

■ BENIN

The Ashanti-Hausaland Trade Route and the Kingdom of Borgu: Archaeological and Oral Historical Survey Within the Republic of Benin

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Introduction

This article provides a summary account of archaeological fieldwork in the Republic of Benin undertaken in January 2013, between the towns of Djougou and Nikki in the centre of the country. This nine-day survey assessed the potential of sites associated with the trade route between Ashanti (southern Ghana) and Hausaland (northern Nigeria), documented from the early modern era (Figure 1). This included investigating sites in and around Nikki, a key town of Borgu, an important kingdom situated on this trade route. This fieldwork was intended to assess the potential for more sustained work. The aim here is to place a summary account of the results in the published record and indicate directions for future research.

The fieldwork strategy involved conducting

oral historical interviews within towns and villages in the study area, then visiting sites considered of interest by local authorities and earlier scholars. The principal historical trade route we attempted to follow ran direct from Djougou to Nikki *via* Bori and Ndali. We also followed a section of another route, running northeast from Djougou. We then focused on Nikki and its periphery. Site visits involved simple recording of site surface characteristics and material culture, particularly pottery (principally decoration). Table 1 lists sites visited. Table 2 summarises pottery decoration types recorded. A record of the interviews conducted is held by the authors.

Historical and Archaeological Background

From at least the early modern era the central area of Benin occupied an important position on the interregional trade route linking Ashanti and Hausaland, Djougou and Nikki in particular being identified as important market centres (Brégand 1998; Lovejoy 1980). This trade route was described in the 19th century as “one of the most beaten roads in Africa” (Dupuis 1824: CVIII). The commodity most associated with this route is the kola nut, a mild stimulant permitted within the Islamic world, exported from Ashanti (Johnson 1968; Lovejoy 1980). This route is also strongly associated with Wangara and Hausa traders, consistently featuring in wider discussions of second millennium AD commerce in West Africa (Brégand 1998; Johnson 1968). Nikki has an additional importance, having been not only a significant regional trade centre but also political centre of the Kingdom of Borgu, a major regional political force within the territory of the Bariba peoples, documented back to the 16th century (Boesen *et al.* 1998; Moraes Farias 2013). Borgu's power was certainly associated with trade, but also with the political control and colonisation of surrounding territory by the Wasangari, the ruling elite within Borgu society, considered as immigrant conquerors of the indigenous Bariba (Baatou) who they found in the region (Idris 1973; Kuba 1998).

Over the past decades a significant amount of archaeology has been conducted in Benin, both in

