CHAPTER NINE

THE RISE OF THE BASSAR CHIEFDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICA’S INTERNAL FRONTIER

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INTRODUCTION

This volume uses the concept of landscape production as a paradigm for understanding the nature and dynamics of political economies and cultural ideologies, including ideologies of power and resistance, with an emphasis on the use and manifestation of power in symbolic, materialistic, and integrative ways. This chapter examines the concept of Africa’s internal frontier as described by Kopytoff in the context of the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom of Northern Togo in the late eighteenth century, including its interaction with corporate descent groups, regional power relationships, and the degree of political economy.

More than twenty years ago, Kopytoff (1987) elaborated on the role of the “internal frontier” in the rise of political entities in sub-Saharan Africa. This article examines his ideas in the context of the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom in the late eighteenth century, and finds there are major parallels supporting Kopytoff’s model. However, while the study of the internal frontier is by definition the study of regional processes (de Barros 2001; Stahl 2004), Kopytoff (1987) spends little time discussing the impacts of two major regional phenomena on the political processes of this frontier: 1) the
immigration of specialist ironworkers associated with the rise and decline of regional ironworking centers; and, 2) the regional impact of slave raiding by centralized polities in peripheral areas associated with the internal frontier. It is suggested that Kopytoff’s (1987:41) exclusion of societies with pronounced specialist occupations (such as ironworking) from his model is premature, and that indeed ironworkers could be an important catalyst for the initial stages of polity formation, particularly the search for adherents as kinsmen. In addition, it is apparent the slave trade had a major impact on Africa’s internal frontier, so that the frontier process was not just primarily the result of “steady little local quarrels and raids” (Kopytoff 1987:21). Finally, this article uses both archaeological and ethnohistorical data to document the processes of the internal frontier.

AFRICA’S INTERNAL FRONTIER

Kopytoff (1987, 1999) argues that most African political entities did not evolve out of pre-existing simpler forms; rather, they grew out of immigrant settlements that split off from existing central polities – immigrants who migrated into the “internal frontiers” between fully formed regional political systems (Kopytoff 1999:88). These areas were empty or occupied by small, decentralized groups or “weak local hegemonies.” These new immigrant groups brought with them pre-existing social and political models from their former polity (Kopytoff 1987:14). The principle of firstcomer primacy, a key to legitimate authority in African societies, led newcomers to struggle to “co-opt the mystical powers of the earliest settlers in relation to the land”; and, in the context of acephalous societies, “a hierarchy can emerge through the simple process of
adding new layers of immigrants under the kin groups that settled the area first” (Kopytoff 1987:51; McIntosh 1999:21).

A recently arrived immigrant group sought to attract followers and new members as kinsmen or pseudo-kinsmen using a corporate kin group model; however, as the new polity became well established and had developed a *modus vivendi* with earlier firstcomer groups, including the ritual “owners of the land,” adherents increasingly were added under a contractual model between ruler and subjects (Kopytoff 1987:40-52). An ideological duality thus develops that tells the story of the polity’s creation from the differing views of ruler and subjects, offering political counter-narratives often associated with sacred geographies. This process of polity creation is useful for understanding processes of political change and continuity among and between African polities, large and small (Kopytoff 1987; McIntosh 1999; Robertshaw 1999; Schoenbrun 1999; Vansina 1990, 1999).

THE BASSAR REGION

The Bassar region of northern Togo is bisected by the Katcha River and is bordered by iron-rich hills and mountains, including the nearly pure hematite ores at Bandjeli (Figures 9.1 and 9.2). It has alternating dry and rainy seasons and an annual rainfall of 140 cm. The savanna-woodland vegetation has been heavily impacted by cultivation and deforestation. Subsistence is based on shifting agriculture focused on yams, sorghum, millet, groundnuts, but also cassava, cowpeas, okra, peppers, shea butter nuts, and nere (*Parkia biglobosa*). For centuries, Bassar exported foodstuffs and iron for cloth, charcoal, slaves, and cattle.
Around the beginning of German colonial rule in 1890, the Bassar region was home to the Bassar and Kabu chiefdoms in eastern Bassar and the relatively autonomous western region extending from Bandjeli to Dimuri. In precolonial times, western villages were likely presided over by lineage elders. The Bandjeli chiefdom is not discussed in colonial literature, but it probably resulted from a Bissib (Lamba) migration in the nineteenth century.

