The river and the shrine: Lobi art and sense of place in Southwest Burkina Faso

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THE RIVER AND THE SHRINE: LOBI ART AND SENSE OF PLACE
IN SOUTHWEST BURKINA FASO

by

Cory Keith Gundlach

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Christopher D. Roy
This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of Cory Keith Gundlach has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Art History at the May 2012 graduation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I discovered Lobi art as an undergraduate at Colorado State University in 2007. After a survey course on African art and another in which I prepared catalog information for several Lobi objects in the Jan and Richard Devore Collection, Professor Patricia Coronel offered me with the opportunity to study the collection as a whole. It consists of roughly fifty Lobi objects, mostly carved wooden figures and a small number of men’s three-legged stools. At the time I had no proficiency in French and little in German and so the majority of literature on the Lobi was closed to me. However, after correspondence with Professor Roy, I secured a translation of Swiss ethnologist Piet Meyer’s *Kunst und Religion der Lobi*, one of the most well-known and well-respected publications on the subject. Since then I have continued to study Lobi art and culture, and learning to read French has recently unlocked a vast amount of new material for my research.

With support from the Stanley/University of Iowa Foundation Support Organization, a Stanley Award for International Research, and support from the Graduate Student Senate, I conducted six weeks of research in Burkina Faso during the summer of 2011. At the capital of Ouagadougou, I became well-acquainted with Nestor Kahoun, Director for the Promotion of Museums. He introduced me to faculty at the University of Ouagadougou and other officials from the Ministry of Culture. At Gaoua, in the center of Lobi country, I stayed at the *Maison de Madeline Père*, whose courtyard includes the tomb of the eminent Africanist herself. During my first two weeks there I was assisted by Siddiki Sawadogo, a driver and mechanic, and Abdoulaye Bamogo, a videographer. I also worked with two interlocutors: first Boubacar Kambou and later with Thierry Youl. I
met with staff at the Poni Museum in Gaoua on several occasions, and Director Prosper
Somé and museum guide Zi Hamidou were very gracious with their time. Throughout
Lobi country, I met with sculptors, diviners, a potter, a village priest, and many other
wonderful people. They were very kind and patient with all my questions.

My experience in Lobi country provided me with much more than I am able to
address in this paper, and will continue to be useful for future research in my doctoral
dissertation. As I continue to learn more about the Lobi through scholarship, it is critical
to maintain relationships with them in person and interactions with their art in context.

I traveled to Burkina with two general goals in mind. First, I wanted to directly
observe how art is being used in context among the Lobi today. Two of the most
significant and most recent publications on Lobi art date to 2007. One belongs to Art
History Professor Christopher D. Roy, which draws on four decades of extensive field
research among the Mossi and their neighbors and the Lobi in 1984.¹ The Italian
ethnologist Daniela Bognolo also published on Lobi art in 2007.² She conducted field
research with the Lobi from 1980 to 1990.³ Her most recent photograph of art in context
dates to 1997, though the majority of her field research dates to the previous decade.⁴
There are a number of others who have published research on art from Lobi country that

¹ Christopher D. Roy, Land of the Flying Masks: Art and Culture in Burkina Faso. The Thomas
² Daniela Bognolo, Lobi (Milan: 5 Continents Press, 2007).
³ Ibid., “Art Lobi: lecture et connaissance” in Images d’Afrique et Sciences sociales. Les pays
lobi, birifor et dagara (Burkina Faso, Côte-d’Ivoire et Ghana), eds. Michèle Fiéloux, Jacques
⁴ Ibid., Lobi, 21.
will be addressed below. Among them, Professor Roy is the only professional art historian to have done so.

My second goal in Lobi country was to observe broader cultural conditions of a people commonly represented as conservative, isolated, and intransigent. There is little argument on whether or not Lobi artwork is inventive and creative. There is an interesting tension in the literature, however, between the innovative quality in Lobi art, and the representation of a cultural attitude that is unable and unwilling to adapt to change. This paper provides a detailed discussion of the written and visual sources of this tension. French colonial history is very important to this subject, and my analysis will include other dimensions of conflict and collaboration aside from European intervention. As I will address below, colonial conflict and collaboration is presented as a common link between artistic style and cultural identity among the Lobi. However this relationship needs to be re-assessed in order to better understand how Lobi art is being used in post-colonial conditions today.

In their introduction to *Images d’Afrique et Sciences sociales. Les pays lobi, birifor, et dagara*, Michèle Fiéloux and Jacques Lombard identify “image and research” as a main theme for the colloquium in which they participated at Ouagadougou in 1990. They write that “l’idée d’une société archaïque et violente” among the Lobi is maintained through a “lancinante répétition” of stereotypical images from the first half of the twentieth century, such as “des costumes, des parures, de l’architecture, des armes, des marques du corps, etc.” As discussed below, Lobi sculpture from the same period has

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6 Ibid., 15.
been used to do the same. Fiéloux and Lombard continue that “l'image doit donc être associée à un relevé systématique et minutieux, aboutissant à une reconstitution, à un nouveau regard, riche de l'avancement de la connaissance.”7 This paper continues an investigation on the theme of “image and research” related to Lobi artwork.

**Lobi Country**

Situated at the intersection of southwest Burkina Faso, northwest Ghana, and northeast Côte d’Ivoire, Lobi country has long been home for the Pwa, Jâa, Dagara Lobr, Dagara Wiilé, Birifor, Lobi, Teèsè, and Gan peoples, with a combined population of roughly 450,000 (Fig. A1).8 Among them, similarities and differences are commonly defined in terms of funerary and marriage customs, language, social norms, and art objects divided between men and women.9 Lobi country is centered around the small town of Gaoua, claimed by the French colonial administration as an official military post on April 1, 1902.10 It lies approximately 267 miles southwest of Ouagadougou, or roughly six hours by car, heading south from the junction at Pa. The surrounding topography consists of a number of moderately formed valleys, rolling hills, rocky outcrops, and dispersed farmlands bordered by the Mouhoun River in the east, and Mount

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7 Ibid., 16.


Koí (or Koɔɔɔ) in the south, which rises gently above the entire region. During the wet season (April through October), the land is lush with green grasses, shrubs, and humble trees. Several baobabs of enormous proportion easily surpass the girth of ancient redwoods in the Pacific Northwest. Beneath gravel of granite and schist, uncultivated soil is predominantly red. Trees brim with calabashes and delicious mangoes are plentiful and ripe by mid-June. Pintade, a type Guinea fowl that no longer runs wild in the U.S., are plentiful in Lobi country. Geckos and giant snails are common, pigs and dogs run freely, and many, many roosters greet the sun every morning. The area remains verdant and fruitful until the ground becomes parched with heat from November to March.

Along with several government buildings, the restored Musée du civilisations du sud-ouest or Poni Museum is located on a central hill at Gaoua. The site offers a spectacular prospect of the surrounding region. The current museum facility was originally built by the French in 1920 to house medical staff working to eliminate trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness. Based at Gaoua from 1910-1930, the French medic Colonel Lerousique proved to be so successful in this effort that the Lobi immortalized him through a type of shrine figure known as bateba Lerousique (Fig. A2). Carved from wood, the object commonly appears as a male figure seated on a chair with a raised back. He wears a colonial cap and he holds a pipe in his mouth. The front two legs of the chair are usually absent as the figure provides frontal support with

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13 Roy, Land of the Flying Masks, 74.
its own legs. Prior to Lerousique, trypanosomiasis had for centuries formed a barrier to cavalry invasions led by Mossi in the north, whose horses could not withstand the infectious bite of tsetse flies around the Mouhoun River.14

Today, onchocerciasis or river blindness, spread from the bite of the blackfly, remains a formidable threat and has been linked to specific patterns of land-use among Lobi and their neighbors. Clement Ahiadeke attributes relatively high infection rates of over 5% among the Lobi to their “scattered” forms of residential and agricultural development in low-lying areas of the river basin.15 Lower infection rates among the Birifor and Dagara appear tied to concentrated forms of development, and communal farming methods decrease exposure to areas where disease is prevalent. Their permanent farms, “parceled out like rice paddies,” appear less prone to infestation.16

During my stay in Lobi country in June, 2011, I witnessed several cases of blindness as two or more people were led by a young boy, single-file in hand-to-shoulder fashion. I noticed regular activity around the hospital and pharmacy, but this is not the place to analyze health-care and disease. Illness is an important problem among the Lobi and medical aspects of anthropology in the region have been published elsewhere.17 At the same time, Lobi country brims with vitality and beauty. The central market in Gaoua runs twice a week, and thrives every Sunday as mile-long processions of men and

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

women arrive from all directions with coal, wood, and fruit stacked high upon their heads. Bicyclists tie live chickens by the dozen to their handlebars, and children tend to small herds of goats shuffling down the middle of the road. Bakeries were more useful to me than the local bank for exchanging bills, and gas stations, mechanic shops, rental stations, cafés, restaurants, hair salons, sewing-shops, cell phone stations, and dry-goods stores were open for business.

A recent report from the Catholic Diocese of Gaoua places the local population at 260,550. Everyday clothing evokes a dominant mood of vibrancy and warmth, with complex patterns and brilliant colors rarely seen in Anglo-American fashion.

Architecture in central Gaoua consists mainly of densely packed, single-story concrete and cinder-block structures. The central mosque is an exception and rises above all others. It is matched in height only by the pristine residence of a health administrator on the northern edge of town. As you drive into town from Pa in the north, modestly scaled buildings flank a paved route that loops around the central open-air market. From there, paved roads radiate east toward the museum and government buildings just beyond the library and post office, and south to the hospital which overlooks a low valley, reservoir, and expansive farmlands beneath Mount Koï. A third route extends west toward Kampti and Côte d’Ivoire. Unpaved roads are best maintained along routes used by wealthy cotton corporations. It is best not to drive beyond them during the wet season, as rain quickly turns minor routes into formidable streams.

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Outside of Gaoua, there are even smaller concentrations of urban development at Kampti, Loropeni, Batié-Sud, and Malba. Architecture in each of the town centers generally consists of rectangular, single-story concrete and cinder block structures. Beyond this, the built environment in Lobi country is sparsely populated by one, and less commonly two-story earthen structures. Clay walls consist of a number of thick, horizontal courses, each of which is allowed to dry before the following is installed. All but the highest are finished with a series of vertical cones to provide structural support for the following layer, each accentuating the overall shape of the house. Surface texture is highly tactile, cracked and crazed by the heat of the sun. The highest course rises above the roof and creates a terrace whose grade is sloped toward a drain. Plans are typically asymmetrical and curvilinear, the sharpest angles appearing within the wedged steps of a large, forked tree branch that allows people to climb to and from the roof where grains are dried and then stored in portable containers or granaries built into house itself. This method of storage may be seen in the model house at the Poni Museum. Interior spaces are connected by round portals that restrict passage to one person at a time, and the main entrance consists of a vertically oriented elliptical hole that commonly lacks a door. Windows or small openings to the exterior are few, requiring a moment to adjust to the darkness of the interior.

Shrines are commonly found inside, above (on the roof), and around the house with a variety of man-made objects sculpted in clay, wood, and metal. Cowry shells, animal skulls, stones, feathers, blood, and kaolin clay are also included. Without addressing them in detail now, it is important to recognize these shrines as a main source for exploring the religious dimensions of Lobi art. At the same time, it is important to
recognize that Lobi art is not restricted to the religious domain. Conducted every seven years, the joro ceremony involves sacred objects, costume, dance, and musical performance. This is discussed in chapter seven. On one level, it is deeply religious in nature given the required approval of thila or spirits beforehand. On another, it is an important opportunity for participants from multiple ethnic groups to display the bonds and boundaries of a complex regional identity. An analysis of objects used within the ceremony also reveals the cultural politics of individual agency, and these politics resist stereotypes of an isolated world controlled by temperamental spirits.

There is also a significant commercial interest that drives artistic production among the Lobi. Each sculptor I met with was open to selling to anyone regardless of the buyer’s intentions for the object. A number of sacred prohibitions have been published regarding the creation of Lobi art, but it would be misleading to suggest that religious laws control the entire field of artistic production. As I will discuss below, agriculture appears as a central context for exploring the significance of Lobi art and ethnic identity. It appears as a frame, a code, and at times, a cage.

Through an analysis of the “essential” bonds between Lobi art and culture, I intend to challenge the image which continues to characterize them as superstitious, intransigent farmers. I am not naïve to the possibility that a manipulation of this exotic image may take shape through the Lobi themselves. Tourism is a major source of income

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20 For example, see Meyer, Art and Religion of the Lobi, 123, Bognolo, Lobi, 33 and Julien Bosc, Magie Lobi (Paris: Galerie Flak, 2004), 22.
in Lobi country, and it is clear that many visitors, including myself, are drawn to the complexity of cultural expressions in the region. I explained to my interlocutor that I was a “student” and not a “tourist,” that I was there to learn about rather than buy art, but the two things appeared one and the same to him.

It is not my intention simply to blame the French colonial administration for all the problems that appear in Lobi art history. However, some problems are obvious. For example, attributions of Lobi artwork made by German collectors Floros and Sigrid Katsouros are explicitly tied to the conception of “Lobi” constructed by the regime. As I will discuss in chapter five, the French were opportunistic in co-opting ethnic stereotypes of the Lobi provided by Dyula merchants, and frankly brutal in terms of capital punishment. Innovations in gas warfare were combined with more conventional methods of execution through hanging (Fig. A3). In 1929, they destroyed the entire village of Domatéon. At the same time, these events are matched by a written history that extends beyond this trauma and this record includes a wealth of information on Lobi art and cultural activity. Colonial texts remain useful for debating the historical context of Lobi artwork, and how this context continues to shape perceptions of the artwork today.

21 Floros Katsouros and Sigrid and Dr. Stephan and Petra Herkenhoff, Anonyme Schnitzer der Lobi (Hannover: Ethnographika, 2006), 5. “In 1898 the French colonial authorities for reasons of administrative convenience [emphasis mine] regrouped the Lobi and neighboring tribes like the Birifor, Dagara, Teguéssié (Thuna), Pougouli and Gan into the so called ‘Cercle du Lobi.’ When we talk about ‘the art of the Lobi,’ it is to this community [emphasis mine] that we are referring to.”

One can hardly say that France became absent in Burkina after the country gained independence on August 5, 1960. French galleries and museums (like many others) are highly invested in Lobi art, and French is the lingua franca for publications on the subject. The historical legacy set up by the French colonial administration is no less complex than Lobi art itself. Both colonial and post-colonial scholarship must also be continually reconciled with historical change in Lobi country, which to me is the most important, because in spite of all we continue to learn about the Lobi, there remains an ‘image’ that art and life in Lobi country does not or cannot change. This paper will challenge the fallacy of this image, which binds cultural isolation to an immutable relationship with the natural and supernatural environment. Carved wooden figure sculptures created by men are by far the most common examples of art that are used to support this image.

At least three interrelated myths contribute to this image: First, Lobi art embodies essential characteristics of conservatism, isolation, and hostility among the Lobi as a people. Second, because the Lobi are politically non-centralized, they are culturally and artistically disorganized. Third, reaction to colonial oppression requires a profound hardening of sorts. It is resistance to be sure, but one that is static and intransigent. It is effectively a form of cultural rigor mortis that becomes fetishized and timeless, and a display of exoticism from which the Lobi are unable to find profit.

CHAPTER 2
THE ORDER OF THINGS

Lobi art is complex. On one level, it is derived from a religious power that is tied
to sacred laws which vary according to owner, shrine, and village. On another, it is always tied to the form of the object, material used (type of wood, for example) and nature of the spirit represented. On yet another level, it is complex because of the various models of classification that have been projected upon the objects. Taken as a whole, these models are a bit like the artwork itself, carefully crafted but not altogether flawless, with areas of contradiction and overlap that deny absolute truth. Objects that have received the most attention from collectors are carved wooden figures created by men, commonly known as bateba. While they are considered the “most important” of all shrine objects, much remains to be understood in terms of how they function in particular shrine contexts.24

The first model of classification for Lobi figure sculpture was published by the Swiss ethnologist Piet Meyer in 1981.25 Based at Wourbira (just east of Gaoua), he conducted fieldwork from 1976 to 1977, and again in 1980. “Doch brauch es ihres Erachtens kein Talent, um “Figuren” (bateba) schnitzen zu können,” writes Meyer.26 According to his informant,

“They say, ‘Anyone can carve statues, they don’t have to be beautiful. They are for the thila; and the thila it’s entirely up to them, or


25 Meyer, 56.

26 Ibid., 51. “It does not take any talent to carve ‘figures.’”
die Figuren, die sie bestellen haben, guy oder schlecht, fein oder grob, schön oder hässlich geschnitzt sind. Entcheidend ist nur, dass sie "Personen" (tibila) "gleichen."  

