called **Kezu**.

On the funeral's second day a ritual named **Baga Bundo** takes place : eight Kanaga and some fiber masks approach and kneel down around a mortuary blanket (i.e. the one used for the deceased's transport to the cemetery six months earlier). They hit the ground with millet stems. Evil spirits must be driven out from the blanket and the dancers are to pay their respects one last time to the defunct.



sangha : ogol da - kezu ritual



sangha : ogol da - бага бундо



sangha : ogol da - бага бундо

The role of women during funerary rites is certainly not negligible. But they do not participate in the masked rituals. When the masks dance, women are spectators and stay at a fair distance. The **Ya Sigine** priestess is the only exception to this rule. Masks represent death and are a threat to their fecundity. In Sangha however, the role of women during the Hogon's funeral differs widely from other funerary rituals. Sangha is split in two : Ogol-Ley and Ogol-Da. The "field of the Hogon" is situated in between the two villages. This is where most of the public events are held. Male mock combats alternate with young ladies imitating the masked dances. They do not wear wooden headpieces but their hairstyles, decorated with mirrors and glass beads, represent the masks. These female dances commemorate the origin of the masks. In mythical times a woman (Yayeme) discovered the masks before men took possession of them (see pages 13 & 40).



sangha : male mock combats



sangha : male mock combats



ana dagi dolo - the binu priest



sangha : women imitating masked dances



sangha : women imitating masked dances



sangha : women imitating masked dances

Usually funerals and the Dama ritual are held separately. This is not the case for the Dama of the Hogon in Sangha. It starts ten days after the beginning of the funeral and lasts three days. Some ten masks will dance at the occasion. But before the Dama can be held, the **Wala** (altar of the masks) must be purified. In fact, by ritually imitating the masked dances at the Hogon's funeral, the women have transgressed a taboo. As a result, corrective measures must be taken. This is where the **Puro** intervenes; a ritual enabling men to assert their authority over women. It is normally held independently from any other ritual. Sometimes men think that the women of their village committed an offence and, to repair it, they must pay a fine. Following the dancing imitating the masks at the Hogon's funeral, the women have to pay a fine to the Wala Banga (chief of the mask altar). It is to pay for the purification of the Wala altar as otherwise the Dama cannot be held.

In 1985 Ana Dagi Dolo presided as the Binu priest (see photo page 37). He became the next Hogon of Sangha. His funeral was held in July 2004.

see :

- D.Paulme " Organisation sociale des Dogon - pages 537-545 "
- Nadine Wanono "Les Dogon - pages 147-168"
- B.Demott "Dogon Masks - pages 48/61"

As regards B.Demott, her text is in contradiction with the above : she mentions the female dances but states that the Society of Masks does not intervene during the Dama of the Hogon. This is not correct.



The masks :

For the Dogon, the village space guarantees order and security. On the other hand, the ambivalence of the bush is notorious. It can be both dangerous and beneficial. It is the world of the invisible. There are all types of evil spirits roaming about. But the bush is also a source of life where food and medicinal plants abound. Wild animals have gifts for clairvoyance. When a Dogon travels and sleeps in the bush, his totem-animal (Ba-Binu - see page 21) will look after him.

It is on the occasion of a Dama that new masks are carved. The fibres for the costumes are prepared and painted in the bush. Whereas the wooden headpieces may be carved, hidden from the sight of others, in the village. To attain their full magical powers, they are to be submitted to various rituals. In Sangha, the Wala Banga is to make a sacrifice for all masks on the mask altar (Wala). The owners of the masks do not assist. Each individual, however, will make sacrifices on his private altar in order to seek protection against sorcery. In some other villages, mask owners may want to seek protection through the intervention of mask dignitaries at Yougo Dogorou.

Today mask carving outside a ritual context has become frequent. The sale of such objects to tourists is no problem at all. But the sale of a mask that is still "active" in a ritual sense must be done with utmost care and requires ritual precautions.