Early German observers exaggerated the extent of the Bassar Chiefdom, suggesting it once held sway over the entire Bassar region and that the late nineteenth century Dagomba War had weakened its power. Actually, the chiefdom was relatively small – 25 to 80 sq km with a population of five to ten thousand (Cornevin 1957:96; de Barros 1985; Dugast 1988). It was centered on the community of Bassar and may have included Kalanga to the west. It was created between A.D.1780 and 1810 (de Barros 1985:723-729), which coincides with the onset of intensive slave raiding by the Dagomba from the west and the Tyokossi from the north, as well as the growth of a major Hausa kola route through Bassar into the Volta Basin (Barbier 1982; de Barros 1985:325-329; Norris 1984). The only other documented chiefdom is Kabu founded in the 1850s (Gnon 1967).

Since ca. 1800, most Bassar have lived in the four centers of Bassar, Kabu-Sara, Bandjeli, and Bitchabe. The Bassar are an amalgam of indigenous Paragourma-speaking groups and immigrants from the north (Lamba, Konkomba, Gurma, Gangan, and Tyokossi), west (Gouang or Gondja and Dagomba), and east (Tem or Kotokoli and Tchamba). Immigrants came to Bassar for its farm land, its iron industry, and as a place of refuge from regional slave-raiding activities (Cornevin 1962:24). The neighboring
Kabiye often traded surplus population as slaves to the Bassar for food. Slaves were used for field labor and as wives who farmed, made charcoal, and mined iron ore. Children of married slaves became freemen (Cornevin 1962; Klose 1903a, 1903b, 1964). Most immigrants were assimilated and speak Bassar. The largest and most important Bassar clan, the Natak Clan, claims an origin from the sacred forest of Dikre northwest of Bassar (Dugast 1992; Figure 9.2).

THE RISE OF THE BASSAR CHIEFDOM

After a brief discussion of the nature of chiefdoms, this section examines the rise of political centralization and the Bassar Chiefdom in the light of both ethnohistorical and archaeological data contexts. Particular emphasis is placed upon the role of iron production and ironworker immigration and the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In a subsequent section, these narratives will then be examined in terms of their degree of fit with Kopytoff’s internal frontier.

Defining the Nature of Chiefdoms

Given the multiple and often ambiguous usages of the term “chiefdom” in the literature, it is useful to define how it is used here. The office of chief is usually hereditary; however, a new chief might be only mildly related to the former chief as a member of a chiefly lineage or clan; selected from outside the clan or may be a foreigner; or selected from alternating clans. Fried (1967) distinguished between simple and complex chiefdoms. The former was chief of a single village with satellite hamlets or farmsteads; the latter minimally had a paramount chief ruling over local village chiefs in
a regional polity. Simple chiefdoms have populations in the thousands and complex
chiefdoms in the tens of thousands. Johnson and Earle (2000) view chiefdoms as a
continuum of variability evolving from the Big Man collectivity to the threshold of the
state; chiefly hierarchies and heterarchies are also viewed on a continuum, with the latter
typical of sub-Saharan Africa (Johnson and Earle 2000:266; McIntosh 1999). For some,
the term “chiefdom” has lost much of its meaning (Yoffee 1993), essentially covering all
intermediate-level societies (Stanish 2004). For Bassar, the position of chief is quasi-
hereditary and its scale and degree of hierarchy most closely resemble a simple chiefdom.

**Ethnohistorical Context of the Bassar Chiefdom**

Oral traditions speak of indigenous firstcomer elements and the later in-migration
of peoples from the west, north, and east into the Bassar region internal frontier. They
also provide evidence of the ideological duality of the Bassar Chiefdom and the
integration of firstcomer elements into the ritual of chiefly installation and the
agricultural cycle, both part of the modus vivendi between rulers and subjects that is an
important part of the processes of the internal frontier. Finally, they provide insights into
the actual authority of the chief over the everyday lives of his subjects and the place of
the Bassar Chiefdom within the hierarchical-heterarchical continuum.