Meyer defines thila as spirits that act as intermediaries between man and god, and bateba are inhabited by them through installation of the figures within a shrine. This “determining factor”—that bateba should “resemble persons” in a ritual context—forms the basis of Meyer’s theory on Lobi sculpture as whole. Accordingly, the ritual power of Lobi figure sculpture is evaluated in terms of anatomical anomaly; the more anomalous, the more powerful the figure. “Die Lobi argumentieren folgendermassen,” states Meyer,

Würde ein Mensch wie ein aussergewöhnlicher bateba aussehen [(Fig. A4)], besässe er mit Bestimmtheit übermenschliche Kräfte und Fähigkeiten. Denn sein aussergewöhnliches Wesen könnte nicht nur für sein äusseres Aussehen gelten, sondern müsste sich auch in seinen Eigenschaften und Fähigkeiten ausdrücken. Auf keinen Fall würden die Lobi einen derartigen Menschen bloss als das Produkt einer Krankheit oder eines Übels ansehen. Deshalb gelten aussergewöhnliche bateba als aussergewöhnlich stark und mächtig. Wir begegnen hier einmal mehr der Regel, dass bei den Lobi ein Wesen um so mächtiger und unberechenbarer erscheint, je starker es in Aussehen und Charakter von den Menschen abweicht. 

Based on this criterium, Meyer divides Lobi figure into three categories of use and meaning according to form. Bateba duntundara, or figures that protect the owner from witchcraft, are divided into four sub-categories. Bateba phuwe (Fig. A5), for example, appear without anatomical anomaly or dynamic gesture. Bateba bambar (Fig.

27 Ibid. "‘Anybody can carve,’ they say, because statues don’t have to be beautiful. They are meant for thila and they don’t care at all whether the figures they ordered are good or bad, detailed or rough, beautiful or ugly. The determining factor is that they ‘resemble persons.’”

28 Ibid, 95-96. “If a man would look like an exceptional bateba [or what Meyer notes as bateba ti bala—anatomically anomalous figures], he would definitely possess superhuman abilities and powers… By no means would the Lobi look upon such a person only as a product of illness or a misfortune. Therefore exceptional bateba are considered as exceptionally strong and powerful… we again come upon a rule [emphasis mine] of the Lobi that the more a being differs in looks or character from humans, the more inhuman he is. The more inhuman he is the more powerful and unpredictable he is.”
A6) appear in a seated position because they are “paralyzed.” *Bateba ti puo* stand in a vigilant position, with one or both arms held up in a confrontational manner. As mentioned above, *bateba ti bala* are anatomically anomalous—including several heads, only one arm or one leg, no torso, etc. *Bateba yadawara* (Fig. A7) are figures that mourn for the owner. They are not apotropaic, but take on grief so the owner does not have to suffer such sadness. They typically appear standing with both hands held behind the back, one hand held to the mouth or chin, both hands held around the shoulders, or stretched up vertically above the head. Meyer notes that with the French installation of a judicial system in Lobi country during the first third of the twentieth century, a new use was found for figures with one hand held to the mouth. If offered the appropriate sacrifice, such figures may be used to cause an opponent to stutter uncontrollably in court. Meyer’s final category of figures based on use is those coupled in intercourse, commonly known as *bateba bêtise* (Fig. A8). These may be used to find a partner and similar to those which represent a woman holding a child, may also be used to facilitate conception.29

Meyer also briefly discusses zoomorphic forms in Lobi art, which commonly appear in the form of chameleons, snakes, antelopes, elephants, and birds. *Thila* may take the form of an animal in the bush, where *soser* or sacred prohibitions are revealed with a human voice. After this “revelation,” the animal must be killed and the *thila* orders a shrine which the hunter will use to profit under the spirit’s direction. *Thil yiire* or the “eye of the shrine” may include a wooden or clay representation of the first animal killed,

which multiply in form and number at the direction of the thil.30 Birds are one of the most common animals to appear in carved wood (Fig. A9). Meyer reports that “bildhauer müssen diese verschiedenen Vogelarten so differenziert schnitzen können, dass ‘jedermann den gemeinten Vogel sofort erkennen kann.’”31 This allows thila to use specific types of living birds, as represented in the shrine, to communicate with the owner over long distances.32

Iron and brass objects are also used by thila and may be placed on a shrine or worn on the body. Shrine objects for thila include bangalbari (walking sticks), gbusoo (spears) and thangba khal (knives). Chameleon forms bring wealth, and iron bateba, serpentine rings, and arm bands are apotropaic. Knives, bells, small pliers worn by children, and all metal objects worn on the body are ordered by spirits found in nature.33 Meyer reports that blacksmiths that create such objects are paid little, and like wood sculptors, they do not form an organized group in society.

Spirits found in nature are called wathila (sing. wathil), unlike thila that can be purchased or ingested through millet porridge inhabited by the spirit. Wathila may be found by men, women, and children, and are responsible for protection of the family. Their power cannot be used beyond the first generation of the original spirit’s owner.34 These spirits and related arts are further discussed in chapter seven.

30 Meyer, 117.
31 Ibid., 113. “Sculptors have to carve the various birds so exact, that ‘one should be able to recognize the particular kind of bird immediately.’”
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 163.
34 Ibid., 24.
Contrary to the objects mentioned above, Meyer reports that dance staffs and men’s stools are made for people and not for thila. He distinguishes between three types of staffs, each of which is curved downward at the top like a hook. The bober (Fig. A10) and khuluor (Fig. A11) may include an anthropomorphic figure, and daphel (Fig. A12) are generally much more simple and abstract. The bober is tallest in height (roughly 80 cm) and is often used as walking stick. The khuluor is no longer than 70 cm and includes a short blade. The daphel is roughly equal in height to khuluor, and crested with a curved blade. Meyer reports that these objects were once commonly carried in public by men over the right shoulder, and would use them as a weapon if necessary. I saw no one carrying these objects in public during my stay in Lobi country.

Meyer’s classification of Lobi artwork is unprecedented in its attention to the form, function, and meaning of Lobi artwork. It is also an invaluable resource for its attribution of works to Sikire Kambire, who was commissioned by the French colonial administrator Henri Labouret to create masks. Labouret spent eleven years in Lobi country as administrator of the Diébougou subdivision from 1912 to 1924. Where Meyer looses footing, however, is in the projection of his classificatory model upon Lobi artwork as a whole. For example, he reports that

\[ \text{auf keinen Fall dürfen Lobi-Figuren einfach als Ahnenstatuen bezeichnet werden; den sie warden von den Lobi mit verschiedenen Kategorien von Wesen assoziiert. Und wenn sie mit jüngst Verstorbenen nach} \]

\[ \text{35 Ibid.} \]
\[ \text{36 Ibid.} \]
\[ \text{37 Jeanne-Marie Kambou-Ferrand, “Guerre et résistance,” 75.} \]
The evidence cited for this rule is supported by the work of the German anthropologist Hans Himmelheber in 1965. His research was based in Côte d’Ivoire, whose border lies roughly thirty miles south of where Meyer was stationed at Wourbira. Significantly, Meyer notes that within southwest Burkina Faso alone,

> die kulturellen und sprachlichen Unterschiede zwischen den Gegenenden von Kampti und Wourbira sind derart gross, dass ohne weiteres angenommen werden darf, dass diese beiden Regionen eigene Vorstellungen zum Wesen von bateba besitzen.\(^{39}\)

However Himmelheber’s work, published fifteen years earlier and at least thirty miles away in Côte d’Ivoire, is presented as somehow sufficient to validating the ancestral significance of Lobi figure sculpture at large.

French ethnographer Julien Bosc calls attention to the fact that *bateba* is a Birifor term, and notes that *thilbia* is the Lobiri term for anthropomorphic shrine sculpture.\(^{40}\) He cites examples of art that do not conform to Meyer’s model, and states that:

> for the Lobi, there exists no classification of various forms and attitudes of the different *thilbia*… a statuette with a particular form can signify different things depending on its owner, and the same signification can be accomplished with different statuettes whose attitudes are different in every respect.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{38}\) Ibid, 54. “in no case can Lobi figures simply be called ancestral statues, because they are associated by the Lobi with various categories of beings. If they are identified with the recently deceased, they do not represent ancestors in the *ethnological* [emphasis mine] linguistic use of the word. Ancestors are only those who died several generations ago.”

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 53. “the cultural and linguistic differences between the area of Wourbira and Kampti are *so* great, that it can be assumed that these two regions have different understandings of the character of *bateba.*”

\(^{40}\) Bosc, *Magie Lobi*, 32.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
He also adds several important distinctions that are not mentioned by Meyer. He provides four categories which are grouped by size. First, *bobothila*, no more than ten centimeters tall, are used for divination and kept in a goatskin bag. I saw a beautiful set of such objects used by my interlocutor’s uncle, Sib Djato Lou, a diviner who lives at Hèlo. Features are typically quite worn and polished through handling (Fig. A13). Second, *thilbou-bia* are between ten and twenty centimeters tall; third, *thilbou-manainni sono* are between twenty and fifty centimeters tall, and last, *thilbou kotina*, the most rare, are from sixty centimeters to over one meter tall. Bosc states that when one refers to *thilbia*, they are never identified by appearance. Like Meyer, he presents an index of forms commonly tied to specific functions. *Thilbou nyèlla*, or figures with both arms raised protect a home from death (Fig. A14); *thilbou banyo*, or figures with one arm raised protect the owner from sorcery (Fig. A15); *thilbou fi hin*, or figures with the head turned to the side protect against the enemy (Fig. A16); *thilbou khè bambi*, or women with a baby on the hips or back protect women against sterility (Fig. A17); *thilbou you-yeno*, or janus-head figures are also used against sorcery (Fig. A18); *thilbou yo* consist of a head and post, a type “whose purpose we do not know” (Fig. A19); 42 and *thilbou ghamgbar*, figures with legs outstretched before them that protect the owner from paralysis (Fig. A20). 43 He notes that variations exist. For example, *thilbou nyèlla* may protect an owner from death in one area and “ensure good harvest” in another. 44

42 Ibid., 30.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Bognolo reports that decorative objects do not exist in Lobi country, because each creation is the product of socio-religious necessity. However this statement does not settle well with the history of Sikire Kambire’s work from the early twentieth century, discussed later in this chapter. Moreover, she writes that

*la statuaire, en tant que source quotidienne d’information, peut d’une certain façon être considérée comme l’essence figurée des principes culturels et son étude permet d’acquérir la compétence nécessaire pour la lecture des signes et l’origine de leurs différences.*

How else is this “essence” of cultural principles defined? Meyer writes that traditional Lobi sculptors have no economic reason to create *bateba*, and that “die gängigen Preise für bateba sind aber so tief, dass sie tatsächlich kaum einen Anreiz darstellen können, *Bildhauer zu werden.*” He explains that this low income is the result of the fact that

*dass Lobi-Bildhauer keine Schnitzerlehre absolvieren, und... dass "jedermann bateba schnitzen kann" weil den thila die handwerklichen und künstlerischen Qualitäten der für bestimmen bateba eintiere sind. Traditionelle Lobi-Bildhauer (der moderne Bildhauer Lunkena Pale ist hier ausgenommen) genossen und geniessen bis heute keine auch noch so kurze Lehre.*

These factors are addressed further at the end of chapter three in relation to Bosc’s discussion of work by Tyohepté Palé. The important thing to recognize here is Meyer and

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46 Ibid.

47 Meyer, 123. “prices for *bateba* are so low, they do not offer any incentive to anyone to become a sculptor.”

48 Ibid. “Lobi sculptors do not go through any training and... ‘anybody’ can carve *bateba* because the quality of craftsmanship and artfulness of th *bateba* is of no importance to the Lobi. Until today, traditional sculptors (the modern sculptor Lunkena Palé is an exception) do not go through any training whatsoever”
Bognolo’s idea that art has little or no commercial value for “traditional” Lobi artists. It is essentially religious in nature.

Bognolo’s survey of Lobi figure sculpture is organized around two main “axes,” each of which includes a subset of important criteria as follows:

**Axe A**
1. Données nécessaires à la connaissance de l’utilisation des signes (localisation, utilisation, contrôle, jouissance).
2. Données nécessaires à la recherche de la signification de signes (statut du détenteur de connaissance, système de transmission).

**Axe B**
Eléments analysés pour la lecture de la statuaire : 1 – forme (dimension, matériel, patine) 2 – fonction (action, message, utilisation) 3 – connaissance (statut du propriétaire, valeur de signe et sa transmission).

Based on these “axes,” Bognolo then categorizes Lobi figure sculpture into four temporal groups, consisting of: 1, The Past; 2, The Historical Present; 3, The Present, and; 4, The Future. Each group includes terms for respective objects used among the Lobi, Birifor, and Dagara.

Group one, “Le passé,” includes objects known as kōthila or “great ancestors” which refer to founders of the patriclan. Tallest of all, these typically appear “tranquil or in repose,” and are placed on a shrine only in the original house of each group (Fig. A21). They are only allowed to be viewed by initiates of joro, a sacred ceremony that takes places every seven years at selected sites long the Mouhoun River. Young participants from seven to nineteen years old are organized by patriclan, ‘reborn,’ and renamed by their father upon completion of the ceremony.

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49 Bognolo, “Art Lobi,” 381.

50 Ibid., 382.

Bognolo reports that kōthila are created by a sculptor who, “à l’intérieur de l’ethnie,” is recognized by a high degree of initiation. These figures are carved from a wood particular to the given patriclan, and “leur forme respecte le schéma de la construction propre à l’ethnie.”

Such objects among the Kou patriclan at Holly are identified by a hairstyle known as yú-kpinbè, the sign of a high-ranking warrior.

“Le passé” also includes zoomorphic objects that refer to sacred animals that may have led to the founding of a community. These objects are always smaller than the “great ancestors” and may be made of wood or clay (Fig. A22).

Group two, “Le présent historique,” consists of objects that refer to “les ancêtres communs” that have succeeded beyond initial stages of ancestralization. They may be maternal or paternal in nature, appear shorter than “great ancestors,” and are commonly found in the thilduù or shrine room maintained by the male head of the household (Fig. A23). Here too, a sculptor is chosen who ostensibly preserves the main anatomical elements particular to the respective ethnic style, while adding others because of interethnic relations. “Maintenant tout est changé, Thuünà et Lobi sont pareils,” states Palé Kouinthé, a Thuünà sculptor from Latara. He states that prior to contact with the Thuünà, the Lobi did not place a tail at the base of their coiffure.

Along with common ancestors, “Le présent historique” includes small statuettes, commonly referred to as bateba (or bùtìbà) in Birifor, or thilbia in Lobiri. Unlike Meyer

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52 Bognolo, “Art Lobi,” 382. Also see Bognolo, Lobi, 35.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 383.
55 Ibid., 384.
and Bosc, Bognolo reports that *bateba* are used for divination and are kept with the diviner at all times in a goatskin sack received after completing initiation in *buür* (Fig. A24). These appear to be no different from the *bobothila* described by Bosc above. Palé Kayé, a Birifor diviner from Hélo, reports that “some are small and some big, but the small ones are the most efficient. They are black because they are the strongest.”\(^{56}\) This reference to color symbolism in Lobi sculpture is rare.

Group three, “*Le présent,*” includes objects which refer to religious and social law and function as intermediaries to the demands of ancestors.\(^{57}\) “Representations of the double” or spirit double are anthropomorphic and relate to familial problems. It is this group which corresponds to Meyer’s three categories of figures based on use. Ini Youl, a Birifor man from Gaoua, reports that a female figure with arms stretched wide is called *tib siéé.* (In Meyer’s system, the form of this object corresponds to *bateba ti puo.*) It refers to a woman weeping at a funeral, and each arm is held up to protect the matriclan and patriclan from evil associated with death (Fig. A25).\(^{58}\) To obtain these objects, one may address “the sculptor of the house” or other members of the matriclan, but the rules for selection are not strict. Like objects referring to “The Historical Present,” Bognolo reports that the function of such figures is “limited in time” and upon the death of the owner, may shift in meaning from a “spirit double” to his role as an ancestor.\(^{59}\)

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 385.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 387.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 387-88.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 388.
Along with these anthropomorphic spirit doubles, Bognolo identifies “sacred ritual objects” of various materials as part of group three, “le présent.” These objects include men’s three-legged stools, which are also discussed in chapters six and seven. Like “spirit-doubles,” these sacred objects are inherited through a system of bilateral descent.  

In Bognolo’s fourth and final group “The Future,” we find objects that refer to “extraordinary powers.” These supernatural entities are not associated with the clan and are typically placed in shrines outside of the house. *Thil dokpà*, or janus-head figures, for example, are described by Oumbouré Kambou as very strong because they allow the owner to see everywhere (Fig. A26). Apotropaic amulets known as *taàri* are also included and like those in groups two and three, are “limited in time” in terms of function (Fig. A27). For example, after protecting the owner, the object may be placed upon the tomb to commemorate the deceased or find place in the construction of a new shrine.