Dogon myths as related by Marcel Griaule give a good idea as to the significance of certain masks :

Mask Satimbe : This mask represents the woman who, in mythical times, captured the old Albarga and stole the masks from the Andumbulu (supernatural beings). One day in the bush she surprised them dancing. They fled and left behind their masks and costumes made of red fibres. She disguised herself with it and returned to where she came from. The men from her village took it all away from her (Albarga included) and hid everything in a cave, for example, the sacred cave of Albarga at Yougo Dogorou (see pages 13 & 37).



sangha : satimbe masks



sangha : satimbe masks



sangha : satimbe masks

According to certain traditions the name of the lady is Yayeme and she came originally from the village of Yendouma. Following these events, the woman who discovered the masks was nominated "Ya Sigine" (the sister of the masks). Today the "Ya Sigine" priestess is the only woman who plays an active role during masked rituals. She is also the sole woman for whom masked dances will be performed at her funeral. Women are completely excluded from all mask-related rituals. During masked dances, they watch on from a fair distance.



The **Great Mask** : This mask is made once every 60 years on the occasion of the "Sigui". This ritual lasts seven years. It starts at Yougo Dogorou and moves alongside the escarpment to the southwest. A long time ago the Sigui came to an end on the plateau at the village of Songo. This was no longer the case in 1972 when Jean Rouch, for the purpose of his documentary, filmed Amadingue Dolo (late chief of the masks) and Diangouno Dolo (late chief of Sangha) ending the ritual at Songo.

The Great Mask is carved from a single piece of wood and measures several metres in length. It looks like a plank with a mask sculpted at its lower end. It is not meant to be worn.

Before, according to Dogon myths, death did not exist. Instead, men metamorphosed into serpents. Yet, after the breaking of a taboo, the Dogon were exposed to death. The Great Mask represents the first ancestor who died in the form of a serpent. Its elongated form looks like a serpent. It is the receptacle of the ancestor's soul.

Every 60 years a new Great Mask is sculpted in replacement of the previous one. On this occasion, the dignitaries of the Society of the Masks teach a few previously chosen young men the secrets of the cult. They are present during the carving of the Great Mask and they have to learn Sigi So, the secret language of the Sigui. After having completed their initiation, they will replace the previous Olubaru initiates.

The Dogon who follow the rituals of the Society of the Masks possess a shelter near to their village where the Great Masks (old & the last to date) are stored. In 1930 Marcel Griaule counted nine Great Masks in the village of Ibi. It means that the beginnings of the Sigui cult in this particular village go back to the 14th century (9 masks x 60 years = 540 years).



great masks



great masks



great masks

The Great Mask leaves its shelter during the funerals of an important dignitary (for example, an Olubaru) only. A hole is made in the roof of the house of the deceased and the mask is placed through it. The upper part of the mask can be seen from far away (see photo above). The mask so displayed is the one which was carved in the presence of the deceased when he was still an "Olubaru to be" at the last Sigui.