As for firstcomer populations, oral traditions suggest there were once indigenous
“Lama” populations (ancestors of the Lamba and Kabiye) in the Bassar region (de Barros
1985; Dugast 1992:138ff; Froelich and Alexandre 1960; Froelich et al. 1963). Gbikpi-
Benissan (1976, 1978) suggests Lamba are present in the indigenous community of
Kankunde; Dugast (1992) found no evidence of this, but admits their origins are a
mystery. While the Bissib (Lamba) clan is a relatively recent arrival, local informants agree they are the “owners” of the four iron hills north of Bassar (Dugast 1992:136; Figure 9.2). The community of Biakpabe-Bassar, of Gurma origin, also claims firstcomer (but not indigenous) status, and emphasizes their ritual role in the installation of the chief, which the Nataka (chiefly) clan rejects (Dugast 1992:868-870). The possibility of Biakpabe’s long-term presence in the area is strengthened by the role they play in harvest ceremonies. Cornevin (1962:22-51) and Gbikpi-Benissan (1978:4ff; see Dugast 1992) state that the major component of early “Bassar” populations came from Ghana (Gurma and Gondja), including the composite Nataka clan which also claims firstcomer status. Immigrant farmers and ironworkers also came over the centuries: Gurma from Burkina Faso to Biakpabe and Bandjeli; Dagomba smiths (Koli clan) to Bitchabe and Binaparba; Lamba ironworkers (Bissib clan) to Bandjeli, Bassar, and Sara; Kotokoli smiths to Bassar-Nangbani; Tchamba ironworkers to Bandjeli; and Gangan ironworkers fleeing the Tyokossi (Cornevin 1962; de Barros 1985; Dugast 1987; Froelich and Alexandre 1960; Martinelli 1982).

In the Bassar Chiefdom, the chief is chosen from the Nataka clan. Pioneering clan elements consisted primarily of Gondja (Guang) peoples from near Kete Kratchi in Ghana (Figure 9.1), some fleeing the Dagomba (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:81), before establishing themselves at the forest of Dikre centuries ago. Nataka elements are in Kibedimpu, Nangbani, and Bukpassiba; in Wadande, Ketangbao and Kpaajadumpu in Bassar; and in indigenous Kankunde by incorporation (Dugast 1987, 1992; Gbikpi-Benissan 1978:8). Oral traditions offer conflicting narratives about who came first to Mount Bassar -- those from the Nataka clan or elements associated with possibly

Indigenous Kankunde is integrated into the Nataka clan which begrudgingly accepts it provided them with land to settle when they arrived; however, it does not participate in the annual sorghum harvest festival to honor the Dikre divinity and has no legitimate right to the chieftaincy – even discussing this is an extremely volatile subject (Dugast 3/12/09, p.c.). However, Kankunde does play an essential ritual role during the installation of a new Bassar chief (Dugast 1992:759-760).

Biakpabe also claims firstcomer status even over Kankunde (Dugast 1992:874-876). The author’s research found that Biakpabe claims involvement in the selection and/or installation of the chief. One story stated the new chief has to choose between two stones, one representing the “earth” and the other “secular power”; if he mistakenly chooses the “earth” stone, a special ceremony must be performed in Biakpabe and a secret one in Bukpassiba where his head is shaved. A similar story was told to Dugast (8/1/10, p.c.) about a stone and wooden bench which he was shown. Biakpabe also brings the first yams to the chief and has the right to sow the first fonio seeds (Dugast 1992:877). Gbikpi-Benissan (1984:17-18) was told the following in Biakpabe: Biakpabe introduced yams to the area; Biakpabe is more interested in deities than the office of chief which explains why the chief is at Kibedimpu; and, finally, Kibedimpu chooses the chief who is then elected in Nangbani. However, the chief is only installed if he can
distinguish the royal stone from other stones presented to him in Biakpabe and can identify those who belong to the royal line versus those firstcomers associated with the Dikre divinity. Although firstcomer and chiefly installation claims by Biakpabe are rejected by the Nataka, Dugast (1992:679, 868-870) emphasizes that all Bassar clans attribute magical powers to Biakpabe, especially related to yam germination. Biakpabe also has the honor of planting the first yams. These conflicting stories of firstcomer status reflect the *modus vivendi* that develops between indigenous firstcomers and immigrant latecomers described by Kopytoff (1987).