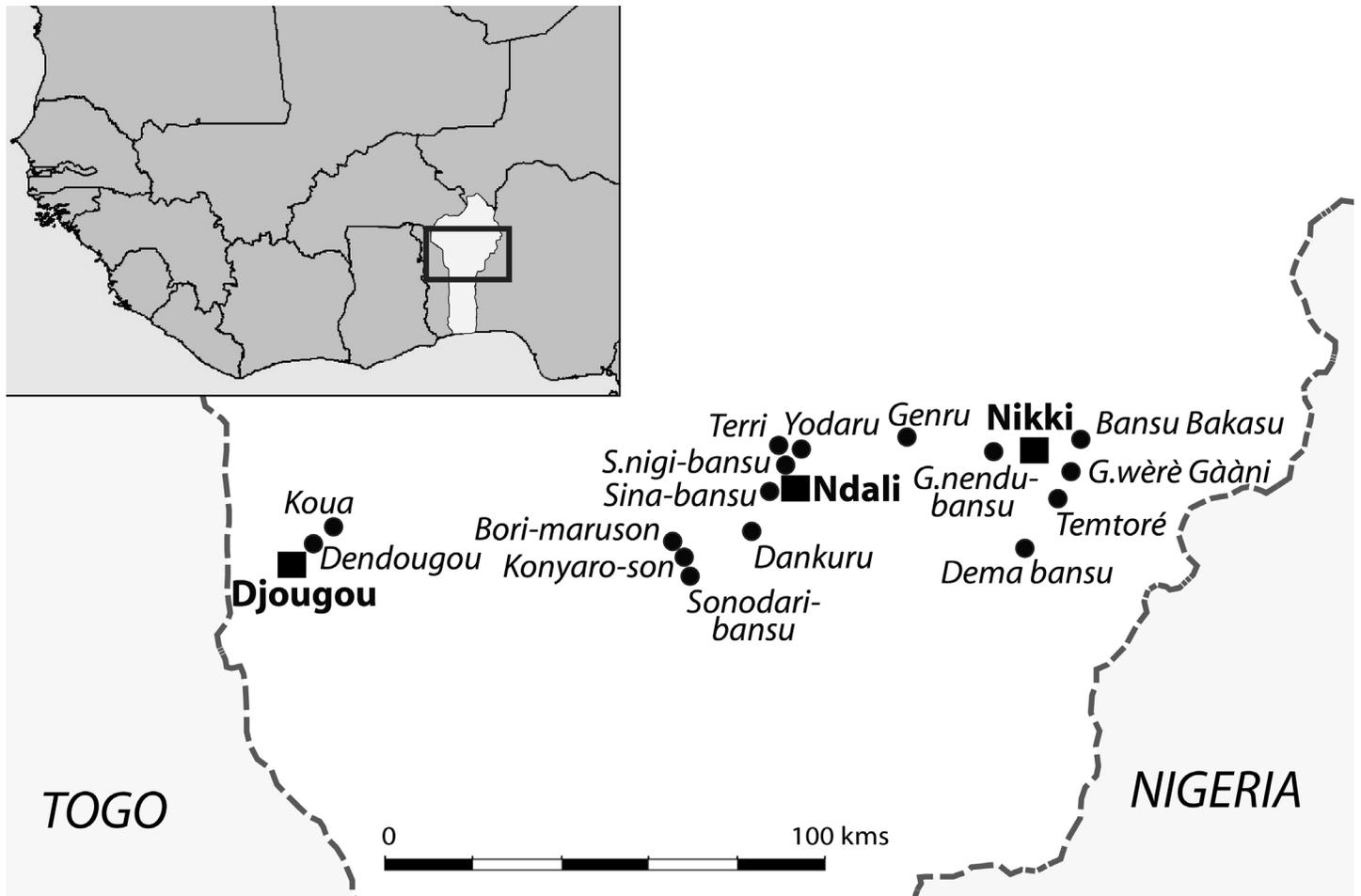


Figure 1: Map illustrating the position of the survey zone within the Republic of Benin and the locations of sites visited.

the south (Kelly 1997; Monroe 2014; Norman 2012; Randsborg and Merkyte 2009), and in the north (e.g., Haour *et al.* in press; N’Dah 2009). Certain regions though have seen very little study, including the area between Djougou and Nikki. N’Po Takpara’s 2011 study of Djougou revealed its archaeological potential, but there has been no broader exploration of this section of the Ashanti-Hausaland route. Likewise, despite Nikki’s importance as a political centre of Borgu, it has seen no archaeological investigation (*cf.* Bagodo 1978) – this is particularly relevant in view of the limited study of other Borgu sites, and the flooding of the major Borgu centre of Bussa by the Kainji dam (Breternitz 1975).

Results

Djougou. Documentary and oral historical sources indicate Djougou was located next to the capital of the polity of Kilir, effectively existing under its power (N’po Takpara 2011). We commenced the fieldwork here to visit sites of known archaeology (documented by N’Po Takpara 2011) and to conduct oral history interviews concerning wider regional dynamics. Amongst the most important sites is the old *caravanserai* area or *zongo*, identified with external trade. Not far away is the purported site of the first mosque. We also visited sites associated with the royal capital of Kilir, including settlement mounds and city wall remains. Eroded ‘pottery pavements’ (edge-lain) are also seen within the town. In addition to visiting Djougou and Kilir, we

