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978-0-521-04031-0 - Traders Without Trade: Responses to Change in Two Dyula Communities

Robert Launay

Excerpt

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Introduction: The people and the problem

. . . I am as you are, a Julietto, which signifies a Merchant, that goes from place to place . . .

Buckor Sano to Richard Jobson,
Gambia, 1621

The Dyula

In the various dialects of the Manding language, the word *dyula* has several meanings. Some of these are of unquestionably recent vintage; indeed, they are unintelligible outside the modern colonial and postcolonial contexts. But at least two meanings of the word are far older. By far its most universal meaning, and almost certainly the oldest, is ‘an itinerant trader’. For the most part, the word referred specifically to Moslem traders who spoke one of the dialects of Manding as a first language.

The extensive participation of Manding-speaking peoples in trade has a very long history, dating at least as far back as the medieval empire of Mali, the predominant power in the Western Sudan from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries (Levtzion 1973:63). However, certain groups of Manding-speaking traders, for instance the Marka and the Diakhanke, trace their origins even further back to the Soninke empire of Ghana which flourished in the ninth to eleventh centuries A.D. Originally, these Manding traders were collectively known as the Wangara. In the words of the seventeenth-century chronicler Mahmoud Kati: ‘. . . the Wangara and the Malinke are of one origin, but “Malinke” denotes warriors, whereas “Wangara” signifies merchants who ply their trade from country to country’ (Kati 1964:65). The word *wangara* was also used to designate one of the gold-producing regions of the Western Sudan, possibly Bambuk (Bovill 1968:119; Levtzion 1973:155); indeed, gold was one of the staples of the trans-Saharan trade whose control formed the basis of Mali’s hegemony. The quest for gold accounts for two waves of Manding expansion. The first, during Mali’s heyday, was towards the Senegambia to the west. The second, triggered by the disintegration of the empire, was towards the south, at first in the direction of the Akan goldfields, and later towards other forest regions which could supply the Western Sudan with cola nuts (Levtzion 1973:94–102). Sixteenth-century Portuguese sources mention the presence of the Wangara at various points along the West

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African coast, not only in the Senegambia but also at Elmina on the Gold Coast (Levtzion 1973:165–8). The Wangara traveled even further afield: the Kano Chronicle attributes the introduction of Islam among the Hausa to the Wangarawa (Palmer 1963, vol. 3:104).

The name *Wangara* continues to be used in modern Ghana to refer to Manding-speaking Moslems. However, particularly in the Manding-speaking world, it was eventually replaced by the word *dyula*. Richard Jobson, an English merchant who visited the Gambia River in 1621, provided the first written mention of the word in his account of a conversation with one Buckor Sano, whom Jobson reckoned the richest trader in the region (Jobson 1968:116). Buckor Sano's use of the word is particularly enlightening, for he refers not only to himself, but also to the Englishman Jobson, as a *Julietto*. Compared to the word *wangara*, this use of the word *dyula* represents an important shift in meaning: whereas *wangara* referred exclusively to Manding-speaking traders from Mali, *dyula* could be used to refer to any trader, regardless of his origins and language. A term which simultaneously denoted ethnic category membership and professional status had been replaced by one which placed a clear emphasis on profession alone.

However, in some parts of West Africa, the word *dyula* could also be used to refer specifically to ethnic category membership. This second meaning to *dyula* was far more localized; roughly, it extended over areas east of the Bandama and Bagoué Rivers in parts of the modern nations of Mali, Upper Volta and Ivory Coast (Person 1968:97). In these regions, all native speakers of Manding called themselves Dyula, whether they were actively engaged in trade or not. There existed a crucial difference between those Manding-speaking communities where *dyula* was an exclusively professional category, and those where it was also a broader ethnic category. It was only a professional term in those areas where Manding-speakers constituted most, if not all, of the local population – areas characterized by a relative linguistic and cultural uniformity, though even here traders constituted a distinct 'subculture'. (Mahmoud Kati's distinction between the Wangara and the Malinke suggests that such subcultural differences were already a feature of the social organization of the Malian empire.) Those Manding-speaking communities who called themselves Dyula lived as minority enclaves among peoples linguistically and culturally different from themselves, peoples such as the Senufo, the Kulango and the Abron.