An emphasis on time is the one thing of undeniable value which Bognolo brings to the history of classifications for Lobi art. Meyer’s model is problematic because temporal dimensions are absent in his analysis, except for that span of time which he cites for the process of ancestralization reported by Himmelheber. While his fieldwork was quite specific in terms of space, his classification model ignores temporal dimensions that ensure a large degree of fluidity in use and meaning for Lobi objects. Meyer deserves

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60 Ibid., 389.
61 Ibid., 390.
62 Ibid., 391.
high credit for the precision of his vision; however contested his categories of Lobi art remain. Bosc’s critique of such categories is strong:

All things considered, it seems that a division by categories—functional, social, religious, or esthetic—is a methodological, or even epistemological error. These functions intertwine so closely that it is absurd to say that thrillia are only functional or symbolic, just as it is to say they are only works of art.63

But without recognizing the significance of time within the use of Lobi art, we run the risk of placing it in suspended animation. Time as origin myth or historical context appear as a common devices for exploring events that inform Lobi art, but Bognolo’s repositioning of time as an integral and dynamic medium of the object itself allows for much greater flexibility in grasping a complex body of polyvalent forms. While three of the four categories identified by Bognolo involve objects whose use and meaning is limited in time, it is perhaps not surprising that she finds objects from group four, “Le futur,” to be the most innovative. They have no restrictions related to social structure or communal law. Bognolo refers to them as kôtéé, which appears nearly identical in name and function to kontéé, spirits who live in the wilderness identified by Bosc.64 Meyer calls them kontoursi, or small, red-haired beings that live in the “bush” and taught the Lobi the art of divination, corpse interrogation, and interment.65 He reports that they do not cause the making of any clay, wood, or metal objects in the area of Wourbira, so they are marginal to his discussion. Bosc reports that there are two kinds of such spirits: kontéé-bouo, the “good” ones that live in the wilderness, and kontéé-pou, the “bad” ones

63 Bosc, 46.
64 Bosc, Magie Lobi, 18.
65 Meyer, 22.
that live in caves, underwater, or the trees. He reports that figures cannot embody these spirits and they remain invisible to man, but that extraordinary figures known as *thilbou you-yenyo* are created to “mirror” and combat those with harmful intentions (Fig. A28). In effect, these are the same objects referred to by Bognolo in group four, “*Le futur.*” *Thil dokpa* or janus-head figures are named among them, which enable the owner to see everywhere.67

It is difficult to resist the impulse to categorize. As an organizational device, it enables one to make sense of complex ideas, objects, and spaces. But as I have discussed above, the outcome of this impulse may obscure the complexity of artistic meaning. It projects a grid over a complex world of objects that are not consistent in use, and this lack of consistency provides a valuable point of departure for future research. Due to the private nature of Lobi figure sculpture, it is best to discuss them in relation to the specific shrine in which they are used.

**Centers of Style and Ethnicity**

After having identified 126 sculptors, Bognolo locates thirty-six “centers of style” throughout Lobi country, corresponding to the Pougouli, Dyan, Dagara Lobr, Dagara Wiilé, Birifor, Lobi, Thuúnà, and Gan (Fig. A29). Among these thirty-six sites, she reports that twenty-seven are always active, and others have become “exhausted” or non-active. Fourteen “centers of style” are attributed to the Lobi—the highest number for all

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eight ethnic groups—five of which were exhausted by 1990 when the survey came to a close.68

Important questions are unaddressed in this report. First, if we take Bognolo at her word, the production of art in Lobi country is restricted to a religious context: “Il n’existe pas d’objets fabriqués à des fins décoratives ou d’agrément, car chaque réalisation est la produit d’une nécessité à caractère socioreligieux.”69 My field research in Lobi country does not support this conclusion. Indeed, many objects are created for the market just as readily as for spirits. These two functions for one object are not mutually exclusive. This challenges Bognolo’s romantic presentation of a “purely” religious art. In 1997, Bognolo reconciled this presentation with a discussion of Sikire Kambire, the Lobi artist whose objects were created for “les Blancs” in the early twentieth century.70 In Bognolo’s interview with sculptor Gbonlaré Youl, who personally knew Kambire, Gbonlaré states that

"Je ne peux pas franchement dire si Sikiré avait changé « notre » façon de sculpter. S’il arrivait que quelqu’un de chez nous le surnomme tethlôdôlô (terme désignant celui qui sculpte des thîla sans en avoir eu la commande, pour de l’argent), mon père voyait rouge. Il nous traitait d’imbéciles et nous devenions sur le champ les victimes de sa colère. Il disait que si Sikiré était mêlé à des histoires avec les Blancs, c’était son problème."71

68 Ibid., 395.

69 Ibid., 380.


71 Ibid, “Djetó,” 129. “I cannot honestly say if Sikiré had changed “our” way of carving. In the event that someone from our home called him thîlôdôlô (a term for one who carves thîla without having had the order, for money), my father became enraged. He called us idiots and we became at once the victims of his wrath. He said that if Sikiré was mixed up with the Whites, it was his problem.”
Meyer published several of Kambire’s objects in 1981 and discussed his fame among colonial officers who commissioned his work.72 Without crediting the artist, Labouret published three of Kambire’s works in 1931, described respectively as “4. *Imitation d’un masque baoulé.* — 5. *Perfectionnement de 4. 6. Technique actuelle pour l’exportation*” (Fig. A30).73 Born in 1896 at Gongombili, Kambire was making art for export perhaps as early as his teens.74 This would have been around 1910. Therefore, Lobi art has been made for non-religious reasons for roughly 100 years.

In a sarcastic tone, Bosc finds the Lobi sculptor and diviner Tyohépté Palé “guilty” of maintaining traditional forms in spite of trade with colonists, Hausa art dealers, and tourists.75 Palé (1915-2001) lived in Gbakpoulona, just southwest of Gaoua.76 Bosc claims that in spite of his work with the Hausa, Palé remained true to conventional form unlike his friends who were willing to break with such standards to satisfy new clientele. To boost the local economy, the state set up an art fair at Gaoua in 1971 that greatly facilitated this new level of commercial exchange and artistic innovation.77

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72 Meyer, 127.


74 Meyer, 127. Also see Bognolo, “Djetó,” 127.


76 Ibid., 7.

77 Ibid., 32.
The second important issue raised by Bognolo’s report involves circumstances surrounding the development and collapse for each “center of style.” As each center becomes extinguished, have the sculptors simply died or have they migrated elsewhere and taken on a separate style? If so, wouldn’t this ability to adapt compromise the “essential” relation between style and ethnicity which Bognolo appears to have discovered? Indeed, Kambire’s fame in the early twentieth century led to the development of a “school” around him, in which other Lobi sculptors began to copy his style.\(^78\) Between Kambire’s objects created for Labouret and other colonial officers, and Lobi artists who shifted in style to emulate Kambire’s prestige, there is a significant artistic, social, and economic context that resists Bognolo’s image of Lobi art reduced to terms of religious and ethnic purity.

Another important question remains unaddressed in Bognolo’s report. What are the stylistic features for these centers of style? Fourteen years later, Bognolo writes:

Although surrounded by these different formal ideas, the Lobi group seems inflexible: instead of looking for supple, fluid forms, it maintains the rigid, massive, stereotyped look. Its artistic vision seems far removed from that of the other groups, and yet it sums up many borrowings through its capacity to fit them into the overall austerity of the figures.\(^79\)

In a similar tone, collector of Lobi art Floros Katsouros writes that:

Lobi carvers grew up in a very restricted social system with very little contact with the outside world and a very limited range of visual impressions, as far as models for their art are concerned.\(^80\)

\(^78\) Meyer, 128.

\(^79\) Bognolo, Lobi, 55.

These excerpts published during the last five years are only two examples of a particular historical trend in the scholarship on Lobi art and culture. This image of intransigence and isolation is commonly interwoven with sophisticated passages of historical analysis and artistic interpretation. Attributed both to the people and the artwork, this scholarly assumption about Lobi art and culture appears ‘natural’ in the literature and deserves thorough analysis and discussion. I will test the reality of this stereotype and explore how art may or may not reinforce its existence today in scholarly and popular literature.

The Sound of Things

In the field of Lobi art, Bognolo stands alone in her sophisticated use of style to define ethnic distinctions among the Lobi and their neighbors. Prior to this, ethnic distinctions had been largely grounded in terms of language. Even as late as 1956, the very distinguished English anthropologist Jack Goody reported that “tribal” or nominal distinctions were non-existent in the area, and so defaults upon terms such as ‘Lobi’ and ‘Dagara’ “with a purely linguistic reference.”\(^\text{81}\) Indeed, it was the scientific basis for ethnic classification of the Lobi and their neighbors by French and English colonists. Much as style reinforces notions of ethnic purity for Bognolo, language did the same and was equally conceived in terms of structural isolation.\(^\text{82}\) In order to arrive at the “truth” of a type, the French colonial ethnographer Maurice Delafosse argued in 1912 that one


must first pass through “a purely artificial classification,” followed by one composed of biological and historical elements, and then the third level, “the ethnographic method,” which is based on analogies and differences of social and material civilization. The obsession with the ‘purity’ of truth persists for Goody, who recently argued that “there is today no trace of the ‘true’ Lobi language spoken by the Lobi of Gaoua.” Historian Jeanne-Marie Kambou-Ferrand has noted that while linguistic relationships may exist between the Lobi and the Dyan, for example, the same cannot be said of that between the Lobi and the Birifor or Dagara, who are commonly included in the Lobi group. She argues that if historical events among the current groups have led to a bond, it is “absurd” to conceive of all them all as Lobi.

Michel Foucault assures us that the artifice of the classificatory system is a necessary evil. But even when this artifice is called out, stylistic and linguistic forms of classification have been shown to lead to mutual points of interest—the ‘purity’ of an object and ethnic group. Where does this obsession with origin and purity come from?

The notion of “one style, one tribe” has long been contested, and recent work by David Riep among the South Sotho has kept the debate alive. However, Professor

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Christopher Roy makes the important distinction between two different “centers of style.” First, there are those which are based on the regional circulation and varied use of artwork created in a single workshop, and second, there are those which refer to a cultural homogeneity or ‘essence’ justified by the presence of similar stylistic features within a predefined region.\textsuperscript{89} This point deserves further discussion of early methods used to classify of the Lobi themselves, which continues to have bearing on interpretations of their artwork.

\textbf{Flesh and Bone}

I went to West Africa looking for a “tribe” called the “Lobi.” Previous writers had reported the existence of such a people in the border regions of the Gold Coast and Haute Volta. In fact I never found a group of people who replied to my questions, “We are Lobi.”\textsuperscript{90}

The term “Lobi” is a colonial ethnonym.\textsuperscript{91} As a people, one of the foremost challenges it presented to the colonial administration was the non-centralized structure of the society itself. French and British colonists used different terms to refer to the same ethnic groups. Perhaps one of the earliest and most important reasons for this confusion was the French creation of the “cercle du Lobi” on December 29, 1898.\textsuperscript{92} Since then, the


\textsuperscript{90} Jack Goody, \textit{The Social Organization of the LoWiili}, 16.


\textsuperscript{92} Jeanne-Marie Kambou-Ferrand, “Guerre et résistance,” 78.
many peoples (generally ranging from six to eight groups depending on the author) living in southwest Burkina Faso have been collectively referred to as “Lobi.” It remains the status quo approach to the art of the region today, and Labouret was not the first to refer to the Lobi as such. Early approaches also relied on physiognomic science. In 1904, Edmond Ruelle’s classificatory model of people in southwest Burkina Faso was based on a “very practical” survey developed by the Société d’anthropologie. He reports that the Lobi do not practice dental avulsion (which Labouret later disproved) or cranial distortion, but women mutilate their lips with jewelry. “La mémoire,” he writes, “surtout celle des yeux, paraît assez bien développée.”

Regarding their relation to the Birifor, he reports that

\[
\text{si nous passons en revue ce qui nous paraît être la base des classifications ethnologiques: l’habitat, la constitution de la société, les mœurs, le langue, nous ne les voyons différer en rien.}\]


94 Labouret, Les Tribus, 183.

95 Ruelle, 659.

96 Ibid., 666.

97 Ibid., 667-8.
Labouret quotes Ruelle’s entire physiognomic summary, which is based on seventy-four Lobi men and twenty-two women, forty-six Birifor men and six women, and sixteen Dyan men.\(^\text{98}\) Labouret also cites phrenological data compiled by René Verneau (assistant professor at the Museum of Natural History at Paris\(^\text{99}\)) taken in 1905 from four Lobi skulls at the village of Hemkoua. Labouret argues, however, that this village is certainly Birifor, and challenges Verneau’s conclusion that

\[il \textit{est incontestable, comme nous l'avons fait remarquer, qu'on ne saurait le considérer (le groupe Lobi) comme représentant un type ethnique homogène. Les caractères céphaliques des sujets dont nous avons pu étudier les têtes, protestant contre une semblable hypothèse. Les Lobi constituent une population mixte, formée d'éléments sûrement disparates [emphasis by Labouret].}^\text{100}\]

Labouret recalls Verneau’s summary, that while such evidence is insufficient to provide an origin for the population,

\[nous \textit{avons constat}’e des analogies frappantes entre certaines séries de crânes mandingues et nos deux crânes lobi les plus dolichocéphales... [and] malgré la distance qui sépare la contrée d’où ils proviennent du pays de Lobi, on remarque d’assez nombreux points de contact.^\text{101}\]

After carefully reprinting such phrenological comparisons, Labouret notes that such influence is impossible to demonstrate in the present state of our knowledge, and that “nevertheless, there is no link, it seems, from the anthropological and sociological

\(^{98}\) Labouret, \textit{Les Tribus}, 45.


\(^{100}\) Labouret, \textit{Les Tribus}, 47. Also see René Verneau, “\textit{Notes sur quelques crânes du 2\textdegree\ Territoire militaire de l’Afrique occidentale française,}” in \textit{L’Anthropologie} 16 (1905): 48.

\(^{101}\) Verneau, 49-50. “We have noted some striking analogies between a certain series of dolicocephalic Mandinka and Lobi skulls... [and] in spite of the distance that separates the country from which they originate to the Lobi, we see quite a few points of contact.” Reprinted in Labouret, \textit{Les Tribus du Rameau du Lobi}, 47.
point of view, to differentiate the Lobi and the Birifor."  He also specifies this in terms of bodily ornamentation. While phrenology is clearly an invalid means of scientific inquiry today, it remains important to recognize how it was used in Lobi country as a means of establishing ethnic divisions that ultimately frame early attributions of artwork.

In 1912, Delafosse devoted an entire chapter to African physiognomy in the French Sudan, included with a survey of habitation, costume, mentality, and lifestyle. As a combination of external and moral characteristics, physiognomies are organized separately from “customs,” which appear in a chapter on “civilization.” The Lobi are counted among peoples of the *Haute-Sénégal-Niger* where skin color is darkest, though apparently unrelated to prognatism. As noted above, Delafosse ultimately relies on linguistics as the most reliable means of ethnic division.

**The “Lobi Branch”**

Labouret directly challenges the reliability of both physical and linguistic criteria for ethnic division. He finds it impossible to visually distinguish a Tegué (pl. Teguessié) from a Lobi from a Birifor, and cites an overlap due to bilingualism and the common adoption of neighboring customs among the Lobi and Birifor. However in the same

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103 Ibid., 45.
106 Ibid., 111.
breath, Labouret defaults on a linguistic classification for a “Voltaic Family” along the following lines: Birifor: White Volta sub-group; Tégué: Koulango sub-group; Dian, Dorossié, Gan, and Lobi: Lobi sub-group.\textsuperscript{108} Labouret presents a list of ten words and their translations in each group as evidence which reveals the “close relationship” among them (Fig. A31).\textsuperscript{109} In spite of the linguistic particularities acknowledged among the groups, a collection of “ethnographic and social facts” allows Labouret to place six “tribes” (each of which includes four clans) into his newly created “Lobi Branch” as follows: Birifor, Dian, Dorossié, Gan, Lobi, and Teguessié (Fig. A32).\textsuperscript{110}

Labouret notes geographical divisions in the following terms: villages constitute a number of closed farms “randomly built” on fertile soils.\textsuperscript{111} The Dyan are based in Diébougou and extend into the upper valley of Bougouriba (Fig. A33). Roughly 1,200 of them have colonized Poura (a major site for gold deposits). The Gan are divided in the west of Lobi country among three unequal areas, of which the most important, he argues, is in contact with the Lobi on the one hand, and the Dioula and Dorossié on the other. The village of Lakosso corresponds to these points of contact. The Dorossié have advanced the furthest to the west. The Birifor, first bordering the Volta, were pushed west by the Oulé toward and then past Gaoua, where an isolated group exists in the Diébougou subdivision of the Dyan and Pougouli.\textsuperscript{112} I will address the Pougouli below. It is

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 50.
significant to note their absence from Labouret’s “Lobi Branch.” He notes that the Teguessié have mostly adopted Lobi names, and that the Gan and Dorossié carry Dyula names, such as Toukoro (tu koro), which means “near the wood.” This appears in contrast to a “properly” Gan name, such as Obri ([now Opité] ho piri) which means “black stone.”

According to Labouret, the “civilization,” the Lobi Branch consists of the following items: a) the absence of clothes and the usage a cache-sexe among men and leaves for women; lip labrets and excision among women and a lack of circumcision for men; b) square-shaped, clay houses that look like castles, whose walls consist of successively superimposed layers; also the use of clay beds; c) the remarkable use of metal and pottery and knowledge of lost-wax technique of brass casting; d) use of the bow and quivers of skin or wood, and arrows poisoned by Strophantus hispidus; e) the use of three-legged stools; f) village societies based on religion and sacred ritual; g) use of a sacred rhombus in the joro ceremony briefly discussed above (Fig. A34). This rhombus or bull-roarer is used in the joro ceremony briefly discussed above. Labouret notes that this preliminary list is restricted because it would be rash to quote further phenomena that have not been properly described.