	N	E
Dendougou	09° 43'59.0	001° 43'39.8
Koua	09° 45'27.0	001° 46'11.3
Konyaro-son	09° 43'38.7	002° 29'09.0
Sonodari-bansu	09° 42'55.5	002° 28'50.3
Bori-Maruson	09° 44'25.9	002° 26'50.3
Dankuru	09° 46'30.2	002° 37'22.5
Bundaru	09° 46'21.5	002° 37'21.5
Yodaru	09° 53'05.3	002° 43'13.7
Sina-bansu	09° 51'24.5	002° 41'20.4
Sina gno.-bansu	09° 52.03.1	002° 42'56.1
Terri	09° 52'13.9	002° 42'55.9
Gèsèwèrè Gààni	09° 54'36.2	003° 17'06.7
Temtoré	09° 50'13.6	003° 15'00.1
Dema bansu 1	09° 44'23.9	003° 11'12.9
Dema bansu 2	09° 43'48.0	003° 11'08.5
Dema bansu 3	09° 43'55.1	003° 11'16.3
Gorino.-bansu	09° 56'39.9	003° 10'35.0
Genru	09° 57'48.7	002° 56'45.6
Bansu Bakasu	09° 57'20.5	003° 17'56.2

Table 1: Sites visited within the survey and their co-ordinates.

visited surrounding sites. This included the mausoleum of the first king of Kilir at Bouloum. A number of other abandoned market locations also exist in Djougou’s immediate periphery, including Séro and Alphakoara, but are considered relatively modern. The village of Soubroukou was also visited, identified as an early indigenous Bariba (Baatonu) centre but then associated with migration from Nikki and the presence of Wasangari.

Dendougou and Koua. While we principally followed a direct route from Djougou to Nikki, interviews in Djougou also referred to other important historical routes. We decided to conduct a brief exploration of the first stages of a route northeast from Djougou. Dendougou (translated as “sit and relax”) is a village located *ca.* 7kms from Djougou, identified as a historical (19th to 20th century) resting place for merchants (principally Hausa) prior to entering Djougou. Supposedly once merchants arrived here they attained the jurisdiction of Djougou.

In addition to being a resting place, a small market (*Batayaraha*) was here, as well as a *caravanserai* where merchants resided. This trading culture is said to have stopped about 40 years ago. The market and the *caravanserai* localities – immediately next to the village and the path of the old trade route (Figure 2) – showed little archaeology other than pottery. Consequently it was very difficult to estimate site size. Pottery featured little decoration but cord decoration (almost all cord decoration evidenced within the survey was cord roulette but the broad use of ‘cord’ decoration is employed throughout) and dragged grass were recorded (see Table 2 for reference to pottery decoration encountered at all sites).

Some 5kms beyond Dendougou is Koua-Bansu (*bansu* being a suffix or prefix meaning ‘ruin’ or ‘old’), several kilometres from modern Koua. Oral traditions state Koua-Bansu was abandoned *ca.* 30 years ago, but there is little clarity on its antiq-

	Comb	Comb-formed 'Wavy Line'	Cord	Folded Strip Roulette	Dragged grass	Channel/ Multiple channel	Incised line	Geometric incised
Dendougou			X		X			
Koua	X		X	X	X	X		
Konyaro-son	X						X	
Sonodari-bansu	X	X	X				X	
Bori-Maruson	X	X	X	X			X	
Dankuru	X	X				X		
Yodaru				X		X	X	
Sina-bansu	X		X			X	X	
Sina gno.-bansu	X							
Terri	X							
Gèsèwèrè Gààni	X	X	X			X	X	X
Temtoré	X	X	X			X	X	X
Dema bansu	X	X	X		X		X	X
Gorino.-bansu	X	X	X					
Genru	X	X	X				X	

Table 2: Site by site occurrence of the principal pottery decoration types encountered during the survey (see Figure 5 for examples of ‘Comb-formed ‘Wavy Line’’, ‘Folded-Strip Roulette’, and ‘Geometric incised’ (*note ‘Geometric incised’ refers to the use of incision beyond a simple line, not to a particular pattern – the example shown in Figure 5 is not found at other sites); all decoration terminology follows standard usage within West African archaeology – see *e.g.*, Haour *et al.* 2010).

uity. Interviews related merchants from Djougou bringing kola nuts through here. Koua-Bansu is surrounded by relatively heavy forest and covered in high grass. Standing remains of mud architecture (*ca.* 1.5m in places) appear relatively recent and specific village quarters were indicated, including the ruler’s residence, the merchant quarter, and the mosque. A very approximate size of the visible settlement remains is *ca.* 200x200m. Pottery evidence included some of the relatively rare cases of Folded Strip Roulette encountered during the survey, as well as carinated wares. Close to Koua-Bansu are the remains of a colonial-era settlement and paved road.