Dugast (1988:274-279) argues the Bassar chiefdom was a reinvention and improvement upon an earlier, less centralized, perhaps even failed “chiefdom.” The primary goal was to reduce clan factionalism and to create an institution that could deal with the huge influx of foreign refugees, including ironworkers, created by intense slave raiding, by bringing in a neutral, impartial outsider who could arbitrate constant disputes that were creating anarchy within the old chiefdom. The Nataka clan captured a Kotokoli man, who after study was selected as the new chief, and thus this foreign element was *not* due to conquest (Dugast 1992:854-886; see Kopytoff 1987:66). Subsequent chiefs were selected through divination between two alternating groups within the Nataka clan: the first from the lineage associated with the reorganization of the chiefdom; and, the other associated with the Dikre divinity and the lineage that provided the chief before the reorganization. Thus, the Nataka clan was a political composite consisting of indigenous and foreign elements and associated ritual leaders, including the *utandaans* associated with the divinity for the entire Bassar agglomeration and that associated with ancient origins of the Nataka clan at Dikre, along with other ritual leaders linked with rain, wind,
and fertility. This grouping of indigenous and other ritual leaders within a single clan provided the spiritual legitimacy the chief needed to rule, but at the same time tightly circumscribed his authority (Dugast 1988:274-275; 2004). In fact, contrary to what often occurs in the classical African chiefdom, where the growth of sacred chiefly authority is associated with a rupture between the chief and his clan, this did not occur in Bassar, a point emphasized with the chief’s disappearance upon his death into the Dikre sacred forest (Dugast 1992:241).

What kind of authority did the Bassar Chief have over his subjects?

Economically, the Bassar Chief had no influence over planting and harvesting decisions, which were made in close coordination with elders and the utandaans, and he had no control over iron production and exchange (Dugast 1988; de Barros 1985, 2011). The chief could decide to go to war, but in principle only with the consent of his council. The chief was the head of the judicial tribunal (bosolib), a larger assembly of elders (unatchebe), and the executive council (diber), yet decisions were generally reached through consensus. The chief’s primary powers lay in his power to make judgments and in his ritual power associated with controlling malevolent forces. Using his judicial powers, the Bassar chief focused on preventing and settling internal disputes, encouraging cooperation at all levels, and mitigating social inequalities (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:148-159). Despite structural elements which sought to diminish tension, inter- and intra-clan conflicts were common (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:123-126). The first were often between the Nataka and foreign (latecomer) clans; the latter between senior and junior clan members. Sources of conflict included women, cattle, and farm land. Gbikpi-Benissan (1976:126) describes clans as pressure groups, reflecting the chiefdom’s
heterarchical nature. The use of physical force to make people comply was problematic; moral persuasion and peer pressure were the best tactics, including the threat of exile. No formal police force existed to enforce decisions (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:134-135).

In terms of ritual power, the organization of a fire dance was central to Bassar ritual activity at both the residential and Bassar agglomeration level. It involves diviners discerning the silhouette of potential evil influences in the flames, concentrating this evil in the cinders, and then disposing of them at a crossroads at the edge of town. The chief and his clan have the responsibility of organizing a fire dance for all Bassar; more importantly, if the chief has the visionary powers to foresee evil, he can order ritual action to render harmless that evil at the town’s crossroads without a fire dance. No one else has such power in Bassar (Dugast 2004:210, 232-234).

In summary, the chief’s authority was legitimated at several levels: practical – justice, order and the general welfare were promoted and maintained; religious – the chiefly installation and harvest festival ceremonies provided the ritual support and legitimization he needed to rule, and his unique powers associated with keeping out malevolent forces through the fire dance and associated rituals; and ideological – he was chosen from and by the legitimate Nataka clan and its composite elements. In terms of the hierarchical-heterarchical continuum, the Bassar Chiefdom was decidedly heterarchical (see also the case of Eguafo discussed by Spiers in this volume).

Archaeological Context

trans-Atlantic slave trade to major demographic and settlement shifts that are related to
the rise of political centralization within the Bassar Region. These studies also provide
support regarding both the nature of indigenous (firstcomer) populations and the later in-
migration of ironworking (and other) latecomer populations.