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113 Ibid., 58.
114 Ibid., 13.
115 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

ART, ETHNICITY, AND COLONIAL VISION

Landscape and the Built Environment

Labouret notes that houses of the Lobi Branch are low, massive, have no sensible orientation, and yet no openings are directed to the east or west—the direction of the wind and the rain. Doors appear oriented to the north or south.\textsuperscript{116} Madeleine Père, however, maintains that Lobi doors always face the west, because the east is the land of the dead, the direction of wind, rain, back luck, and the general direction of malevolence.\textsuperscript{117} Labouret also reports that dwellings for the Lobi Branch are distributed in relation to water courses, and rely on the river rather than wells.\textsuperscript{118} They are never built at the base of the valley, due to the recurrence of floods that arrive in the wet season. Their farms are almost always placed at mid-slope, and their method of cultivation seems rather strange at first. In spite of the incredibly rocky condition of the soil, locations of fields are bitterly disputed among residents.\textsuperscript{119} Competition for rare areas of cultivatable land, reports Labouret, has led to a particular dispersal of houses that form what is very improperly called a village.\textsuperscript{120} The elongated characteristics of settled zones are determined by an attachment of man to the valley, in which he finds water, and to the proximity of the land itself to grow grain. Poor soil conditions and the need to move

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 8-9.

\textsuperscript{117} Madeleine Père, \textit{Les Lobi: Tradition et Changment}, 27.

\textsuperscript{118} Labouret, \textit{Les Tribus}, 9.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 10.
frequently justify the formation of groups of three or four houses and the jealous
color of its occupants, whose farms with crenellated walls are built face-to-face. He
notes that houses are usually placed in the same side of the valley and when other houses
arise on the opposite side, they nearly always form another group, distinct and generally
rivaling the first. A village is not formed by a group of isolated farms designated by
place-name such as “behind the stream, on the hill, etc.” (This appears awkward in
relation to his translation of the name for the village of Tambili, which means “on the
hill.”)121) The dispersal of these sites has not favored the emergence of a municipal
sentiment; the notion of common interest among occupants of the land hardly exists and
consequently, social organization is still rudimentary. Labouret writes that

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pourtant certains progrès ont été réalisés à ce point de vue par les Dian,
les Gan et les Dorossié. Ceux-ci, grâce à l’influence des Dioula, ont
commencé, il y a une soixante d’années, à se réunir dans des villages
comme Loto, Koubéo, Toundia, Lokosso, Obiri. On peut supposer que
cette concentration a favorisé l’évolution qui se constate dans ces trois
tribus.122
\]

Everything Labouret has to say, until these last two passages, seems fine, or
perhaps even natural. While one cannot dispute with Labouret’s eleven years of
experience with the Lobi, his image of Lobi culture appears stunted by the land itself—
there is a natural, **geological** base to their primitive being. His observations on the pattern
of development in the landscape appear careful, and respects that the built environment in
Lobi country does not mirror conventional models of Western urban design. At the same

121 Ibid., 57.

122 Ibid., 10. “However certain progress has been realized in this point of view by the Dian, Gan,
and Dorossié. These, thanks to the Dyula, began sixty years ago to reunite in villages like Loto,
Koubéo, Toundia, Lokosso, Obiri. Presumably, this concentration has promoted evolution
observed in these three tribes.”
time, those peoples to which he attributes an advanced state of evolution have “arrived” not through their relationship to the same, but in their relationship to the Dyula—whose refined indices of power point to everything but the land and its “natural” effect on social organization and evolutionary rank.

In terms of social organization, the Lobi posed a serious challenge for French and British colonists. Without a king or ruler to function as a territorial representative, administrators could not efficiently collect information or enforce rule within a “sphere of influence” that formed the colonial landscape. Among the peoples colonized by the French, only the Gan form a centralized kingdom. They have been in southwest Burkina since the late sixteenth century. Given their historical alliance with Ouattara royalty based at Kong in present day Côte d’Ivoire, Père writes that the French colonial installation of Sidi-mori Ouattara among the Gan proved to be a relatively stable transition of authority.

In 1931, Labouret reported that Sékou Ouattara captured Kong and installed a number of his descendants in the surrounding territory while local authority remained recognized. The exact date for this coup remains uncertain. In 1892, the French explorer Louis Gustave Binger wrote that Sékou rose to power in the late eighteenth century.

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century. However, History Professor Georges Niamkey Kodjo recently reported that Séku and his followers had frequented Lobi markets between 1700 and 1710 while attempting to control trade throughout the region. Sékou’s sixth son, Bakary Ouattara, raided the Lobi in 1815. While based at Kampti and Iridiaka, he led attacks against many villages, including the Lobi at Bomoï, Tinnkio, and Nako. He was also the source of information on local history for Binger. Bakary’s son Karakara Ouattara later attacked the Lobi, Gan, and others in a prolonged conflict that lasted well into the 1890s. In section one of the 1897 treaty signed by French Commandant Caudrelier and Baratou Ouattara, all Lobi country was placed under French protection.

French colonization developed not only through violence and suppression of pre-existing concepts of space and methods of land-use, but also through the appropriation of a centralized political system surrounding the Lobi with shared economic interest in the land. The French appropriation of Ouattara sovereignty maintained an image of political and cultural inferiority among the Lobi. Aspects of moral character and ethnic “type” were significantly reinforced through interpretations of material culture by colonial

127 Louis Gustave Binger, Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée par le pays de Kong et le Mossi: par le capitaine Binger (1887-1889) Ouvrage contenant une carte d'ensemble, de nombreux croquis de détail et cent soixante-seize gravures sur bois d'après le dessins de Riou (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1892), 324.


131 Ibid., 31.

132 Labouret, *Les Tribus*, 33. Also see so McFarland and Lawrence, xxix.

ethnographers such Maurice Delafosse, Edmond Ruelle, Léon Charles, and Henri Labouret.

To create their publications, each relied heavily on information provided by the Dyula, a hierarchical Islamic merchant-class society of Mande origin whose presence in the Voltaic region dates to the early fifteenth century.\(^\text{134}\) These colonial informants belonged to the same kingdom of Kong engaged in conflict with the Lobi throughout the nineteenth century.\(^\text{135}\) The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are known for extreme religious intolerance among Islamic states for “pagans” in West Africa,\(^\text{136}\) and aside from this period of holy-wars, commercial interest in gold significantly informs the broader scope of historical conflict in Lobi country. However political, religious, or commercial tensions became, Lobi reception of the French was already wrought with conflict due to their alliance with the Dyula. The latter provided a model for the French reception of the Lobi as a “synonym for heathenism, primitiveness, nakedness, political fragmentation and bitter resistance to all foreign forms of rule.”\(^\text{137}\)

When it was first published by Charles in 1911, Lobi artwork was presented as monstrous and inferior to objects made by their peaceful neighbors, the Birifor (Fig. A35 and A36).\(^\text{138}\) The Lobi is presented as a drunkard, a lover of war and plunder, and finds


\(^{135}\) Kambou-Ferrand, *Peuples Voltaïques et Conquête Colonial*, 216.

\(^{136}\) Bravmann, 13.


\(^{138}\) Charles, 207-8.
glory only in killing. This moral character is supported by interpretations of Lobi furniture and architecture. For example men’s three-legged stools are also presented as weapons and roof terraces are shields against enemy attack. Even as the Lobi is hard-working and intelligent, he is violent and quarrelsome. The one historical case study that Charles uses to justify this “moral portrait” dates to events in 1904. Fixed in an eternal trance of hatred,

_Le temps ne prescrit pas le crime aux yeux de celui qui doit en tirer vengeance. La haine des Lobi est implacable et leur vindicte n’a point de bornes. On en jugera par cette affaire commence en 1904 et qui n’était pas encore terminée deux ans après._

The event involves a man from the village of Gamba who stole an injured deer from a hunter at Dakpo. The hunter reclaimed his deer and took an ox from the parents of the thief, to which the thief responded by taking a woman from Dakpo. Battle ensued for more than twenty months, only to be halted by colonial intervention. Resolution was not definitive, and such is the “timeless” state of Lobi anarchy. However “les Dioula,” reports Charles, “peuplade inoffensive de colporteurs, nous donnent une note à peu près exacte de la mentalité et de l’état social du people Lobi, dont ils ont une peur d’ailleurs

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139 Ibid., 207.
140 Ibid., 209.
141 Ibid., 207.
142 Ibid., 210.
143 Ibid.
très justifiée.”¹⁴⁴ Their life is like that of an eternal trance, living in constant fear of the enemy, and “they do not like us.”¹⁴⁵

Six years earlier Lieutenant Ruelle reported that their “favorite past-time is war,” and their art is “merely representations of men and women in wood… [and] they have no sense of perspective or shade.”¹⁴⁶ Architecture is described in great detail, noted for its lack of chimneys and arches, and furniture is limited to small tripods that roughly imitate the shape of an animal.¹⁴⁷ However the Lobi have “no notion of space” and astronomical constellations appear significant only through variation in number from one evening to the next.¹⁴⁸ Such aesthetic and intellectual shortcomings are matched by a vague concept of religion¹⁴⁹ and lack of authority beyond a domestic patriarch.¹⁵⁰ Their neighbors, the Birifor, are considered nearly identical in terms of social structure, moral character, and language (with a slight variation in “dialect”), and Ruelle suggests the two should be considered an ethnic composite, the “Lobi-Birifon.”¹⁵¹ If this classification appears at all artificial, he admits that “the abuse of names is, in fact, a rule in black country,” and that:

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 210.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 211.
¹⁴⁶Ruelle, 660.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 666.
¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 667.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 661.
¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 662.
¹⁵¹ Ibid., 668.
Les Dioulas ou marchands, du qui, le plus souvent, nous obtenons nos renseignements, ont coutume de baptiser, à leur guise, les populations qui’ils traversent ou côtoient : de là, partout, une multitude d’appellations qui ne répondent réellement à rien et, lorsqu’on les admet sur les cartes, sont cause, pour les voyageurs qui en font usage, d’erreurs et d’ennuis.152

The inferiority of Lobi art is presented in contrast to “more developed” 153 forms of art from the Mossi Empire in the north, and interpretations as a whole are justified by the reliability information provided by Dyula merchants.

That same year Delafosse published a survey of West African languages based on Dyula classifications,154 which Labouret roundly criticizes for a lack of published citations.155 In 1908, Delafosse wrote about the art of peoples living at Donko, approximately twenty-five miles east of Gaoua. He describes them as the “Birifo” (now referred to as Birifor), and unlike Ruelle, specifies their linguistic separation from the Lobi, although artistic forms between them (and surrounding neighbors) appear shared. As a “véritable musée et la chose la plus curieuse que j’aie vue jusqu’ici au pays Noir,” writes Delafosse, the inside of the sokala, or Birifo house, is lined with ceramic pots on

152 Ibid. “The Dyoulas, or merchants from whom we most often get our information, are wont to baptize, as they please, the populations which they pass or co-exist with; and thence, everywhere, a multitude of names which really respond to nothing and, when accepted on maps, are the cause of errors and problems for travelers who use them.”

153 Ibid., 683.

154 Delafosse, Vocabulaires comparatifs de plus de 60 langues ou dialectes parlés à la Côte d’Ivoire et dans les régions limitrophes, avec des notes linguistiques et ethnologiques, une bibliographie et une carte (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1904), passim.

155 Labouret, Nouvelles Notes : sur les tribus rameau Lobi, leurs migrations, leur évolution, leur parlers et ceux de leurs voisins (Dakar : Ifan, 1958), 67.
one side, above which a hole in the ceiling allows light to pierce the darkness. At the entrance, he describes a heap of chicken feathers strewn upon the floor and on large calabashes caked in blood, the jaws and skulls of domestic and wild animals, and some Dagara chairs which form a mound roughly twenty inches in height (Fig. A37). Toward the back, in a single row, two female and three male earthen statues sit with their hands on their knees “dans l’attitude hiératique des statues égyptiennes.” The central figure represents a middle-aged man with an “inferior” jaw surrounded by a beard. To his left, a bow, and to the right, an iron oil-lamp. The central male is also flanked by two female figures with large pendulous breasts, and the group is framed by two smaller male figures that Delafosse takes to be a family portrait. “Ces statues ont un tel air de vérité,” he writes, that one feels to be truly in the presence of humans, and “c’est seulement lorsque l’œil s’est habitué à l’obscurité que l’on découvre que ces êtres sont en terre.” Further back, Delafosse describes two “rather crude,” enormous animal heads also made of earth, and behind them, a huge pile of cow, goat, and antelope skulls. Between the animal heads and earthen statues, and between the arms of the statues themselves appear a multitude of human statuettes, varying in size. Some are made of terracotta and others are carved from wood. Delafosse reports that someone told him the small figures represent the ancestors of the chief of Donko, buried under the ground of the sokala in a

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156 Delafosse, Les Frontières de la Côte d’Ivoire de la Côte d’Or et du Sudan (Paris: Masson et Cie, 1908), 179. “veritable museum and the most curious thing I have ever seen in Black Africa.”

157 Ibid., 180. “In the hieratic attitude of Egyptian statues.”

158 Ibid. “The statues have such an air of truth… it is only when the eye becomes accustomed the darkness that one discovers that they are made of earth.”
cave that communicates with the exterior by a conduit closed with an urn. Feathers, skulls, blood, and cowries placed in chairs represent the offerings made by the living in order to permit the dead to live comfortably in the afterlife. Delafosse notes that these customs and mode of burial exist among the Birifor, Dagara and the Lobi, with simple modifications in detail that separate them. The Lobi are indistinguishable in appearance from the Birifor, have the same proud countenance, dress and ornamentation (which include the lip labrets worn by women), and their t’or (pl. t’ona) or houses appear similar except for the parapet structure on the roof terrace that is more elevated. While Charles’ 1911 account of carved wooden stools and figure sculpture is commonly attributed as the earliest description of Lobi art, Delefosse’s earlier report is drawn from the observation of objects common to the Lobi, and his appreciation appears less distorted by racial prejudice.

The Seat of Aggression

For Labouret, the Dyula are presented as a political role-model for the Lobi and not just a source of information. By placing them at the head of a Lobi township, locals would become accustomed to authority and hierarchy inherent to Mande caste-societies. After proving themselves sufficiently civilized, the Lobi would safely assume control of their newly formed state of centralized power. Labouret’s notes on

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159 Ibid., 181.
artwork include the same rhetorical devices used by Charles, and like him, attention is first directed to the “most remarkable” of objects—men’s three-legged stools that also function as war-clubs.\(^{162}\) He expresses strong admiration for the careful attention given to carved facial features in anthropomorphic stools often decorated with a janus-form head, which unfortunately are not pictured. He does not provide any interpretation for the stools beyond their secondary use as war-clubs.

Recalling his work as a colonial judge at Gaoua from 1956-57, Roland Valdelièvre notes that “concerning inhabitants, my thirst for exoticism was well served.” This image is described in terms of long columns of naked women on their way to the market and men who use three-legged stools as weapons.\(^{163}\) This function is not something I intend to dispute, but what is problematic about the colonial representation of \(dako,\)\(^ {164}\) or Lobi stools, however, is the continually limited emphasis and ostensible “novelty” of this secondary role. It is presented as evidence of an ethnic type whose ‘love of conflict’ takes the form of a casual or “natural” hostility, where even furniture is a weapon. The novel integration of such disparate objects also creates a distance between a colonial ‘self’ and the exotic ‘other,’ where singular and specialized use is the mark of a civilized man. Beyond this utilitarian and violent function of the object, religious context is never recognized, for to do so would reveal a cultural history and discrete form of social organization that must be rendered invisible. Within a theocracy, this was not difficult to do. Without a king, chief, or single source any kind to provide a taxonomy of

\(^{162}\) Labouret, \textit{Les Tribus}, 188.


\(^{164}\) Meyer, 52.
meaning, the broader political significance of religious objects was merely domestic and incidental at most. The general significance of shrine figures described by Delafosse, for example, is limited to technical prowess of representational verisimilitude.

Meyer notes that in contrast to bateba, anthropomorphic stools are not created as vessels for thila, and that they were entirely unknown to sculptors working in Wourbira. He mentions their use as weapons in case of “emergencies” and discusses stylistic variations among local sculptors, but does not explore the religious dimensions of the object. This may be because his general focus is on objects inhabited by thila.

I saw many examples this type created by the sculptor Kambou Massep who lives at Tambili, just east of Kampti (Fig. A38). Massep informed me that his janus-head stools were created for the parent’s of twins. Created on speculation, the price of 5,000 CFA was carved into the surface several examples (Fig. A39). The longer, frontal leg in his stools project down at a sharp angle away from the edge of the seat, and is capped by “foot” marked by a small flange. Massep’s carved janus-form heads appear in a conventional type, where two opposing faces are joined at the back of the skull and share the same neck and crested coiffure. In two examples of bicephalic stools I saw by Sib Poulfouté at Latara, the heads project separately from the rear of the seat (Fig. A40). In one example, both heads appear bald, and in the other, which appeared much newer, the male head on the left is flanked by parallel braid-like ridges, is coiffed by a crest, and finished with a tail at the base of the skull. Labouret describes the same hairstyle among both men and women, and is seen in the stool by Sikire Kambire in the Stanley

165 Meyer, 119.

166 Ibid., 187. “Quelques-unes gardent sur le sommet du crâne une sorte de crête quelquefois nattée en tresses parallèles ; comme des coiffures masculines.”
Collection at the University of Iowa Museum of Art (Fig. A41) and many other objects attributed to the Lobi. In Poulfoutré’s stool, the female head on the right includes the braid-like parallel ridges and tail but not the sagittal crest. He explained to me that stool represents an ancestral pair. Nothing was mentioned about its use as a weapon.