Bori. On the direct route between Djougou and Nikki, the first point visited was Bori, situ-

ated at approximately the mid-point between these two major centres. Konyaro-son, considered as the oldest local site, is said to have been inhabited by Baatonu of the clan ‘Do’. The most important event related in Bori’s history is the arrival of Sime Danri, a Wasangari. It is recounted that when Sime Danri arrived (from Nikki-Dari) he did not want to settle close to the Baatonu, and therefore settled at Sonodari-bansu (“ruins of the forest of Dari”). Sime Danri was “asked to rule” but to do this was required to settle at Bori-Maruson, next to the modern village. The modern village was then occupied from Bori-Maruson but the timing of this is unclear.

Konyaro-son is situated *ca.* 5kms from Bori, along the road in the direction of N’Dali. It is covered in thick undergrowth and trees and it was



Figure 2: Prospection on the old trade route at Dendougu, in vicinity of *caravanserai*.

difficult to assess site size. It appears to be cut by the modern road. The limited pottery found (mainly in the road cutting) was however of high quality. Sonodari-bansu is located *ca.* 5kms southeast of Bori, in a forested area. The surface of the site was covered in small agricultural mounds (see Figure 3), and disturbance of the surface aided significant recovery of pottery over a relatively large area (*ca.* 200x200m plus) – again, however, amidst forest it was difficult to assess true site extent. Much of the pottery found was undecorated and relatively coarse, but amongst the decorated pottery was comb-formed ‘wavy line’, cord, and incised wares. Bori-Maruson, situated *ca.* 500m southeast of Bori, was largely free of vegetation (see Figure 3). The most prominent tree is said to be the location of the ‘royal house’ (*Biru Bake*), where the king of Bori comes during their investiture. The site appeared to be relatively large (*ca.* 300x300m plus, though not all of site was visited) and had the appearance of a shallow settlement mound. Pottery was encountered on the surface, albeit not in great quantities (perhaps due to lack of recent cultivation). That recovered was of a high quality and included Folded Strip Roulette, cord, and comb formed ‘wavy line’ decoration. Carinated vessel forms were also evidenced.

A polished stone axe was also recorded (Figure 4).

Ouenou. Mid-way between Bori and N’dali, the next locality visited was Ouenou. The name ‘Ouenou’ is given as the name of a tree (*‘weni’*), many of which were cut down to install the village. Interviews recounted a ruler, Oueno Sonogobiyo, described as coming from the east, from “Kisira” (this was the only time the famous Kisira legend (Adekunle 2004: chapter 3) was mentioned during the fieldwork). Sime Abaro was named as the first prince from Nikki to rule, and 24 rulers are said to have followed him. In 1962/3 the old settlement of Ouenou was abandoned. This is located *ca.* 1-1.5kms southwest of the modern village and consists of two areas, ‘ancient Ouenou’ and Dankuru (“those who make sculpture”). A strong market presence is testified for Ouenou, associated with Hausa traders, with cloth and kola the main commodities mentioned. The area identified as the market was very flat and showed no evidence of pottery – consequently it is difficult to estimate the size of this site area. Dankuru had clear evidence for subsurface remains of structures (small mounds) and grinding stones were also noted. Dankuru covered a *ca.* 100x100m area. The pottery included comb-



Figure 3: Left, Sondari Banson, within dense forest and covered in agricultural mounds; right, Bori-Maruson, looking towards the 'royal quarter' of Biru-Bake (marked by tall tree).



Figure 4: Polished stone axe on the surface at Bori-Maruson.

formed ‘wavy line’ decoration (Figure 5). Also, sections of artefacts identified as pottery lamps were found. Approximately 200m south of Dankuru is what appears to be a small site called Bundaru. Due to difficulties of access we were not taken to the ‘ancient Ouenou’ quarter itself.

