

# Intrasite features distribution as a source of social information: The case of Djaba-Hosséré (Northern Cameroon)

Olivier Langlois \*

CNRS, UMR 7041, Maison René Ginouvès, 21, allée de l'Université, F-92023 Nanterre Cedex, France

Received 2 March 2006; revision received 11 July 2006

Available online 17 October 2006

## Abstract

The spatial organization of Dii settlements has been considered as the reflection of the peculiar social organization of Dii chiefdoms: a model based on an association of several lineages, most of them being necessary for the working of the whole. The distribution of thousands of surface remains (features and ceramics) located on the eastern foot of the Djaba massif, the site of the eponymous chieftaincy in the early 19th century, together with stratigraphic data, is likely to provide information about the age and the foundation process of a Dii chiefdom. Following the spatial analysis, we will see that, locally, the growth of political complexity began about the 18th century and that this process may have resulted in the arrival of 'foreigners' among one or more of the autochthonous communities, one of what appears to have been strongly involved in metallurgical activities. Archaeological data seems thus to indicate that the foundation myth of the 'generous foreigner' shared by most of the Dii chieftaincies was based on historical events.

© 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Northern Cameroon; Dii settlements; Djaba chiefdom; Features distribution; Surface remains; Social organization; Foundation myths; Ironsmiths

Since 2000, as part of two successive programs aiming to define the past occupation patterns of a sudanian savannah and to assess their environmental consequences over time,<sup>1</sup> we studied the area occupied by the Dii community of Djaba during the

early 19th century. This area, which we were able to localise and delimit, shows thousands of archaeological surface features the spatial organization of which we shall try to understand. Generally speaking, features distribution reveals functional zones: used for domestic activities, for craft, for burial... In a more novel way, the distribution observed at Djaba-Hosséré seems to provide information of a social and political nature.

First, we will present available data concerning the history of Dii chieftaincies, and more specifically those referring to the community of Djaba. Then, from archaeological data, by associating spatial and stratigraphical information, we shall outline the

\* Fax: +33 1 46 69 26 28.

E-mail address: [olivier.langlois@mae.u-paris10.fr](mailto:olivier.langlois@mae.u-paris10.fr)

<sup>1</sup> Between 2000 and 2002, the archaeological part of the multi-disciplinary program named 'Historical ecology of sudanian savannas' was financed by the CNRS (APN 99). Since 2003, the archaeological study carried on in the framework of the archaeological program "Archaeo-ecology of Northern Cameroon savannas" sustained by the "Ministère des Affaires Etrangères," the French foreign office.

chronology of the occupation of the area surrounding the Djaba massif (or *hooeere* Djaba)<sup>2</sup> from early in the second millennium AD up to the abandonment of the site, around 1830. We will thus focus on the last centuries of occupation, a period marked by a regrouping of the habitat on the eastern foot of the massif, an area where we will observe the distribution of surface remains. These remains relate to two successive stages leading thus to a diachronic study of the final occupation. The latter, which cannot however stretch over more than two centuries, seems to bear witness to the emergence of a chieftaincy, in this case that of Djaba. We will see that the process that explains the emergence of a centralized power at the foot of the Djaba massif, as deduced from archaeological data, recalls the foundation myth of Dii chieftaincies. We will see also that, during the early 19th century, the spatial organization of the chieftaincy of Djaba seems close to the model defining Dii establishments of the recent past. And this model is thought to be a faithful reflection of the association of different lineages, i.e. the base of the local socio-political system. Through the case of Djaba, we will consider how the spatial distribution of the surface remains mapped on the previous place of a chieftaincy can shed light on the process that led to the emergence of a specific socio-political model now only recalled in stereotyped myths.

### Available historical and anthropological data

#### *The Dii people today*

Djaba people belong to the ethnolinguistic group named Dii (or Duru), a population of more than 40,000 persons. Nowadays these people are both located in the upper Benue valley and in the northern part of the Adamawa plateau, in Northern Cameroon. Dii people speak different dialects (*mam nà'a*, *mam be'*, *huun*, *paan*, *saan*, *naan* and *gum*). They may gather groups from various origins. For more than two centuries (Fig. 1), some of the Dii communities occupy the upper Benue valley, a sudanian area of woodland savannas still not very densely populated despite the growing influx of populations from the North. Before growing corn and cotton these farmers cultivated different kinds of grain -sorghum, pearl-millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) and finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*)-, and tubers, particularly yams

(*Dioscorea* sp). Only some communities living on the down slopes of Poli massif owned cattle, as the tsetse fly prevents stockbreeding in the plain. This economy seems already to be in place in the early 19th century. Archaeological data obtained at Djaba-Hosséré, the site studied in this paper, have indeed revealed that, at this time, Djaba people cultivated sorghum, pearl-millet, finger millet and probably yams. They were not stockbreeders, but hunters and fishers (Lesur and Langlois, 2005).

In the upper Benue valley, Dii people are one of the few ethnic groups to be organised in chiefdoms, most of other regional societies being segmentary. The hundred or so small autonomous Dii chiefdoms show a very particular structure. According to J.-C. Muller (1996, pp. 102–103; 1997a: 61; 1997b, p. 9; 2001b, p. 210), a Dii chieftaincy can be regarded as a “contractual” association between various lineages, one of them providing chiefs. Each one of these lineages is in charge of specific functions, all of them necessary for the correct working of the chieftaincy. Most of them are focused around the essential ceremony, circumcision: “Circumcision is the main cultural and social backbone of Dii political and social structure and internal social division is generally explained in terms of circumcision. It is said, as a way of legitimation, that the chiefdom needs a chief to organize the ceremonies, an autochthonous lineage to ‘sweep’ and ‘open’ the circumcision ground, another autochthonous lineage, called *don nàà*, to perform the operation and also, a blacksmith to forge the circumcision knives” (Muller, 1996, pp. 102–103). Among the Dii *mam nà'a* people,<sup>3</sup> some of the various lineages that a chiefdom can gather are absolutely necessary: the lineage of the rulers of course, but also two lineages of autochthons (one being in charge of circumcision), and one lineage of blacksmiths (Muller, 1996, p. 104).<sup>4</sup> It is important to notice that Dii society is divided into two endogamous groups: Dii (*stricto sensu*), and Naŋ, i.e. the blacksmiths, who, according to J.-C. Muller (2001b, p. 209), “...se définissent comme des êtres d’essences séparées...”. Formerly, according to the myths, Dii and Naŋ peoples, both “fallen from

<sup>3</sup> Among Dii speaking the gum, the paan and the saan dialects, the functions of “blacksmith” and of “circumciser” are coupled (Muller 1997a, p. 61; 2001a, p. 13; 2001b, p. 210).

<sup>4</sup> “The lineages of the ruler, the circumciser, the autochthons and the blacksmith are the core of a chiefdom’s structure, but there are usually a number of other people with no such lineage affiliation living in a chiefdom.” (Muller, 1996, p. 104).

<sup>2</sup> *hooeere*, (plur. *koosseje*): mountain, massif, in *fulfulde*.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1035256>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1035256>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)