In contrast to Lobi stools, Labouret describes *bateba*, or figure sculptures found in nearly all houses, as “very coarse… ugly and disproportionate… quickly executed and carved anyhow.” ¹⁶⁷ They form a contrast with smaller figures that hang from the neck, which appear to be the result of a prolonged effort and are therefore more attractive.¹⁶⁸ He reports that sculpting is not the work of a specialist although most are gifted in the capacity to carve wood, and one in particular had become quite adept in copying objects for export to European collectors.¹⁶⁹ One such object was a Baule mask that Labouret had collected during his recent military conquests in Côte d’Ivoire (Fig. A28).¹⁷⁰ Meyer identifies this carver as Sikire Kambire.¹⁷¹ Clay figures found around and within Lobi houses appear more common to Labouret, and like carved wooden figures, are “rather crude.”¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.
¹⁶⁸ I saw one attached to the necklace of a child at Gbombohora, but was not given permission to ask questions or photograph it without the father present.
¹⁶⁹ Labouret, *Les Tribus*, 188.
Among all the villages I visited in Lobi country, one of the largest quantities of wooden *bateba* appeared in a pile for sale by a Dyula merchant at the central market in Gaoua (Fig. A42), located directly adjacent to the mosque. Meyer notes that Dyula merchants were critical to the development of European interest in Lobi art beginning in the early 1970s, and they had already professed their “peaceful” role in European trade to Binger in 1892. Anthropologist and art historian Christopher Steiner argues that their interest in the trade of African art is indeed religious, and not purely commercial insofar as this activity effectively decontextualizes, and therefore neutralizes such “idolatrous” objects. The notion of monolithic iconoclasm among Muslims in Africa is problematic however, and assumes that adherence to religious law strictly governs artistic practice. Art History Professor Renee Bravmann has shown that explicit prohibitions against representational artwork do not appear in the Koran itself, but are contained within *hadith* literature created roughly 300 hundred years later. In my experience, Lobi sculptors were unconcerned with the religious convictions of the buyer, and Da Sansan, a diviner I met with in Batié Sud, incorporated the Koran itself into his practice (Fig. A43). While Sansan did not read aloud specific passages from the text, his physical manipulation of the printed copy was combined with casting cowries before a shrine composed of wooden *bateba*, eggs, and small vessels whose water was cast upon the shrine. He explained that Allah was but one of many gods called upon to bestow

173 Meyer, 155.


176 Bravmann, 17.
favor in divination, and in contrast to diviners I met with elsewhere, cowries and the Koran were his primary objects of divination. He did not touch the *bateba* at all, and their surface betrayed a lack of physical manipulation. Sansan’s syncretistic use of objects made evident his liberal notion of religious law and artistic practice, inasmuch as the *bateba* were integral to his ability to consult the supernatural. His divinatory focus on the Koran and cowries also signaled to me the historical spread of Islam in West Africa by Dyula merchants through the same type of mediums, where cowries were used a historical form of currency and the Koran attested to physical proof of the word of God.

While it is known that salt formed primary commodity in trade for gold among the Lobi,¹⁷⁷ the local use of cowries was no doubt a part of that religious economy and the integration of Islamic and animist faith. While Islamic faith appeared common throughout my travel in Lobi country, it is perhaps significant to note that I only saw it integrated into animist divinatory practice along the southern frontier of my field of research closest to the Ivory Coast.

At the market in Gaoua, all of the Lobi objects for sale were more or less covered with a sacrificial patina, and some were much more convincing than others. The total lack of freshly carved sculptures signaled the merchant’s exclusive sale of ritual objects, or those things which had only been used to communicate with *thila*. They formed a stark contrast to those highly polished objects sold by Massèp, whose patina literally included the selling price. I have no to doubt that there has been plenty of art theft in Lobi country, and I also have no reason to assume that this merchant had stolen his collection because he appeared to be a Muslim “iconoclast.” Meyer notes that it was through such

traders that some Lobi sculptors were able to develop artistic and technical talent while meeting an increased demand. The many bòber canes sculpted by Kambire for Labouret have been recently discussed as an example of how mass-production compromises the religious function of such objects. And of course Walter Benjamin had confirmed this general principle much earlier. Bosc notes that the Lobi sculptor Tyohèptè Palé sold to the Hausa for decades without significantly changing the style or type of his objects. This evidence challenges the assumption that Muslim merchants have an inherently negative impact on the production of Lobi art. Their role in commercially supporting sculptors in the region is obviously significant, and as seen with Sansan, Islamic faith has been woven into divinatory practice.

Without Dyula traders, the history of brass jewelry among the Lobi would be much less significant, as Labouret reports copper as a principal form of early exchange. He appears impressed by the “remarkable fidelity” with which their brass bracelets imitate those made of vegetal fiber. Pendants of coupling chameleons are worn by women as fertility amulets, and a serpentine form is identified as a puff adder motif. Chameleon and serpent pendants, small wooden bateba, and small iron or brass chains are worn on the arm or leg by infants to combat a vengeful spirit that causes

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178 Meyer, 127.
179 Bognolo, Lobi, 28.
180 Bosc, Tyohèptè Palé, 34.
181 Labouret, Les Tribus, 190.
182 Ibid., 189.
183 Ibid., 190.
repeated still-birth known as *bi ki mbiri*.\(^{184}\) Bognolo also identifies them as *bisana puú*, meaning ‘rotten children’ or ‘aborted fetuses,’\(^{185}\) and are kept away from male infants who wear small wooden *bùthib pumbiirà* around the neck.\(^{186}\) Infant girls are ensured protection from the spirit only through arranged marriage with the son of the diviner present at the birth of the child.\(^{187}\)

While French colonial ethnographers may present a consensus on the ethnic inferiority of the Lobi, the same is not true for their artwork. Charles is surely the least impressed, but Delafosse and Labouret reveal moments of sincere admiration. Any true respect for the Lobi, however, is clouded by a repeated theme— their essentially violent nature and love of war. Charles’ case study for this timeless behavior traces it back only six years prior to the publication of his report. Drawing on Binger’s text, Labouret goes much further back and investigates the history of conflict with the Watara of Kong in the late eighteenth century.

Labouret criticizes Binger for the politically naïve reception of his Dyula (of Kong) hosts at Diébougou, and attributes this to the “peaceful nature” of Binger’s mission, which caused him to find the Dyula equally peaceful in character; their “horror of war” becoming a favorable enterprise only when the integrity of their territory appeared compromised.\(^{188}\) Regarding Sékou’s son Karamokho-Oulé, the *djemmàa* or

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 301.

\(^{185}\) Bognolo, *Lobi*, 17.

\(^{186}\) Ibid., 19. This information was collected by Bognolo in Nanmpoura, Djigoué district, 1992.

\(^{187}\) Ibid.

\(^{188}\) Labouret, *Les Tribus*, 31. Also see Binger, 325.
absolute ruler of Kong, Binger ensures us that he does not engage in looting or war, and that thanks to this "just man of integrity, esteemed and liked by all, the Kong States live in perfect peace. There are no known enemies of this brave leader," and among others, the Lobi are named as vassal warriors of the state. 189 While nearly forty years separate the work of Binger and Labouret, this passage reveals conflicting cultural values projected upon the Lobi from within the French colonial administration itself. Labouret argues that Binger’s presentation of the Dyula as “peaceful” is unjustified due to their installation of authority by force and engagement in pillage and plunder whenever able. 190 After unsuccessful raids against Lobi and Dagara in the east, the Dyula formed an alliance with the Dyan in the west, which had become weak through conflict with the Birifor and Wilé. 191 This new alliance allowed for the unpatrolled pillage and exploitation of resources unchecked by central powers at Kong. 192 Fifteen leaders from Kong ruled successively in the region before French arrival. These raids were also accompanied by conflicts born of the slave trade, which the Lobi engaged in themselves. 193 The Lobi were at an extreme disadvantage, as Richard Kuba, head of the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt am Main, has shown their central location in a network of major nineteenth century slave-posts at Kong, Sya (present day Bobo-Dioulasso), and Wa

189 Binger, 324-5.
190 Labouret, Les Tribus, 31.
191 Kambou-Ferrand, Peuples Voltaïques et Conquête Colonial, 215-16.
192 Ibid., 216.
193 Ruelle, 662.
Residing just northwest of Gaoua, the Phuo (also called Pwa and Pougouli) were also engaged in slave trade at this time, and Lobi were numbered among its captives. They were not taken for trade, but assimilation to facilitate territorial expansion. This exogamous method ensured that tensions among rival candidates were avoided within the Phuo clan itself.

As ceremonial leaders of *joro*, the Phuo (and Jãa) continue to hold respectful authority over the Lobi and other initiates within the ceremony. Why the Phuo refrain from undergoing *joro* initiation themselves has not been well documented, but perhaps their history in the slave trade sheds light on a history of conflict that has evolved from slavery and assimilation to a respected bond of religious authority.

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195 Ibid., 155.

CHAPTER 4

MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

Pre-colonial History

Techiman (or Takyiman), Ghana, is said to be the ancient home of Lobi from the Dà matriclan. It is also the “legendary birthplace” of the Akan peoples. Akan business with English sea merchants dates to the mid-16th century, and indeed their trade routes ran along the west bank of the Black Volta River, currently occupied by the Lobi and many of their formerly-Ghanaian neighbors. Dagomba wars of the 1770s coincide precisely with the first wave of western migrations by the Lobi across the Mouhoun River. This history locates the Lobi directly within a network of local and international economic and political exchange (and conflict) that long precedes the French colonial encounter. It also points to a deep history of trade with Hausa merchants along a route connected to the west of the Mouhoun. Last but not least, it strongly suggests that the Lobi are hardly so isolated as to suffer from a lack of cultural exchange.


In his presentation of pre-colonial events between the Koulango and Lobi, Labouret notes in 1931 that given the widespread nature of his story, it is “more exact” than that given by Delafosse, whose Koulango informants claimed descent from Yendi in present-day Ghana.\(^{202}\) They have two branches, he maintains, which are the Koulango “proper,” and the Nabé, called Lorhon by the Dyula, and Lorhoma by the Lobi and Birifor.\(^{203}\) Labouret attributes the founding of Koulango at present-day Bouna (Kodo and Kenngué) to the three children of a Mandé hunter killed by Dagara hunters.\(^{204}\) During this time a Dagara hunter named Toroboussien killed an elephant at Kenngué, where he also gave many gifts to Manntou, daughter of the village’s founder.\(^{205}\) Manntou later bore a son and sent a messenger to tell Toroboussien, but the messenger could not explain because he could not speak Dagari. Toroboussien confusingly thought more gifts were now in demand, and asked “Bun nkani (what is missing)?” The messenger misunderstood this to be the name of Manntou’s child.\(^{206}\)

Bounkani developed an imperial character early in his life, recruiting partisans from the surrounding area. He also enrolled the Nabé, which explains why the people of Bounkani are sometimes called Koulango, Nabé, or Lorhon.\(^{207}\) Bounkani and his three sons extended their reign in the north as far as Gaoua, Tiolo, and Pandiao, and to the

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\(^{203}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{204}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{205}\) Ibid. Kenngué was founded by Kahé, daughter of Kodo who was killed by the Dagara hunters.

\(^{206}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{207}\) Ibid., 22.
south near the Kong at Gaouy and Balabo. This period saw the succession of several migrations that passed through Gaoua, beginning with the Gan, then the Teguessié, and later the Lobi and Birifor. Following architectural traditions of Kodo (present day Bouna), they built houses of stone in the region while looking for gold. Well-experienced miners from the ancient kingdom of Abron joined Bounkani and worked among Lohron blacksmiths. Labouret reports that the mine shafts dug into lateritic soils around Tiolo and Dimana are the result of their early efforts. The Lobi soon picked up on the practice, but without iron tools they were unable to excel in the industry like their neighbors.208

Labouret notes that due to the “isolation of the tribe,” the Lobi were unable to expand this industry and it remained confined in the region among families who first practiced it: the Gan, Birifor, while the majority of Teguessié ignore it.209 What were the circumstances of this isolation? Jeanne-Michèle Kambou Ferrand writes that

*les populations du Sud-ouest voltaïque, en utilisent la guerre comme principal moyen pour résoudre les conflits sociaux, avaient fini par isoler leur pays et à le protéger de conquérants africains de la fin du XXIX*\textsuperscript{e} *siècle.*\textsuperscript{210}

However, this image of isolation does not stand up well to the history of trade and conflict mentioned above. The tsetse flies in the Mouhoun River may have prevented Mossi cavalry from conquering the region; the Lobi resisted defeat by the Ouattara in the nineteenth century and were not easily “pacified” by the French. But it is problematic to bind this history of colonial resistance to isolation. Its logic suggests that defeat is the index of an inclusive disposition or cultural receptivity to the surrounding environment.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{210} Kambou-Ferrand, *Peuples Voltaïques*, 387.
Père has revealed that beyond the Lobi, the Dian, Gan, Pwa, Dagara, Dagara-Lobr, and Birifor had also proceeded from Techiman before crossing the Mouhoun into their present-day territory in southwest Burkina Faso. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a period of conflict in Ghana saw the consolidation of the Asante Empire under Osei Tutu at Kumasi, just seventy-five miles south of Techiman. In spite of the lack of hard evidence on relations with the Asante, it is hard to believe that the Lobi were also “isolated” from this important center of power in West Africa.

The Village Shrine and Zone of Influence

Oral traditions maintain that the Lobi were driven across the Mouhoun River by pressure and attack from “strangers.” There was also the promise of agriculturally fertile land along the west bank of the river, which is also spiritually powerful. Village shrines established throughout the region by early settlers attest to this spiritual power, and remain as important features of a contemporary landscape that pre-dates European intervention. Actions and beliefs associated with particular dîthîla define the regional scope of a Lobi village, and domestic power is further maintained through household


shrines that complement them. I visited a díthíl at Hélo maintained by Youl Samir. It is composed entirely of natural stones and pottery sherds (Fig. A45). Pottery is made exclusively by women in Lobi country, and those for shrines can only be made those who have finished bearing children.215

From 1980 to 1990, Madeleine Père led a survey on migration history among 800 villages in Lobi country (Fig. A46).216 Questions were not posed on the details of initiation ceremonies such as joro, which generally retrace migration routes, but focused on matters of lineage chronology and shrines established during the founding of local villages.217 The inception of a Lobi village occurs through the matriclan of the founder who appropriates the ‘zone of influence’ in a given territory, and the establishment of a wathil shrine is essential to this process.218

Village shrines function as a vessel for a spirit that protects the lineage of the founding matriclan. The wathil shrine of the Puúdará, based at Tiankoura (near present day Nako) dates to 1760 (Fig. A47).219 It consists of six main elements, including three grooves carved into the surface of a large boulder. The grooves are the trace of a sacred “slap” received by the village founder, discussed below.220 According to Khabira

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217 Ibid., 59. Village priests, as well as male and female elders and diviners, served as the main sources for this information.

218 Ibid., 60.

219 Ibid., 61.

220 Ibid. Père identifies three grooves, while the photograph and illustration show four.
Sokhithé, dithildaár of Tiankoura, the shrine dates to Bebe Khabir’s founding of Puúra (just south of Tiankoura), who found a thil (spirit) while hunting. The shrine also includes the partially calcinated trunk of a shrub, a white stone plate, tree trunk, upright white stone, and sacrificial libations. The stones are known as “the little ones” next to Bunè, a thil discovered at Tebiwo, which had already been settled by the Khabira clan. They had recently been defeated there by the Dà thuno clan and left the area. They later returned to sacrifice a cow, three chickens, two pintades, and to make an offering of millet beer to the Bunè, effectively securing its support. Under its direction they headed toward Puúra, near Nako, but were stopped at Tiankoura by Lùu, a wathil kotin (great spirit) of the Khabira clan who ordered him to go no further. Bunè persisted and was given a “slap” by Lùu that remains visible on the rock today.221

Also during the late eighteenth century, the dith of Bakulonà was created by the Téesè,222 whose presence in southwest Burkina Faso preceded Gan settlements during the sixteenth century. They undergo the joro initiation along with the Lobi, Birifor, and Dagara. However, they conduct also their own initiation ceremonies called Dariwé every four years at Yulawo, and hold religious authority over the land and water.223 Père notes that after the Téesè established the dithil at Bakoulonà, all dithila in the Gaoua region were installed in the same manner.224 Like the dithil at Tiankoura, the physical presence of the shrine appears rather understated through the use of natural elements.