sangha : bongo - great mask



sangha : bongo - great mask



great masks

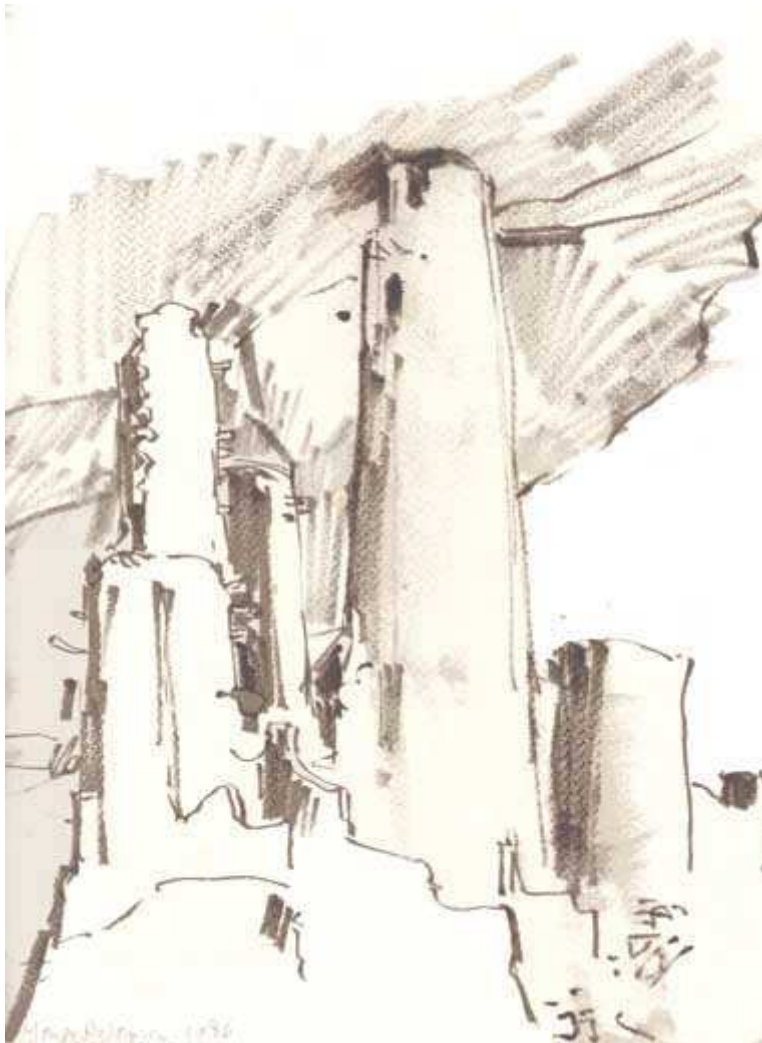
Most ethnographic literature translates "Great Mask" as Mask **Imina-Na**. However, Imina-Na is the name given to the "voice" of the Great Mask and not to the wooden structure itself ("Masques Dogons - M.Griaule" - page 250). The voice of the mask is a rope with two wooden or metal pieces attached at one end. By making it whirl above one's head, the Imina-Na makes a sound resembling the mask's voice. Depending on the region, the exact name is either **Wara** or **Dannu**. Originally the Dannu (a wooden pole) and the Buguduru (a cone of clay) form the stand against which the Wara leans ("Masques Dogons - M.Griaule" - page 745). With time passing, a number of villages abandoned the carving of the Wara and replaced it with the Dannu.

see :

- Polly Richards " Imina Sana : (masques à la mode)" - A study of Dogon Masquerade at the Turn of the Millenium 1994-2000 - pages 132/207
- Marcel Griaule "Masques Dogons"



imina-na : the voice of the great mask



The **Sirige** mask :

This mask measures several metres in length. It represents a Ginna, the house of the extended family. It takes a strong young adult to manoeuvre this type of mask. They jump and make rotating movements with the head forwards, backwards and sideways. Such movements require a physical strength that not all dancers possess.

One of the Sirige dancers (photo hereunder) is wearing a costume made of fibres painted in black. A husband with a wife who is pregnant will never wear a costume with the usual red fibres. It would bring her in danger. To the Dogon the colour red represents menstrual blood.

It happens that a mask breaks whilst dancing. Dancers and the dignitaries of the Society of the Masks will try to hide the repairing from the spectators' view. Masks are magical objects and any intervention needs secrecy.