Those communities who labeled themselves Dyula were quite aware of the other and more usual meaning of the term. Any individual calling himself a *dyula* might either mean that he was a professional trader or simply that he was a native speaker of Manding. In any particular context,

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there was not likely to be any doubt which meaning was intended. However, in a more fundamental sense, these minority communities of Manding-speakers, by calling themselves *dyula*, were explicitly identifying themselves as a people of traders. Despite the fact that not all Dyula were traders, this identification made perfect sense. In the first place, in those regions where they settled as immigrant minorities, Manding-speakers enjoyed a virtual monopoly of local trade. This monopoly was made possible by the fact that the Dyula were only a small portion of a wide network of Manding-speaking traders and an even wider one of Moslem traders throughout the Western Sudan and beyond. Precisely because the Dyula did not assimilate to their neighbors, but rather conformed to cultural norms accepted elsewhere within West Africa, they served as useful intermediaries between local populations and other regions with which they traded. As such, immigrant Dyula were not only tolerated, but often welcomed, particularly by local chiefs with whom they collaborated on numerous occasions. Secondly, revenues from trade were one of the main sources of subsistence in these Dyula communities. In other words, trade provided a livelihood for many members of Dyula communities as well as the very *raison d'être* for their separate existence as representatives of a minority culture.

Koko quarter

When I set out for the field in 1972, it was my intention to study the Dyula both as traders and as a people. In particular, I was interested in determining how they had adapted their precolonial system of trade to modern social and economic conditions. Other West African peoples who had specialized in trade before the colonial period – the Hausa and the Kooroko for example (Abner Cohen 1965, 1966, 1969; Amselle 1971, 1977) – had successfully made the transition. I assumed that the same would be true of the Dyula.

Soon after my arrival in Ivory Coast, I set out for the town of Korhogo. The town seemed to me an appropriate place in which to begin. It was located in a region with a long history of Dyula settlement, with important precolonial centers of trade situated both to the east (Kong, Bouna and Bondoukou) and to the west (Tingrela, Tiong-i and Boron). Compared to these other towns, precolonial Korhogo was a minor place indeed. However, during the colonial period, it had been chosen as the administrative center for much of the entire northern region of Ivory Coast; it remains by far the largest town in the region, and one of the largest in the country. Despite the fact that it is not located along the major rail and road networks leading out from the capital, it seemed by its very size a likely candidate for a place where trade would continue to be an important activity for part of the

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population. In any case, I was by no means committed to staying in Korhogo; it simply seemed the best place to begin searching for a community in which to conduct field research.

I began my search immediately upon arriving in town. With hindsight, I can now say that I was surprisingly lucky. In the first place, I found a Dyula community with incredible speed: I arrived in town on a Sunday, and moved into what were to become my permanent headquarters on Tuesday! I owe an immense debt of gratitude to a number of individuals for the efficiency of the help I received in establishing myself this rapidly. I was directed on Monday morning to the veterinarian's office, which was doubling at the time as the local headquarters of the Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire, the unique and official party of Ivory Coast. The local party officials were taken entirely by surprise by my request to settle into a Dyula community. However, I insisted that I knew what I was doing – an assertion which proved even less true than I imagined at the time – and they promised to decide what to do with me on the following day.

They held absolutely true to their word. One of the party officials, Mory Kounandy Cisse, party secretary for the town of Korhogo, was himself a Dyula. He had arranged in the meantime to make a room available for my wife and myself in the house of his elder full brother, Al Hajj Valy Cisse. (I found out soon afterwards that this was Al Hajj Valy's personal room, which he was to give up for my benefit with overwhelming generosity for nearly two years.) The party officials could not have made a better choice for me. Throughout my stay, my hosts made every possible effort to help me with my research, however incomprehensible it may have seemed to them. Indeed, it is a host's responsibility in Dyula society to act as an intermediary between his 'stranger' and the rest of the local community, but it is also expected that the 'stranger' act through his hosts rather than take direct initiatives. One cannot change hosts within any one community without giving serious offense, so that a responsible host is an essential asset to any newcomer, and an irresponsible one a nearly irremediable disaster.