221 Ibid.
222Ibid., 64.
223 Bognolo, Lobi, 9.
224 Père, “Chronique des villages,” 64.
Placed at the base of an *Acacia albida* (which Père notes has no regional significance among *dithila*), it consists of five main elements, two of which are almost entirely hidden. First, a sacred stone is placed beneath a ceramic pot. The stone was taken from the Mouhoun River at Donko, and refers to the crossing point for the deceased along a path to the land of the ancestors.²²⁵ Père notes that the deceased must be “particularly pure” to cross this threshold, and if even slightly unworthy, one must go to Dapolà to negotiate traversal by means of a mythical canoe that very difficult to obtain.²²⁶ Above the buried stone, a clay pot is covered by a mound of kaolin clay taken from the local environment. The pot contains water drawn from a sacred well named Baka (at Bakoulonà) that never runs dry. Another *dithil* is described from Sinaperduó, placed at the base of a jé tree (*Pléocarpus-carpus erinaceus*), whose name means “gathering.”

Unidentified stones appear at the base of the tree, beneath which are sacred cowries and traces of kaolin. A root that extends from the trunk includes a natural serpentine form. As a natural form, it may not have the apotropaic function of serpentine motifs seen in Lobi divination drawings and brass jewelry.

The significance of the three *dithila* addressed above is presented by Père in terms of the migration histories they are linked to and supernatural powers they contain. Their dynamics are recounted by the Lobi themselves, who continue to defer religious authority to the “original” occupants of the land. Along with the condition of “purity” required for admission to the land of the ancestors, these two forms of essentialism are the basic indices of an organized society that were nevertheless invisible to nearly all European

²²⁵Ibid.
²²⁶Ibid.
colonists.227 These village shrines also point to the precise locations of the Lobi in northwest Ghana prior to the late eighteenth century, such as Nyolé and Lawra, from which the Kambou matriclan arrived. They crossed the Mouhoun River at Dapola, site of the mythical canoe.228


228 Père, “Chronique des villages,” 64.
CHAPTER 5

COLONIAL CONFLICT AND COLLABORATION

The Lust for Gold

The French occupation of southwest Burkina Faso began in 1897 under the command of Battalion Chief Caudrelier. The following year, lieutenant Modest led the first attack against the Lobi at Gairon, a village inhabited by the Kambou matriclan. Both local and European invasions of Lobi country appear heavily tied to its reputation for gold. First Dyula and then Mossi merchants had established a profit from gold trade in the region, and European commercial interests followed. In 1897, a letter from the French Minister of Colonies to the governor of Côte d'Ivoire highlighted the economic potential of their mission: “cette localité (Bouna) à notre influence, il y aurait intérêt nous relier au Gourounsi, non seulement par le pays de Oua, mais encore par le Lobi, dont vous ne sauriez perdre de vue l’importance en tant que région aurifère.” Labouret reports that a colonial survey from 1922 had shown this reputation to be unjustified and that locals had given up exploitation due to lack of profit.

Gold-panning, however, which the Lobi had learned from the Koulango (who in turn

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233 Labouret, Les Tribus, 73.
were taught by the Asante), remained active around Gaoua, and was practiced by women.\textsuperscript{234} His map shows a concentrated strip of activity from Nako to Gaoua (Fig. A48), where the Compagnie minière de Haute-Volta was established in 1929, but closed in bankruptcy eight years later.\textsuperscript{235} In spite of inconsistent profits in the immediate region, Gaoua’s location remained along trade routes between significant mines at Poura in the northeast and major consumers in the south, such as the Kong and Ashanti (Fig. A49).\textsuperscript{236}

But the lure of gold has not been identified as a source which caused the Lobi to displace the Gan at Gaoua at the beginning of the nineteenth century, some thirty years after they migrated across the Volta River.\textsuperscript{237} “We have to remember,” notes Meyer, “that adult Lobi are always farmers first,” and that the Lobi arrived in present day southwest Burkina in search of better farmland.\textsuperscript{238} Interestingly, this agricultural “essence” of Lobi ethnicity has also been used as an index of cultural inferiority. Jack Goody reports that characterizations of the Lobi as farmer, along with women’s preference for wearing lip labrets, has “led ‘others’ to dismiss them as ‘dirty.’”\textsuperscript{239}

If the commercial value of gold did not lure the Lobi across the Black Volta River in 1770, it plays an important role in local folklore. In the story of the hunter, the

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 75.

\textsuperscript{235} Kiéthéga, 192-3.

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 174.

\textsuperscript{237} Filoux, Les Sentiers de la nuit, 18.

\textsuperscript{238} Meyer, 15.

antelope, and the curious woman, a hunter saves a faun from death, and in return the mother antelope pours her milk into his ear to understand the language of animals. He is promised riches and is warned that he will die if he shares his secret. One day the Lobi hunter sees a herd of cattle led by a Fulani shepherd. He overhears a cow say

“Voyez tout cet or,” dit l'un d'eux. Mais un autre le réprimande: “Tais-toi! Si ces gens-là comprenaient notre langue! — Ils ne nous entendent pas, s'ils savaient ce que nous savons, ils prendraient un poulet et un cola blancs pour faire un sacrifice à l'endroit où je suis, ils y creuseraient un trou et en sortiraient de l'or.”240

The hunter heard everything, followed the directions, and found a large quantity of gold. Later on, while having sexual intercourse with his wife, he overhears mice commenting on his actions and he erupts into laughter. His wife accuses him of mocking her and she demands an explanation. Under pressure, he reveals his secret and falls dead just as the mother antelope had warned. Before his interment however, the corpse is interrogated and it accuses the wife of murder. Tragically, she confesses guilt and is put to death. Labouret reports that the story is used to remind women of the dangers of being overly confident, and admonishes them to keep certain things secret.241 This passage also demonstrates the marginal significance of gold within Lobi tradition, for while the hunter succeeds in finding it, it is not the currency itself which increases his temporary wealth, but his ability to understand the language of animals. Indeed, hunting and agriculture,

240 Labouret, Les Tribus, 209. “Look at all this gold!” said one of them. But another scolds him: “Shut up! If these people understand our language! They don’t hear us, if they know what we know, they would take a chicken and kola nut to make a sacrifice here, they would dig a hole and gold would come out.”

241 Ibid., 210.
rather than commercial prospects, are commonly presented as factors for migration among the Lobi.242

Klaus Schneider reports that gold is considered a dangerous living material among the Lobi, and that its handling requires a number of constraints.243 This danger appears not within any natural form of the mineral itself, but through its commercial circulation. Schneider recounts the history of events in a market at Ouélé-Ouélé, where a Lobi man named Tyanko Da traded local gold for salt—a rare and highly coveted commodity—with a Dyula trader, well before European presence in the region. Over time the man became quite wealthy, but suddenly died through unknown causes. A diviner was consulted and the cause of death was identified as a living force within the gold. Other maladies of hallucination and physical pain arose in connection with its use, whose power was likened to lightning. A solution to the problem appeared through the intervention of thila, spirits that inhabit the natural world and special objects used to communicate with Thangba Yu, the supreme creator. The thila had ordained that one must pass through a cooling treatment which rid the mineral of its toxicity, defined as follows: bury it either at the edge of a cesspool, or beneath a domestic dung heap or barn; throw it with force at the head of a cow; pass it through a cow before placing it in fresh cow dung and then bury the dung. If the gold is found by a woman, it must be smashed against the head of a young cow four times without looking into its eyes, and for men, three times until the animal is dead. After this the nugget may be cut into small pieces.

242 Meyer, 15.

and sold without danger, but the meat of the cow must not be eaten. If the animal is not killed by this process the gold cannot be sold. Gold buried beneath a barn must remain in place for ten days, and for nuggets buried in manure or near a cesspool, a diviner must wait a full year before assessing the danger of the object. Once the gold has been successfully neutralized, a piece must be given to the dithildaar, or priest of the thil of the village. He buys this with 3,000 cowries, with which a chicken is purchased and sacrificed upon the village shrine, or dithil. The original owner of the gold removes a small piece to trade for one or two chickens to sacrifice to thila inhabiting his own domestic shrine.244 The circulation of gold in the region is thus tied to the power of the village shrine, and this in turn bolsters the authority of dithildaara or village priests who settle local disputes and maintain sacred law.

These divinatory prescriptions are not shared to suggest that the handling of gold among Dyula traders and Europeans was any less “ritualistic.” Their profit derived from its trade was equally tied to the display of cultural prerogative (however politically centralized and monotheistic in faith). It is no small wonder that such parallels exist between polytheism and “acephalous” societies on the one hand, and monotheism and “hyper-cephalous” or politically centralized societies on the other.

**French Colonial Law**

On November 10, 1903, a dual system of “indigenous justice” was implemented by French decree and applied to the “cercle du lobi.”245 A tribune of the province was

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244 Ibid., 196. If the gold is found by a woman, it is kept in the possession of her eldest brother as a dowry for the sons of his sister who want to marry.

245 Charles, 219.
controlled by the “indigenous population” and was responsible for settling civil and correctional business. The tribunal de cercle judged criminal affairs in which the indigenous population served only as consultants. French colonial administrator Charles finds the true essence of the Lobi in this marginalized role. His penchant for merciless violence appears here in judicial form and rarely strays from the following verdict when consulted in court: “Do what you will, but my opinion is that we kill him.”

“'It is bloody and cruel,’ notes Charles, and ‘it is very lobi.’”

During his rule as Colonial Judge at Gaoua roughly fifty years later, Valdelièvre recalls that the majority of criminal cases he ruled over had to do with violence resulting from stolen cattle and marital infidelity. Marital disputes apparently stemmed from the matrilineal structure of Lobi society, which gave little power to the husband and hence led to the “promiscuous” nature of Lobi women. He also describes the nature of a case in which the wife’s prosecution of her husband was not tied to polygamy, but the threat of malevolence she would be subjected to if her husband married the daughter of a blacksmith. The European judge therefore found himself caught between the recognition of local laws which incorporated sovereignty of the supernatural and those of France, whose colonial power lay in the suppression of such indigenous laws to justify “protection” of Lobi country in general. Given his acquittal of the plaintiff (the first wife), Valdelièvre

246 Ibid., 220.
247 Ibid.
248 Valdelièvre, 142.
249 Ibid., 143.
250 Ibid.
questions the jurisprudence of his ruling, and cites several other cases in which his recognition of local law won him the general favor of the community. His cases challenge stereotypical images of French colonial brutality, he argues, which evolved into an environment of mutual respect at Gaoua in the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{251} Indeed, this history appears quite different than that created by Ruelle in 1904, and while artwork is not discussed by Valdelièvre, his recognition of the social and spiritual dangers involved in blacksmithing implies his recognition of objects used to control that power.

Meyer discusses a particular type of \textit{bateba} used to compromise legal testimony in court, characterized by a figure with hands held to the mouth.\textsuperscript{252} The gesture is meant to signal the embarrassment of the speaker caused by stuttering, which is provoked by making a sacrifice to the figure. Like \textit{bateba Lerousique}, this type of object functions in dialogue with systems introduced through colonial occupation, and resists the notion that Lobi artwork is unable respond to change.

\textbf{British Interventions}

British colonists were included within this forum of collaboration and conflict, and they presented serious challenges to French dominion in the area. By 1897, the British had established four posts along the southern frontier of the region, which posed a formidable threat to seven French posts in central and northern areas. Roughly 112 miles lie between a French post in the north and the British post in the south. Those established west of the Mouhoun River defined a territory nearly thirty-seven miles wide. With a

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., 145.

\textsuperscript{252} Meyer, 125.
stronger presence east of the Mouhoun, the river formed a natural and psychological barrier for British activity,253 and ultimately formed a barrier between the colonial nations after the Lobi, represented by Baratou Ouattara, signed a treaty with the French on September 11, 1897.254 The French-English Convention of June 14, 1898, further established “the definitive delimitation” of respective territories in Côte d’Ivoire, the French Sudan, Dahomey (Benin), the Gold Coast (Ghana), and mutual “spheres of influence” east of the Niger River.255 This would also mark France’s “definitive” possession of Lobi country.256

Among the threats posed by Kong invasions, the slave trade, and French and British colonists, there was more than enough reason for the Lobi to appear hostile in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their “love for war” emphasized by French colonial administrators was defined by a resistance to these various forms of imposed authority. Centuries of commercial trade between the Dyula and Europeans established the grounds for a political and cultural alliance that strengthened their own image of superiority over the Lobi and all other non-centralized peoples in the Voltaic region.

253 Kambou-Ferrand, Peuples Voltaïques et Conquête Colonial, 257.
254 Ibid., 456.
255 Ibid., 458.
256 Kambou-Ferrand, “Guerre et résistance sous la période colonial en pays lobi/birifor (Burkina Faso) au travers de photos d’époque,” 77.
Vengeance and Social Stability

The Lobi are well-known for their fierce resistance to colonial occupation, having sworn to “never follow the way of foreigners.” But conflict in Lobi country did not begin with the French. Two major events in the late nineteenth century underscore local resistance to imposed rule when the Birifor crushed the Watara at Lotoro between 1888 and 1897, and when the Lobi defeated prince Pintyéba of Bobo-Dioulasso in 1890. Vestiges of power that remained in this weakened kingdom were appropriated by French colonists during their own efforts to subjugate non-centralized peoples of the region. That structure would not permit the development of highly organized and concentrated imperial attacks led against them. It was equally hampered by a dearth of firearms, though arrows poisoned by the toxic liquid of the perennial *Strophantus sarment*, serpent venom, or the disease of a cadaver proved fatal if not counter-acted with a dose of tannin.

Conflict in the form of local vengeance among neighboring villages in Lobi country has been addressed by numerous scholars. In 1931, Labouret reported that “il y a quelques années, à l’époque où la vengeance privée florissait avec une fréquence regrettable” it was common among all to feel justified in avenging anyone who had been

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injured or killed with the same last name. 260 He also reports that victims of such
vengeance were also frequently killed in error. Such “errors” would also justify the image
of political instability he projected upon the Lobi in order to validate colonial rule. In
military attacks he led against them during a period of “pacification” in 1917, Labouret’s
own margin of error was reduced through the use of la grenade suffocante, a new method
of gas warfare that proved much more efficient than incendiary bombs that could not
penetrate the thick walls of a Lobi house.261

Rouville reports that the foundation of a matriclan is tied to obligations of
vengeance, military assistance, collective responsibility in case of murder, mutual aid,
hospitality, and participation in funerals.262 Michèle Dacher reiterates that

la guerre lignagère avait pour but non de conquérir ou d'écraser qui que ce
soit mais, sous le prétexte de venger un affront, ou de reprendre une femme,
celui de raffermir la cohésion des unités qui s'opposaient. 263

He argues that such feuds reinforce the identity and autonomy of the clan and permits the
society to retain a lineage-based system. Bognolo echoes this notion: “a decisive factor in
the smooth running of society, the vengeance system was very quickly set up, codified,

260 Labouret, Les Tribus, 241-2. “several years ago, when private vengeance flourished with a
regrettable frequency.”


262 Rouville, 153.

Faso,” L'Homme 144 (October – December 1997): 22. “lineage wars among the Lobi were not
waged to conquer and crush but, under the pretext of avenging an insult or recapturing a woman,
to reaffirm the cohesion of the units who were opposed.”
and ritualized.”

264 ‘To avenge’ in Lobiri is *ti hil*, or in other words, “to extinguish debt.”

Bognolo explains that each matriclan had “the right and the duty to avenge the blood of one its members,” and that the ensuing conflict could only be ended through the transfer of “blood debt” to a third party.266 While the identity and precise role of this “third party” remains unclear, there are a number of concrete elements involved that may be clearly identified, as follows: *khélé*, or the dangerous spirit of the murder victim; *milkuùrdará*, murderers who become shrine priests in control of such spirits; Milkuûr, name of the clay shrine itself and the respective religious association; and *baăthila*, meaning “power of the end,” which are carved wooden head-posts driven into the mounded peak of the shrine. They are created to house *khélé* and to serve Milkuûr.267

Are deaths related to local vengeance the same as those related colonial violence? According to Bognolo, *all* murder victims release *khélé* upon death, but the cult of Milkuûr has not been discussed in relation to the souls of those killed in colonial conflict. However, a display of four wooden figure sculptures at the *Musée des civilisations du sud ouest* at Gaoua were created to control the dangerous spirits of colonial officers killed by the Lobi in war.268 (Unfortunately, the museum does not allow their collection to be


265 Rouville, 166.

266 Bognolo, *Lobi*, 36. She notes that today, the shrines exist to protect those from victims killed in self defense.

267 Ibid.

photographed.) The figures are unusually tall—ranging between three and four feet each—and all but one includes a distinctive colonial cap like those see in *bateba Lerousique*. Each is carved in the same style: the trunk, arms, and legs are cylindrical and smooth; arms are carved away from the body with hands held before the waist; the neck is slightly elongated; the head is round; eyes are rounded convex forms bisected with a horizontal line; the bridge of the nose is raised to divide the eyes; thin lips are held slightly apart; half-discs form the ears; and the jaw is pointed with a subtle curve. The objects are beautifully carved, and the museum notes that

*l'autel des anciens combattants prouve, s'il en était besoin, que ces pratiques cultuelles sont toujours très vivantes et ne se limitent pas aux manifestations de la vie quotidienne et traditionnelle, mais peuvent intervenir sur des événements liés à l'histoire récente ou même à l'actualité.*

While the name of the religious association for the figures above is not provided, ideas and events which inform their use are similar to the way in which *khélé* or dangerous spirits are handled through objects in Milkuûr. Social and artistic elements related to Milkuûr are empowered through a bond between honor and vengeance. While the avenger enjoys an elevated status through defending the integrity of the clan, to become a shrine priest in service to the dangerous spirits of fallen victims involves further rise in social rank.\(^{270}\) While Bognolo does not make this distinction in status clear, the logic is present within her analysis and reveals that social aspirations are not inherently tied to the

\(^{269}\) Ibid. “The veteran shrine proves, if proof were needed, that these [fetish cults and divination practices] are still very much alive and not limited to traditional everyday life, but may intervene on events tied to recent history and the present.”

act of killing, but the control of dangerous spirits relating to it. If this was not the case, the greater prestige associated with becoming a milkuürdaár would not exist. Bognolo notes that “certainly society has evolved and conflicts between matriclans have vanished,” but contemporary use of the shrine remains tied to the control of spirits from victims killed in self-defense. This assertion appears awkward in relation to comments by Rouville and Dacher above, who present vengeance as a means of strengthening clanship identity rather than a stilted form of social evolution.