Ndali. During discussions in Ndali, four sites were seen as of significance: Yodaru, Sina-bansu, Sina gnonnigi bansu, and Terri. Yodaru, located *ca.* 2.5kms north of the centre of Ndali, is seen as the oldest site. It is associated with a Somba population who fled to Atakora following Wasangari arrival. Yodaru is located in a field, below the level of the modern road. It is difficult to say much about the nature or scale of the site due to modern development. The pottery assemblage however is strikingly different to that from other sites around Ndali, and indeed elsewhere in the region. This was the only site where a large quantity of Folded Strip Roulette was recorded (see *e.g.* Figure 5) and cord decoration was also a noted absence.

Sina-bansu, “the ancient site of N’dari”, was seen as the most important to visit. Oral histories are unclear on its foundation and history, but do relate it as abandoned following a war where the oldest son of the village was killed, the king upon learning this information disappeared into a hole in the ground and the population fled. Sina-bansu is located *ca.* 3kms west of Ndali. The place associated with the disappearance of the king features several whole pots located on the surface and a hole, still venerated. The site was the most obviously large site visited during the fieldwork (estimated minimum size *ca.* 500x500m plus), and most apparent as a settlement mound. It is mainly free of vegetation, and significant portions are farmed. Amongst the relatively significant quantities of pottery found, we see a range of decorations including cord, comb, and incision: significantly no Folded Strip Roulette decoration, which dominated at Yodaru, was evidenced and the pottery as a whole looks very different. The pottery was of a good quality. Sina gnonnigi-bansu is seen as the successor site to Sina-bansu. Following abandonment of Sina-bansu, the king’s sister, named “Sina gnonnigi”, led the

population to a place called Sina gnonnigi-bansu, on the outskirts of modern Ndali. This is seen as the first occupation of what would become modern Ndali. The site is located in an area of light forest *ca.* 0.5km northwest of the town centre and features no distinct localisable archaeology. Only a few sherds of coarse pottery were found. Terri is a sanctuary site where people come if it rains or if there is sickness in the village. Located *ca.* 1km north of the town centre next to a small pond, it features a small mud-built structure, the centre of the sanctuary. The site is small and only a few sherds of coarse pottery were encountered.

Nikki. Nikki is identified as a Wasangari foundation and is today split between Wasangari and Baatonu (indigenous Bariba), the king being Wasangari, the prime minister Baatonu. Importantly, the prime minister appoints the king. The quarter of Nikki-Marò (‘Marò’ meaning ‘a big place’ or ‘a civilised place’) is historically associated with external trading communities. Nikki-Marò’s foundation is associated with the story of a Peul who came when Nikki was facing ruin after a war. This person assisted the king to re-establish Nikki, but then settled a little distance away “to retain his value”. The merchants stayed with him in Marò as he was Muslim and would better understand them. He is also said to have asked the king’s son to stay with him. Nikki-Marò is said to have been continuously occupied in the same place since its foundation (Figure 6). Aside from Nikki itself, we visited a range of abandoned sites in the wider vicinity, associated with indigenous political powers from the time of Nikki’s foundation, as well as with Nikki’s local political relations.

Nikki Ouenou/ Gèsèwèrè Gààni. Nikki Ouenou is a locality *ca.* 7.5kms east of Nikki, associated with the Baatonu people who the Wasangari collaborated with when founding Nikki. Approximately 1.5kms east of this village is the site of *Gèsèwèrè Gààni*. Traditions relate this to Somba populations who migrated to the Atakora, though this tradition appears unclear. *Gèsèwèrè Gààni* features large standing walls made of rammed earth (Figure 7), seemingly linked to a major structure