Iron Production and Political Centralization

A regional archaeological sample survey (10 sq km) of the east central portion of
the Bassar region between the Katcha River and the Bidjilib iron ore source (Figure 9.2)
was conducted to look for associations between the rise of iron metallurgy and the rise of
political centralization (de Barros 1985, 1988). No evidence for a settlement site
hierarchy was found until the Early Iron Age with the site of Dekpassanware (late 1st
millennium B.C.), and then again with the Later Iron Age settlements associated with
large-scale iron production beginning in the fourteenth century and reaching peak
production levels after CALIB A.D. 1550. In both cases, the site hierarchy consisted of
a village-satellite hamlet complex with little or no evidence for residential segregation,
the production of elite goods, monumental architecture or other signs of more complex
political centralization. In short, it is hypothesized that political centralization was no
greater than that associated with generic big man systems or simple chiefdoms. The only
centralized polities recognized in local oral traditions are the relatively recent Bassar and
Kabu chiefdoms, both best characterized as simple chiefdoms.

During the Early Iron Age, two concordant sets of radiocarbon dates from
Dekpassanware date early iron production to CALIB 400-200 B.C. (de Barros 2011),
where small, probable bellows-driven furnaces were used to meet primarily local iron
needs. As noted earlier, oral traditions suggest the Bassar region was formerly inhabited by the Lama, peoples ancestral to the present-day Kabyie and Lamba, whose homelands today are just to the north and northeast (Figure 9.1). The excavations at Dekpassanware strongly suggest the inhabitants of this 30 hectare site were ancestral to the Kabiye (de Barros 1985, 2011). This evidence includes the following: 1) the dominant ceramic ware (Bright Mica Ware) is made from clays derived from gneisses and granites which are not present in the Bassar Region but do exist in the Kabiye area; 2) the ceramic forms, including pots with flared hollow bases and carinations (along with the frequent use of grooves and incisions), are similar to modern Kabiye forms; 3) the people at Dekpassanware buried their dead in family or communal tombs as do the Kabiye (Posnansky and de Barros 1980), along with iron grave goods, whereas local Bassar informants stated this is contrary to Bassar burial practices; and, 4) Dekpassanware contains iron bloom crushing mortars (lukomandjole) and fragments of large stone forging hammers, practices used in north-central Togo today by only the Bassar and the neighboring Kabiye (Dugast 1986). Thus, it would appear that early Bassar region metallurgists were probably ancestors of the present-day Kabiye, and perhaps the Lamba as well, given the Bissibi clan’s Lamba origin noted earlier. In short, archaeological data support the ethnographic evidence for an indigenous Lama people.

Turning to the Later Iron Age, induced draft furnace technology appears in the fourteenth century (de Barros 1985, 1986) when iron and iron tools began to be produced for trade with neighboring populations, such as the Konkomba and Kotokoli. The emergence of the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Gonja states to the west (Figure 9.1) during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries greatly increased the demand for iron weapons, horse
paraphernalia, and protective chain mail for their cavalries. These states, along with Bono-Mansu and then Asante, stimulated long-distance trade into the Middle Volta Basin by the Hausa. Bassar responded with a spectacular growth in iron production between the late sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (de Barros 1986, 2001). Major iron production centers developed north of Bandjeli and Kabu and at Tipabun (Figure 9.3). Bassar iron markets thrived (e.g., Natchammba) and Bassar blacksmiths organized trading parties to adjacent areas. Bassar iron was traded throughout Togo and eastern Ghana with the help of Tyokossi and perhaps Hausa traders (de Barros 1985, 1986; Dugast 1986, 1988). The thriving iron industry led to a marked population increase due to better living standards, the import of slaves as field laborers, and the immigration of farmer-ironworkers from regions that had either exhausted local wood supplies (Goucher 1984) or were plagued by slave raiding.

Large scale iron production led to larger, more sedentary villages; a population shift closer to major ore deposits (de Barros 1988); specialization within the iron industry (Figure 9.3); and, a rising standard of living for ironworkers, especially clan elders who often amassed wealth in the form of food, cowry shells, cattle, slave labor, and imported goods (Dagomba brass rings, Kirotashi agate beads on the Niger, and European glass and native ground beads; Klose 1964:162-163). It is not known whether the new regional settlement pattern of larger villages with satellite hamlets resulted in incipient big men or simple chiefdoms (de Barros 1988). A simple chiefdom was perhaps at Dikre before the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom (Dugast 1988), but no chief names are remembered.