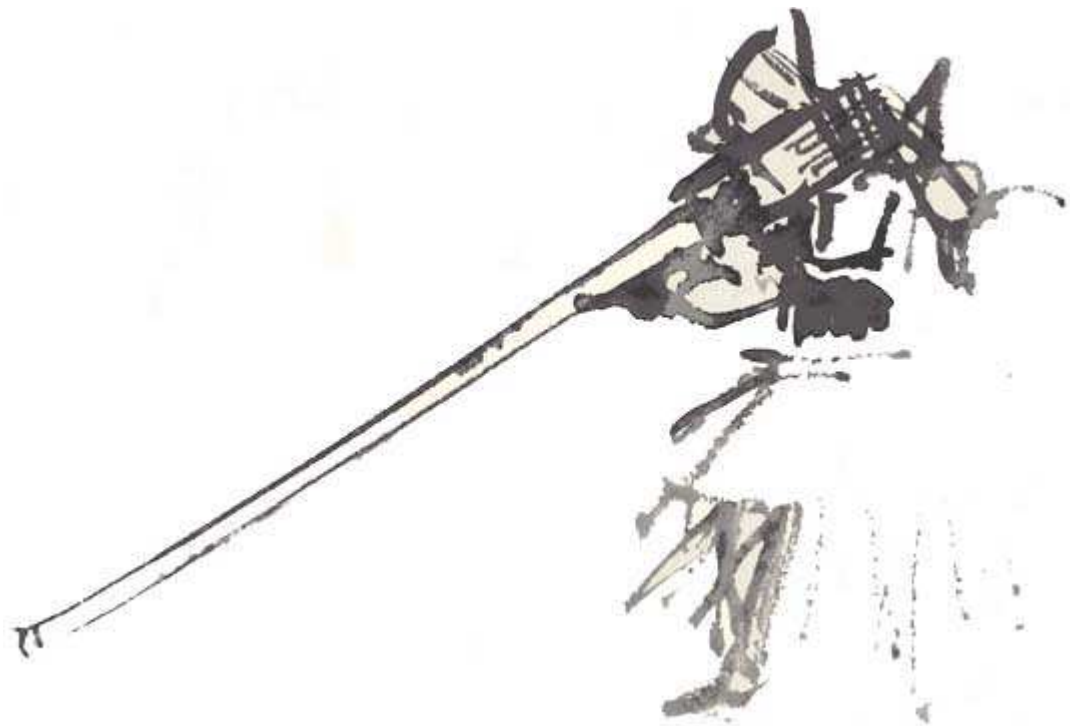
sangha : enguel



sangha



sangha : bongo



The **Kanaga** mask :

The significance of the Kanaga mask remains obscure. There are a variety of interpretations. It has been described, among others, as a bird or a female spirit. Kanaga dance performances are very spectacular. The dancers always appear in numbers. They make a circular movement with the mask and brush the ground with its upper part. Striking it would be wrong. But it happens more often than not. Sometimes, in the heat of the moment, a mask even breaks. The photo hereunder shows a dancer caught in the act.