But perhaps my greatest stroke of good fortune was the nature of the community in which I unsuspectingly found myself. The name of the quarter in which I was living is Koko, which means 'across the stream' in Dyula; indeed, Koko quarter is separated from most of the town, and particularly the center, by an inconsequential little brook which can easily escape the notice of the casual visitor. (In fact, the locution *koko* is relative; 'across the stream' is by definition on the other side, so that Dyula residents of Koko quarter usually use the name to refer, not to their own home, but to the rest of the town!) The use of a stream as a boundary to divide a town or village into two distinct parts is a frequent phenomenon in the region, and many villages also have their own *koko* quarters. One of the most frequent uses of the boundary is to separate the Dyula part of a town or village from

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the Senufo part; the Senufo form the majority of the population of the region. This was the case for Korhogo in the nineteenth century, when Koko was essentially the Dyula quarter of a large village that was the capital of a small Senufo chiefdom.¹ As with most modern African towns, Korhogo's rapid growth tended to erode or superannuate the social referents of many earlier spatial boundaries. However, most of this growth has taken place on only one side of the stream – the Senufo side. While it is true that Koko quarter has received a certain number of recent immigrants, most of its residents trace their descent to inhabitants of the nineteenth-century village.

Within Koko itself, there exists a distinct Dyula quarter, entirely composed of Dyula who are indigenous to the town. This remains the site of the Friday mosque for all the Moslems of the town, a vestige of Koko's precolonial status as *the* Moslem quarter, despite that fact that more imposing if not more aesthetic mosques are to be found across the stream. The Dyula of Koko continue to hold rights over the office of *imam* for the town mosque. The Dyula quarter has not escaped the trappings of modernity. Land has been parceled out into privately-owned plots, and cement houses are rapidly replacing the traditional mud huts. Surprisingly, in spite of all this, the Dyula quarter has by and large retained its traditional subdivision into clan wards. By a fortunate accident (fortunate for an anthropologist, in any case), the Dyula part of Koko has maintained an identity as a distinct community of the 'indigenous' Dyula residents of Korhogo. Spatially, and in many respects socially, its structure remains the same as that of a large Dyula village.

Koko is not, of course, a village. It is in many respects an integral part of the modern town. Many residents of Koko work across the stream, and all of them have extensive networks linking them to residents of other parts of town. Yet its identity as a 'traditional' community in the eyes of its own members as well as in those of an anthropologist make it a particularly interesting, if relatively rare, type of urban community. Compared to Koko, Korhogo 'across the stream' partakes of that amorphousness typical of any modern town anywhere in the world. Many anthropologists have been able to study the ways in which individuals adapt to the conditions of modern urban life. But in Koko I was able to study the adaptation of a whole community, as if a village could be grafted onto a town.

As opposed to many immigrants to Korhogo, the Dyula of Koko quarter consider themselves inhabitants, not only of the town itself, but of the region as a whole. They maintain extensive and important ties of kinship and friendship with Dyula in the surrounding villages, ties which antedate the colonial period. My hosts had particularly strong ties with a number of such villages, including Kadioha, a large all-Dyula village, 50 km or so to the southwest of Korhogo, from which their grandfather had emigrated in the nineteenth century. I visited Kadioha with my hosts on a number of

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occasions, and eventually spent several months there on my own. The comparison between these two Dyula communities, one in the village and one in the town, was illuminating in a number of respects. Of course, anthropologists have rightly emphasized the dangers of hasty comparisons of social behavior in town and village settings.² However, the special nature of Koko, whose Dyula inhabitants perceive themselves as members of a 'traditional' community, makes such comparison relatively easier. Indeed, the example of Kadioha highlighted those respects in which the Dyula of Koko structured their social relationships in the same way as did villagers. Perhaps the most insidious temptation in making such a comparison would be to consider Kadioha as 'traditional' and Korhogo as 'modern'; to assume that one community was changing 'faster' than the other. Both communities have experienced radical changes in the recent past. The crucial difference lies rather in the simple fact that Koko is, after all, very much a part of town. First of all, this influences individual strategies for coping with change. Whereas a villager must necessarily migrate in order to obtain wage labor or gain access to important consumer markets for certain services he can provide, the townsman is more likely to be able to find what he needs at home. More importantly, the very identity of the Koko Dyula *as a community* depends on the relations of individuals and the community as a whole with those on the other side of the stream. Kadioha will retain its identity as a Dyula village as long as people continue to live there. Koko, on the other hand, is faced with the prospect of another kind of disappearance; it could become like the rest of town, with one side of the stream a mirror image, perhaps in miniature, of the other. In a certain sense, the Dyula of Koko have their cake and eat it too. They can act as residents of a town and residents of a village at the same time in the same place. But such a feat can hardly be accomplished effortlessly.