Cornevin (1962) and Dugast (1992) have documented the importance of immigration to the Bassar region during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Many
of these immigrants were farmer-ironworkers attracted to the region’s good farm land and its important iron industry with its excellent ores at Bandjeli. This period of in-migration corresponds well with archaeological studies described above which show a pronounced rise in site size and regional site density, as well as the appearance of a village-hamlet site hierarchy beginning in the late sixteenth century. In short, farmer-ironworker migration was important force in the production of the internal frontier landscape of the region.

The Impact of the Slave Trade on Bassar Political Centralization

Beginning in the late 1700s, Bassar was subjected to major slave raiding by the Dagomba from the west and the Tyokossi kingdom to the north (de Barros 2001). The Dagomba sought slaves and cattle to pay tribute to the Ashanti and the Tyokossi sought slaves to raise food. Some of the slaves sent to the Ashanti ended up in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and one can argue that the displacement of the Tyokossi from the Ivory Coast to northern Togo in the late eighteenth century was an indirect result of the turmoil caused by this same trade (de Barros 2001). In 1873-76, the Dagomba laid siege to the town of Bassar. While they never conquered Bassar, there is some evidence Bandjeli may have periodically paid tribute or gifts (Dugast 1992:62; Rattray 1932:580). The Tyokossi may have briefly collected tribute from Kabu (de Barros 2001:69-70).

Archaeological data (de Barros 1985, 1988) confirm this intensive slave raiding led to the abandonment of the Bassar peneplain between 1775 and 1825 and the regrouping of populations in mountain refuge areas like those inhabited today (Figure 9.4). Major ironworking centers moved to new locations: 1) in Bandjeli, populations and smelting sites moved from the north to the south side of Djowul Mountain; 2) the major
iron producing areas north of Kabu and to the south at Tipabun were abandoned, with some populations later regrouping at Sara with the rise of the Kabu Chiefdom in the 1850s; 3) new smelting sites developed north of Nangbani; and, 4) smithing populations north of Bitchabe moved closer to the mountains. People left Dikre and settled near Mount Bassar at Nangbani, Bukpassiba, Wadande-Bassar, and Kibedimpu. The last group at Dikre (Old Ussakar) left in the early 1800s. Oral traditions from the composite Nataka clan state their ancestors left Dikre under Bangaraku. Kibedimpu became the new chiefly residence, close to Mount Bassar for protection; Nangbani, Bukpassiba, and Wadande were spaced across the landscape to alert the Bassar of impending slave raids (de Barros 1985:662-667). Bissib smelters settled between Bassar and Nangbani (Gbikpi-Benissan 1976) and some smiths from Bitchabe settled at Binaparba (Figure 9.4).

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, regional specialization in the west continued with smelting near Bandjeli, smithing from Ignare to Natchammba, and charcoal-making at Dimuri; in the east, smelting and smithing villages developed in association with the Bassar and Kabu chiefdoms (Figure 9.4). Women from Kankunde, Langonde, Jimbire, and Moande near Mount Bassar specialized in potting, and Bassar women dyed imported Kotokoli cloth obtained in exchange for iron. This slave raiding and major population shift coincided with the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom and the production of its associated cultural landscape.

THE INTERNAL BASSAR FRONTIER
To a great extent, the Bassar region parallels the processes operating within Kopytoff’s (1987:16-17) “internal frontier.” With the exception of Dekpassanware during the Early Iron Age, which was a major ironworking center and may have been the center of a simple chiefdom, it was a region of small, decentralized groups or “weak local hegemonies” with no evidence of centralized polities in the archaeological record for at least eleven centuries prior to the Bassar Chiefdom (de Barros 1985, 2006, 2011).