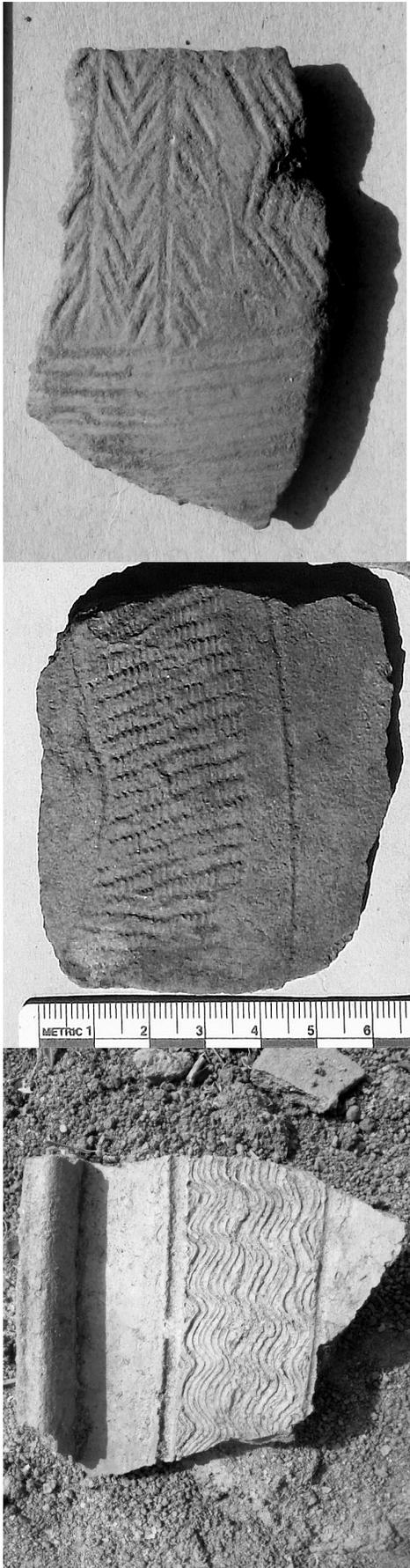


Figure 5: Examples of pottery decoration types evidenced during the survey. Left to right: comb-formed 'wavy line' from Dankuru; folded strip roulette from Yodaru; Geometric incised décor from Gèsèwèrè Gààni.



Figure 6: The Maro quarter of Nikki.

of a rectilinear plan (*ca.* 75x75m). No pottery was found within the walls themselves but immediately west of this area is a ploughed field featuring extensive pottery, including cord, comb-formed ‘wavy line’, and geometric incised wares (Figure 5). Also in the locality are found tombs associated with the ancestors of Nikki Ouenou.

Temtoré and Dema. Temtoré (or Tonterou) is seen as another important pre-Wasangari locality, situated *ca.* 10kms south of Nikki. Unlike Nikki Ouenou/*Gèsèwèrè Gààni*, Temtoré has more strained relations with the Wasangari, seemingly because they were unwelcoming to the early Wasangari. Broadly, Temtoré means “the first occupied place in the region” or “the old site occupied in the region” (“tem” = “earth”; “toré” = “beginning”). Today Temtoré “doesn’t pay respect to Nikki and they don’t meet each other”. The site, located next to the modern village, appears relatively extensive and rich in materials. Extensive pottery was found, as well as slag and cowrie shells (Figure 8). The pottery decoration includes comb-formed ‘wavy line’, cord and geometric incised wares. Dema

Bansu, located *ca.* 20kms south of Nikki, is another of the important sites associated with the indigenous groups powerful in the region before the foundation of Nikki. Dema means: “what we have found”. One of the key stories associated with Dema Bansu states that it was occupied by a Wasangari prince coming from the court of Nikki – seemingly this was already an occupied site when this happened. Dema bansu consists of three sites occupied successively leading up to the occupation of the modern village. The sites are found close to the modern village. Given the positioning of the sites in cultivated and wooded areas it was difficult to assess site extent, though these do appear to be relatively large. Abundant pottery shows a general commonality between the sites, including the presence of comb-formed ‘wavy line’, geometric incised wares, and cord decorations.

Gorinomanendu-bansu. The site of Gorinomanendu-bansu is located approximately 1km to the north of the village of Gorinonanendu, itself situated *ca.* 3kms west of Nikki. Roughly translated, Gorinonanendu means “someone who



Figure 7: Rammed-earth wall remains at Gèsèwèrè Gààni.