Two photographs of Milkuür shrines have been published. German ethnologist Hans Himmelheber published one from Tianme, Côte d’Ivoire, in 1966 (Fig. A50) and Bognolo’s dates to 1993 at Lokar (Fig. A51). Each shrine is composed of a mound of clay surrounded by thornbush branches. No information has been provided on the location of such shrines in relation to the murdered or murderers. Himmelheber’s photo of the shrine reveals two baàthila, one well-driven into the peak of the clay mound and the other emerging well above the ground. They are surmounted by a lidded thil blo or shrine pot positioned within the fork of a thornbush branch, above which rests a straw hat. Unidentified vessels also appear in the fork of another branch in the far left of the photo. An upturned spherical vessel is placed before the shrine, with feathers and drip marks that confirm the sacrifice of a chicken. Bognolo’s photo includes only one baàthil in a clay mound, around which hangs a calabash with sacrificial patina. It stands before what appears to be a granary whose floor is raised from the ground.

Bognolo notes that the creation of baàthila involves strict rules and the use of particular types of wood (neither of which is elaborated upon). They are now incredibly

271 Ibid.
rare, she states, and sculptors are kept secret. She argues that wide stylistic variation among known *baàthila* suggests widespread use of the objects in the past. Particular significance is found within a *baàthil* from the Gettner Collection because it includes a small pot set upon the head, noted as a “typically feminine element” exclusive to female figures.²⁷² It stands as a salient contrast to a virility commonly seen in the object, expressed in hairstyles exclusive to men.²⁷³ In late 2011, the German art dealer Woflgang Jaenicke and Italian collector Paul Howlett published a blog about a *baàthil* they attribute to Sikire Kambire (Fig. A52). Eyes appear as “D-shaped” forms with the convex line facing upward, and ears appear as simple curved projections. Both the eyes and ears are pierced with a hole at the center. These are all characteristic features of Kambire’s style. Given his fame as an artist in Lobi country (and now throughout the Western world), it seems strange that he would be selected to make an object whose creator—according to Bognolo—must remain secret.²⁷⁴ Perhaps such information was never intended to be revealed beyond the immediate region. Howlett reports that the softened facial features of the object betray the maturity of the artist’s later style, dating to the 1950s and early 60s.²⁷⁵ The fame Kambire enjoyed was tied directly to his talent as a sculptor and the commercial connections he made through selling objects to

²⁷² Ibid. For example, see Plates 12, 15, 31, and 40 in *Lobi*, 2007.

²⁷³ For example, see Figure 58 in Bognolo, *Lobi*.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 39.

Labouret and other European officials. His involvement in the Milkuûr association may compromise the nature of secrecy surrounding the creation of baàthîla, but his renowned prestige as an artist only supports the notion that all involved in Milkuûr were men of honor, in spite of spilt blood and the commercial function of a great many other objects created by Kambire. Unsurprisingly, these Milkuûr shrines are not recognized by Labouret or in colonial literature in general. However, the age of an unattributed baàthîl in the Gettner Collection—perhaps eighty or ninety years old—strongly suggests a history that extends back at least to the early twentieth century (Fig. A53).

The anatomical appearance of the object also suggests a link to Gan customs of royal interment west of Lobi country, where the head of the deceased was kept local while the body was buried far away. The metaphorical implications of the head as a source of power in human form appears perhaps nowhere else more literally and explicitly than in this type of object and the religious activities that surround it. Given that Milkuûr shrines and “the fundamental role of these murderers in [Lobi] social fabric” has already shifted from a focus on “traditional vengeance” to matters of self-defense, the artform does not stand a mere form of immutable conservatism, but points to a highly organized and creative effort to resolve conflict and indemnify murder through art and religious practice.

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276 Bognolo, Lobi, 28.
278 Bognolo, Lobi, 136.
279 Ibid., 36.
Crested hairstyles that appear on certain baàthil (Fig. A54) also point to ranked positions within the joro initiation that separates children and adults even as it confers a “supra-identity” of ‘Lobi’ on participants as a whole.\(^{280}\) Michael Pennie published one labeled as a “yuo” in 1998, and includes a French kepi or flat-topped forage cap with a straight peak.\(^{281}\) This type of cap first appeared on bateba Lerousique. Again, this motif confirms the creative use of appropriation to bolster the power of the object and religious utility of Milkuûr, who is obviously receptive to such signs of cultural alterity.

\(^{280}\) Ibid., 136. See Plate 58.

CHAPTER 6

LOBI RELIGION

God and Spirits

Polytheism among the Lobi is most apparent in objects that house a complex hierarchy of spirits. The Supreme Creator, Thangba Yu, is never directly represented, but communicates with people through *thila*. Certain *thila* appear in service to matriclans and patriclans, the latter of which are much more secret in nature. There are also nature and animal spirits, and certain types receive more privileged treatment in shrine than others. Lions, elephants, hyenas, panthers, antelopes, and hippopotami for example, contain the same dangerous spirits known to be released upon the death of a murder victim. The killing of such animals requires a serious degree of supernatural and artistic intervention, discussed below. First I will outline the ranked structure in which spirits appear in the Lobi pantheon. Numerous scholars have illustrated this spiritual order as follows, ranked as follows from top to bottom: Thangba Yu, *thila*, *konté* (also *kontoursi*), or nature spirits who taught the Lobi the arts of divination, *bateba*, and *tibila*, or small *bateba* used in divination. Mankind ranks the lowest in the scheme. Meyer explains the hierarchy in terms of human likeness: “*je weniger mensliche Charakteristika es aufweist, desto hoher wird es auf der Pyramide stehen.*”

While Thangba Yu may never be directly represented, François Warin identifies a particular type of object known as *thangbadaar*, which serves a priest of God (Fig. A55). Meyer classified this same figure among objects called *bateba duntundaara*,

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282 Meyer, 22. “the less human in character it is, the higher its position in the pyramid.”

which are used within a domestic shrine to defend the user against evil sorcerers.\textsuperscript{284} The carved wooden figure appears with arms held up in a “V-shape” gesture that Meyer attributes to the vigilant function of the object. Features in general are largely obscured with a sacrificial patina, and the legs have completely deteriorated unevenly just below the knees. Beyond the arresting gesture, oversized hands dominate the object. Fingers are barely visible, and palms are wide, flat, and rectangular. The head is roughly one-third the size of the body (perhaps conceived as one-fourth prior to loss of the lower legs). The height of the skull is greatly exaggerated (brow extending up but not forward), and eyes are reduced to swollen lids. The nose and mouth are barely visible above a subtly chiseled jaw, and earlobes project unevenly on either side. The sex of the figure is not explicit, though pectorals suggest a male identity—which supports the gender of the associated spirit. Indeed, Thangba Yu is a male deity, who impregnates the earth with rain.\textsuperscript{285}

The spirit of Thangba appears indirectly within the first of several shrines created in a domestic setting. A shrine for \textit{wathil Tangba} is created first, and is located on the roof of the house (Fig. A56).\textsuperscript{286} It is built by the father of one who discovers an auspicious object, such as a piece of iron.\textsuperscript{287} Meyer reports a \textit{wathil Tangba} is only a clay cone with a clay pot on the top or side, which is filled regularly with water by the \textit{tyordarkher}, or “first woman of the house,” who first married the head of the household.

\textsuperscript{284} Meyer, 89.
\textsuperscript{285} Labouret, \textit{Les Tribus}, 400.
\textsuperscript{286} Meyer, illus. 35, 37.
\textsuperscript{287} Ibid., 24.
The water (Meyer does not report its source) is an offering to the inhabiting *wathil*. The found iron object, called *thil yire*, is placed in a mound of earth and is considered to be the eye or sign of the *thil*. In spite the presence of spirits within the shrine, they do not begin to provide services to the owner until a second shrine is built within the house, located in the room of the first woman of the house or in the *thilduò*, a specially built shrine room inside the house. After the space is designated and sacrificial offerings have been made, the earthen cone containing the found object is taken from the first shrine and placed in the second inside the house. The installation of this shrine is typically performed by the maternal uncle of the *wathil* owner, who is also the person that found the object. At this point, objects must be placed upon the shrine as demanded by the *thil*, and these orders are revealed to the owner through consultation with a diviner. Among the objects ordered by *thila*, *bateba* are the most well known. Made of wood, clay, metal, and ivory, those carved from wood are by far the most widely collected and written about. Other objects ordered by *thila* include brass and iron objects, cowries, and vessels and figures of clay. According to *soser* or “prohibitions” (which always appear in the negative form) dictated by *thila*, the inhabited shrine objects are used to maintain social order in the domestic environment.288

During my visit with Da Lepirté at Bandajara, I saw wide a range of all these objects in his *thilduò* (Fig. A57). But before I was allowed to document Da’s domestic compound and ask questions about his shrine objects, he consulted his *thila* alone, and then returned to me and stated that I must join him in a second consultation within his *thilduò* to determine if the *thila* would approve of my interests. Just prior to entering the

288 Ibid., 27.
house, my attention was drawn to a throbbing buzz-like sound. Inside the entrance and immediately to the left lay a large mound of cow dung, over which swarmed a massive cloud of flies completely engrossed by the manure. Having worked on a farm as a young adult, I was not repulsed by the smell and was amused that my presence was of no interest to the flies. The entrance led to a rectangular space that requires one to stoop slightly to avoid bumping into rafters above. A drum and a bicycle hangs on the right wall, and the end of the space is divided by a portal closed by reed mat hung from above.

Passing through the portal, a small entrance on the right requires one to stoop down and step up through a rounded portal. The interior space is dominated by bateba, and a shrine pot is secured into place at the inside left. Da sat upon a three-legged stool in the far left corner of his thilduù, which is only large enough to comfortably hold two people. All along the wall to the right, and the rear wall facing the entrance, dozens of bateba are crowded together and placed against the wall. Beneath lay numerous clay, iron, and wooden objects.

Among this collection of diverse forms, Da identified a combination of spiritual powers. He referred to a seated figure as bateba bambar, and his explanation of its paralysis was almost identical to Meyer’s discussion of the same type of objects. Two small clay zoomorphic objects placed at the center of the installation immediately caught my attention. Roughly three inches tall, each object consists of a bulbous, biomorphic trunk lightly inscribed with a grid upon the surface. A small tail-like extension leads away from the base, and at the top, three knobs curl forward. In one, the central knob emerges from the object like a softly modeled half-disc punctuated by a hole at the center. In the other, the central knob curves forward and ends in a blunted tip. Like all
other objects in Da’s *thilduu*, they are covered with the vestiges of sacrifice: blood, feathers, and small specs of kaolin clay. The specs had dropped from his hand while consecrating the room, whose walls are animated by large and expressive swaths of white. Below, the small and unassuming zoomorphic objects are *thungbu*, or elephants hunted by Da’s ancestors, and their great power is called upon in the act of divination.

*Khélé*, or the dangerous spirit released by murder victims, is not restricted to the human domain, but is equally released by the death of an elephant and other powerful animals. The control of such power was linked to the personal display of a *komé*, or ivory pectoral ornament that is no longer worn. 289 Elephants are also gone from the region, but the power of the animal remains alive through Da’s use of *thungbu* objects in divination, and his explanation of their power was directly linked to his ancestors. Alongside with the *thila* which inhabit the large collection of *bateba* in his shrine room, a complex network of spirits and objects empowers his divination.

**The Creation of Mankind**

Anthropologist Bernard Lacombe and geologist Frédéric O.K. Palé published a recent account of Thangba and the origin of the Lobi world as follows:


289 Bognolo, *Lobi*, 28-9. While elephants no longer run wild in Lobi country, Bognolo writes that the “outstanding heroes” that once hunted them continue to enjoy high status and prestige in Lobi country today.
Pour se nourrir ils coupaien un morceau de ciel et le faisaient cuire. Le ciel était au sol à cette époque des origines. Ainsi les enfants n’avaient jamais faim. C’est Tangba, Dieu, qui les avait autorisés à faire ainsi, mais à une seule condition : ils ne devaient pas voir le ciel en train de cuire !
Alors, on mettait le morceau dans une poterie soigneusement fermée. Un jour, c’était au tour de Koùnn de faire la cuisine. Mais il dut s’écarter du foyer car il devait uriner. Alors, Khèr, dévorée de curiosité, profita de son absence pour soulever le couvercle de la marmite. Aussitôt, le tonnerre éclata, et le ciel s’enfuit : il monta, et c’est depuis lors qu’il est si haut, hors de portée des hommes.  

The legend goes on to reveal that Koùnn discovered millet, sorghum, guinea corn, peanuts, and beans by watching ants eat them. But Koùnn and his family remained hungry because they ate the grains uncooked. So they asked Thangba for his assistance. He sent his son as a messenger to earth, who provided man with a hoe to cultivate the land. He instructed them to turn the soil and plant the grains after the first rain. The hoe that Thangba sent was enormous, but so were the men, so they took it and used it. One can still see their work in the land today through the valleys, ridges, and hills. Even though the Lobi today are not giants like their ancestors, they continue to use hoes that

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290 Bernard Lacombe and Frédéric O.K. Palé, “Origine de l’agriculture et legends des chefs de terre des pays bwamu, lobi et samogho,” in La brousse, le champ et la Jachère au Burkina Faso, ed. Robin Duponnois and Bernarde Lacombe (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007), 15-16. “At the origin of the world there were a couple of humans, they were giants. The man was named Koùnn and the woman Khèr. We do not know where they came from. Some say they came from the sky, others that they emerged from the earth. They had numerous offspring and their children remained with them and were intermarried. They ignored work in the field and did not build houses, because they did not suffer from hunger or thirst. To feed themselves they took a piece of the sky and cooked it. The sky was on the ground at the time of origin. Therefore the children were never hungry. It is Thangba, God, who authorized them to do so, but on one condition: they could not look at the sky while cooking! Then, one put the morsel in a carefully closed pot. One day, it was Koùnn’s turn to cook. But he had to leave the house to urinate. Khèr, devoured by curiosity, took advantage of his absence and removed the cover from the pot. Right away, thunder erupted and the sky fled. It went up and has since been so high it is out of the reach of men.”
Thangba gave them to plant the grains discovered by Koùnn. They harvest so that hunger does not ravage their home.\(^\text{291}\)

In terms of art, the important thing to recall here is that God gave the Lobi the hoe, and the agricultural and religious significance of this object cannot be overstated. The form of a man’s stool is “inspired by the shape of a hoe stuck in the ground, serving as a natural seat for the gardener.”\(^\text{292}\) It has been said by more than one scholar that farming is essential to Lobi identity, and indeed, that to give up the life of a farmer is to shed one’s identity as Lobi. “Even today,” writes the anthropologist Alexis Tengan, “a Lobi ethnically becomes a Wala if the person abandons farming to engage in commerce.”\(^\text{293}\) Meyer also writes that “wir müssen hier daran erinnern, dass erwachsene Lobi immer und zuerst Bauern sind.”\(^\text{294}\)

**God’s Gift**

Both legend and (ethnological) science underscore the agricultural essence of the Lobi. Defining the landscape and the people, it appears as the bond between the two. It is a useful framework for analyzing the sacred significance of millet used in a wide range of social activities, including expressions of local allegiance to the *dithildaar* or village priest and the construction of a house.\(^\text{295}\) Its role as a sacred libation is evident within the sacrificial patina seen on many shrine objects, and may be ingested as porridge

\(^{291}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{292}\) Bognolo, 22.


\(^{294}\) Meyer, 52. “we have to remember here that adult Lobi are always farmers first.”

\(^{295}\) Rouville, 126.
inhabited by *thila* to permanently take on the protective powers of the spirit. Millet is sacred because it was first harvested by Koùnn, it is incredibly important as a food crop, and there is no reason to doubt the significance of agriculture among the Lobi today. Farming is a principle activity among the Lobi and many were hard at work during my visit to the area. However, in seeking to understand art historical factors that support cultural stereotypes, this ethnic “core” of agricultural virtue (along with an animist faith) provides a useful foil for identifying possible targets the Lobi must resist in order to maintain this essential character. This essentialism also signals the importance of identifying possible variations to the scheme. Are there any? And if so, what do they look like and how are they used?