Another key similarity is the importance of in-migration from neighboring regions -- “the production of frontiersmen” (Kopytoff 1987:16-23) – some seeking to avoid internal disputes in their homeland, others seeking better farmland, still others fleeing slave raiders. Such immigrants also included farmer-ironworkers seeking new opportunities because of depleted wood fuel (Goucher 1984) and/or because local ores were no longer accessible due to civil strife or slave raiding (de Barros 2000:185). This phenomenon of collapsed iron industries was widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Schmidt (1997:265-288) presents archaeological, ecological, and technological evidence showing how thriving “Early Iron Age” communities in northwestern Tanzania collapsed due to wood fuel depletion. By the seventh century, ironworking had ceased in many areas and would not be reestablished until the thirteenth century when the land had become reforested. Similarly, it is likely that the ironworking industry of Mema in the empire of Ghana also went into serious decline as a result of regional deforestation (Haaland 1985:66; see de Barros 2000:186). A similar decline in Burkina Faso may have led to the immigration of ironworkers to the south, including the Bassar region. And, deforestation was becoming a serious problem in Bassar when the Germans arrived in 1890 – they described how the entire core region was denuded of forest and how wood
charcoal was imported from the Konkomba to the north and from Dimuri to the south (de Barros 1985; Goucher 1984; Kuevi 1975). In short, immigrant ironworkers were probably a common phenomenon over the centuries (de Barros 2000:186; McIntosh 1994:177), often contributing to the production of frontiersmen to the internal frontier landscape.

Kopytoff (1987) describes how the growth of polities in the internal frontier consists of obtaining adherents (kinsmen and pseudo-kinsmen) and how each latecomer group is added on as a layer in the political and social structure. This process is evident in the Bassar region where immigrants from different cultural areas have been assimilated into the structure of Bassar society, resulting in smelting and smithing groups or clans of diverse origins. The author found that when village elders were assembled by the chief to answer questions, they spoke of a common origin in the Bassar region; however, if these same elders were asked similar questions within their family vestibule, one suddenly discovered a diverse range of origins (Gonja, Gurma, Dagomba, and so forth).

Firstcomer primacy also played a major role in the structuring and legitimization of the Bassar Chiefdom. The ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence presented earlier indicates this internal frontier was “initially” characterized by firstcomer Lama populations, followed perhaps by later Gurma migrations (Biakpabe), followed by later immigrants, including elements of the Nataka clan as well as ironworkers of diverse origins during the mid-to-late second millennium A.D. The archaeological evidence suggests these later ironworking populations brought induced draft furnace technology to the Bassar region during the early fourteenth century A.D (perhaps from Burkina Faso; see de Barros 1986). Such populations would have had an important “edge” as
latecomers: 1) as ironworkers they had an independent means of wealth production that could be used to attract adherents (especially through marriage to the daughters of other groups) allowing them to build up potential embryonic polities; and, 2) they could solve their latecomer status paradox by claiming to have brought a “new order” of wealth and production (thanks to induced draft furnaces) to the internal frontier (see Kopytoff 1987:50). This appears to have led to the rise of an earlier, simple chiefdom associated with the populations living near the sacred forest of Dikre. This polity was apparently relatively small and the chief’s powers relatively constricted as no list of chief names comes down to us from that period, though Chief Ouro Atakpa told Szwark (1981:19) that fourteen other chiefs are buried at Dikre in a communal tomb. Chiefs of the new chiefdom are said to disappear into the ground at Dikre upon their death (Dugast 1992:237).

The combined ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence also suggests that the firstcomer Lama populations were largely displaced to the east and north of the Bassar region, with remnants perhaps at Kankunde. Similarly, Gurma firstcomers lost their pre-eminence with the growth of the probable latecomer and heterogeneous Nataka clan. These firstcomer remnants were then ritually integrated into the politics of the Bassar Chiefdom when it arose in the late eighteenth century, which helps explain Biakpabe claims about involvement in the chiefly installation ceremonies described earlier. It is also noteworthy that Biakpabe has the honor of planting the first yams in the chief’s fields and the right to sow the first fonio seeds.