Figure 8: Cowries at the site of Tontarou (photographed *in situ* as found).

comes to rest next to one so that one can exchange at distance”. Oral history recounts that the king of Gorinomanendu, Sinagongi, was the king of Nikki’s brother, and a Wasangari. After the king of Nikki, the king of Gorinomanendu is the most important within the Wasangari network. When the king of Nikki conducts visits within his territory he first comes here before his delegation continues. Gorinomanendu-bansu was supposedly abandoned on the death of Orakasakperigi, a Wasangari prince who lived there with the king, but was killed by a Hausa pupil who betrayed him. While the site is difficult to understand due to vegetation, one has a sense of a relatively significant site possibly on the scale of the larger sites documented within the survey. At the ‘centre’ is the ‘royal house’ featuring piles of stones, said to mark tombs. The “House of Orakasakperigi” is also said to be near here. Pottery is not of the highest quality and not particularly abundant. Amongst the decorations evidenced are comb-formed ‘wavy line’ and cord.

Genru. When visiting Biro, *ca.* 30kms west of Nikki, we were informed it was not particularly old and that Genru, *ca.* 7kms north of Biro, was historically the most significant of the surrounding villages. Genru is associated with a founder called Sinaworarugi, a Wasangari prince. His descendants became kings of Genru. The site of Sinaworarugi bansu is located about 8kms away from the modern village, and is supposedly where Sinaworarugi settled before Genru. Oral history recounts that Sinaworarugi bansu was “associated with 60 Peul camps”. We were not able to visit this site but instead visited sites next to the village. These did not appear to be archaeologically rich or extensive (*ca.* 100x100m area). However, remains of houses and drying pits were observed, as well as pottery, including decorations in cord, comb-formed ‘wavy line’, and incision.

Bansu Bakasu. When conducting interviews at Nikki-Ouenou/Gesewere we were told of another ruin, approximately 5kms away, *Bansu-Bakasu* – this was *ca.* 10kms east of Nikki. *Bansu-Bakasu* broadly means “the largest ruin compared to all others”. There were little in the way of detailed histori-

cal accounts to explain this location, though as with Gèsèwèrè Gàni the Somba are proposed as having created the site. We found ruins that were relatively similar to the ruins of Gesewere Gaani, namely standing remains of two enclosures of a relatively large size (*ca.* 50x50m size) with rammed earth walls. No pottery was recorded.

Research Potential of the Results

Four of the localities visited with their associated site clusters appear to offer the greatest potential for investigating the Ashanti-Hausaland commercial axis within Benin, as well as the Borgu Kingdom of Nikki, its associated Wasangari culture and diaspora, and successor sites in the region:

- **Ndali:** Yodaru; Sina-Bansu; Sina gnonnigi-bansu
- **Bori:** Konyaro-son; Sonodari-bansu; Bori-Maruson
- **Nikki:** Nikki/Nikki Maro; Temtoré; Dema bansu; Gorinomanendu-bansu
- **Djougou:** Djougou caravanserai/zongo; Kilir

The site cluster of Ndali appears to offer the best potential for investigating broad regional cultural developments, with three abandoned sites seemingly related to different phases of cultural and chronological development, as well as a clear Wasangari historical presence. The site cluster of Bori would likewise offer a good compliment to this, with three abandoned sites seemingly associated with three cultural phases and an associated Wasangari interaction.

The study of the key centres of Nikki and Djougou would be interesting, though most research would involve urban archaeology, and therefore a far more developed logistical approach. A study of the cultural developments in the Nikki locality might usefully commence with investigating abandoned sites seen to be related to important

(Baatonu) powers at the time of the arrival of the Wasangari, namely Temtoré and Dema-bansu. Also, the nearby abandoned Wasangari site of Gorinomanendu-bansu would provide a useful complement, investigating the origins of Wasangari power in the locality. Further studies might also usefully pursue investigation into the nature of the fortified sites in the vicinity of Nikki, such as *Bansu Bakasu*, these potentially relating to Nikki regional power and control. While outside of this study area and the fieldwork documented here, developing research by one of the project team (Mardjoua *in preparation*) on the site of Niyanpangu-bansu in the Banikoara region shows the even wider regional potential of Nikki-Borgu research as this was a powerful centre far removed from Nikki but supposedly conquered and destroyed by Nikki during the period of its foundation. This study certainly does not claim to be authoritative, and it is likely that other interesting and important sites can be identified by further oral historical interviews and survey. Sinaworarugi bansu, one of the sites we were not able to visit, is a good case in point.

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