sangha



sangha



sangha



sangha



sangha



sangha



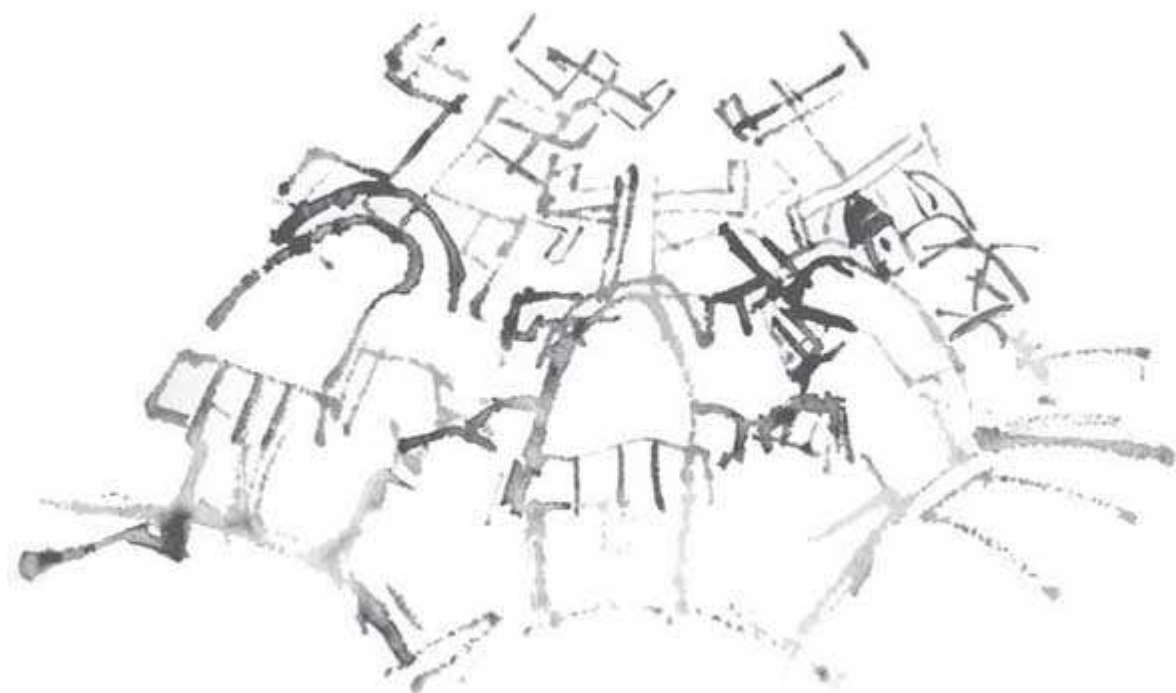
yanda



yanda



yanda



Masks represent the bush and its mysteries. During funerary rituals they leave the bush and enter the village. They attract the soul of the deceased out of his house and towards sunset they return to the bush followed by it. Masks are not all equal in importance. Certain types (Kanaga, Satimbe, Sirige) are important from a religious point of view. They are surrounded by an aura of mystery. Their dances have a wild quality. They do not speak but emit noises. The Olubaru shouts to them in Sigi So (the secret language of the Sigui). Other mask types tend to interact with the public and their dances may even be entertaining. The following pages show masks that are easily identifiable (human and animal).