Kopytoff (1987) emphasizes that the internal frontier often attracted royal or chiefly elements that fissioned off from nearby centralized polities, and that as a polity
grew in importance within the internal frontier, it sought to situate itself in a regional context by identifying with common values, themes, and historical precedents. Here the Bassar case only partially parallels the Kopytoff model. The Nataka clan selected a foreign (Kotokoli) element to serve as first chief, but traditions do not describe him as part of a chiefly or royal lineage (Dugast 1992:868-872). A critical difference between the Bassar Chiefdom and the neighboring Dagomba, Gondja, Tyokossi and Kotokoli centralized polities was that the latter were all influenced by Islam, whereas the Bassar Chiefdom was not. The smaller Kabu Chiefdom (formed in the 1850s), however, was partly influenced by the organizational structure of Islamic Kotokoli chiefdoms and adopted some of its administrative terms (de Barros 1985:68). The composite nature of the Nataka and other Bassar clans also applies to Kopytoff’s (1987:40-48) kin-group model for attracting adherents, where latecomers become incorporated as ‘pseudo-kinsmen’ as the polity grew by increasing its “wealth in people.” In the latter case, the “firstcomers” would have included a number of layers created over time, including the Lama remnants and various immigrating groups. Indeed, Kopytoff (1987:48) suggests that internal frontier processes can result in a new ethnic identity -- in this case, “the Bassar,” whose identity was probably strongly influenced by the common ironworking traditions of many of its people (de Barros 2000:185-186). Finally, the chiefdom’s ideological duality (Kopytoff 1987:62-69) is reflected in the conflicting versions of firstcomer status between the chief and ritual firstcomers described earlier. It is also reflected in the severe internal conflict created when the German and French colonial administrations attempted to violate the alternating foreign vs. indigenous chief pattern that had been negotiated prior to their arrival (Dugast 1988).
It was mentioned earlier that Kopytoff’s (1987) original model tends to emphasize in-migration into the internal frontier in terms of the results of “steady little local quarrels and raids.” In the case of the rise of the Bassar Chiefdom, however, and probably for many other embryonic politics in the internal frontier during the many centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a critical factor included the immigration of refugee populations and the dislocation and trauma inflicted on existing populations by constant slave raiding. In the Bassar case, it led to major relocations of its population and its iron production centers from the plain to refuge mountain areas (see above), ultimately creating an untenable political situation where a combination of local quarrels, quarrels between local and immigrants populations, and quarrels between immigrant populations, required the negotiation of a stronger chiefdom to deal with these problems (Dugast 1988; Gbikpi-Benissan 1976:123-126). Indeed, one might argue that the Bassar Chiefdom might not have come to pass without this disruption, especially considering that iron production and trade were fully under the control of corporate kin groups before and after the rise of this chiefdom (de Barros 2001, Dugast 1988). The rise of the Bassar Chiefdom shows that the presence of pronounced specialist production need not be excluded from the processes of the internal frontier. To the contrary, one can argue that the immigration of substantial numbers of ironworkers was an important element in the creation of a new ethnic identity and a new regional polity, using the very processes described by Kopytoff for Africa’s internal frontier. In short, the production of the internal frontier landscape of the Bassar region was strongly impacted by major regional forces to which local polities had to adapt.
In conclusion, the history of the Bassar region internal frontier as deduced from both archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence provides considerable support for Kopytoff’s (1987) description and explanation of its processes. This includes: the nature of local polities; the production of frontiersmen; the process of acquiring adherents in polity formation; the importance of firstcomer primacy and the processes of integrating firstcomers and latecomers; the ideological duality of the new polity (the Bassar Chiefdom) in terms of rulers vs. subjects; and the resolution of this duality in terms of the ritual integration of firstcomers in the political processes of the chiefdom, particularly in the chiefly installation ceremony and the selection of alternating foreign and indigenous chiefly lineages. It differs in that there was no imported political model in the Bassar case, and no ruler-subject dichotomy developed as there was never a complete rupture between the chief and his clan. The Bassar case also illustrates the importance of internal frontier processes not emphasized by Kopytoff: 1) the importance of specialist ironworker immigration and how it fits within the political processes of the internal frontier, and, 2) the major impact of slave raiding on these same political processes.
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REFERENCES


Figure 9-1 -- Bassar and Bassar iron trade in West Africa. Relationship to states of the Middle Volta Basin and Hausa kola routes c. AD 1800.

Figure 9-2 – Bassar region showing iron ores, chiefdoms centered on Bassar and Kabu, and specialist villages at contact (1890s). The Early Iron Age (400 BC-150 AD) ironworking site of Dekpassanware is also shown.

Figure 9-3 – Bassar region c. AD 1600-1750. Major ironworking villages and sites are shown near Bandjeli, Kabu, Nababun (Tipabun), and Bassar. Insufficient data are available for the Bitchabe area.

Figure 9-4 – Bassar region c. AD 1825/1850. There has been a major shift in the distribution of smelting settlements to south of Bandjeli and closer to the large mountains adjacent to Kabu and Bassar. Tipabun and Dikre have been abandoned and two major smelting centers appear north of Bassar.