Responses to change

So far, I have dwelt on my good fortune in finding such exceptional hosts and such an unusual community as Koko, and extraordinarily rapidly at that. But I doubt whether any anthropologist can rely forever on beginner's luck, and I was certainly no exception. I had come to Korhogo to study precolonial and modern patterns of trade. Not surprisingly, information about precolonial trade was rather limited. I had to rely on the reminiscences of old men about the activities of their fathers and in some cases their grandfathers. There were few men indeed who were both willing and able to provide me with any details, and there were even fewer checks on the accuracy of the material that I managed to glean. But my real problem was gathering information on modern trade: it simply did not exist, at least in the form I was seeking. That is not to say, by any means, that there was no trade

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in Korhogo – quite the contrary – nor even that there were no Dyula traders in Koko. But, whereas the Dyula of Koko and their cousins in villages such as Kadioha enjoyed a virtual monopoly over trade in the nineteenth century, they had irremediably lost this control by the time that I arrived in the field. The overwhelming majority of Dyula who still earned a living by trade in Koko were operating on an extremely small scale. In the not-too-distant past, it had not been unusual for Dyula with other occupations to engage in trading ventures on the side; this was now increasingly rare. There were large-scale traders in Korhogo . . . but they were mostly across the stream. It became increasingly clear that any study of continuities between pre-colonial and modern trade was not going to bear much fruit.

I was faced with a difficult choice. On one hand, I could abandon the Dyula of Koko and try to build up a network of contacts with traders across the stream. Otherwise, if I wished to stay in Koko, I would have to find another focus for my research. I chose to remain, feeling that it would be easier to find another problem than to find another set of people to study, especially given the congeniality of my hosts. I had by that time collected a considerable amount of information about marriage in Koko, and more kept coming my way whether I sought it or not. So, in my hurry to find another topic of research, I chose marriage. In particular, I set out to determine how the changes which the Dyula of Koko and Kadioha were experiencing were affecting marriage patterns. In retrospect, I believe this focus was too narrow. The question remains an important one, but it is only one facet of two more general and, in a real sense, fundamental problems. First, how are the Dyula of Koko and Kadioha adapting to their loss of control over the region's trade? Second, how are the Dyula of Koko adapting to their community's incorporation into a modern town? In a sense, my attention was turned back to the question I had wanted to answer before setting out for the field: how have precolonial patterns of social interaction been adapted to modern social and economic conditions? But I had erroneously assumed that these patterns were, both now and in the past, intimately connected with a system of trade. Instead, I found I had to explain the paradox: how can there be 'traders' without trade?

Of course, any discussion of change necessarily involved a diachronic dimension. To say that 'modern' conditions involved 'change' is either a truism, or, for want of evidence, an unwarranted assumption. Simply to state that the Dyula have lost their regional trade monopoly and that Koko has been incorporated into a modern town is not enough; it still needs to be shown that these changes have had a fundamental effect on the nature, if not the structure, of Dyula social relationships. In short, it is necessary to describe Dyula society as it was before the colonial period in order to assess the effects of any later changes. Such a description can only take the form of a hypothetical reconstruction, and as such can only be tentative. The task is

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all the more difficult because of the lack of written historical documentation, at least as far as primary sources are concerned. European exploration of the region began at the very end of the nineteenth century, a very brief prelude to its incorporation into the French colonial empire. The only exception was Rene Caillé, who passed through Tingrela, considerably to the east of Korhogo, in 1829, on his way to Timbuktu. The next European visitor was to be Binger, who arrived in Kong in 1888. His account of the town remains the single outstanding description of Dyula society before the advent of colonial rule. But, despite their relative proximity, Kong and Korhogo must certainly have been very different places before the colonial period. The former was a great trading town, whose population, estimated by Binger (1892:198) to be 15 000, was entirely Dyula. The latter was the seat of a former Senufo chiefdom, whose Dyula population was a minority, if an important one. That we have no comparable description of Korhogo is hardly surprising; the very importance of the site is almost entirely a function of the colonial period. It remains possible that there are extant local histories, written in Arabic, of Dyula communities in the region of Korhogo. A number of such texts have been discovered in Ghana (Hodgkin 1966), for example; I was assured by Dyula informants that similar texts had indeed existed in the past, and that some copies might still be extant, but my attempts to uncover them bore no fruit. However, my quest was hardly exhaustive, and there remains hope that some texts will eventually be brought to light. In any case, my own sources remain almost exclusively oral.