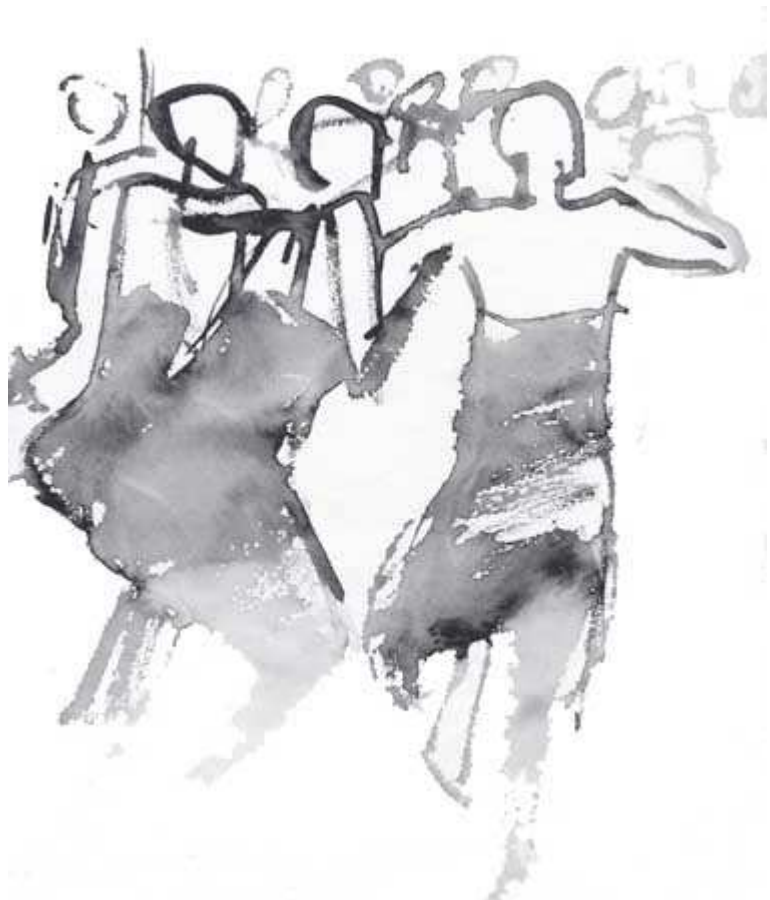
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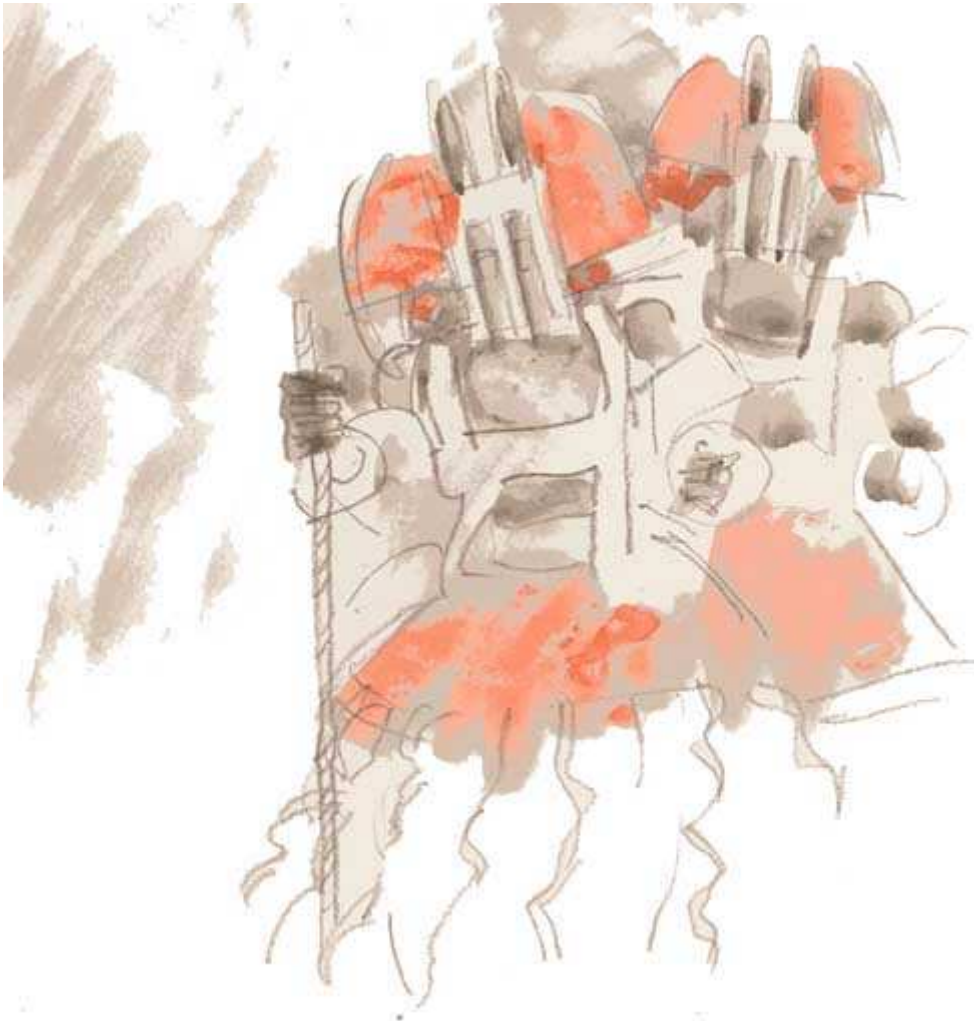
kundu andou



banani



kundu andou





kundu andou



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kundu andou





yanda



kundu dogomo



yougo dogorou

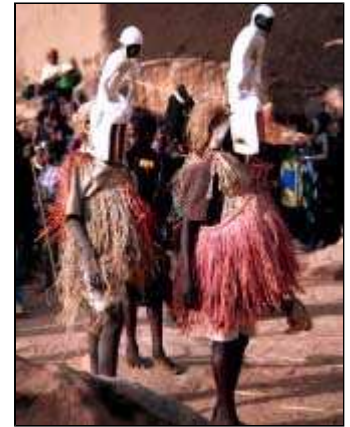




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yanda

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