While *toópár* or men’s three-legged stools are commonly used to illustrate a casual hostility among the Lobi, the same object has been used to illustrate their essential agricultural character. Bognolo identifies *toópár* as a “primary social marker [whose] image has become a stereotype” since Labouret mentioned their occasional use as war clubs. She challenges this stereotype by emphasizing the significance of the stool as a mark of the owner’s familial rank. It is owned only by a head of the household and is carried around publically as a status symbol. Unfortunately, I saw no one using a stool this way while I was in Lobi country. I did see one broken in half, lying in the middle of the road on the way to the market in Hèlo, and was provided with one to use.

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296 Meyer, 30.
297 Bognolo, *Lobi*, 23. *Toópár* is based on the phrase, à tò pár, or “I am crouching.”
298 Ibid., 22.
299 Ibid., 23.
while documenting a domestic shrine there. Men’s stools are sculpted when the *thilduù* or domestic shrine room is built, and thus mark the ritual independence of the owner. They are commonly made from the hardwood of a *Diospyrus mespiliformis*, or jackal berry tree that usually shelters a village shrine.

After the death of the first owner, the name and significance of the stool changes when it is passed on to his son. The stool of the deceased is renamed *daàká*, an abbreviation of “*à da à ká hirè*, or ‘I am coming, stuck to you, without stopping.’” Passed on through generations, Bognolo presents the stool as a symbol of “group cohesion,” and this bond applies directly to men who own such objects, and indirectly to the extended family that lives under their authority.

The changes in the significance of this stool are also tied to a reorganization of the deceased’s *thilduù* (shrine room) by his son, which takes shape in three distinct phases. In the three year period following the *bòbuùr* or second funeral of his father (during which the spirit of the deceased officially enters the land of the dead), the son consults a diviner to confirm that his father wants to be represented in a special shrine known as *thré*. If so, an artist marked by a high degree of initiation is commissioned to sculpt the figures from a type wood that is proper to the deceased’s patriclan. While the extents of this process remain to be published, Bosc notes that all Lobi wood sculptors must undergo a

300 Ibid.

301 Ibid.

302 Ibid.


304 Ibid.
basic level of initiation that involves taking thèl-thii, a medicine that prevents the sculptor from becoming blind, mad, or paralyzed by malevolent tree-dwelling spirits known as kontè-pou. Before the ancestor figures are complete, the son is allowed to represent his father’s spirit through an inverted fork-shaped branch known as gbuì, but not with figure sculpture. The consecration of the object begins along a path considered to be significant to the ancestor, where a chicken is sacrificed upon the object in the presence of members from the deceased’s sub-patriclan. If accepted, the object is first placed inside the house of the deceased where millet is ground by women, and receives further offerings by those who wish to pay their respects. It is significant to note that unlike many other shrine objects used among the Lobi, gbuì must not come into contact with the blood and feathers of a sacrificial offering. The ceremony ends with the shared consumption of millet-cakes, which signals the activation of the thré shrine. But the permanent installation of thilkôtina, or ancestor figures, will not take place for several more years—time which is considered necessary for the spirit of the deceased to officially become an ancestor.

This context for men’s stools shifts away from the common emphasis on its use as a blunt weapon. However, Bognolo also presents the image of “group cohesion” among

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308 Ibid. The point at which the deceased “arrives” as an ancestor is detected by the son or nephew through a dream or illness whose significance is discerned by a diviner.
the Lobi by stressing the significance of the stool as a spiritual weapon: “the Lobi consider any extended contact with foreign soil as dangerous because the powers that dwell in it, which vary depending on the location, often prove harmful.” In order to keep the dangers of foreign soil at bay, the daàká is used to keep the owner safely elevated from its surface.

Accordingly, the stool is used as shrine furniture, a club, a symbol of domestic status, and a shield against supernatural powers in foreign lands. In this shift from physical to spiritual weapon, the presentation remains consistent with dominant narratives that use Lobi art to maintain an image cultural isolation, now referred to as “group cohesion.” The dynamics of this cohesion are patrilineal, funerary, religious/spiritual, militant, and indeed—artistic.

But this is only one of several functions for the stool. Even as a daàká enables the owner to maintain a physical and spiritual sense of security and autonomy, this stool (and others described below) play a central role in an event designed to strengthen bonds among several peoples in southwest Burkina Faso.

CHAPTER 7
ART AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Comme l’ont montré des recherché historiques récentes, les sociétés segmentaires sans chefferie politique centralisée, du même type que la société lobi, ont souvent su développer une capacité de résistance supérieure aux populations groupées en petits États à pouvoir central.310

\textbf{Joro and the Seat of Initiation}

\textit{Daàkà} are among a select number of highly prestigious objects owned by priests of \textit{joro}.311 As mentioned above, this ceremony takes place every seven years along the bank of Mouhoun River, and involves initiation into adulthood among the Lobi, Birifor, and Dagara. Conducted by the Pwa and Jãa, the event “confers on all these people, men and women, regardless of their origin, the supra-identity of ‘Lobi.’”312 At Batié-Nord, the ceremony is conducted by Birifor and Dagara officials, whose distinctive hairstyles include a crest running over the top of the head from forehead to nape… The Lobi charged with the same religious task in the Gbomblora \textit{joro} apparently also added this crest to their helmet-like hairstyles… [called] \textit{yuû-burkûrè}, “the head that announces an arrival” (from \textit{bur}, “to come” and \textit{kûrè}, a religious cry which announces the \textit{joro})… to emphasize the underlying authority and extreme rigour attached to the idea of chastisement inherent to the great \textit{joro} initiation.313

What is significant in terms of the art involved is the fact that \textit{daàkà} are used by \textit{joro} priests in a context that creates social \textit{bonds} rather than boundaries on a regional

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbullet{} 311 Bognolo, \textit{Lobi}, 25.
  \item \textbullet{} 312 Ibid., 8.
  \item \textbullet{} 313 Ibid., 42-3.
\end{itemize}
level. This “supra-identity” is not to be confused with the “Cercle du Lobi,” created by the French, but extends beyond limits of kinship tied to the patriclan and matriclan. As a trans-ethnic identity composed of peoples from non-centralized societies, the dimensions of this “supra-identity” of Lobi are poorly understood. However, art objects such as daàkà used within its ceremonious inception confirm a regional social structure that is hierarchical and yet “limited in time”—once every seven years.

When the object is used to mediate contact with others, it supports and dissolves notions of “difference” depending on context. While it maintains the autonomy of the owner within a domestic and agnatic level, its use in joro also supports a sense of place much broader in time and space.

In 1922 and 1923, Labouret was able to personally witness the joro ceremony. “J’ai assisté aux cérémonies les plus importantes,” he writes, “ayant payé le prix qui me fut demandé et étant considéré comme initié.”314 He reports that the ceremony takes place every seven years during November, December, and January.315 In 1984, the Danish anthropologist Jan Ovesen attended the ceremony only because he helped a participating Birifor elder that had been accidentally wounded in an argument over who was allowed near a sacred pond.316 He was instructed to go nowhere near the sacred pond, and indeed, his presence was not generally welcomed by all.317 “The central

315 Ibid., 416.
316 Ovesen, 163.
317 Ibid., 164.
importance that the Lobi attach to the dyoro was very clear,” writes Ovesen, “the initiation is what makes a Lobi a Lobi.”

During my stay at Gaoua in the summer of 2011, my Birifor interlocutor Thierry Youl thought it absurd that the joro should be closed to my observation. The same was maintained to me by my Lobi guide Boubacar Kambou. I only learned after my return from Lobi country that Da Lepirté, the diviner whom I met with at Bandajara, is also the owner of a baà, or sacred drum that is performed for initiates who dance upon completion of the joro ceremony. I hope to meet with Da again in the future to learn more about this object, the history of its use, and other objects related to joro in Lobi country.

**Hippopotamus Shrines and Centralized Power**

Specific shrines are shared among separate matrilineal and patrilineal descent groups among the Lobi. They may include clay objects that are secured into place and are part of the built environment. In the next couple visits to Lobi country, I plan to investigate seven shrines of this type created by the Kambou and Hien matriclans. They form one of the most creative expressions linked to Lobi migration history and ancestral powers.

Known as *wathil sipòë*, the shrines embody spirits of ancestors and animals from the Mouhoun River (Fig. A58). Each shrine consists of four clay objects: 1) a hippopotamus that functions as an intermediary between the land and the river; 2) the

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318 Ibid.


320 Meyer, 21.
“wife of the river,” which refers a woman who first helped the Lobi cross the river; 3) a seated male figure and 4) his wife are co-owners of the shrine, whose “head” is kept within a ceramic pot on top of a cone.321 Power maintained among the shrines is hierarchical, with lesser seniority linked to the age of each installation.322 All seven existed under the authority of Tiofere Hien, a priest whose personal shrine was reported to be in ruins three years after his death in 1982.323

During my visit to Lobi country last summer, I found the “head” of the wathil sipöé at Bandajara had grown to more than twice its size since it was published in 1981 (Fig. A59).324 Italian scholars Giovanna Antongini and Tito Spini report that every night, Gbalankite Nufe (previous shrine owner) collected heavy stones and placed them on his shrine. The stones were placed as offerings to his ancestors, who were forced to perform the same labor while building roads for the French colonial administration.325 Indeed, fifty-two years after independence, colonial history continues to shape art and religious practice in complex ways among the Lobi today.


322 Ibid., 352.

323 Ibid., 359.


In 1920, the first reported hippopotamus shrine in Lobi country was built by Koko Somé, who later shared the religious association with his family and neighbors.\textsuperscript{326} Oral history reveals that the power of Somé’s shrine was taken by force rather than provided through inheritance.\textsuperscript{327} The hierarchical power structure associated with the shrines was not officially recognized by colonial authority. Labouret acknowledged a number of “cults” and those related to village shrines, but he fails to recognize them as significant centers of social organization. He does however, present village shrines as a significant source of hostility and cultural isolation. For example, \textit{dìthila} were the source of power behind an attack on the Dyula at Lokosso in 1920 and against the Mossi in 1914 and 1922.\textsuperscript{328} “\textit{Cette antipathie de la déesse pour l’étranger}”\textsuperscript{329} was resolved through a French alliance with the Dyula, \textsuperscript{330} and a sweeping image of political “insecurity”\textsuperscript{331} justified colonial rule. More recently, ethnologist Cécile de Rouville noted the authority of a village priest to resolve public conflict, and this authority is of course impossible without the physical presence and power of his shrine.\textsuperscript{332}

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{326} Ibid., 356. Also see Labouret, \textit{Les Tribus}, 404.
  \item \textsuperscript{327} Antongini and Spini, “Les gens de l’hippopotame,” 356.
  \item \textsuperscript{328} Ibid., 401
  \item \textsuperscript{329} Ibid. “This deity’s antipathy for the stranger.”
  \item \textsuperscript{330} Rouville, 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{331} Kambou-Ferrand, “Guerre et résistance,” 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{332} Rouville, 128.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

The theme of cultural isolation and conservatism common throughout literature on Lobi art and culture needs to be re-assessed. In order to do this, more research is needed to understand on how art is being used among the Lobi today. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the majority of field research on Lobi art in the last fifty years took place in the 1980s. In the generation that has passed, the local environment has become more urban and Christian missionaries have established a stronger presence in the area. How will the Lobi continue to respond to these trappings of Western modernity? My observations in Lobi country lead me to believe that art there demonstrates a profound relationship with the past, and that this relationship is dynamic and creative. Lobi works of art, like those who make and use it, respond to contextual difference.

As more is learned about Lobi art, the Mouhoun River emerges as one of the most significant features in the cultural landscape. In their introduction to *Bonds and Boundaries in Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso*, anthropologists Sten Hagberg and Alexis Tengan write that

> the use of the Mouhoun (Black Volta) by colonial administrators as a border demarcation between present-day Ghana and Burkina Faso certainly coincided with its local use as a frontier zone. Whereas for the former the river is a line of separation and national identity formation, for the latter the Mouhoun remains a cosmic agent whose power draws together people from different nationalities and ethnic groups.”

The *joro* is also a catalyst for this “cosmic agent,” and as I have discussed above, many objects can be linked to it: carved wooden figures and stools, ceramic animal figures and

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vessels, drums, and many others linked to the power of the Mouhoun as a source of artistic and social power.

The theme of “image and research” first presented at the colloquium at Ouagadougou in 1990 continues to remain relevant for future investigations of art in Lobi country. Sophisticated forms of appropriation and innovation seen in artworks deserve further study in relation to the bonds of colonial history and ideas that are important to the Lobi today.
APPENDIX

FIGURES

Figure A4. Artist unknown, *bateba ti bala*, date unknown, wood, h. 35 cm, Dr. M. Itzkovitz Collection, Paris. Piet Meyer, *Kunst und Religion der Lobi*, (Zürich: Rietburg Museum, 1981), 95, fig. 95.


Figure A7. Artist unknown, *bateba yadawara*, date unknown, wood, h. 63.5 cm. Winizki Collection. Piet Meyer, *Kunst und Religion der Lobi*, (Zürich: Rietburg Museum, 1981), 105, fig. 120.

Figure A9. Artist unknown, standing bird, date unknown, wood, h. 22.5 cm. Muhlack Collection. Piet Meyer, *Kunst und Religion der Lobi*, (Zürich: Rietburg Museum, 1981), 115, fig. 140.

Figure A13. Artist unknown, *bobothila* (divination figures), date unknown, wood, h. 7-15 cm. Sib Djato Lou Collection. Photo by the author. Some of these objects are larger than those identified by Bosc as *bobothila*, but this does not concern the diviner.


Figure A33. “Common ancestors” on the shrine of a Dyan house at Dolo, Diébougou district, 1982. Bognolo, “Art Lobi,” 384. Bognolo later republished the same photograph and labeled the figures as *thilkõtina* (or *kõthila* as mentioned above) within a Jãa house, same location. Whether or not this is represents a change of ownership or a correction of previous data is unclear. See Bognolo, *Lobi*, 13, fig. 3.
Figure A24. *Bateba* being used by a diviner at Naumpoura, Djigoué district. Photo by Daniela Bognolo, not dated. Bognolo, “Art Lobi,” 386.

Figure A25. Artist unknown, *tib siée*, wood, date and dimensions unknown. Bognolo, “Art Lobi,” 388.

Figure A27. Artist unknown, *taāri* in the form of chameleons, brass, date and dimensions unknown. Bognolo, “Art Lobi,” 391.
Figure A28. Artist unknown, *thilbou you-yeno*, wood, date unknown, h. 19 cm. Bosc, *Magie Lobi*, 86.
Figure A29. Centers of style for the production of art in Lobi country. Bognolo, “Art Lobi,” 395.
Figure A30. “Esthétique: Sculpture.” Henri Labouret, Les Tribus du Rameau Lobi (Paris: Université de Paris, 1931), page not numbered, Plate XVI.
Figure A31. Linguistic basis for creation of the “Lobi Branch.” Labouret, *Les Tribus*, 49.

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Figure A4. Tribes and clans of the the “Lobi Branch.” Ibid.
Figure A33. “Cercle de Gaoua.” Ethnic map of the Lobi and their neighbors. Ibid, 50.
Figure A34. “Sacred rhombus,” wood, date and dimensions unknown. Ibid., page not numbered, Plate XVII.

Figure A35. Standing figure, Lobi, wood, date and dimensions unknown. Léon Charles, “Les Lobi,” Revue d’ethnographie et de sociologie 2 (1911): page not numbered, Plate XV.
Figure A36. Birifor stool (left) and Lobi stool (right), wood, date and dimensions unknown. Ibid.

Figure A37. Dagara chair. Maurice Delafosse, *Les Frontières de la Côte d’Ivoire de la Côte d’Or et du Sudan* (Paris: Masson et Cie, 1908), 171.
Figure A38. Kambou Massep. Photo by the author, Tambili, 2011.
Figure A39. A stool by Kambou Massep. Photo by the author, Tambili, 2011.
Figure A40. Stools by Sib Poulfouté. Photo by the author, Latara, 2011.
Figure A41. Janus head stool, Sikire Kambire, wood, not dated (early to mid 20th century), Stanley Collection, University of Iowa Museum of Art. acc. #X1986_357.
Figure A42. Lobi sculpture for sale at the Gaoua market. Photo by the author, 2011.
Figure A43. Da Sansan. Photo by the author, Batié-Sud, 2011.
Figure A45. Village shrine at Hélo. Photo by the author, 2011.
Figure A47. Wathil shrine of the Puúdárá, based at Tiankoura (Present day Nako). Père, “Chronique des villages,” 61.
Figure A48. Colonial map of Lobi country showing areas with gold deposits. Labouret, *Les Tribus*, 74, fig. 13.

Figure A52. Sikire Kambire (attributed), *baàthil*, wood, date and dimensions unknown. Photograph by Wolfgang Jaenicke, 2011.

Figure A53. Artist unknown, *baàthil*, wood, h. 42 cm. Gettner Collection. Bognolo, “From Ritual to Protection,” 16, fig. 93.
Figure A54. Artist unknown, baàthil, wood, h. 30 cm. Galaverni Collection. Bognolo, *Lobi*, 137.

Figure A57. *Thilduí* of Da Lepirté. Photo by the author, Bandajara, 2011.
Figure A79. *Wathil sipòč* at Bandajara. Photo by the author, 2011.
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