The first part of this book will be devoted to a brief reconstruction of Dyula society in Korhogo and Kadioha before the colonial period. Chapter 2 traces the history of Dyula immigration to the region, and discusses the nature of the symbiosis of the Dyula, as a minority, with their Senufo neighbors, both chiefs and agriculturalists. Chapter 3 examines the division of labor within the Dyula community in terms of the organization of the three economic activities held in most esteem by the Dyula: warfare, Islamic scholarship and trade. These two chapters attempt to delineate the nature of the social and economic 'niche' which the Dyula occupied in a multi-ethnic society before the advent of colonial rule. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the principles of 'traditional' Dyula social organization. Chapter 4 deals with kinship, and particularly with the *kabila* or 'clan ward', the fundamental unit of Dyula social organization; Chapter 5 discusses the structure of marriage choices and the reasons for preferential marriage within the clan ward. Unlike most of the features of the precolonial Dyula economy, these aspects of social organization are still very much a part of modern Dyula society. Their description relies essentially on my own first-hand observations, rather than on reminiscences, and one might object that it is an unwarranted assumption that these features existed in similar form in

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the precolonial period. However, the Dyula insist that they did, and I shall argue that Dyula social organization was in fact a successful adaptation to the economic and social niche which the Dyula occupied in the Korhogo region in the nineteenth century and before.

The rest of the book deals with the changes which have taken place since the beginning of the twentieth century and their effects on the Dyula communities of Koko and Kadioha. Chapter 6 explains how the Dyula communities of the region lost their control over local trade, and how the transformation of Korhogo into a modern urban center has affected the relations of the Dyula of Koko with their neighbors across the stream. Chapter 7 describes the various strategies which the Dyula of Koko and Kadioha have utilized in order to carve out a new economic niche for themselves: the adoption of new occupations; migration away from the home community, and usually the region; and Western education. The next two chapters deal specifically with the response of the Koko Dyula to their incorporation into a larger urban community. Chapter 8 deals with the community's own sense of its distinct identity and the way that this affects the relationships of its members with other residents of Koko, with the town across the stream and with other Dyula in the region. Chapter 9 is specifically concerned with Islam and how the ideologies of religious tradition and reform have been used to express and maintain the Koko Dyula community's sense of identity. Chapter 10 reconsiders Dyula kinship and marriage in the modern context. This problem is particularly interesting in two respects. In the first place, the Ivoirian Civil Code of 1965 has expressly sought to legislate 'traditional' forms of social organization out of existence. Secondly, a consideration of those aspects of the kinship system which continue to operate, as opposed to those which have been abandoned, raises the general issue of the adaptation of 'traditional' structures to changing circumstances.

This last problem – the persistence, and indeed the very notion, of 'tradition' – is the subject of the concluding chapter and, ultimately, of the book as a whole. For, in a sense, the very idea of 'tradition' is misleading. It connotes a blind commitment to the past, a stubborn refusal to adapt, a denial, one might say, of the present, and, by implication, of the future. The Dyula have never been partisans of this kind of blind commitment. After all, they are by their own definition a people of traders, and traders cannot, in a very literal sense, afford such blindness. They must be responsive to change, if only changes in market conditions, in order to survive. And if the Dyula of Koko and Kadioha have abandoned trade, this is again because of their awareness of change and the need to adapt.

Yet the Dyula still consider themselves 'traditional'. If they can nevertheless adapt to change, it is because 'tradition' is, for the Dyula, very much a thing of the present rather than of the past. 'Tradition', in this sense,

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is a means of supplying meaning, and if the present acquires its meaning in terms of the past, it is equally true that the past takes on meaning in terms of the present. This book is a record of ‘tradition’ as well as of ‘change’ in Dyula society – two notions which we in the West label, perhaps too hastily, as opposites.